

PLANET STORIES



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*'Twas said of The Berserker
... "when an opening
comes he'll play for it, and
he'll do it with a single-
minded violence."*

THE BERSERKER

By CHARLES V. DE VET

ALL of Big Jim Ostby's attention seemed on the cigar as he lit it, but it was not. He observed the faces of the men who passed him by, and the figures of those

across the street, and up and down the sidewalk. Satisfied, he moved on.

Ostby's six feet four, and two hundred thirty-five pounds, were not conspicuous on

this other-dimensional world, where his size was but little above average. And only the sharpest observer would have noted the leashed aliveness of the instrument of sinew and muscle which was his body.

Deliberately Ostby avoided the shadows. That way lay danger. Reason, abetted by an instinctive capacity for adaptation, told him blending in with his background offered the best concealment.

By now the whole district would know that the police were after him. He wondered what the latest reports were. Casually he slowed his pace until two men behind him drew near enough to be overheard.

"They say the police have the Berserker cornered in our half of the Flats," one of the men said.

"If they trap 'im there's gonna be some dead police before the night's over." the second answered. "He ain't called the Berserker for nothing."

"I'd hate to be in his shoes. They've got a net around the district that a fly couldn't get through."

"I'd hate to be one of the police that corners him."

"He'll never get away this time."

"I wouldn't bet against him if I was you. The gamblers in the street are giving odds of two to one that he makes it."

"How do you figure he's got a chance?"

"I don't know. We're not cut out of the right stuff for that kind of thing. He is. When an opening comes he'll play for it, and he'll do it with a single-minded violence."

Suddenly Ostby's attention was drawn to a group of men collected at the corner ahead. Two thin lines of police were blocking the way and examining identity cards. He drew in a long, deep breath. Life for him on this world was one of a series of crises, unforeseen, but stationed along his way as regularly as mileposts.

Swiftly, but with studied unconcern, he looked about him. To turn back here would arouse attention. His cigar had gone out now, and he flicked it into the gutter.

To his right was an amusement place. He turned and entered.

The place was filled with the usual crowd of drinkers and merrymakers. Ostby found a seat at the bar and ordered a drink.

A minute later he left his stool and went to the rest room. He had to plan a way out in case of necessity. There was no back entrance to the rest room, he saw, and the only window was high above his head. Too small for a man's body to squeeze through. He'd be trapped if he let them corner him here.

Back at the bar he found his drink still waiting.

"I held your place for you," a woman's soft voice said.

OSTBY glanced into the full length mirror above the bar. The girl next to him was young and pretty. He shifted his glance to his own reflection. The mustache and the little patch of beard between his chin and lower lip had grown well. His whiskers always came in heavy and black, and they were the style now. They altered his appearance considerably.

Evidently it had not lessened his attraction for the opposite sex. That attractiveness had been with him so long that he had ceased being surprised by it. But it still puzzled him. There was strength in the features of the reflection that looked back at him, he admitted, but no beauty. Rather the outline was almost harsh, as though etched by a rough masculine hand. He wondered, without caring, why women were drawn to it.

All this retrospection occurred in the split second after he glanced into the mirror. "I am in your debt," he said, turning to his companion. His manner and expression was disinterested, even a bit disdainful. Yet his voice was gentle and courteous.

Perhaps that contrast was the thing that held women's attention. The manner seemed to imply a knowledge of their wiles, and an ability to read through their vanities. Yet his voice told them that he recognized their womanly need to be appreciated, and coddled, and that he would be invariably gentle with them.

"May I buy you a drink?" he asked.

"My glass is still full," the girl answered, and smiled at him. She did not look so young now that he saw her face to face. The features were young, but the eyes were old, and too wise for one of her chronological age. With his flameless lighter Ostby lit the white oval which the girl drew from its

package and placed between her full red lips.

All the while Ostby's eyes made their swift survey of the room and stamped its every feature in his eidetic memory. Only one exit, other than the front door, he saw. The windows were all about seven feet above the floor, and banded with burglar-bars. A man would have difficulty gaining entrance or exit.

At the opposite end of the room he observed a small dance floor and a mechanical music box. His attention was held for a moment by a party seated in a booth at the edge of the dance floor. The men and women in the booth were too well dressed, too well bred, to be down here in the Flats.

The apex of the party was a woman whose beauty attracted Ostby clear across the room.

"Who are the people in the back booth?" he asked his companion.

"The Duchess of North Hudson," the girl answered, wrinkling her nose in affected hauteur. "She's slumming. Seeing how the other half lives."

"Does she come often?"

"Only when she gets tired of being a lady. Right now she's celebrating her separation from her second husband."

Abruptly Ostby sensed something was wrong.

He glanced into the mirror. At the door stood a half dozen of the police. His gaze shifted to the rear entrance. He saw another party of police there.

"If you'll excuse me," he said to the girl, as he stepped down from his stool, "I believe I'll have a word with the Duchess."

The girl's mouth made a round O as he left her.

Ostby paused directly in front of the Duchess. Her attention swept up to him.

"My name is Captain Faas, formerly of the Emperor's private guards," he said, bowing deeply enough to show courtesy, but not so deeply as to seem subservient. "May I be so bold as to hope that the Duchess has not forgotten me?"

There was no recognition in the Duchess's look but there was interest.

"Should I remember you?" she asked.

"It was my privilege to meet her grace at the winter games a few years ago," Ostby

answered. The look he gave her was appreciative of what he saw.

The Duchess returned the look without recognition, but with amused acknowledgment of a clever approach. "Of course," she said. "How could I have forgotten? Won't you join us?"

"You are very kind," Ostby said. From the corner of his eye he saw that the soldiers were drawing nearer. They were demanding identity cards from all the men. "If I may presume on that kindness," he said to the Duchess, "would you do me the honor of dancing with me?"

The Duchess hesitated for a barely perceptible instant. "I would be happy to," she said.

THE Duchess danced well. Ostby followed the waltz piece with a fine sense of the music's rhythm that women love.

The Duchess' dress was worn off her rounded shoulders and each breath stirred the fullness of her breasts against the dress.

At the side of the dance floor he saw that a lieutenant of the police was waiting politely for them to finish their dance. The big test would come soon.

"You say we met at the winter games," the Duchess mused. She looked up at Ostby. "We danced at the ball after the games, did we not?"

"That's right," Ostby answered, while one part of his mind considered the problem of the lieutenant waiting for them. "That is why I asked you to dance. I'd hoped it would recall our acquaintance."

"Acquaintance is such a formal word," the Duchess said teasingly, and Ostby knew, without pride, that she was reacting to that intangible something about him that pleased women. He looked down into her eyes and noted just a suggestion of permanent crinkles at the corners. He judged her age as about thirty-three, seven years older than himself.

"I assure you that I feel anything but formal when I hold you in my arms," he answered, following her lead. He made her feel desirable by the things he expressed in his glance.

In the meantime the other portion of Ostby's mind had made its decision concerning the lieutenant.

"I see the police are making another of their nuisance spot-checks," he said. "I'm afraid I'm due to go through a bit of red tape. I've misplaced my identity card."

"I hear they're tracking down some notorious criminal," the Duchess answered. Abruptly her glance, full of sudden speculation, swept up and studied his face. After a short pause she said something that at first thought sounded irrelevant. "I've never danced at the winter games," she said.

Ostby drew in a quick breath. She knew!

The lieutenant was beside them now.

"You won't need to see his identity card, officer. He's with me," Ostby heard the Duchess say, and he let his breath out in a long silent sigh.

The lieutenant was not satisfied, but he was clearly afraid to press matters. He bowed to the Duchess as they walked past him.

Ostby lay on his back, with his knees drawn up and his hands beneath his head. His eyes shifted idly about the room, taking in its every feature automatically. It was this automatic attention to details that had always helped him land on his feet in the past whenever he had been in trouble. And he might be in trouble now. Too much of his trust rested with the Duchess—Rinda, she had asked him to call her. His entire safety rested in her fair hands—and he did not like it. He liked to trust no one except himself.

Ostby had accepted the invitation to visit her because he needed a place to hide; and because she knew too much for him to do anything except agree. But he would have chosen otherwise had he had a choice.

However, his reason told him that she had not taken him from the grip of the police to turn him in now.

And so he lay quietly, with the relaxed alertness of a resting cat. His thoughts were back on Earth.

When he had taken this assignment to come through the "door" between the worlds, he had known that there would be hardships, and that his life would be continually in danger, but it was moments like these that he hated the most—moments when he was not able to dictate the next step.

