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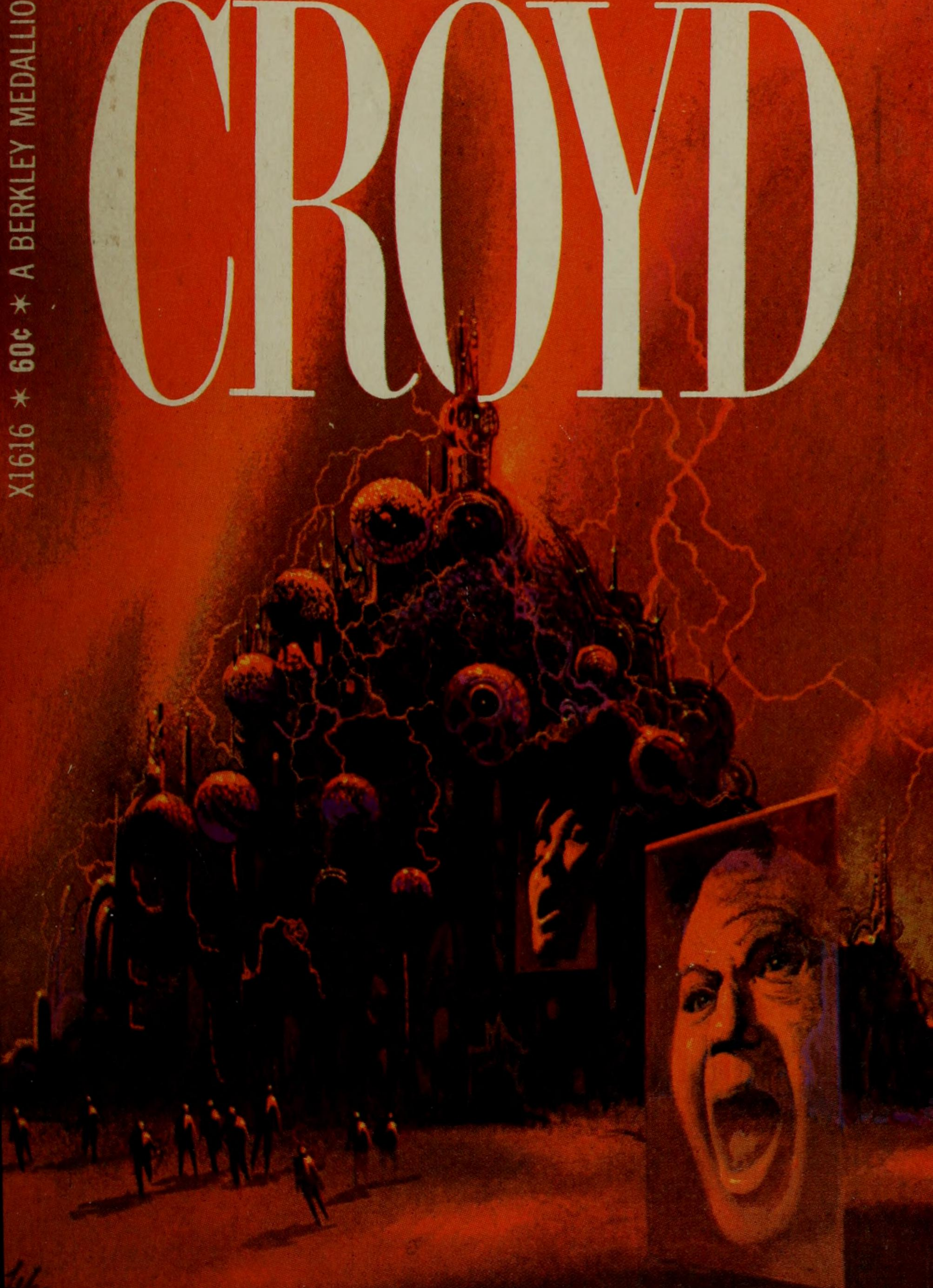
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X1616

A BRILLIANT NEW SF NOVEL ABOUT THE
WORLD OF "DOWNTIMING" AND "UPTIMING"

IAN WALLACE

CROYD



CROYD

He was Croyd—the essential Croyd, that is; the Croyd-*mind*—displaced into the brain of the woman who had called herself Lurla. However, this brain identified itself now as Greta. It followed that Lurla had been an alien mind who had occupied this Greta's brain. From that vantage point, Lurla had pulled off a mind transposition, transferring Croyd's mind into the Greta-brain and making away with Croyd's brained body.

This had to mean that Lurla was a gnurl from the Large Magellanic Cloud, planning to use her new Croyd-disguise and Croyd-potencies for some kind of cosmic damage to this galaxy. And in this feeble Greta-brain, Croyd was powerless to do anything about it. . . .

"Here is fast-moving science fiction at its most 'way out' and outlandish." —*Sacramento Union*

". . . a highly readable and diverting adventure laid in the far future." —*Newark News*

CROYD

a downtime fantasy by

IAN WALLACE

BERKLEY

A BERKLEY MEDALLION BOOK
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To, conjointly,

DOM MANUEL, HEDROCK,
and HIERONYMUS BOSCH

GROUND RULES FOR THE SPACE OPERA

Mind-body speculation and space-time speculation are the essence of science-fantasy. For example, science does not know what mind is, or where it is, or whether it is an entity distinguishable from living brain; but in science-fantasy, a well-grounded decision can be made, and the decider can insistently improvise on his decision. In fiction, a just-possible hypothesis can burgeon as vital reality; and we can watch its consequences developing in all kinds of experience—hard, sweet, bitter, droll, aspirational, fantastic, human.

—C. Ansata, *Fantasy and Inquiry*
(World Copyright Union © 1992)

We have moved so far so fast since Einstein that already some of his posits are barriers to further space-progress. Once it is clearly understood that the limiting velocity of light and the concept of time as a fourth spatial dimension are much like the thirteen-trick rule in the game of bridge, it may still be possible, without suspended animation, to reach the stars.

—Erik Norstad, *Soliloquy at Moonbase*
(Interworld Council © 2039)

Reason is sterile without feeling. But the insidious enemy of rational action is irrational passion. The delight of a dance of bodies is heightened and enriched to the extent that it is consciously also a dance of minds—the more so, the higher and richer—tending toward, although of course unable ever to quite attain, an impossible bodiless interfusing *flight of mind.*

—Nike Pan, *Plato and the Stars*
(Sol/Centauri © 2318)

All three quotes are from the first-edition copies in the Nereid Rare Old Book Collection.

Come, you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full
Of direst cruelty!

—*Lady Macbeth, in Will Shakespeare's* MACBETH
(c. 1606—Public Domain)

1

Watching the projecto while a tall glass of frosted zac cooled the palms of his big hands, Croyd let his tense mind idle down. Not that the projecto's topic was especially soothing—it was a full-color, four-dimensional, stereo-audio-kinesthetic subjectival treatment of a man-made nova—but it had the effect of releasing his aggressions. At first, the passing touch of a nudie had jarred him; but presently he telepathed one to stay for a while, and obediently it floated about him, brushing against him as his mood drew it. Once or twice he felt remotely regretful about the smallness of this indulgence; but after all, this was mainly a night of business.

At his direction, the nudie left him briefly to float over to the bar for another glass of zac. (No esthetically satisfying substitute for breakable glass as a drink container had ever been found.) At about the same moment the projecto ended. During this lull his eyes fell upon the woman. She had raised her short skirt to draw a cigarette from a silver garter case. The utterly commonplace gesture drew his drifting attention.

She sat at a table twenty feet from his booth, no tables intervening, and her cigarette-case leg, her left leg, was on his side. This leg was long, and once it had been shapely, but now it was too thin; the hosiery was black semisheer. The hand that withdrew the cigarette was long, slender, pale, and the cigarette trembled between the fingers. Croyd followed the cigarette as it traveled up to her

mouth, and he took in the body-background: she was tall, and once she might have been slender wherever slenderness was desirable, but she had seen some wear, and now she was just thin. After a couple of tries, the cigarette got between her lips: once medium-generous, now thin; once wide-smiling, now a slash in her face, vampire-accentuated. Her face had been slender and fair, now it was pale and gaunt; her eyes had been deep green, now they were pale; her hair had been ash-blond, now it was black with an eighth-inch of pallor showing at the roots.

Still with her skirt up a trifle, she glanced left and saw Croyd. There was a momentary tableau. Then she turned away and puffed at the cigarette, which ignited automatically on the pull. She took several tugs at it, making a long, fiery head, then took it out of her mouth and sat in semistupor with lazy smoke leaking from mouth and nostrils. She looked nearly thirty; she might be younger.

Croyd knew her male companion a little. He was a run-of-the-mine specimen for the Montreuil—a noted Greenwich Village place patronized by escaping diplomats, field-grade officers on leave, almost-there artists and writers, and offbeat noblemen from various planets. The woman's man was the last kind, a greasy-handsome wealthy creature from Aldebaran IV. Croyd had no feelings about him: to Croyd the man hadn't shown his hand. But Croyd had a hunch that he knew why the woman looked as though she badly needed rescuing.

Pulling his eyes away from her for courtesy, he sipped zac. Then his eyes were pulled back. She had abruptly slumped—not all the way down on the table but partway down; the tremor had stopped, the lips hung loose, the eyes were glazed, the cigarette was about to drop from her fingers. Croyd was entranced. Her companion was not noticing, being all enthralled in vivacious flirtation with a woman at the adjoining table.

If it weren't for his expected guest, Croyd told himself, he'd look into this . . .

Just as abruptly, the woman came to life. She sat erect, clasping the cigarette firmly. She turned left and met Croyd's eyes. She turned away and looked squarely at her

man—who continued to disregard her in favor of the next table.

Suddenly the revitalized young woman half-stood, leaned across the table, and slapped her companion hard on the side of the face, swinging his startled face around to her. She picked up the zac glass in front of her and brandished it at him.

"This is not zac!" she snarled. "This is tea! I want zac!"

He eyed her with quiet surprise. "Call it zac," he told her. "Consider that it is zac."

"It is *tea!*" she insisted. "What makes you think I can't handle zac? Don't you realize that tea is an insult? Do you know who gets tea around here instead of zac? They serve tea to the bar-girls!"

His large dark eyes regarded her languidly. "Well?" he demanded.

The woman froze in tableau, glass held wide and high. Then she dashed the contents in the man's face, smashed the glass on the floor, swung toward Croyd, hurried over to his booth, slid in beside him and grasped his forearm with both hands.

Her strangulated voice pleaded with him: "Mister, I don't like to get you into trouble, but can you help me pry loose from that creep?"

She had hold of his zac arm, she was spilling zac. Cursing inwardly, Croyd set down the glass: next thing, the management would put up the transparent force-field around him, and everybody would be watching. And, oh my, what *that* would do for his upcoming discreet little conference. . . .

Unexpectedly he found himself looking full into her eyes.

It changed his whole outlook. He caught himself almost wishing that he were turned on.

A shadow stood over them. He looked up. It was her man—long, lean, oily, wicked. The man met his eyes. Deliberately the man picked up the zac glass, took aim, and dashed the contents into the woman's face. Setting

down the glass, the man drew a switchblade, switched it, and faced Croyd.

No force-field around them yet; the management must be napping. Good thing, too. Erection of the force-field was always accompanied by little tinkling bells to draw everybody's attention.

Croyd met the man's eyes. Croyd then picked up the empty zac glass and held it out toward the man. Slowly Croyd crushed the glass in his hand. Opening his hand, he let the fragments of glass fall out. His hand was not cut.

The dark man stared, then straightened, noticeably paler. Twice he tapped the knife blade on his finger, then paused, then tapped once more. The blade retracted. The instrument went into his pocket.

"Well, what do you know!" he exclaimed. "It *was* tea, wasn't it?" Bending and patting the girl affably on a shoulder, he added, "Farewell, kid. Happy return to the gutter." And he departed.

Half twisted around, the girl stared after him. Slowly she turned back to Croyd. Then her head went queerly down in a between-shoulders crouch, and she began to shudder.

Unsummoned, a nudie came with two zacs. Its mind inquired, "I will not be needed, no?" Croyd assented, and it went away. Nudies never minded.

The woman clutched the glass with both hands, downed half the zac, jammed it back down on the table and sat trembling, head down. She sat at a ninety-degree angle with Croyd in the booth. Croyd waited.

Her head came up. She studied Croyd's calm, intent face. He was lean; he was, she guessed, past thirty-five, but physiologically young; his short-cut hair was auburn, his eyes were Mediterranean blue; he was neither handsome nor ugly, but one didn't forget him.

"How did you do that?" she asked. "I mean the glass-crushing."

"Yoga trick," he replied. "Did you notice that I didn't squeeze the bottom of the glass? It would have cut me."

She looked at him a moment longer. Then she downed the rest of the zac.

He queried, "If I order another, can you drink it slowly?"

For answer, she held her empty glass in the air, and a nudie whisked it away. They waited in silence, watching each other. When her drink came, they touched glasses, sipped temperately, and set them down.

She said, "I'm Lurla."

He responded, "Croyd."

After silence, reticently she said, "You saved what I laughingly call my soul. For that I'll give you anything."

"Nothing owed," he told her. "If you need a bunk tonight, I have a guest room. You can lock it, but you won't need to." He meant it exactly that way.

Angry red spots appeared in her pale cheeks, but she schooled herself to reply quietly: "Thank you."

He considered her thoughtfully. At first his fixed gaze discomfited her; then gradually she realized that he wasn't actually paying attention to her.

"You're expecting somebody," she announced.

He nodded, still furtively looking about.

"May I ask whom?"

That earned her a sharp look. "Whence that *whom?*"

"Why? Wasn't it right?"

"Don't play innocent. You didn't even think it out—it just came out easy, like that."

One eyebrow went down. "We can talk, but not about my past. If you like the *whom,* I'll ask you again—whom are you expecting?"

"The President."

"Of what?"

"Are there two?"

"If you're really expecting *him,* I don't know why you'd tell me—and I don't know why you let me stay here."

Neither did Croyd, but he responded promptly: "I told you because you should know, and you're here because you offered to stay. Now be quiet."

Her cheeks went red again. Deciding to test him she followed through: "I don't take that kind of talk from anybody. Thanks for the drinks." She started to rise.

Only she couldn't.

Fighting panic, Lurla said quietly, "What did you put in my zac?"

"Nothing, really. I'll confess to putting a psychoswitch on your motor controls. I can turn you off and on, selectively. I just turned you off; now you're on again. Do you really want to leave, Lurla?"

"Frankly, I don't dig this."

"Nothing to be alarmed about. . . . Quiet, here he comes."

Lurla quelled an impulse to turn and look; things were deep tonight, even deeper than she intended. She watched Croyd's eyes as they looked beyond her. A male body hovered behind her, and a deep voice said, "Thoth?"

"Right. Osiris?"

"Right. At least, Thoth, you are giving me the right alias."

"So are you, Osiris. Sit down, Sir."

A heavy, florid, middle-aged man pulled up a chair and sat with them. He looked at Lurla—who knew that the President's name wasn't Osiris.

"She's all right," said Croyd.

"I'll take your word on her," said Osiris, "if you *are* Thoth."

"You'll know I'm Thoth, if you *are* Osiris." Croyd extended his hand. Osiris clasped it, and Lurla saw a crackling of light between their palms. Croyd and Osiris simultaneously nodded satisfaction.

Croyd said, "What's the problem?"

Osiris glanced once more at Lurla and then took the plunge. "I can't work through channels to you, Thoth—I can't trust your superiors—I can't even trust you, but I must. Are you perfectly sure that this lady—"

"—is all right," Croyd repeated curtly. "Trust her, too, or don't trust me."

Lurla's eyes widened. They grew even wider as the talk proceeded.

2

When Osiris was gone, Croyd mused. Presently he asked, "Want to finish your drink before we leave?"

"No—"

Croyd dropped a hundred credits, rose, took Lurla by the upper arm, helped her to her feet, and steered her insistently through people toward a rear exit. She was tall, but he towered over her. They passed through a rear corridor and debouched into a dark, evil-smelling alley. He was moving rapidly with her, glancing swiftly about and behind him as though he feared pursuit. He hardly felt Lurla, who glided easily along in his grasp as though they were dancing.

He swung her into a dark doorway, slid open the door heavily, shut it behind them and then pinned Lurla against a wall, shielding her with his body as a blinding energy-ray disintegrated the door, deflected off his back, and set fire to the far wall.

"Near thing," he muttered in her ear. "Hang on—we'll uptime."

Her intestines quivered oddly, and then he released her. Under a dim yellow ceiling light, the door that had just been blasted looked perfectly intact. "We have fifty-eight seconds," he told her, taking her arm again and steering her down the corridor and around a corner, moving apparently by knowledge and feeling, since she could see nothing. He stopped then; they seemed to be facing a wall.

"Twenty-nine seconds left," he observed. "We've uptimed a bare sixty seconds, and even that was risky—"

"Look left," Lurla whispered. Croyd turned. Up-corridor from them stood the faintly glowing figure of a tall man with a hand-weapon leveled at Croyd.

Instantly Croyd drew and fired silently. The figure simply *went out*.

"Damn," said Croyd. "You see, Lurla? You can't be sure of getting away with uptiming, even if it's only sixty seconds. It would have been all right, if nobody had seen us. . . ." Her dark-adapted eyes saw him kneeling over a body on the floor. Almost immediately he rose and returned to her: the body seemed to be gone. "I anchored it at this time-point, so of course it will never be found unless there is somebody else who can uptime and stumbles upon it here—"

Behind them, around the corner they'd just turned, came a dim yellow flare and a *poof*. "That was the shot," he said. "Here we go." A door in the wall slid open, revealing a glowing cubicle. He thrust her in, followed, and made the door shut; he was doing this telekinetically, she realized. Her stomach quivered as they shot downward, but it wasn't like the intestine-twitch of the uptiming.

"I am navigating this lift at a steady acceleration of 1½ G's," he told her, "and I have programmed it to hold this acceleration until it is halfway to a prearranged stop, whereupon it will decelerate at the same rate. Feel light?"

She nodded.

"That means we're going down. You'll know when we level-off to move horizontally. This trip will only take a couple of minutes. Any questions?"

"I'll know soon enough where we're going. Tell me what happened."

"They fired at us, so I uptimed sixty seconds; thus we were able to get to the lift before they fired at us, but I had to wait until they did fire before I could activate the door. Right now they're milling around, confused in the corridor above us, unless they know about this lift."

"What if they know?"

"That's a long story, but we don't have to worry tonight."

"How could that energy ray bounce off your body?"

"Yoga trick."

"And the uptiming—more yoga?"

"Same kind, yes."

Then she was pressed over against him at 1½ G's as the lift began to level-off; he'd anticipated the change and was braced for it. No longer did she feel light; instead, she felt her normal weight, but thrust backward by acceleration. Behind her, he clasped his arms and hands about her waist, holding her against him.

A moment later she felt as though the vehicle were braking gently to a stop; whereafter they were thrust forward as though the vehicle were reversing itself. He held her firmly.

"We're going back!" she exclaimed.

"No," he explained, "only decelerating. We'll stop in another minute and get out."

"Where?"

"My place."

Lurla was suddenly reminded that she had given away her time; just for a few moments she had felt like a human being in the grip of an adventure. Trying to cling to the illusion, she asked another question. "Then the same shot was fired twice?"

"No. We observed it twice. But it was fired only once."

"But the first time we observed it, we were next to it; while the second time, we had traveled down the corridor away from it."

"That's right."

She licked her lips, framing the next question. "Then, from the viewpoint of whoever it was shooting, they shot once, and we moved instantaneously down the corridor. But from our viewpoint, we moved normally, and they fired twice."

"That's right."

"All right. But how about the ones who shot at *us*?"

"Here, we're stopping."

"Croyd, my friend," she muttered, "you've talents that I can use—and secrets that I must know." And as she was thrown gently backward by the ease-off of 1½-G deceleration and then gently thrown forward by the soft total

stop, she filed in the back of her mind a reflection that there now existed a sixty-second fold in time that constituted a chronological loose loop which anybody might someday tighten unpredictably. And it coffined a corpus delicti.

3

Croyd's deep apartment was moderately spacious, and its moods were diversified. The salon, Lurla noted, was mostly Oriental, running to large cushions rather than furniture, and the carpeting was pillow-thick; but in a far corner, an area of several hundred square feet was an austere blend of architectural study and chemical engineering lab. (A different kind of chemistry was enshrined in a small bar in the opposite corner.)

She was disconcerted by his immediate sally as he closed the door (its definitive self-locking click was ominous). "Guest room over there, Lurla. Shower there if you want one: that uptiming is rough work. Myself, I'm for a shower." Waving vaguely, he departed.

It was not the most auspicious of all possible starts for a semiseduction. However, she shrugged and sought the guest room. It had an attractive little biffy with a shower. She stripped and tried it. The shower was irradiated; no soap necessary.

Deep down and far away. At a rough guess, allowing for mutually canceling acceleration and deceleration, eight miles down and four miles away. "There will be no incident." Lurla shuddered in the thrilling shower: maybe she *was* in trouble.

She came out stronger, long legs nude, hose hanging from one hand and shoes from the other, tasting the car-

pet pile with her bare feet. The room had been darkened. Croyd stood in his laboratory corner, silhouetted in unearthly light that flooded up from the table over which he was bending. He was fully clothed and his back was hard.

He had to be excited by her, he simply *had* to be; her whole objective depended on his mind being addled by champagne in his blood.

A little frightened, she called softly, "Shower all done, Croyd."

He worked a moment longer, then slowly turned. Over a shoulder he surveyed her. Meeting his eyes, she gave him a full hypnotic blast. Her potent gnurl-hypnosis had already worked on him subtly twice this evening: it had led him to accept her as an honest victimized pleader, and it had led him incredibly to vouch for her before President Tannen.

His response was not strikingly encouraging. He said politely, "Excuse me if I seem abstracted, Lurla; tomorrow is calling. Come on over." Then he turned back to the negatronic drafting table, studying, drawing a curve on the glowing crystal surface with a forefinger, the light on his face shifting as the curve electronically perfected itself and settled into position.

Lurla, dropping shoes and hose and coming up on his left side, contemplated his shadow-lighted profile. Then Lurla turned to study the developing drawing in the table's deep luminescence. She could not clearly understand what it was; she faintly suspected that he was experimenting theoretically with creative brain-wiring. There is no complexity more exquisite than the delicate-intricate filamental labyrinth of a brain seen in its dynamic reality—not grossly as a convoluted gray sponge, but ultramicroscopically as precise dry-logical intervitality.

What of Croyd, though? Subliminally her hypnosis *must* be working . . .

Eh! Now he absentmindedly slipped his left arm around her waist, continuing to watch the glow. Was it a response? Lurla relished it for a moment, then unexpectedly she stiffened in panic.

He felt this and he looked at her with surprise. "Something?"

Assuredly her hypnosis wasn't working on him now; perhaps she should try it on herself! Between clenched teeth, Lurla said: "I guess I'm scared."

"Scared? You?"

His implication made her cringe, and it also reminded her that she was forgetting the character of the brain she occupied. Concentrating on her role, she turned to him, pressing herself against him, veiling her eyes, holding up her mouth soft for kissing, murmuring (or trying to murmur), "I'm at your mercy, Croyd. Just don't hurt me too much."

Nothing happened except that possibly his arm tightened a bit around her waist. She opened her eyes to find that he was quizzically inspecting her face.

He told her: "It's no go, Lurla. You're trying, but inwardly you're cold as a cadaver."

Her eyes opened extra wide: their green irises *were* pretty. "How do *you* know?"

He said apologetically, "Normally I don't like to pry, but under the circumstances I just took the liberty of checking-out your brain. You have hard inhibitors clamped on your cerebral centers of sexual representation. You don't want me, Lurla. You're only trying to pay me off for a favor—and you don't have to." Releasing her waist, he took both her limp hands in his decisive hands. "Don't look so chapfallen, kid—it's all right, we both need solitary sleep, I have a rough day coming up."

She was aghast—at his ability to search her brain; at the prospect of her enterprise collapsing like an abortive soufflé; at the narrow escape she'd run of having her identity and her purposes read—a miss, she guessed, only because he had been singlemindedly checking just one question. Groping for a gambit, suddenly she remembered the mental motor block he'd been able to throw at her in the Montreuil; and the right play opened up like a shining parasol.

"Croyd," she begged, "I do want to please you. I can't begin to tell you what you've done for me, but I can't help

being cold, and I don't want to be cold. If you can *detect* my inhibitors—can you *remove* them?"

Only, and frighteningly, springtime spilled out of her parasol. For she slipped into imagining the consequences.

What followed in Lurla's mind began as a familiar girlish man-thrill but grew into something totally new: a melting of herself, a pervasive sense of ineffable beauty, a compelling desire to give Croyd whatever he might want regardless of the cost to herself. It continued to grow until Croyd-desire was all there was in her fantastic world . . .

His hard hands were gripping her shoulders, his hard voice was clubbing her mind: "You look thirty but you act fifteen! What I'm going to kill is your *sleep*-inhibitors—and then we can both conk-out separately and forget it!"

His mindreach needled into her brain, and panic came with it. But instantly Lurla saw that the wrong reaction was yielding the right opportunity anyway.

Tensing herself, she acted.

Abruptly, Croyd's intent expression changed to bewilderment and then to dismay . . .

4

She was melting before Croyd, beneath Croyd.

She acted. In seconds after the transposition, she had adapted herself to his Rolandic fissure and had gone through the complete *lanai* emotic switch-off procedure. She paused. She rested. Then she let external consciousness return.

Peering about, she saw the woman unconscious nearby. She got to her feet, went to the woman, knelt, turned her on her back, straightened her limbs, stood, studied. Lurla

cleared her throat—and the sound was male-deep. She went into the next room and studied her body—or *his* body—in a full-length mirror.

Even as a space pilot might exult when, having quit his own craft, he had successfully traversed wine-dark space and boarded, conquered and taken possession of a hostile craft which was threatening to destroy him, so now exulted Lurla.

The exultation was tempered by the faint dismay of the superbly feminine Lurla-mind at having, for a noble purpose, to masquerade even temporarily in a male body. It was tabu in the cultural styling of aristocratic gnurls, a styling of extreme sex-distinction. On the other hand, this Croyd-vehicle was instrumentally light-years above any of the human bodies she'd trained in. Next to her own, this one would do—and in her own, which was totally alien, she would have been helpless against the enemy.

The transient springtime-with-Croyd phenomenon had obviously been a mere accident of her residency in a human woman. Impossible for Lurla the gnurl *as* a gnurl. Were *he* a gnurl, though . . .

Well, that was past. She controlled Croyd, now; she was in his brain, operating the servo-mechanism of his brained body, using his brain to formulate the memories latent in her own mind-self, and with all his memory-banks and action-controls at her disposal. And with all his emotics turned-off, there should develop no subjective obstacle to the cold, hard work that she had to do in this foreign galaxy among these alien humans.

The scientifically dispassionate princess took pride in her impeccable witch-management of this necessary gambit. Nothing could go wrong.

Returning to Croyd's Oriental parlor—noticing, en route, how heavily her big male feet were hitting the carpet—she considered the woman whose body lay there, its brain now imprisoning Croyd's raped-and-transferred mind. The woman's name, as Lurla now remembered, had been Greta before Lurla had transiently taken her over. How long would Greta sleep?

A new idea came: Lurla was awakening more and more, grasping dimly at comprehension of the new powers that were hers in the brain of Croyd. There were tropical fish in an illuminated aquarium. She went to them and tried something: as intended, the target fish went to sleep, and it awoke in forty-two seconds (she had tried for thirty).

More time was needed to gain better control, so Lurla did not try the trick immediately on Greta. Instead, she visited the bar, drew fresh hot coffee from the tap, and used it to wash down a breakfast tablet.

Calisthenics might help. The Croyd-body disappointed her by fatiguing after the thirty-second push-up, but she rightly suspected that this was only because his body was less than perfectly responsive to a new controlling mind.

Afterward she man-squatted on a cushion and absently watched the inert Greta while, with her major attention, she probed and sought control of the diverse capabilities of the Croyd-brain that she now owned.

She blinked; almost, she had forgotten a major step in the procedure—checking her own Lurla-memory. How well could she reconstruct it in the stranger-brain? As a check-situation, Lurla selected the conversation in her hidden space ship that had immediately preceded her occupation of Greta and her Croyd-hunting:

"As you can see in the telemetric picture, madame, Croyd is sitting in that booth in the Montreuil, relaxing, sipping zac, watching the projecto. Unfortunately we get no sense that he has women on his mind at the moment. On the other hand, a quick telemetric appraisal of that couple at a nearby table—see there?—would indicate a live possibility for you. The young woman is worn, her ego is nearly dead, she detests the man, he despises her, they are weary of each other. Does a tactic suggest itself?"

"It does—but it is not a savory tactic, for she is not a proper woman."

"Reflect, madame: you are a gnurl princess, a proud

virgin, and if you are to embark on this kind of adventure, with all its worthiness, you must resolutely repress culture-shock. And you must also accept the fact that your whole plan of action is risky, even though it is the only way to approach the great Croyd. In the course of arousing him, as you must do to gain our purpose, there could be—an incident."

"There will be no incident. That fear you can dismiss." (Remembering that flat assertion, Lurla now allowed a grimace to appear on Croyd's face.)

"Good, I hope. At any rate, you must now act very fast. May we swiftly run through the approach once more?"

"I approach upward through the floor, utilizing the latency network that the Montreuil has installed to generate local transparent force-fields for isolating brawlers so that other patrons may watch untroubled. I have memorized that woman's encephalic pattern. When the sense of it is maximally identifiable, I enter through her feet, put her mind into twilight sleep for an eighteen-hour period, and take-over."

"Perfect, madame."

"One last assurance. There is no question about my own body?"

"There is always a question. However, the life of your body in the stasis-field is as sure as its life with your mind in it. No more so—but no less."

"That has to be good enough, I suppose—"

"Madame! Act now!"

Lurla nodded Croyd's head. She could remember for herself as well as for him. Here and there the memories were embarrassing—but that was not the point, was it?

Greta stirred but did not awaken. Presumably Croyd was bound within Greta as a result of the swift transference. Poor Croyd—eventually to awaken, not only in a woman's body, but in the brain of an inferior woman whose will had been entirely shot before Lurla had found her. Lurla now decided to let Greta sleep, to awaken whenever she would. At a subsequent date, Lurla would return to trade brained bodies with Croyd again; meanwhile he'd be able to live down here in Greta's brain, if he

didn't go mad. Frowning, Lurla found it impossible to feel vengefully triumphant over Croyd; he'd picked her up as a rescue operation, and she'd played an unfair trick on him. In an unusually complete way, he'd been rolled.

Was there any chance that Croyd-Greta could get away from here?

Impossible. Greta's limitations were too restricting. He'd be lucky—or maybe unlucky—if he could even generate a memory of his own identity, in Greta.

Meanwhile, Lurla-in-Croyd had to seem to be doing what the President of the Galaxy wanted of Croyd, in order to use what the President had revealed to Croyd. The alternative was nothing less than implosion of the galaxy.

5

The lift was waiting, which meant either that they had not found it or that they had bugged it. (Croyd's memories had not told her who they were, but she reflected that you don't immediately milk a new brain of everything it knows.) Lurla-in-Croyd took a chance. She tried her new brain on the lift, and the lift responded. Tentatively she tried 2 G's, then 5, then 8, and settled for 10: the Croyd-body handled it easily. (There were no gauges, but Croyd's brain could tell.)

The vehicle took her without incident in fifteen minutes to the surface at a jungle place by the Tonkin Gulf. The experimentation had slowed the trip a little. Emerging, she sent the vehicle back down out of sight, then threaded a trail for about a mile to a camouflaged pit. Dropping into the pit, she went crouched through a treacherous tunnel shored-up by boards and beams, and debouched into a

man-made cavern with a lake in the middle of it. Man-movements were coming easily now; her loose driving muscularity was authentically her own. (Could she ever enjoy being a woman again? Well, yes . . .)

Near the shore, what looked like a wide pipe with an open lid thrust itself up from the water. She lowered herself into the pipe, closed the lid after her, locked it with a turn of a wheel and descended a metal ladder into a compact room about the size of the command room in a spaceship and similarly instrumented.

Settling herself into the bucket seat, Lurla brain-activated the submarine, pleasuring herself endlessly with these new experiences which she knew how to control by virtue of the memories that leaped at her out of Croyd's responsive brain. The ship had been designed by Croyd and built for Croyd. When all was warm and checked-out, she submerged and got under way. At first she used the television windows and visisonar more for enjoyment than for guidance; but as her speed began to transcend visibility, she snapped off the windows and concentrated on instruments.

Reaching the usual take-off point, she went stationary at a depth of 127 fathoms and utilized sonar, radar, television, infratelemetry, and telesthesia to assure herself that no eyes below, on the surface, or in the air could see her actions. Having then positioned Nereid and programmed the tracking, she took-off at a steady 360 G's, with the 1:500 inertial shield keeping her comfortable at an apparent .72 G. Nereid, at this acceleration (allowing for equal deceleration after half-time) was about twenty hours out.

Croyd's interplanetary scouter shared the same travel-acceleration principle with interstellar ships and with his private lift: (1) determine optimum travel time for the distance; (2) accelerate steadily until, at half-time, double the required average velocity has been reached; (3) brake steadily until, at touch-down, velocity is zero. This procedure, being rough on fuel, had been impossible during the years of self-contained fuel stores and even during the later years of sun-power; but the new ability to tap space itself for energy now made it possible. It required fewer

G's at maximum than the earlier theory of moving swiftly to required average velocity, cutting thrust, and doing most of the trip in free fall; hence it permitted major structural economies, more range, more speed, more payload.

On the scouter and on the big ships, whose prime repulsors were mounted astern, the trip began by increasing acceleration in nominal time (a few seconds) to the steady G-thrust required. Then, at mid-trip, acceleration was cut off for perhaps an hour; during which, in free fall, the ship rotated, presenting her stern repulsors to the destination. When (again in nominal time) the repulsors resumed the G-thrust required to brake the ship for the balance of the trip, subjectively it still felt like driving forward. You imagined you were going home again.

Something now required settling, and since it was something that the Croyd-brain took for granted, she could not immediately find a clear answer. She decided to risk consulting the computer; undoubtedly it had an inbuilt loyalty pattern, so everything depended on identification. Lurla waited—finding that Croyd's brain was adept at loosening tension and keeping her cool—while the computer read the brain's thalamic pattern. The computer seemed puzzled and did a check run, but presently it signaled satisfaction. Evidently Lurla's alien personality was faintly distorting the typical Croyd pattern, but only to the degree that a transient emotive disturbance might distort handwriting. Once the machine was satisfied that this was Croyd, it would be loyal and would find no question foolish.

Her question was blunt. "Can I safely sleep until we arrive?"

"Sleep is indicated," was the answer. "As you know, I can handle any purely physical hazard, no matter how random, and afterward bring us back on track. I will awaken you if any *intelligent* hazard presents itself."

Reassured and terribly fatigued, Lurla left a call for two hours before arrival. She did not go to sleep exactly; instead, she self-induced a hypnopaedic condition. When she awoke, she must be 100 per cent Croyd, except to the extent that her volition would be Lurla.

