



MATING *Centre*

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The Mating Center

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ONE

Teleman couldn't remember when he had first experienced the strange torment. The restlessness, the almost frightening desire to behave like some mad criminal, would come upon him at the most unexpected moments.

He'd find himself turning his head and staring wildly at the women who passed him on the travel strip. He'd watch them while they went striding on ahead of him toward the mating and child-rearing centers, never taking his eyes from them until they were swallowed up in the golden glow from the distant buildings.

It was incredible, and completely unlawful. It made no sense at all. He was an engineer and a construction worker, not a sex-privileged man. Theoretically all physical desire had been eliminated from his biogenetic heritage for four generations.

In the year 2061 only one man in fifty was supposed to feel the stirring. He had read about it in books, of course. But the scientific descriptions had never stirred him before, and neither had the sight of the passing women, swaying their hips in voluptuous abandonment as they went about their appointed tasks.

The very word "seductive" had been to him an intellectual concept solely. Emotionally it had awakened no response in him, no real understanding of how a man could be drawn from his work by enticements of the flesh that were as coldly meaningless as a row of numerals set down at random on a blank sheet of paper.

Meaningless once, but now.... NOW.... Another woman passed him, her eyes downcast, her tightly-sheathed breasts burgeoning despite their bound state, breaking through the restraining, semi-translucent fabric. Like great tropical blooms the breasts of the women seemed, ensnared by clinging vines which were parasitic and wholly pernicious, a new growth introduced by Man in a jungle of his own cruel planting.

How cruel it was to select one woman out of fifty and say to her alone: "You may mate and bear children." How cruel to compel the rest to conceal their charms and pretend to be completely sexless!

Teleman drew in his breath sharply. What was happening to him? Why should he feel angry and resentful when he knew that only one woman in fifty could be stirred by the sight of a man, or respond to a man's love-making? Had not all other women been made virtually sexless in their mental processes by selective mating and other gene-altering techniques?

Surely a woman without physical desire had no need to appear seductive or to flaunt her charms. And surely a man without physical desire would not care at all if a woman lacked a mating look, and was just a human being more fragile than himself with contours that were softer and more rounded.

Am I going mad? he wondered. In all the books there was no reference to the possibility of a change in non-sex-privileged men and women. It could hardly occur biologically. How could it, when all desire had been bred out of the non-sex-privileged for four generations?

To every man his appointed task, his niche in the social fabric. And to every woman. The sex-privileged were naturally in the minority. How could it have been otherwise, when there was so great a need for trained specialists in an advanced technological society? How could a reasonable and thoughtful man fly in the face of what history had confirmed time and time again?

Had not three great societies gone down in flaming ruin because Man had permitted his animal instincts to block the road to progress?

Another woman passed him and this time the stirring became almost uncontrollable. He had a wild desire to abandon all restraint, cross the strip to her side and plead with her for permission to take her into his arms and make passionate love to her. She was blonde and very beautiful, her hair a golden fleece spread fanwise across the dazzling whiteness of her shoulders. Her garments were free-flowing, all of her charms tantalizingly unconfined. The tips of her full breasts were clearly visible, pushing against the material of her tunic, and the other curving, secret places of her body were revealed in the play of light and shadow, the rippling of fabric. Her eyes were not downcast, but bold and fearless and she met his gaze searchingly and without embarrassment, as if she were greeting a sex-privileged man without shame in the mating center.

He knew at once that she was a sex-privileged woman. No modesty of attire had been imposed on her. Her lips were heavily rouged and her slender young body had the supple grace of one adept in the arts which can only be learned at Eros' shrine.

She returned his gaze steadily for an instant, with an unmistakable look of amorous invitation. Then, slowly, her eyes hardened and her lips curled in scorn and derision. His hesitation and the flush which had mounted to his cheekbones had quite transparently given him away. He was not one of the sex-privileged. She instantly lost all interest in him, and moved away from him with a slight shrug, as if the stern taboos erected by society did not in any way concern her.