Approximately twenty years earlier—in

1950—the aliens had somehow made their "door" between the worlds; that "door" which never appeared twice in the same spot. At first they had been content to come in, circle their noiseless vessels through the air as they observed the Earth, then return through their shifting "door." They had refused all contact. Then gradually evidence began to come in that they were raiding undefended areas, abducting men and stealing property. Their depredations increased through the years until eventually they constituted a major menace.

There was no effective defense against them. Now and then one of their air ships was shot down but invariably it exploded before crashing. At last, in desperation, the United Governments had attempted to get operatives through with the captured persons. Ostby was one of the few instances of success.

For six months now, by dint of adroit maneuvering and luck, he had managed to stay alive, but he was no nearer to closing the "door."

Impatiently Ostby climbed to his feet and began pacing the room. He had never been able to get used to these rooms, with no corners, and all their furniture in the center. But they made for convenient pacing.

Had he been wrong in his estimate of the Duchess, he wondered. She had appeared too much woman to let matters of the state come ahead of her private affairs. Suddenly he stopped in mid-stride as there came a gentle tapping on his door. He had not been wrong!

II

THE Duchess had been a woman of her word, Ostby reflected, as he leaned against the counter sipping his drink. Knowing full well who he was, she had allowed him to leave, making no demands of him, and inviting him back whenever he cared to come. She was quite a woman. Some day, if and when he was able to clear up this business, he would return.

Now the time had come for him to change tactics. He had been able to accomplish nothing by playing a lone hand. He needed help. When you opposed the police the best place to seek help—he had decided

—was among others who broke the law. Thus he returned to the Flats, hangout of the underworld.

To make his contact with the underworld the first step should be some spectacular move that would focus their attention on him. "Fill it up," he said, sliding his glass along the bar. From his pocket he drew a thick roll of bills, a thickness caused by paper padding.

He paid for his drink and laid the roll carelessly at his elbow.

A minute went by and he felt someone slide in beside him. From the corner of his eye Ostby observed his companion. When he saw a hand close over the bills, he reached swiftly over and gripped the wrist of the hand that held the money. "Drop it," he said.

The thief's lips parted over stained teeth, but he said nothing. For a moment he stared back, viciously, then he shifted his body slightly and Ostby felt a knife point pierce the flesh of his right side and come to rest against his ribs. "Let go, bud." The thief spoke low without moving his lips.

Ostby hunched his shoulders and twisted his body around in a half circle. As the thug went off balance Ostby pulled forward, still gripping the wrist, and threw him over his shoulder. The thug struck the floor on the flat of his back, and the wind left his lungs. He lay for a moment, his body doubled up, and one leg kicking spasmodically, as he fought for breath. Ostby bent over, picked up his money, and leaned backward, with his elbows resting against the bar, and watched the struggling man.

All the fight had left the thief by the time he regained his breath. He cast one venomous look at Ostby as he climbed to his feet, and left the drinking place.

The preliminaries were over. Now to await the main action. It was not long in coming.

"That was pretty rough treatment," a coarse voice near Ostby said. He turned his head. The man had a day's growth of whiskers, and a long scar stretched his mouth into a permanent grin. Ostby shrugged non-committally and turned back to his drink.

"You a stranger in town?" the man persisted.

Ostby nodded, as he frowned and brought

his attention back to the harsh-voiced man.

"I'm not being nosy," the man said, "but you handle yourself like a lad who's been around. And you must be afraid of the law or you wouldn't be hanging out down here. Right?"

Ostby turned and faced the stranger squarely. "Is it any of your business?" he asked belligerently.

The man held up his hand. "Take it easy," he said. "I'm looking for a fellow like you. Do you have the guts to kill a man?"

OSTBY found a cellar window unlocked. He crawled through and let his legs hang down. When they touched a floor he pulled himself completely in. He paused and let his eyes become adjusted to the semi-dark.

At the end of the cellar he could make out a short flight of stairs.

Ostby climbed the stairs and softly opened the door. Directly in front of him, but half way across the room, a fat man sat in an over-stuffed armchair. He sat so quietly that at first Ostby thought that he was dead.

Only when he reached the fat man's side did he see that the slate gray eyes of the man had been watching him since he entered.

"If you were able to get this far," the fat man said, still not moving a muscle, "my guards have been bought off."

"You're Siggen?" Ostby asked.

"Who else?" Siggen twisted his lips into an ironic smile and bowed his head. "I'm Siggen, head of the thieves of Yarr. And you're here to kill me. May I ask who sent you?"

"Can't you guess?"

"Many men would like to see me dead. Most of them are afraid to try it themselves. Just as the one who sent you is afraid. But don't bother telling me who did it. Roka has coveted my place for a long time."

Ostby said nothing.

"I trusted too much in my guards," Siggen said, more to himself than to Ostby. "My reputation must have sunk low if they allowed themselves to be bought." He sighed. "Perhaps it's no use trying to save this old hulk, but hope dies hard." For a moment his tired face showed stark and

very naked in the light of the lamp. And somehow Ostby felt a bond of sympathy with the old man. "How much will you take to spare my life?"

"What will you pay?" Ostby asked.

"Roka probably paid you a thousand heds," Siggen answered. "I'll pay you ten thousand."

"A fair enough exchange," Ostby said. "Except that I don't want money."

"Then what do you want?"

"I want help—to enter the Stalls. And to get out again with my life."

"A simple order, for Siggen." The fat man had his vanity. "Give me a day to plan it. You have my word."

"Can I depend on it?"

"Men have said many things about Siggen, but never that his word was not good."

"Then it's settled," Ostby said. "I'll be back tomorrow."

"Just a minute before you go." The old man unclasped his puffy hands. "You are an unusual man and you intrigue me. Would you mind telling me your name?"

"Not at all. It's James Ostby."

"Ostby . . . Ostby . . ." the fat man pondered slowly. Then his head came up. "The Berserker!" he said. He whistled low, under his breath. "Tell me," he said, "why have we never met before. Or, if not, why are we meeting now?"

Ostby shrugged. "Perhaps because I have little confidence in others."

"You do have the reputation of being a lone wolf." Siggen remarked slowly. "After this business is over I'd be glad to consider consolidating our, ah, talents. We could go far together."

"You offer me this when you know me so little?"

"The best test of good relations between men is an instinctive liking," Siggen said. "I feel we have this, plus a common purpose."

"I'll think it over," Ostby replied. "In the meantime I'll expect results tomorrow."

Ostby lay flat on his stomach with his head facing the window in front of him. The window was set flush with the floor and he had a good view of the Stalls across the street.

The Stalls was a squat, three-story building, with a basement and a sub-basement.

The upper three stories were occupied by government offices. The basement housed the heating equipment and was used as a storage space. But it was the sub-basement that gave the place its name. Here the slaves were kept until sold.

THE deserted office room in which Ostby lay had been closed for many months, and it was hot inside, and close. The sun shining through the windows added to the heat, and the film of moisture that bathed his body had long since developed small rivulets that collected in sodden patches of his clothing.

"How much longer will it be, Groves?" Ostby asked.

"There's no way of knowing." The young man who sat with his back resting against the wall had wilted under the heat and crawled over out of the sunlight. "As soon as it's safe," he said. "Let me know if you see anyone coming out."

"I thought Siggen had fixed it so we could get in without any trouble?"

"He bribed the guards," Groves replied. "But you saw those two men go in. I recognized one of them as Boorrls of the secret police. They're liable to turn up any place, any time. We'd be sticking our necks out to go in while they're there."

For another ten minutes neither man said a word. A big drop of moisture collected on the cleft in the middle of Ostby's chin. He wished he were certain that he could trust Groves. Groves was an open-faced young man with candor in his blue eyes, and a ready smile that asked for confidence, but somewhere in the man's makeup was a black streak, Ostby reckoned.

All morning Ostby's infallible intuition had throbbed a slow pulse of warning. He knew better than to disregard that warning but when he turned to thieves for help he had no right to expect sterling characters for companions.

Siggen should have enough control over his men to make Groves afraid to double-cross him. And, strangely enough, Ostby trusted Siggen. His intuition told him that Siggen was a man true to his own principles, distorted though they might be.

Ostby had seen another facet of Siggen's character that morning. When he had re-

turned to the house Siggen had introduced him to Groves, and the three of them had gone down into the fat man's basement.

"I want to show you a pretty sight," Siggen said.

Lying on the basement floor was the body of a man. A knife was buried in his throat. The dead mouth that smiled up at Ostby was widened by a long scar.