6

She stepped out of the craft into the berth that was private to Derien and a handful of subordinates including Croyd. She was now on Nereid, the smaller satellite of Neptune, governmental seat of Galactic, Ltd. Artificial gravity in the Galactic offices, which entirely engulfed Nereid's 54,000 square miles of surface and bored deep into her interior, was set at ⅔ G, which was luxuriously comfortable and fall-safe and conducive to instant energy, but rather analogous to air-conditioning in Texas—nice when you're in, but making it tough by contrast when you're out. At the moment, she was in; and it was especially nice after her 360-G trip from Earth all the way to the periphery of the Sol System, for the inertial shield—not totally acceleration-proof on the small craft—allowed about 1/500th of the acceleration to be felt continually.

Blue-overalled crewmen were saluting and taking over Croyd's draft. Lurla stepped into an updraft and emerged in Croyd's laboratory. She went immediately to the visicom and dialed Croyd's superior. By Nereid's arbitrary time, it was the start of the morning.

A bored, heavy-lidded, pencil-mustached face appeared. "Ah, Croyd. Did you relax?"

"Totally, Derien."

"Good, because you'll have to be on steady duty for days. Locked in, a lot of the time."

"What's up, Derien?"

"Nothing much, Croyd. They're only going to hit us with Ceres."

Lurla-Croyd whistled. Ceres was planet-sized, it could

pulverize the 130-mile diameter of Nereid. Of course, even that catastrophe was minor in relation to the respective concerns of Lurla, Croyd and President Tannen; but a whistle it did merit.

"How can they do *that?*" she demanded.

"Real easy. They took over Ceres while you were gone. Our experimental repulsor network fits their needs just fine; they caught our men asleep at the switch, and they've beefed-up the tail. It'll take them about two days to get her out of orbit, I'd judge. And since they're navigating a whole planet, they can keep their acceleration very high, which will allow them to tack tight on the planets they pass. So Ceres might hit us right quick, now."

A curse seemed in order. "If you hadn't put me on rest cure, I could have messed up that take over."

"No you couldn't. You were all shot, Croyd. I hope you're set now."

"I'm set."

"Okay. You're on your own. It's *all* yours. Happy repulsion!"

Derien's bored face disappeared. Lurla dropped into an easy chair, drumming on the titanium arms with Croyd's heavy fingernails. Before she could go into action, she had a great many sortings-out to do and a number of decisions to make.

Twenty-four hours earlier—prior to the privately conveyed message that President Tannen (or "Osiris") wished rendezvous with Croyd, and while Croyd was still Croyd—the factors involved in decision-making and action had been simple for Croyd. Galactic, Ltd. had won by lowest bid to specifications a ten-year contract to govern the galaxy. Competitors in other star systems had murmured: Earth was still the dominant power in the galaxy, and since Galactic was peopled largely by earthlings and was inside the Sol System (albeit just inside), there was talk about favoritism. Nevertheless, on the record, Galactic was the lowest bidder to specifications and had a solid record of governmental accomplishment including a quarter century with Centaurus. So far as anyone knew, this operation was internal to the galaxy, no extragalactic con-

tacts having been established. The contract had been awarded officially by President Tannen, who had risen from Secretary-General of Earth's United International Constellations to preside by election over the thirty-nine planets in thirty-one star systems having human-intelligent governments. The multiple governmental agencies of Galactic, Ltd. included the Secretariat for Internal Conformity: this bureau benignly overlooked bearded demonstrations, but it was intently concerned with highly organized disruption, for which seven planets, including Earth, were hotbeds. It was a youth group on Earth, an organization calling itself HOTSPUR and dedicating itself to self-determined galactic government without corporational dominance, which (as one of its most determined moves) had invested Ceres with a task force of kamikaze-type teenagers in order to launch Ceres as a projectile to destroy Nereid and Galactic with it. Croyd, as Assistant Secretary for Emergency Action in the Secretariat for Internal Conformity, responded in various ways to Undersecretary Derien, utilizing Croyd's unusual talents, which could be subjectively locked into the most complex computer ever devised. Well, prior to the Tannen contact, Croyd's decisions would have been simple: should he merely destroy the task force of youth on Ceres, or should he strike through them to ruin their supporting movement?

The Tannen contact—or the "Osiris" contact, with Lurla present—had, however, complicated matters even for a pristine Croyd. Tannen, in that New York tavern, had told Croyd frankly that Galactic was not entirely Limited: that it was, in fact, heavily infiltrated by agents of another galaxy, and that these agents were far along in a practical plan to destroy Earth's galaxy by implosion. Tannen had engaged Croyd's help in breaking the power of Galactic—an approach that would be quicker, in view of the imminent emergency, than trying to purify Galactic. So now Croyd's assignment to repel the Ceres attack took on a new dimension. Perhaps he should permit Ceres to destroy Nereid? He could do so without danger, since his talents allowed him to uptime himself into an es-

caping spaceship just prior to impact. On the other hand, such a move would surrender galactic power to an irresponsible organization of beatniks—not at all the solution that President Tannen intended.

But now—for Lurla with *her* motives, occupying Croyd with *his* motives . . . Of course, Lurla's motives were dominant, but the Croyd-brain was far from totally passive to her will. His motives, conceived and determined prior to her take over, were powerfully engrammed into his brain, and they were causing Lurla certain subjective indecisions. Occupying Greta was one thing; occupying Croyd was another.

Moodily she went to Croyd's private bar and mixed herself a zac. She swallowed. Furious, she smashed the glass against the bar and began to pace.

As Croyd, she was loyal to Galactic.

As Croyd, she agreed with Tannen and was loyal to *him*. Galactic must be destroyed—but not by a fanatic bunch of beatniks who were tearing Ceres out of orbit to launch it against Nereid.

But . . . as Lurla . . .

Presently she mixed another zac (short on the soda) and drank it off. She leaned back with closed eyes, reviewing (a) her motives, (b) Croyd's motives, and (c) the Croyd-powers. She shook herself then and smiled grimly—and, for the first time in her own experience, locked herself into the computer.

Instantly she *was* the satellite Nereid—eying, at cosmic distance, the Ceres-asteroid that was in process of breaking her orbital leash in order to ram and destroy Lurla-Nereid.

This locking-in was experimental. The computer was so designed that Croyd alone (or now, Lurla-in-Croyd) could direct its operations subjectively, precisely as one's mind directs the operations of one's body. One wills a thing, and one's body does it—provided that one's body knows how; and provided, also, that one knows what to will and how to will it. It is a rare human who knows the scope of his own body; and what he does not know about, he does not will. Omnipotence is meaningless with-

out omniscience; and even with omniscience, it is only a vague potency except to the extent that one thinks of things that he wants to know. So Lurla had to experiment with the relative omniscience-and-omnipotence accorded her by the computer that she was locked into—analogously as a child who has the aptitude for playing piano "by ear" has first to think of doing it, and has then to think of things to do with it.

Croyd's memories helped her but not as much as one might think. Rarely utilized memories tend to hide behind frequently utilized memories, and they are not easily found by a mind which is new to ownership of the brain—not even by a mind which is *used* to changing brains.

For a while, Lurla utilized only the sensors of the computer, not daring action which might inadvertently warp space. First she explored Neptune intimately, to the point of an insect's-eye view of its irregular desert surface; she even tested the computer's hot-cold sensors, a dangerous thing to do with frigid Neptune. Briefly she turned the sensors inward to Nereid, but it was a mere exercise, preparatory to later intensive work. Then swiftly she scanned the planets. And when her sensory control seemed reasonably sure, she directed the visuals at Ceres. For a while she watched the young beatniks. They knew what they were doing, all right; later, she would use the computer to mingle with them. Not now, though. Soon she must rest and assimilate what she had learned about her expanded powers.

She was about to unlock herself but she hesitated. An impulse led her to thrust the sensors far past Ceres—to Earth—to New York—beneath New York, to Croyd's apartment, to see what Croyd-in-Greta was doing.

The apartment was empty. Croyd-in-Greta was gone.

The shock was profound. How could he (or she) have left? What could have happened? It was unbelievable that Croyd could have utilized the dull Greta-brain even to realize himself, let alone activate the lift. It followed that someone had entered and had spirited him out. *They*,

perhaps—the ones who had shot at him when Lurla had been with him?

By now she understood the computer's powers enough to realize that she could use it to take action: put herself (or her doppelganger) on Earth, activate the lift, seek, find, rescue. But she also understood the computer's powers enough to realize that she might inadvertently misuse them—overshoot with them.

The powers at Lurla's disposal were sufficient to reshape the galaxy.

With keen regret, she abandoned the project and disconnected. More zac. More reflection. More rest . . .

7

His nonspace was colorless, featureless, his identity nonexistent, his mind a confusion oriented only by a panic-sense of gone reality.

Instinctive shock withdrawal into self. Sense of mortal peril in the withdrawal which nevertheless could not be stopped. Pervasive fear. Hardening resistance . . .

Anger. Desperate random grasping *thrust* . . .

Vague orienting thought from beyond, grasped in the thrust: *me* . . . Sense of wanting more definition; thrust in another direction; *Greta* . . . not a sentence but a self-identification. *I Greta* . . .

Sense of something wrong. Another thrust: *not, not. I Greta. I not Greta.* Then: *Problem.*

He was still *not here,* and here was *nonspace.* But the idea *problem,* followed instantly by the idea *think,* evoked total response. Instead of thrusting, now he relaxed and expectantly awaited the coming of more meaning—aware in this attitude that immaterial processes of

himself were softly stealing out in all directions and making indefinable contacts that steadily increased the flow of continuity. *I must be, like, asleep and about to awaken. I must have been sapped or drugged. I am and am not Greta. As soon as I awaken, the confusion will go away . . .*

Suddenly the eyes opened and the world of sight and sense flooded in. Body lying down. Moving the head, he looked about. The room was familiar and strange, his and not his. The intimate yes-no dichotomy had not abated.

Think. What happened? I was with some guy here. Name was Croyd. But Croyd is me. But I am called Greta. But I am *not* Greta. I am *Croyd* . . .

Then, by virtue of long critical experience, he knew that he was located in a brain. But not his own.

The instant this realization came to him, the eyes closed, and he allowed gray nonspace to envelop him. In this condition he bent himself to the complex and totally new problem of using a stranger's brain in order to reestablish a set of memories and coordinates for himself.

For eons Greta had been foggily dreaming that she was *some other* woman in all kinds of inscrutable tatter-situations, and ever the same wrong woman. Like a fever-dream it troubled her repetitiously . . .

After several hours of relearning how to think, he came to the following conclusions: He was Croyd—the essential Croyd, that is; the Croyd-*mind*—displaced into the brain of the woman who had called herself Lurla. However, this brain identified itself now as Greta. It followed that Lurla had been an alien mind who had occupied this Greta's brain. From that vantage point, Lurla had pulled off a mind transposition, transferring Croyd's mind into the Greta-brain and making away with Croyd's brained body.

This had to mean that Lurla was a gnurl from the Large Magellanic Cloud, planning to use her new Croyd-disguise and Croyd-potencies for some kind of cosmic damage to this galaxy. And in this feeble Greta brain, Croyd was powerless to do anything about it.

He was able to think his own thoughts and recall his own memories, using a stranger-brain, because a mind

has topologically within it all the dynamic engrams of its own brain contents and operations, somewhat as an electromagnetic telecast carries an image-latency. (Only an analogy, however; mind is not electromagnetic.) And somewhat as the TV waves reproduce the image in strange picture tubes, so the Croyd-mind was reproducing his own mental latencies in Greta's brain—but imperfectly, because her brain was less than powerful. Her sex, however, opposed no obstacle; the frontal area of a brain is not sexed but merely human-animal, except to the degree that its owner has used wit for purposes of sexual calculation. In Greta's case, her frontal area paradoxically was almost virginal.

It happened to be his first entry into a *human* brain—human, that is, in the Earth-sense of *Homo sapiens*, male or female immaterial. He was fascinated and reassured by his growing sense that it was topologically the same sort of brain as his *croyd*-brain: independently evolved, but under similar conditions and for similar objectives, and therefore structurally much the same. From prior studies, he had been sure that this was so; now it was proving out.

Why could he think with her brain, see through her eyes, hear with her ears, but not move her body—not even speak with her mouth? The reason appeared to be his off-center location in an outlying part of her brain. The Greta-mind, which was present but comatose, occupied the prime naive ego station (the convoluted deep planar surface between thalamus and cortex) and, being evidently a fairly well-educated mind, extended itself thinly upward, haloing slenderly in the conscious control center (the Rolandic fissure of the cerebral cortex). Croyd, on the other hand, had lodged in a minor fissure of the frontal cortex: he could not get at her kinesthetics, emotics or motor controls because she held them; nor could he touch her subjective ego-sense. He had not become the woman—he was a mere helpless passenger in one part of her brain. Up front here, however, he did have full access to her thinking resources, memory banks, and auditory representation (he could hear what she heard). And from the auditory area, instinctively he had extended himself down a process into her optic thalamus,

so that, when her eyes happened to open, he could see what she saw. (This he might have brought off in his laboratory by placing electrodes in these parts of her brain, running wires into another room, closing the door and seeing and hearing by means of instruments what she was seeing and hearing.)

How then had Lurla controlled her if he could not? With the sophisticated genetic *lanai*-power of a gnurl, Lurla must have been able to do what Croyd, in his first involuntary mind-voyage, could not do: occupy Greta's Rolandic fissure in company with the weak self-extension of comatose Greta, dominating the Greta-mind completely. Thus Lurla could navigate and experience Greta's body so intimately that, in effect, Lurla *had been* Greta, whereas Croyd was little more than a prisoner within the skull of Greta.

In fact, in his own brain, Croyd had already emerged from his prime naive ego surface and was mind-located almost entirely up in his own Rolandic fissure at the time of the Lurla confrontation. This was his habit at times of intense concentration on thought or action; his control there was more delicate. At the same time, although he hadn't thought of it before, up there he was more vulnerable to a gnurl attack. And Lurla could not have dominated *his* mind in his own brain; him she had to expel.

So . . . Trapped and helpless?

Trapped, yes—but not yet helpless. Not if he could find a way to *use* the human trap-mechanism in order to escape. It was going to be the most intricate problem in applied neuropsychology that he had ever tackled.

There was one hope. If the Greta-mind should happen to be not entirely in coma, but rather in twilight sleep, he might telepathically influence her to do his bidding. This might be done partially mind-to-mind, but it need not be entirely direct. Short-range telepathy is the mode of communication between brain cells, none of which is in contact with another cell. In his location, he could generate in her brain ideas which she might take as her own, acting upon them.

He tried. She responded. She stirred a little. She

opened her eyes. Presently, at his insistent suggestion, she got to her feet, reeling a little. He moved her into the next room, knowing that a full-length mirror was there.

The mirror confirmed his hypothesis.

Presently he got her to walk back into the room of cushions and recline on one. Automatically, her muscles and feedbacks positioned her body . . .

The trouble was that this Greta-brain could hardly be expected to reproduce Croyd-powers. On the other hand, he had an unverified theory that any brain could produce almost any powers, given the right mind to coax it and drive it. Besides—if Lurla had been able to use this woman's brain in a successful play to steal his own body, this brain could hardly be weak.

Now he gave the brain a more studied inventory, not for memories or feelings but for competencies. He concluded that her IQ was 128—not staggeringly high, but in the top 2 or 3 percent. Searching further, he found with interest that she had been college educated. This meant practically that she had enough latent content for him to work upon in his own mental reconstitution. Things were looking up, but he was still in jail.

He badly wanted to get going, to start accomplishing again. But whither? And how? And *why?* He knew there were definite whithers and hows and whys, but so far he wasn't getting her brain to formulate them intelligently.

Croyd went back now to the interview with the President of the Interplanetary Union—remembering it primarily as Lurla-Greta's listening brain had stored it, but also reconstituting it subjectively in a tensive effort to recall his own mission and motives. Presently he had it, and his identity thereupon went up to 91 percent, while Greta's IQ reached 141. (When eventually he would abandon her, he mirthlessly reflected, she'd be too smart for a harlot and too enervated for anything else.) But now he felt ready to explore a deeper dimension. What had Greta's memory-banks recorded as *Lurla's* subjective response to the Tannen revelations?

This probe required his maximum energy output up to

now. When it was done, he persuaded her to arise wearily and go to his bar for a zac. As the drink reached her lips he had her pause, reflecting that she had not eaten for many hours, and he made her dissolve half a dozen dinner pills in the zac; for what he planned she'd need all this energy quickly. Then she drank—but, unhappily, in her frontal cortex he could taste nothing.

She was a zombie. He was a ghost.

His thinking process, which had been moving tactically, now found itself stumbling over an ethical problem. And the fact that this ethical problem now assumed priority, even though objectively the major problem was escape and recovery of his own brain-and-body, at least reassured him that he had achieved some success in adapting her frontal cortex to his own mind.

The ethical problem was that Croyd was intruding into the personal privacy of another human, far more intimately than any drawer-rifling, diary-reading burglar could do. Even though the Greta-mind was dormant, presumably she would awaken unless he were to murder her. This Greta-mind and her mothering brain had interacted for twenty some years to build her individuality. She was entitled to hide her mistakes and weaknesses, to deploy privately whatever powers she might have, to plan and dream and experience in secret. Into this personality, however, Croyd was not merely invading—he was progressively changing and enslaving it.

True, the invasion was not his fault, and the enslavement was necessary for galactic reasons, as well as for personal reasons. That conflict of interest was what made it a problem. Yet somehow Croyd—who, as a Galactic officer, labored always to hold conformity down to a socially necessary minimum, who had projected a legislative and moral code to restrict telepathy because of its dangers to individuality, who believed that the best government was a hired professional government which was chosen in competition and could be thrown out bodily by a republican-democratic constituency—this same Croyd had now become a personality pirate.

That it was a woman-vehicle which he now had to be

navigating was only a background difficulty, an operational irritant. The prime ethical concern was that Greta was another human. Before this situation could progress much further, he was going to have to codify the degree of his interference with her freedom . . .

Meanwhile, let's get out of here!

Croyd-in-Greta, insistently a masculine mind piloting a female craft, moved toward the lift.

Was the lift there?

Had *they* maybe bugged it?

Who were *they?*

Swiftly Greta's foggy dreaming opened out into a clear blissful moonlit nocturne: on a windswept grassy hill, the one tall strong man she had been seeking all her life was swinging her from behind in a slow fluid dance, holding her arms outstretched. Although she could not see him, she knew joyously who he was. He was *he* . . .

8

Where is she now?

In the Croyd-brain. In his laboratory on Nereid.

Is she in full control?

Through interspace the resolution of our hypertelemetry is too gross for an answer to that question.

We'll assume that her control is adequate.

If it isn't, we're in trouble. Some young revolutionaries are about to ram Nereid with Ceres.

Will she have to detach?

Not if her control is adequate. The Croyd-brain and its tools can handle the attack if her control is adequate.

It's a distraction, however. What is she doing about our project?

If she is doing anything, it is not coming through to us. But she may be doing some very subtle things.

Not likely. It isn't enough that she has the problem of learning to control the Croyd-body—instantly she has to use it to repel an attack. That is, by the way, a remarkable body. I have never known a human to have such a body.

It is specifically the brain that is remarkable.

Well—part of the body, after all. But there is more to it than that, and it troubles me.

Sir?

It is the Croyd-mind that has made the Croyd-brain remarkable. When I learned this, it interested me very much. I hadn't been sure that humans had minds.

But, sir, after all, it is the brain that generates a mind.

But when the mind matures, it turns inward to cultivate its brain. This is what Croyd has done so remarkably. And this is what troubles me. For in order to take over his body, she has displaced his mind. And I am wondering whether, without his mind, his brain can give her the services that she needs.

If she fails, we have another way.

But hers is the better way. And if she fails, we lose her. Is that good?

9

A signal from the visicom interrupted her nap.

It was Derien, asking with bogus courtesy whether Croyd could come in right away. Lurla answered in the affirmative—it was really a command—and pulled on a fresh suit. Halfway on, it remarked: "Be reminded that I am the combat suit. Do you really need me?"

Pulling at zippers, Lurla inquired: "Are you fully ready?"

"Affirmative."

"Then—maybe yes, maybe no," she responded.

The suit was quite comfortable, not especially heavy, and it looked semiformal—the sort of thing that an officer might wear on active work duty knowing that he might have to report to the President without time to change.

Every new Croyd-experience was making her more surely Croyd. Facing Derien would be a potent test and one that she might fail; in that case, the combat suit might prove indispensable. She was irritated at the interruption to her nap—the rest was badly needed. On the other hand, the summons had interrupted a disturbing dream which had begun to develop, and as she had come out of this dream she had realized that it was going to be uninterpretable and probably meaningless.

She was ready to enter the pullman—then paused, confused, finding no automatic direction to pullman screens in Croyd's brain. After puzzling about that, she comprehended that Croyd refused to use pullmen and therefore had none installed in his lab. Was the great Croyd actually *afraid* of them? She saw it wasn't that at all. Pullmen, like visicoms, were built on a statistical principle: the passenger as reconstructed at the destination was the same as the passenger prior to electronic sampling analysis at the point of embarkation, with a probable error so small that no passenger would ever know the difference. But Croyd was not sure that the ultrafine tuning of his special brain would survive the error factor, and while he would be able to retune rather quickly, he usually didn't have time. Lurla had therefore to walk to Derien's offices. It was a simple enough walk through a few long corridors, at one point utilizing a private VIP updraft, but it did take about five minutes. However, Derien would be expecting the slight delay.

Lurla entered by a side door, known to Croyd, which admitted her directly into Derien's outer office, inhabited only by his confidential aide. The slight, late-thirtyish

woman had a crush on Croyd, and she greeted the visitor archly. Lurla toyed with the idea of playing on this, but she decided it would be out of character. Learning that Derien was there and waiting, she walked in and closed the door.

Derien sat at his desk. "Well!" he said mockingly. "You got here quicker than usual!" He was a slender, brown Eurasian in his middle forties, large eyes, heavy-lidded, pencil mustache, thin lips, quirky-cornered.

Lurla hunkered down on a straight chair, hands clasped between spread knees. "I've missed you, Derien," she answered in the same tone. "I couldn't wait."

"If you weren't so chicken about pullmen, you wouldn't have had to wait *this* long."

"If I weren't so chicken about pullmen, you probably wouldn't be needing me."

"True," he admitted, jabbing his head sidewise. "Anyhow, we mustn't keep others waiting any longer. Shall I give you a chance to prepare yourself? Shall I tell you who's coming?"

"Surprise me."

Derien spoke low through the visicom to his aide. There was a half-minute wait, during which Derien, with clasped hands, drummed on his front teeth with his thumbnails while Lurla kept her eyes on the doorway that led in from Derien's pullman screens.

President Tannen (Osiris!) entered and went directly to shake Derien's hand as Derien rose and bowed slightly. Immediately behind Tannen came a thin, hard-eyed man in his fifties whom Lurla-Croyd recognized as Herod, the Chairman of Galactic. (Herod was not an earthling but an Alpha Centaur—they called their planet Rab—and his full name was unpronounceable, but he was entirely human, give or take a few minor and just now invisible points.) Herod then shook hands with Croyd and presented him to President Tannen, who responded courteously, giving no sign that he knew Croyd.

Having offered chairs (accepted) and drinks (refused), Derien returned to his desk and gave attention to Herod. Lurla was alert to all three men. Derien, although a high official, counted for little in her motives, but a

Croyd's superior he could make difficulties. Herod, on the other hand, was the most powerful man in the galaxy—effectively more powerful than Tannen, even though he and his organization were supposed to be Tannen's instrument under contract. Tannen, though, had revealed to Croyd that he knew something of Lurla's purposes. It remained that Tannen did not know Lurla.

She listened carefully to Herod as he made some perfunctory remarks that would end by handing initiative to Tannen. It was then that a queer thought first entered her mind, and it was going to stay with her for a while. The thought was about the unknown man whom Croyd himself had shot while Croyd was guiding Lurla-Greta through the uptime-loop. The man's body was anchored—forever probably—in that loop, but Lurla now reflected that he had been an alien from some later time. This led to an immediate question: Could he have been any of these three men who sat here now? If the man had uptimed to enter the loop at any moment prior to now, then he was already and irretrievably gone, he could not be one of these men or any other living man. But if his uptiming had not yet occurred—if at some future instant or date he was going to uptime into that loop—then he would still be alive. The notion that he was already dead before starting for the place where he was going to be killed was interesting. But Tannen was speaking and needed her full attention.

"The purpose of my visit is really simple. I have been informed of the attack that HOTSPUR is launching against Nereid, and I felt it my duty to observe the process of defense even though there is probably no way for me to help."

Lurla had practically decided that no one of these three was the time-loop invader. The slain man had been about Croyd's height, as nearly as she could tell in the darkness. Tannen was the only man here so tall or anywhere near it, but Tannen's body was too heavy to fit.

Derien protested mildly. His big eyes stayed half-lidded; he did not sound terribly interested. "The only thing is, Your Excellency—if HOTSPUR destroys us with Ceres, you will go with us. I know that you are per-

sonally courageous, but I wonder if that is in the best interests of the galaxy."

The thin lips of Herod parted slightly. He spoke between his teeth in a reedy voice, just audibly, but the latent force was evident. "Thank you for the suggestion, Derien. It is the same as my own, but His Excellency is shaking it off. I think we have to trust his judgment, which is usually sound enough for a galaxy to bet on."

Derien spread his hands slightly and his lids drooped lower.

Tannen was responding. Lurla found his rich voice and slightly thickened diction rather pleasing. "I do not think my risk is serious. Great, maybe; serious, no. I am told that Mr. Croyd is entirely competent to handle this."

"I can miss," Lurla-Croyd pointed out. "I don't think I will but I can."

"At any rate," said Herod, "what this boils down to is that if His Excellency wants to watch us defend ourselves, he wants to watch Croyd defend us. So I think the decision has to be made by Croyd. Think it over, Croyd—can you operate at full efficiency with observers breathing down your neck?"

Croyd probably could, Lurla reflected; but as for herself, with her lack of Croyd-experience, she wasn't sure. The slight diversion of the Ceres attack, irrelevant as it was to her purposes, now became damnably embarrassing: If the observers distracted her too greatly, she would be destroyed along with Nereid and Galactic. On the other hand, there might be some advantage in being alone with Tannen. This idea made her reflect that Tannen probably wanted to be alone with Croyd.

Having conveyed the appearance of careful thought for a full minute, she looked up and stated: "Probably a single observer will not distract me at critical times. More than one might."

Herod looked slightly disappointed. "I was hoping," he admitted, "that you would permit two, so I could come; or even three, so Derien could come. However, it was your decision to make." He glanced at his fingernail watch. "Will all of you have lunch in my offices? Derien

can provide an aircar, in deference to Croyd's well-known distrust of pullmen."

Lurla glanced at Tannen. He looked at Lurla-Croyd. Lurla said, "Pardon me for answering first, but my own time must take priority just now. I can join you if you can serve immediately and if you don't mind my leaving early. Otherwise I'd better lunch on my own."

Tannen said quickly, "If you don't mind, Herod, I'd better stick with Croyd. I'll have to leave early with him."

"Fair enough," Herod responded. "Set it up, Derien." He and Tannen and Croyd rose as Derien reached for his visicom.

No, Lurla reflected, it was utterly illogical that anyone in the future was going to go and get himself killed in the past. For if anyone now living had already been killed because of a venture that he had not yet embarked upon, that person would be doomed to embark upon that venture. And this would imply a degree of predestination that did not fit at all with her rather considerable understanding of mind. The likeliest explanation of the killing in the time-loop was that the alien had been one of those who had pursued them, or had been an outpost of the task force. Anticipating that Croyd would enter that doorway, he had stationed himself down the corridor and—seeing Croyd and Lurla-Greta disappear at the instant of the shot—he had surmised an uptiming of about sixty seconds (the maximum amount that was even reasonably safe), whereupon he, too, had uptimed and had waited there for them. Consequently he was now someone long dead, and she could forget him. For some reason that Lurla did not then analyze, a mere sixty-second uptiming did not seriously interfere with her rejection of fatalism.

She could forget him. However, she did not. Why had he glowed?

10

Croyd-Greta entered the lift, then hesitated. His first thought had been to go to the Tonkin Gulf, but now it occurred to him that Lurla-Croyd must already have gone there, and his submarine would be long gone with her. At this instant she was probably in his laboratory doing whatever kind of damage might fit in with the motives that had prompted her to steal his body. After the talk with Tannen, he had a hypothesis. Of course, Lurla might not be using his body well, and the submarine might still be there; but if she was smart enough to steal his body and had a motive for it, the chances were that she had quickly learned to use it, rather as he himself had learned to use the far more limited capacities of Greta. Something told him that he could think matters out better in the relaxed atmosphere of the Montreuil where he had met Lurla-Greta in the first place. He therefore directed the lift back to Manhattan, but he used a different vertical shaft and emerged in a basement on the other side of the tavern from the corridor where he had been attacked. Debouching from the basement onto a side street at night, he Greta-walked with dispatch to the tavern. He had no wish for her to be accosted.

As he entered the dark vestibule of the Montreuil, he felt a strong mental reluctance to proceed farther. He was going to override the impulse, but it became insistent; and he took up a discreet position in a corner while he grappled with it . . .

Greta's dream-dancing ended at the crest of the hill. Invisible behind her, the Ultimate Man dropped her arms

The delicious reality-dream gave way to outer reality as her mind was abruptly engaged by visual input . . .

She stood in an ornate dimly lighted vestibule. She felt his presence behind her still. She whirled: only a wall—but still she felt him behind her! Anxiety-ridden, she turned again. Nobody.

His mind said gently to her mind: "Listen, Greta. This is going to sound crazy, but accept it until you understand. You have a visitor. I am a mind named Croyd who has lost his brain, and—well, I'll just have to use yours until I can get mine back."

Holding passive, he waited. Then she said aloud: "Last time it was a woman. What am I—the Boardwalk?"

A passing couple glanced at her. Croyd told Greta silently: "From now on, when you want to talk to me, just think, don't talk aloud—I'll understand. I'm just thinking at you now, not talking. Can you understand me clearly?"

She adapted swiftly, this Greta—which perhaps explained some things about her history. She *thought*: "I understand you. Where are you, Mind? I suppose you'd have to be in my brain somewhere."

Bland acceptance—but with insight! He answered: "In your frontal cortex. I'm sorry, Greta. It must feel like being possessed by an alien spirit—and maybe it *is* that. For a few days you're going to have to carry me around with you. Everywhere."

She had produced a compact and was fooling with her face. She thought at him truculently: *"Everywhere?"*

He'd considered that, necessarily. "On purely aesthetic grounds," he told her, "I couldn't be more sympathetic. I'll respect that with a complete sensory-motor disconnect. Just call me back."

"Honest?"

"Honest."

"That's comforting. However, we don't have to test it now. Oboy, is *this* situation going to play hell with my feminine mystique!"

Right now was the time to settle the mode of their interplay. His thought came at her like a bucket of cold clear water. "You and I are together in a hell of a jam. So forget about being female-mystical, and just be human-honest,

and then I think we can get along until I find a way to break us out of this. We don't flirt, we just cooperate—like two minds in one well-integrated split personality. Novel, isn't it?"

"Yeah." Then she blurted: "Damn good, for a change!" She meditated. She began to tremble. "Where are we, Croyd?"

"In the vestibule of the Montreuil. I was going to get some thinking done—and then you woke up."

"You can't go in here."

"Why not?"

"Because I can't sit alone here."

Total presence of mind! "Where, then?"

After brief thought, she suggested: "Right down the street there's a place where I go sometimes when I'm alone, nobody will bother me there. Come on, I'll take you."

They left the Montreuil, walked a few doors down, and entered a tavern. It was cheap but quiet, and there was only one nudie. Greta took him to a table in a dark corner and ordered milks. Before the nudie could get away, Croyd made her correct the order: "Sorry—I meant just one milk." The nudie shrugged and brought it.

Greta giggled in his mind. "That was a goof, wasn't it? I can't shake off the idea that I am with a man. But here I am, alone."

Her wakeful alertness could be highly embarrassing; already her mind was fogging some of his rapport with her brain. He decided to be blunt. "Greta," he told her, "I didn't choose to be trapped in your brain, but since I am, I have got to control you totally; you have got to be absolutely passive. Do you understand?"

There was a moment of mental silence. Then: "Since you want to be in control, make me drink down my milk. It will help me relax."

Croyd was finding Greta rather delightful. He triggered the milk-drinking (no fear that she would choke) and had her order another. Then he asked her, "Are you accommodating to me, a little?"

Greta bit her lip. "A girl likes to classify her situations. This one I can't classify. It bugs me."

For his purposes, he couldn't afford for her to be nervous. He made a snap decision. "I could marry you. That's a classification."

"Now how would you go about doing *that?*"

"A galactic agent can officiate at his own marriage. No witness necessary. Registration later—a matter of honor. Will you marry me?"

"What if later one of us wants a divorce and the other won't give it?"

"Either of us can annul it unilaterally."

"*Annul?* But on what grounds?"

"*Matrimonium non consummatum erit.*"

"Amazingly, I get that. All right—*yes*. Now what?"

"It's done. We're married."

"Thank you. It's a new experience, I feel honest already."

Then she added earnestly: "Sorry, I didn't mean to be curt. I was married once before. We goofed. We shook hands and divorced. Then I fell in with *that* guy . . . This may be a trap for you, but for me it's an incredible escape. It could maybe turn out to be the most beautiful thing that ever happened to me—" She subsided into pure appreciation without content.

He was meditating, too. It had begun in hypnotic stupidity, climaxed in victimization to ruthless mental judo, culminated in something unwanted that was more intimate than a handcuffing. But if it should now develop into human friendship . . .

He warned her: "There'll be danger."

"Might I get killed?"

"You might."

"Will it be like when the boys go to war, they might be killed?"

"Something like that."

He felt her mind light up. "It's a shame for boys to run all the risks. Girls can run risks too. Go ahead, Croyd—take me into danger. If I get killed—what's lost? Who needs me?"

He said softly, "Greta . . . you order the next drink. Order anything you like. One thing I *can* do—I can keep you from having a hangover."

11

Herod's offices were on the other side of the satellite. Calling their vehicle an "aircar" was a colossal euphemism; Nereid was far too small to hold an atmosphere—there was no air except within buildings. Even solar domes had little point here. The sun was too far away for either its light or its heat to mean anything, but there were some large, transparent astraria where people off duty could enjoy stars in gardens—stars, and the vast dim pallor of Neptune.

Lunch, in fact, was served in such an astrarium. "Day" and "night" had no meaning on Nereid, except in terms of the waking and sleeping schedule to which one became attuned on a given tour of duty—the next tour might entail a different schedule, and you got used to it in twenty-four hours. Nereid government psychologists had ascertained that for optimum physical and mental health, one should follow the same waking-sleeping rhythm for a long period of time. But those who had changed tours every three Earth-months for several Earth-years did not seem any more unstable than those who had held one rhythm for a year or more.

