

PLANET STORIES



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KELLY FREAS



TEMPTRESS OF PLANET DELIGHT

By B. CURTIS

*A sears-monkey flew to vend his wares
On a planet strangely groomed.
Lo and behold, he lost all his cares
As the genetic experiment bloomed.*

WHEN the alarm signalled the first whiff of the atmosphere of the next planet on his route, Herl Hofner stopped chinning by his strapping six-foot self and left the little gym. Slipping into the swivel chair at the desk he clipped the pile of loose papers into an empty niche at the side of the desk, spun the chair around to the instrument panel of the *Krylla*. Dialing with his left hand, he swept the bank for incoming signals while his



right hand adjusted the microphone frequencies.

"Class M-for-Mary ship requesting permission to land. Do you have automatic beam landing device? Class M-for-Mary ship requesting permission to land. Do you have automatic beam landing?" His dial pointer swept back and forth.

"Come in, class M-for-Mary."

Herl's left hand moved to the autobeam switch. "What band for M-for-Mary landing? What band for M-for-Mary landing?"

"Come in on seventy-three point eight, M-for-Mary. Come in on seventy-three point eight, M-for-Mary."

Herl's left hand now centered the needle neatly on the appropriate setting as his right pressed the stud for extending the wings with their powerful atmosphere motors; and he sank back into the chair cushions with a relieved sigh. This was still a civilized planet. He'd be able to get back maybe a month sooner than he'd expected after the most recent setback. Forty years, he frowned, was too long between visits from Galactic Central, even if Central had no responsibility for autonomous groupings. A lot could happen in forty years on these isolated planets. The unprecedented mutation leaving half the population deaf and dumb had made the last call a long and tedious one. But by the signs so far, this planet was still ticking along satisfactorily with radio and radar and standard language, a spaceport and all the comforts of civilization.

The speaker hummed into activity. "Please state vessel name, registration, number of crew, destination, and nature of business, M-for-Mary entering on band seventy-three point eight."

Herl grinned comfortably to himself. Familiar red tape had a homelike ring. "This is the *Krylla*, registered J-John five two L-Lomax one five on Earth Sol at headquarters of Galactic Coordination, on routine round trip of thirty planets carrying only Captain Herl Hofner, your sears-monkey, to governmental centers for trading coordination."

He heard the snort from the speaker before the bellow. "What in seven light years is a sears-monkey?" He could visualize the veritable bull of a man at the port control tower.

"Traditional term on Earth for a trading

catalogue, now used to signify the man who carries it. I've got five hundred thousand feet of microfilm of the latest manufactured articles and raw materials and their descriptions and prices from about three thousand planets in the galaxy. Anything you need?"

"I don't know. Nobody tells me anything." A pause. "How long do you wish to remain on Delight?"

"That depends on what's needed and how long it takes me to find out. How long has the planet been called Delight? I have it listed as Geescow, or maybe that was my predecessor's idea of a joke."

"That was no joke. We only settled here eighty years ago and there was a little bug in the water that made the whole place stink like a garbage scow. We've got that pretty well cleaned up and renamed the place." Another pause. "Do you need hotel accommodations?"

Hotel. Herl felt his chin. He'd better redepil on the way down. Sears-monkeys were expected to go the local culture one better on everything to keep up Galactic Coordination's reputation. And he should wear the red dress uniform tunic and black trou. The more civilized they were, the harder they fell for a little routine glamor.

"How far is the port from the capital?"

"Not more'n ninety, hundred miles from the middle of town. Plenty of taxi service for the little bit of business we get here. Only twelve spaces and eighty-three jets registered for the whole planet."

Well, that explained the volubility of the control man. Evidently just busting for somebody to talk to. Not first-class security, being so gabby, but pleasant to come in out of the black to.

"I may need an office where I can play the samples. Can you get me something?"

"No. You gotta have a clearance permit to rent, a commercial visa, a set of ration cards for food . . . do you need one for clothes? . . . a transportation permit to hire a vehicle . . . an application blank for health examination, an application for personal insurance, vehicle insurance, theft insurance, credit bonding, driver's license, secretarial assistance (will you need a secretary?), and, the most important of the kaboodle, application for permission to make additional applications for permission."

"Leaping Luna! I don't expect to be here longer than a couple of weeks at the most. I don't need clothes unless the ones I have are offensive to your planetary taboos; and I certainly don't need a secretary. Can't I just hire a cab and let the driver worry about the insurance and driver's license and all the rest of that stuff?" Herl mentally withdrew his grin at the comfort of red tape. "I can eat food from the ship if I have to."

"Can't unload any food without special permission two weeks in advance of unloading date to give time for federal inspection." The heavy voice was firm if regretful. "You'd better just pick up this book of forms and fill them out while you wait for clearance to enter the city."

"Clearance," Herl almost yelped. "How long will that take?"

"Depends. You might be able to get it in four, five hours if the video bands are fairly free. You're almost down now. Don't forget the 1.3 earth gravity. Buckle your belt: the field's jet-pitted and you're coming in on wheels. Be seeing you."

HERL was still seeing him six hours later, sitting across a castered utility table from almost exactly the bull of a man he'd visualized . . . about Herl's own height but broader all the way from shoulders to beam. Where he'd half expected a close-cropped head, however, the tower man, Saem Berry, wore his hair in ragged brown locks falling almost to his jacket collar.

Herl had looked up at him curiously in the midst of asking a question relevant to a three-page form describing his employment status and waiving unemployment compensation during his stay on Delight.

"Let my barbering permit lapse," admitted Berry, sheepishly. "Can't re-apply for six more months, so I have to hack it off when it gets in my way."

"Earth months or Delight months?" Herl asked as he wrote.

"Delight months. That's about a year and a half, earth time." Saem Berry opened the desk drawer and took out a pair of office shears. Holding his head over the wastebasket he snipped off a few of the longer strands; then he sat up and replaced the shears. "Good thing I learned to shave myself."

Filling out forms and returning to the *Krylla* for a snack had taken only five of the six hours: waiting for vizor connections had taken the last hour along with a game of tri-di chess to kill the time. Berry had been surprisingly uncommunicative about the state of Delight culture and technology.

"Better see it for yourself," he'd said. "I don't know half of what goes on in town, living way off here."

He had been politely curious about Herl and Herl's job.

"Go around from planet to planet and system to system selling stuff, eh?" He tilted his head at the captain. "What made a smart young fellow like you want to wander around the galaxy instead of settling down to a steady job and raising a family? Lot of money in it, or are you staying away from something you don't like?" he asked penetratingly.

Herl responded in kind. "Don't know as I ever thought of it just that way," he admitted. "I guess I like to see things getting tied together in some sort of organization. I like to see people getting what they want and need . . . and I'm good at it. There's no great income in it. Maybe I just like going from place to place and seeing how things are there."

"Looking for something you need yourself, I'll bet. Got a girl?" the controlman grinned slyly.

"No girl," Herl grinned back. "Do the girls on Delight need a man like me? I might be able to arrange for a shipload."

Saem shook his head. "I've got a daughter," he said, "who yearns for far places . . . marriageable gal . . . I'm always on the lookout." He laughed. "That's the kind of thing she'd say, not me, the little brat."

"Do I have to get a special permit to take her to dinner?" Herl asked, just as the vizor connection was completed.

The major official in a conservative blue tunic, who looked like half the civil officers in the galaxy, peered apologetically out of the screen. "You can come right to my office in the city, Captain Hofner," he urged. "I'll get some of our leading men together to meet you at once. I understand you're a busy man. Uh . . . have you all your applications filled out?"

The towerman assented quickly for Hof-

ner. "Yes indeed, Mr. Commissioner. He's alone and planning to stay only a few weeks, so he didn't need most of the big ones like permanent housing or shopping assignment or resident tax registration and like that. Will you be sending a temporary driver for him till he's got his permit?"

"Oh, yes. I'll send a man out as soon as I can clear one."

Saem's tone was deferent. "Thank you, Mr. Commissioner." The connection was broken and the screen went dark. "Pretty obliging guy, Commissioner Crawford. He doesn't forget a thing. Never has. That's an impressive record." The controlman nodded his head; his hair swung down over his eyes; and he fumbled in the drawer for the scissors again. "Now I'd forget my head if it wasn't dogged down."

"It can't be that bad," Herl objected.

"Right again," the other admitted. "That's a joke around here at any rate. You can't afford to forget anything around here."

"I won't forget," smiled Herl.

"You'd better not. It would be awkward as hell if you did and got stuck here."

"They couldn't hold me here just for forgetting something. I'm an employee of Galactic Coordination, you know, and not a local citizen."

The brown locks swung from side to side. "I don't know but I wouldn't risk it. It might be a good many years, from what you tell me, before anybody came out from the Sol system looking for you if they're as understaffed as you say."

"I'll be careful, then." And Herl Hofner patted his pile of applications and turned back to the chess game.

THE driver of the cabter was even less communicative about the state of things on Delight. Captain Hofner tried to get him to talk about what the planet might be able to use in the manufactured line but the young driver only pursed his lips and shook his head slowly and said, "I don't know a thing about it and I can't afford to forget that I don't get paid for looking around and then griping about it. Commissioner Crawford will tell you what you want to know. He gets paid for it." And he would say no more.

Crawford sounded like quite the little despot. Herl shivered in the open cabter as it plowed through a thin cloud and turned up the heating element in his scarlet uniform tunic. The driver seemed very thinly clad, but he gave no sign of being cold except for a whiteness around the lips and fingers.

"Don't you draw enough clothing ration here? Maybe Delight will be in the market for synthetic fabrics if you're short here."

The young man turned a look of fury on Hofner. "None of your damn business if I haven't got enough clothes and I wouldn't say anything about it to Crawford either if you know what's good for you!"

Hofner shrugged, and the silence held till after the cab had alighted on the outskirts of the city and proceeded through a number of blocks of moderate-sized residences and stores. Realizing the probable public pride of the driver, Herl made no mention of the occasional fetid whiffs that blew through the cabter reminding him that Delight had once been called Geescow, but instead turned his attention to the city. The houses were brick or stone boxes, solidly built, drab-colored, set behind lawns of silvery gray mossy looking stuff. Great trees lined the street at precise intervals: the pavement, though lightly serrated for friction, was as smooth as the newest roads on Earth. Hofner noticed that the cabter stopped automatically at certain intersections and was obviously equipped with a radar braking device. Technicians here might have something to list in the catalogue.

Suddenly the driver stiffened in his seat, slammed on the cab's own brakes and swore simultaneously. "Those blankety blank damned irresponsible Eyefers!" He leaned out of the window and yelled, "Where in hell do you think you're going? Do you want to get killed?"

Hofner, who had been looking at the buildings on his side of the street, looked out the front of the cab and saw a vacant-faced, middle-aged woman almost touching the bumper. She turned her head at the driver's voice, looked at him as if she hardly saw him, and walked slowly to the opposite kerb. The driver pulled in his head and muttered under his breath, "They ought to declare an open season on Eyefers around here.

They'd just as soon smash up a good cab as get killed."