"What will we do when we get in the Stalls?" Groves interrupted Ostby's reflections.

Ostby did not answer, but turned his head to look at the young man, long and levelly.

"It's none of my business, of course," Groves added hurriedly, "but I won't be much help in case of trouble if I don't even know what you're trying to do."

"If trouble comes we just get out as fast as we can."

"You aren't going to try to get one of the slaves out, are you? You told Siggen that you only wanted to get in, and get out again."

"That's all I want."

"If you're trying to close the 'door,' what would you want in. . ." Abruptly Groves stopped talking. Ostby read the dismay in his voice as he realized that he had said too much.

Ostby rolled over on his side, bringing his gun up and firing in the same motion. Groves had his own gun drawn when the slug caught him in the forehead and slapped his head back as though riding the blow of a fist. Slowly he fell sideways along the wall.

Ostby was on his feet immediately. He'd have to move fast now, he knew. No one but the police, or someone high in the Emperor's confidence, would know that he was here to close the "door" between the worlds. Groves had made a bad slip.

In Groves' right rear pocket Ostby found a black billfold. Inside was a white card with the word, *Confidential*, written on it. He found nothing else of interest. But that was enough to wipe away Ostby's last doubt. Sweat broke out anew on his forehead as he realized how close the trap had come to closing around him. He might be too late already.

On the other hand, he reflected, perhaps this would be the moment when boldness

would accomplish more than it ever could have in the past. He had been able to get nowhere in the past months with caution, and this time, being so close, he would not turn back.

II.

Ostby entered the Stalls through a back door. The building was built on a hill. At the front, the first floor was on the ground level. But the door Ostby entered opened into the sub-basement.

The card he had taken from Groves gained him ready admittance. He flashed it once again to the clerk seated at a desk in the inner office. The clerk nodded respectfully and Ostby went through into the main section of the sub-basement; the section housing the slaves.

The stench that struck his nostrils was nauseating. It stank of men too closely crowded, of unwashed bodies, and of inadequate sanitation.

The place was dimly lit.

Ostby waved back the "trustee" who came forward to meet him, and went alone along the stalls. At each gate he paused to look through the thick mesh wire at the hope-deadened specimens who lay apathetically on the uncleaned floor. Some of the prisoners were criminals of the state, but most of them were captive Earth people.

Ostby did not pause long at any compartment until he reached one in the corner of the huge room. He studied the creature seated in a wall-crook staring back at him. The slave's beard was an inch long and his features were hardly recognizable, yet something about him held Ostby's attention.

After a short minute Ostby said, "Detroit," in a low tone.

The prisoner did not move but his eyes glistened in the dim light as he opened them wider. His lips formed the sound, "Tigers," as he answered the code word.

"What have they done with Rohr?" Ostby asked.

"I'm afraid you're too late," the slave answered. "The guard took him away yesterday—through that door, over on the far side. If he's still alive, they're probably torturing him right now."

"I'll be back," Ostby said, and he walked

rapidly toward the door the prisoner had indicated.

Once inside Ostby flashed his card at the guard sitting on a desk, paring his fingernails. "Where's the spy?" he asked briskly.

"Straight through," the guard answered. "Inspector Boorrls is working on him now."

In the back room Ostby closed the door behind him and stood with his back against it. The two men standing in the center of the room turned to look at him. He let the silence grow thin without speaking. It was with an effort that he kept his eyes from the figure that hung by its wrist tendons, on steel hooks suspended from the ceiling.

The taller of the two men shifted his feet uncomfortably, and wiped his right palm along the leg of his trousers. "What do you want?" he asked irritably.

Ostby drew his card from his pocket and showed it to them. "I'm direct from the Emperor," he said. "Which one of you is Boorrls?"

"I am," the tall man answered.

"Have you made him talk yet?"

"No. He's stubborn as all hell. But he'll talk soon or I'll kill him."

"That's what the Emperor was afraid of," Ostby said bleakly. "And that's why he sent me. Now get out while I try to save what you may have lost already with your stupidity."

For a moment the inspector seemed determined to bluff it out. "What did you say?" he asked pugnaciously.

"I said get out!" Ostby's voice did not rise, but there was no mistaking the threat behind it.

Boorrls broke easily. He was a bully. "C'mon, Jorg," he mumbled and the two men left the room.

THE figure suspended on the hooks could not see Ostby. Where his eyes had been were now only bloody orifices. His stomach was cut to ribbons and the inside organs showed through. He was beyond the help of any doctor.

He seemed to have recognized Ostby's voice. His lips and tongue moved agonizingly as he strove to speak. When he finally succeeded his voice came from far back in his throat—hardly more than a whisper. "For God's sake," the voice croaked, "kill

me! Please!"

Ostby repressed a shudder as he gently touched the tortured man's leg.

They had picked him, back on Earth, for this job because his was a sensitive organism, keyed with "high survival characteristics."

His nervous system was geared exceptionally high, and its acute reflexes with their delicate balance of intricate excitations made his response to stimuli proportionately more rapid than that of other men.

Yet this very sensitiveness of brain and nerve fiber made the brutal circumstances with which he was forced to cope all the more difficult to endure. It was ironical that the very qualities that made him the most fit for this dangerous kind of work, made him suffer the greatest under its harshness.

Ostby could remember how, even as a child, he had suffered through this keenness of emotional reaction. His empathy with any person or animal in distress always caused him pain nearly as great as that of the sufferer.

In later years he had developed a philosophy that helped carry him through most of those trying times. He had never exactly defined that philosophy but it encompassed the ability to recognize "the little things as little, and the big things as big; and to laugh in the face of the inevitable, to smile even at the looming death."

This philosophy was never able to give him the shell of hardness which would have shielded him from most of the meanness of the world, but it had given him the strength to bear it.

Now the suffering of the wretched creature before him played along Ostby's nerves like a live flame.

"Everything will be over in a minute," he said softly. He opened his shirt front and exposed a mesh-weave vest fitted close against his skin. In the innumerable pockets of the vest he carried everything he owned on this world.

From one of the pockets he drew a hypodermic syringe with a plastic vial filled with light green liquid. He pushed the needle into the flesh of the hanging man's leg, and pressed the plunger home.

A moment later the suspended figure sighed once, long and gratefully, and was

still. They would never be able to torture him again.

Ostby studied the mechanism that held the hooks, but could find no way to lower the body. Impatiently he pulled a chair over and stood on it. He probed the body's thin left forearm with his thumbs until he found the spot he sought.

Drawing a sharp scalpel from his vest he cut a thin slit through the flesh. When he felt the blade touch something solid he probed deeply into the cut and brought out a small, innocuous appearing capsule. The cut did not bleed and Ostby pressed its sides together. It appeared no different than many of the other cuts on the emaciated body.

He hesitated no longer than it took to pick the exact spot he wanted on his own forearm. If they had been unable to find the hiding place on Rohr, it should serve as well for him.

With almost surgical skill he cut a small slit in the flesh of his forearm. Probing with the scalpel until he had opened a small pocket, he placed the capsule in the opening and forced it down. From the vest he removed a flat carton and sprinkled sulphur powder into the cut. In a few days time it would heal and there would be no mark left of the hiding place. If he could only buy that few days' time!

Ostby stepped through into the outer office. Boorrls and his aide were nowhere about. That could be dangerous. His time was undoubtedly running short.

Ostby walked back to the stall of the prisoner he had conferred with earlier, at the same time motioning the trusty over to him. "Open this stall and let me in," he commanded.

"Lock it again and leave us alone," he said to the trusty as he entered. The trusty obeyed and left.

Ostby turned immediately to the prisoner. "This is it," he said. "We'll have to move fast." He took a flat tube from one of his vest pockets and tossed it over. "First, get rid of that beard. But be sure to leave a mustache and a chin beard like mine."

The slave applied the depilatory to his beard. "What about Rohr?" he asked.

"Dead," Ostby answered laconically as he removed his clothes.

Neither said anything more as the slave

washed his face and wet his hair from a trough of dirty water. In the meantime Ostby dirtied his own face and hands. The slave stripped and they exchanged clothes.

"Rattle on the gate," Ostby said after they finished. "It's not very bright in here, and with that mustache and beard you should pass for me without any trouble. But don't give them more chance than necessary to spot the deception by wasting any time."

Five minutes later Ostby was alone—just another grimy slave curled up in his filthy sty. A perfect hideout. The last place they would look for him.