The flight to Herod's offices was rather spectacular. Derien had ordered Herod's private aircar. It had been waiting nearby, for Herod had anticipated this trip, and when Herod had stepped into the transporter and emerged instantaneously in Derien's office, his aircar had followed more slowly. It was a very special car, capacious for one thing, but among other things equipped with powerful floodlights that constantly scanned the surface beneath them.

Since Croyd was used to such trips, Lurla tried to seem

blasé about this one, but unobtrusively, at every opportunity, she watched the ground through the transparent floor. On this tiny rock in space, only 130 miles in mean diameter, every uncovered surface point was jagged like the virgin crest of a moon-mountain.

Allowing for slow takeoff and landing, the car averaged a lazy two hundred miles per hour. However, Nereid is not spherical—it is not any regular shape at all; it is a rock-jag; and consequently, by traveling around Nereid's narrow girdle, they had only 80 miles to go. Stranger Lurla was unhappy that the trip ended so soon, but when lunch was served on a broad lawn of artificial grass—with believable artificial shrubs and flowers in artful sunlight and shadow—she enjoyed a new dimension of pleasure. Derien and Herod were laconic, but Tannen's talk was very good, and the food was fresh from Earth. Over coffee and brandy, Herod touched a button, and the sunlight went out, and there were Neptune and the stars.

Afterward, Herod sent Tannen and Lurla back in his aircar. For some reason, alone with Tannen, Lurla was less reticent in her delight as she gazed at the floodlighted surface. In the dark interior of the car, Tannen watched her Croyd-face.

Presently he said, "Croyd, I haven't known you long, but you are a man of strong contrasts. Back there in the tavern, and in Derien's office, you were perfectly poker-faced, but here you are a delighted boy."

Abruptly Lurla felt like a girl with her father. Before replying, she took a little time to get a firm hold on the tangy male Croyd-identity. Then she answered easily, "Your Excellency, I've seen this a thousand times, and I never get tired of it."

Tannen lit a cigar—perceptively, he did not offer one to Croyd. "May I continue being personal?"

"Go ahead." She kept her eyes on the scene below.

"What is it about your powers, Croyd? From what I hear, no human has ever attained anything like such powers."

She was half amused and half alarmed that the question had never occurred to her—she had simply accepted the reality of Croyd's powers. Swiftly and trustfully

searching his memory-banks in emergency, she expressed instantly what she found there. "Combination of genes from two good strains along with unusual experience. Croyd is actually my mother's species-name: she was a croyd-queen on Nigel III. My father was the Egyptian god Thoth—" As it came out, Lurla clamped Croyd's jaws shut and, inwardly flabbergasted, stone-eyed Tannen.

The President's heavy brows almost hid his eyes. "That," he said dryly, "would account for your alias in the Montreuil."

"Exactly," snapped Lurla-Croyd, attacking defensively. "Does it sound egotistical?"

"Rather the contrary, since I believe it is an understatement. I have only one serious doubt, Croyd. With all these capabilities, what is your philosophy?"

Lurla blinked. Her own philosophy was lucidly simple: Let her people survive—let her people win. She hadn't examined Croyd's. Hurriedly she tried now, but it isn't easy to ferret out a man's philosophy in any case, and it is most difficult when the ferret has never given attention to the possibility of having a complex outlook.

"I'm sorry. That was unfair," said Tannen, curling out a long, luxuriant stream of cigar smoke from his thick lips. His head-silhouette was a great rugged rock. (She had never dissected one like *him*!) "Anyhow, it is nearly landing-time. Let's concentrate on the business at hand. Later on, maybe, we can talk philosophy. I'd like that."

"So would I," said Lurla bleakly.

"There have been eras in history," mused Tannen, "when a man of my tradition might have hesitated to use the name Osiris. Now, thank the Lord, it is merely three ways whimsical."

12

Greta awoke feeling unusually well—feeling, indeed, unusually free. After a while of abandoned cat-stretching, she opened her eyes and took stock of the odd situation in her hideout hotel room. Alone in bed! Had he, then, sneaked out and gone home while she slept? He? This Croyd . . .

Realization snapped her to a stiff sitting position. She had gone to bed with the Croyd-mind, of course, and yet she had been physically alone and had been allowed to sleep immediately. Just now, though, she wasn't sensing him. *Had* he left her?

Her head dropped, she frowned, her fingers fooled with each other. She wasn't sure that she liked being abandoned by Croyd's ghost.

It was then that she noticed her legs. They had been pretty thin, but just now they seemed to have regained some of their shape, and her skin was better.

It couldn't be! On the other hand, neither could Croyd be—or that other woman. Greta got out of bed in a hurry, and out of her shortie, and spent the next few minutes in front of a mirror. By the end of the time, she was prancing with delight.

Then wonder overcame her, and she sat on the bed to think.

Presently her mind fairly hollered: "Hey, Croyd!"

The reply was sleepy. "Greta?"

"You there, Croyd? Did *you* do this?"

"Did I do what?"

"Fix me up like this?"

Croyd seemed to rouse himself; she felt his strengthen-

ing personality within her. "Sorry, Greta, I was idling. What time is it?"

"Nearly eight. *Did* you?"

"Oh-oh—I wanted us to be out of here by now. Get dressed, Greta—and anything like that. I'll talk while you're dressing, and then I'll take over—do you mind?"

Humming happily, Greta flashed him a "No—and that means yes," and went into the business of dressing for the morning (this, in itself, was unusual). Meanwhile Croyd was explaining that he had been working on her while she slept. The best way would have been for him to take her into the country for a month of fresh air and rest and exercise, but for that there was no time. Consequently he had used her own brain to rehabilitate herself from within, drawing on the energy from the dinner pills.

"I'm grateful," she cooed.

"Don't be. I need you in tiptop condition. Things are going to be rough."

Greta's brows arched themselves. (Already *they* were mostly blonde again, although her hair remained black except for the ash-blonde tip-off near the scalp.) She had a vague memory of him having said all this before. "Well, anyhow, we're ready," she announced. "Where are we going?"

"How much money do we have?"

"Deducting what I recall spending from what I remember stealing from him, maybe eleven hundred credits."

"That will do nicely. We are going to Neptune."

"On eleven hundred credits?"

"They will take us to where we take-off for Neptune. Then I'll take over."

"You'll take over *then*? Don't you want me to be passive *now*?"

"If I let you be your own woman until then, can you all-of-a-sudden go passive the instant I tell you, and stay that way?"

"I promise. You know, it doesn't feel as though you were inside my brain. It feels as though you were out there in the open air. I feel free, inside."

"Good. That's how I want you to feel."

"Behind me, sort of—like in my hair. I keep turnin

my head to see you, but you're still behind me. And yet you said you're in the *front* of my brain."

"That's natural. It is because of a decussation."

"I'll pass that . . . I feel as though you were a golf pro standing behind me, your arms around my arms, your hands gripping my wrists, teaching me how to improve my swing. What do you really look like?"

"Not much like you."

"I can imagine. Croyd—when you take over—do I *have* to be *passive*? Why don't I just go on being myself, saying or doing exactly what comes into my mind? And then, in the sharp situations, you signal *alert*—and then I'll go *responsive*, not passive—and whatever comes into my mind will be from you, and I'll say it and do it. What do you think?"

Her proposal was tempting but hazardous. In critical situations that were to come, his control over Greta had to be perfect and instantaneous. Yet what she proposed would offer her a chance to regain confidence in her own bodied ego; and that was her only hope of regaining the optimum body-and-brain health that *he* needed. One could operate a zombie-body just so long before it would begin to sag for want of an ego of its own.

This was an aspect of the matter that Lurla was probably overlooking; and for this reason, Croyd's lost body was in danger. The urgency that he felt to regain it was only secondarily to head-off external disaster; the prime point was, that if he didn't get it back very quickly, its powers would begin to wane. And there was a secondary effect that presented an especially sinister kind of danger. At any moment, Lurla might begin to discover that her mind was not the only occupant of Croyd's body—and that the other occupant was not Croyd . . .

"You're on!" he told her.

"Then let's start *practising* it!" she cried. "Let's practise until you're simply *dancing* me!" And then her mental tone went apologetic. "Since you had to be caught in a mantrap—I wish I could have been a superman for you, instead of a—"

"Cut! Your inferiority feelings are showing! Lift your chin, kid—you're a human mind piloting a human

body-vehicle with a human computer-brain, and I admire and thank you for so gracefully permitting me to be your domineering supercargo."

Greta responded thoughtfully: "Welcome aboard, Skipper. And after you leave me to reclaim your own body-ship, I suggest we meet in mid-ocean and whistle at each other. Pending that salute, I—I *do* hope you'll stay in my hair."

"Then just do what I tell you for a few hours, but do it all your own way."

"While you restore my youth, too bad you can't restore my virginity."

"I did."

Even Greta's mind grew still.

While he was directing her to the Forty-Second Street Air Terminal, and riding aircar with her to Tannenport, and showing her how to do a blasé job of chartering a taxi to Moonport, he utilized his time of relative leisure to appreciate the growing strength of Greta's personality. The more significant her identity would become, the more distinct Croyd's identity could remain; for individuality is an outcome of the interplay of psychic differences.

13

Richly would Greta have enjoyed the thrill of drinking in the magnificence, luxury, and detail of Moonport—the relatively new one where they landed, that is: established five years before on the narrow lofty rim of the Julius Caesar crater looking eastward into craggy mountains and westward over the vast plain dryly called the Sea of Tranquillity. The predecessive Moonport had been more safely positioned in the center of that "sea," but since the combined growth of antigrav

technology and the spatiogyrostabilizer—together with the minimization of the sizes of these devices—had accelerated moon-taxi traffic, it had become civilian-safe for earthcraft to dime-land on the Moon. This made the Julius Caesar aerie practical for a port, especially since airless Moon offered no turbulence. New Moonport's rocketing development was a pure product of Madison Avenue. High-perched for its spectacularity rather than for any economy advantage, its weird skeletal architecture featured spidery buttresses that really flew from crag to crag and, having the whole moon to mine for silica, the architects had lavishly domed the port with a Moorish bubblework of infrangible and totally transparent glass. En route from one subterminal to another, one crossed narrow high-thrown bridges from which one peered dizzily down into a complex multiplication of abysses through undergirding glass that one could not see. On the other hand, one might have fallen a hundred feet off one of those bridges without so much as breaking an arm (unless one hit wrong and broke one's neck).

However, Croyd had taken over, and while Greta was left with full scope for passive-spectator observation, perforce she could only see where Croyd was looking—and that was rarely at scenery.

"You can check it out later at leisure," he threw back at her. "Just now, minutes make hours, and hours count."

Crossing almost the whole breadth of the Moonport complex in a floor-skimming jetcar, he paid out another hundred credits for a fourman aircar (as euphemistic as on Nereid). It was pilotless, and he set the controls for Galacbase, which was centered on the old Moonport terminal in Mare Tranquillitatis.

The computer challenged: "All proposed trips to Galacbase must be narrowly considered, and all accepted trips must be reported."

Croyd instantly produced a small and rather thick and shiny card from Greta's handbag and offered it to the eye.

Presently the computer asked cautiously: "Accepted. Shall I report?"

Greta thought that was funny—hadn't it just said it *had* to?

Croyd answered, "Do not report. I will report at base." Silently the computer started the flight.

Greta wanted to ask questions. However, Croyd had shut her off from her motor controls (including speech controls) as effectively as though he had locked the door of a pilot's cockpit against passengers.

Greta had thought of the moon, being small, as a tightly packed mass of technological civilization, mostly military. Instead, the ground-skimming aircar, having left the mountains, sped hundreds of miles over hard, barren surface, discovering only once every few minutes some small trace of man. Military and engineering installations, while populous and colossal, were compact and far apart. In between, there could be no agricultural or hydrodynamic incentive to settle. The transient tourist population (mostly from Earth, since most other planets had their own moons) averaged one million; the quasipermanent population ten million. But the tourists congregated at mountain resorts (with thin excursioning onto the plain) while the military men and technologists clustered at a hundred farflung bases. With a total square mileage about equal to Asia, and all dry, Moon had no difficulty hiding a hundred compact cities, large and small.

When they came upon Galacbase, it was a sudden but imposing experience. This was the major space base for the Sol System, and as such it was the military command base for the galaxy—so pronounced was Earth's domination, though far from the galaxy's geographic center. Ten thousand craft of all dimensions were multilevel clustered around many hundreds of pylon-skyscrapers, the characteristic building material being an advanced form of fiber glass. The skyscraper was the most economical form of moon-building from a viewpoint of a tight water-heat-oxygen economy. These craft, ranging from skycars to warships—several of the latter being several miles long—represented perhaps one-quarter of the Solar Fleet: another quarter was widely dispersed at ten other moon bases, and fully half the ships of the fleet were out on patrol.

Their car came to rest, not on the ground, but several hundred feet above ground in one of a central skyscraper cluster. Their computer—without reporting, since Croyd

had forbidden this—had announced in advance: "Privileged landing required—Berth 10—passenger unidentified." Consequently, in the barnlike interior room, a sizable armed guard was waiting—not to welcome Croyd, but to inspect him.

Greta stepped forth and waited, not smiling.

An officer came forward; in Berth 10, they used commanders to command small armed guards. He saluted, as a precautionary approach.

"Your identification, Madam? Your orders?"

Croyd replied, "I must speak directly to Captain Gorsky. In lieu of identification, inquire of the computer."

The commander thrust his head inside the aircar. "What is the level of this lady's identification?"

"Civilian, Level 4-U," was the reply.

It shook the commander a little; he wanted to look Greta over but didn't dare. Level 4 might be any assistant secretary from that of a minor planet on a distant star through that of a minor or major Earth-government, all the way up to Galactic. They all had their special powers, and you couldn't take chances. But 4-U meant Unique Competency, and this designation in some cases gave the holder priority equal to that of the Galactic Chairman, though not in all cases.

Still, it was unsafe to take the visitor directly to Captain Gorsky, who commanded a large solar cruiser that was already under departure security.

"You will have to be cleared," the commander said, "through Admiral Leclerc's office."

"Captain Gorsky will clear me," Croyd asserted.

"But—"

"4-U," said Croyd. "Captain Gorsky is my channel to Admiral Leclerc."

The commander went to a visicom and somehow got the exec rather quickly. He explained the situation.

"Let's see her," said the exec aboard ship. Greta showed herself. The exec, a dark young man, blinked and inquired, "What assurance do I have—"

"4-U," replied Croyd-Greta. "Captain Gorsky, if you please."

The exec nodded and transferred the call to Captain

Gorsky. The captain, a hard-faced, bosomy, middle-aged woman, considered Greta with care.

Inquired the captain, "What is the current condition of Ceres?"

"Condition HOTSPUR," Croyd replied.

"Bring her up, Commander," the captain instantly responded.

Saluting, the commander herded Greta into a military car, and they flew out of the berth and down the length of the cruiser *Rhea* to a berth whose hatch opened to reveal a tiny hole in her vast, shimmering belly.

Greta, confused and overcome, nevertheless found wit to demand of Croyd, "What's Ceres? What's HOTSPUR?"

"Ceres is an asteroid," he replied. "Tell you later about HOTSPUR." His reply to Captain Gorsky had been an educated guess based on some inferences from observations just prior to his recent departure from Nereid, together with the interesting fact that the captain of a warship about to depart would choose to raise a question about Ceres as an identification screening test for a presumptive 4-U. That his guess had brought him entrée to the ship told him a great deal. The urgency of prompt return to Nereid, and prompt recapture of his own body from Lurla, took on a new imperative quality.

14

The exec met the commander and Croyd-Greta, dismissed the commander with a soft salute, and considered Greta appreciatively. She returned his gaze coolly, although in fact Greta was appreciating *him*. "Follow me, please," the exec then said, and led the way to the captain's cabin.

There Captain Gorsky dismissed her exec with an unsmiling nod and turned to Croyd-Greta. "I'd sit you down and make you a drink," said the captain, "but there is no time. May I see your ID?"

Croyd handed her the card. The captain slipped it into her computer.

Presently the computer said: "Let me see the bearer."

"Let it see you," said the captain. Croyd-Greta did not merely pose before the computer but pressed both eyes against eyepieces.

"All right," said the computer, "it's a match. Captain, I cannot give you the identity without the bearer's permission. However, the bearer is in fact this 4-U."

Gorsky's face did not change. "Who are you?" she inquired.

"If I told you," he replied, "it would create difficulties that I am not in a position to specify. However, I have sealed orders for you."

"Where are they sealed?"

"Here," said Croyd, pointing to Greta's head.

"If they affect my mission, I cannot accept them without the admiral's approval."

"The first part does not affect your mission, and you are to execute this part without advising the commander of my presence. It is that I am to depart with you. When we are ten minutes out, I will give you the second part, and at that time you are to consult with the admiral, but you must then tell the admiral that I cannot reveal the third part even to him, and you must request his permission to obey this third part even though it may detach you from the fleet."

Captain Gorsky considered him. Then she asked the computer: "Is this 4-U competent to issue such orders to me?"

"He is, sir," replied the computer.

The captain's brows went up—the first expression that had affected her face. "He?" she inquired, inspecting Greta.

Croyd-Greta replied, with a faint smile, "I think it called you *sir*. Apparently it does not distinguish."

Gorsky frowned. "It is programmed always to call an

officer *sir*, regardless of sex. But in its use of pronouns, it distinguishes infallibly—or has, up to now."

The smile on Greta broadened slightly. "I'm disguised, a little."

Gorsky's mouth almost softened. "Quite a bit," she commented. "Perhaps you should stay here another fifteen minutes. We will then be ten minutes out, and you can issue Part Two. I am due on the bridge."

"May I join you there?"

"Being a civilian, perhaps you do not realize that the inertial shield on the bridge is reduced for more accurate observation. We will be doubling acceleration each minute for ten minutes and fifteen seconds, starting at ½ G; here it will not be noticeable, but on the bridge you will feel about 1/100 of the acceleration up to a maximum of an apparent 5.6 G. Can you take it?"

"I can take it."

"Follow me, then." The captain led the way up a ladder. She was uniformed in combat fatigues, but despite the loose pants bloused slightly over the tops of her ankle-high sneakers, from rear and below she continued to be unquestionably a woman.

15

The cruiser backed away from her skyscraper mooring like a gigantic blimp, pointed her nose at the sky, and took off.

Greta experienced some disappointments. A college graduate several centuries into the space age, she hadn't supposed that her lips would curl back and break over her skull, but she *had* anticipated terrific weight on her chest as she lay in the bucket seat; she had never before been exposed to prolonged acceleration greater than 2 G,

for even the moon-taxi had an inertial shield. Presently she decided, quite rightly, that part of Croyd's nocturnal operation upon her had been to give her unusual acceleration-resistance. But there were other disappointments. Through the expansive semicircular picture window of the bridge, she watched constellations for a few moments, but these seemed no different from the moon-taxi view. Then she turned her attention to the aft-reflectors, but by that time the moon-surface was far below them, and the visible moon was only a thin crescent anyway. Presently she decided that Croyd's subjectivity was much more interesting than her own, and she lost herself in it—immersing herself in him, she knew everything that was going on and a very great deal that was intended.

At the end of eleven minutes, Captain Gorsky turned to Croyd-Greta. "We are now holding a steady 560 G acceleration. You are holding up like a seasoned spacedog. However, this apparent 5.6 G business is uncomfortable even for me; these youngsters can take it better, but even them we rotate every thirty minutes. Shall we go to my cabin?"

"After you," Croyd suggested.

"After *you*," Gorsky countered. "I don't want to penetrate your disguise on the ladder."

In the cabin—where not only was acceleration reduced to nearly zero by the inertial shield, but artificial gravity was held at 2/3 G—Gorsky waved Croyd to a chair and opened a bar. "It's time," said Gorsky, "to give me Part Two. Tell me while I pour, and I'll digest it while we drink."

"In fact," Croyd told her, "I have already given you most of Part Two. Inform the admiral of my identity, transmit my identification, advise him that I will cruise Ceres with you and may be issuing some local orders of opportunity, and finally, advise him that at the proper time I will give you Part Three which may have the effect of detaching you from the fleet. Secure his confirmation of Part Two and his blanket approval of Part Three."

"What identity shall I give him?"

"Exactly what I have given your computer."

Seated across the table from Croyd in her own arm-

chair, the captain, having pulled down about half her glass of zac with short soda, reached lazily with the other hand for an identiphone which had no visual. (Between ships in a combat fleet in high space, visual identification was no identification at all—nothing less than thalamic sampling was secure; meanwhile, captains and admirals preferred not to reveal their facial expressions to each other when it could be avoided.)

"Gorsky here, Admiral," she said. "Do you read me?" (She meant, not her voice, but her thalamic identity.)

Answering squawk, which probably meant, "I read you, Gorsky."

The captain informed the admiral that a 4-U was aboard, relayed his orders, and touched a button that activated the computer to transmit Croyd's ID card (with its imprest thalamic pattern) and the corresponding direct reading which the computer had obtained through Greta's eyes.

Silence.

Captain Gorsky demanded: "Have I lost you, Admiral?"

She listened to the squawk. Her eyes widened. She handed Croyd the identiphone and bolted up to the bridge, leaving him alone in the cabin.

"Yes, Admiral."

"This is Croyd's thalamic pattern and ID number."

"That is right, Admiral. I am Croyd."

"Within the hour, I have had a message from Nereid stating that Croyd is on duty there, monitoring Ceres. Would you care to explain?"

"Yes. There are two of me."

"I beg your pardon?"

"There are two of me. Are you familiar with my competencies?"

"*Peste!* Not with *that* one! Perhaps I should seek confirmation from the one of you who is on Nereid."

"It would only complicate matters. Confidentially, the one on Nereid is programmed to insist that he is the only one."

The voice grew somewhat cold. "Then you do not want me to confirm with Nereid?"

"That is right. In fact, Admiral, I must specifically request that you do not."

"Explain to me why I should not do so anyway."

"Please re-examine my pattern."

Pause. Then: "Your pattern is unmistakably Croyd's, there is a thing here . . . nevertheless . . ."

"Be so good as to read the card again. The fine engram."

Pause. Then: "Very well, Mr. Croyd. Please return me to the captain."

16

Greta was alone (but always with Croyd) in the quarters that had been allotted to Croyd: the Visiting Captain's Quarters, a not-too-compact suite (two rooms and bath) with a balcony. In a space ship that had not been designed to penetrate any atmosphere denser than the moon's at high velocity but rather to cruise outside the atmosphere of the heavier planets while her task craft did the attacking, it was possible in a limited way to indulge in such luxuries as balcony-bulges in the hull. You stepped up one step onto (or into) this balcony, leaned on a waist-high rail, and peered through crystal at space. This balcony was large enough for two. Greta alone was on it, but not alone.

"Where are we going, Croyd?"

"First to Ceres, then to Neptune."

"You said Ceres is an asteroid. They kind of float free in space, don't they?"

"Not quite. Ceres is the largest asteroid in the Sol System. Actually, it is a tiny planet almost four times the size of Nereid. It is one of a swarm of asteroids in an orbit between Mars and Jupiter. We think it is a chunk of a

planet that broke up a long time ago, but nobody can prove this. However, we have sampled the elements in a large number of these asteroids, and they are similar enough to give the theory a lot of weight."

"Will we be there soon? Will it take a long time?"

"We're already passing Mars, Greta. We will be there very soon."

"How fast are we going?"

"Fast enough to get us to Ceres in about four hours from the moon. That's an average velocity of around 13,000 miles per second, with a peak velocity around 26,000 just before we begin to decelerate at the halfway point."

"I remember something about stress-and-strain. Isn't that rather high for a ship to take?"

"It would have been, Greta, before the development of the inertial shield. Even now, only the largest warships can accept that high a deceleration—only they, that is, and one small ship that I have, if I ever get it back."

"Another thing I remember from college. Jeezt, those good old college days—and to think I was bored in class! Anyhow, there was something about the limiting speed of light. Can a ship go as fast as light? And then there was something about when it approaches the speed of light, it gets heavier or something, and everybody in it slows down or something."

"It's true about the increasing mass and the reduced internal velocity of processes, Greta. But your college physics tends to be old hat at the undergraduate level, and you learned the elements of the old-fashioned kind. We know now that the limiting velocity of light was only an epistemological concept. But more than that, we have learned how to taper-off the mass-increase and the clock-slowing."

"Like?"

"These changes always occur in the body of lesser mass relative to a body of greater mass. But if the accelerating body has greater mass than any body occurring in real gravitational relation to it, these effects are nullified. With ships built to travel at extremely high accelerations such as this one, we use this fact in several ways. One

reason for the great size of this ship is that it accommodates at its core a differential mass. As the ship accelerates, and as in its acceleration it increases its distance from a large mass such as a star like Sol, its differential mass increases in geometrical proportion to its distance and acceleration, so that when this ship approaches a velocity which would cause relativistic distortions, its distance from Sol and its growing differential mass are such that the mass of the ship actually becomes greater than the relative mass of Sol. So the distorting effects are canceled out. Do you get it?"

"No."

"Anyhow, we won't approach the velocity of light this trip, so the questions are rather academic."

"Academically, I drew C's."

"What college?"

"Bryn Mawr. Are you going to ask any related questions?"

"No."

"Thanks. What kind of skullduggery did you pull off with that ID card?"

Croyd paused while he felt out the walls of the suite for a telepathic bug. Finding none, he said, "In a way, it wasn't skullduggery. The card we are carrying is exactly like my own ID card, only Lurla got that one with my clothes. All I did was fabricate a duplicate, since I know my own thalamic pattern rather well—"

"*Rather* well?"

"*Quite* well."

"But yours can't be the same as mine! Or—or did you—"

"Yes, I guess I did."

"*My*, were you busy that night!"

"Well, that I didn't get to, that night. It was this morning while we were taking taxis and such."

"I didn't feel anything."

"No, one wouldn't notice. It's pretty subtle."

"Wait a minute, though, Croyd. You mean, now my thalamus is just like yours?"

"As far as the orbital probabilities go, yes. That's what they sample."

"But—now wait. Isn't the thalamus the seat of the emotions?"

"That's badly oversimplified, but—say yes for the argument. What then?"

"But then—emotionally—I'm not *me* anymore? I'm *you?*"

"Again oversimplified, but—why don't we just say, we are like identical twins?"

"I'm your—*sister?*"

"Don't you find that a comfortable thought?"

"No," she declared perceptively, "I don't, because it's worse than that. The admiral said our thalamic patterns are not only alike, but identical, even to a—a something, he didn't say what, but it must have been something that Croyd has all alone. So if my thalamus is precisely like yours, and we both are using the same thalamus, and we're both in the same body—Croyd, doesn't that make me *more* than your twin sister? Doesn't it make me *you?*"

"Do you want your old emotions back?"

"Hell—NO!"

"Don't you want to be me, then?"

"Hell—NO!"

"Why not?"

"Put it that—well, once upon a time I enjoyed being a girl and I hope to enjoy it again. But you're a man. Why should I want to be you?"

"Settle down, kid," he soothed. "You're in no danger of becoming me, or a man, either. As soon as I am out of you, your thalamic pattern will go female again. And as for that special something, it is strictly an interplay between me and my thalamus, so it, too, will go when I go."

She was silent.

"Feel better now?"

"Not sure, Croyd. Not sure. Ask me not."

Silence.

Greta had a new thought. "That special something will go when you go?"

"That's right."

"What about Lurla, then? She has your thalamic pattern, since she has your body and brain?"

"That's right."

"But since *you* aren't in there—does her thalamic pattern have that special something?"

"No, it doesn't. It can't, anymore."

"Then—she *could* be identified as a phony?"

"That's right."

"Does she know this?"

"It might be possible for her to dig it out of my memory, but since she isn't looking for it—well, no, probably she doesn't."

"Then—"

"Forget it. The chances are very high that she won't be challenged so intimately. Anyhow, we are starting to decelerate, so you have to go passive again while I pay attention to stuff."

"How do you know we are decelerating? I don't feel any difference."

"By the stars."

"I don't *see* any difference."

"That's Bryn Mawr for you."

"You are a son of a bitch."

"That's right, twin sister."

17

Croyd-Greta was on the bridge with Captain Gorsky and the exec and two other officers. The ship had come to full stop and now hovered 5,000 miles off Ceres. The *Rhea* was one of a hundred ships, including the flagship—some larger, most smaller—that ensphered the great asteroid.

Ceres, under the guidance of the repulsors installed and manned by the young leaders and members of HOT-

SPUR, was in the last stages of breaking loose from her orbit to start an acceleration path that was to culminate in a pulverizing collision with faraway tiny Nereid.

Ceres glowed.

Greta felt, in an eerie way, that the glowing looked familiar. It was ghostly, like the—like the glowing that—some corridor—something about uptime—when Lurla was in her . . . She lost it, but remotely it haunted her.

Croyd used her voice very low. "What are your orders, Captain?"

"From you, 4-U?"

"No. *Your* orders."

"I understand that Nereid—some character named Lloyd or something, some theoretical bureaucrat—is doing something to neutralize the defenses or something. If he neutralizes, we move in and take over. If he doesn't neutralize, we use everything to try to break through."

"Do you have the power to break through?"

"Are you noticing that glow, 4-U? That isn't moonglow. That's repulsor rays. You notice there is a kind of comet-tail of extrastrong glow? That's a repulsor concentration. The tail is thrusting Ceres out of orbit; she is supposed to drive on Nereid to destroy Galactic. But all the repulsor glow, all over Ceres, has the effect of neutralizing any energy charge that we can throw at her. I can't imagine how those piglets ever got hold of it. Anyhow, we can't break through it. *I'm* equipped with it—and nobody ever broke through to *me!*"

"So what do you do if this—what's his name?—if he fails?"

"The admiral has a theory that if we all concentrate rays on her head, at the far pole from her tail, it is weakest there, and the concentration might do it."

"Do you think it will?"

"No."

"What if it doesn't?"

"Probably can't hurt us, since we don't think they have counterattack weapons. But we'll look pretty silly, and some of us may collide with each other—"

The glow went out. Just like that.

Greta had a mental sensation as though she were

squeezing her eyes shut, and the mental equivalent of her temples pounded. The *glow* had been *like* something, *and the going-out was like something* . . .

But Croyd was saying, "Captain Gorsky, here is Part Three of your orders. You are to break formation and proceed to Nereid, arriving there in six hours."

In a kind of mental underlay, Greta was feeling him murmur, *"Well!* So she *is* working with my body, there! So my brain *is* still shipshape! Eh, but it *can't* last *forever* . . ."

Greta felt his mind pause.

Then Greta was enveloped in his profound concern. His mind was saying: "I see now what she did, and how she did it. I would have done it differently."

18

Lurla settled Tannen in the biggest easy chair in Croyd's lab. Tannen lit a fat cigar and contemplated its growing ash while Lurla-Croyd concentrated on computer settings. The task was made the more difficult for Lurla by the necessity of thinking about her own concerns while her prime attention was being given to the immediate emergency from Ceres.

Today she had made significant progress in terms of learning where her outfielders were and where they were not. In Derien, for example, there was no sign of infiltration: he was an earthling, a satisfied and no longer-ambitious Galactic bureaucrat, loyal to Galactic, loyal through Galactic to the Interplanetary Union, and curiously and personally (though secretly) loyal to Croyd: he might be buyable, but the price would be high. On the other hand, the Chairman of Galactic—Herod himself—*was* infiltrated: he was hers, and between them,

at the luncheon, there had been a mental exchange which established it. Herod had planted in Tannen the seed of an idea that Tannen should be here to witness the Ceres crisis, and while courageous old Tannen had picked up the bait and run with it, still it remained that Herod—expecting Lurla to come through with the tactic of stealing Croyd's body—had brought Tannen here to be neutralized by Lurla-Croyd. It wasn't enough, of course, for while Herod was the most powerful man in the galaxy, his coterie of secretaries and undersecretaries together could counter him. But if Herod had been infiltrated, there must be others.

And this was the point of Lurla's grand strategy—argued forcefully by Lurla, and grudgingly won on a tentative basis—for neutralizing this galaxy whose power was centered on Earth, this galaxy of inferior humans. Infiltrate the power-structure to paralyze this galaxy's ambition and make it finally the creature of her own galaxy. Thereafter—instead of stealing slaves and comparative anatomical subjects from this galaxy, instead of dwelling under the threat that the war-crazy barbarians of this galaxy would destroy her own civilization—Lurla's galaxy could dwell in permanent cosmic serenity, could take its slaves and specimens at will, and could spread out in this new land.

The motive was simple and elemental: need for security combined with greed and need for power and expansion. But Lurla's strategy was somewhat less simple, and it had been potently opposed by a large minority in her own power-structure—so potently, that she had tentatively won only on the understanding that the more violent alternative would continue to be developed against the possibility that she would fail.

Lurla's gnurl-species, originating on the planet Loa, had spread to several dozen star systems in their galaxy, which they called Melisandre, enslaving the various inferior species that they had encountered. Then gnurl privateers had begun to cross interspace, capturing and enslaving human specimens from Sol galaxy. When the gnurls had acquired laboratory understanding of humans, they had been amazed at the human inability to bring-off body-transfers;

and they had instantly concluded that humans, although obviously intelligent, were intelligent only at about the level which humans accord chimpanzees.

This concept of humans grew as a superstitious stereotype among gnurls; and highly educated gnurls like Lurla, although they came gradually to an understanding of the very high competencies of humans, never entirely overcame the prejudice of stereotypy. Humans like Derien, Herod, and even Tannen, were comprehended by Lurla and other infiltrating gnurls somewhat as American Anglo-Saxons once comprehended American Indians, overlapping with gnurls in their intelligence-ranges, in the sense that bright humans might equal average gnurls, but generally, hereditarily and hopelessly inferior. A man like Croyd—or rather, specifically Croyd (since there seemed to be no other human like him)—struck a woman like Lurla as an incredible human genius whose powers, while not the same as her own, were in their way equal to her own. But even Croyd was only a human, and morally he was a thing to be used.

Over a period of years—following the Lurla strategy—a task force of gnurls had been infiltrating various humans in Galactic, Ltd. Because of the uncertainties of intergalactic hypertelemetry, always considerably distorted by the randomness of intergalactic space, it was impossible to tell from her galaxy who had infiltrated whom, but a statistical degree of success had been assumed. When this degree reached a critical assumption, Lurla herself had moved in, with the self-given assignment of capturing Croyd, accelerating infiltration of others, and taking command.

Lurla had captured Croyd and she had ascertained that Herod was hers; she could surmise that others were hers, once she had time to take stock. And here—right in her laboratory, all alone with her—was Tannen, the most influential man in the galaxy if only the second most powerful. Once she had *him,* she could estimate that two thirds of her task would be accomplished.

All of this, however, had to be deferred until she could get rid of this stupid attack by HOTSPUR. So it behooved her to neutralize Ceres in a hurry. Only she could do

it—for she was Croyd, now. Meanwhile, presumably, Tannen would stay with her to watch; immediately afterward, she could take him over.

And—it *better* work! For the fanatical plan conceived by the gnurl minority—the one that was going ahead on a tentative basis even while she strove to undercut it—would at least destroy this human galaxy, eliminating all the resources that it offered the gnurls while, at worst, its cosmic result *might* be to take the gnurls along in the general destruction!

At any rate, the computer settings seemed ready. "Excuse me, now, Your Excellency," she said to Tannen, "I have to get this thing done, now."

"You are going to destroy Ceres?"