"What's an Eyefer?" Herl asked, hoping to get some crumb of information from the surly young man.

"Short for 'I fergot,'" answered his companion brusquely.

"I fergot what?"

The reply was bitterly sarcastic. "Fergot to get a license, Fergot to get the next ration card, Fergot to apply for compensation . . . Fergot to do practically anything but eat . . . and be a drag on everybody else. I got three of them myself to look out for and if I don't look out I'll be going Eyefer myself and then what?"

"All right, then what?"

The young man clenched his teeth, thinned his lips. "There won't be any 'then what.' I'd hang myself."

Concealing his startlement, Herl asked as coolly as he could, "Tell me about these Eyefers. We don't have them where I come from and I can't say I exactly understand the score."

"No Eyefers, huh. Ask Crawford." And the driver clenched his teeth again and drove on. Herl was unable to get anything more out of him until the cabter turned and drew up a long ramp into the side of a pretentious pseudo-Greek edifice that filled a whole block.

"Civil Building. Crawford's office is here. Straight ahead," he stopped the cabter beside a gateway in the railed concrete walkway paralleling the road, which apparently went clear through the building, "and take the fourth elevator to your right. Crawford has the whole sixth floor."

Herl grabbed his case full of credentials and applications, opened the door, and stepped onto the walkway. He turned to thank the driver, but the cab was already gathering speed along the way.

II

HE LOOKED after the dwindling cab a moment, then walked quickly along the concrete toward the elevators. To his left, a procession of assorted vehicles hurried in either direction through the tunnel. Occasional cabters, long-cars, and congyribles pulled up to openings in the railing to

let out passengers who approached one or another of the elevator doors. Herl passed three clumps of people waiting for transportation to other floors and noticed that the panels beside the doors, which listed the offices to be found on the ninth, eighth, and seventh floors respectively, were all listings of headquarters of some sort of civil control . . . health insurance, building permits, fire inspection, inoculations, etc.

There were both men and women among those waiting, most of them in what Earth would call informal dress (a pair of simple trousers and knitted shirt in gray or brown, often topped off with a heavy furred cape or swathing capelike coat); and most of them were much more warmly dressed than the driver of his cab. Apparently there was not such a shortage of heat-holding fabrics as he had assumed.

As he reached the fourth elevator, the door opened and the group was sucked into its recesses. Herl joined it and the doors closed. "Express to the sixth floor: face the rear of the car please," said the tinny voice from an overhead speaker. Twenty people stood glumly motionless as the car glided up with the faintest of vibrations but with a heavy pressure against the soles of Captain Hofner's feet.

A door opened at the rear of the elevator chamber and the crowd pushed out and spread wide in the large lobby ahead. Herl Hofner shifted his case to his left hand and looked around for some clue to the whereabouts of Crawford's office. That worthy might have the whole floor, but he must have his particular sanctum at some particular place.

Most of the lobby was filled by comfortable looking upholstered couches and chairs, and these in turn were filled by what Herl judged to be a couple of hundred people talking, reading pamphlets, or glancing preoccupiedly through pages of forms that looked like the ones he'd filled out earlier. In a chair near him, Herl saw an old man gazing blankly ahead and approached him.

"I wonder if you would be so good as to tell me where I could find Commissioner Crawford," he requested hopefully.

"What say?" the man blinked and turned his gaze on the red uniform jacket at about the level of Herl's floating ribs

"Where would I find Commissioner Crawford?"

"Down that way somewhere, I suppose." The man's voice was toneless as he indicated direction with one elbow.

Yes, almost at the corner of the room was a broad paneled door on which the stencilled name Mr. Commissioner A. G. Crawford became legible as Herl approached it. He knocked briskly just below the letters; and the door swung slowly inward to admit him.

Inside sat a receptionist at a switchboard. She looked up at Herl's entrance; and he could see that she was a homely brunette with dull skin and a shapeless figure. Her glance at his trim scarlet uniform was approving and she said, "You're Captain Hoffman from Galactic Information, aren't you?"

"Hofner, from Coordination," he corrected. "May I see the Commissioner? I believe he's expecting me."

"The Commissioner is in conference at the moment with some of the men he wants you to talk to. If you could wait in the lobby a few minutes, I'm sure he'll be ready to see you soon."

"Can't I wait in here?"

"I'm afraid not," she replied reluctantly. "It's a rule that no one can wait in the offices. They'd be filling the place to the ceiling if we let them get in this far. Not," she added with what she seemed to think was a fascinating smile, "that you'd try to get in ahead of your turn . . . but some would."

HERL retreated with his case of papers to the lobby and took the nearest of two vacant chairs about fifteen feet from Crawford's door. He sat down and pulled a stilo and permanote pad from his breast pocket. Using his case as a writing desk he noted down several questions he wanted to ask somebody. There were vacant planets in his catalogue: maybe he had a market for one of those: and while there wasn't any commission on such a 'sale', there was usually a lot of kudos.

He glanced up at Crawford's door again, and a motion on his left drew his eye. There was someone in the chair next to him only ten feet away . . . a woman, no, a girl.

The thought flitted through his mind that she was a quiet one to slip into the chair without his noticing. She was looking at him, and he turned his head to look directly at her.

Shock like a heavy charge of electricity gripped and tingled in him. This was no girl, it was a . . . a . . . a . . . who knows what. Wrapped in a thin golden haze, she sat, as if in the midst of an incandescent cloud, through which her face shone as if it, too, were illumined from inside. One bare arm lay along the upholstered arm of the chair, but not quite touching it, as though the cloud gave a little support; but the perfect arm was merely the lower frame for the exquisitely lovely face with its blue eyes that seemed to penetrate his awareness to its depths and the smile that smoothed his irritation at another tedious wait into nothingness.

Herl sat and regarded her a long instant, a foreverness of perhaps ten seconds. Then he came fumblingly to himself and smiled back at her. "Waiting for Crawford, too?" he asked lamely.

The tones of her voice were rippling water, a chord on a stringed instrument. "No."

Herl had a moment of ridiculous longing to stand up and see over the thick arm of the chair to find out what the rest of her looked like. Then embarrassment came and he lowered his eyes. "Excuse me," he apologized, "I'm a stranger to Delight. I didn't mean to pry."

The voice was two tones of a flute. "I know."

"By the uniform?" He raised his eyes again to look at hers.

"By everything." The smile faded, replaced by a look of sober gravity.

Questions raced through Herl's mind: who she was; what the cloud was; what she knew about him; even what she was wearing, for the cloud thickened near the shoulder and neck and he could glimpse only a few shining strands of waving amber hair through the concealing haze.

"You may ask me," she said.

"Ask you what?" he returned, surprised.

"Any of those questions. I will tell you."

Crawford's door opened and the receptionist came toward them. One thought rose imperatively in Herl's mind.

"Will you be here when I come out?"

"No."

He grasped his case and got up. He could see now that she was literally wearing nothing but the half-concealing haze that left her slim legs and bare feet visible. "Will I . . . can I . . . see you again?"

"Yes."

Herl turned his head toward the receptionist.

"Commissioner Crawford can see you now," she smirked.

He looked back to ask the vision when and how he would find her but the chair was as empty as when he came out of the office.

CONFUSED, like a man suddenly awakened from a fascinating dream, Herl walked after the receptionist through the outer door and to the inner one. She returned to her switchboard and he went on toward the door, which slid into the wall at his approach. He gave his head a quick clearing shake and looked inside the long, austere, uncarpeted office, with its one window at the far end.

Directly ahead of him was a group of men sitting on both sides of a long conference table . . . little men, serious-faced, important, earnest. At the far end, a man faced him . . . a small, pleasant, but harried-looking middle-aged man, almost bald. Herl identified his outline against the window as that of Commissioner Crawford of the vizor call.

"Come in, Captain Hofner," the Commissioner invited cordially.

Herl did so and looked curiously at the sober faces of the men at the table while the door slid shut behind him.

"Come and sit down," Crawford indicated with his palm the empty chair at Herl's end of the table. His voice was still mellow and cordial. "We are all ready to discuss your officers and see your samples. You will find that we are accustomed to doing business promptly on Delight . . . an agreeable feature of our culture, I think you'll find."

Herl smiled, pulled out the heavy chair and sat, pulling it back to the table as he did so. Promptness would indeed be an agreeable feature after those deaf mutes. He put his case upon the table.

"I didn't bring the tapes and films with me from the ship, gentlemen," he apologized. "They seem to have exceeded the weight limit which I could bring into town without special permission. I suppose I shall have to have all these papers approved before I can show you what we have to sell." He opened the case and slipped out the stack of applications. "However, I can make a preliminary survey of your needs and what you have that you'd like an extra-planetary market for." He reached into his jacket pocket for stilo and pad.

A bell sounded beyond the door, which opened; and the receptionist stuck her head into the room.

"Miss Haulwell, would you be good enough to get a special messenger to take these papers around to the proper offices and get 'em stamped?" Crawford gestured to the stack. He scribbled on a pad by his hand, tore off the sheet and held it out. "This will give my authorization for complete clearance."

The shapeless Miss Haulwell came meekly around the table and took the note, then returned to the other end to pick up the pile of applications, handling them almost reverently. "Yes, Commissioner. Will there be anything else, Commissioner?"

"No, not at the moment."

She retreated silently to her anteroom and the door closed.

Just as the door clicked shut, Herl saw the golden haze thickening slowly behind the seated Crawford . . . thickening and then fading to nothing as if a cloud had changed its mind about coming into being. Staring beyond the man, Herl missed the beginning of the sentence, but picked it up before the meaning was lost.

". . . have been discussing some of the things we need. We'd be interested in seeing any electronic calculating equipment developed in the last eighty years. And our requirements for reducing and storing records, particularly photographic records, have so far exceeded our production of file and development chemicals that we are definitely in the market for such . . . or any different improved methods. That's right, isn't it, Mr. Jerrip? (Mr. Jerrip is our Commissioner of Records.)"

A man down the table on Herl's left nod-

ded agreement. "Exactly right, Mr. Commissioner." His tone was most respectful.

Herl made a note on his pad. "Those are some of the most popular numbers in our new listing. What next?"

"Well, we've been discussing the matter of permitting the use of plastic housing materials and if we can come to some agreement, we may be in the market for some plastic formulae and construction plans."

One of the men on Hofner's right grunted an objection.

"Housing Commissioner Ferguson, here, feels that as long as we can continue to supply the expressed demand, there is no need to plan any expansion."

Herl nodded agreeably toward Ferguson and suggested, "Since delivery on heavy items like hot molds for plastics can't be guaranteed in less than ten earth years, you might like to see what we have and reconsider your needs in terms of the next fifty. Our department is trying to get us sears-monkeys around more often than that, but we can't be sure of doing it unless planet-nopping becomes a lot more popular with the boys of the galaxy."

Ferguson grunted again. "In fifty years we probably won't need anything but barracks for Eyefers."

Most of the men at the table laughed, a little self-consciously, it seemed to Herl.