SOMETIME during the morning of the third day Ostby was awakened by the rattling of the wire gate of his stall. He rolled over on his side and looked out. The trusty who brought him his food twice a day was shaking the gate.

"On your feet," he said, "and make it snappy."

Ostby climbed erect without argument. He had no intention of directing attention to himself by making trouble. By now his black hair and beard were matted with dirt, his skin was soiled with many thicknesses of grime, and he stunk with the stench of the prison blocks.

A few minutes later a short man—approximately six feet tall, but short for these people—bustled importantly forward. He was dressed in lace-adorned dress which proclaimed him one of this world's aristocracy. The newcomer eyed Ostby disdainfully for a moment and then passed on without a word.

Later the self-important dandy returned with the trusty in tow. He stopped in front of Ostby's cage. "Bring him out here where I can get a better look at him," he ordered.

The trusty unlocked the gate and Ostby shuffled out.

"He's a filthy looking beast," the nobleman remarked, as he slowly circled Ostby. He evidenced only the interest of a man appraising an animal. "However, he seems to have a splendid body beneath those layers of dirt. I'll take him, but I suppose I'll find him rotten with disease when I have him cleaned up."

The trusty and one of the guards snapped a leg-iron around Ostby's left ankle while the nobleman went into the office to pay for

his purchase. They led Ostby out to a waiting carriage and secured the other end of his leg-iron to a bolt set in the floor of the carriage. Two of the nobleman's liveried servants seated themselves on either side of Ostby. The nobleman sat across from them.

They drove for almost a half-hour before the carriage stopped in front of a low, one-storied stone building. No one spoke. The servants alighted, and one of them unlocked Ostby's leg-iron from its bolt in the floor.

"Step down," the nearest servant said.

Ostby obeyed and they walked, with Ostby again between them, toward the stone house. The nobleman remained in the carriage.

One of the servants opened the unlocked door of the stone house and the other shoved Ostby through the doorway. They closed the door behind him, and he stood in a dark room, blinded by the sudden change from bright sunlight. The first sight that met his eyes, as they adjusted to the dim light lurking under the drawn shades, was the familiar one of a fat man slumped in an easy chair!

"Welcome to my new abode," Siggen said.

The events of the past hour snapped into place in Ostby's mind in an instant and he evidenced no surprise as he smiled back at Siggen. He even debated with himself whether or not Siggen had done him a service by taking him from his foolproof hiding place so soon. But then he had another in mind that should serve as well if he had not underestimated his influence with the Duchess, Rinda.

"You pay your debts, I see," he said.

"Siggen's word is his bond," the fat man said. "I told you I would get you in and get you out. Our bargain is now complete."

"Your man put on a good act as a nobleman," Ostby said. "He fooled me as completely as he did the guards."

"It was no act," Siggen replied. "He is a nobleman. But he owed Siggen a favor."

"Good work," Ostby said. "Accept my thanks. Incidentally, I suppose you know by now that your man, Groves, was a secret agent?"

"No, I did not," Siggen answered. "I wondered why he never returned. I presume you took care of him?"

"Yes," Ostby replied.

"Good," Siggen said. "I almost missed knowing they had you. The reports were that the Berserker had been shot leaving the Stalls. But I sent a man to check on it and he reported that the man shot by the police was not you."

So poor Barbasiewicz had not gotten away, Ostby reflected sadly. And Rohr, too, was dead. That left him completely alone. But he had made some progress. He had the capsule. If the Duchess would hide him until he was ready for his next action he might still be able to close the "door." "Can you get me a carriage?" he asked Siggen.

"I THINK you'd be taking too big a chance if you went to the palace, even with the crowd there for the ball," the Duchess said.

Her anxiety made Ostby a bit uncomfortable. Their flirtation was no longer a game with her. He felt a bit guilty whenever he observed, by the thousand little signs she gave, that she was in love with him.

In ordinary times he might have loved her, also; but he was a man who never did things by halves. He had come to this world for one purpose, and he would not allow himself to be diverted from it—not even by a woman so fascinating as Rinda!

He looked at her now, beside him, with her rich brown hair done up in a pug on the back of her neck, and intertwined with a string of matched pearls; her soft skin, which the sun had turned to the shade of golden honey; and her red lips.

She returned the look, her blue eyes warm with love. She was a tall woman, well-formed, and she rested languidly against her cushions, but deep within Ostby could read the quiescent female vitality that rode her always.

"I'm afraid that I have no choice," he said gently. "It's something that I must do."

He was glad that she had never questioned him in the week he had been with her, since his escape from the Stalls. She knew only that he was doing something unlawful, and that the police wanted him badly.

But she was a temperamental woman, Ostby knew, and her moods were as sudden and mercurial as a tropic storm. Now he

observed one of those sudden changes building up within her.

"I've decided not to let you go," she said. "It's too dangerous."

Ostby had had enough experience with her to know that temporizing was useless. It hurt him to be brutal, especially when he realized that her stubbornness was prompted by concern for him, but he could not let himself be detained now. "I must," he said, "and there's no use our arguing about it."

"I said you're not going," she repeated.

"If you wish, I'll return when I'm able,"

Ostby said, rising.

She, too, recognized the inflexible spirit in him, and passion flared up suddenly in her face. A flush of blood darkened the olive of her skin. She twisted in sudden fury and buried her teeth in the flesh of his wrist.

Ostby reached over with his free hand and dug his fingers deeply into the ridge of her jawbone.

"I'll kill you for that!" she gritted, releasing her grip.

Ostby knew they had gone too far now for any hope of reconciliation. He bent her arms behind her back and bound them tightly with the long sleeves of her gown.

The Duchess was relaxed now, making no attempt to resist him. Her face had gone hard and the skin was stretched tightly across her cheekbones.

She said nothing as he bound her feet and gagged her. But the venom in her eyes made him pause. This woman was not soft, he saw, and he knew he had made an enemy who would be ruthless. He did not look back as he left the room but he could feel her gaze following him—hating him, as only a frustrated woman can hate!

IV

HE GLANCED up at the huge square frame of the palace, crouched like a great machine waiting to devour him. There was something about the building that was subtle, mysterious, luring. Engraved in deep convex letters above the door was the motto of the Emperor: THE WORLD BELONGS TO THE STRONG. Now for the 7—PLANET—March

first time, Ostby thought, he was to meet that controversial figure face to face.

There was no formal greeting of the entering guests. Two liveried servants stood at either side of the entrance, eyeing, politely but carefully, each entrant. They did not stop Ostby and he passed through the doorway. He deposited his outer wrap with still other servants inside, and mingled unobtrusively with the guests in the wide entrance hall.

For a half hour Ostby loitered about the edge of the thickening crowd, wearing an expression of abstract concentration that discouraged conversation. At the end of that time the Emperor had not appeared. Ostby decided to wait no longer.

Walking casually down a long corridor that led into the palace he began his search for the man he wanted. The occasional servants he met asked no questions. They merely nodded politely and went about their duties.

When he came to a long circular stairway he walked quickly up. He knew that the closer he came to his goal the greater would be the risk. But this was not the time for surreptitious conniving. Only action would produce results now.

A door opened suddenly behind him and a voice said, "Keep walking."

Strangely Ostby was glad to hear the voice.

"I'm not moving," he said.

A gun pressed against his back and he knew the time had come to act. Pivoting on the balls of his feet he knocked aside the hand that held the gun with his left arm. As he completed the pivot he aimed his right fist at the stranger's face.

His assailant rolled with the blow and it caught him with glancing force on the chin. But it was hard enough to drive him off his feet.

Ostby followed swiftly, but his opponent turned like a cat and kicked both feet into his stomach. The kick knocked the breath from Ostby's lungs. Black circles ringed his vision and the only thing that worked then was instinct. He grabbed at the ankles as the man's feet came up again. Letting the momentum of the kick furnish most of the power, he pulled on the ankles in a circular jerk that lifted the man clear of the floor.

Ostby swung him around in a wide circle,

scraping his head and shoulders on the wall of the hallway, before releasing his grip. The gunman crashed unconscious against the far wall.

Ostby took two steps forward, and a blinding light bathed his body! He turned, raising one leg to retreat, and found himself fighting with an awful exertion to set it down again!

The air had become viscous, and he took one step that felt as though he were walking in freshly mixed cement. The cement hardened rapidly and held him rigid. Next his vision blurred, and he stood with all power of motion gone. His respiratory function was his only movement.

HE WAS no longer rational enough to judge when the agony in his muscles changed their tenor to the sensation of a thousand needles being stabbed into his flesh. Somehow he knew that this meant the paralysis was leaving.