A feeling of despair, of bitter hopelessness, made him groan inwardly and increase the length of his stride. Swiftly the moving travel strip continued to carry him toward the heart of the city, past suburban gardens bright with vermillion-petaled flowers and small artificial lakes which gleamed like gigantic garnets in the early morning sunlight.

It was difficult to wait patiently on the travel strip for the city to sweep close. Walking was not illegal and few energetic men and women could resist an impulse to exercise their legs and swing their arms before their technological duties compelled them to perform just one task well in a glass-enclosed activity cell.

One task well! He must never allow himself to forget how important that was. There would always be a constantly growing need for men and women conditioned by heredity and training to bend a machine to their will or secure the right answers to difficult problems in the research laboratories and industrial administration units.

Without such specialists the entire fabric of twenty-first century civilization would be rent asunder. In fact—

Teleman began to tremble. A non-sex-privileged woman had brushed with outrageous brazenness against him and he had thrown out one arm in an instinctive gesture of self-protection. Off balance, he had gone stumbling past her, and now she was at his side, grasping him firmly by the elbow and helping him to his feet.

She was trembling also, and her breath was warm on his face. The dark wilderness of her hair was more intoxicatingly fragrant than he had ever dreamed a woman's hair could be. She was whispering strange words to him, her breath quickening.

"It is breaking down! Can't you feel it? Can't you tell? For five days and nights now I have wanted only one thing—to be embraced by a man. But no man free to choose a mate would look at me twice, because I am not supposed to feel as I do. If I should attempt to visit a mating center I would be condemned to death. The man, too, would be punished. To court me would be a crime—anti-social, monstrous."

She touched the small, glittering insignia on her right breast, invisible from a distance, which indicated all too clearly her precise status as a specialized industrial worker. Instinctively Teleman glanced down at his own status insignia. On his right shoulder there gleamed a tiny silver bridge supported by hydraulic pillars, a miracle in miniature of engineering perfection.

For the first time the silver emblem seemed a badge of dishonor, an insult to his dignity as a man with the blood warm in his veins and a desperate need to love and be loved.

Her voice became cajoling. "To a sex-privileged man making love to me would be a crime. But you can look at me, touch me, hold me close if you wish. The Monitors have passed no laws to protect a woman like me or a man like you. Who would believe that we could desire each other in an intimate, physical way? Let us show them how mistaken they are! Let us make a mockery of their cruel laws here and now! Let us make love boldly as we have every right to do."

"No!" he heard himself protesting. Forcibly, almost brutally, he freed himself, untwining her clinging arms and turning his face aside to avoid the maddening thrust of her lips against his tightly clenched teeth.

"For five minutes I have been watching you!" she cried. "Listen to me. Don't be a fool. I *know* you feel as I do. You have followed and disrobed with your eyes every woman who passed you on the strip, and some of them were quite ugly, if you would like me to be completely honest about it. Perhaps you resent candor in a woman and prefer the lying sort. I don't particularly care, because I know that I am so desirable in your sight that you would like to take me into your arms and tell me how beautiful I am. To whisper it tenderly while you loosen my gown and—"

"No! It would be a dark and terrible crime!" Hammers had started pounding in Teleman's temples and he could scarcely breathe.

"You fool, you fool!" she went on quickly, unbuckling the golden belt at her waist and throwing back her head. Her shimmering dark hair was a miracle of loveliness, the sunlight bright upon it. She stood very straight, her knees together, her full red lips slightly parted, morning-dew moist.

"Some of the women who passed were not beautiful at all. But others were radiant and when you stared at them your eyes lit up. In your eyes desire was a high-leaping flame. You were powerless to quench its bright splendor. You were tormented and afraid. But you did not really want the fire to dwindle and expire. I was watching you closely. I could not have been mistaken. There are some things no woman can be deceived about."