"How about those Eyefers?" Herl opened tentatively. "I don't quite understand about them but I gather they're something of a drag on your culture. We have a number of vacant planets. Would you be interested in sending off a gang of them to colonize? Would they be interested in going?"

A TALL man next to Ferguson spoke to Crawford. "How about it, Bert? My household would get along more smoothly with about six less mouths to feed and six less backs to cover."

A fat bearded man directly on Herl's left shook his head rapidly several times. "No, no, no, no!"

Crawford spoke noncommittally. "Commissioner Guildris of Health and Welfare objects"

Guildris stood up. "I certainly do. Not only are the Eyefers hardly competent to colonize anything but the whole success of our

cultural and genetic experiment hinges on their being here among us as an example of what we must avoid if we are to succeed as a race!" He sat down, plumph, on the air-cushion of his chair.

Crawford turned to Herl. "I can explain about the Eyefers while we are waiting for your things from the ship," he assured Herl. "They are really quite important in our scheme of things, as Guildris says."

Herl was startled. "You mean you're sending somebody for my things?" he wanted to know.

"Certainly, if you like. If you don't trust a man to get them, I'll go along with you and we can talk then."

Herl relaxed. "There may be a good many things you'll be interested in when you see the pictures," he said.

The members of the group suddenly seemed a little tense.

"For instance," Herl looked round the ring of faces so sober and intent, "how about entertainment and entertainers? There are nightclub bleepers, and grand opera troupes, carnivals, dancers, magicians, and bocko teams, theatrical companies, acrobats, and several thousand individual artists of various talents . . . all good, or Galactic Coordination wouldn't be listing them. What's your preference, gentlemen?"

Commissioner Guildris rose again, a heavy frown on his heavy features. Looks of disapproval were obvious on several other faces also, although one or two commissioners raised their eyebrows questioningly at Crawford.

"I would not presume, Captain Hofner," Guildris stated, "to condemn light entertainment for the peoples of the galaxy. It is, however, an occupation from which we have been able to shield our people for the time being. We have our own approved methods of relaxation and of temporary escape from the pressures of daily living; but these are mostly in the nature of solitary meditation and mechanical music."

Herl winced inwardly. These people would have been better approached by a non-humanoid robot than a red-blooded terran boy. Six feet six of healthy hungry handsome salesman was wasted here. And Guildris would hardly go off on an extended sermon to a machine.

But a human audience was fair game for the paunchy commissioner. "The danger to our citizens, you understand, is not in escapism, even though that may have its own dangers. It is in the approval and possible emulation of individuals . . . individuals who, though talented, might not be truly fitted for survival here. We cannot tolerate . . . I repeat, we cannot tolerate public distress and public pressure when a public figure fails in his civic duties. Entertainers would be loved. The public would want to forgive them their lapses. This we cannot have."

Herl glanced with a ghost of a smile at one of the men who had raised his eyebrows at Crawford. "No dancers?" he said.

"No dancers," Crawford replied firmly, without giving the other a chance to answer.

Herl returned equally firmly to his task. "And how do you plan to pay for what you buy . . . by Galactic Credits . . . by man hours of assigned labor . . . or by barter? In other words, what do you want to sell among the stars?"

A suave looking man with oily hair and an oilier manner looked at Crawford. "May I, Mr. Commissioner?"

Crawford nodded. "Mr. Applegate, Commissioner of Raw Materials (and that includes labor of course) will answer that."

Applegate turned to smirk at Herl.

"We have on Delight, Captain Hofner, a rich supply of natural fuels, several strains of high-oxygen producing plants, and a most remunerative taxation system. We can sell or barter or even pay for our few needs, whichever proves most satisfactory to Galactic Coordination. We have an untapped reservoir of unskilled labor in our Eyefers, whom we have heretofore avoided exploiting but whom we can use if it seems desirable for the good of our planet. Does that answer your question?"

Herl nodded, surprised that such a prosperous people hadn't gone straight to Coordination for what they wanted years before.

Guildris of Health and Welfare added, "We are most fortunate in being a completely self-sustaining planet. In our abundance of natural foods and textile rawstuffs, we are probably capable of supporting twice our present numbers. That is why we are

able to make progress with the great genetic experiment now in progress here. Because it works actual hardship on no one!" he added proudly.

Herl looked at Crawford. "I suppose this experiment will be one of the things you'll tell me about when we go to get my things?"

"Of course," blandly.

"Another matter you might be considering while we are getting the tapes and films," Herl offered, "is transport. Have you enough home-owned space tonnage to carry your exports and imports; or would you be interested in purchase, rental, or simple contract for haulage? You will get your orders much more quickly, I hardly have to tell you, if you use your own ships; but there are a number of haulage companies around the galaxy which would be very glad of your business. And if you cared to send a representative to the nearest coordination center, he could bring you our listings every couple of earth years and return with your orders, so that you could be in much closer touch with what the galaxy has to offer in the way of raw materials, manufactured goods, technological advance, and markets." Herl looked inquiringly around the table.

The rotund Guildris stood up again. "I believe I may speak for all of us when I say that we are not overly anxious for increased contact with the galaxy at this point in our social development. A great deal of thought by some of our wisest men," he bowed to his colleagues pompously, "has been expended on making Delight a self-sufficient independent unit for the most worthy of purposes, the eventual improvement of our race. In a few more generations, we may have something to offer the galaxy . . . not to sell but to offer to the need of all other planets . . . a strain of *homo sapiens* so selected as to be a hardy, keen, responsible and intelligent race of administrators and leaders of the galaxy. Because we have dedicated ourselves to this purpose, we must necessarily cut ourselves off from the pleasant interdependence of thriving trade until we are ready to market the noble fruits of our projected garden."

Guildris remained standing a moment, while a gentle handclapping from both sides of the table indicated that his remarks were,

indeed, the opinion of all those present.

Herl kept a grave face with the greatest effort. Going to run the galaxy in a few generations, were they? These little two-for-a-credit bureaucrats? Wanted a few little calculators to make themselves the final bosses of everything. He had seen a giant calculator . . . an electronic multi-brain, with fifty men coding information for it, preparatory to making the selection of a minor planetary economic advisor. It would be an interesting day when these little men came to Earth to take over. All this flashed through his mind while Crawford was rising to his feet.

"We shall be perfectly satisfied," said Crawford genially, "to have delivery of our small order made by any means you care to contract: but as you have heard, we are not interested in opening up Delight as a trade center, so we have no need for regular shipping service. Now I don't want to take these gentlemen's time with discussion of things they already know," he looked around the table, "so if that's all we can do now, I propose that we disband and meet again at sundown. That will give us two hours to go out to the ship and back. Are there any objections?"

The men were rising from their chairs.

Herl said, almost plaintively, "Doesn't anybody eat around here? Couldn't we add time for a meal?"

Crawford laughed. "I forgot you didn't have your ration card yet. Make that time one hour dark. If your papers aren't cleared yet, I'll stand you to a meal."

Herl stood also, and the men filed past him, shaking his hand as they went. Six commissioners who had not spoken during the meeting added their names and positions. The last to go was a Commissioner of Psychology and Psychiatry, to whom Herl said, "I'd like to see you before I leave here, Commissioner. I think I've been having hallucinations."

The man halted, still holding Herl's hand. "What sort of visions, my boy?"

Herl grinned. "A pretty girl in a golden fog. Probably just the result of months alone in a space ship."

The man sighed, relieved. "Oh, just a goddess. A local phenomenon. Think nothing more of it. Commissioner Crawford will

tell you all about that, too." He followed the others out.

A local phenomenon! Maybe that girl was the 'noble fruit' Guildris was talking about. If so, these people might have something after all.

III

COMMISSIONER CRAWFORD had gone to a desk in one corner of the conference room and was rummaging in one of the drawers. "Better hunt up my guest permit for restaurants," he began, when a two-tone chime sounded and the screen of a large vizer against the wall lit up. "Excuse me," he said, sitting down in the desk chair facing the video. "Crawford speaking," he said distinctly.

A young man with a narrow pimply countenance and sparse lightish hair appeared on the screen. "Sub-commissioner Torrin of Highways and Vehicles," he identified himself.

"Yes, Mr. Torrin?"

"I have here a set of application papers with your request for special rapid clearance," Torrin said accusingly, holding up the sheaf of papers which Herl recognized, although it was now much thinner than when he had relinquished it to Miss Haulwell.

"That is correct. Don't tell me something's been omitted. This is urgent, Torrin."

"Nothing has been omitted, Commissioner; but your note calls only for clearance on papers for a Captain Herl Hofner," Torrin said curtly.

"Still correct. So?"

"There is also an application for driver's license here for a Miss Agnes Haulwell . . . and I've leafed down through the rest of the forms and there are several more in her name: cooking fats and oils; crimp yarn textile clothing; limited individual rental housing . . . and then there are others of the same type as requested for Captain Hofner. Did you mean to authorize these also? Is she accompanying Captain Hofner in his temporary stay here? If so, I hardly see why she should need a number of these."

Crawford groaned and replied ruefully, "Haulwell's my receptionist and secretary.

Obviously going Eyefer and near-criminal as well. Very discerning of you to have caught it." He sighed. "She was a good secretary, though. Wonder where I'll get another."

Torrin requested coldly, "What shall I do with the applications?"

"Approve Captain Hofner's and send the rest of his on through. I'll get Haulwell's fraudulent forms from you tomorrow and put through her Eyefer status officially then. I'm too busy now."

"Thank you, Commissioner." The screen went black.

Crawford's face when he turned back to Herl was tired and disgruntled. "That's the third girl in a couple of years. They just have no consideration for their jobs. She was the best of the three, too." He rifled some more papers in the drawer and came up with a small green card.

"Why didn't you tell him you meant to add her name to your note?" Herl asked curiously. "You could have given her a scolding or something, couldn't you?"

"Oh no. You don't understand. She might have married and had children and I wouldn't have been able to say a thing, or I'd have been an accessory after the fact." He pressed a button on his desk. "Being Chief Commissioner of Delight is a responsible and tough job, Captain. But we owe it to our children's children to make them a hundred times as responsible and tough."

The door opened and Agnes Haulwell advanced a few steps into the room. "You wanted me, Commissioner?"

"Yes, Miss Haulwell. You may leave now and go home and pack your things. I'll phone Placement to get an assignment for you so you can go right there to turn in your permits when you've packed."

"P-placement, Commissioner?"

"Eyefer placement, Miss Haulwell. Sub-commissioner Torrin has just informed me about your having added a number of your personal applications to the rush approvals for Captain Hofner."

Agnes Haulwell turned pale, then began to tremble and burst into tears. "Oh, no, Commissioner. I . . . I couldn't. None . . . well almost none of those permits has really lapsed . . . I'm engaged . . . I just can't," she sobbed, "I mustn't . . . you can't . . . oh, I'll go to detention or . . . or . . . temporary

curtailment of privileges or anything, but you can't make me go Eyefer!" she wound up defiantly.

Crawford was seemingly regretful, gentle. "Had the housing permit lapsed? and the cooking fats? and the winter clothes?"

"Yes, but that was all. I forgot just those three. The others all had hours to run yet."