The first muscles to free themselves were those in the lids of his eyes. He opened them and found himself staring into the iciest, most emotionless eyes he had ever seen. Strangely enough they were brown eyes yet they gave the definite impression of being colorless.

The eyes were in a face carved with lines of craglike pride. Strength and ruthlessness breathed in every feature. Ostby needed no introduction to know that the face belonged to the Emperor!

A voice said, "He can see and hear now. But his power of speech and movement won't return for a few minutes." The voice came from Ostby's right. He was unable to turn to see who spoke.

The Emperor smiled. "My Name is Magogar," he said to Ostby in a voice an octave lower than normal. "I've been waiting a long time to meet you."

Ostby returned the look, wordlessly—all he was capable of doing.

"We'll begin our discussion," Magogar said, "with my telling you that I know you are the one they call the Berserker, what your mission is, and much else about you that you may not suspect. On the other hand, there are many things you do not know about me, and, strange as it may seem, there are some things concerning yourself that you

do not know.

"When you were first brought into our world," Magogar continued, "you made the mistake of confiding in several of your fellow captives, thinking that they would aid you. Needless to say, one of them talked. That last I probably don't have to tell you; you must have guessed, because you made your escape soon after. You didn't even try your preconcerted story."

"You knew about that too?" Ostby asked, and was surprised that he was able to speak again.

"Yes. You were right in believing that your confidants would be sympathetic to your schemes, but you forgot one thing. Men can be made to talk."

Ostby had recovered some of his self-possession by this time. "If you know, tell me what that plan was," he said.

"Certainly," Magogar replied. He rose to his feet and walked with long strides about the room. Ostby was surprised at the breath and girth of the man. At first glance he appeared squat. But that appearance was a deception caused by his great bulk. He was as tall as Ostby, but heavier of bone, and must have weighed a hundred pounds more. He walked heavily, each step landing forcefully on the heel of the foot.

"One of our ships," the Emperor said, "read your distress signal of colored rocks and picked you up. Your story was to be that you were a survivor of a ship of ours which crashed twenty years earlier. I believe you had established quite an authentic story. Your mother and father had been hurt, and died several years after the crash, you said. But not before they had taught you, their six-year-old son, to care for himself, to pass as one of the people of the world in which you found yourself, and last, how to establish contact with us. It was a good story, and its background was authentic. Tell me, why did you decide not to use it?"

Ostby shrugged. "Mainly because I made the mistake of confiding my plans to several of your prisoners. And you forced one of them to talk."

Unexpectedly Magogar no longer seemed to be paying attention to Ostby. He had turned his head and was looking to his left. It was then Ostby remembered that he had made no effort to discover to whom the

other voice he had heard belonged. The thought of it now made him realize how much his faculties had been dulled by their session under the paralysis. Ordinarily, by this time he would have had every detail of the room catalogued in his mind. He hastened now to correct the omission.

The sight that met his eyes as he turned his head was one that would stay with him for all the years of his life!

A square, paneled box, supported by four sturdy legs, rested against the wall, across the room from them. In the center of the box was a large eye!

The eye had no pupil; its entire surface was one of mottled streaks of gray, pink, and black. The colors slowly flowed and changed, following a seemingly erratic pattern. It was the weirdest sight Ostby ever expected to see. And behind and through it all glowed intelligence—human, reasoning intelligence!

Vaguely, through his momentary funk, Ostby heard the Emperor's voice, "Allow me to introduce you to the Brain."

Then those vague rumors he had heard had been true, Ostby reflected, or at least some facets of them. He had heard talk—which he had regarded as superstitions—that the Emperor possessed the living brain of a man long dead, a brain of infinite wisdom, and possessing all the knowledge there was to be had. Ostby was forced to believe in its existence now, for here he was faced with the living proof.

Once again Magogar's words interrupted his reverie. But the words were not directed at him. "He's here now. What did you want to ask before I have him killed?"

"You may change your mind about that after you hear what I have to say," a voice from the box answered. "You call yourself Ostby," it said. "Do you remember your father or your mother?"

Ostby stared at the apparition, not answering. The reality of the present situation, and yet its impossibility, was overwhelming.

The voice in the box continued. "I believe that I am safe in assuming that you do not remember them. I would like now to give you a hypothetical problem. If we were to assume that everything upon which you built your life were false: that the men you trusted lied to you: that you are not even

who and what you believe you are . . . what would you do?"

The voice paused, but Ostby remained silent and it went on, "The records of the people of our world, who crashed in yours, I assume you studied very carefully. That would be necessary to make your planned deception more effective. Their names were Shemolang and Roelang. Am I correct?"

Ostby nodded. The Brain went on. "Shemolang was no ordinary man. He was first in line for the Emperor office, after Magogar."

The voice shifted its focus by some subtle change of the vision in the eye, and Ostby knew that it no longer addressed him. "Will you look in the files and find a picture there of Shemolang, Magogar?"

The Emperor brought his attention to alertness with an obvious effort of will. He had been listening as intently as Ostby. Now he rose and walked to the indicated files.

After a minute he drew a picture from one of the files and studied it. The Emperor gasped and murmured, "I had almost forgotten how he looked."

"Show the picture to Mr. Ostby, will you please?" the Brain said.

Ostby took the picture and the first glance sent a shock through his system that started as a weight in the pit of his stomach and flooded his body like fever. The picture that looked back at him was very nearly a replica of himself!

"Your father," the Brain interrupted his thoughts. "You not only have had a vast deception practiced upon you, but you have been fighting your own people!"

V

THAT night Ostby slept very little. In his thoughts two emotions fought for dominance. On the one side were the people of Earth—he still thought of it as his Earth. He had lived with them; they were his friends; their problems and joys had always been his—until now. The menace to them had been his to share, and to help eliminate. He had accepted this assignment knowing that, at best, he would never be able to return; at worst, that he would be killed. And he had taken it willingly.

Now he knew that he had been duped.

He had been an alien among the people he loved. And they had sent him to fight his own kind!

His final decision came hard, but by morning he had made his choice.

He rose early but had to wait until well into the afternoon before the Emperor put in an appearance.

Magogar greeted Ostby with a smile, but there was no friendliness in it. He was a man who made no friends. The people about him were divided into two classes: those who served or obeyed him, and those who opposed him. The latter did not survive long.

"Step out onto the sun balcony with me," the Emperor said, with the easy assurance of a man accustomed to obedience. He strolled to the railing of the balcony and leaned against it, looking out over the water of the city's harbor. The balcony extended out over the water, which came directly up to a small walk bordering the palace.

"I have given your case very deep thought," the Emperor said, "and I will be perfectly frank with you. Whether I accept you or dispose of you will be directly determined by what I decide within the immediate future. There is no point in my asking your views because your range of choices is very small, and entirely incidental to my decision. You can willingly accept whatever I decide for you—if I let you live—or you can oppose me. The latter, of course, would be tantamount to asking for death. Do you have anything to say before we continue?"

"Not knowing what you have to offer leaves me with no possibility of making a choice," Ostby said carefully.

It was immediately evident, however, that he had made a wrong choice of words. The Emperor's arrogant brows rose and he frowned. "I never offer anything," he said, spacing each word with a hard emphasis, "except the choice of accepting my decisions."

When Ostby made no reply, Magogar seated himself and remained in deep introspection.

"Let me tell you a story," he said finally. "At first it may sound like idle boasting, but I can readily demonstrate to you that I am the living proof of its authenticity."

The Emperor paused while he tilted back his chair and stared at the ceiling. "In the early years of man's existence," he said, "he possessed two physical survival characteristics. First, he could run. As he was one of the weakest of the animals he found that most expeditious. And because the instinct to run grew to occupy a prominent place in his emotional makeup, it enabled him to survive.

"The other survival factor was to fight. The fighters died an earlier death than did those that ran, and they had fewer progeny. But those fighters that lived ruled the tribes.

"During each generation these separate instincts developed and became more virile. The numbers of the fliers propagated and soon the mass of the human race consisted of their descendants. The fighters, however, ruled the tribes, as was logical. They were the doers, and became the leaders.

"I, Mr. Ostby, am a direct descendant of this long line of fighters—perhaps its culmination. I have never known fear, and I never flee! I have inherited the strength of those ancestors, and I rule now because I am the strongest man in the world, both mentally and physically. The world belongs to the strong, and I am the strongest. Let that weigh heavily in every thought you have concerning me."

Ostby found himself wondering in amazement at the colossal pride that could give birth to such thought processes.