She moved close to him again. She caught his right earlobe between her lips, nibbled at it, whispered passionately into the chambered recess, "Fire! In your veins and in mine! In every breath we draw and when we breathe as one."

"No!" he cried, in desperate protest.

"Look at me," she pleaded. "Am I not beautiful? Make love to me now. Do not be afraid. There are no other pedestrians close to us at the moment. If they see us at all we will in nowise astonish them. The sex-privileged often embrace quickly and furtively on their way to the mating center, when distance turns them into small, barely distinguishable figures black against the sunrise. Everyone expects it of them, since they are naturally on fire with impatience."

"I have never seen—"

"At close range, no. But surely you have seen men and women acting strangely at a great distance, bobbing like tiny sails in a breeze when fortune favors them, and gives them as wide an expanse of empty travel strip to rejoice in as we now have at our disposal."

"There are at least five men and women coming toward us," he protested, but his throat was so dry the words were barely audible.

"Mere marionettes, dwarfed by distance. Think of them as such. What do they know of love's splendor? In all likelihood they are non-sex-privileged men and women, empty husks, hollow shells filled with ashes. We were like them once, but all that is changed now. Embrace me quickly and boldly. Hurry! Whisper sweet words to me. Call me your life and your bride. Lover, be bold. Lover be sweet and gentle and fierce and ardent. Can you not see that I am aflame with passion? Make haste, my darling, my dearest one. The opportunity may not come again."

He looked at her then, really saw her in all of her womanly completeness for the first time. She had loosened all of the constricting bands which had confined her charms from neck to ankle only a moment before, so that her attire was now as free-flowing as the garb that was worn in the mating centers and occasionally on the travel strip by sex-privileged women who were unusually bold and fearless.

He did not stare at her garb for long. In mute adoration, his temples throbbing, he let his gaze travel downward from her pale, beautiful face to her swelling bosom and perfectly formed hips and the enchanting whiteness of her sylph-slender thighs.

The twin mounds of her breasts were rose-tipped and tip-tilted and there was a tiny mole just above her navel which made the whiteness seem even more of a miracle, just as a tiny beauty-patch will often enhance the loveliness of a face designed by nature to drive a man to a frenzy of desire, amidst a carnival-bright shower of confetti and the strains of amorous music.

His temples swelled to bursting and there was a roaring in his ears and deep within his groin a trip-hammer had started up and was pounding faster and faster.

She moaned and swayed toward him. Then she was in his arms and he could no longer see even her full, red lips, moist and trembling and so hungry for kisses that he feared for an instant that he would not be permitted to breathe.

He spread his mouth over her lips to subdue their vehemence and her tongue rebelled and came through in darting defiance and with so fierce an ardor that his mouth seemed filled with weaving filaments of flame.

His hands moved up and down and across her back and he held her so tightly pressed to his finely muscled body and she pressed so passionately against him in return that it was hard to believe that human flesh could endure so close an embrace without dissolving into fiery motes swirling mindlessly about in the blazing heat of the sun.

But the ecstasy which came to them both in the same moment was not mindless and if there was a dissolving it was of a different nature entirely.

TWO

His arms were still tight about her and she was murmuring strange words of endearment when one of the approaching pedestrians swung about and gestured to a lean, big-boned woman a few feet to the left of him. Both pedestrians increased their strides, their shoulders jogging in the sunlight.

The first gesturing pedestrian was a man with a squat, muscular body and coarse-featured face. He was not a civilian. He wore the iron-gray uniform of a Monitor-caste security guard and the insignia of his rank, a silver mace, glittered conspicuously on his chest. A thick leather belt encircled his waist, and a flexible metal rod terminating in a catgut whiplash dangled at his hip.