"I forgot, I forgot." Miss Haulwell, there's one thing you can't forget and that's that an adequate memory and constant attention is the mark of those fitted to survive. Now I'm very disappointed in you," his voice became more gentle as she sobbed anew, "but I would consider it a personal favor if you'd come in in the morning to show your successor how to operate the switchboard and doors and where the supplies are."

"OH! . . ." Miss Haulwell fairly shrieked and ran blubbing from the room.

Crawford said sadly to Hofner. "They never do come in tomorrow morning. It just shows they were Eyefer stuff from the beginning. I only wish we had some way of weeding them out before they reached adulthood, but we don't. Now let's go and eat. By the time we get back, your permits should be here."

THE restaurant was in the basement. Progress between tables had been slow as Commissioner Crawford acknowledged greetings from numerous small groups and introduced Captain Hofner. Finally, however, they were seated at a table for two at a corner of the yellow-brick walled room.

A brown-overalled waiter approached them.

"My guest permit," Crawford explained in loud clear tones, "is for cereal foods and fruit. But you're probably in the mood for breakfast anyway." He spoke to the waiter. "Bring him," he nodded at Herl, "one of your regular breakfasts. I'll have steak and mushrooms and mashed wathros . . . and how's the bean puree to start with? and enchil salad and thollet pudding for dessert. We'll both drink morgen."

To Herl he added, "Do you want your cereal hot or cold?"

"Hot, I guess, for this weather," replied the ravenous captain.

"Very wise. Hot cereal for my guest.

Here's the card."

The waiter took the card and scanned it carefully. "Cereal card. Very good, Commissioner." He departed on a zig-zag course among the tables.

Herl was hungry and tired and furious at the commissioner for ordering a full and appetizing-sounding dinner, but he smiled a well-trained smile and got back to his business.

"This might be a good time for you to tell me about the Eyefers, Commissioner. According to Miss Haulwell, it doesn't seem a very desirable condition to be in; and yet you don't want them to leave the planet. What's the story?"

"I'll have to start at the beginning and rush through eighty Delight years of history to tell you . . . that's about two hundred earth years.

"As you probably know, our people came here from Madrilune as volunteers to prevent overpopulation there. They were a picked group of urbanites accustomed to the benefits of social control and convinced that lack of sound economic policy integrated with the daily life of every citizen had been at the root of Madrilune's troubles. The shortages of basic necessities to be found on any raw planet were little greater here than they had been on crowded Madrilune . . . rationing was very strict and justice heavily enforced so that all might have their chance to survive.

"Delightites are hard workers; and in about twenty of our years there was an abundance of foodstuff, textiles, and housing; and, as Guildris told you, we're really most enviably situated."

"What about all this rationing now?" Herl looked distastefully at the green card still lying on the table.

Crawford pocketed the card. "I'm coming to that," he replied.

"The Chief Commissioner at that time was a Buford Finchley; and the great experiment Guildris talked about was his idea. From the beginning here, there had been a certain small proportion of the population which consistently seemed unable to cope with the regulation of life which was necessary to a pioneer planet. Some of them starved when their private holdings failed; some of them became criminals when their

families were exposed to want, leaving themselves and their families to be supported by the remainder of the population. When there was finally plenty of food and clothing and shelter for everybody and an end to the rationing system was proposed, the wise Commissioner Buford saw that such an end would put the weaker citizens at the mercy of the acquisitiveness of the stronger and threaten the stronger by the latent criminality of the weaker. He reasoned that no one needs more than enough of the necessities of life and that submission to socially beneficial regimentation was the mark of the socially adapted, the fitted-to-survive in a civilized age. So he began the present program of the most extensive control of the necessities and luxuries of life and the Eyefers were part of the natural result. They are the unfitted.

"They forget to apply for many of their types of rations: they forget the special ordinances for seasons and parts of the cities: they forget to re-register for all permits when they change their addresses: some of them even forget to earn enough to pay for both permits and food, and let the food go and get all the permits and have to be hospitalized for malnutrition . . . they're Eyefers, too. They have a thousand excuses, but they all boil down to, 'I fergot.'"

Herl objected, "But you don't segregate them as you would criminals."

"No, of course not. They haven't committed any crime, usually; and we have no intention of punishing them. They are simply recognized as incompetent to manage their own affairs, sterilized, and guardians appointed to look after and support them. We realize that we have no right to interfere between an individual and his personal goals unless that individual threatens the liberty of other individuals." Crawford spoke self-confidently but without any show of self-righteousness.

The waiter approached with a loaded tray and began to place the food on the table.

HERL kept his gaze from the bowl of steaming gruel before him and the tremendous steak before his companion. "You don't interfere with them . . . you just take away their jobs and their motivations to be social and their obligations to be

human beings?"

Crawford started to reply: the waiter put the last dishes on the table and departed: Herl continued speaking hurriedly.

"I don't mean to sound critical of your experiment when I don't know the whole story yet . . . but I should think that Miss Haulwell's competence to manage her own affairs (since you say that she was the best of your last three secretaries) was hardly to be judged on the basis of one small set of lapses."

"I'll talk about that in a moment," Crawford said, rising. "But first if you'll just change places with me. I haven't been able to eat this sort of thing for years," he waved at the full dinner, "since a job like mine wrecks the digestion early. But I couldn't get the waiter in trouble, you know."

The men changed places, and Herl found his mood of violent opposition to the social system tempered somewhat by the pleasant prospect.

"For a man without a long experience of Eyeferers, your reaction is more than justified," Crawford continued, frowning at his bowl of mush.

"But our experience had given us certain data. In the first place, when an individual goes Eyefer, it seems to be a symptom of a decreasing conviction of social responsibility. When the condition was first recognized, Eyeferers were merely placed under guardianship and their children's permits stamped to show that they were of Eyefer parentage and so were debarred from breeding with more select stock. However, Eyeferers tended to reproduce so rapidly and irresponsibly that there was danger of their becoming a parasitic burden too heavy for our normal population. That irresponsibility spread to other spheres of action as well . . . they were careless about the property of their guardians . . . if they held jobs still, they had little incentive to improve since they obviously could not manage their own moneys. Most of their children grew up to be twice as irresponsible as their parents, many of them never even applying for permits in the first place but merely sponging on their parents' guardians.

"Obviously this was no way to build a

superior race, a socially adapted race. So we accepted the obvious solution. If Eyeferers wished to withdraw from social responsibility (as they must subconsciously do or they wouldn't forget), we insist that they go the whole way. Miss Haulwell *wants* to be an Eyefer, in spite of her surface training, or she wouldn't be one."

Herl nodded, cutting off another bite of the superb steak. The argument was certainly plausible, and he pushed back the uncomfortable thought that he should be quicker to see the flaws in it.

Lifting his gaze from his plate, however, he was confronted by the outline of Crawford against the warm golden radiance of a cloud half concealing the shining body of a man of such splendid proportions and so noble and sympathetic a countenance that Herl remained a moment as if paralyzed, his knife halfway through the steak. The shining man was shaking his head slowly, regretfully, as if to indicate his disagreement with Crawford's last remark.

Then Herl lifted his knife free of the meat and pointed with it over Crawford's shoulder. "Your friend here seems to have another opinion."

Crawford turned in his chair and looked up at the glowing face. "Have I said something wrong?" he asked the figure, conversationally.

The haze swirled around the long-limbed body and the man shook his head again. "You really believe it," said the man in the tones of a great bell. "It is not wrong to tell your belief."

"Will it interfere with my doing business with Captain Hofner?" Crawford wanted to know.

"No."

"Is there anything you want me to tell him? Something I've left unsaid?"

"No."

"Then run along and let us eat in peace, there's a good chap." Crawford's words were patronizing, his tone imploring.

"Wait a minute!" Herl said sharply; but the haze seemed to be dwindling, the figure of the man evaporating before his eyes. More than anything he wanted to re-establish communication with the girl of the lobby chair.

"Want to ask him something?" queried

the Commissioner. "I think I can find you another one after we're through eating. It's fairly easy to get them to come but only hard to get rid of them if you want them to go."

"Who are they and what are they?" demanded Herl.

"We call them gods. Not because we worship them, you understand, but because they're so damned beautiful and because they are, for all practical purposes, omniscient, omnipotent, and as omnipresent as they want to be. I said 'for all practical purposes' but they don't serve any practical purposes. They're a by-product of the Eyeferers, as far as we know (and they're strangely close-mouthed about that). I'll finish my story and you'll know as much as I do."

HERL drew a deep breath. If the goddess of the lobby were even partly human, he was going to have to know her a great deal better. He visualized her rounded smiling face, its look of utter awareness, her graceful arm. Galaxy women were not like this. It must be for this he'd stayed a bachelor.

Unable to admit aloud his desire and unable to look at Crawford when thinking of her, he went back to carving the steak, half listening to the exposition which Crawford continued.

"When people go Eyefer who already have children," the commissioner went on between sipped spoonfuls of gruel, "we have to institutionalize the kids. Sterilize them too, to protect the rest of us. You may even get the idea that we're a planet of petty puritans because we care more for our race than for particular children and because the 'mortality' among scientists and artists was very high so that there are few such among us these days. However, we've taken care of the latter recently by appointing semi-guardians for the artists and scientists as soon as they announce their professions. The semi-guardians take care of all routines at their wards' expense. The architect of the Civil Center here," he waved a spoon around to indicate their environment, "is that gray-haired man over there. It justifies the change in rules."

"Why couldn't any rich man hire a 'semi-guardian' who would take care of the

formalities for him?" Herl asked.

Crawford looked shocked. "That would be grossly unfair to the rest of the population," he insisted. "There is no particular advantage to a society to perpetuate the strain of wealthy individuals; while we do need scientists and artists. But to get back to the story . . . shortly after the sterilization program began, a noted psychologist went Eyefer and managed to get himself assigned by placement to the head of one of the children's asylums. He worked with the Eyefer children there and somehow the gods are the result. They have perfect recall, perfect bodies, telepathy, intuitive perception of the nature of matter, teleportation, and some precognition. Occasionally even today, a child disappears from one of the asylums and we have a new god or goddess. And there you are."

"Are they what Commissioner Guildris was talking about? The Galaxy will really be excited," Herl said eagerly.

"Heavens, no!" Crawford laughed heartily. "They wouldn't be any more use to you than they are to us. Their bodies are changed in some way so that they are nearly pure energy."

Herl had a tight sensation of loss, of incipient grief.

"They don't eat, they don't need clothes, they don't even reproduce. As far as we can discover, they have no motivations at all except that they seem to like to watch people doing things . . . you could hardly call it curiosity. So . . . since they have no motivations there's no way to get them to cooperate with society; they can't be bribed or threatened, paid or deprived. And yet they'd beat any calculator made if we just had some means of getting them to stay around while we put the problems. They answer any questions you can ask correctly; but there's no way we know of to get them to come around when we have the questions. Oh, you can go out and pretend to do some crazy thing when you have a problem with all the factors in your head. Maybe one of them will turn up and you can ask the question before he reads your mind and fades away . . . and maybe you can't. So we call them gods and forget about them."