"Now," the Emperor went on, "let me give you one last warning before you leave. You may be in line for my position, and you must prove to me that you are strong enough to take my place, if that ever becomes necessary. On the other hand if your strength evidences itself by the slightest opposition to me, I will kill you. Thus you have a fine line to walk, with your life hanging in the balance.

"This concludes our interview until later this afternoon," the Emperor said. "I would suggest, in the meantime, that you consult the Brain. He can supply you with an understanding of our background which you may find useful."

Ostby was glad the Emperor had suggested his speaking with the Brain. He had made his decision now, but there was

much the Brain could tell him that he needed to know.

He walked down one flight and into the room housing the Brain. When he arrived he found it awake and obviously watching him. Once again he experienced a vast discomfort in meeting that giant eye, with its mottled apperception. He wondered uneasily if it had the power to read his mind.

Ostby's unease was not lessened by the Brain's first words. "You have finished your interview with the Emperor," it said. "Evidently you were wise enough not to antagonize him or you would not be here now. Is there anything special you would like to ask me?"

There was much he wanted to learn from the Brain and Ostby had no hesitation in replying.

"What are you?" he asked without preliminaries. "How old are you, and just what is the extent of your powers?"

For a moment Ostby was afraid that he had, in some way, made a wrong approach, and that the Brain would refuse to answer him, for it was silent. But finally it said, quietly, "Perhaps one question at a time would be better for both of us. I can answer directly then, and you will be able to assimilate the answers more easily. Some of them will have many ramifications and require supplementary explanations.

"I am over five hundred years old. I was originally a man, the same as yourself, and one of the few real scientists our race has produced. I limited my activity to no one field, but delved into anything that interested me. One of my interests was longevity. When I decided that immortality was limited by the weaknesses of the bodily vehicle to which I was tied, I designed this instrument in which my brain resides, and trained others to make the essential transfer. Does that answer your questions?"

"All except the extent of your intellectual ability. The rumor is that you know everything."

"That, of course, is ridiculous. Knowledge is like a fan-shaped wave; beginning with the first fact learned, and spreading wider and wider the more one learns. I started with an exceptional intellect, and for five hundred years have acquired as much knowledge as that intellect, and a vast

curiosity, could give me."

"I see," Ostby said as he framed the next question in his mind. "What is your relationship with the Emperor?" he asked. "Are you an ally or a servant?"

"That is a bit difficult to answer," the Brain said, "because it depends on the viewpoint of the observer. As far as Magogar is concerned, I suppose I am both, though surely more of a servant than an equal. As I regard it, he is merely another man, though one who supplies me with most of the material for speculation which I desire."

"Are you loyal to him?"

"As you mean it, no. Loyalty implies an emotional basis. I'm afraid that I have none of the standard emotions. I will answer any question put to me by anyone. I care nothing about the purpose of the question or to what use the answer is put."

"Could I ask a question, in confidence, and be certain that you would not reveal that I did so to the Emperor?" Ostby asked. This could be placing his neck in the noose, he knew, and he waited anxiously for the answer.

"No," the Brain replied. "I would volunteer nothing to him, but I would tell him anything he asked."

Ostby decided that he needed time to think over this facet of the Brain before he ventured further. First, he would attempt to learn other facts which he might need later. Perhaps he could even obtain the answer he wanted in a roundabout way. "What is the population of your world?" he asked.

"Approximately seven million. Over a million live here, in Yarr, our one mechanized city."

"Why is it that you have so little technology, as compared with the Earth?"

"I suppose that its basis is our low birth rate," the Brain answered. "There is ample living space here, as well as natural resources, to supply our people's needs. Thus there is little necessity for them to shape and remake their environment. It is always easiest to accept nature as it is, if that can be done with a minimum of self-adjusting."

"Then why is this city of Yarr different?"

"Yarr is the creation of one man, a man hungry for power, for the authority, and the strength to dominate everything about him; to hold the lives of men and women

in the hollow of his hand. That man, you will recognize, is Magogar. In his creed strength is right; in fact, it is everything. It is the philosophy that controls him, and through him, the city. Under his rule the unfit are killed, or at best, allowed to perish on the ragged confines of our artificial civilization.

"What is your opinion of that philosophy?"

"Magogar is wrong, beyond a doubt," the Brain answered unhesitatingly. "Any species survives and develops through co-operation, and self-restraint of its individual members. Ruthless self-assertion is a stumbling block to human progress. Magogar is right when he says that the world belongs to the strong. It must, by the very constitution of man. But a ruler who is merely strong will inevitably be overthrown. Eventually the world will be governed by the strong, but by the strong who are noble as well."

"Magogar's philosophy seems to me to be the outgrowth of an overweening pride," Ostby said.

"Perhaps. Up to a point self-admiration is not to be deplored. But in excess it is an evil thing."

NOW, Ostby decided, was the time to ask his vital question. "Don't you think that you and your people would be better off if the 'door' between the worlds were closed?" He held his breath while he waited for the answer.

"You are making a mistake if you associate me, in your mind, with my world's people," the Brain said. "Not having a body to inspire emotion, wants and desires, I am tied to them by nothing. Whether they are better or worse off concerns me not at all. Whether they are happy, or even all die, concerns me equally as little. But you are right. The 'door' is a bad thing for them. This city is a parasite. All its technology, its customs, its sins, its vices, are copied from your Earth. Without the 'door' this city, this artificial oddity, would vanish. Its inhabitants would disperse and resume their pastoral life, where, I assure you, they would be much happier.

"And the solution to this is, as you say, the closing of the 'door.' Because every

machine we have, that we did not steal, is manufactured by captives from Earth."

He was in too deep to back out now, Ostby decided. He plunged recklessly into the next question. "Can you tell me something about the operation of the 'door'?"

"This is not the first time the 'door' has appeared between our worlds," the Brain said, "though I know very little about its original appearance. Practically all I know about that is the result of abstract speculation. It appeared at least once before, thousands of years ago. My own theory is that at that time there was a mass migration from our world to yours, and that the present Earth people are descendants of our own ancestors."

The Brain paused for a long minute before continuing. "I have studied many of the writings of the Earth, and am quite certain that I know more about its history than its average citizen. Do you recall the evidence found concerning the Cro-Magnon man of Earth's prehistoric ages? It seems that the so-called Neanderthal man was the animal that most nearly approached the present homo sapiens, until suddenly—as such things are reckoned—he was supplanted by another, much more advanced species of man, the Cro-Magnon. My research leads me to believe that those Cro-Magnon men migrated from our world to yours!"

A dozen questions sprang to Ostby's mind concerning this fascinating theory, but he put them aside impatiently. He was a man with a bulldog tenacity of purpose, and he had no intention of wasting time on questions prompted by idle curiosity.

"That's a very interesting theory," he said, "and I would like to discuss it more fully some other time. But for now, are you telling me that the 'door' is a natural phenomenon?"

"Not the present 'door,'" the Brain replied. "It was created, approximately twenty years ago, by the concentration and intellectual power of one mind—my own!"

"But how did you do it?"

"I don't know how much knowledge you have of physics," the Brain said slowly. "The explanation is a bit technical for the untrained man to understand. However, I'll explain it as simply as I can.

"Matter, as you probably know, is made up of tiny electrified bodies called electrons. When measurements were made it was found that the whole mass of the electron is due to its electrical charge. The inevitable conclusion is that the material universe is not the substantial, objective thing it was formerly thought to be. Matter is a completely spectral thing with no actual substance. The idea of substance must be replaced by that of behavior.

"Thus, opening the 'door' became a problem of controlling that behavior in such a way as to create a refraction of the matter separating worlds. That is not as simple as it may sound because a mind, to be able to do it, must possess a thorough understanding of the forces it deals with. It must have a tremendous capacity for concentration, and its logic must be entirely uninfluenced by emotion. I believe it is safe to say that no other mind, before mine, has ever combined these qualities in sufficient degree to accomplish the deed."

Strangely Ostby was not too surprised by this revelation. The makers of the capsule residing in the flesh of his left forearm had concluded, as a result of their studies, that the "door" might be the product of mind power. Their greatest mistake had been that it would take the combined power of at least eight brilliant minds to achieve the necessary matter refraction.

Here, then, lay the end of his search, Ostby knew. He regretted that its conclusion must entail the death of the Brain.

Somewhat as a form of apology he said, "It probably won't surprise you too much to know that I have decided to continue my fight on the side of the people of Earth. I am not going to let the accident of ancestry blind me to the justice of their cause. Also, regardless of my personal feelings, I must do whatever is necessary to attain my end. Do you see what I am trying to say?"