The big-boned woman also wore a uniform. It was so tight-fitting that it seemed molded to her body, accentuating its angular contours and stripping her of every vestige of femininity. Lantern-jawed and gimlet-eyed, she bore down upon Teleman and the girl in his arms with a stride so vigorous that she quickly outdistanced the man, who was moving forward resolutely enough but without undue haste.

Teleman turned pale when he saw her. He swung about, relaxing his grip on his companion's slender waist, and taking a swift step backward. His alarm communicated itself to the girl and she stepped back also, letting her arms drop to her side and shaking her head, as if her hair, in its wild disarray, had become a brand of shame as dangerously revealing as her flushed face and heightened breathing and the crumpled condition of her attire.

The memory of what had just happened seemed suddenly like a stone around Teleman's neck. He felt weighted down and helpless, and filled with a terrible burden of guilt. He felt as if he had been hurled from the heights into a dark, deep well and was sinking down in thrashing helplessness and despair, with the weight still attached to his throat.

He dared not meet the bony woman's savagely condemnatory gaze or the gaze of her companion, who had gripped the whiplash at his waist in one of his wide hands and was using the other to gesture with.

The bony woman was the first to speak. She came to a halt directly in front of Teleman and the girl and looked them up and down, her lips curling back from her teeth in scorn and loathing.

"You are not privileged to make love," she said. "You have done an outrageous thing. There is no precedent for such behavior. It cannot be tolerated and you will both be punished. How severely I am not in a position to say. But you *will* be punished. You can rest assured of that."

"They may find themselves begging for death!" the Monitor-caste security guard said, halting at her side and slapping the metal-handled whiplash against his left palm with a look of brutal impatience in his red-rimmed, slitted eyes. He held himself

very straight, his gaze passing from Teleman to the girl and lingering with an insulting, utterly brazen boldness on the ivory-textured whiteness of her unbound breasts.

"Be quiet," the bony woman said. "I'll do the talking."

She looked directly at the girl, and her voice, when she spoke again, was harsh and derisive. "I have seen love-privileged man plant senseless kisses on fat lips," she said, her color rising, "and the sight has revolted me. But what I just saw was far more revolting. What is your name, girl?"

"Alicia," the girl replied. "We have done nothing wrong, nothing that is in the least shameful. The shame is all in your mind. You are a shriveled-up old harridan. You don't know the meaning of love and never will. No man would look at you twice."

The gaunt woman's face flamed scarlet. But her voice did not rise. She lowered it deliberately to a whisper and said with a venomous inflexion, strangely like the hiss of a cobra. "You will regret such talk. I warn you. For conduct so outrageous the death penalty may well be mandatory. The Monitors will decide by secret ballot. It is not for me to say. If it were, I would pity you, for I would like very much to tell this very dutiful and conscientious guard that he need exercise no restraint whatever."

"What would you have him do? Rape me?"

"Be silent, you little fool. You are straining my patience beyond endurance."

"He is a brute and would like to rape me. I can see it in his eyes."

"That is not true and you know it. He is a high-minded man and the very sight of you revolts him."

"That is true," the guard said, smiling. "The very sight of her revolts me." He winked as he spoke, but covertly and resumed his brazen staring.

The hypocrisy of it infuriated Teleman. Or perhaps it was the girl's incredible and splendid courage that made him leap to her defense, with no concern for his own safety.

He lunged forward and struck the security guard a resounding blow on the jaw, sending him reeling backwards.

The guard was taken so completely by surprise that he nearly fell. He had to throw out his arms to maintain his balance on the moving strip, and his staggering gait made him look distinctly ludicrous. He dropped the whiplash and bent to recover it, but before he could bring it into play Teleman was upon him. The hand-to-hand struggle which followed was a test of strength and Teleman was no weakling.

The two men fought with no holds barred, primitively and savagely. They rolled over four times, gouging, kicking, pummeling. Teleman absorbed punishment stoically, groaning only once and meting it out with a vigor and assurance that surprised him.