Calculators indeed, was Herl's inner reaction, as he tried to recapture the sensation

of being completely understood which he had felt upstairs in the lobby. She had to be a woman, not a supercalculator. "But they're so beautiful, so perfect. There must be a reason for them," he insisted.

"That's the worst thing about them," admitted Crawford. "They make ordinary people look very drab and uninspired. The Eyefers actually have several cults which worship them; and I suppose that's a good thing. Keeps the Eyefers out of trouble. I never heard that they did anything for their worshippers, though."

Herl thought, "We'll see about that. I think I know what to ask, next time I get the chance." Aloud he added, "Don't go out of your way to get one for me to question . . . but if one turns up, I am curious about some things."

"I see you're about through," noticed the commissioner. "Let's get back up and see if your papers have come."

IV

NOT only had Herl's permits come when they returned to the office, but so had an officer from Eyefer Placement who wanted to talk about Agnes Haulwell and a number of other cases. Herl had no difficulty in persuading the commissioner to let him go alone to get his listings and films, when he assured Crawford that the latter's presence was not essential to the trip.

Crawford called for his cabter to take Herl out to the ship; and Herl started back for the elevator, stuffing his assorted cards and permit slips in various pockets about his person.

He scrutinized the lobby for centers of golden light as he passed, but there were no gods or goddesses to be seen there. There were none on the nearly empty elevator going down. There were none on his side of the walkway at the bottom, though he thought he glimpsed the glow far away on the other side just before his cab drew up beside him.

The driver was the same sulky young fellow who had brought him in. Herl settled back for a silent ride to the port, looked intently out the window at the large warehouses, small shops, and low compact residences as they headed for open country

where the cab could take off. The air seemed a little fresher as well as much colder. There were few pedestrians to be seen on the chilly streets and those few seemed to be in a great hurry . . . whether merely because of the cold or because the demands of life were so numerous, Herl could not tell. He wasn't even sure this might not be a time of eating or sleeping for many of the population. He turned his head to his companion.

"What's the daily schedule here?" he asked. "I mean, what hours do stores and offices and families keep?"

"Stores and offices are open all day. Families have two ups: a day and a night up, depends on their jobs and such whether it's morning and first night or afternoon and second half night."

"What do they do in their night ups?"

"Kids go to school same as day. Rest of us have night jobs . . . mostly mining and factory work. My sister and I work in a viscose mill nights."

The cabter had arrived at a broad hardtop landing area. The driver turned in, raised the copter vanes and took off. Herl watched the bleak countryside drop away below. The air had the piercing dampness of coming snow.

It occurred to Herl suddenly that the driver had volunteered some personal information . . . maybe he could get more.

"What's your name," he asked interestedly, turning to face the driver.

"Bill Haulwell."

"Oh, any relation to Agnes Haulwell?" Herl felt a little apprehensive.

"Brother."

Herl let the conversation drop right there. He'd have to fish for information roundabout. He watched miles of fields and pasture roll behind, noticed an isolated house, used that.

"Lonely sort of place to live," he pointed downward. "Don't suppose your people assign Eyefers to live out so far."

"Some do. What's it to them where they live?"

"Does it make any difference to a man's relatives when he goes Eyefer, other than his wife and children, I mean? Crawford told me some but not all about them," Herl added.

"Difference? They might as well have

gone Eyefer themselves. They usually give a man's wife some heavy routine job no matter what she's been trained for. Say it's to keep her busy and take the mental strain off while she readjusts. Other relatives generally get the same. If they're close relatives they're suspected of being on the verge of Eyefer, since they're from the same stock; so all their permits come due within a month after. That's one reason I work so blamed hard on this job. . . . Aggie's job means so much to her. She wants to get married, too; and she'd have a deuce of a lot of trouble with that if anything happened to me."

This long speech made Herl most uncomfortable. It wasn't any of his business to tell Bill that Aggie had gone Eyefer only an hour since. But maybe it would ease Bill's strain. If Bill was going to lose his job when he got back to town anyway, it wouldn't make any difference if he knew it now. Might even give him a chance to wrestle it out inside himself.

"Bill," he began as if it were to be another question.

"Yeah?"

"Miss Haulwell went Eyefer an hour ago. Commissioner Crawford told me."

Bill Haulwell's face went whiter than it was by nature. "You're kidding. And that's not the kind of joke I like," he said threateningly.

"It's no joke, I'm afraid."

Bill scanned Herl's face, saw it grave, sympathetic. He then opened the door on his own side of the cabter and stepped out into the sky.

HERL found himself sliding over to the driver's seat, reaching for the loosely swinging door, peering down and out. Bill was a mere dwindling spot below. Herl slammed the door shut by reflex action; then sat numbly nauseated. The cab flew on evenly.

Herl took a couple of very deep breaths to subdue the nausea and looked ahead to where the outline of the port tower was sharpening on the horizon. Cautiously he tried the controls of the cabter . . . up . . . down . . . right . . . left. He could manage it, he thought dully. He could find no lever, no button, no pedal with which to reduce or increase the forward speed, however. The

brake pedal for surface control evoked no response in the air. The tower came nearer and the image of the dwindling, falling blob that had been Bill Haulwell faded from Herl's mind as he sought frantically for the mechanism to cut his speed for landing.

The tower rushed toward the cab . . . and past. Herl set the cab into a tight circle a little smaller than the circumference of the landing area. Someone would notice him, someone would either signal him or, if the power were broadcast, let him down slowly . . . he hoped. If the cab used its own fuel, that would have to run out with time. He circled and circled, counterclockwise.

There seemed to be no diminution of speed so he began to spiral down toward the ground. If he could hold the circle a few feet above the ground, someone might at least come out and shout instructions.

There was no sign from the tower that his approach had been noticed. He circled the *Krylla* several times, then circled the tower. The place seemed deserted in the growing twilight. He considered flying close to the ground and jumping out but rejected that thought as he remembered the towerman's remark about the pitting of the cinder surface . . . and remembered the paved runway at the edge of the field from which the cabter had taken off on his trip to the city.

He headed for the runway in the direction from which he had originally taken off, coming down to let the wheels skim the smooth pavement. The cabter gathered speed rapidly as the end of the runway flung itself toward him. He raised the machine into the air missing the rough ground at the end of the way by scant feet.

Herl smiled grimly. Apparently power was somehow beamed at the runway. He circled over the weedy pasture-like space and a copse of small trees and headed back to the runway. Perhaps the power would be cut if one approached from this end. Again he lowered the cab till the wheels seemed but inches above the pavement . . . and sure enough, the speed decreased. Slower and more slowly he went; but the far end of the runway approached all too rapidly. He tried to rise again, but the response of the cab was sluggish now. By lightning judgment, Herl knew that only a jump would save him from crashing with the cab among the weeds.

Those weeds swept toward him as he opened the door and rolled out, relaxing to meet the pavement sliding past.

There was no tearing bruising impact, no sound of the cab's crash. Herl opened his eyes suddenly to see, meaninglessly before him, the control panel of his own *Krylla*. He was sitting in his own pneumatic control chair.

A moment of dull wonder was replaced by a deep shuddering from shoulders to hips and a feeling that his legs and arms had turned to dough. His eyes regarded the shadow across the control panel without trying to comprehend it; but the golden light reflected on both sides of the shadow meant something. He turned to see the source . . . and it was the goddess of the lobby.

She smiled reassuringly, and the smile seemed to flow through his veins and tingle along his nerves, pushing the numbness out and away. He was alive and eager and yet utterly peaceful for the duration of her smile. But as the corners of her mouth fell into a graver repose, his thoughts sped back through the moment of expected impact . . . through the frantic struggle with the cabter . . . through the moment of Haulwell's step from the door.

"Bill Haulwell," Herl mumbled, "he . . . he's . . ."

"He's in his cab halfway back to the city to report to Eyefer Placement." The matter-of-fact words were sung in the triumphant cadence of the close of a vast chorale, rich and full.

"You saved him . . . and me?" Herl asked incredulously.

"Yes."

"Why?"

Clear recitative explained, "He had not earned his death; he did not wish to die. No more had you."

Herl thought this over for a moment. Did no one die here till he was ready? Were the gods personal guardians? Was the presence of human life one of their conditions of being, one of their motivations? He started to speak, then hesitated as he remembered his conclusion that there were special ways of phrasing special questions for such beings as these. His mind tried in vain to block the consciousness of fear that she would leave him with his questions unasked . . . and

simply that she would leave him.

But the cloud still swirled and glowed with a million pinpoints of deep yellow incandescence. A sodium halo, Herl thought irrelevantly.

"Yes," she smiled again from her seat above the edge of the paper-cluttered desk. "It's like sodium. And we are not guardians. We do not care whether men live or die but we do . . . enjoy . . . their being glad about living or dying. I will not leave you till you are sorry." She stood and came near his chair.

Herl could not see that she walked in the air . . . she was just nearer. He rose and put out his hands as if to take hers to assure himself that she would stay, but where his hands entered the cloud they disappeared and felt nothing. He withdrew his offered embrace and his hands reappeared.

"Sorry for what?" asked Herl's voice; and Herl's heart quickened and his breathing forced, as he grew afraid to lose her and wild to keep her with him.

"Just sorry."

REGRET was like a knife stab. He must lose her: a man couldn't go around re-joicing forever. Anger succeeded regret, and he accused her bitterly, "So that's why you do nothing for the poor Eyefers! Because they're sorry to be that way! When you could save the poor creatures even by picking them out of the air, it offends your sensibilities to save them from a little red tape. Is that kind or just?"

His voice sneered 'kind' and 'just' as his mind pictured 'sympathetic' and 'the best that men ought to receive.' He was angry for himself, for the Eyefers. His anger grew with the hurt to include all humanity betrayed by heartless beauty.

But a flood of intense living greenness washed through the control room, blotting out the walls and lapping against Herl's red tunic above the hip pockets, as if a strange sea rose about him to quench his anger.

He repeated his last words, vaguely, enthralled by the green waves, "Is that kind or just?"

The green waves changed to living blue and he heard her voice like a distant bell. "No."

Herl had a sensation as if the blueness

washed completely through him with a tingling coolness. Suddenly the room cleared and she was sitting on the edge of the table still. In Herl's mind lay fresh and clear the method he had planned hours . . . or was it minutes . . . earlier for communicating with this glowing girl-thing, exact, detailed, perfect questions for a perfect mind. His overwhelming intent to embrace her was put neatly to one side as on a shelf; his anger was as if it had never been.

"Do you have a name?" he looked coolly at her as if helping her fill out a questionnaire.

"Yes."

"What is it please?" he asked, firm, polite.

"Abigail."

Herl smothered a grin. There could be something unexotic about a goddess. "Can you offer data as well as supply data and computation on demand?" he wanted to know.

"Yes."

"Will you be good enough to do so hereafter when I ask you questions?"

"If you will indicate the limitations you wish on additional data," she replied gravely.

"Do you mean that there is so great a correlation between all extant data that you would continue offering indefinitely if you were not arbitrarily limited?" he asked curiously, feeling an interior warmth of success. His method of communication was working indeed. Be explicit, he told himself.