"I do," the Brain answered. "Your next question is, will I consent to close the 'door' voluntarily. My answer will be no, and then you will say that you must kill me. Am I right?"

Ostby nodded. "Tell me," he said, "are you not afraid to die?"

"The instinct of self-preservation is as

strong in me as it ever was."

"Then I can only offer you my deepest regrets for what I must do." Ostby rose and gripped the back of his chair—he should be able to smash the brain-box with that, he decided—and found himself unable to lift it!

"And I must offer my regrets at the necessity of defending myself," the Brain said ironically. "I will allow no one to harm me. I am going to release you from my mental grip now, and I want you to leave this room. Never come in my presence again with the intent to harm me or I will be forced to kill you." The voice was entirely emotionless throughout.

Ostby's strength returned in a warm wave that washed his body free of the stasis that bound him, and vigor flowed back into his muscles. But he knew he was helpless before the unnormal powers of the mind before him, and he turned and left the room.

VI

BY THE time Ostby reached the outer balcony a black frustration clogged his veins. To be so close and still be unable to act. He was willing to give his life to close the "door," but every way he turned he found himself battering against walls of futility. The anger within him now, so close to despair, was more than he could control. His reason feared that anger and he fought against it, but it went with him like a tangible thing and he knew that he could no longer restrain it.

The sight of the Emperor lounging in an easy chair on the balcony, his face, arrogant and powerful, set in its habitual expression of disdainful hauteur, did nothing to ease Ostby's emotional storm.

"I've been reading the police reports concerning you and giving them some thought," the Emperor's voice laid its heavy weight on him. "My conclusions are not very flattering. I find you lack many admirable qualities. I'm about convinced that your dominant characteristics are cunning and guile rather than strength. If there is one thing I hate it's a dissembling man."

"You could be wrong," Ostby said, so

softly that only a man as confident and self-assured as the Emperor would have missed the pent-up force behind the softness.

The Emperor waved his hand negligently. "I'll admit that you displayed ingenuity in hiding from the police," he said, "and you have a certain amount of animal-like adaptation to danger. But when you fought it was only with the desperation of a cornered rat! Your most noteworthy trait is subterfuge. I despise a gutless man!"

"Does it take guts to boast of your strength while hiding behind a palace guard?" Ostby asked.

For the time it took an incredulous expression to cross his face Magogor sat still, not believing what he had heard. No one spoke to him like that! He straightened and turned to face Ostby full on. "Will you repeat that?" he asked, the words half strangling in his throat.

"You heard me correctly," Ostby said, seating himself deliberately and insolently in a chair that faced the Emperor across a heavy wooden table. He had thrown the gauntlet. Now to strike hard at the twisted core of pride that bent the Emperor to fit its ruthlessness. "You boasted that you were the strongest man in the world, physically and mentally. You're wrong on both considerations. Mentally you are weak, with a sick and rotten pride that warps your mind. I believe you're even a bit insane."

The Emperor rose to his feet. Muscles bunched in hard straight lines along the ridges of his jaw, and the flanges of his nose were white with suppressed rage.

Ostby went inexorably on. "Physically you've passed your prime. Soft living has coated your muscles with fat, and fat girds your middle. You . . ."

"You've said enough," the Emperor interrupted. He reached toward a bell resting on the table between them.

"Wait!" Ostby stopped him with the word. "What is the strong man going to do? Ring for his men to help him? Are you a coward as well as a braggart?" Ostby could see his words strike like blows.

The Emperor, his eyes wide open, wicked and quiet, sat down purposefully. Oddly he seemed to have recovered his self-control. "Pull your chair up to the table,"

he said. "We will see where the strength lies."

This was the moment! Now, Ostby reflected, if only he hadn't overestimated himself. With the thought came a tinge of doubt. Perhaps he would find that he was governed by the same false pride of which he had accused Magogor.

He followed the Emperor's example and laid his left arm flat on the table. Their left hands made contact. They rested their right elbows, their arms forming an elevated triangle, with the table's surface as the third side.

They gripped right hands, each large and powerful. Ostby hoped that he had the sheer animal strength to cope with the Emperor's extra hundred pounds of weight.

The Emperor threw his full strength into a forward press, and they were locked in fierce, inarticulate conflict. Ostby felt the muscles in his forearm, his biceps, and into his shoulder protest against the violent strain. It took all his strength to meet the power that beat against him, wave upon wave, and he realized immediately that the best he could hope to do was hold his own. He set his muscles, with all his might behind them, and watched almost disinterestedly as the cords of his forearms swelled and pushed out the skin until they stood like taut wires. A dull ache came into the shoulder socket, and he felt perspiration gather in a cold drop in the pit of his arm and roll clammy down his ribs. He knew now that, whatever he might have said, the Emperor was not soft.

For a long minute, while the realities about them seemed to pause, they held their position, both straining every muscle. The Emperor's face turned slowly red. The red flowed down his cheeks and into the corded tendons of his neck. Ostby could feel a pulse pounding in his own temple.

Suddenly, though he felt no relaxation in the Emperor's arm, Ostby knew he had won. Something in the grip of the hands told him that from here in he was in command. The first concrete sign of it, however, showed in the Emperor's face. Ostby saw the first doubt creep into the cruel down-slanting corners of his mouth, and deep within the features of his face there was a sign of remote breakage. With the loss of

certainly came a kind of shame into the man's face, and before Ostby's eyes he changed. Changed as the things he had lived for, all his life, were destroyed.

There was an excitement in Ostby now, and the excitement pleased him. He bent the Emperor's arm slowly back, until it was a few inches above the table top. He shot the adrenalin of his excitement into his arm and rapped the knuckles of the Emperor's hand sharply against the table.

For a moment they sat in a silence that carried more inflection than any noise. The Emperor's head was dropped as he went through his lonely thoughts. When he rose all reason had left him, and his face was twisted into a snarl of bottomless hate. Ostby knew he was facing a madman. A brutish roar rose from the Emperor's massive chest and rolled along the walls of the room. He reached for Ostby, and the table between them collapsed before his advance.

In the hall behind him Ostby heard the sound of running feet, and he knew he had to act, fast and forcefully. He set himself flat on his feet and brought his right arm around with fierce strength. His fist landed squarely against the Emperor's jaw.

The Emperor stood motionless and his eyes rolled slowly back. He swayed—with his body still unbending—and fell across the upturned table. He lay very still.

Ostby ran quickly to the balcony ledge and dived over.

OSTBY swam underwater until his burning lungs forced him to the surface. He observed with relief that he had placed a bend in the harbor shore between him and the view from the balcony. He pulled himself from the water and walked rapidly away. The first shadows of evening had begun to fall and he hoped his wet clothing would not arouse too much attention. His broken right hand throbbed with dull anguish.

A half hour later Ostby entered the Flats and made his way toward Siggen's house. He was only a few blocks from his destination when a tightening between his shoulder blades warned him of danger. Swiftly he turned. His throat quickened as he saw two men, a half-block behind, hurrying to overtake him. He began to run. He'd be safe

if he could reach Siggen's.

Then with dismay he noted two men ahead of him blocking the walk. He looked desperately to either side for a way out.

He spied a passageway between two houses and cut sharply in between them. Behind him he heard a shout and men running. In front loomed a high fence. A blind alley!

Without pausing, he leaped high and caught the top of the fence, his shattered hand protesting every movement. Swinging his body like a pendulum he pulled his feet up. "I've got to make it!" he breathed.

He didn't!

His feet missed the top of the fence and fell back. He hung for a second, helpless.

He felt the sting of steel in his neck. He hung in shocked stupor as his life poured out in a flood of blood that ran down his shoulder.

Ostby crumbled to the ground. Painfully he clasped his fingers over the gaping wound but the blood continued to ooze out between his fingers. All strength and power of movement left him.

Oddly enough his mind remained clear. There was no fear in him now, and no pain. The thing that had happened to him seemed the misfortune of some other person and he viewed it almost dispassionately. There was only regret that he would never be able to finish his job. And he had been so close.

Soon he became aware that someone stood beside him. He looked up with eyes that still registered clearly everything they saw. The cynical figure, wiping a short knife on a handful of grass, Ostby knew, was the man who had assaulted him. There was no emotion in the man. No hate and no rancor.

Abruptly another figure stood beside the assassin. With a shock Ostby recognized Rinda. For a second hope flickered as he noted the anguish on her face and the tears in her eyes. But the face hardened resolutely.