Fist fights and close in-fighting in general were not to his liking and he had no strong desire to engage in physical combat for its own sake. He liked to think of

himself as a completely civilized man who had risen above such barbarism. But there were times....

It was curious, but he did seem to be enjoying it, getting a thrill every time his right fist landed solidly on meaty flesh or increased the redness of the guard's leering, ruffianly face, already bloodied by a dozen previous jabs, the sturdiest kind of jabs delivered with a maximum of accuracy.

Over and over. Hit hard and often, and stop worrying about bruised knuckles or what would happen if the ugly son should get in a really crippling blow. It can't happen if you don't give him a chance to breathe freely or get his second wind. Keep at it, keep pounding away at him and you'll wear him down and turn him into a limp clown begging for quarter, begging for just a chance to get to his feet and wipe the blood from his mouth and blink glazed eyes in the sunlight.

It didn't end in quite that way. The thick-bodied security guard simply sighed once, heavily and unexpectedly, and rolled over on his back. He lay supine on the moving travel strip, his breathing harsh and ragged, in a grotesque sprawl with one arm twisted under him.

"You've killed him!" the gaunt woman shrieked. "You won't escape the death penalty now. Unlawful love-making and now deliberate, wilful homicide. You've attacked and killed a security guard. There is no more terrible crime—"

Teleman got to his feet slowly and a little wearily, rising first to one knee and shaking his head to clear it. For an instant he swayed unsteadily but he managed to retain his balance until the wave of dizziness passed.

"I haven't killed him," he said. "It might be better if I had. The most terrible crimes are the ones you would like to commit and usually do commit in the end. The brutal sadism in him may take many lives before someone discovers just how dangerous he is. He is about as high-minded as a rattlesnake."

"That's a lie!" the gaunt woman cried in furious protest. "Security guards are completely impartial. They do what they have to do to protect society from criminals like you and this girl. Unlawful love-making would destroy all specialization and without specialization we would all perish. The wickedness in you is beyond belief!"

"I don't intend to argue with you about it," Teleman heard himself saying, surprised by his own boldness. "This girl has done nothing criminal and neither have I. I intend to go on protecting her—with my life, if necessary."

The bony woman swayed back and forth, gripped by such an ungovernable access of rage that it drained all of the color from her cheeks and twisted her features into a mask so repellent that it made Teleman shudder and look away.

Alicia had drawn close to him again, and suddenly his arm was about her and they were facing the trembling, fury-convulsed crone together, in complete defiance of the authority she was still attempting to wield. The security guard was moaning and stirring a little but Teleman did not give him a second glance.

"We're leaving the strip," he said. "If you don't want to be hurt you'll stay right where you are. Don't compel me to use force to keep you here. I've never struck a woman in my life but I won't hesitate to use force if you turn stubborn. I'll have no choice."

"I'll shout for help," she threatened. "The instant you leave the strip! Just how far do you think you'll get? They'll put electronic scanners on every stretch of woodland, every back country shelter, every dwelling in this region. You'll be caught quickly enough, and brought back and punished. You're making the mistake of forgetting that we're living in a complex technological society with an interlocking network of crime-preventing mechanisms. No criminal can hope to escape for long."

"We'll risk it," Teleman said. "With luck I may be able to draw some of those mechanical fangs."

"A single, carefully directed blow on the head would knock her unconscious," Alicia said, a sudden hardness in her voice. "She might suffer a concussion, but the chances are she wouldn't. She has invited it by threatening to shout. Do you want me to do it? If you'll just let me have that whiplash for a moment—"

"No," Teleman said firmly, tightening his hold on her waist. "You're justified in suggesting it and I'm almost tempted to say yes. But I guess, because I'm a man, I can't be quite that objective and sensible about it. I couldn't just stand here and let you do it."