"Yes."

Herl sneaked a mental look at his urge to kiss her. As when eating Crawford's steak, he found that he could forgive and forget a great deal when confronted with considerable pleasure in prospect.

He continued. "Will you decide and tell me what questions I ought to ask and what actions I ought to take and what limitations I should set on the data you have to offer?" Now he would have communication by the roots.

"No."

"Are you capable of doing so, Abigail?" A crucial question, asked almost in a whisper.

"No."

Grief more bitter than anger ran through

his veins like corrosive poison. This was the wrong answer. She must be a machine-thing after all, he concluded . . . limited, arbitrary, unhuman, incapable of loving him or being concerned for his welfare, incapable of sorting out good from bad or valuable from expedient.

He withdrew his eyes from her brightness and from her delicate features and from her rounded limbs and put his head in his hands. An agonized sigh burst from him. No human woman could keep from giving him good advice, particularly if she knew all the answers . . . his mother never had avoided the responsibilities of knowledge. So she could have nothing human about her. She was just a thing.

"No . . . no . . . no," her music faded slowly away; and Herl looked up to catch the faintest after-image of the brilliance that had centered on the table. That, too, was gone in an instant; and no presence or effects of a presence other than his own was visible before him.

He sat motionless in his supporting chair, his eyes staring unseeingly at brown table and black film lockers and at the long blue chart roll hung behind the table and at the calculator keys in their neat meaningless ranks. In her absence, he felt compressed between the backward thrust of disillusion and emptiness and the forward pull of a tearing desire to be with her wherever she was. He would have done anything she wanted, gone anywhere, been anything . . . and there was nothing she wanted of him. He remained slumped, drained of purpose. Drained, he reflected, by a shiny machine more bound than he to commands and limitations. At any rate he did have a few minor purposes of his own.

V

HE GOT up stiffly and reached for the locker handles, squeezed the metal, felt the latches withdraw, swung the doors open. Mechanically he took down the reels of film and wire from their pegs and laid them in squat pillars on the table top. Another locker yielded two black rectangular carrying cases with handles. Herl loaded the reels carefully into one case, checked the power pack in the base of the other case

with leads to a test-board in one drawer of the table. Lifting both heavy cases, he started for the door.

The slightest clue of remembrance tinged in his mind, and he returned to his chair and phoned the control tower.

"Class M ship *Krylla* on the field calling control tower," he bit off the words tensely.

"Control tower to *Krylla*; come in *Krylla*." The voice was high-pitched and boyish, obviously not Saem Berry.

"Did you see what became of the cabter that landed me here," Herl referred to the chronometer on his instrument panel, "ten minutes ago?"

"Cabter KZ-351 returned to Delight City."

"Can you call me another cabter to take me to the city?" At any rate, Herl thought, she really was powerful to be able to return an empty cabter. He had an amusing mental image of Abigail stretching an extra shining arm through the miles of air between the *Krylla* and where a shining hand supported the waiting and unconscious Bill Haulwell. He might learn some tricks from her yet.

All he had to do was find out why she had rescued him and Bill. After all, if she had no knowledge of valid selection of purposes, she must be controlled by some command, some exterior compulsion, like the familiar robots of earth, so carefully constructed with arbitrary functions and prohibitions built in. Time to compute on that later. The thought was rapid, finished before the answer came from the tower.

"I'll have to see your hired vehicle permit, if you have one." The thin voice was sarcastic and a bit suspicious.

"I'll come right to the tower with it. Over."

Grasping a case in each hand he left the ship and headed for the tower entrance. Almost there, the hum of an incoming copter made him turn and look at the runway. The copter landed neatly and, even from that distance, Herl could recognize the fur-coated figure of Commissioner Crawford getting out.

The Commissioner raised an arm and hailed Captain Hofner. "Hey!"

"Hey, yourself," Herl turned from the tower and strode toward the copter. "Did

you come for me?"

"Sure," yelled the Commissioner. Turning to look up and wave at the tower, he called, "It's all right, Alco. This is my guest." He halted and waited for Herl to come up with him.

"Bill phoned me," began Crawford apologetically, "that he'd had the word about Agnes and dashed back to straighten out the driving job so someone else could take over." The two men walked side by side to the copter. "That was a very decent thing for him to do, even if it did leave you stranded out here . . . so I came out for you. Find everything?"

"Oh I found everything, all right," Herl grinned wryly. "Did Bill tell you about Abigail?"

"Abigail?" asked Crawford. "I don't seem to remember the name."

"She saved me from getting hurt during the landing. A goddess. Bill was probably embarrassed to mention it. It was my own stupid fault."

Herl went around the copter to get in.

Crawford edged in behind the controls. "Bill probably wanted you to keep out of trouble. He knows that we are apt to look with considerable suspicion on people who have to be saved from their own foolish mistakes by superhuman agencies. That doesn't apply to you, of course, unless you're planning to settle and raise kids here." The 'perish-the-thought' tone was obvious.

"Frankly, as an outsider," Herl said, "it seems to me that these gods and goddesses could be a very useful mechanism. I didn't mind missing a bad fall at all."

"And frankly, as a local citizen and an ordinary one at that, I think you were very lucky. You might even say that down underneath I'm just a bit jealous." The copter slid through the upper air. "I sometimes dream of having a chance to rescue some female not a tenth as luscious as a goddess."

HERL was surprised to hear the Commissioner snigger at his own remark. Surprised but not disgusted. Females less perfect than goddesses seemed to call for sniggers.

"Goddesses are only goddesses, but women are women," Herl commented dryly.

"Oh! You found that out already, did

you?" Crawford looked admiringly at his companion. "You're a quick worker."

Hard bitterness surged through Herl. "I found out a lot of things. They're nothing, absolutely nothing but mechanism. I wonder you people haven't learned to use them in place of copters and television. They're probably even capable of sorting your population in infancy so you wouldn't have to go to the trouble of inventing a dozen new kinds of red tape a day which must annoy your normal citizens even while it screens the adults."

"No . . . no . . . no . . ." Crawford's descending cadence was oddly reminiscent of some other falling cadence of no's. "You've got both the gods and us all wrong, Captain Hofner. I don't know what you think you found out from this Abigail, but you must have misinterpreted it somewhere."

"Indeed?"

"Oh yes indeed. Mechanisms are made . . . made for somebody's use. Our best minds have never been able to find any use for gods. We can even use natural phenomena like rain and heat and wind and gravity and such because those things are governed by observable natural laws . . . but the gods? No. Absolutely random in appearance; absolutely unpredictable in action. Whatever they are, it's not machines. Although," he added curiously, "I shall be most interested to learn how and why you think we could use them."

"Maybe I should sell you the secret. Selling is my business," suggested Herl.

"The commissioners will be most willing to buy . . . if you have anything to sell," Crawford replied smoothly.

"You could use that childhood or prenatal screening, couldn't you?"

"Yes and no," answered Crawford. "That's another mistaken idea you have about us. What you think of as red tape invented purely for screening purposes is not so at all. It's an integral part of civilized life and social responsibility. We'd all be pleased to spare a portion of our children the strains of such a life if we could, but we have no intention of reverting to savagery ourselves just to avoid filling out a few miserable blanks at a few stated times."

"Oh, you like it?" Herl asked facetiously.

"We like having cars and living in houses

and driving in comparative safety and eating enough and not having people we've cheated or oppressed or maimed in unnecessary accidents whining around on our doorsteps making us feel guilty and miserable. We even like having occasional strangers like you around so we can tell them all about it and keep the beauties of civilization clear before our eyes, so to speak."

"You win," Herl laughed. "I don't know whether there's a galactic destiny ahead of your people, but as long as you're enjoying it so much, that hardly matters."

"I hoped you'd see it that way," the Commissioner said genially. "And as for the destiny, that'll take care of itself. Did you have quite a talk with the goddess?" he added curiously.

"Quite a talk, but brief. I've had some training in cybernetics . . . that's how I was able to ask the right questions to find out that she was a machine."

Crawford smiled to himself. "Then," he said slyly, "our experts must have asked the right questions to find out that she wasn't."

Herl bit his tongue. "Maybe," he admitted. There was no object in telling Crawford all about his method or his discoveries, or he'd have nothing to sell. Not that he'd make the profit from such a sale but somebody in coordination would appreciate his cleverness in selling a planet something it already had and still being able to peddle the idea to somebody else. If he were really clever, he could take a few gods on with him to the places where they could do the most good. He certainly would enjoy looking at Abigail, for instance, for a few months before he unloaded her on a planet less fortunate than Delight. And, if he were sorry to leave her behind, she'd stay there the more gladly. If she wouldn't tell him what to do, obviously she would have to do what he told her.

THE gray air of the planet seemed to be thickening as they landed and drove back toward the Civil Building. A few more heavy-coated pedestrians were hastening along the walks, and a solid stream of small, lighted vehicles poured along the street in the opposite direction. As Crawford's slowed automatically for an intersection, Herl noticed flakes of snow in the air.

"Is this early spring or late fall?" he asked without enthusiasm.

"This is the way it always is at this altitude," Crawford replied, surprised. "I've read about seasons, of course, but we don't have them here. Our foodstuff is mostly grown further south. Around here and to the north is mostly grazing and pelt land on the surface above the mines."

At this moment the vehicle pulled to a stop in the middle of a residential block; and Crawford growled, "What the . . . ?"

Herl noticed that the opposing traffic had also halted. Then the air was split with the deafeningly raucous hooting of some great signal horn.

"Power's off! Emergency warning," Crawford shouted in Herl's ear. "Sit tight and see what happens!" He gestured to the line of opposing traffic from which passengers were popping out to run confusedly to the sidewalk. "They know better than that," he fumed.

Herl looked at the crowd gathering on his side of the carpter, then suddenly beyond it to the nearest house. Smoke was pouring out of two of the front windows. Some of the people from the vehicles were running toward the house, while the front door was flung open and two men and a woman came running out. Herl grabbed Crawford's arm. "Fire!" he yelled.

Crawford leaned across Herl to look. "Can't be serious," he bellowed. "Those places are practically fireproof. Inspected every two months."

Then he sounded puzzled and alarmed. "Where the devil are those three going?" and he pointed to the people who had run from the house and who were still running fleetly along the edges of lawns in the direction faced by Crawford's carpter.

Herl opened the door and leaned out to watch. People were coming out of houses further down the street, a few at a time, to follow or precede the first three in the direction of the heart of the city.

Cries of "Fire!" could be heard on down the street. Flames showed through the windows of other houses. The people who had got to the sidewalks from their abandoned vehicles were moving hesitantly toward the houses, apparently confused by the flight of those within.

A man appeared in the doorway of the house from which the first three had come. "Hey!" he shouted at those stragglers nearest him, "some of you come in here and help me put out the fire!" Several men ran into the house behind him.

A few more single individuals ran by in the direction of the business district. Herl turned to his companion.

"It looks as though those first three set the fire and ran off," he shouted, puzzled. "What's up?"