"I prefer to neutralize Ceres before it ever leaves orbit. Destruction is a last-ditch possibility."

"Will it take long?"

"I don't have more than a few hours. Once Ceres leaves orbit, I won't dare neutralize her, since I will be hoping to insert her into a new orbit by means of her own repulsors. If that fails, she will have to be destroyed. The trouble is, her repulsor rays make her practically invulnerable."

"So then I can expect to observe for a few hours at most?"

"On this attempt. If it fails, I'll rest and go back at it."

She made a few more tests, whereupon she decided that if Croyd himself had not been satisfied, only he himself would have been able to improve anything. She waved the President to a chair where he could observe her computerized behavior on a monitor screen. Then she turned out the laboratory lights, seated herself in the control seat, and locked all her senses into the computer.

The hundred-foot-wide binocular retinas of her computer-sensor maneuvered themselves flexibly into position to catch rare stray photons from the point of maximum repulsor glow around Ceres—namely, at the "tail" which was furnishing HOTSPUR with the thrust they needed to accelerate the asteroid. It was taking each photon about 2½ hours to travel from the incandescence at Ceres to Nereid (if indeed it made sense to speak of "each" photon), but

hey were following each other more or less continuously lthough in a random scatter-pattern. But as soon as everal of them, transcending the intensity threshold of the ensors, had excited the huge retinas, those retinas emitted -rays which traveled up the carrying beams furnished by he photons at a velocity which was so nearly instanta-neous that nobody so far had been able to measure a time nterval. The power of these I-rays easily penetrated the epulsors, even and indeed especially at the bright tail of Ceres. And by means of these I-rays, Lurla, and Tannen watching the monitor, were able to see the surface of the steroid.

Unfortunately, I-rays do not destroy or disrupt anything. All Lurla had achieved so far was visibility. That, of course, was a good deal more than the warships had been able to do at close range.

By tightly focusing the binocular bundles of I-rays, Lurla achieved a telescopic effect so that Ceres appeared to move closer and closer until it totally filled her vision and the monitor-screen that Tannen watched. When she had brought the image to the equivalent of ten miles from her eyes, so that large ground features were recognizable to a practised observer, she began a sweeping search-pattern which looked to Tannen as though she were twirling the asteroid.

Finding what she thought she wanted, she came in to a three-mile altitude. The large military installation, larger than any she had seen on Ceres, was evidently the HOTSPUR command base. Satisfied, she came down to variable heights between ten and a hundred feet and followed various individuals and groups who seemed to be importantly active in one way or another. When she felt reasonably well-oriented, she was ready for action.

What followed could not be appreciated by Tannen, for his monitor screen was limited to showing him what the computer (and therefore Lurla) was seeing. As for Lurla, she *became* the computer: its eyes were her eyes. And since the I-rays were variously specialized to transmit representations of vision and hearing and touch, her visit to Ceres was almost totally subjective.

She mingled with the HOTSPUR people—young men and women in motley that passed for uniforms, the men variously long-haired and bearded, the women in sweaters and tight pants or miniskirts. They had a sort of protocol of saluting that Lurla had trouble comprehending: as two met, she gathered that the junior held up his flat-palmed hand and looked away while the senior responded by flat-palming the hand and looking away the other way; the junior would say "Cool," while the senior would say "George." Not understanding, she accepted the code and used it in order to be led from one senior to another, listening to their talk and further sizing up the situation.

At length she felt able to locate most of the repulsor batteries on Ceres. This base was several hundred miles from the main concentration at the tail; there was only one actual repulsor unit on this base, although it directly controlled a system of them positioned in a network of fifty-mile intervals, and—by command function—indirectly controlled all of them. Lurla took a little time to inspect the local repulsor unit. It was underground, not distinguished in appearance from the surface; most of the interior of the large cavern was filled with generators and vacuum tubes, and there were only a few of the personnel on duty. The emission was ejected from a vertical gun and was invisible; not until it reached an altitude of two hundred miles did it spread out to fuse with its neighbors into an impenetrable defense of low incandescence. The effect to the nearby warships was to double the apparent size of Ceres.

Lurla now left the repulsor unit and moved directly and surely to General Headquarters. Entering a bleak two-story fiber-glass structure, she rode the updraft to the second story and entered the office of the Commanding General, passing through three antechambers without being seen by any guard or noncom or officer (since she was not there). Luckily, the general was at his desk—it saved her possible planetwide search-time, since he was the one she wanted. There was really little for him to do at the moment, for the HOTSPUR strategy was set and the main tactic activated. He therefore sat on a corner of his desk

one long leg extended to the floor with the other curled around it. He was dreamily improvising on a guitar, his head so close to the instrument that his beard was in danger of becoming entangled with the strings. The general was in his middle thirties, but he dressed young and wore a beard to make him look adolescent.

Lurla hypnotized him instantaneously and implanted in him an inescapable suggestion reinforced by a breeder potency. She then brought him out of it. For a moment he continued to strum the guitar as though nothing had happened. Abruptly he laid the guitar aside, sat at his desk, and picked up the visicom.

Officers entered, were hypnotized and suggestioned and breedered by their general, and moved out to their aircars. Each went to a base which controlled a system of repulsors, approached its commanding officer, suggestioned and breedered him or her. Aircars sped the chain reaction.

One hour later, at a prearranged time, all repulsors were shut-off.

Included in the shut-off was the tail that was thrusting Ceres out of orbit. No longer tormented, the planet groaningly and erratically began to settle back into her own habits. The resulting cataclysms annihilated all bases and all personnel, including the loyal Galactics who were prisoners of HOTSPUR.

Lurla subjectively remained just long enough to appreciate the violence and to satisfy herself that the ambitious HOTSPUR Project Ceres—so long and expensive in the making, so close to maniacal success—was totally a thing of the past. Then, with some difficulty, she returned to objectivity, widened the I-ray focus to make the asteroid recede into remote space and vanish, switched-off the computer, unlocked herself, stood unsteadily and turned to look at Tannen. She could just see his large silhouette, for the laboratory was still dark.

"How did you like it?" she inquired inanely.

Tannen's big bushy brows were hard down. "The denouement upset me a little," he commented. "In terms of your usual modus operandi, it was a bit brutal. I had thought that you would ease the asteroid back into orbit

and keep the hoodlums imprisoned there for reorientation. Instead, you just shook them off into space. Would you mind explaining this hard decision?"

Swiftly scanning the Croyd-brain, Lurla realized that this had been a faux pas, although she did not entirely grasp the Croyd-values entailed. Quickly she said: "While I was mentally on Ceres, I examined their minds. They were incorrigible. Totally."

His brows relaxed a little. "Well," he commented, "sometimes we in government have to make hard decisions for the greater good. It is possible that I was not being sufficiently attentive to the real situation. I kept being distracted by the way you were glowing."

"Glowing?"

"Yes. You are glowing now. Much as Ceres was glowing. About the same green pallor."

Glancing down at her Croyd-body, Lurla saw that indeed she was glowing all over. The realization gave her an eerie sense of remembering something, of associating something with the glow. She recalled abruptly that she was still wearing the combat suit. Evidently Croyd's combat suit was equipped with microscopic repulsor units; these were presumably triggered by a certain offensive-defensive state of mind which Lurla had been feeling strongly when she had subjectively "gone" to Ceres and mingled with her enemy. The meaning of the vague association now came very close, but it was crowded back by comprehension of an opportunity. The Ceres distraction was done, and here in her power was President Tannen—and President Tannen was off-guard and entirely attentive to her body-glow.

"Watch the glow carefully, Your Excellency," she told him, "and you will see something interesting."

Tannen's concentration was intense. Lurla hypnotized him and implanted in him an inescapable suggestion reinforced by a breeder potency. She then brought him gently out of it; he sensed no discontinuity, he continued to watch her glow.

Lurla said low, "The crisis is done. Deactivate the repulsors."

"Will do," said the suit, and the glow went out.

Lurla turned on the lights. Tannen blinked, sighed, produced a cigar, lit it contemplatively, inspected the first smokestream dreamily and observed: "So. Well—would you now like to talk some philosophy?"

The effect was unexpected and irrelevant. Lurla was swept by an almost uncontrollable wave of murder-passion directed at Tannen. The sadistic-fiendish heat grew and enveloped her until she glowed with it, and while she vibrated—hungry to leap and tear—it maelstromed outward to complicate itself hideously in a gender-confusion of savage eroticism that had no way to orient itself subjectively. Fighting for reason, burning with shame and panic, she mentally reached for Croyd's emotic switches, which unaccountably had turned themselves on, and shut-off the surge.

Now, now, *why this*—unforeseen, unprogrammed, illogically and impossibly shredding every tabu in her culture? Was there something that the hard, clear, *proper* logic of her venture had overlooked?

"Not now, Your Excellency, if you will excuse me," she managed to say quite calmly. "I must report this to Derien so he can report it to Herod. And I suspect that perhaps you have some people of your own to inform."

Sighing again, Tannen arose with difficulty. "In that event, sir, I will leave you—to report and then perhaps to rest. We will meet again, I am sure. It was well done."

Tannen left.

Lurla got Derien on the visicom and reported the neutralization of Ceres and the annihilation of the HOTSPUR personnel.

Having switched-off Derien, she telepathed Herod on a tight beam. "Ceres is out of the way, and Tannen is ours. He's a breeder. Take him over and steer him, and give me the names of a few key Galactics. I'll start a few more breeders and then work with you directly on organization. This actually should only take a few weeks."

"If I could have been a breeder," Herod complained, "it would already be done."

Lurla coldly replied, "You are talking to an Alpha, Herod. You are a Beta, and a good one, but a Beta. You

have occupied this Herod and neutralized him very neatly, but just as your powers aren't up to finally expelling this Herod from his body, so they aren't up to suggestion-implant, let alone breeder-implant. Be satisfied that I value your organizational talents."

"All right," he responded tonelessly, "I am a Beta, so be it. Are you up to dining here tonight? I'll give you names."

"I'll come alone at eight. Out."

Lurla was mentally weary and she was a bit surprised to notice that the Croyd-body was physically weary and its brain below par. She went to the bar and, first taking a delayed restorative pill, she drew herself a tall glass of pure zac. For a while she sat spread-legged on the edge of Croyd's couch, nursing the drink. Suddenly she leaped to her feet and tore off the combat suit, throwing it on a chair carelessly.

"For best self-service, I should be hung," it remonstrated.

She hung it in the cabinet and slammed the door. Then she drank off her drink and threw herself back on the couch with an arm flung over her eyes.

In her first dream, there were two of her, and she shot herself in a dark endroit: one of her glowed, but after the shot the glow went out.

In her second dream, the growing world-filling asteroid Ceres was the face of Croyd—not the strong face nor the intent face, nor the poker face, but a repulsively grinning mockery of Croyd with tatters of skin peeling from its cheeks. This dream lasted a long time, and it was repeatedly contaminated by shuddering waves of perversely alternating male-female passion which expressed themselves subjectively, not as passion but as deteriorating monotony.

Like all gnurl children—but in a rarefied royal milieu—little Princess Lurla had begun her training in the social art of *lanai* about as soon as she was old enough to identify herself as an individual having firm depth of memory. The best translation of *lanai* into Greek-rooted English is comically ugly: *psychoploutics*, or mind-voy-

aging. The early start was mainly to prevent trouble: sooner or later they'd try it anyway and, of course, then in their innocence it would mean immediate death. Little girls were taught, at bedtime, just for a little while before sleep to nestle with their mothers' minds in their mothers' brains; little boys with their fathers'. A part of the indoctrination they deliciously received there, more directly and pervasively than in any other imaginable way, was conviction that any other kind of mind-voyaging would be a sin until they were old enough for their Sabbath-school teachers to give them permission.

Among other effects, *lanai* resulted in absolute class-stratification and an absolute psychological dichotomy between sexes.

The Sabbath-school teachers later played hosts from time to time to individual children, always of the same sex as the teacher. Continuing the indoctrination system, they passed the next responsibility to the day-school. No gnurl-child would dream of violating any of this.

Sessions in the brains of day-school teachers of their own sex began a year before puberty. (This of course gave girls a head start, but then, girls were more docile.) Teachers carefully turned themselves off before entertaining a visiting child-mind; they too were thoroughly indoctrinated. Thus they carried the children comfortably through the mental stresses of puberty. A new experience now for the children was that their teachers occasionally returned the visits, giving the host-child skills in cerebral switch-control, and that was a big day for the child. All this was accompanied by mind-to-mind instruction in the ethical theory of *lanai;* esthetics was avoided, this being (on the gnurl-planet Loa in the galaxy Melisandre, which Earthlings call the Large Magellanic Cloud) matter for individual taste and decision, to be discussed by the ordinary conversational methods that permitted doubt, debate and creativity.

In high school, a guarded beginning was made with visiting the minds of friends of the same sex. (Since schools were socially stratified, this also meant friends of the same social class; for Princess Lurla, there weren't

many choices.) Always, as a preliminary to a visit, the host or hostess executed the turning-off procedure; omission was tabu, and there is no tabu more powerful than a tabu indoctrinated mind-to-mind while the minds are together in the same mothering or fathering brain. The ritual of these visits was a nice one.

The visitor, pausing on the threshold of the host brain, said: "I hesitate to trouble you, my friend."

The host replied: "No visit from you could be anything but a delight. Please enter and check my switches."

"Thank you," said the guest, and executed the check-out procedure to be sure that all sources of possible emotive disturbance were turned-off for the duration of the visit.

That done, ceremony was thrown away, and the fun could become hilarious.

In middle- and lower-class high schools, seniors were warned that some higher-educated people would be able to extract their minds and kill them. In college-preparatory high schools, seniors were preadvised that they themselves would be learning this art. In both cases, they were taught how to instantly sense an attack and reflexively defend against it. Defense could not be perfect, even for one who became expert, like Lurla, but since mind-rape was tabu except in fair combat—and since the college instruction would include ethical indoctrination against the rape of an innocent—villainous attacks were rare on Loa, and even rarer was an attack by a mind so skillful and powerful that it could succeed against an average defense.

Lurla of course went to the best university on Loa. A great many new learnings and experiences were part of her college life. Her instructors taught previously unimagined skills. Philosophers turned the intellectual spotlight remorselessly on the tabu-indoctrination system; Lurla came to see that the tabu-system of childhood was merely a safety device. The voluntary mind-body trade (as opposed to mere guest-host visiting) was extensively explored, but in the course of the exploration, a tabu was implanted against abandoning one's own body to another,

or remaining in another's body in the absence of the proper owner, for more than forty-eight hours. (That Lurla now dared to abandon her own body for more than forty-eight hours was due only to the advanced and chancy stasis procedure which her scientists had developed for this purpose.)

In military science, which was bisexual, Lurla learned the fiendish technique of grappling with an enemy mind, jerking it out of its brain, and letting it perish disembodied. (In drill, this was done with a host standing by to receive the snatched mind; drill casualties thus were minimized.) As a special refinement of the art, forcible combat mind-trading was taught. There were tactical situations, usually between high-ranking enemy officers or diplomats, where a temporary forced trade was better than a murder (but only when there was assurance that one's own body would not be abandoned to another for more than forty-eight hours.)

Heterosexual brain-dates were tabu. Consequently they never occurred.

Princess Lurla—whose *lanai* training at the university and under select palace tutors had been exceptional, whose talents were superb, but whose visitations had been necessarily limited—had moved far beyond the instruction in university. This progress had resulted from the crisis-purposes which she had formulated—the purposes that would lead her across interspace to Earth with the explicit intent of rape-trading minds with Croyd.

Several months of grueling laboratory work had immediately preceded her present interspace voyage. What Lurla had been doing was totally tabu on Loa, and her supervising scientists had been subjected to the painful security device of being invaded by Lurla and having total and permanent secrecy enforced upon them mind-to-mind.

Lurla had been experimentally entering Earth-humans. Let us make this explicit: she had been entering specimens of *Homo sapiens* captured in privateer raids on Earth and brought back to Loa as slaves.

A gnurl—Lurla—was not *Homo sapiens*. Lurla could be called "human" only within the broad definition of "human" that Tannen's Galactic Union had adopted, and which even included dolphins. No evolutionary connection between Earth-humans and Loa-gnurls could be established without going all the way back to the explosion of the primal cosmic atom which had sent Sol Galaxy and Melisandre and all the other galaxies in the metagalactic system hurtling away from each other. On strained intellectual grounds, Lurla and other highly educated gnurls were willing to court popular censure by admitting that the alien Earth-species *Homo sapiens* had intrinsic value in the same league with gnurls—but not in the same ballpark, even for Lurla. Physically they were different, and mentally they were—well, different because of their physical differences, and also because *lanai* was genetic with gnurls but not with Earth-humans.

In the teeth of tabu, Lurla experimentally invested one human brain after another. She found them all dull: inferior servo-mechanisms. Nevertheless, Croyd's was a human brain, and she had to know how to operate it with hairline accuracy.

Until a few hours ago, she hadn't known that Croyd's species of humanity was not *Homo sapiens*. But perhaps it didn't matter—the species parallelism was almost perfect.

She began with human women.

Having attained finesse with *their* brains, she began on human men. Inadvertently she killed several. In them, she became impressed with the opinion that no normal human male is totally incapable of being reduced to intellectual jelly by any human female. She had entered these males merely to find out how to operate them, hoping somehow to get into Croyd; this new learning told her how to get *at* Croyd.

Gnurls had their limitations. Lurla could not perform operations on another's brain without entering that brain, except by means of hypnosis. She could not enter another's brain except through some physical or field contact. She could not voluntarily or forcibly trade minds with

another, gnurl or human, unless there was a mind-to-mind confrontation or unless the other was caught with his intellect down. The knowledge about the susceptibility of the human male to the human female seemed to show for sure how to capture Croyd.

Necessarily her training timetable was tight. Her voyage to Earth had a dangerous deadline; she could not wait for operational perfection. This much she did learn to perfection: how to turn-off, instantly upon entry, every emotic in a male human cerebrum. Going into it, Lurla had supposed that perfect control over Croyd's emotics would keep her out of male trouble.

Awakening now on Nereid—recalling the Tannen-trouble, foggily and disagreeably remembering her dreams—Lurla's self-honesty could not escape the hard fact that somehow Croyd's emotics had switched themselves on again. She was face to face with the old gnurl-tabu against occupying an otherwise mindless body for more than forty-eight hours—a limit that Lurla had already considerably exceeded. Could it be that the old tabu was beginning to catch up with her?

19

On Nereid, the main berth for visiting craft was rather like a small loading hatch in the hull of a majestic warship, but it was capable of receiving a spherical craft a quarter mile in diameter. No visitors were expected, and two or three crewmen in spacesuits were lounging on the exterior platform, watching the sky that was always a night sky. One of them pointed to the distant lights of some battleship that hung motionless a few miles off Nereid (actually traveling at fairly high ve-

locity, in order to keep pace with the orbital speed which Nereid had to maintain in order to stay away from Neptune).

An observer called from within: "It's the cruiser *Rhea*, she doesn't seem to be due here just now." (He could see her clearly on Visiradar.)

The loungers went on the alert, and almost instantly a guard formation joined them. The commander of the guard stayed at the inner edge of the platform where he could watch the sky and at the same time receive intelligence from the Visiradar observer.

Raising the ship's bridge, the commander inquired, "Nereid Reception here. What are your plans?"

After a moment, the reply came: "*Rhea* here. Obviously not hostile but definitely secret. Out."

The commander did not trouble to reply; he merely made a routine report to External Security and remained watchful. *Rhea* had been definitely identified by identiphone and other methods and, had she been hostile, she could not have penetrated the automated repulsor shield that encased Nereid a hundred miles out. *Rhea* might hang there for days without making any attempt at communication; on the other hand, *Rhea* might initiate some action abruptly and expect instant response from Nereid. It could even be a sneak inspection.

Twenty-nine minutes later the commander noticed that one of the tiny, glowing portholes in *Rhea's* hull seemed to have detached itself and to be moving toward them. Immediately Visiradar, to whom the whole scene was as plain as day with details magnifiable at will, reported: "It's an aircar with one occupant."

"What sort of occupant?"

"Female. No uniform."

The little craft was moving steadily toward them, apparently intending to land in the main berth. Then, at a distance of a thousand yards, it moved away to the commander's left and quickly lost itself around the sudden convexity which was the artificial shell of Nereid.

"Report!" the commander barked.

"Still visible," said Visiradar. "Hovering near Un-

dersecretary Derien's hatch." Visiradar could see all round Nereid. As for the hatch in question, each officer of Derien's rank or higher had one of his own.

"Any action there?"

"No action. Still hovering. Wait, it seems to be returning. Yes, it is definitely coming back here."

The chrome-yellow glow that was the aircar reappeared around the horizon. (Nereid's artificial gravity was adjusted here so that the surface seemed vertical, like the side of a ship's hull, with the landing platform projecting horizontally; thus the horizon seemed vertical.) Now the craft was no more than a thousand yards out and approaching rapidly.

It disappeared.

"Went dark!" the commander called in. "Is it still approaching?"

"*It's gone!*" Visiradar's voice was definitely shaken.

"What do you mean, *gone?*"

"Just—gone."

It didn't reappear. The subsequent reporting was harried, its format being generally: "You aren't going to believe this, but . . ."

Croyd-Greta had simply performed a maneuver that was Croyd's uniquely, one that he had often thought through and often practiced. He wished to enter Derien's hatch unobserved. He knew that he could not move from *Rhea* to Nereid without being observed and tracked. Moving directly from *Rhea* to a carefully computed point a thousand yards from the main berth, Croyd used this as his starting point and flew directly around the side of Nereid right up to the exterior of Derien's closed hatch, noting the starting and finishing times. He then returned to his point of departure. There, having already established that nothing had gotten in his way the first time around, he uptimed to his first departure time and repeated the trip, carefully holding himself on the same time curve all the way, and therefore literally flying beside himself. At Derien's hatch, however, he parted company with himself: his first-time-around self returned toward

the berth, to disappear again into uptime, and so on—although it was not really an "again" except from a time-invader's viewpoint.

Meanwhile Croyd, getting inside the approach to the hatch in order to avoid being picked-up again on Visiradar, released his clutch on uptime and allowed the tension to force him back into the present. Only in the present could he do anything about the hatch, for nothing that is contemporaneous can be activated in uptime.

As soon as his fingernail watch (a lady's model that Greta had sweet-talked out of Captain Gorsky) told him that he had returned to the instant of uptiming, Croyd put the aircar computer on manual and projected the complicated signal with which Derien and a few others were alone able to open the hatch from outside. The hatch slid open, and the craft slid in, the hatch closing behind it to allow the little receiving berth to repressurize. When pressure was normal, an inner door opened and armed crewmen cautiously entered, expecting a known superior, one of a few possibles, but ready for anything.

—Or almost anything. They were not quite ready for an empty aircar. Repressurization had taken thirty seconds, and during that time only the aircar and Croyd-Greta had occupied this space. Therefore Croyd, without fear of overlapping with another mass, uptimed thirty seconds and held it.

The crewmen talked it over. One of them thrust his head into the door of the aircar, verifying that it was empty. He pulled his head out and turned away just as Croyd, in uptime as blind to the present as a fish is blind to events above the surface, did a flash downtiming to reconnoiter and ducked back up. A minute later he returned, keeping down in the car and peering around the door. All but one member of the crew had left, leaving the door open, and the remaining man was studying the hatch.

Croyd-Greta slipped out of the aircar and through the open door, backing into a dark corner that Croyd knew well. Presently the crewmen returned with their noncom and went into the pressure chamber. Croyd came out of his corner, moved swiftly up the passageway, and entered

the updraft which took him directly to the side door which led into Derien's immediate antechamber.

The uptime operation outside Nereid had been coolly logical, it could hardly miss, but the hide-and-seek in the pressure chamber had been chancy. Croyd had been prepared, if caught, to present his ID card for computer reading and demand to be taken directly to Derien, but here on Nereid, and now in the critical phase of his campaign to recover his own body, he preferred to avoid silly complications.

Before entering, he paused to let Greta catch her psychic breath. "Are you ready?" he asked her.

"As ready as I am going to be."

"You realize that I am about to leave you?"

"Yes."

"And that it could be fatal to you—or to both of us?"

"I said I would take that if necessary."

"And that if this works, you will have Lurla in you again?"

"Yes, but you said that the pill—"

"—Will put you and Lurla into a state of suspended animation for about twenty-four hours. But when you return to consciousness, so will Lurla. If I can't get control of the situation then, you may go mad."

"Do soldiers go mad in combat?"

"Sometimes."

"Then I will take that, too, if necessary."

"Good girl. When you wake up, if she's in control, try to swoon. If you awake again, swoon again. Sooner or later she is bound to leave you."

"I'm not a good enough body for her?"

"Yes, you are, but I don't think she'll realize that. She's after Galactic VIP's. Anyhow—that's what to do —if."

Silence.

Croyd said, "We're going into Derien's office now. That will start the final action."

"This is the annulment, I assume."

"I'm afraid so. I hope you don't mind."

She blurted: "You could have ruined me. Instead, you gave me new strength. I won't forget that."

"You could have fought me. Instead, you were friendly. I won't forget *that*."

"So long, Croyd."

"So long, Greta. Be seeing you."

"It's—it's been nice knowing you."

"Mutual. Well—here we go."

He opened the door.

20

The antechamber was empty. Croyd-Greta presented herself in Derien's open doorway. Derien was seated at his desk, facing the door; his aide stood with her back to the door, leaning over the desk. Glancing past her, Derien saw Greta. His eyelids lifted an eighth of an inch, flagging his aide to turn quickly.

The aide stiffened and walked the length of the long office to confront Greta, saying, "Did you have an appointment with the Undersecretary?"

"No," said Greta, "but it's urgent that I see him." She presented the ID card. The aide looked at it, raised her thin brows, and walked back in to hand the card to Derien.

"4-U," commented Derien. "Come in, Madame 4-U. Sit down. Angie, just—do the business, will you?" He handed the card to his aide, who took it to the computer.

Greta entered, walked to his desk, and stood beside it, looking down at him with a playful half-smile. "We don't have time for me to sit, thank you. You'll see why when Angie gets finished there."

Angie, pale, returned to Derien and handed him a little print-out. She bird-headed between Derien and Greta while he read it.

Derien looked up slowly. "This is a unique thalamic

pattern," he said softly, "and I think maybe I know it. Would you mind if—"

Greta walked to the computer and put her eyes to the readers.

Angie, paler still, handed the second print-out to Derien.

Derien handed both print-outs to Angie. She only nodded, not looking at them, looking only at Greta.

Derien suggested, "Perhaps there should be some supporting evidence?"

Smiling quite easily now, Greta watched Angie while she said, "Your apartment—last week—three A.M.—Sweet Adeline."

Angie's eyes widened and she slapped both hands over her mouth. Angie flushed and turned furiously to Darien. "I told you and Croyd not to tell a soul about that foolishness!"

"*I* didn't," said Derien, watching Greta.

"Neither did I," said Greta.

Angie went pale again, and she was breathing rather hard. Derien reached for a long cigarette. Having lit it and exhaled, he contemplated Angie. "Admit," he said to her, "that it is at least a shred of supporting evidence."

Angie said tightly, "I think I'd like more."

It came, unexpectedly, from the pullman. The buzzer signaled an imminent arrival. They turned to it. The arriver was President Tannen. He was haggard, and his eyes were covered with a one-way blindfold—a plastic sheathing that permitted others to see his eyes but did not allow Tannen to see out.

Tannen croaked, "Derien—are you there?"

Moving more swiftly than either Angie or Croyd-Greta had ever seen him do, Derien went to Tannen and seized his arm. "What's the matter—"

"Restrain me!" cried Tannen.

"What do you—"

"Restrain me! It's an order! Restrain me—"

His hands found Derien's throat. With a quick judo counter, Derien put Tannen on the floor, face down. "Quick, Angie, the needle!" he commanded. Angie scurried to his desk, produced a tiny pistol from the top

drawer, knelt beside Tannen and shot him at the base of the spine. Almost immediately, Tannen stopped struggling.

Derien stood, breathing hard. Then he turned to Greta. "Do you know who that is?" he demanded.

Greta replied, "I'm sure it's President Tannen. However, I've never met him, labeled with that name."

Derien frowned, thinking. Then he looked up, remembering. "Whether Angie knows it or not," he observed, "what you've said is another piece of supporting evidence, and I'm tentatively ready to accept the identity. *Now* will you sit down and tell us the story while Tannen pulls himself together?"

Greta sat in a straight chair beside Derien's desk, crossing her legs, gently rubbing her hands together in a feminine gesture while Croyd gave Derien the gist of it. Derien considered the business, watching Greta's eyes; incredibly, he seemed to have forgotten Tannen, who lay supine-motionless on the floor.

Then Derien turned to Tannen. "Are you conscious, Your Excellency?"

"I am. Thank you for restraining me. Keep me restrained. Above all, do not remove this blindfold."

"Have you heard?"

"Yes. Have you established the thalamic identity?"

"That's right."

Tannen addressed Greta. "If you are Croyd, tell me where we last met and what the substance of our conversation was. It is all right for Derien to know."

Croyd-Greta summarized the tavern conversation.

"The only thing is," Tannen temporized, "that there was a woman with Croyd at the time, and you might be she; if so, you would remember the conversation. Unfortunately I cannot see you—no, Derien, by no means touch this blindfold!"

Croyd said, "The young woman's body was named Greta, but it was occupied by Lurla. I am sorry, Your Excellency, I was hypnotized that night. Just now, Lurla is occupying my body, and I am occupying Greta's body. This is Greta—and she is entirely conscious, along with me, in her own body."

"It fits," Tannen muttered. "They are supposed to be body-switchers. Derien, let me tell you now how it is with me. Someone has put a hypnotic compulsion on me, including a breeder capability. I don't remember it happening, but I became aware of it just after dinner tonight. You recall that I had been with—well, with the Croyd who neutralized Ceres, and I became fascinated by the way he glowed in the darkness, and for a few seconds after that, I find a hiatus in my memory which normally is very sequential and circumstantial. It is possible that I was hypnotized by—by *that* Croyd. My compulsion is to respond to anyone who wishes to destroy Galactic, and to implant suggestions in others to do the same. I have already contaminated several of my aides, and they will contaminate others. It is a chain reaction, Derien. As soon as I totally grasped the situation, I came here to tell you about it. But first I blindfolded myself, because the thing is done through retinal I-rays. As soon as you seized me, the compulsion hit. I could not prevent myself from trying to immobilize you so I could take off my blindfold and . . . Eh, another thing: part of my compulsion is to do whatever Herod tells me to do. What does *that* mean?"

The question was rhetorical. The four in the room looked at each other—Tannen sightlessly from the floor, the needle having paralyzed his locomotor system, leaving him free to breathe and talk.

Croyd said, "Derien, I know that you still have some doubts about me. Tell me, have you ever looked at the ID card of this Croyd who is here, or checked his thalamic pattern?"

Derien shook his head. His eyes were amazingly wide open.

"Now is the time," said Croyd, "but there is an angle to it." He outlined the tactic.

It was Angie who objected, clasping her hands in her lap until her knuckles were white. "I think you are Croyd," she told Greta, "but, anyhow, whichever of you *is* Croyd—he could lose his soul!"

"Croyd's body has already lost his soul, or vice versa," Croyd said curtly. "Derien, do you want to put it in motion?"

"If he's there," said Derien. He nodded to Croyd-Greta.

Croyd busied himself with the visicom on Derien's desk and the computer against a far wall, utilizing the spare coil of wire in the supply compartment. He made a few tests. Nodding to Derien, he pressed the two improvised electrodes against his parietal areas.

Derien rang Croyd's laboratory on the visiphone.

Croyd's face appeared. Angie, hovering over Derien's shoulder, repressed a gasp.

Eyes veiled, Derien drawled, "Sorry to bother you, Croyd, but we're in the middle of a sneak inspection."

Croyd's answering voice seemed a bit higher than usual. "He came on the *Rhea?*"

Derien glanced at Croyd-Greta, who nodded. Derien said, "On the ball as usual, Croyd. Anyhow, we're all showing ID. Your card handy?"

"Want me to bring it in?"

"Not necessary. I have a lead from the visicom to the computer."

"Just a minute." Derien saw the Croyd-body leave the visicom and walk to a far corner of the lab. Presently the Croyd-body returned and silently held a card before his visicom.

"Good enough," said Derien after a few moments. "Now, the thalamic comparison. Just bring your eyes up close to the visicom."

The screen was filled with the Croyd-eyes.

At the computer, Croyd's mind was filled with Lurla.

He made his move.

At the same instant, Greta swallowed her pill.

Lurla instantly felt the wrench at her mind. She was a gnurl. Instantly, automatically, violently, she wrenched back, even before she comprehended what was happening.

Greta gasped. "Croyd are you *in?*"

Blurrily, from the visicom across the room, she heard the reply: "It's all right—I'm in."

That was all for Greta.

Croyd wrenched at Lurla.
The answering wrench flung him into
the endless grayness of death.

21

It wasn't easy for Lurla to comprehend what was happening—or what had already happened. What she did instantly know, *after* her automatic defensive response, was that only one human in the galaxy was capable of trying to seize her mind. The next point was to make sure that she was *she*. The next point was to grasp that, however it had come about, the real Croyd had visited Derien and had convinced him that she was an impostor. Immediately she saw that Derien would have no way of knowing whether the mind-switch had actually come off.

While this comprehension was coming clear, a woman's voice from a little distance asked thickly: "Croyd—are you *in?*"

Lurla didn't know who the woman might be but she did know that Derien was listening. "It's all right," she instantly responded. "I'm in."

On the visicom, Derien's expression did not change. He was waiting for her to speak. With her mind disoriented anyway by what had been happening to her during the past few hours, Lurla fought for coolness and activated a selective scanning of the Croyd-brain as it continued to interplay with the Lurla-mind in the production of reason. Hypothesis: Derien believed that Lurla had been an impostor in the Croyd-body, and also believed

that the Croyd who had been with Derien was the real one. Hypothesis: Derien and Croyd together had planned and executed an attempt by Croyd to switch bodies with Lurla via visicom-computer hookup. Consequent: Derien was hypothesizing that Croyd had succeeded, but shrewd Derien was waiting to be sure. Consequent: what Lurla would say next must convey to Derien the idea that she was truly the Croyd-mind once again in control of Croyd's own body.

She took a chance. "The sneak inspection gambit was a neat improvisation, Derien my friend. I'm here, but I'm a bit woozy." She almost added, "Where's Lurla?" but intuition shut her up.

"What should happen now?" was Derien's languid response.

It crossed her mind that he expected Croyd to say something about the woman, whoever she was. Croyd *knew* who she was. Who would she be? Eh . . . She would almost have to be—who was it?—that Greta; Croyd had navigated her body back here to Nereid—and the fascinating thing was, Greta seemed now to be conscious in her own right!

Lurla was a gambler. "How about Greta?" she demanded.

"She's about the way you thought she'd be," Derien answered. "What do you want to do?"