"I want you to know I had it done," the Duchess said. She drew back her foot and kicked him. Then she was gone.

So it had been she, Ostby reflected. Ironic justice. The one diversion he had allowed himself had been his undoing.

The assassin still stood at his side, Ostby noted. Was the ghoul waiting to enjoy the

finish, he wondered. Then his mind, which even in this extremity refused to accept its fate, conceived the shred of a plan. He strove to speak. At the third attempt he succeeded.

"How much . . . How much did . . . she pay you?" he asked.

"One thousand heds."

"If you get me . . . take me . . ." Ostby's reasoning was beginning to leave him. Vision and speech blurred. A fiery ball of pain strained at the base of his head, as though striving to break out.

The immediacy of his need helped him focus his vision once more on the face above him. He gasped, "Take me to Siggen. He will pay you two thousand if you get me there alive."

Ostby felt himself being lifted carefully off the ground.

The ball of fire in his head burst and he fell through darkness. He fell until he struck the bottom of a black pit, went through and fell some more. Consciousness left him.

FOR six days Death sat on the wooden prop at the foot of Ostby's bed and grinned at the thing that clung so tenaciously to life. The spark within its destitute body flickered feebly those days and the nearest Ostby came to lucidity was when he sat up in bed and cursed the grinning spectre.

Each time fat but gentle hands eased him back and murmured to him until he returned to sleep.

By the sixth day Death's grin became strained. Why would the creature not die? All the vitality had been drained from the husk, yet the thing within—the thing called Will—would not surrender its life. Each minute it forced the body to breathe once more. And the next minute it breathed again. The minutes stretched into days, and the days to a week; and the seventh day, when Ostby opened his eyes, Death was gone. He had won the hardest battle of his life.

Death's frost still lay along his nerves during the next two weeks. Ostby realized how far he had been along the road to dying by the reluctance with which his strength returned. This was the first time

in his life he could remember having been weak, so weak that the last frayed ends of his vitality lay naked. And with this weakness came a kind of humbleness. He lay quietly in the placid embrace of the apathy which the humbleness brought.

"I wish I knew some way to thank you," he said to Siggen.

"Don't try," Siggen urged. "If I'd ever had a son," he added, "I would have liked him to be like you."

An hour later Siggen said, "I'll do what you ask, but only on one condition: that you wait until you are stronger before you move."

Ostby considered. "I'll give myself two more days," he said. "By that time you should have everything ready."

Reluctantly Siggen agreed.

The sun had not yet risen, but its light was creeping into the sky as Siggen and Ostby stood huddled in a cold doorway across from the palace. All around them Ostby's discerning eye caught signs of life. But the signs did not disturb him. They were Siggen's men, and they were here at his request.

Suddenly a small splash of sound came from within the palace. A few minutes later two men, dressed in the uniform of the Emperor's guard, emerged. They were followed by four more. And during the next half-hour almost a hundred came from the palace. Some of them carried their belongings in their arms, and all of them were in a hurry.

"Something unusual is happening in there," Siggen said.

"Whatever it is, it suits our plans," Ostby said. "There can't be many guards left inside. Your men should have little trouble overpowering the remainder."

"I don't like it," Siggen said. "But every fear grows worse by not being looked at. Shall we go in?"

"Soon," Ostby answered. "Take me to the water-duct first."

"It's just around the corner," Siggen replied. "Come on."

They turned the corner of the building and Siggen paced off eight steps. "It should be right here," he said. He kicked in the dust until his foot struck a loose brick. "Right," he grunted.

Siggen bent and lifted the brick from its loose-fitting hole. "I supervised the job myself to see that it was done right," he said.

Ostby could hear a faint gurgle of water coming from the hole.

He rolled back the sleeve of his left arm and probed with his fingers until he found the spot he sought. "Cut here," he said.

Siggen shook his head disapprovingly but did as he was told. Blood crept out around the knife blade as it did its work. Ostby said nothing.

When Siggen had extracted the capsule, he handed it to Ostby.

Ostby knelt on one knee and broke the capsule, holding it carefully over the hole in the street. He counted the drops that fell.

"Six," he said. "And one more." He shook the broken halves, and dropped them into the water flowing beneath the hole. "That should do it," he commented, with satisfaction. "One drop will effectively impregnate two hundred fifty thousand gallons of water."

"I wish I knew what you were trying to do," Siggen said, "but I suppose that you'll tell me in your own good time. Do I send my men in yet?"

"Yes, we'd better start. They know that they're to take over the entire first floor and to hold it against all comers."

Siggen nodded and lifted his hand in a prearranged signal. The shadows about the buildings gave up their skulkers, and figures slipped out from every doorway and hiding place and entered the palace.

TEN minutes passed and not a sound came from within.

"It's too quiet," Siggen said. "I don't like it."

"We'll go in now," Ostby said.

Once in the palace Siggen called over one of his men. "Anything doing?" he asked.

"Nothing," the man replied. "The whole place seems deserted."

"What do we do now?" Siggen asked, turning to Ostby.

"We'll go upstairs. Magogar should be there."

"Will I bring along some of the men?"

"No," Ostby said. "I have a feeling that we won't need them."

Siggen and Ostby went slowly up the stairway. When they reached the room that housed the Brain, Ostby entered first.

"You timed it very well," a hollow voice greeted him, but it failed to catch Ostby's entire attention for he was looking down at a figure lying on the floor.

The figure was that of the Imperator, with a knife buried in his breast!

"Yes, he's dead," the hollow voice said, "and you killed him."

"I?" Ostby brought his attention up to the huge eye that gazed at him unwinking.

"You," the Brain answered. "Technically it's suicide. But when you defeated him in a test of strength, you killed him as surely as though you plunged the knife into his heart!"

"Then my work may be finished," Ostby said. He looked at the Brain with a question in his gaze.

"Yes," the Brain answered his unspoken question. "It is done. You were wise in deducing that I must use water to function, and thus would be exposed to the potion you placed in the palace water-duct. I'll never be able to open the 'door' again."

"I'm happy to hear that," Ostby said, letting his shoulders ease down. Only with the release did he realize the weight of the burden he had been carrying all these past months. "I hope it didn't harm you otherwise," he said.

"Not at all," the Brain answered. "You merely changed the pitch of a subtle brain resonance necessary for the opening of the 'door.' It is analogous to a growing boy's loss of the ability to sing tenor. His vocal cords are in no way injured when they grow too coarse to attain a certain pitch. But . . ."

The Brain paused. "What now?"

"How do you mean?" Ostby asked.

"You know that you will never be able to return to Earth after this. And, as you are the nominal successor to Magogar, I presume you will take over the city's government?"

"You're wrong," Ostby replied unhesitatingly. "I have no slightest desire to be Imperator."

"If you don't there will be chaos in the city."

"You told me once that the people would

be happier if they returned to their pastoral way of life. So now let them."

"That's correct," the Brain replied. "But if you leave the city without a government it will collapse in a bath of blood. It would be much better if you allowed the disintegration to occur gradually under your control. Furthermore, here is a thought which may not have entered your mind. There are thousands of Earth people in the city. If given the opportunity they could be quite happy here. They would be the technicians and tradesmen. In time they, and their descendants would be assimilated into the population, perhaps giving it many of their better traits. Would you give that up and expose them to death under the anarchy you would leave?"

"No," Ostby said. "But I have a different plan. One in which you play an integral part. Would you be willing to give Siggen the cooperation he'd need if he took over as Emperor?"

For the first time Ostby saw Siggen show surprise. His eyes widened at the first realization of what Ostby had proposed, but he said nothing and his features settled back

into their usual placid tranquillity. Only in his eyes did Ostby see how greatly he was pleased.

"You think, perhaps, that you surprise me," the Brain answered. "But I, too, have given Siggen thought since Magogar took his life. Siggen is the head of the element most likely to get out of hand, and he would be best able to control them. The so-called aristocracy may not like the choice but they have very little actual strength. As for the guards and police, with my, and your, sanction, I am certain that they will be happy to return to their former posts. And finally, Siggen is an able administrator. You may not like this, but he will make a better Emperor than yourself."

"Then it's settled," Ostby said. He turned to Siggen and held out his hand. "My friend, Siggen—Emperor—I leave the city in your capable hands. For the present, I bid you goodby." He turned and walked from the room.

For the first time Siggen spoke. "He is at heart very romantic," he said to the Brain. "He goes now to renew an affair of courtship with a certain Duchess, Rinda!"