Crawford put his hand on the door and shook his head. "Don't know, but I recognized one of those fellows who just passed us. Eyefer named Hanston. Used to be a clerk of mine. I'm going on down the line and see what's doing."

"Not without me," Herl stated. "I can't operate one of these things," he waved his hand at the carpter, "and you may need help." Commissioner Crawford hardly looked in condition for a long run.

"What about your things? Don't you want to keep an eye on them?"

"They'll be all right," Herl said flatly, knowing that he should never let them out of his sight outside his own ship . . . that they would be impossible to replace without returning to Earth.

The older man slid out of his seat and jogged off down the middle of the street till the younger caught up with him. Together they ran toward the city.

BETWEEN the lined-up cars they could see fires in many of the houses they passed, and groups of people standing helplessly on sidewalks and lawns. None of the houses appeared to be actually on fire, but window draperies or something near the windows were blazing merrily. Through some casements, people could be seen aiming fire extinguishers at the flames or throwing water on them.

Crawford lumbered along rather slowly. Herl matched his pace. A young man running rapidly passed them from behind.

"Going to the Civil Building to see the fun?" he panted out as he passed.

"Sure," returned Herl, speeding up a little. "What's it all about?"

The young man looked back at Herl, seeming to notice the red tunic and drum

cap for the first time. "If you don't know . . ." he gasped out, "you'd better stay back. It's the Eyefer Plan." He sprinted on and Herl turned back to wait for the Commissioner.

"It's something about the Eyefers," he told the trotting man as he fell into step beside him. "He said he was going to the Civil Building to see the fun, and he called it 'the Eyefer Plan.'"

"Can't imagine what . . . that . . . is," Crawford blurted out. "Keep going."

They passed dark shops and closed warehouses. The lines of cars were solid here and a tide of hurrying pedestrians on the sidewalks swept toward town. Runners threaded among them, men in shabby clothes, forlorn looking women pushing and stumbling ahead a little faster than the general pace. The center of the street where Herl and Crawford jogged on between the cars was almost deserted.

Crawford grasped Herl's sleeve and pulled him to a stop. "Look there!"

Herl looked where he pointed and saw the crowd milling about the door of a shop. A man and a woman stood in the doorway tossing fur coats out into the mob. Here and there a runner paused, grabbed up a coat where it fell on or near a pedestrian, and ran on.

Crawford climbed over the bumpers of a couple of cars and got to the sidewalk. Herl followed and joined him at the shop doorway in time to hear the Commissioner say, "See here, my man, those coats are not yours to give away. You're an Eyefer and you have no business at all here. Now get on home."

He grabbed the man's elbow to start him on his way . . . and recognized him. "Good grief! Bill Haulwell!"

The woman in the doorway was Agnes. She laughed boisterously. "Get along home yourself, old man. We want coats so we take coats. Here, have one."

She threw a heavy fur coat over Crawford's head and as he tried to fight clear of its folds, Bill held it down like a bag and hoisted the small man along toward the edge of the crowd.

Herl caught him as he fell and pulled off the coat. Crawford threw it angrily on the ground. "You can't get away with this," he

shouted. "The police will be here in a minute."

This time it was Bill who laughed. "They're all too busy at the Civil Building to bother with coats." Agnes threw out a couple more coats which had been handed to her by somebody within the shop.

"Besides, they already have coats," she added.

"We'd better get out of this," Herl told Crawford, starting back across the cars.

"Yes," agreed the latter as he clambered up and over. "Better see what's happening downtown. Sounds drastic."

The pair ran on faster now. From ahead grew a trembling roar which swelled to a steady gentle thundering above which the alarm yapped and blatted. A ruddy glow silhouetted the bodies of the cars they were passing, and the center of the street was filling with runners. A few hundred yards brought them to where Herl could see the shape of the Civil Building and recognize the glow as fire spurting from the windows of the two top storeys.

They stopped on the outskirts of an immense crowd circling the building. Great streams of water shot aloft from immense hoses; but the streams wobbled and wavered in a hundred directions as the nozzles shifted everywhere but at the building itself. Herl and Crawford were drenched twice before they could get close enough to see that the hoses were being battled for by gangs of Eyefers against the sturdy teams of firemen. The shouting and roar of the fire were so deafening that Herl and the Commissioner were well into the crowd before the words were comprehensible.

"Let 'em burn! Let the records burn! Let 'em burn up!"

"The records!" Crawford gave out a kind of spluttering screech that made Herl turn in astonishment. "The records! My God! There won't be any laws . . . any Eyefers . . . any *civilization* if we lose the records!"

Herl thought the little man was going to faint, he trembled so violently. Then, suddenly, Crawford took a great gulping breath, wrenched himself from Herl's supporting grasp and, pushing his way through the massed bodies, made for the cordon keeping the onlookers out of the danger zone. Herl pressed after him but reached the

front line only in time to see Crawford jumping sidewise fifty feet ahead to elude a fireman and dashing for the gaping mouth of the vehicle tunnel through the building. Herl followed on the double, pointing ahead at the disappearing figure of the Commissioner without trying to yell out his destination to the hindering firemen.

A greater shout went up as a piece of the stone cornice fell from the top of the building to the pavement below with the crash of nearby blasting. Severed sections of hose blatted forth powerful torrents that swept firemen and mob along the street into a line of cars. Herl dodged among writhing pythons of hose toward the tunnel. Another surging shout heralded another cataclysmic deed of fire; and Herl looked up to see a piece of wall about twenty feet high falling slowly away from the building above him.

He closed his eyes and dashed forward. He felt the tremendous jar of the smashing stone force him to his knees, but no sound . . . in fact all sound had faded to utter stillness.

"Struck deaf," he thought wonderingly and opened his eyes to find himself kneeling before the table in the silence of the *Krylla*. The bright warmth of Abigail shone before him where she sat several inches above the table top.

"Abigail," he shouted, scrambling to his feet. His voice rang through the small cabin, and he lowered it to suit his surroundings. "Why did you bring me here?"

"You were in danger," she replied pleasantly.

"So is Crawford. I've got to help him. Take me back!" he commanded.

"He's all right. No one will be hurt tonight who doesn't want to be hurt." Her voice was sweetly matter of fact.

"I don't believe it. The Eyefers have run wild! Crawford ran right into the building. He'll be killed. Take me back!" He pounded the table with his fist.

VI

HE WAS back. The roar of the crowd and the fire and the hideous 'poot-poot-poot' of the alarm filled his consciousness. He was stumbling forward into the pithy blackness of the tunnel under the

building. He could see a man a hundred feet ahead scrambling up to the walkway, illumined only by the glare from the tunnel mouth. Suddenly brightness bloomed beside the man and the golden form of a god cradled the man's body like a child, rose four or five feet into the air, and faded abruptly into nothingness. The tunnel was dark and empty ahead.

Herl turned and strode back toward the mouth of the tunnel. Just under the sheltering edge he paused to look out at the mob and to judge whether another part of the building were about to fall.

The throng was now a series of rings of luridly red wild-faced beings linked together at the elbows, swaying this way and that, howling in unison, "Burn the records! No more Eyefers! Burn the records! No more Eyefers!"

Hovering over the heads of the chanters, Herl could see at least half a dozen great yellow lights which he took to be gods watching the doings.

"Some sense of humor," he said to himself, as he leaned out of the shelter to look up.

The searing redness of the fire faded before his eyes to the cooler radiance of Abigail; and he was looking up at her where she hung near the ceiling of the *Krylla's* cabin.

"They don't think it's funny at all," she replied reproachfully, as if he had addressed his last remark to her. "They are simply preventing accidents. Being trampled to death is not really a joke." This in a minor cadence of muted violins.

"But don't the Eyefers intend death and destruction to the non-Eyefers? That fire is no joke, either."

"No one will be hurt, as I told you. The Eyefer Plan calls only for the destruction of the records. They burned all the individual permits they could find before they left the houses. Now they burn the files. Nobody could tell an Eyefer from anybody else without the papers; and papers burn." She sounded quite pleased.

"Are you gods in on this?" Herl sat frustratedly on the edge of the desk. "Why didn't you just vanish the papers years ago?"

"We only help when people are sure they know what they want to do. The Eyefers

had to be ready. After that they will do as they please and as they can and must."

"But you are involved in this revolt somehow," he frowned, "and why should this uprising come just when I arrive?"

"You are a catalyst," she giggled, a peal of tiny sleighbells, and drifted down toward the pilot chair. "And we are just preventing the Eyefers from being sorry for their plan as we prevented the civies from being sorry for theirs. The civies made a mistake and we are saving them from it." She laughed again. "They frown at people who are saved from their mistakes by 'supernatural agencies' so the Eyefers will save them."

Herl was ready to ask how he was a catalyst, but the words 'supernatural agencies' reminded him of Crawford and his own cases resting on the stalled carpter.

"My cases," he said. "I've got to get them back here. Take me back again, Abby." His thought continued that he would get a chance to see more of the fight, that had been brewing for decades.

"I'll bring them to you," she assented, resting lightly in the chair. "This isn't your squabble."

"But you said I was involved—as a catalyst at least."

"The reaction is self-sustaining now."

"But you don't know where the carpter is," he objected hopefully.

"You do . . . so I do." The cases were on the table in front of him.

"What am I supposed to do now? Wait till Crawford calls to say all deals are off?" Herl remarked irritated. Who did the girl think she was, refusing like an over-solicitous mother to let him get back to the riot?

"Yes. Mr. Crawford won't be able to call you till the power is restored about noon tomorrow. And it will be months before he knows what he wants to order. What you do is your own will, of course. I can't penetrate that unless you can. I'm going back to the fire to help there. I'll see you again unless you decide to blast off before I come back."

Herl grabbed for her bare shoulders where they shone a mere yard in front of him. "You're not going back without me!" he stormed but she was quite gone before the sentence was complete, leaving him in the utter darkness of an unilluminated cabin.

He found the back of the chair, seated

himself, touched the light switch. He was indeed alone in the cabin. The heavy cases sat smug on the motionless table. He felt numb, aware only of an unwillingness to move and of the futility of trying to get back to the city if he was only to find himself back in the *Krylla* if he did. "Damned interfering female," he muttered disgustedly, "I'll show her!" All he had to do, she'd said, was blast off. Why not?

He switched on the phone, still set for the control tower.

"Class M ship *Krylla* on the field, calling control tower," he articulated crisply.

There was no response.

"Class M Ship," he repeated impatiently, "calling control tower. Come in tower!"

There was no carrier hum from his receiver. The thing seemed dead. He activated the viewscreen above the instrument panel and adjusted the angle for a full sight of the tower.

The tower was there, all right, a black hulk against the slightly luminous night sky, unlighted, solid, a mere chunk of construction.

"Hanh! Power's off, of course," Herl said aloud. Well, that meant nobody else would try to land here, so takeoff should be safe if he wanted to do his own manipulating out of the atmosphere.