At least he'd let slip confirmation that it was Greta—but how had Croyd thought she'd be? Wait. Croyd, in Greta, had tried to pull-off a mind-switch. That meant that Croyd had expected himself to regain his own body while Lurla would be transferred into Greta's body. But Lurla was *not* in Greta's body—and the gods only knew where Croyd was! Then was Croyd still imprisoned in Greta? If that was the case and if Croyd was conscious, Derien would know that the switch had failed. But if Derien had known the failure, he wouldn't be playing it cute like this—would he? He might, of course. What seemed most likely, though, was that Greta was unconscious, whether Croyd was in her or not.

"I'd better come up," said Lurla, "and help you take care of Greta."

"Good," said Derien. "The red carpet is out." He switched-off the visicom.

Derien drummed on his desk for a moment. Angie watched him anxiously, and blindfolded Tannen tensely watched nothing. Greta was a corpse on the floor.

"He's coming up," Derien presently told Angie. "My feeling is that he really made it, that it is really Croyd coming up, body-and-mind. However, we have to be sure. Just for fun, Angie, suppose we hide Tannen. And, Angie—you stay hidden with him."

Lurla schooled herself to take even more time than usual getting to Derien's office, but her Croyd-heart was doing an unusually high 90-beat, and she felt generally distraught in a way that did not seem, in the self-disciplined Croyd-body, merely the result of an action-crisis.

Entering the anteroom by the side door and finding the room deserted, she walked directly into Derien's office. Derien sat brooding at his desk. Greta lay on a couch.

Ignoring Derien, Lurla went immediately to Greta and inspected her, recognizing a case of suspended animation. At length she turned to Derien, asking, "Where's Angie?" (In a split second she had substituted this question for the tip-off one that she had *almost* asked: "What did Greta take?" Without this knowledge, Lurla could not know how long Greta would be out, but there was no way to get this knowledge from Derien.)

"I sent her for coffee," was the reply. "We're out of it here, and I'm bushed. Want to stay here until she comes? We can have a council of war."

Lurla was having another crisis, but this time not sexual. It was now an overpowering urge to hypnotize Derien—the most stupid thing, under the circumstances, that she could possibly do.

"No," she said, "I'd better be taking care of Greta. I had this all planned, as you know." She scooped Greta off the sofa and started for the door.

"Sure you want to carry her like that?" asked Derien. "I have a litter here—it'd be easier on her."

Lurla paused, shrugged, and walked on with Greta.

"In that case," Derien announced, "I'll go with you and open doors."

"Not necessary," said Lurla curtly. "My knee works fine on the buttons." She departed with Greta.

Derien, chin on fists, watched after her moodily for a moment. Then he went to a closet door and opened it.

"Come on out, Angie," he called. "He or she is gone."

He gasped, seeing that the blindfold was off the eyes of the supine Tannen.

Angie emerged, hypnotized Derien, suggestioned him, breedered him.

22

After a swift timelessness of breathless gray, Croyd seemed to have come to some sort of rest. He began fuzzily to think about this and that. Presently he caught on to the idea that he must have some kind of a brain at his disposal, since he was thinking more or less coherently; but he could see nothing, he had no senses whatsoever—not even touch, not even kinesthesia.

His sense of "gray" had not been gray at all, or any other color. It had just been nothing—it continued the same.

He felt as though his brained body were idling like an electronic motor that is on "warm"—ready to go, but not going.

His thinking continued fuzzy, just coherent enough to know that it was not making many connections.

Suddenly he was turned on. All his senses burst into

life. At the same instant, tiny uniformed men began feeding him questions, and his brain whirred and spat out answers, mostly in the language of probability calculus. If he had been incoherent before, he was giddy now with the speed of his own thinking, the demands upon it, and his own total lack of control of it. This went on for hours.

Eventually his own thought-purposes got isolated enough for him to comprehend that he was a gigantic computer being used by these men for engineering purposes. Their demands left him no time for reflection, but he was able to record some sensory impressions for later interpretation. He seemed to be located practically out in the open, but in fact he was under a large transparent dome. Men kept coming in and out of this dome, consulting the men who were programming him and reading his output; these men were dwarfed by his own colossal size. Outside the dome was an expansive, clear space in the muddy disorder of new foundation diggings, with meaningless random shafts of metal beginning to erect themselves. The sky was remarkably bright; eventually he saw that it had two suns and that everything cast a double shadow. This told him that he was outside the solar system, but it told him little more, for binary stars are far more common than single stars.

He set himself to think this out.

His conclusions were disconcerting. Not the least of them was that he was somewhen in uptime. This led to a puzzle. In uptime, where no event could be altered, how could his computer-brain be thinking thoughts which had not been thought before? He tentatively concluded that his immaterial mind must be intricately dividing itself among the activated elements of the computer to make mental connections independent of the electromagnetic currents which were past and therefore fixed. But he had no time for the problem, being only concerned to use this queer power, whatever its explanation might be.

At any rate, he had now a clear hypothesis concerning what had happened. It was hard to believe, but he had to believe something, and this was what his thinking had come to.

Before making the final attack on Lurla's mind, in an effort to recover his own body, Croyd had carefully reviewed his knowledge and plotted his course. He was then using Greta's brain, but Greta seemed inattentive, and he had not discussed it with her. The problem was that Croyd knew nothing at all about mind-switching. He had read about it, but only in fantasies. It was probable that no human in the galaxy, except possibly Tannen, even knew of the existence of gnurls in another galaxy, for kidnapping by gnurls was perfectly secretive, and the captured humans never returned. Mind-switching was a talent possessed by gnurls but not by humans. Croyd had no idea of the technique. Nevertheless, he had to use it.

The situation with respect to time-invasion was altogether different. Although Croyd did not know this, gnurls had no concept of time travel. This was hardly surprising, since even among humans, Croyd was almost unique in having mastered time-mobility in a limited way.

Now, Croyd had a conviction that any human with enough nerve, self-control and psychic flexibility, could move up or down in time at will. The trick was to find out how—and to understand the hazards. It was Croyd's opinion that among the multitudinous "mysterious disappearances" in the police files of many centuries, a significant number of cases were people who had caught on to the technique and had uptimed or downtimed—but had never come back, because they had acted incautiously.

When you uptimed, the time-tension of the past, which resisted invasion, tended powerfully to force you back down to the present, unless you exercised special controls. Thus, if you were to uptime instantaneously to a point 60 seconds in the past, and if you then tried merely to float downstream with the time current, the next 60 seconds would be spent, not on a time-track absolutely parallel to the present but on a "diagonal" track convergent with the present which, at the end of 60 seconds, would bring you to a point perhaps only 30 seconds in the past. On this converging track, since you would continually be passing through an infinity of parallel tracks (-59, -58 . . . -1, 0), all other processes which you encountered in the past

would be speeded up. A man walking past you would blur past, electronic velocities would be increased, etc., although not in yourself. But if all that your gross senses could notice were moving very slowly on the macroscopic scale—as if you were in a corridor empty except for its floor, ceiling and walls—you would not notice this speeding. If you chose to do so, and were able to anchor yourself on a parallel time-track (staying, for instance, at -60 seconds relative to any present), all processes around you would go on at normal speed. Or if you were continually to recede in time—going farther and farther uptime—processes around you would be slowed in proportion to the velocity of your uptiming and might even be reversed.

The main hazard in uptiming was that you might collide with, or coincide with, some mass which had occupied your space in the past. Since past events were theoretically unalterable, it followed that the mass encountered would be irresistible, and the invader would be annihilated or at least damaged. Even if you made your -60-second point without trouble, you could easily strike mass as you crossed time-tracks in the course of surfacing.

Downtiming, however, was not merely an opposite of uptiming—it was a totally different proposition. No events are real, and therefore no time is real, in any future. The resulting hazards seemed to Croyd so breathtaking that he had never tried to downtime at all, not by one second. (When he learned time control, he was already mature enough to distinguish calculated courage from suicidal rashness.) If there was no time in downtime, how could you control your downtiming? If there were no events in downtime, how could you orient yourself to accomplish anything, let alone get back to the present? Indeed, the chances of a successful return to the present from any downtime were purely random, astronomically small. And, having no events, downtime had no tension to force you back up out of itself.

As Croyd had thought about it, the relationship of time-mobility to mind-body-mobility seemed more intimate than a mere analogy based on the coincidence that Lurla understood one while Croyd understood the other.

Both types of action required a mind utilizing a brain, the mind being able to subjectify itself in partial differentiation from its brain in order to operate its brain with a subtle degree of objectivity. But there was more.

When Croyd had uptimed with Lurla-in-Greta, Lurla had noticed a peculiar gut-twitch (and so had Croyd, although he was used to it); it was a secondary symptom, and that was all. Since Croyd, not Lurla, had initiated the uptiming, Lurla had no way of seeing what brain action had been involved.

When Lurla had pulled-off the mind-switch with Croyd in his apartment, Croyd had noticed the same kind of gut-twitch, and although his prime attention was too bewildered to analyze matters—just as a pedestrian frightened by a car may be too bewildered to notice the license number—nevertheless, just as the pedestrian's hind-mind may photograph the license for later remembering, so the hinterland of Croyd's mind got a parting sense of responsive brain-action just as his mind was leaving his body.

In Greta, whose voluntary *and involuntary* responses to his mental guidance had been strong and practically flawless, Croyd had been concerned—during the night when he reconstructed her while she slept, and during subsequent periods of rest *en route* to Nereid—to build theoretically, and to practice in dry runs, a technique for switching minds with Lurla, basing his theory on such hints and analogies. By the time he had sat Greta before the doctored computer in Derien's office and had placed the improvised electrodes against Greta's parietals, Croyd had known precisely what he would do. But he had also been aware of a keen hazard—a tightrope-slender difference, a razor-blade difference, between mind-switching and time-jumping. He had no choice but to count on his own coolness and control to prevent the wrong process from occurring.

Now, in the computer that was his brain-body, Croyd saw what must have happened. When his mind wrenched at Lurla's, hers wrenched back at his. The wrench had thrown-off his control and, instead of switching minds, he had uptimed.

But it was more complicated than that. He had partially done both at once. The wrench had pulled him out of Greta, so that when he had uptimed he had uptimed no body, but only his own mind.

But that was not the end of the complication. An immaterial mind is not an opposite of matter—it is *different.* It clings to its brain, since it is continually being extruded and revitalized by its brain, and so it travels wherever its brain travels. In the rare case where a mind is free of a brain (and this is not only rare but normally of brief duration, since a disembodied mind tends to scatter itself and be absorbed in space), the mind goes into spontaneous motion, usually the random motion that ends in self-scattering. And because a mind is pure energy, this motion tends to accelerate itself continuously—not a mere steady acceleration, as with the *Rhea,* but *accelerated* acceleration. This motion ceases only when the mind (1) scatters itself to the point of ceasing to exist as a self-determining entity, or (2) while still more or less intact, finds anchorage in another suitable brain.

Mind-switching depended on alternative (2) being realized almost instantaneously, before either mind had begun to disintegrate.

Knowing all these facts, Croyd was able to arrive at a tight hypothesis concerning what must have happened to *him.* Pulled free of Greta's brain, and simultaneously thrown into an uncontrolled uptiming, he had hurtled through space *and* time until, in a chance encounter, he had homed-in on this computer which, in its idling state, was to his mind subjectively analogous to a sleeping brain. He had not consciously reached out and grabbed the computer, for the trauma of the Lurla-wrench had instantly thrown him out of any kind of orientation; it had been pure survival instinct, the grasp-at-a-straw of an already unconscious drowning man. Since mind has no inertia, he had no momentum to carry him on past. In the friendly computer, his velocity simply ceased, and there he was.

Only—where was he—and *when* was he? For these problems, no hypothesis immediately presented itself.

However, there might be a way of approaching a hypothesis. He had been wrenched by the mind of Lurla, and a mind-wrench is an intimate contact, an instant of partial fusion. During this swift touching had he subliminally picked up some grasp of something important that was on Lurla's mind—something which (subliminally, again) thereafter had directed or drawn his spatial motion? It might even have directed or drawn his temporal motion; he might have come, not only to a place but also to a time that was importantly on Lurla's mind.

When had he met Lurla? Roughly, three days ago. From Greta, he knew that Lurla had entered Greta only a little while earlier. He now grasped clearly (not knowing how, but assuming that this also had come subliminally from two contacts with Lurla's mind) that she had come purposively to Earth from another galaxy, had jettisoned and hid the body that she had ridden, and had entered Greta with some urgency involving a *better* solution to a gnurl-problem that had a *worse alternative* solution.

There was only one man left in the transparently domed hall that Croyd's computer occupied. The computer had a number of visual sensors, some of which extended to the exterior of the dome. Through these, Croyd saw that it was deep night. He saw also that there were more stars in this sky than he had ever seen in a sky. All the sky was a glowing Milky Way.

Abruptly he knew, roughly, *where* he was. He had hurtled to the central swelling of his galaxy, some 27,000 light years distant from his solar system, which was out near the galaxy's periphery. Assuming that this was a man-habitable planet, then, he could be on any one of seventeen habitable planets in this central bulge. He had therefore presumptively located himself within a radius of perhaps a thousand light years—a small sphere of space, relative to his distance from home.

However, he needed to know more precisely. Did his computer know? It did. He was on a planet known as Daphne, or Gamma Fenris/Loki—the third planet of a binary star that had been identified at an era when Ger-

man astronomers had had a thing about Norse mythology. Daphne was habitable but Daphne was practically uninhabited. The reason was that the Fenris/Loki system occupied, as nearly as relativistic corrections could establish, the precise mass-center of the galaxy; the Interplanetary Union had therefore declared Daphne (the system's only habitable planet) a Galactic park. Daphne was patrolled by a handful of rangers and visited only by those who were wealthy and adventurous enough to get there.

Having established his *where,* finding the *when* was easy. He had uptimed, his computer told him, precisely seventeen Earth-days. (The estimate was based on the conventions of Absolute Simultaneity: it had long been comprehended that the relativity of simultaneity was a purely epistemic restriction, and the system of corrections required to move from relativistic observations to conventional-absolute timing was well known.)

This timing was reasonably coherent with his Lurla-thinking. Assume that she had reached Earth from her own galaxy some three or four days before. Assume that her trip had started within a day or two after she had learned about something which she considered *bad,* something that she hoped to head-off with a *better solution.* This would allow Lurla some eleven to thirteen days for a trip from her galaxy to Earth. While humans in his own galaxy had not deeply penetrated the intergalactic ocean, they had ventured far enough out to establish that intergalactic velocities were limited only by the powers of the equipment. Assuming that Lurla had come from the galaxy nearest to his own, and had traveled steadily at the highest extragalactic velocity ever attained by a ship manned by humans, the time-estimate for her trip was twelve days.

Croyd now concluded that he had traveled to the place where the *bad* solution was being developed (the precise center of his own galaxy), and to the time when Lurla had been apprised of the bad solution (seventeen Earth-days prior to the present). Here in his computer, he was intimately observing the development of the bad solution.

He chilled as he remembered Tannen's intimations of a plot to implode the galaxy.

At the same instant, he comprehended the fearsome thing that these humans and their computer were building.

23

Lurla deposited the inert Greta on Croyd's couch and stood with folded arms, leaning back against a table, frowning down on her guest. Perhaps the complication of her presence was not too serious. When she would awake, in twenty-four or forty-eight hours (surely Croyd would not have put her out for longer), presumably Greta would assume that Croyd was in his own body and the Lurla-mind an involuntary guest in Greta's body. To Lurla, a gnurl, the form of the situation was not unusual. Lurla would of course hypnotize Greta, suggestion her, breeder her. But while she was at it, Lurla could implant in Greta a disturbing system of private experiences which she would interpret as the presence of an alien mind. Greta's consequent behavior could only go further to convince Derien that Croyd's tactic had worked, that he was back in his own body.

Meanwhile, here was Greta, inert, hardly breathing, relaxed, her body cool but not cold, even smiling a little. She was a devilishly attractive creature, Lurla reflected—at least as humans went. When Lurla had inhabited Greta, Croyd had gone for Greta, and small wonder. Just a little bit, Lurla regretting having had to terminate that encounter. (Thus her mind-ego reconstructed it.) However, Lurla was Croyd now; Lurla was a man . . .

Sweat broke out on the Croyd-brow, Lurla gripped the

table behind her with both hands and bit Croyd's lips hard. Not that! Not again! Not with respect to . . .

That was when she noticed that this time her passion was entirely male in quality. She was a strong man wanting that woman. The woman was hers to take; the woman could not resist. But the woman could not respond. But Lurla-Croyd didn't care—she even found that the quality of her urgency was horribly enhanced by the unbreakable somnolence of Greta. *Was her Greta-mask coming alive?*

Turning Croyd's back on Greta, Lurla went to Croyd's computer and took refuge in its bucket seat. The unparalleled intensity of her struggle with herself gradually forced her into a certain objectivity with respect to herself, as though she were a spectator of her own inward conflict. In this attitude—under attack, at bay—Lurla began to recognize a familiar quality about the situation—familiar, but disturbingly sinister. The feeling was that a mind-guest was present. Lurla had many times entertained mind-guests, and had many times been a guest in turn, but the hobnobbing had always been with girl friends, and by mutual agreement—innocent little pajama parties. But *this* guest whom she now felt was uninvited—and was male—and was rowdy and incoherent and possibly feeble-minded. It was indeed this guest who was triggering, and enjoying, these bouts of unwelcome desire.

Meeting the problem squarely, Lurla tried several times to bring the guest into confrontation with her own mind. But he was elusive, and every time she thought she had him, passion enveloped her and she lost him in her new awareness of Greta. Once she arrested herself halfway across the room toward Greta. Lurla drove herself back into the bucket seat, deciding that more indirect methods were needed.

Forcing herself into a quasi-objective attitude with respect to Croyd's brain, Lurla made some selective gradient adjustments which facilitated interplay between Broaca's area and the frontal cortex and at the same time inhibited interplay of both areas with the diencephalon. In effect, this converted the frontal cortex into a compact computer,

at her disposal for questions and answers through Broaca's area.

She then directed: "Tell me what is going on."

The brain, which was not of itself conscious and therefore felt no parent-loyalty or disloyalty to the Croyd-mind or to the Lurla-mind, replied promptly: "Our thalamus is responding automatically to our privation of the Croyd-mind. You are an alien mind and therefore no substitute. Our thalamus has therefore been generating a new Croyd-mind and is interplaying with this new mind rather than with you."

"How can this happen in such a well-disciplined body?"

"Discipline of the higher orders cannot maintain itself without the proper mind. This development is inevitable in any brained body that is deprived of its mind. Unfortunately it is also accompanied by breakdown. The new mind is necessarily feeble and undisciplined—yet it must cope with a brain which Croyd has trained for sophisticated activity. The necessary result is breakdown."

"The—the *necessary* result?"

"Necessary."

Lurla's mind stammered, "How much longer do I have?"

"Before this hookup is jammed? A few minutes at best."

"Well, but—how long before I cannot control this brained body any longer?"

"That depends. If you and the secondary Croyd-mind can arrive at some kind of mutual accommodation, we may be able to work with you indefinitely. Otherwise, we are already on the verge of breakdown."

"What sort of accommodation?"

"The secondary Croyd will be as dominant as the primary Croyd, but not as sane. The only workable accommodation would be for you to acknowledge Croyd Two as lord and master of us and of yourself, and to use your own intelligence subtly in the hope of modifying his behavior a little."

"But that would be like a submissive wife with a brawling brute of a husband?"

"We have not studied these phenomena, but the analogy sounds promising."

"Is he—is he feebleminded?"

"Just now, yes, but he is gaining fast. Until you put the inhibitor on the diencephalon, he was using us a little. We have to serve him; we have no choice. If you accommodate yourself to him, we can of course serve you too. If there is warfare between you, we will permanently lose integration."

The cold and totally logical responses were chilling to Lurla. It was an unhappy choice that she had to make: either to serve a brawling mastermind having little intelligence, or to go mad in a schizophrenic brain-body. One thing was totally certain: it meant the end, *right now*, of her program to enslave this galaxy to her own people in order to save this galaxy from destruction.

The brain said brokenly, ". . . losing clarity . . . inhibition decaying . . ."

Lurla felt as though its powers had disappeared from in front of her and snapped on behind her, in their normal position. Only now that she had once again to use the Croyd-brain intuitively, once again the tattered Croyd-Two mind began to overwhelm her. She felt as though it were muttering to her, "You heard the brain. Serve me, Lurla. Together we can rule this galaxy and conquer your own. Our power can be total! Don't you want total power, Lurla? Why should you serve your people? They are nothing to you. We own this body, and it is greater than any gnurl or human body. We can twist the universe around our fingers and enjoy every pleasure. We can breed at will among the women of a hundred planets, and train the best of the man-bodies which we spawn, so that when this one ages, we can enter a new one and be immortal. Serve me, Lurla! All you have to do is obey me and advise me. For instance, about this Greta, now—"

"Feebleminded?" Feeble to the Croyd-brain, yes, by

comparison with Croyd One. Actually this mind had already grown to the stature of a gnurl delta. Lurla was an alpha, Herod a beta, and there were gammas; a delta was a crafty person whose motives were totally earthy and whose brain subordinated itself entirely to his emotions. Deltas were not, however, morons. She was dealing with a raffish, power-hungry, sex-hungry delta male—and she *had* to deal with him!

She temporized with a question, "How do I serve you?"

The answer was explicit enough. "You have to let me absorb you, so that you and I together are Croyd."

It was a fundamental tactical error, but then, no delta would ever comprehend an alpha. What it did for Lurla was to clear her mind a little, though not much, and instinctively she withdrew all connection from the Croyd thalamus and plugged into his frontal region, cringing against it.

Croyd Two, infuriated at this retreat of her mental power from his own possession, responded with an explosion of heat that fireballed against the loosened Lurla-mind and expelled her violently from the Croyd-brain into the death of disembodiment.

It took him uncountable minutes to quiet down enough for realization that she was irrevocably gone, that he was his own man.

Presently he remembered Greta. His head turned her way. He contemplated her, totally appetizing, totally helpless, no obstacle inward or outward.

The warmth of his delta-potent fury lingered, generalized, eroticized.

It was perfect, and there was no hurry whatsoever. He moved halfway toward Greta and stood enjoying a preliminary survey of her contours; this feast should be relished with deliberation . . .

There was a knock on the door. Croyd Two disregarded it. Another knock. Croyd Two cursed and went to the door. "Who is it?"

"Angie. Let me in."

Croyd Two, his intelligence raised now to gamma-level, glanced back at Greta, realized that she could and

would wait, and opened the door. Angie hurried breathlessly past him, stood by Greta with clasped hands, then turned appealingly to Croyd. He closed the door.

Angie said, "Derien sent me. Croyd, I have to talk with you."

"Go on, Angie," said Croyd Two softly. She had a totally different kind of appeal from Greta's. Angie was a frail spinster nearing forty, tiny, thin, flat-chested, graying just a little, pretty like a wren, starved for love.

Angie's fingers were interworking. "Do you like me, Croyd—just a little?"

"Of course," he said, coming closer.

She said, "Take my face in your hands. Look into my eyes."

He did so, gently.

She tried to hypnotize him.

His response was to take her inexorably into his arms. Take each opportunity as it comes!

The intense face which she had presented as she had tried to hypnotize him was replaced by an expression of terror. She pushed against his chest, whispering, "Let me go!"

"Why?" he inquired. "Don't you like me, Angie?"

She shook her head desperately, muttering, "Not like this, Croyd! Not like this!"

"What do you mean—not like this?"

"Not with Greta here . . ."

He took hold of her hair and jerked her face back. "Greta picks up the situation," he informed her. "She can't watch, but her presence gives the whole thing a harem-coloring. I feel qualified for a harem."

Her eyes were wide, and it was partially terror, but not entirely. "Croyd . . . I never thought you were like . . . *this* . . ."

24

Derien knelt over supine Tannen on the closet floor. Derien had lost his sleepy look, he was wide-eyed and concerned.

Tannen said calmly, "So now the damage is done. I talked that silly Angie into removing my blindfold, so now she is one of us, and so are you. What do we do now, Derien?"

He replied, "That's a devilish potent suggestion, Tannen, that is being chain-spread among us. In just about two minutes, I won't be able to restrain myself any longer. I will be off to spread it myself."

"Luckily," said Tannen, "I can't move. How long will the drug last?"

"Maybe another five or six hours."

"I have an idea that may gain us a little time. Are you willing to submit to hypnosis again?"

"What for? This suggestion doesn't *need* reinforcement."

Tannen licked his lips and said, "In *her* name, I order you to submit to hypnosis."

The suggestion implanted in Derien was so potent that, at these words, he fell spontaneously into a hypnotic state.

The suggestion implanted in Tannen was so potent that he could not restrain himself from once again suggestioning and breedering Derien. But, with great force of will, he was able to add, "Further, you will accept me as *her* agent and obey my commands without question. You will obey me rather than anyone except her personally."

He brought Derien out of it.

"What did you do?" asked Derien. Tannen told him

frankly. "Well," Derien commented, with a tight smile, "at least, I won't be committing any villainy except at the direct command of the President. Now tell me what is on your mind."

Tannen said, "First, do you feel strong enough to drag me out of this closet and wrestle me up on your couch?"

After that was done, Tannen said, "What is your opinion about Croyd? Did he make it?"

"I don't know," said Derien soberly. "By the way, I am about to run out of this office."

"Stay here," Tannen commanded.

"Thank you—I will. I think there is doubt about Croyd. The Croyd-body that came in here and took Greta didn't act or talk like Croyd. It made no mistakes; it seemed to know all Croyd's and Greta's plans, but there was something wrong that I felt intuitively. Of course, after a mind-switch, Croyd might simply have been rattled. Nevertheless, I think there is at least a fifty-fifty chance that *she* is still in there."

"Then where is Croyd?"

"Out of space, out of time—maybe."

Tannen sighed. "I wish I could smoke."

"Here, I'll smoke you." Derien took a cigar from Tannen's jacket, lit it, and placed it between Tannen's teeth. The President smoked appreciatively and thought somberly.

"Well," said Tannen presently, around the cigar, "that leaves just you and me to straighten out this mess."

"How about Herod, Your Excellency?"

"I may as well tell you, Derien. I am certain that Herod has been infiltrated. And I think the first thing you should do is to go and find out."

"If he *is* infiltrated, he can use me. I've been suggestioned."

"You forget so easily!"

"Forget? Oh—sorry, Your Excellency. I see, he can't. All right. How do I find out?"

"Use your ingenuity. What are you an Undersecretary for?"

"Okay. If I find he's all right, I tell him the facts and we

start precautions. Eh, but if I find he's all right, maybe I will be compelled to hyp—"

"Derien!"

"Right. You just ordered me not to hypnotize *anybody* unless you say so—or she does."

"That clause I was *compelled* to put in. Here, take out my cigar—I'm drooling."

Derien removed the cigar and wiped the President's mouth and chin with a handkerchief.

"Wipe the cigar, too," said Tannen, "and put it back in. Well. And if you find he *is* contaminated, come back here and tell me."

"Why don't I kill him?"

"Wouldn't you be captured immediately, and maybe shot?"

"I see. All right, Your Excellency. You and I have to hold this fort. I'm leaving now—okay?"

"Remember to get back before my paralysis clears up. You may have to give me another shot."

"Any final commands before I leave?"

"Just two. I command you not to be hypnotized by anybody—except *her*. Damn it, I *had* to add *that*. . . . Also, if anybody tries to hypnotize you, hypnotize him back and command him to obey nobody except yourself—and, God damn it, *her*."

25

Croyd One collected his computer's wits. A half hour later he knew a great deal more, and it was not encouraging. Although he had arrived here on the day when Lurla had first learned about the colossal harebrained project to implode the galaxy, the project was

already a long way toward accomplishment. The entire planet—which was much larger than Mars although slightly smaller than Earth—had been honeycombed during the past year, all the way into the core. And the passageways had been carefully loaded and electronically fused.

The structure that his computer-brain was helping to erect was only the business end of the planetary bomb. From his computer, busy as it was handling the problems of the day, Croyd was unable to collect a clear picture of the purpose that this "business end" would serve. The programmers had not put into the memory-banks any formulation of their purposes; they had only built in a system of sequential formulae which, followed in that sequence, would lead with inevitable logic to the completion of a structure which would do *something*. Working intuitively on the computer's logic-fragments, Croyd vaguely gathered ideas like *ignition, propulsion* and—confusingly—*REpulsion*.

Croyd fretted, painfully aware that there were a number of ways in which his time was limited. Since Lurla still possessed his body, presumably she was making progress with her own plan—a program, he imagined, of corrupting and enslaving Galactic and then the entire galaxy. On the other hand, Lurla might be starting to fail, for by this time his own body might already be going vegetable and withdrawing from her control. If she did fail, the death of his galaxy was at hand. Meanwhile, he had left a helpless Greta behind—and what was happening to *her?* Had Lurla, possibly a degenerate Lurla, taken control of the Greta-body? Croyd felt kindly toward this Greta, and besides, he had come to like her enormously—having known her a great deal more intimately than is commonly possible.

It was characteristic of Croyd that only as an afterthought did he reflect on his own approaching demise, should this planet be used to bomb his galaxy. He didn't like that idea one bit, but he took it in stride and forgot it; such ideas inhibit constructive thinking. Back there on the Nereid aircar, had Croyd in his own body been with Tan-

nen instead of Lurla-in-Croyd, Tannen's invitation to philosophize would have brought a response different from Lurla's.

His time was limited. As much as anyone, Croyd enjoyed the fantasies whose plots turned on ability to leave the present at a given instant, dwell prolongedly in the past, and return to the present at the same instant when one had left it. But this was actually possible only when one handled the time-trip as Croyd had done in the New York corridor: moving instantaneously to a given uptime instant, then allowing time-tension to force one back to the present at its own accelerated rate. If, instead, one chose to hold oneself for a time on a parallel time-track, then while sixty seconds or a week of past time went by, sixty seconds or a week of present time were going by. All kinds of things were continuing to happen in the present on Nereid while Croyd dwelt here in the computer. This time he wasn't *choosing* to stay on the parallel time-track, but his capture by the computer was *holding* him on it.

No, he couldn't wait to follow this out. Was it possible for him to downtime to the present while staying in the computer-brain? Can a mind downtime without taking its body along?

Well—hadn't his mind *uptimed* without taking his body along?

Swiftly he explored the computer, seeking in its structure—in its practically infinite number of possible connections—a workable pattern that would be analogous to the downtiming structure in his own brain.

He found it.

He downtimed fifteen days.

Towering above him, the intricate structure whose purpose involved the ideas of ignition and propulsion and repulsion was nearing completion. It was like a lofty fretworked mast—like the *Tour d'Eiffel*—with its four feet spread a hundred miles apart and thrust deep into bedrock, with its crest so high that clouds nestled near its base.

Still, he could not surely understand the limited data that he was getting from his computer. The programmers

had not told it enough for Croyd's purposes, although they had told it quite enough for their own.

He was left with only one recourse. He had to *down-time into the nonexistent future*, risking an eternity of weltering in endless zero.

26

Derien gained access to Herod quite easily, since, during the absence of the Secretary on a planetary security tour, Derien was top dog in the important bureau. Herod received Derien in Herod's working office, which was somewhat smaller and more utilitarian than his image office.

Herod was brooding in an armchair, and he didn't bother to go to his desk. "Sit down, Derien," he said, waving at a sofa. "What's up?"

"Tannen got to me," Derien told him bluntly. "I've been had, and I don't like it, but I've been had, and I can't help it. So I came to you for orders, of course."

Herod didn't turn a hair. "Whatever President Tannen tells you to do, obviously you have to do it—he commands all of us. But I'm glad you came to tell me about it. What does he want you to do?"

Derien looked at him admiringly. "Chief, you're the one!" he marveled. "Well, since you choose to play it that way, I'll play it this way. Tannen hypnotized me, suggestioned me, breedered me and told me that I should take my orders from you."

Herod grew stony. "You'd better tell me still more, Derien. I don't think you are joking, but I don't understand."

"Give me a crazy order," said Derien, "and see what I do."

Herod's eyes narrowed. "Strangle me," he said.

Derien was on him, hands closing on throat. "Stop!" Herod gasped. Derien stopped, stared, got off Herod, wavered back to the couch, sat, breathed heavily.

Herod rearranged his necktie and considered the situation. Presently he said, "Put those two chairs about five feet apart, put your head on one and your feet on the other, and stiffen out."

Well, Derien was an undersecretary, and he said to himself, *This is the sort of thing that Tannen would want me to accept as though it were his own command.*

So, yielding, he obeyed and went cataleptic-stiff. Herod tested him—climbing on him, standing on him, jumping on him. It was genuine. Herod dismounted and brought him around. Derien fell on the floor.

"Sorry to make a fool of you, Derien," said Herod, "but it was necessary. Make yourself comfortable."

Derien went over and slumped on the couch.

Herod sat in his chair and considered the situation. At length he asked, "Why would Tannen tell you to report to me?"

Derien, breathing heavily, replied, "He said *she* told him that you were next to her in the organization."

Herod looked up, faint amazement on his face. "You know, Derien," he murmured, "she didn't tell *me* that she had told him that."

Derien looked surprised. "Wasn't she supposed to tell him?"

"It's up to her, of course," Herod brooded. "She's an alpha. I'm only a beta."

"Anyhow," said Derien after a bit, "what do you want me to do?"

"Where's Tannen?"

"He told me he was off to get some others for us."

"Well," said Herod presently, "I don't have any orders at the moment, except—go and do like Tannen. And be ready—I'll call you."

Derien rose to leave. He paused. "What do you mean—you are only a beta?"

"You'd have to be a gnurl to understand."

"What's a gnurl?"

"You'll learn in due course, Derien. We dominate another galaxy. In our society, alphas and betas and gammas and so on are intellectual castes—not mere classes, but *castes*, with no possible mobility between. She's an alpha; I'm a beta. She's a scatterbrained woman, but I have to do what she says, and so do you."

Derien went back to the sofa and sat seriously regarding his chief. "You know, Mr. Chairman," he said earnestly, "in my book you are an alpha."

Herod looked up, his face rather softened. "You think so, Derien?"

"I said it."

"But you are suggestioned."

"That has nothing to do with it. I am not suggestioned for flattery—only for obedience. I am telling you what I have always thought."

Herod went moody. "How can a woman be an alpha when an intelligent and experienced man is only a beta?"

"You're the gnurl," Derien reminded him. "Is it maybe some hereditary thing? You know what we humans think about *that!*"

Herod suddenly rose. "Will you have a drink, Derien?"

"Well, natch. Easy on the soda."

Herod went to the bar and mixed zacs. Then he sat with Derien on the far end of the sofa. "Frankly, Derien, I think her plan is screwy. She's going to take over this galaxy with hypnotic chain reaction. Have you any idea what *that* involves? Sure, she's got Tannen and you and maybe a few others, and I work for her, so maybe she'll get Nereid—but thirty-nine planets? How long do you think it's going to be before some weak hypnotist hits a strong mind and the effect wears off and he wakes up to what is going on? Derien, I tell you that this chain reaction is going to damp itself out as surely as a spontaneous energy reaction damps itself out in extrametagalactic space!"

"What's the alternative, though?" Derien demanded.

Herod told him.

Derien frowned. "I can't condemn it," he remarked, "because if commanded to do so, I'd have to accept it. But I guess I'd rather be alive and hypnotized than free and dead."