But he'd have to leave some sort of message for Crawford, he realized. He swivelled the chair and regarded the cases of film and wire blankly. His job was coordination, not dashing off on a mad into space. He calculated quickly . . . twenty-two, twenty-three hours till daylight; then maybe another ten hours or so till the power was restored and he could talk to Crawford . . . if Crawford would talk to him . . . if Crawford still had any power to negotiate extra-planetary purchases. And if Crawford didn't, he, Herl, would have to wait around till somebody did have the authority. Wait, wait, wait!

Every muscle in Herl's body seemed taut to the breaking point. He couldn't just sit and wait thirty-two hours for the privilege of waiting till the Eyefers formed a government and got ready to bargain! He jumped hopefully for an instant at the thought of walking the eighty miles to town. He could probably do that in thirty-two hours. Only to have that woman catch up to him when

he was halfway there and plump him back in this ship.

A METALLIC clanging against the skin of the ship brought him to his feet. He moved to the inner lock door and opened it slowly, noiselessly. Maybe the Eyefers had got control of the tower already!

Bang! Bang! the hammering continued. Not power hammering, more like knocking.

Herl let the outer lock open a fraction of an inch toward him. The voice from outside filled the lock with its bellow. "Hey! Anybody in here? Hey, Captain."

It was the tower man of the first long wait.

"What d'you want?" Herl asked suspiciously, shoulder against the lock door.

"It's Saem Berry. I need help. Power's off, Joe Alco's gone, twenty-five hours mail is due in anytime. May try to land right on top of us! You got a radio!"

"Sure," Herl's suspicions faded. "Come in." He opened the lock wide and gave the heavy man a hand up. "Want me to try to contact the mail, huh?"

"Yeah. But you better let me talk to them." The towerman followed Herl to the chair, adding the necessary instructions for calling the mail ship.

Herl sat down and got to work.

Within five minutes the ship had been re-routed back to its last port of call and Herl and Saem were relaxing over cups of huffy Herl had opened in the galley. Saem tipped back in the pilot chair to reflect on the state of things in the city, which Herl had given him in bits and pieces as he relayed it to the oncoming mail ship.

"Well, Captain, I might as well get back to the tower and wait it out unless you're willing to have me here for company, that is. There's no other ship due till about morning."

"I'd be glad to have you stay," Herl said hesitantly, "but I haven't decided just what to do myself. I don't suppose Crawford and the commissioners will be in any position to trade now; and I'm not too hopeful about trying to deal with an irresponsible gang like those Eyefers. I could probably get back this way in, say, a couple of years when things have settled down and they know what they need." His voice was nonchalant,

but with an undercurrent of eagerness for an excuse to be gone.

"I wouldn't be in any hurry, son," Saem assured him, taking a deep swig of huffy. "I don't think the Eyefers will try to run things at all. Not only out of the habit, but they don't want to. They'd have everything to lose by not using the present trade and power set-ups. All they want is jobs and justice."

"And no questions asked?" Herl frowned. "You sound as if you approved of this revolt."

"Why not?" Saem demanded truculently. "I had a kid all trained to take over the second day shift . . . best radioman I ever had. When his mother went Eyefer they jerked him out of here to a bobbin job in the mills so fast I had to work twenty-two hours a day for a month before I got a replacement. I approve of anything that'll put a stop to such stupidity."

Herl squirmed, pursed his lips. "You think I'd better stay, then?"

"Well, why not wait for that goddess to come back? She'll have a report on what's going on and you can make up your mind then. She can give you better advice than I could." The shock-headed Saem set his empty cup down on the desk with a smack. "Got another of those?" he gestured at the cup.

"Blast the huffy, man! This calls for something better than that." Herl jumped down from the table. "I've got a bottle of bonded thiska for medicinal purposes. That'll shorten the wait!" He bounded past Saem through the galley door.

The towerman looked after him bewildered, watched him reach into a locker and bring out the plastic flask, saw him take down two small plastic beakers and come back past the doorway to perch jubilantly on the desk again holding out the flask invitingly. Saem looked at him questioningly.

"She said she wouldn't leave us as long as we're not sorry," Herl announced. "So let's get just as unsorry as this bottle will let us."

Saem approached the desk hesitantly. "What is that stuff," he asked, "something like beer?"

"Something like beer, the man says!" chuckled Herl. "Yes, boy, something like

beer. Here." He poured out a beaker full of amber thiska and handed it to Saem. "One for me." He poured out another beaker full. "To not being sorry," he raised his beaker and drained it.

Saem tasted his, then gulped also. "Whooeee! Something like beer, the man says," he echoed and passed back his beaker. "Did you offer *this* stuff to the commissioners?" he wanted to know.

"Silly old commissioners," Herl remarked archly, slopping out two more drinks. "Didn't want girly shows . . . don't like people to get mixed up with goddesses . . . couldn't possibly appreciate bonded thiska. Didn't even offer them any." He drew a deep breath. Thiska couldn't work this fast on only one drink unless he were tired or upset. It must be thinking about Abigail that made him feel he had an antigravitor attached to his ears. Abigail!

"Here's to Abigail. May she never be sorry either!" he announced.

"Here's to Abby . . . knows all, sees all, tells 'em nothing!" Saem downed his drink and moved over to the swivel chair, sat, held out his beaker.

"Say, Saem," Herl filled the extended beaker with deliberate care, "what kind of a wife would a girl make if a man never knew where she'd be next?"

"I dunno, son. Maybe you could anchor her at home with a pair of electro-magnets." Saem laughed longer and louder than Herl expected, downed his beaker and held it out again.

Herl looked at the proffered container, narrowed his eyes and looked at Saem suspiciously. "That's about enough for you, Saem. You're beginning to get blurry."

Saem looked down at his extended arm. Sure enough, a golden haze was starting to form around the limb, a naked, rippling muscular arm. He set his beaker with exaggerated precision on the edge of the desk and slapped at the offending haze. "Get back in there," he commanded. The haze cleared, the brown shirt sleeve regained complete opacity. "Nothing wrong with me," he announced firmly. "You must be seeing things. Give me another." He held up the beaker.

Herl shook his head and poured himself another. "I need this worse than you do.

I'm the one that I . . . need Abigail not to leave me . . . myself and not you. You can get just as sorry as you like because then when she comes back she'll leave you and not me and that means she'll put you somewhere else. If I don't give you another drink, you'll be sorry and I'll have her all to myself . . . do you follow me? Hurry up, Abigail!"

A FLARE exploded brilliantly by the gallery door and it was Abigail. Her cloud of golden haze was forming into swiding tendrils which snapped into sparks at the ends.

Herl widened his eyes at the frequent revelation of thigh, of bosom.

Her voice was an angry pizzicato of steel strings. "Saem Berry! Dad! You're drunk! Get out of that matter this instant! The idea, Herl Hofner, getting Saem drunk when he was supposed to be keeping *you* out of trouble!"

Her slender arm pointed accusingly at Saem. "Out of it!" she jangled, "or I'll leave you to do all the explaining."

Herl's gaze followed her gesture and he watched, trancelike, as the clothes of the transfiguring towerman disintegrated into wreaths of shining golden smoke which clung around a superb sculptured torso and swirled to leave a benign and thoughtful face regarding him with sympathetic, almost regretful amusement.

Saem's voice was the pedal tones of a great organ improvising in a minor key. "All that alcohol wasted when I put off the flesh," he sang at Abigail. "A new sensation, and you take it from me."

"You can go back to your tower and re-materialize with all that poison inside you, as soon as you've explained us and the rebellion to Herl. He doesn't trust me very much, yet," she chimed.

Herl shook his head and looked at Abigail and back at Saem. He blinked and straightened his spine and breathed deeply; but they didn't change or go away.

Saem looked at him intently and, to Herl, the interior of the room was filled with the liquid blue of his first tete-a-tete with Abigail . . . blue and green waves of coolness washing through him and then complete clarity and sharpness of outline of every-

thing about him.

"I'll synthesize you another flask of thiska," Saem apologized, "later."

Abigail relaxed her accusatory attitude, crossed her perfect legs and sat in the air at the level of the desk. "Now tell him quickly," she requested, "so he can leave if he wants to."

"Abby took one look at you and made up her mind," Saem said matter-of-factly, "partly because she'd like to travel and partly because most of us god-boys are younger than she and not ready to materialize and settle down . . . and partly because . . . well, she can tell you that herself."

"Oh?" Herl's clarity of mind did not prevent bewilderment at this sudden revelation. He looked at Abigail who smiled seraphically back.

"But she didn't want to miss the fun of the Eyefer revolution she'd been conniving at for years, so she had to precipitate that at once and get it over with."

"I see," said Herl, "what kind of catalyst I was." And he was beginning to.

"She was being quite literal when she told you she couldn't tell you what you ought to do. Your own morals and ethics are so far inside that she couldn't get at them without your full consent or hypnosis. But of course, like any other gal, she knew perfectly what she wanted you to do; and she did it."

"Aha," said Herl, whose grasp of the idea was sudden and complete.

"We can read formulated thoughts, of course, but not basic postulates unstated . . . as long as we are composed of space, time, and energy and don't dabble in the slow stuff you call matter too much."

Herl looked at the shimmering Abigail keenly. "You mean to tell me that you can take on a matter body and give up sliding through my mind?" he demanded.

Abigail straightened her already straight posture. "If I want to," she replied coolly.

Saem chuckled in bull-fiddle tones. "If she wants a family she'll have to," he informed Herl. "The best babies are like the worst . . . they all have to be made out of matter."

Abigail's sodium haze deepened toward the neon. "Dad!"

Her father's look became affectionate. "I don't know where you'd be if Mother and I hadn't settled down long ago with faked papers by the ream and started raising little pre-goddesses."

To Herl he said, "Mother's a somatic surgeon, specializing in the reversal of sterilization operations. That's one reason why they won't be able to tell Eyeferers from anybody else when the smoke clears. Oh," he added, remembering, "I forgot to ask about the little insurrection and whether you think Delightites will want to buy anything from this sears-monkey."

"You're a dear old Eyefer, Dad," Abigail laughed. "The excitement is still on, but Hanner and Treece are smoothing things down." She turned to Herl. "I hope it isn't a disappointment to you, but Delight won't need to buy anything for years. They're just about to find out that they can do anything they want to. You'll have to peddle your planets and your calculators and your dancing girls somewhere else . . . where they're really needed."

And back to Saem, "You can go see the fire for yourself now, if you like."

"I guess that's my cue," Saem stood up a foot or so above the floor, extended his glowing hand. "Take care of my little girl and drop back this way sometime soon."

Not knowing what else to do, Herl reached for the hand and saw his own vanish into the cloud, felt nothing. "Good-bye, sir," he fumbled.

He withdrew his hand and said, "But . . ." But Saem was just not there.

Abigail laughed, sweet, musical.

Herl turned and saw her, a woman in a silky blue gown. A woman with red hair, not amber flames, a woman surrounded by a faint flowery scent, not incandescent sodium vapor. A woman standing shyly on the floor, not proudly seated on an airy throne.

He sprang down from the table and took her into his arms for a long long moment.

She drew away for an instant and laughed. "I thought I'd given up telepathy, dear, but I still seem to know just what you're thinking."

"And I know what I ought to do," he replied and did it.