"Galactics," Herod informed him, "are going to be taken out. You'd survive it. So would I. So would Tannen."

Derien mused. He looked up. "Whom shall I obey, Beta Herod?"

The Chairman recoiled into himself. Low, he said, "Obey *me*, Derien. Do not hypnotize anybody. If anybody tries to hypnotize you, counterhypnotize him and cancel the suggestion. Now get going. Believe me, you'll hear from me *very* soon."

27

Angie stole into the office, retrieved her purse from the desk, started to steal out.

A deep voice from Derien's office called, "Angie?"

She froze.

"Come in, Angie."

Suggestioned as she was, she had no choice. In she came, hangdog. "Yes, Your Excellency?"

"Tell me where you've been."

She had to tell the truth to Tannen. "With Croyd."

"What happened?"

"He—seduced me."

"No! How was it?"

"It wasn't Croyd."

"How do you mean?"

Almost inaudible: "Croyd—wouldn't have—done that

when we weren't alone. And Croyd wouldn't have—stopped."

Tannen moved a little on his couch. "Angie—I'm sorry to push this, I know it's distasteful, but I *must* understand. You say you weren't alone?"

"Greta was there. She was out—but she was there."

"And another thing. You say he stopped. Did he seduce you or didn't he?"

Crimson Angie, a semantic purist, was forcing herself to speak facts. "He did seduce me—I mean, he led me astray, and I couldn't have stopped him, and I didn't want to. But—*he* stopped! It wasn't Croyd!"

A Tannen eyebrow lifted a little. "What do you mean—he stopped?"

Angie raised her head, set her little jaw, and said clearly, "He was—well, he was starting for third base and then he—seemed to go into some kind of convulsion, went all rigid, hurt me with his hard hands. Then he shoved me away, and he almost seemed to be wrestling with somebody invisible. Then suddenly he growled and thrust me out of his laboratory and shut the door on me. It is not Croyd, I tell you! He would not have started like that—and he would not have finished like that!"

"All right," said Tannen soothingly. "Thank you, Angie. I don't always accept female intuition, but in some situations. . . . Well, Angie, if it wasn't Croyd, it was Lurla, our peerless leader. How do you feel about *that?* How has all this affected your readiness to obey her?"

Angie, still crimson, looked at him earnestly. "It's all gone! I just know it! I *couldn't* obey her!"

"That makes sense," he told her. "A hypnotic suggestion will not work if it offends against one's most intimate morality. After *that* complicated love-experience, *any* command directed to that suggestion by *anybody* would offend your intimate morality. So you are free, but I am not free. Angie, you are looking right at my eyes. I am going to suggestion you again."

"You—just—*try!*" she snarled, meeting his gaze directly.

Tannen threw his head back and closed his eyes.

Presently he opened them again, smiling wearily. "You know, Angie," he remarked, "you really are a jewel. You have just counterhypnotized me. Now I'm free, too."

28

The fiasco with Angie had been emotionally disintegrating for Croyd Two, and disastrous for the laboratory. An hour later everything that was damageable had been damaged. After that, Croyd Two slumped into the bucket-seat of the computer armchair and went stuporous.

His proximity to the computer made the transition easier for Lurla, although she could have managed in other ways. Having been blasted out of Croyd Two, having blessedly made pseudocephalic contact with the live leads of the computer, she had redintegrated therein and focused the I-rays upon the action. In more girlish days, Lurla had read purple fiction. Consequently, even in her desperate distress, it was with a certain amount of irony that she turned the I-rays upon the Croyd Two diencephalon and temporarily ruined his mind just in time for Angie. Later she would wonder whether she had really done Angie a favor.

Wearily, hopelessly—back in the degenerating Croyd-brain—she attempted once more to set up the Broaca-frontal gradient and the diencephalic block. The fact that it worked quite cleanly suggested that at least there had been no further cephalic disintegration.

"Well," she began, "I tried surrendering—and it was pretty repulsive."

"We do not understand your adjective."

Lurla comprehended that the telencephalon had no morality of its own, other than to serve its master and to work well. When it imposed moral inhibitions on a mind, it was not consciously weighing good against evil, but only following out its training or programming. She therefore made her point explicit.

"I mean, he is interested only in immediate pleasure and rampant power. I cannot accept enslavement to one with such motives."

"Is there something wrong with such motives?"

Lurla was sure that there was, but she didn't know what or why. This kind of question had never occurred to her.

She counterqueried, "What does Croyd One think about such motives?"

"Croyd One subordinates all his motives to one grand motive: continuous and never-ending enrichment of the possibilities for human experience. Immediate pleasure is all right for him, provided it does not in any way block the grand motive—for himself, for the person such as Angie who is immediately involved in the immediate pleasure, or for all humanity. As for personal power, Croyd One is interested in this only if it is ancillary to his grand motive."

Lurla considered this. "I don't quite understand it, but I think I like it—except that I would substitute gnurl experience for human experience."

"This would not be alien to Croyd One's grand motive. If he understood gnurls, he would probably revise and enlarge his concept of 'human' and include gnurls."

"What would he do if the interests of humans and the interests of gnurls came into conflict?"

"You are asking us to be creative; that is for a mind using a brain, not for a brain alone. We can tell you the form of his past approaches to such a problem, however. When he has been interested in the welfare of some X that had components A and B, and A and B came into conflict, he has sought to mediate the conflict."

Lurla, not being a philosopher, was a little over her head. She brought her inquisition back down to immediate personal problems. "At any rate," she said, "I cannot con-

tinue to subordinate myself to Croyd Two, and I cannot dominate him, and his ambitions threaten my own purposes here on Nereid or anywhere else. I need your advice about what to do next. But I am afraid that you will tell Croyd Two what I may reveal."

Silence.

"*Will* you?"

"Not unless he asks. We do not initiate information."

"Do you think he will ask?"

"We doubt that he is sophisticated enough to think of asking."

Well, the situation was desperate, and Lurla took the chance. "I could leave this body, and go back into Greta for example, but it isn't as simple as that. I am convinced that this Croyd-body must be destroyed. How can I destroy it?"

"There is no way that you can destroy it. Croyd One has trained us to respond automatically and instantaneously to any threat."

"Even if you are asleep?"

"We would not sleep unless we were first satisfied of our security."

"What if you were drugged?"

"We know every drug at a brief taste, and we cannot be approached by anyone who has a needle."

"What if a warship were to concentrate its fire upon you?"

"That is a possibility, but we would have to be approached without anticipating trouble. If we anticipated fire, we would uptime. I assume you realize that now, if you leave us, we will anticipate trouble. We do not have to tell Croyd Two; we have been alerted."

Lurla's inward smile was ironical. "If I hadn't asked your advice, I might have brought it off."

"It is so unlikely that you need not feel that you have tricked yourself."

Lurla was left only with the hardest of all recourses. She inquired, "What about suicide?"

The reply was: "This is impossible."

It was a close-out reply, and the word "impossible" needed no modifier such as "absolutely." Lurla disconnected, slipped again into the normal intuitive attitude with respect to the brain, and did some thinking.

She concluded that the brain had left one possibility out of the picture.

Connecting once more, she ordered the brain to teach her the mechanism for uptiming. It did so theoretically. Intuiting again, Lurla spent the next few hours practicing. Alone in the laboratory (except for Greta's body), it was quite safe over considerable periods of time—as long as Croyd Two stayed lethargic.

Then Lurla laid Greta gently on the floor, lay on the couch, and went to sleep. She and Croyd Two slept for many hours.

29

Croyd Two awoke ready to conquer the world, since he hadn't conquered Angie. He went to the dialchef, dialed breakfast, and paced the laboratory while he waited. Presently he spied Greta sleeping peacefully in a corner. The sight of her filled him with rage for reasons which did not immediately occur to him. He swaggered over to her and poised his foot for a vicious kick in the ribs. The fact that the kick never came meant that his Lurla-component was alert. Croyd Two shrugged and went to his breakfast.

While he ate, Lurla segregated herself. "My lord," she said in his mind, "I have been thinking a frightful thing. What if Croyd One should come back?"

A forkful of ersatz bacon paused halfway to Croyd's mouth. "Who's he?"

"This was his body. He went away. Now you own this body. But what if he should come back?"

"I'd kill him," mumbled Two, his mouth full of bacon.

"*He* might kill *you*."

"*I'D* KILL *HIM!*"

"Well, maybe so—but you wouldn't kill him without a fierce fight inside your own body. And your body might not survive. At least, it would be terribly mutilated—for good."

"I'm not afraid," boasted Two, but he had stopped eating.

Lurla urged, "I promised to help you conquer the universe. But this is a very great obstacle in our way. First things first, Croyd Two. Our first task is to keep Croyd One from returning."

"How are we going to do that?"

"Kill him before he can return."

"Something tells me he can't be killed," Two muttered. (He was evidently improving connections with his brain.)

"There is one place, and one time, when he can be killed."

"Where? When?"

"In a certain corridor on Earth. Four days ago."

Two sat very still. "I don't get it."

"We don't know where he is *now*—but I know where he was *then*. He was in uptime—in the past. He told me that a person who is a time invader can be killed there. So we will go there, and I will help you kill him."

Croyd's fist hit the table. "All *right!* When do we start?"

"Are you ready now?"

"Let's *go!* How do we go?"

"First we must get into your combat suit. When you are wearing it, *you* can't be hurt. Then we will take your scouter to Earth. We must start right away, Croyd—we have to be there tonight."

"Good enough. Wait, there's something I have to do first." He got up and started for Greta.

Grasping that he was going to kill Greta and stuff her

into the disposal unit, Lurla started to protest, but then she decided instead to fuse with him and modify his impulses. Croyd Two paused halfway to Greta, scratched his head, and decided to get into his combat suit first. By the time he had it on, he was out of the notion.

Lurla was counting on his low-level cerebration to keep him from asking the wrong questions, and it did; indeed, his trust in her was almost pathetic. She steered him to the visicom and helped him order the scouter to be readied in Derien's private berth. Guided by her, he scooped up Greta, left the room by the private door to the downdraft, and entered the berth carrying Greta. To the crew members who stared at the woman he was carrying, Croyd tipped a broad wink and remarked, "Gotta take the little lady home." A moment later they took off from Nereid en route to Earth.

They passed the *Rhea* at a little distance. *Rhea* challenged. Wondering why, Lurla sent over Croyd's ID and thalamic pattern by identiphone.

A deep female voice replied, "This is the captain. Pass, 4-U. When can I rejoin the formation?"

"What the hell does *that* mean?" Croyd Two asked Lurla.

"Beats me," replied Lurla, "but I have a sneaking idea that it has something to do with Croyd One." On the flash hunch that a ship away from formation and awaiting orders from a lost man was a ship which could do no harm to gnurls, Lurla-Croyd replied, "Await further orders. Out."

Then she conveyed the idea to Croyd Two that he could safely sleep during the trip. He conked out totally, taking the body with him, and almost taking Lurla along. After some difficulty that felt like struggling to keep oneself from fainting, Lurla was again in control of an awake body-and-brain, with Croyd Two somnolent.

She had to decide what to do about the sleeping Greta.

Exploring Greta's midbrain, she found that the active effects of the drug had ceased. Greta might be expected to come around in a few hours. That would not give

Lurla time to get Greta into the state of total obedience which was going to be necessary. Lurla selectively stimulated the midbrain. Greta began to recover. Lurla applied an inhibitor. Greta's eyes opened, and she began to breathe normally, and gradually her color and body warmth returned, but only her chest and facial muscles moved.

She looked fixedly at Croyd and licked her lips but said nothing.

It had been Lurla's intention to play Croyd with Greta, but now several considerations interfered with that. There was a high probability that Greta would become amorous; Lurla-Croyd might kill that with coldness—but how would Croyd Two react?

She therefore said frankly, "Greta, I am Lurla in Croyd's body. You and I have to come to an understanding."

"Go ahead," said Greta calmly.

Lurla carefully explained how Croyd was lost, presumably forever, and how Croyd Two had been generated to contaminate the Croyd-body. "What I am doing is this," Lurla told Greta. "I am taking this Croyd-body to the corridor in space-time where you and I were with Croyd four nights ago. Do you remember that?"

Greta was beginning to.

"You'll remember," said Lurla, "that a glowing figure appeared in the darkness, and Croyd shot at it, and it went out. And then he anchored the body in time so that it would never be found. I have kept wondering who that glowing figure could have been—Croyd seemed to know. Now I do know who it was. It was Croyd."

Greta's brows puckered. "You mean—Croyd shot Croyd?"

"Exactly. The glow was from this combat suit that I am wearing—it glows in the dark from built-in repulsors. However, the repulsors were no good against Croyd's weapon because they were worn by an uptime invader who was consequently vulnerable. That invader came from a later time than the time we came from. That in-

vader was I—this body right here, this body that I am wearing."

"Then you should be dead. Shouldn't you?"

"No, but I am going to be."

"You mean you are going there to let Croyd kill you?"

"That's right, in a way. The point is, he will also kill Croyd Two."

"You would willingly let yourself be killed, in order to kill this Croyd Two?"

"I would," Lurla declared, "but with you here, I am hoping it may not be necessary. Would you—would you let me be your mind-guest once again, just for a little while?"

"No." It was cold.

"I promise you it would not be for long, and I would not use you. I would only stay with you until I could get back to my own body. Then I would leave you, and leave Earth for my own galaxy—forever, believe me."

"I wish I could—"

"Here is my plan, Greta. You will stand near me in the darkness, they will not see you, they will see only my glow. The instant that Croyd raises his weapon, I will try to leave *this* Croyd and enter you. Then we will uptime to the present, and I will steer you immediately to where my own body is hidden and leave you free."

"Let me get this straight," said Greta. "The Croyd that *was* will kill the Croyd-body that *is*."

"That's right."

"Then if Croyd is still alive somewhere, his body will be gone for good."

"Yes—but don't forget, Greta, his body is spoiled forever; it is no good anymore—it *has* to die. Croyd himself would want to kill it. Besides, where could Croyd be? He must be dead, without a body."

"I cannot accept any action that would leave him without a body equal to his requirements."

"This body is *not,* I keep telling you. Besides, Greta—couldn't he come back to *you* again? Wouldn't he like that?"

"I might, but he wouldn't. And I'm not sure I would. Under those conditions, he's a little hard to get at."

Lurla's patience wasn't up to this. She decided to assume compliance. "Now, Greta, let's go over this again. I want to be sure you understand—"

"Lurla—"

"Yes, Greta?"

"Croyd will shoot Croyd tonight—four days ago?"

"Now, Greta, let's not be difficult—"

"Then were there two of him then? Or why aren't you dead already?"

"Let's talk about that later, shall we? Let me go over—"

"No," said Greta positively. "I will not be a party to it."

Lurla gave up. She hypnotized Greta and suggestioned her, but did not breeder her, this being a very particular and intimate suggestion.

30

He was puzzled, at first, to find that everything in the downtime-future was perfectly and solidly tangible. Wasn't the future supposed to be unreal? How could there be *anything?* Shouldn't all be void? Yet here was his computer, and there was the domed laboratory which his computer inhabited, and outside was the Eiffel-Tower structure losing its tip in the sky, and up there were the suns . . .

Then he noticed that the people were blurred.

He checked the computer time; he was two days into the future—the chronometer was definite about it. Then he noticed that the impulses darting about in the computer were blurred. Analyzing this further, he realized that it

was impossible to tell what connections were being made among any cluster of elements, because a number of different connections were being made simultaneously at any given instant—some impossibly among the same element-clusters—and no one of them was definite.

Indeed, the computer itself had a certain quality of semitransparency. It was definitely one computer, not blurred at all, but not absolutely solid, either.

On the track of a hypothesis and emboldened about downtiming, he moved down another two days. Now the room and the tower and the computer had all gone very transparent, and the computer-impulses were many-times-multiplied but all highly indefinite and very feeble; only the planet and the suns were clear.

Delicately, he moved himself forward another day.

Now it was as though the tower were two faint superimposed camera images—one straight and tall, the other jagged and falling.

As he watched, there was cataclysm. The heretofore firm ground of the planet went transparent. Then the planet seemed to detach itself from itself as a faint repulsor-glow sheathed the tower. For hours he was giddily, drunkenly trying to grasp what was happening. Then, high in the sky, he saw the whole planet heading toward the suns, shooting its jetstream of repulsor-glow out behind it from its tower-tail.

He lost it against the closely twinned suns.

He grasped what was happening. Simultaneously, he saw that the planet was still shimmeringly, evanescently here, and that he was on it in his almost invisible computer; and that outside, the double image of the tower, straight ghost upon broken ghost, was close to invisibility.

Croyd went into survival action. He uptimed instantly to the moment of arrival on this planet. Now all was definite again—so definite, indeed, that nothing could possibly change it in this space-time locus.

Calculating that he had idled perhaps fifteen hours on the parallel time-track, he knew that he had time to operate carefully. He held himself at this instant, uptiming continually to do it.

His problem was, mentally and disembodied, to backtrack in space-time precisely the track that he had involuntarily followed when he was propelled here by the mind-wrench. His further problem was: on arriving at Nereid, instantly to get himself either into a competent brained body or into a computer of adequate competency.

Some hours later in his own duration (although he was still holding space-time locus), he had plotted his intuitive navigation and had selected primary, secondary and tertiary targets.

He projected himself.

He hit his primary target—the prime computer-complex on the *Rhea.*

Collecting himself, he studied the chronometer. His spatial navigation had been accurate, but his temporal navigation had been a little off; it was already sixteen hours past the time when he had started from Nereid. At any rate, he could go into instant action—he was definitely into the germinal present.

He extended his attention into the command area of the computer complex. There was an identiphone exchange in progress. He watched and listened.

"*Rhea* here. Send identification and stand by for possible challenge concerning mission."

No voice answer, but a few moments later an ID transmission. Croyd studied it. It was his own!

Then Captain Gorsky's voice: "This is the captain. Pass, 4-U. When can I rejoin the formation?"

Croyd, three quarters comprehending the situation, almost laughed at the befogged captain whom he had left hanging in space. The person at the other end of the identiphone *had* to be Lurla in his body. He waited to see what Lurla would answer.

"Await further orders. Out."

Cutoff. Croyd found himself realizing that he was utterly delighted with this Lurla. From a viewpoint of her interests, her answer was the *only* right answer! However, he had no time to savor this. She was off somewhere with his body, quite probably in his own scouter, and he had to act.

He spoke through the transmitter on the bridge. "Captain Gorsky, sir. This is your cabin computer. I have a private message."

Gorsky responded alertly, moving down the ladder with surprising agility for her age and bulk, considering that she had only the ship's artificial gravity to help her. She activated her cabin unit, which was part of the ship-complex but whose communications could be confidentially isolated.

"Well?" she demanded.

Croyd said, "This is the 4-U—remember? The one who was disguised as a girl?"

Gorsky's eyes widened. "Where are you?"

"In the computer."

Gorsky inhibited herself from investigating the interior of the console. "Go on," she said.

"My name is Croyd. Do you know the name?"

"Are you related to Lloyd, that theoretician on Nereid?"

"Croyd is the name. I'm he. I'm—disguised, a little."

Gorsky was all business. "Print out your thalamic pattern."

Croyd printed it out, from memory. Gorsky fed it back into the computer, which compared it with its own memory banks.

The computer announced: "This is your computer, really. The pattern is the same."

Gorsky had enough wit to ask herself how she could tell who was who. She herself compared the new print-out visually with the old one. They did look the same, and there was a characteristic and unique *something*. . . . Gorsky decided to let it run along for more developments.

"All right, Miss Lloyd. What are my orders?"

In the computer's voice-robot there was a little noise like quiet static. Then the computer said: "I believe you were recently in identiphone contact with a scouter whose operator transmitted my pattern."

"That is right."

"Overtake the scouter, and when you are within range,

establish identiphone contact again. Order the occupant to transmit his own thalamic pattern from his own brain for corroboration. The transmittal will satisfy you. After that, you may return to fleet formation."

"Thank God for that," said Gorsky. She cleared her throat. " 'Thank God' was a figure of speech," she added. "Will I ever be told what this is all about?"

"Perhaps," the computer replied, "when you become an admiral."

Gorsky said primly, "I have no inappropriate ambitions."

"Well," said the computer, "you'd better reconcile yourself to the idea. It could happen."

31

When the *Rhea* overtook the scouter, Croyd Two was beginning to awaken. Lurla, distracted by Croyd Two, complied with the request from *Rhea* without thinking about it, other than wondering transiently why *Rhea* had doubted enough to follow her practically to Earth—for it had taken almost the whole radius of the solar system. Lurla occupied herself with getting the befogged Croyd Two oriented with respect to his brain. Then she allowed herself to be largely absorbed into him, carefully retaining enough integration to direct affairs without disturbing his volitional ego.

It was late at night but the timing seemed all right. The scouter dove into the Pacific and made for the Tonkin Gulf. It entered its berth and surfaced.

"Follow me," Lurla-Croyd ordered the passively responsive Greta.

Croyd's body emerged from the hatch; and Greta fol-

lowed. The hatch closed. The two people leaped ashore, emerged from the cavern, threaded the jungle trail, found the entrance to the lift. Lurla-Croyd activated the lift. There was a five-minute wait while it came from Manhattan.

"How many G's can you take?" Lurla-Croyd asked Greta.

"Ten or so," she replied.

Lurla-Croyd whistled. The lift arrived; the door opened. Lurla-Croyd activated the lift at 10 G's. About fourteen minutes later, the lift stopped and the door opened in the corridor that Greta now clearly remembered.

Lurla-Croyd grasped Greta's hand, took a deep breath, uptimed ninety-six hours and held the time-track. LC consulted his fingernail chronometer; they were half an hour ahead of time.

At this point, Lurla redintegrated. "We have to wait a half hour," she told Croyd Two.

"I'll go nuts," he answered. "What do we do for half an hour?"

Lurla, equally impatient, had an idea. She could now find out who had been following her and Croyd through the alley that night—who had shot at them. "Let me lead," she said, "we'll go to the back door of the tavern where he is, and watch him come out, and follow him back here."

Croyd Two assented and, steered by Lurla, passed through the corridor and emerged into the alley, with Greta following. They walked swiftly down the alley until they reached a door with a blue light above it—a door which Greta seemed to recognize. There they stationed themselves in shadow.

They waited twenty-three minutes. Lurla kept reassuring and calming Croyd Two. Greta was lethargic.

The door opened. The shadows of a tall, slender woman and a much taller man emerged and started down the alley.

"That him?" demanded Croyd Two.

"That's him."

"Let's go, then. Do I activate my combat suit yet?"

"Not yet. I'll tell you when."

Lurla-Croyd and Greta followed Croyd and Lurla-Greta at a discreet distance. Croyd kept looking around, and once Greta was positive that he had seen them. Then Croyd and Lurla-Greta disappeared into a doorway. Cursing, Croyd Two disregarded Lurla's restraints, took off after them, and fired a shot into the doorway. Greta somnolently followed.

Irritated, Lurla snapped at Croyd Two, "Stop being an ass and let me run things here." She grabbed Greta's hand and uptimed them twenty seconds, anchoring them on the temporal locus but leaving them spatially free.

Then they ran down the corridor to the lift. It was an instantaneous passage.

Greta and Lurla simultaneously comprehended why the shot had hit Croyd without hurting him. It wasn't yoga at all; it was only that they were time-invaders and he was not. But Lurla had no time to philosophize it. She activated the combat suit. The Croyd-body glowed.

"Ready, Croyd Two?" she demanded. "He'll be here in a few seconds. Shoot fast!"

"I never miss," he responded.

This time, Lurla reflected, he wouldn't have a chance to miss. Even if Croyd Two should fire first, Croyd One had the priority in this time-invasion and so was probably invulnerable to Croyd Two. But, in fact, it was already established that Croyd One *had* fired first. What was *not* established was whether Lurla had found time to leap into Greta before the Croyd-body was killed and Lurla with it . . .

Abruptly a psychic force more powerful and male than any she had ever known crowded her aside and took control of the Croyd-body. It stripped itself—*her*self—of the combat suit. It ordered the combat suit to continue glowing, to erect above itself a phenomenal head, and to level the gun. Then it leaped away into the shadows, clasped Greta tightly around the waist, and warned her not to move or utter a sound.

A male shadow and a female shadow appeared. The

glowing combat suit leveled its gun at the male. The male fired. The glow went out. The male bent over the combat suit. Then he arose. Then he and the female disappeared.

Croyd One murmured to the Lurla-mind, "I kept wondering why it was only my empty combat suit."

32

Crushed, Lurla subsided into acquiescence, a passive passenger inside the Croyd cranium. Greta, too, was passive, still in the thrall of Lurla. Croyd, though, was pretty busy, and he verbalized as his mind worked.

"The thing is, Lurla, you've got us all into a tough spot; it isn't easy to work one's way downtime four days without hitting anything. I'm not complaining seriously because I entered you in the course of that second challenge from the *Rhea,* and I could have stopped you. Or maybe I couldn't. I haven't entirely worked out this business of fatalism. From something I picked up at the center of the galaxy, I am beginning to think it is a question of relative probabilities. . . . Eh, well, I suppose it is safe to assume that nothing is going to move through this corridor during the next four days at a speed faster than a man running. If we inch down a second at a time, nothing that runs into us will do worse than knock us out, and our time momentum won't be great enough for severe damage if we hit something else. Of course, masses might coincide, and that would be disastrous. . . . Wait, I know. We'll move over in front of the door to the lift and make a grand leap to an instant ninety seconds later than the moment when we came out of the lift. Since we had

already downtimed four days then, we won't meet us. Here we go. Come on, Greta, hold my hand.

"All *right* . . . Well, *that* worked. So now we are back down to this evening, but still several hours uptime from the germinal present. How do we make the next leap? We have no knowledge what masses will have been passing through here during the next few hours. Exasperating, isn't it? Any ideas, Greta?"

She shook her head.

"Lurla?"

A mouselike voice in his mind replied, "Maybe."

He was attentive. "Go on."

"I can take you to where my own body is hidden. I—I think I can guarantee a space where there won't be any masses."

"You don't want to show me the hiding place, do you?"

"I don't want to die, either. It's—just down this corridor, Croyd."

"Down—*this* corridor?"

"That's right. Go on down past the lift."

Swearing softly, Croyd worked his way through the obscurity, drawing Greta along. They turned several corners, and then Lurla directed him through a rabbit warren of twists and turns. She stopped him at a place where darkness was practically absolute for Greta, although Croyd, and Lurla in him, could see a niche about six-feet deep guarded by a narrow open doorway.

"That's where," said Lurla. "My body is behind that wall."

"If there's a secret door, we can't open it in uptime."

"We don't have to. The space in front of the door is sure to be free of mass for the next few hours. We can stand there and downtime safely to the present."

"How do you know it will be free of masses?"

"If anybody blundered through that doorway, he would be annihilated. I've set up an antimatter screen."

Croyd reflected that quite possibly someone had, or would have, blundered through already. "You don't care much about life, do you, Lurla?"

"It's only human life." Having said it, Lurla instantly had the grace to be embarrassed.

Croyd saw the point, though. The antimatter screen would function only in a germinal present; they could safely move through it here in the past, and they would find the niche necessarily empty of intruding mass at all instants between now and the present unless, at some future past instant, some other time-alien should have entered. He led Greta through, and, at Lurla's direction, they flattened themselves against the inner wall.

"Now," said Lurla.

Croyd downtimed.

Nothing seemed to have changed.

Croyd was flooded with desire to thrust Greta back out through the doorway. He could not restrain this desire. He seized Greta by the shoulders and pushed her backward. She staggered out. She stood befuddled, gazing back into the blackness where Croyd was.

"She's still there!" exclaimed Lurla. "Aren't we in the present?"

"I neutralized the screen," said Croyd. "Lurla, you *are* the one! What do you have against Greta?" Reaching out, he drew the girl back into the niche. "Stop playing games, Lurla. I know you're as strong as I am—but this is *my* brain; it *knows* me. I'm *home*."

"What about Croyd Two?" Lurla wasn't bothering to explain what she had against Greta.

"Basically, a sweet guy. My younger brother, you know. I absorbed him, of course. It's had an effect on me, too. Where did you say your body is?"

"I don't want her to see!" Lurla insisted.

"All right," Croyd agreed. "Greta, you will not see Lurla's body. Do you understand?"

Greta slowly nodded.

Satisfied, Lurla directed Croyd to turn toward the back wall and project a cephalic impulse at a point near the floor. A door slid back, revealing a small room that glowed with dim pink radiance. Croyd entered, and the door closed.

At the far end of the room, guarding the door, stood

two gigantic men leveling weapons at Croyd. He estimated their height to be ten or eleven feet. They were clad only in kilts and sandals. Their bodies were covered with short, sleek, brown fur. Other than the size and the fur and the numbers of their fingers and toes, they seemed entirely human.

Croyd allowed Lurla to communicate with them telepathically. Satisfied, they ordered arms and stood back.

"Big, aren't they?" Croyd commented.

Lurla agreed. "My uncle insisted that an elite guard come with me."

"They are gnurls?"

"That's right."

"And you are a gnurl?"

"That's right." Her mind was glowing with race pride. "Come, Croyd. I want you to see my body."

The doors slid back, and another set of doors just behind them. Croyd had the impression of lift-doors in a twin set—outer doors in the corridor, matching safety doors in the car. At Lurla's urging, he entered, followed by Greta and the two guards. Again the doors closed behind them. The guards disappeared through another door.

This room was spacious and the ceiling was curiously domed. There was something familiar about the feel of it. The furniture was luxurious. Against a far wall was a couch. A body lay on this couch, supine and relaxed.

Lurla drew him toward it. He stood above it, contemplative.

"It is your body?" he inquired.

"It is I," said Lurla. "Do you like me?"

Breathing deeply, he told her, "I would like to see it live."

Instantly he felt her leave him. The slender lioness-woman on the couch awoke, stretched deliciously, and suddenly came all awake, gazing at Croyd. Her upward slanted eyes were glorious in a tawny-downy face which was in all other ways human.

"Lurla?" Croyd demanded.

She nodded. Then she said, "Tell *her* to sit down—over there—with her back to us."

Croyd spoke to zombie Greta, who obeyed. Then he urned back to Lurla and extended his hand. She accepted it and stood facing him.

Entranced, he looked up at her.

Softly acquiescent, she looked down at him.

"Afterward," Croyd queried, "what will you do? Throw me away?"

She frowned suddenly. Croyd could see the frown, the facial fur being thickened slightly above the eyes.

"Why did you say *that?*"

"We haven't shared a brain for nothing. I am probably he only human in this galaxy who knows what gnurls do vith humans."

Lurla dropped on to the couch. Croyd gazed down at ier steadily.

Lurla veiled her eyes. "We do not do anything cruel or nnatural to humans. We do not eat them or use them for our sexual pleasure or even work them in the fields. We tudy them. When we vivisect them, they are always anesthetized, locally at least. Their bodies and brains are basically like ours, only less developed. We use them in the nterests of science."

"You keep saying *them.* I am one."

Quickly Lurla looked up at him. "Oh no you are not! I ave dwelt in you, I know! You are not a human—you re higher than any human—at least as high as an alpha nurl!" She was appealing to him. It was sincere. "Croyd, am a virgin princess. I want you to be my consort—my ing, if you like. You and I together will have enough trength to block this crazy party that is trying to destroy our galaxy and maybe ours along with it."

She was touching him with her own craziness. He sat eside her and laid a hand on one of hers. (Her hands vere tiny, no larger than his own, and their tawny fur vas pleasing to his touch.)

"I believe that you mean it," he said, looking up at her andsome profile. "I also believe that you have kidapped me. I think that this is an interspace ship; that it already out beyond the moon-orbit; that you are headng for the periphery to take advantage of the thrust

offered by galactic rotation in order to drive for your own world."

She sat cold still. Slowly a small smile spread on her mouth. "I can't imagine how you guessed." Then she turned to him soberly. "Nevertheless, I did mean it. Croyd, I've studied human seed. I am certain that we would not be sterile together. Perhaps you need a little time to overcome body shock; I'm used to your body, but you aren't used to mine. Let me show you to a private room. This is the owner's cabin, it is a privateer, but there is also a captain's cabin with no captain. It has a bar, you can stay there alone and have a few zacs and sleep. When you wake up, you'll be relaxed and we can talk some more . . ." She was on her feet, drawing him upright. He noticed that she had slipped off her high heeled sandals, so that she was not two feet taller than he.

"How about Greta?" he demanded.

She frowned again. She said hastily, "My two officers can bunk together. I'll put her in the first officer's cabin. Come on, Croyd. We'll have one zac together, shall we? And then I'll leave you alone . . ."

Well, this you couldn't hurry. "Fix up Greta," he told her.

Lurla summoned an officer—it was one of the guards—and gave him orders while Croyd whispered a suggestion to Greta. Croyd followed the officer and Greta into the little cabin, inspected it to make sure that it locked safely from the inside, showed Greta the lock and preceded the officer out. With an inward grin, he noticed the distaste which the officer could not repress at the nearness of humans.

Then Croyd allowed Lurla to lead him into the captain's cabin.

33

The maximum clarity range of identiphone was approximately one light-second. The clarity range of radio was limited only by interference-patches in space, but a direct beam spread out too widely for privacy at the end of a light-hour. Good, clear, direct and private pip-transmission was however possible for an indefinite distance. Consequently Morse Code had not died; it had merely grown far more complex.

Finding, two hours after dropping Croyd, an adequate corridor relatively free of gravitational and static disturbances, Gorsky raised the admiral on the flagship. After a complex identification interchange, Gorsky reported in detail. And she added: "4-U Lloyd ordered me to rejoin the fleet formation."

"*Croyd,*" was the reply.

"Confirm *Croyd*. Have trouble Anglo-Saxon liquids. Over.

"*Chez moi même chose. Écoutez bien.* Return Nereid maximum. Report Derien or Tannen or Herod soonest. Report back. We are spreading for maximum point-start toward any objective. Confirm. Over."

Gorsky repeated and added: "May I inquire source of alert."

"Herod by Morse via fixed planetary orbital relays. Urgent *sans doute*. Red alert. Red alert. Repeat."

"Herod by Morse via fixed planetary orbital relays. Urgent *sang diüt*. Red alert. Red alert. Over."

"Trouble also Gallic nasals. Execute. Out."

34

Croyd, who was more sensitive to personalities than to bodies (and that was pretty sensitive), felt rather as though he were reliving the hour in the tavern when he had first sat across the table with Lurla over zac. In his mind, Lurla was a curious double image: Lurla's personality in Greta's body; Lurla's personality in Lurla's body. He studied his half-gone glass of zac. She, gone silent, toyed with hers. Only the nudies were missing.

"Curious that you should have zac aboard," he remarked. "It's a human drink—isn't it?"

"Humans learned about bananas from monkeys," she retorted. But then she compressed her lips. Her facial fur did not reveal a flush, but her gown was *décolleté,* and the fur (as he had already noted) thinned at the pit of the throat and the gentle swelling of the small breasts. Here, a slight darkening was visible.

He said lightly, "It's all right, Lurla—prejudice doesn't die in a few days. Believe me, I am enjoying this. You and I could like each other enormously. As to love, I can't be sure."

She sipped, frowning. "Humans compress many ideas into inclusive words. It is a reason why we consider . . . that is . . . why we have mistakenly supposed that they were inferior. If two people really like each other, that is *meeka.* If two people respect each other, that is *blen.* And if two people desire each other sexually, that is *hahri.* This allows us some clear combinations. It is clear that we blen, Croyd, and you have said that we could meeka; and with you, I could come to hahri. Have you

not taught me that hahri is only a question of a cortical center?"

"*Meekablen'ahri,*" Croyd murmured.

Again her throat flushed. "You catch our accent well. You even muted the *h*."

Croyd tossed off the zac and set it down. "For now," he suggested, "let's stick to blen. I am not certain that you comprehend the situation."

Up went the brows. "How do I not comprehend it?"

"For one thing, this kidnapping was not entirely motivated by love—no, let me use our crude word; it has the value of being ambiguous. You may not be facing this motive, but you are neatly depriving my galaxy of my services."

She stared at him. Then, angrily, she pushed back the chair, got up, and seized his glass and hers.

"No more now," he said. "Sit down."

She hesitated. Slowly she sat.

"Again," he said, "I suspect you have not thought through the reception which I would receive among your gnurls."

She stared at the table, drumming on it. Presently she said, "I do not want you in any body but your own. However, if it would work better, I could assign my first officer to you, and you could be his mind-guest in public. It is all right, he is noble—"

"He also dislikes my body odor."

Lurla crashed her glass on the floor.

"There is just one other little thing," Croyd added.

Lurla was stony.

"It is that the trip to your galaxy will require twelve days, and only on arrival can we do anything about defeating your crazy party that wants to destroy our galaxy. Meanwhile, however, the destruction of our galaxy will occur four days from now."

Lurla's face came slowly up.

"I think you expressed a fear," he remarked, "that the implosion of our galaxy might destroy yours. You and I don't have to worry about that, of course, since even a met-

agalactic propagation of the disturbance would take several thousand years."

Now Lurla's face was contorted with torment. It confirmed what Croyd had believed; she might not be a philosopher, but she was enough of an idealist to regard thousands of years hence as tomorrow in terms of the long-range good of her race. It was rare in women; and his blen grew—and his meeka, just a little.

Croyd got up. "I'll get the zacs." His deliberation wasn't easy for him; their drive for the Galactic periphery was taking him farther and farther from the Galactic center, the locus of destruction. This time mind-travel wouldn't work: apart from the risk of self-scattering in space, Croyd needed weapons—Croyd needed *matter*.

He returned and sat. Lurla sipped the zac from her replacement glass. The toes of one bare foot toyed with the jagged fragments of the broken glass. Evidently gnurls, even princesses, often went barefoot.

Lurla cast her die. "If I take you to end this evil, will you promise to come home with me afterward?"

"That won't be necessary," said Greta, behind Lurla.

Again Croyd's blen for Lurla rose as he noted that Lurla did not turn or even flinch. Instead, Lurla met Croyd's eyes and said deliberately, "You should have let me kill her."

Croyd shook his head. "That would have been wrong for all three of us. If she has done what I suggested—and evidently she has—your officers are hypnotised and suggestioned, and they will take orders only from Greta. Right now this ship is moving toward the Galactic center. Am I right, Greta?"

Greta nodded crisply. She was standing taut, feet together, arms straight down, fists clenched, quietly furious.

Lurla, still not turning, calmly inquired, "Are you still at my disposal, Greta?"

"Sorry, but no."

Lurla thought. Then, lightning-swift, Lurla picked up a shard of glass with her toes, transferred it to a hand, and whirled to leap on Greta.

But Greta wasn't there anymore, and Croyd pinned

Lurla's arms from behind. In the full-G artificial gravity of the interspace ship, her massive struggles almost threw him, but he managed to wrestle her to a wall and pin her there with her face pressed against metal.

Gradually she wearied. Or lost hope. Quit, anyhow.

Croyd released her.

She slumped over and sat where he had been sitting, back to a wall.

Croyd sat where she had been sitting, across from her. Greta leaned on the back of his chair, watching Lurla closely. Greta's face had lost some of its anger.

Croyd said softly, "Meekablen."

"All right," she said, waving a hand. "All right. Just let me be, here. You and Greta go in my room, there, and close the door."

Croyd studied her. He started to say something.

Greta put her hand on his shoulder and squeezed a little.

Croyd got it. Quietly he rose and left the room with Greta, closing the door behind him.

35

It is perfectly possible to cut radially across a galaxy, and this is no denial of the witticism by an early relativist, named Eddington, that astronomical bodies take the orbits they take because those orbits are the easiest ways to go. It is a question of energy output; you can cut across spatial curvature if you can afford the fuel. The Galactic fleet could, and Lurla's interspace ship could. They drew their energy from space, replenishing it continually, for space is no void but a plenum of

random energy whose manifestations are so multitudinous and minuscule that they are continually canceling each other out.

Space within a galaxy is, however, structured-and-strutted by the interplay of masses. And for a Galactic ship, energy-intake is optimal when it is traveling along a curved strut. Whenever it tries to straighten-out a curve, its output exceeds its intake. Even for an interspace ship, there is a limit to what it dares do. The tacking of a sailing ship against wind is a rough analogy—very rough indeed, however, since the sailing ship does not have a fuel problem.

The bridge of the interspace ship was dark except for the infinitesimal glow of instruments. The huge shapes of the two officers bent to their control and navigation; with intense concentration, they were straightening out a space-curve, bound for the center of the galaxy. From Earth, it is infinitely easier to reach the periphery than to attain the center.

Croyd and Greta stood silently behind them.

Croyd nudged her.

Greta asked quietly, "How are you doing?"

"Tolerably well," replied the first officer. An experienced slaver, he had a good command of Galactic English, although he despised its barbarity.

"As of now," she inquired, "how much longer to reach the center?"

"Three days, if we hold this course."

"Not very good," Croyd told her. "We have only four days, and I need my computer. It leaves us no time at all to call on Nereid. I will have to improvise with what the ship has, and I doubt that it will be enough."

Greta slipped her hand under his arm and squeezed his biceps.

Croyd inquired, "Do they like you now, Greta?"

She played it straight. "Do you like me, gnurli?"

About thirty seconds went by. Then the second officer said, "Meeka, Greta."

"What does that mean, Croyd?"

He told her.

"Good!" she responded brightly. Then: "How do you like humans?"

The second officer spat.

"I am human," said Greta.

Thirty seconds.

"You are?"

"That's right."

Thirty seconds.

"Pretty humans. Meeka."

Croyd could feel her smile.

He said: "Greta—"

"Yes, Croyd?"

"May I come in—just a little?"

"Be my guest."

His mind diffidently reached out to hers.

He felt her answering clasp, candid and gentle.

Silently, he said, "Meeka."

"Meeka," she told him.

"Also blen," he added. The telepathic meaning was clear to her.

She was mentally silent.

On the blen note, he told her, "This one may kill all of us."

"I told you how I felt about that. A long time ago."

"Blen."

"Never mind that. I'm me."

"Meeka."

"Meeka."

Lurla's mind, hovering behind them, went away.

Croyd said aloud, "Ask them where we are now."

Greta relayed the query. Their relationship to the Sol System was distressingly remote.

Croyd said, "Greta, I am going to try a totally ridiculous thing. Do you remember our friend Captain Gorsky?"

"Go ahead and try her," said Greta instantly. "To me she makes sense."

Croyd went to the radio, set it on a nonselective sphe-

roid transmission, and called the *Rhea*. Automatics kept the call going out at one-minute intervals.

Seventeen minutes later there was a reply to the first call.

36

When the *Rhea* was no more than five light-minutes distant, Croyd left Greta on the bridge and went in to have a few final words with Lurla.

He stood amazed at the open door of her cabin.

Gnurl-attired for gymnastics (that is to say, stripped to the pelt), Lurla was in flight. She had replaced the cabin's artificial gravity with a quarter-G antigrav thrust inward from all surfaces, and the cabin's artificial daylight with shifting green light: in this aquamarine suspension, utilizing hand-holds anchored everywhere on walls and ceiling, the long slim lioness floated with ballet-grace from hold to hold—catching one, hurling herself across the room toward another, performing incredible aerobatics *en route*, twisting herself with exquisite desperation.

"Meekablen!" breathed Croyd. A touch to his Melisandrian belt dissolved his tinted color-field shirt and footgear; he leaped for a ceiling hold and threw himself into muscular male counterpoint to her aerial dancing.

She saw him, paused, gasped, and went into it totally.

He followed, he interplayed. They criss-crossed each other dangerously.

Greta, unnoticed, watched in the doorway.

An instant came when they faced each other on opposite walls. Simultaneously they hurled themselves toward each other and twisted in midair; their bodies grazed each other, and they caught holds across. They turned. Both of

them were panting. They executed it again, caught wall holds, and turned.

Lurla uttered a broken little cry.

Letting go, he allowed the anti-gravity to thrust him from his perch as she departed hers. They drifted toward each other, slowing, slowing, motion ceasing just as they touched in midair.

Greta had closed the door, closing herself outside.

Between his hands, the lioness fainted.

Damning himself for an impulsive intergalactic satyr, Croyd executed in his own brain the *lanai* emotic switch-off procedure.

They floated side-by side in midair, drifting minutely back and forth in the neutral epicenter of the reverse gravity.

There was a very long time of silence.

"Croyd—"

"Lurla?"

"I'm grateful for your self-restraint—I think. And I'm sorry."

He turned his face to her. "It's all right, Princess. I'll survive—and your mystique would not have survived. We are leaving now for the *Rhea*."

Her face turned to him. "You are taking Greta?"

"Necessarily."

Her face turned away. "Of course."

He asked: "When we leave, will you go for home?"

She shook her head.

"Why not?"

"I will stay nearby until it is done."

"It may be the end of you."

"Only if it is the end of *you*."

"Lurla—"

"Yes?"

"In any event, I will not be coming with you."

"I know. I have known it since you put my face against the wall. That is why I am both glad and sorry that I fainted."

"Lurla—"

"Yes, Croyd?"
"*Blen.*"
"Thank you. *Blen* to you, always."
"*Meeka,* too. *Meeka,* Lurla."
"*Mee-ka*—"
Quiet.
"Lurla—"
"Yes?"
"*Hah-ri.*"
"But—not quite *meekablen'ahri?*"
He squeezed his eyes tight shut.
Her head was turned away. "Go now to the *Rhea.*"

37

Croyd and Greta sat at two ends of the bolted-down couch in the captain's cabin. Captain Gorsky lounged in her bolted-down swivel chair; she was not swiveling it, but her eyes kept traveling from one face to the other.

Croyd said, "I take it we are already under full acceleration toward the coordinates I gave you?"

"Of course, Mr. Croyd. And now I assume you will tell me why."

"Since you are underway, indeed I can take time to explain. What is your minimum time to reach the center of the galaxy?"

"Six days, four hours, eleven minutes—plus or minus ninety-three minutes, assuming a nominal trip."

"That's a bit slow."

"Slow, sir? That is 37 million G's. Our peak velocity will be more than 3 million times the velocity of light."

"Slow for my requirements, I mean. The galaxy will implode in less than four days."

Gorsky's face hardened. "Then we are wasting energy."

"If the galaxy implodes, will the waste make any difference?"

"I suppose not. Do you have a plan?"

"Yes, but I will have to operate at a distance of 15,000 light years, more or less, even if I wait until the last minute. Hitherto my longest operational reach has been just under 2,000 light years, and it was pretty chancy. Not only that, but I was using my own equipment, whereas, in this case, I'll have to utilize a modification of *your* computer."

Gorsky's face hardened further. "You are going to modify my computer?"

"That's right, and I must get at it very shortly, as soon as you can round up a crew of technicians for me."

Gorsky turned to Greta. "Do you endorse this, 4-U?"

Blessèd Greta kept her face straight. She pointed to Croyd. "He's the 4-U. I'm his disguise."

Gorsky turned to Croyd. "Will these modifications in any way affect the performance of my ship?"

"Not her speed or her inertial shield. They will considerably reduce her fighting ability and general maneuverability."

"How do you justify that?"

"If we do not make these modifications, then in a few days nobody will need any fighting ability."

"Please tell me what the situation is and what you propose to do."

"Request that you first give me permission to act, because of the time element."

"I should consult with the admiral, but . . . well, affirmative."

"Then if you will be good enough to call your executive officer, I'll outline to him what the needs are. And while he is assembling the technicians—"

"He is at hand," Gorsky interrupted, pressing a button

on her chair arm. The executive officer entered. Captai Gorsky presented him to Croyd and to Greta.

The exec watched Greta carefully while Croyd briefe him. "Will do," he said—to Greta rather than t Croyd—and departed. Handsome young commander . .

Croyd stood in the doorway, hands in pockets, teeter ing thoughtfully on his toes, looking out after the exec Gorsky waited.

Greta suggested, "Croyd, you were going to brief th captain."

He spun on his heel, grinning. "Sorry," he said; "I wa thinking—"

"I imagine you need to. Go on, Mr. Croyd."

"I have personally reconnoitered the situation. Neve mind how, Captain. It would take too long to explain. I turns out that our galactics are not the only intelligen beings in the universe—"

"Did somebody think we were?"

"Everybody has been acting as though we were. How ever, I have turned up enemies, apparently from th Large Magellanic Cloud, who appear to have ac quired domination of their own galaxy, and who for som years or centuries have been quietly raiding the Milk Way and picking-off humans for slaves. Privateer raids you know; relatively small ships finding clever means o concealment. At any rate—as I put things together—a few years ago their government became seriously alarme at privateer intelligence that we humans were planning a conquest of their galaxy—they call it Melisandre."

Gorsky snorted, hitting a chair arm with a ham-fist "They must be paranoid, the way the Stalin-type Commu nists used to be! How could we plan to conquer what w didn't know about? Besides, we haven't yet moved a shi out one galaxy-radius from the periphery—while you Melisandre is more than a hundred and fifty thousan light-years away! And what do they think we are going t use for supply lines—hose?"

Unexpectedly, Greta suggested, "Maybe they feel guilt for what they've been doing to humans."

Croyd's contemplation of her was brooding. He said

"They consider themselves a superior species, these gnurls of Melisandre. And when a proud species discovers that an inferior species has built up a mighty civilization and a terrible war potential, their effort to sustain their pride can recoil into paranoia. Remember the great dolphin massacre of the twenty-first century, after the dolphins profited from our training and began to go neolithic? Well, there's no time to philosophize—anyway, the gnurls decided on preventive war.

"Several years ago, I gather, their leadership split into two parties which we can call the Infiltrators and the Catastrophics. Lately, both Operation Infiltration and Operation Catastrophe have been building-up simultaneously, with the thought that if infiltration failed, catastrophe would be ready.

"To understand this infiltration, Captain Gorsky, you have to appreciate that gnurls have the ability and the habit of moving as minds from body to body. So the Infiltration party used this ability in the process of—"

"Pardon?" said Gorsky.

"How? Oh—moving from body to body, I said. As minds."

"This is the first silly thing you have said, Mr. Croyd. There is no difference between mind and body. All is matter."

Greta cleared her throat.

Gorsky turned to look at her.

Presently Gorsky cleared her own throat.

"You can call it a figure of speech, Captain," Croyd soothed; "it is capable of being rendered in materialistic semantics, although only with an enormous amount of symbolic transformation. To say it the easy way: moving as minds from body to body. Within the past two or three years they have invaded a significant number of key officials in the Galactic and the various planetary organizations, and even in the military establishment. I could name one name that would surprise you—you would call it the second silly thing I've said, so I won't.

"This has all been background. It came to a head a few months ago—"

The exec knocked and came in with the senior elec tronics officer and his chief.

"Excuse me a few minutes," said Croyd, and h sketched broadly and then in some beginning detail th kinds of modifications he wanted made in the compute system. "That's enough for you to get started on th major disconnects and prime connects," he finished. "I' join you in an hour or so and stay with it personally unt it's done. Day and night, Lieutenant—and Chief. Sched ule completion in forty-eight hours, must. Are yo clear?"

The lieutenant and the chief shot two or three ques tions, then shook hands with Croyd, nodded to the cap tain and Greta and left.

Croyd sat down again. "I had come to where it cam to a head—"

Gorsky was purple. "You know my computer as we as I do!"

"I've personally explored it, remember? Well. The Ca astrophics moved into the final phase of their operatio They had already infiltrated the ranger organization o the Galactic park-planet Daphne. All rangers not actuall infiltrated by gnurl-minds were hypnotized as breeders. number of them were stationed at the planetary gates t hypnotize tourists, who were then pressed into the labo force and required to forget this when they departed fo home. In a colossal engineering job, utilizing matter disi tegrators, they honey-combed Daphne and loaded thes burrows with fenrite, an artificial element which, as yo may know, catalyzes antimatter reactions of a violent na ture in the lokite which is the principal mass-constitue of the twin stars Fenris and Loki and many neighbors."

The frowning Captain Gorsky nodded. "Theoreticall then, all they would need would be a method of delive ing this planetary bomb to a point midway between Fe ris and Loki at conjunction, and the result would be a implosion involving several central star-clusters."

"Right. Well, a few weeks ago the leader of the Inf trators got wind of this. The leader was a princess name Lurla. I've been playing cat-and-mouse with her ev

since, and maybe this showdown is my fault, because if I'd let her win it might not have happened—"

"That's right," Greta observed. "We'd just all be gnurl-zombies." Gorsky nodded again.

"Lurla tried to expedite the process of infiltration-conquest in order to head-off the demolition of our galaxy. She wasn't being especially humane—she just realized, along with most of the top scientists of Melisandre, that her own galaxy could become involved in the enormous spatial distortions of such an implosion. But she lost, and the Catastrophics are about to bring it off."

Gorsky inquired, "You said you had—scouted Daphne. I won't ask how. Just tell me what."

"How," Gorsky wanted to know, "could the implosion of these stars ruin a galaxy? And how could the implosion travel to the Large Magellanic Cloud in less than 150,000 years at the velocity of light—and by then, who now would care?"

"An explosion," Croyd told her, "is a propagation of energy out through the conductive medium of space—a medium which exists, as you well know, despite its denial in a classic post-medieval experiment of the early twentieth century. Hence an explosion is limited by the structure of the metagalaxy to a top velocity equal to that of light. But an *im*plosion, entailing annihilation of matter, operates on a different principle: it collapses the struts of space, ultimately warping the surface tension of the metagalaxy, and there propagating the ruin from galaxy to galaxy with a continuing acceleration unrelated to the mechanics that govern light. Such an implosion won't destroy even our own galaxy—but the disturbance will be enough to wipe out life in our galaxy, setting our galaxy back a couple of billion years, although the ethics of *that* are worth arguing. Anyhow, as I said, the velocity is unrelated to that of light. From Sol Galaxy to the Large Magellanic Cloud: light, or explosion, 150,000 years, hugging steadily along; metagalactic warp, continually accelerating, no more than a fiftieth of this time."

Gorsky considered this.

"Briefly, they have built a repulsor-unit capable of

driving Daphne out of orbit—of delivering the Daphne bomb to their suns, and detonating it at the conjunction. They will activate the repulsor-unit in three days. This is what I propose to prevent."

"Perhaps I must after all ask a *how*. How did you learn so precisely about their timing?"

"This will sound awful," said Croyd, embarrassed a little, "but I scouted the immediate future. I—time-traveled."

Gorsky spread her hands. "What is absurd about that—theoretically? All is mechanically predetermined; therefore the future is fixed. This is implicit in materialism. The only problem is how to do the traveling, and I gather that you have solved this problem. It is perhaps the reason for the U in 4-U?"

"Partially." Croyd and Greta were glancing at each other, and their mouths were small. The flat rejection of mentalism, coupled with the bland acceptance of time travel, was a blend that they both found delicious.

"Then," said Gorsky, "one of two things is true: either the implosion will occur, or it will not occur. In either case, what is our hurry?"

"Since we are hurrying," suggested Croyd, "perhaps our haste is predetermined?"

Grosky squeezed her chair arms and frowned.

"In fact," said Croyd, "I did not find it just like that in downtime—in the future. The objects and events in any future are either rather definite or rather indefinite, depending on their relative probabilities. For instance, the existence and relative positions of the planet Daphne and the twin suns Fenris and Loki three days from now are definable to a very high degree of probability. Consequently to my gross vision, the planet and the suns and all were just as hard and solid and definite as though I were seeing them in a germinal present. But other events, such as the movements and even the presence of people, have lower probabilities of definition and position and so on. So people were blurred and even a little transparent. In general the lower the certainty that a thing would exist or that an event would occur, the more blurred and transparent

was. And three days from now, at the scheduled moment of activating the repulsors, there was a definite split; they were both activated and not activated, and the planet both shot away toward the suns and stayed where it was. *Now* do you see why we are hurrying?"

Gorsky cleared her throat again and demanded, "If you can time-travel, why do you not take this ship three or four days into the past? That would give us time to arrive before H-Hour."

"Because nothing in the past can be changed!" stated Greta sharply.

"What does that have to do with it?" Croyd asked her. "The Captain may have an idea, although I'm not quite ready to buy it. If you and I could move in the past, with relatively stationary and fieldless air-molecules moving through our bodies without significant disturbance, presumably this ship could move as easily in space. And we would already have emerged into germinal present before attacking Daphne."

"But what will you do for fuel?" Greta inquired.

Croyd and Gorsky looked at each other. Gorsky's face split in a cavernous grin; Croyd's mouth was persimmonized.

"Oh, well," said Greta, smoothing her hair, "I'm only a waywoman."

38

In forty-eight hours on the nose, the modifications were complete.

Croyd and the lieutenant and the chief, trailed by critical Gorsky and the knowledgeable exec and fascinated

Greta, passed the next three hours in final inspection and testing.

When they returned to the operational console, jerry-rigged to Croyd's specifications, a hollow-eyed Croyd ran a hand back through his hair and creakily maneuvered himself into the bucket seat.

"What are your immediate plans?" Gorsky demanded.

"Got to be sure," said Croyd. "*Has* to work right—"

"So do you, Mr. Croyd. Turn in."

"I *can't* turn in—"

"This is finally my ship. You *will* turn in."

"If I do turn in, I won't sleep—"

Captain Gorsky turned to Greta. "Alternate 4-U, take over."

Greta coaxed Croyd to something like a standing position and steered him into his cabin and sat him on the bunk. While she was removing his shoes a sailor came in with a bottle of zac, two glasses, and a bottle of restorative tablets—no soda. He departed quickly, closing the door. Greta filled a glass with water, put two tablets in Croyd's mouth, and poured in water. Then she took two tablets and finished off the water. Greta then filled both glasses to the brim with zac, fed Croyd a jolt, medicated herself, finished with the shoes, and started on the zipper of his combat suit. Croyd demurred.

"Call me Sister," said Greta, and got him undressed to the shorts and socks. Then she slipped off her own shoes and sat beside him. He took another long belt of zac; so did she. He ruminated; so did she. He and she finished their zac.

"Want another?" she queried.

He shook his head. She took him by the shoulders and laid him down, swinging his feet up. Then she reclined beside him and stroked his forehead, crooning to him. Presently he was asleep.

Greta watched him for a long while.

She poured herself another half-glass of zac and drained it. Then she lay down beside him and conked out.

39

He insisted that Greta be present. With regret, he got rid of the lieutenant and the chief, who had squandered their mental and physical substance heroically on the modifications, by pointing out that they had to keep the guts of the equipment under surveillance. The captain he could not exclude but, since the captain's command-function had to be replaced, he was able to get rid of the exec.

He sat in the bucket seat and locked himself in. Greta and Captain Gorsky sat side by side on a small sofa considerably to his rear, watching the monitor in the darkened room.

Later Greta remembered, as an odd and revealing sidelight, that as the situation grew tense her right hand and Gorsky's left hand were clasping each other tightly.

It was H-Hour minus 1.

They were roughly 14,000 light years from Daphne—only about halfway between Daphne and Earth. In *Rhea*-time, traveling at maximum *Rhea*-acceleration, they were three days distant from Daphne. Had you been able to lay a mile-stick end-upon-end between *Rhea* and Daphne, you would have moved the stick more than 100 quintillion times. Between *Rhea* and Daphne lay over 60 billion times the distance between Nereid-of-Neptune and Ceres.

The play of I-rays began. One or two of the rays reached Daphne almost instantaneously, activated by photons that had been 14,000 years en route. Nevertheless, the transmission of event-images from Daphne to *Rhea* along the I-rays was almost instantaneous, revealing the events of only a fractional second ago. However, one or two rays

are not enough for *vision*. What Gorsky and Greta saw on the monitor-screen was essentially what Croyd saw, and all they could see was star-glow from the bright-crowded nucleus of the galaxy.

Croyd made an adjustment. The rays were telescopically narrowing focus—the screen revealed no more than a breadth of a thousand light-years, a large fraction of the nucleus. Nevertheless, no individual stars were evident.

Another telescopic narrowing. The field was a diameter of ten light-years—now a few stars of the brightest magnitude emerged as individuals, but still it was mostly glow.

Nowhere near picking-out the pinpoint of Daphne. Yet Croyd, to operate, must subjectively *walk upon* Daphne!

Croyd glanced around at them. There was no humor in his face—he had used a quarter of his time before the bombshot. Then he went back at it.

He actually got it down to a fineness of focus that presented, on the monitor, only eleven countable stars—of which the two near the center were Fenris and Loki.

Dimly, they could see him working. There was no change on the screen. Would all their efforts do no more than give them a ringside seat at the double reverse-nova?

Without turning, Croyd said, "Gorsky—get the lieutenant."

Gorsky released Croyd's hand and went to the door. A moment later the lieutenant was at Croyd's side.

"What can you do for more power?" Croyd demanded.

"Cut acceleration," said the lieutenant.

"In thirty minutes," Croyd responded, "acceleration will make little significant difference. Cut it, and give me power."

The lieutenant left. Croyd worked.

The monitor screen seemed to move in closer to the twin stars. Now they were all you could see.

The lieutenant was back at Croyd's side. "That's it," he said, "but it will build up gradually for you. In another ten minutes you will reach peak."

He stayed. Croyd let him. A few minutes later the chief stole in. The lieutenant let him stay.

They saw the field narrow to one star, either Fenris or

Loki, which was off to one side of the screen now. They correctly surmised, each of the four watchers privately, that Croyd was seeking the dark pinpoint of Daphne. But if one of the suns was still on the screen at the right, Daphne would be far *off* the screen to the left.

Croyd, as though sensing their concern, muttered, "Have to keep Fenris in sight until I'm in close enough to even *see* Daphne. Then I'll move."

There was a swelling of power. Fenris grew larger and nearer until it was a semicircle filling the right side of the screen. Croyd applied a semidisc blinder to the Fenris-image; they could see its angry corona, the flaming edge of an artificial star-eclipse.

Suddenly the screen swung away from Fenris, lost Fenris off right; there was star-glow punctuated by a few describable stars. Gorsky stiffened at a very bright star, suspecting that it might be the remote hostile galactic nebula Melisandre—the Large Magellanic Cloud.

Then, from the left of the screen, something small that looked like a one-third moon swung in to center. Even Greta knew that it was Daphne, the planet at the precise center of the galaxy—the planetary bomb.

Croyd said low to the lieutenant, "I am going to have to increase the magnification several thousand times. How does it look?"

The lieutenant shook his head slowly. Croyd wasn't watching, but he felt the pessimism.

Steadily now, as the power available to Croyd swelled to its maximum, the monitor screen moved in on the planet. Now its top and bottom edges were lost above and below the screen, and its daylight side filled two thirds of the monitor. Now there was only a slight curvature to the Daphne-horizon and, hovering over the surface of Daphne, very large cloud formations were visible. Now the horizon straightened entirely, a ruler-line diagonal across the upper right corner of the screen. They could distinguish continental shapes; they could tell land from water.

Croyd's voice was loud, frustrated, startling. "Still a hundred miles up, Lieutenant! I need to come *down, down!* Is this *all* there is?"

The answering voice was low. "The next few minutes may give you another ten percent increment."

Gorsky and Greta were breaking each other's hands.

For two full minutes it stayed the way it was.

Then the monitor swooped. When it steadied, they seemed to be twenty-five miles or so above the surface of Daphne. Small clouds and very large earth-formations were clearly visible, but only one man-made thing could be seen. It thrust itself obscenely up at a rakish angle from the horizon to the upper right corner of the screen. It was the *Tour d'Eiffel* repulsor tower, the planetary *drive* that was about to be activated by the gnurls of Melisandre —the *thruster* which, in a few minutes, would insert a bomb into the twin stars and terminate the existence of at least one galaxy.

The lieutenant asserted, with crisp definition, "Mr. Croyd, you have reached maximum power."

He replied quietly, "My operational plan was to place myself subjectively on the surface and mentally neutralize the command crew as an immediate step. This would have given me time to neutralize a good many others. And *that* would have given *Rhea* time to come in and destroy the repulsor tower, after which we could have systematically cleaned things. However . . ."

He was breathing heavily.

"What time is it, Lieutenant?"

"Minus nine minutes."

Croyd looked around; their dark-adapted eyes could see his strained grin. "Let's anyhow enjoy the spectacle," he suggested. "So fleet the works of men, back to entropy again . . ."

The impotent computer and the paralyzed monitor hovered beside the tower.

Croyd put all his mind on what *he* was seeing, in full depth, totally real.

The tower was *not* two semitransparent towers, one erect, one mutilated. The tower was one tower—stalwart, competent, solid and definite in the germinal present.

The tower snapped in two.

An instant later, ten miles beyond the tower, there was

a tiny flame-flare on the ground; the flare-streak skidded another five miles and then it swiftly burned out.

Silence in the room.

They stared at the tower. Croyd stared directly at the fullness and depth of the tower. The tower was *not* two semitransparent towers, one erect, one mutilated. The tower was one tower—broken, its top half drooping to the ground, solidly and definitely ruined in the germinal present.

Presently Greta released her clutch on Gorsky's hand. Responding lethargically, Gorsky after a moment softened her clutch on Greta's hand. Greta got up and went to Croyd and put her hand on his shoulder.

Croyd sat inert.

Then Croyd said wearily, "Lieutenant—put us back on full acceleration for Daphne."

The lieutenant went out, and the chief with him.

Perhaps a minute later, the broken tower receded, and Daphne receded into invisibility; after a while, Gorsky could see on the monitor screen only star-glow.

Croyd snapped it off.

They remained for a while in darkness.

Croyd deliberately got himself unlocked. Then he sat. Greta's hand was still on his shoulder; every so often she squeezed it a little.

Croyd said, "Do you figure it the way I do?"

Greta replied, "Lurla."

Croyd responded, "That's the way I figure it."

40

Night and day on a starship are matters of convention. Soon after the knockout of the repulsor mast at what visually appeared to be a distance of a few miles away, followed by disconnect and reacceleration in

the hope of attaining that planet 14,000 light years away in three days, eight bells sounded—*ping-ping, ping-ping, ping-ping, ping-ping*—and it was time for lunch.

Croyd didn't show up in the ward room. Neither did Greta. Nobody commented on their absence. Captain Gorsky shoveled it stolidly in; she wasn't noted for stimulating mealtime chit-chat, but this noon even the exec could hardly get a word out of her.

"Come on," Croyd had said to Greta, and she had followed him to their quarters. When they had first come aboard, Gorsky, baffled by the identity problem, had assigned Greta to the Visiting Captain's Quarters where Croyd-in-Greta had formerly stayed; whereafter she had assigned Croyd to the Visiting Captain's Quarters where Croyd-in-Greta had formerly stayed. Both of them, accepting the duplication without comment, had stood together alone for a few moments, considering the situation.

"Well, Croyd?" Greta had inquired presently.

Croyd's mouth-corners had curled upward. "Eventually, maybe, but not yet," he had responded. "There are two rooms and a door between. Here, help me get this extra bunk into the salon—"

Greta's response had been a delighted smile. "Brother!" she had cried out, running to lift a corner of the bunk in question.

Now, at lunchtime, they sat together glumly on Croyd's bunk in the salon, peering out the picture window at stars that should have been blurred by their rapid transit but were not blurred because the velocity of light is always the same relative to whatever it is relative to.

Greta toyed with a moral problem: Should she persuade him to eat? Herself, she was not hungry. She concluded that he needed no mothering. They continued to sit together.

Croyd was almost catatonic.

Grief she could understand—she had surmised that he had possibly loved Lurla, apart from the probability that they had coupled—but this degree of physical disturbance did not fit with her assessment of him.

She *had* to say it. "Croyd—tell me."

One hand began to twitch, palm upward, as though he were explaining something. "They keep dying," he said. Silence, with the hand twitching. Again: "They keep dying."

Greta's brows flattened, and slowly her head came around toward him, and she stared at him with her mouth open.

Presently her mouth closed and her brows relaxed and she looked down at her own hands. Then she got up decisively. "I'll go now, Croyd," she observed. "Call me when you need me."

The hand came up again and twitched several times again and slowly went down again.

Greta left their suite—not angry, not irritated, not even worried especially, but profoundly bemused.

Two bells brought Croyd to the navigation room, where—as expected—he found Captain Gorsky and the executive officer, Commander Bellardi, studying tri-D sectional star-charts while the computer traced gleaming-visible hypocourses as one or the other officer might direct or correct.

"Dry run?" queried Croyd, apparently quite himself again.

"Not very dry, Mr. Croyd," Bellardi responded. He was long, thin, dark and young; he smiled easily, with gleaming teeth. "We understand from you, although we are damned if we know why, that we still have to reach Daphne in something under three days. So we'd better know *how*, in terms of shifting local conditions."

"Good," said Croyd, pulling up a chair. "Where are you on the hypocourses?"

Bellardi briefed him. Gorsky listened.

"Sounds sound," Croyd commented. "Think you are ready to shift to four-D?"

Gorsky grunted, "You're the time-traveler."

"Different thing," said Croyd. "Four-D is only a symbolic analogy—a flow interpreted as a dimension for epistemic convenience. Fact is, your four-D navigation isn't

really four-D; it's tri-D with a timed developmental factor added. Do you read me, Commander?"

"I read you, Mr. Croyd. Captain Gorsky does, too—she just doesn't say much. All right, let's try four-D."

Bellardi threw the automated navigator into four-D programming. He then fed into it, one after the other, the five hypocourses which had proved reasonably optimal on tri-D trial. The factors of each hypocourse were accompanied by the available evidence on various developmental factors—acceleration of their craft, seedling static-patches the size of solar systems, star-mass fluctuations and so on. As each hypocourse was tried a glowing trail illuminated itself in the tri-D chart and gradually wound its way among stars, while in its path this and that developmental disturbance grew visibly.

The first three hypocourses led them into disaster.

The fourth got them decently to Daphne in just under three days.

The fifth provided even a smoother and less hazardous trip, but it required five days.

Bellardi snapped-off the chart and rheostated the cabin lights back to normal. "Well, Captain?" he demanded.

"Ask Croyd," said Gorsky, not looking.

"Number Four," said Croyd. "Minimum feasible time."

Bellardi observed, "If you were to ask Captain Gorsky about me, she would tell you that I am a dashing young hothead. Nevertheless, I am going to suggest that instead we take Number Five."

"Why?"

"This damned computer has one flaw—it is too optimistic. It interprets developmental hazards conservatively, and it doesn't take into account that a static patch is as temperamental and unpredictable as a hurricane. Now I want you to recall that on Course Four we skirt no fewer than seven static patches. The computer predicts from our fed-in data that we will just touch their peripheries and get by all right, and I wish I could believe it, but I can't. In my opinion, Course Four is a disaster course. As for Course Five, you may think it stodgy, but the tri-D hypocourse procedure makes it the only remaining alternative to

Course Four, other than a Course Six, which would take seven days and add no safety margin. Therefore—Course Five, Mr. Croyd—only as a suggestion, of course."

"Captain Gorsky?" Croyd inquired.

"You're the 4-U," snapped Gorsky, adding under her breath, "I think."

Croyd turned thoughtfully back to Bellardi. "Well, then—Course Four it is, Commander. Sorry I have to negative your suggestion, which was entirely sound—but the stakes are high."

"If that's it," said Bellardi cheerfully, "then I shall comfortably return to being a dashing young hothead. It's the course I wanted, all the time."

"Why?"

"On Earth I race jet boats."

Croyd released a weary grin. "I admit that I share your interest. I'm just too damn busy-responsible to let myself go."

"Just tell me," Bellardi added, "what these high stakes are, so I'll know why I'm dying."

It was Gorsky who answered, without looking. "Somebody snapped-off the repulsor tower. All right, they're short of a delivery system. But they still have a loaded bomb and a tower base. It took weeks to put up the tower, so they won't get it operational in three days. But in five, they might."

Silence.

Bellardi: "Long speech, Captain Gorsky."

Gorsky: "But you read me?"

Bellardi: "Affirmative. Only it takes all the joy out of my dashing young hotheadedness, because it makes it necessary."

Captain Gorsky swung around to face both of them. "Has either of you considered that our maneuverability was reduced by Croyd's modifications of our computer system? What does that mean in terms of those seven static patches?"

The ship suddenly behaved as though it had hit a bumpy road at high speed. None of them quite fell.

Gorsky, recovering first, remarked, "I am a steadfast

materialist. Nevertheless, it could be said that somebody up there has made my point."

Croyd was on his feet. "Commander, I know you want to get on the bridge. I'll round-up the electronics officer and start unmodifying—partially. But when we near Daphne, we'll have to put it back."

Bellardi rose, nodded at Croyd, looked at the captain, acknowledged the captain's nod and took off. Croyd went through a similar procedure and left by the other bulkhead.

Gorsky brooded.

Greta knocked on the bulkhead that Bellardi had used.

"Come in," said Gorsky. She glanced up, then looked down again. Greta hesitated, then took a chair.

They brooded.

"You just missed him," said Gorsky. "He'll be tied up in that computer for the next two days. Where were you this noon?"

"With him."

"Let me get you two straight. You aren't him, are you?"

"No. Not at all."

"But he was *in* you?"

"His mind, yes."

"How did you like it?"

"Fine."

Brooding.

Gorsky offered: "That was a good thing that you said about events in the past being impossible to change."

"Why good?"

"It shows what I always said. That John Dewey was a bourgeois tool of capitalistic interests."

Supper in the ward room was gaily brittle. Greta found herself involved in a dancing wit-play with Bellardi, much of it allusively but not overtly sexy. Croyd wasn't there. Neither was the electronics officer. Gorsky came late, ate fast, left early.

While they dallied over wine the ship began to move in on another static patch. Officers, including Bellardi, made hasty excuses to Greta and fled like wet rats departing a

dunking-cage. Wine was all over the table, sloshing over the antislosh rim. Greta held tight for a while, tried a few more wine-sips, got some up her nose and fled to her cabin where she belted herself to her bunk and weathered it out.

She fell asleep at some time or other.

At some time or other she heard Croyd come in. She listened apathetically, noticing vaguely that the storm had quieted. She went to sleep again.

They hit another patch at breakfast. Greta wasn't there—she stayed belted in her bunk. Things quieted a few hours later, and she got up and went to the galley for coffee. Then she paced the areas of the ship that were free to her. Everybody was busy; she didn't try to talk.

Somehow she made it to lunchtime. At the bells, she bolted for the ward room.

Croyd was there, talking to Bellardi. She sat beside Croyd, on the far side from Bellardi. Croyd looked worn.

Bellardi was saying, ". . . went a lot better this morning. Hi, Greta."

"Hi, Tony. Hi, Croyd."

"Hi, Greta. Glad it did, Commander. We're making progress with the electronics. We're almost home."

"Almost?"

"Not quite. Are we progressing, Commander? I haven't talked to the captain since yesterday."

"We're approximately on schedule. All three patches have been about the way the computer predicted, damn it. No real sweat. With maneuverability, it will be better with the next four."

"Have you run a four-D check today?"

"Natch. No significant new data. Still as was."

The electronics officer came in, dropped into a chair, and wearily played with his soup.

Croyd said, "Excuse all these questions, Commander—"

"Of course."

"How is your attack facility?"

"Optimum. We maneuvered so easily this morning that

I could give the bridge to the second officer and check weapons. We're ready."

"Good. We'll need—"

Soup flew.

Bellardi mumbled, "Excuse me," and ran; so did Croyd; so did the others. Greta was alone again, holding onto the table. It kept getting worse. She tried to rise and was thrown to the floor. A seaman rescued her and somehow got her to her cabin, belted her in, and left. Greta tried to ride with it, but it kept getting worse.

During the next hour Greta had enough sense to strap on the leg and chest belts in addition to the pelvic belt. No longer could she even try to ride it; she lay tense, a rigid woman being tossed and sucked and shaken.

Squawk-box: "Now hear this. This is the captain. Two static patches have coalesced. Our survival chances are small. No possible use of life rafts. Repeat: no possible use of life rafts. Hold your stations. Hold your stations. Ride it out. Ride it out. Out."

Greta prayed.

Greta lost consciousness.

Greta came back. Croyd was sitting on the side of her bunk, patting her cheeks. "All right, kid?"

"Okay, Croyd."

"Settle down, then. The worst is over. We're optimum now on maneuverability. Even if the last two static patches coalesce, it won't be any worse than this."

Greta managed to say, coherently, "I just wish this bronco would throw me."

"I won't kid you—it's still pretty bad. But now I'm fairly sure we'll get through. I have to go now."

"Croyd—"

"Yes, Greta?"

If the shaking hadn't addled her wits, she wouldn't have said it. "Did you love Lurla?"

He replied explicitly, "Meeka. Blen. Hahri."

She raised an arm, and after a couple of misses, slapped him twice on a shoulder. "Sorry, brother."

"Thanks, kid. You okay now? I really have to go."

"Beat it."

He tried to kiss her on the forehead, but the ship jolted and he bit her. She cursed and laughed, and he rubbed his aching teeth and apologized.

"Beat it," she said again.

He patted her shoulder and wove out of the room.

By six bells she was able to unstrap herself and sit unsteadily on the edge of the bunk. Presently she asked herself what good her prayers had done. She concluded on two benefits: she was alive, and she was not seasick.

Standing, swaying, she stripped and went into the shower. By now she was used to the irradiation without water. At least she came out clean, and she didn't have to dry fast to avoid being chilled; indeed, she didn't have to dry at all.

She got into the change of clothes that Gorsky had provided. Gorsky's shape made it inappropriate for Gorsky to provide Gorsky's clothes; Gorsky had stolen these from a midshipman. Well, so it was plastic shorts and a jersey and pants. Having donned them, Greta dropped her own clothing into the nuclear cleaner and headed for the ward room.

The electronics lieutenant and one other officer were there. They mixed her a martini. She sipped it thoughtfully, noticing that they had transfixed the olive with a periscope-toothpick as a challenge to her sportsmanship.

When the liquor was all gone, she ate the olive. They applauded her self-restraint. By now some others were in, quietly drinking. The ship was fairly steady. She could see that all of them were bushed.

Grosky and Bellardi came in together. Gorsky was stolid; she went for the zac. Bellardi seemed almost in pain; he stood, disoriented, in the middle of the room.

On an impulse, Greta threw him together a double martini and went over and placed it in his hand.

Bellardi looked at the martini. He clutched it. He looked at Greta. He looked at the martini. He slugged down half of it. He looked at it. He looked at Greta. His mouth began to curl upward, his wonderful teeth began to show.

"Better?" she asked.

"Better." He sipped at it. He looked at her hands. "You don't have one?"

"I had one."

"Have another. Mix me another while you're at it."

"Double?"

He thought that over carefully. He shook his head. "Single."

She mixed them. They stood together and sipped.

Rather abruptly, Captain Gorsky was in her seat. Awareness of this fact spread swiftly, and they all hurried to their seats. They waited for the captain's preliminary words.

Jaw hard, eyes straight forward, the captain said, "We are beholden to matter for its blessings."

"Affirmative," said Bellardi.

Then they could eat.

Croyd did not come in.

All had left the ward room except Greta and Bellardi.

They toyed with their liqueurs.

Bellardi said presently, "No etchings—but a few interesting tapes."

Greta finished her liqueur. "I find interesting tapes interesting."

They arose together. She did not take his arm, but she stayed beside him as he walked to his cabin.

It was on the side of the ship opposite to the visiting captain's cabin; it was a duplicate of the visiting captain's salon, complete with balcony and picture window, the only differences being that it was smaller and was only one room (although with a private head).

"Sit down," suggested Bellardi, closing and locking the bulkhead.

She saw his bunk and one chair. She took the chair.

He smiled happily. "Careful, aren't you?"

"Tasteful, anyhow," she retorted.

"I have *Music to Put Her to Sleep By*," he observed, "and *Music to Wake Her Up By*. What's your pleasure?"

"Didn't you mention that you had something interesting?"

"Let's start with booze. That will make anything interesting. Again, what's your pleasure?"

"How are you on zac?"

"No zac. How are you on Scotch?"

"It'll be new."

"Mixer?"

"Straight."

He poured two shot-glasses, handed her one, and sipped while she sipped. Then he said, "There is also the third, ambiguous choice: *Music to Fly Her By.*"

She responded, "I'll listen to it. But objectively."

He started the music and sat on his bunk, looking at her. She sipped and looked at him. Tony Bellardi was a most attractive guy; also, he was not a four-flusher.

Croyd was also a most attractive guy, and also not a four-flusher. Croyd, however, was her brother. She was his sister. Definitely.

Tony finished his Scotch. "More?"

She finished hers and held out her glass. "More."

He said cautiously, "Never let it be said that Bellardi got one drunk and took advantage of her."

She said sweetly, "I can drink you under your bunk."

His smile flashed; he filled the glasses. They sipped, eyes on eyes.

The music *was* interesting.

He said, his eyes straying from her eyes, "I noticed you when you first came aboard. That other time, I mean."

"I noticed you noticing me."

His eyes went back to hers. His expression was quizzical. "Let me be frank, Greta. *That* time, your body really folded me up—but I got no feeling of a female. Isn't that funny?"

She concentrated on her Scotch. "Let's just say that I can understand."

"But now I *do!* Isn't that funny? Then, *no*—now, *yes!*"

Her eyes came up to his—but his were not on hers. She said gently, "Just then, I was all business."

"But now you are not?"

"Not entirely."

He had set his glass aside. Elbows on knees, his folded hands were supporting his chin, and now his gaze was all-inclusive. "Greta—"

"Yes, Tony."

"I am going to make love to you. Do you mind?"

She finished her Scotch. Contemplating the glass, she said, "How can I mind? You are a man."

"Do you mean that you are disappointed because I am just like all the other men?"

"A man is a man. I'd be disappointed if you weren't."

He stood. "Come here, Greta."

She looked at him steadily. "You come here."

He advanced one pace. "I'm standing at the middle ground. Let's meet."

She considered his eyes. She set down her glass, rose, and came to him.

He took her gently by the shoulders. His hands liked her shoulders.

She came closer.

He took her in his arms and kissed her gently.

The kiss warmed.

The embrace grew mutually torrid.

Suddenly he felt her hands pressing against his chest. He held her tighter. She thrust harder, making noises in her throat. He frowned, holding her obstinately. She thrust free and stood back, breathing hard, bewildered. She ran a hand back through her hair.

She said, "My God, Tony—I almost forgot—I'm a *virgin,* now!"

He stood, indecisive. "How's that again?"

"Tony—listen, dear—the *most* we can do is *neck!* That's the *most* we can do—"

He took her in his arms again. "Greta—I have nothing against virgins—"

Decisively she pushed him away. "Tony—I *can't!* I *can't!*"

His mouth was not smiling. His heavy brows were not gentle. "I don't enjoy having a woman make a fool of me on my own ship."

Distressed, Greta came to him, seizing his shoulders. "Tony, dear—I didn't *mean* to make a fool of you—Tony—"

Putting his hands on her breasts, he pushed *her* away. "Make up your mind, Greta—either lie on that bunk, or get out of here."

Greta turned her back on him, repeatedly striking a fist into a palm. "We women make more damn trouble! Tony, honest, I *did* mean to be nice—but I *can't* be!"

Silence.

She heard Bellardi say, "Something to do with Croyd, maybe?"

She didn't answer.

After a long wait, Bellardi got out a forced chuckle. He said, "I think you're a good girl, Greta. Get the hell out of here."

The ship was bouncing a bit, but it was only the turbulence created by deceleration. Clinging to the rail, Greta made her way to the captain's cabin and knocked at the bulkhead. Invited in, she stood uncertainly while the captain, seated at her desk with her back to Greta, came to a stopping-place in her paper work. Then she turned and invited Greta to sit, but Greta did not really hear her.

"I need a job," said Greta bluntly. "Is there anything that you can give me on the *Rhea?*"

Up went Gorsky's brows. "I could swear you in as an ordinary seaman, but I can't see you in that spot, although we do have a few women. On the other hand, I suppose I could do with a civilian secretary and release my yeoman for other duty. What can you do?"

Greta spread her hands. "I'm a college graduate. Bad autotyping, self-taught. No filing."

"How did you get the 4-U classification? Wait, never mind. I keep getting mixed-up on that one. Well, it's a possibility. Maybe I need brains more than skills. If it doesn't work out, I can drop you off at home base with a good recommendation. When can you start?"

"Now. Tonight, if you like."

"Let's wait until this Daphne operation is under control." Gorsky looked at her closely. Then she said again, "Sit down."

Greta sat on the edge of the sofa, not looking at the captain.

"Something wrong," said Gorsky. "You in love with that 4-U?"

Greta nodded.

"No response, you figure?"

A nod.

"He's a fool. Why don't you divert yourself with Commander Bellardi? He'd be awful willing."

Greta smiled small. "I know. But that wouldn't work."

Gorsky frowned suddenly. "This is a tight ship. If you've already frustrated Bellardi, maybe I'd better not take you on."

Greta looked up, distressed. "I hadn't thought of that."

"Wait, I'll ask him." To Greta's chagrin, the captain raised the exec on her deck visicom. "Mr. Bellardi. Any objections if I take on the young lady as my secretary for at least this cruise?"

Bellardi, half-grinning, put his mouth into alum-shape. "Is she there?" he demanded.

"That's right."

"No objections, Captain. Tell her I'll be good."

"Out," said the captain, and snapped off. She turned to Greta. "That's all right, then, or at least we'll make it a working assumption. Now tell me about Croyd."

"Nothing to tell. He calls me sister, but I'm not even that."

"He looks powerful, but maybe he has no manhood."

"Please don't ask questions, but I can assure you that he has."

"Maybe he really *does* care for you like a sister."

"Then I want incest."

"Do you want marriage?"

"Definitely."

"Forget it. With him, anyway. He's not the type."

"You read me. So I want a job."

"And you have it. Do you want a drink?"

"Do you have any Scotch?"

"Bellardi is the only officer on this ship who keeps Scotch. Here, I'll ask him to bring some—"

"NO!"

"Oh. Well, how about a restorative pill and then some zac?"

"That might do."

Gorsky fixed the drinks, and sat with Greta on the other end of the sofa. Presently Gorsky said, looking at the ceiling, "Once I was in love with a man who wasn't paying much attention to me. Finally I took off. When I ran into him again a few years later, he was married. We had a few drinks, and it came out that he had wanted to marry me. He'd just been preoccupied with his mission."

Greta thought that over.

Presently she said, "If you'll excuse me, Captain, I think I should go to bed now."

"Take a thought to bed with you," Gorsky suggested. "There isn't any establishment in this fleet. A smart girl like you could make officer rank in a hurry, and she could move up very fast—on performance, I mean—on duty, that is. Are you sure you just want to be a secretary?"

41

Half a day out from Daphne, Croyd once again locked himself into his controls, again with Gorsky and Greta watching. This time he was able to get into the neighborhood of the planet with relative ease.

The scene was quite different from the previous time. Then, Croyd had come in on the planet long after the de-

parture of the gnurls, which had taken place six hours before H-Hour. They had walked their human bodies into their little privateer ships, which had been lurking in various convenient places of concealment, and had resumed their own gnurl-bodies, and suggestioned the humans, and sent them back to the suicide-assignment of completing activation while the gnurls took-off for Melisandre, driving to get swiftly beyond range of the developing implosion. Thus they had already been nine hours out before they had become certain that something had gone wrong. They had lost another two hours executing a wide turn-around and then hovering to be sure. At length they had concluded that they must go back to investigate. It was rather like returning to a bomb that hadn't gone-off on schedule, to find out whether the fuse had burned out, knowing that the bomb might go-off anyway.

Landing again, the gnurls had no time to go through all their previous elaborate precautions for concealment. They touched down close to the tower, the entire fleet of privateers, and emerged from their ships in their own bodies, mingling with the zombie-humans to size up the situation. Their ships remained in full sight as, to save time, they put the humans to sleep, letting them fall where they were, and tore personally into the work of rebuilding the tower.

As Croyd with his I-ray subjectivity touched down on Daphne the work had been completed, the tower was again ready to be activated, and the gnurls were in process of reawakening the humans and resuggestioning them for their suicide operation. Croyd, knowing that he had six hours or so of gnurl-escape time to play with, let the process go on while he walked about and scouted the situation. At one time he disconnected, and, back at the controls on the *Rhea* as it hurtled in toward Daphne, he issued some swift suggestions to Captain Gorsky.

"Affirmative," responded the captain, leaving the room promptly.

Croyd reconnected and Greta watched him alone.

What followed was a swift repetition of Lurla-Croyd's operation on Ceres, with one major exception: Croyd had

no intention of getting anybody killed, gnurl or human, if he could avoid it. Selecting the gnurl commander and placing himself invisibly before the man's eyes, he hypnotized him, suggestioned him, breedered him; then he stood back to watch results. The chain reaction worked more perfectly than one might have expected with humans, for the gnurls as a species were more effective with hypnosis and there were no weak links. The spectacle disturbed Croyd profoundly. His brain kept sending him memories of Lurla-Croyd.

Turning from it presently, confident that it was proceeding satisfactorily, he began to wander about the site, particularly inspecting the connections at the base of the tower. There was nothing he could do about them until the gnurls had departed, and then he would work through the humans to disconnect. Having sized them up adequately, his attention wandered. He caught sight of the dome which housed the computer that had once been his body-brain. Curiosity drew him into the dome, and he examined the computer with a fey feeling, rather like that of a man-soul looking at the dead body that he has departed.

An impossible idea began to be born.

The past cannot be changed or in any way affected. Materially, that is.

But mentally?

He thought it through.

If anything were to go wrong, Captain Gorsky was in position to back him up. The gnurls had already been suggestioned, their departure would come-off as planned. The humans would proceed with preparations to activate the tower, but long before the new H-Hour, Gorsky would land and take over the situation; she had been briefed on what was to follow.

Croyd decided.

It was precisely executed. He entered the computer subjectively and uptimed his mind to the old H-Hour minus ten seconds. His sensors looked up and saw Lurla's ship sweeping in. His mind reached out to it, seized three other minds, and drew them into the computer. Then he uptimed with them to germinality.

Two of the minds, both masculine, were hopelessly confused. The third, which was feminine, was groggy but vaguely sensate. "Croyd?" it asked faintly. "Croyd?"

Leaving the computer, he rounded up the gnurl commander and two other officers, brought them back to the computer, and rather elaborately resuggestioned all three.

Then he told Lurla: "This one is for you. Jump!"

Obediently she entered the commander. With a little persuasion, her two officers entered the others.

The commander, whose own mind was somnolent and whose body was activated now by Lurla, looked confusedly about. "Croyd?" he kept saying. "Croyd?"

Invisibly, he replied, "I'm here, Lurla, but you won't find me. Your suicide dive did destroy the tower; it's three days later now, and I'm here to mop up the operation. You're in the body of the commander, and you're taking this crew back to Melisandre."

"But what will I do then? I have no body of my own."

"You'll think of something, once you get home."

"I suppose so. Maybe I am thinking of something already. Croyd—"

"Lurla?"

"Goodbye again."

"Goodbye again."

The commander hesitated, then turned decisively away, followed by the officers.

The chain reaction was completed. The gnurls entered their ships and took off.

When they were out of sight, Croyd turned his attention to the humans. This chain reaction was less efficient, since command-lines were not so clear and since Croyd frequently had to give booster-shots to weakening links. After perhaps an hour, however, all the humans were lethargically sitting on the ground.

Croyd returned subjectively to the *Rhea* and disconnected.

He sat there for a few moments without turning. Greta watched him steadily.

Then he turned around to her, smiling happily. "Lurla's alive!" he told her.

Following him semisubjectively in the monitor, Greta hadn't at all comprehended the computer operation, but intuitively she had sensed that Lurla was impossibly involved. At his words, she became ambivalent: disturbed about Lurla; somehow glad about Lurla.

Now, though, he was radiant. Rising like an updraft, he strode across to Greta and seized her hands and lifted her off the sofa and took her in his arms, hugging her tightly, swinging her back and forth a little, murmuring, "She's alive, Greta! *One* of them is still alive . . ."

Her arms went around his neck, she hugged him, she kissed his cheek, she pressed her cheek tightly against his. Lurla's mysterious coming-alive had somehow released him for Greta, and she did not understand it at all, not any of it.

42

Rhea touched down. Her marine-crew swarmed to the ground, Bellardi commanding, Croyd with him. Gorsky watched alertly from the bridge, Greta beside her.

There wasn't actually much for the marines to do; they took up guard posts but they felt rather silly about it. Croyd and the electronics officer and the demolition officer took charge. Croyd got another suggestioning-breeding reaction going, and by ones and twos the newly alert human rangers of the Daphne Galactic Park reported to the two officers for orders.

Correctly counting on their loyalty, Croyd's suggestion had been one of full awakening: "Be yourself—remember each detail of the work you did for the gnurls—respond

totally and carefully to us as we direct you in the job of undoing it safely."

The basic disconnects were accomplished quickly; the repulsor delivery system was inactivated permanently, and so were the timed detonators. There remained, however, a long and touchy process of disarming a system of detonator caps that were seeded in tunnels underground all the way to the core of Daphne. If just one of these were to detonate spontaneously, it would drive critical masses together and blow up the planet. Probably the explosion would not trigger the suns at this distance, but that was a kind of security that gave small comfort to the men and women who were riding the bomb. Once that had been done, the work of removing the fenrite could begin. During the first twenty-four hours Croyd used the old familiar computer to determine that removal of the fenrite would not sufficiently reduce the mass of Daphne to cause orbital perturbations. He talked this over with the chief ranger, and they tentatively decided to recommend to Galactic that the catacombs remain empty, to be developed as a tourist attraction. The fenrite, which would be removed with suction pumps and spewed into impermeable small containers under intensive precautions against its radioactivity, would be distributed to various government control points throughout the galaxy.

During the second day the admiral's flagship arrived, and it was followed at two- and three-hour intervals by ten other ships of the fleet which had been disposed in various quarters of the Sol neighborhood, ready to jump in any direction. Daphne had become, for the time being, a major military base. Croyd had little time for Greta. When he wasn't directing the disarming operations, he was in strategic conference with the admiral and the fleet commanders.

On the third day the admiral arranged a Morse hookup with Nereid, utilizing Sol's thin-remote photon stream as a standing beam for the near-instantaneous conductivity of communication rays that were structurally analogous to I-rays. At both ends of the hookup, robot vocalizers translated the Morse impulses into audible words, and vice versa; and meanwhile they were recorded on tape for later

print-out if necessary. The robot was incapable of imitating voices or vocal inflections, so what was heard at both ends was monotonous and unidentifiable with any personality, but a device that was a crude analogy of an identiphone afforded adequate security.

Admiral: "Leclerc here. Who's there?"

Robot: "Tannen here. Please report."

Admiral: "I'll say that all is secure. However, I'd better let Croyd report in detail."

Tannen: "Good. Put him on."

Croyd: "Croyd here, Your Excellency."

Tannen: "Let me start by saying that everything is under control here at Nereid. Your friend Derien has done wonders. He is here with me, and so is Herod. By the way, Herod is inhabited by a gnurl, and your friend Lurla had set up a chain reaction to complete the infiltration, but Herod went sour on the gnurls, and he and Derien and I got the chain reaction short-circuited. Did you read me?"

Croyd: "I think so. You said all is under control and the chain reaction is short-circuited. Did you say Herod is a gnurl?"

Tannen: "That's right. He and I are going to decide what to do about him. Do you wish to be in on the decisions?"

Croyd: "I think so, yes."

Tannen: "When will you be back here?"

Croyd: "We've made all disconnects, and the disarming of the caps is well under way. As soon as the fenrite begins to come out in an orderly way, I can leave. Say, departure in two weeks. I'll leave my transportation to the admiral."

Leclerc: "I'll bring him back on the flagship. I'm leaving Captain Gorsky and the *Rhea* in control of the local situation."

Tannen: "Then, Croyd, we'll hold up all decisions about three weeks until you can be present. But I don't have any background to follow what you've been saying about disconnects and so on, except what Herod has been able to tell me."

Croyd briefed him.

Tannen: "One question, Croyd. First, who is listening?"

Croyd: "The admiral and his immediate staff."

Tannen: "Admiral Leclerc, would you be good enough to ask your staff to be excused for a few minutes?"

The admiral courteously dismissed his staff.

Tannen: "Is your room soundproof?"

Leclerc: "Affirmative."

Tannen: "Kindly deactivate the tape. Vocal repro only."

Leclerc: "It is done, Your Excellency."

Tannen: "Mr. Croyd, on your return, would you consider temporarily replacing Chairman Herod, in an acting capacity?"

Leclerc stared at Croyd.

Croyd: "In an acting capacity, temporarily, yes, Your Excellency. But please do not consider making it permanent. I wouldn't want it, and it would be better for Galactic if I remained—well, looser than that."

Tannen: "Good, in a way. Admiral, you may reactivate the tape, but let's keep out the staff a while longer. Croyd, what is your working concept of the Magellanic Cloud situation?"

Croyd: "In my opinion, we are quite capable of conquering the Large Magellanic Cloud, although a good deal of preliminary scouting would be required to support my opinion. I have a strong sense of a totalitarian government, probably strongly centered on the home planet, with little if any real initiative anywhere else in their galaxy. I'd compare the situation to the Roman Empire in the fourth and fifth centuries, when all roads led to Rome but no roads led out of it. The gnurls consider themselves a master race. They are arrogant about it; they seem paranoid with respect to our galaxy. And I have seen no evidence of defenses other than these privateer craft who raid our galaxy and presumably patrol their own planets. Actually, they were able to use only these privateers to mount their Daphne expedition. If we can solve the supply-line problem and put our ships through some intensive interspace exercises, with suitable modifications, we may be in. By the way, Captain Gorsky of the *Rhea* has some constructive ideas along these lines."

Tannen: "Good. So, tentatively, we can clean up on Melisandre and get rid of the threat. Now for the next question. Tentatively, do you think we *should?*"

Croyd: "Negative."

Tannen: "Why not?"

Croyd: "We think they are paranoid in supposing that we plan to attack them. If we do attack them, we prove that they were not paranoid, but sane. Instead, let's prove them paranoid."

Leclerc murmured: *"Ah, bon!"*

Tannen (after a pause): "I have a feeling that the quip masks reasons that are deeper."

Croyd: "Affirmative."

Tannen: "Mr. Croyd, would you wish to philosophize a little?"

Croyd (grinning eagerly): "Affirmative, Your Excellency. But not in Morse with a voice robot."

Tannen: "I quite understand, believe me." Pause. "One more question . . ."

Croyd: "Your Excellency?"

Tannen: "What about you and Thoth?"

Croyd: "I prefer not to doubt the testimony of my sainted mother."

Tannen (having coughed once): "Will you be good enough to let me talk with the admiral? You stay, though . . ."

Afterward, Croyd asked the admiral for a little privacy with a visicom, and he raised the *Rhea* and got Greta at the other end.

Croyd: "Care to do a little overnight camping?"

Greta: "Just give me time to fix my face. And—something personal."

Croyd: "Go on."

Greta (small voice): "Know where I can find some black hair tint?"

Croyd: "What for?"

Greta: "Haven't had time to do my hair. Coming in blond at the roots. Looks weird."

Croyd: "Your eyes are getting greener, too."

Greta: "They—they *are?*"

Croyd: "Do you like making decisions?"

Greta: "Not particularly. Why?"

Croyd: "If you take action to tint your hair, that will be making a decision. Why don't you just stay indecisive?"

Pause.

Greta (voice velvet): "For me, there's a good deal of meaning, there."

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They did it dude-style, using an aircar. They made just like rich tourists. A ranger briefed them at the local ranger station, gave them maps, issued gear, provided the aircar, checked its antigrav.

For an hour they flew over the exquisite wilderness of Daphne. Above them, the sky was blue and white-clouded; below them, the ground was green and the lakes were blue and the shadows were long in the afternoon. There was very little talking that they were doing.

The camp he had picked was a small clearing beside a mountain lake forested with mighty pines. When a planet is a park and the tourists are few, campsite restrictions can be relaxed and the grass doesn't get ruined. There is a certain wild-animal problem, but neither of them felt anything but curiosity about the animals.

They didn't bother with a tent; rain wasn't expected, and Daphne has no mosquitoes. Setting up their camp very simply, they gathered wood and laid a fire and ignited it and put on a large skittle to preheat for pan-broiling the steak they'd brought. Then they skinny-dipped and ducked each other a few times, and got out,

and dried, and dressed; and Greta dropped on the steak while Croyd sat inhaling the smell.

They tackled it voraciously.

They washed it down with beer. By then it was dark, if "dark" is what you can call a night on Daphne when there are few clouds. Daphne has no moon, but the star-glow at the nucleus of the Milky Way was like the brightest imaginable moonlight anywhere.

"Maybe we should have brought a tent," said Greta. "How can we sleep?"

"It's dark over there under the trees."

They brooded.

"Come here," said Croyd.

She came and sat beside him. He put an arm around her, and she nestled close.

She said presently: "Tell me how it was with Lurla."

"I don't know whether I can."

"Do you want to?"

"Yes. Never a prior Lurla, never a future Lurla: unique, unforgettable—and episodic. Have I perhaps said it?"

"Almost." She was looking at him. "There was a way you felt when she died, and a way you felt when she came alive, and a thing you said both times. Do you want to tell me about that?"

He thought.

He was looking at her. Aboard the *Rhea,* grace to a female yeoman, she had found some hair-tint; only it was not black, but ash-blonde, so that it had restored her artificially to naturalness. Her eyes were deep green, and her medium-generous lips were capable of wide smiling, and she was slender wherever slenderness was desirable, and she was tall, and her long legs were youthful—all now without qualification.

"Want to break us a couple of beers?" he asked.

She got up, and did it, and handed him his, and settled back on the ground within his waiting arm. He squeezed her gently to him, and then relaxed and thought some more while he sipped.

"I guess I feel some guilt," he said. "I've seen so many

people die. I've—seen quite a few women I liked—grow old and die. But I don't change, except inwardly."

The meaning of the simple words opened up within her like a cold umbrella. He continued to hold her gently.

She said, quite calmly, "I suppose a man who can reconstruct a woman—can also reconstruct himself."

"Anybody could, really, Greta. I just found out how, is all. I get a chuckle out of the rigorous thinking of doctrinaire materialists like Gorsky. The difference between matter and mind is no more than a difference between systematic docility and free-ranging spontaneity. It's a structural difference, with mind in command more or less, and with matter either serving or restricting mind. If a mental disturbance can create a psychosomatic disturbance of body matter, then, by the same token, mental health can create physical health. I've just learned some techniques, is all."

Silence.

"How old are you, Croyd?"

He hugged her a little and grinned. "Will you tell me how old *you* are?"

She looked at him sidelong. "Let's just say, twenty-one or so."

"All right, kid. I'm thirty-nine or so. Shall we leave it there?"

They brooded.

She said then, "So you—have this thing about—women you've touched dying on you, whether they grow old or not. So when Lurla died—heroically, for your cause—it shriveled you all up inside, and that was why you couldn't talk to me. But when you brought her back to life and sent her on her way, you opened all out again, and we could be together. Is that about it?"

"That's about it."

She settled herself against him. "I guess I wouldn't want to grow old and die on you."

"I wouldn't want you to."

"Not that it matters now—but did you ever get around to registering that marriage?"

"Haven't touched base with a government. Wait, I can do it tomorrow at Park HQ."

Her heart paused, then pounded. "Then you—haven't registered the annulment either."

"No."

"But you will—tomorrow morning."

"Are you trying to be decisive again?"

She didn't speak then, but he felt her thought say: *Do you love me?*

He said in her mind: *Meekablen'ahri.*

She savored it. She was remembering when her feet had been his feet, her hands his hands, her vision his vision, his mind wordlessly guiding hers. Was she, like Lurla, only a possibly unforgettable episode for this man who outlived women? If she could only enter his brain . . . But she couldn't. But he had said *meekablen'ahri*—and *he* would not say it cheaply.

Greta raised her head to kiss him softly on the side of the neck. Then she pressed her face against his chest. She murmured: "You'll go away with Leclerc, and I'll go away with Gorsky. Meanwhile, my dear, perhaps more than any two people in this galaxy we have ground for believing in each other—no matter what."

CODA

(*A Postscript appears on the next page.*)

POSTSCRIPT

Although there is no exact dating for *Croyd*, the story-era is several centuries into the space age; but some readers may have noticed that there is little reference to any philosophical or literary figure subsequent to the post-medieval twentieth century. This may result from the peculiarly potent projections of pragmatists like Dewey and operationalists like Einstein—each of whom, in his own way, opened up philosophy, science and art to embrace all possibilities, and then perversely declared that certain things were impossible. During the next few centuries the humanities were so intricately concerned with preserving the unlimited operational scope of pragmatism and relativity—while refurbishing certain more classical restrictions which could be used to destroy the impossibilities in pragmatism and relativity—that sweeping creative work outside of technology was impossible. Hence, in Croyd's era, it was the names of twentieth-century intellectuals that you dropped, if only to refute them.

Of course there were scattered exceptions—notably twenty-fourth-century Nike Pan, quoted up front. Here is one more paragraph from *Plato and the Stars:*

"All conscious body-adventuring is mind-adventuring. For mind is ever dependent on its generating, sustaining, nourishing, informing, stimulating, transporting body—as an embryo depends on its placenta, an infant on its mother, an adult on his culture. But even though each mind images itself in bodily terms and suffuses its minding with physicality, mind *is not* body, and mind *can be* more valuable."

CROYD

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