"I'm sorry I suggested it," Alicia said, all of the harshness gone from her voice. "I didn't really want to, but—"

"You'll be sorry you didn't!" the gaunt woman said, her eyes blazing with defiance and contempt. "Strike me if you dare. I haven't told you, but I'm Monitor 6Y9. Remember that! I am one of the *Ruling Monitors*. When you are brought back I will vote with the others—for death!"

"Wear the insignia on your uniform next time," Alicia flung back at her. "No, no. Strip yourself naked and wear it as a brand between your shriveled breasts. It is a mark of shame. I would rather die in torment than be a Monitor with all men hating me, and all women. Is that why you go in disguise, in the uniform of a female security guard? Is that why?"

"There is no need for me to wear the insignia of my high station," the gaunt woman said, drawing herself up in pride. "It is visible in my bearing. Monitors walk differently and talk differently from all other specialists. We look upon even the love-privileged with scorn."

"The truth at last!" Alicia flared. "Take care not to say that in public. You would be torn limb from limb!"

"Soon our rule will be absolute," the gaunt woman said. "There are strange and disturbing stirrings, rebellions taking place. Here and there the gene-controlled mutations are reverting to ancestral type. Men and women are becoming—aware of sex again. All men and women, not just the sex-privileged. It is an outrageous

regression, a corruption and a threat. It must be stamped out, by all of the Monitors acting in unison and imposing penalties so severe that no one will dare to do what you have done here today. No one not sex-privileged; and even the sex-privileged have become too numerous. Do you hear? Even they have become too numerous and just thinking about it—the bridal bed, everything that takes place in the mating centers night and day—has become hateful to me."

"That does not surprise me!" Alicia cried. "Envy can become a corrosive blight."

"It is not envy!"

"Listen to me, old woman, I will tell you what takes place in the mating centers. A young man, strong-limbed and comely, removes all of his garments and walks with proud and eager steps into the chamber of his beloved. She too has removed—"

"No, be quiet. I will not listen. Are you lost to all shame?"

"Not as lost to shame as you are, old woman. Listen well. You may never hear it again, at least, not from lips as eloquent as mine. It is all a great glory new to me—a glory just discovered, just revealed. So I can speak of it without restraint and without false modesty. It does not bring a blush to my cheeks. Why should it to yours?"

"You are a lewd wanton."

"No, I am a proud and honest woman who knows what it means now to love and be loved in return. Listen well. She is reclining on a couch, and the moonlight shines on her young breasts. He is approaching, you see, quietly so as not to startle her, and for a moment as long as forever his eyes linger on that which only a true lover is privileged to see. Then very gently and tenderly—"

"Stop! I will not listen. If you are not silent I will shout now, so loudly that you and your lover will never reach the edge of the strip. You will be caught and brought back before you have gone a hundred feet into the countryside."

"I told you what I would do if you shouted," Teleman said warningly.

"Her words are more hateful than anything you could do! Keep her quiet or I will take her by the throat and cut off her breath with my bare hands."

"Scarecrow hands, old woman. The bony hands of a witch. Listen well to the delights of young love in the dark. Oh, I'm forgetting. It isn't quite dark. The moonlight is slanting down and—"

The gaunt woman clapped her hands to her ears and shut her eyes, swaying back and forth in inner torment.

"Quick!" Teleman whispered, tapping Alicia lightly on the arm and gesturing toward the edge of the strip. "No pedestrians within fifty yards. We won't get a better chance!"

She nodded, darting a swift glance at the slumped security guard, who was still groaning and stirring a little, but had given up his attempt to rise.

"Three men went past without interfering," she breathed. "That was blind luck.... It shows what fear can do."

"No one will try to stop us, even if she starts shouting," Teleman whispered, his fingers tightening on her arm. "Not right away. People stay out of trouble when they can."

"I know. But hurry. We have no time to lose."

They turned and started walking with no appearance of haste for an instant, their shoulders almost touching. The gaunt woman continued to sway back and forth, her lips tightly compressed, her eyes glazed and unseeing.

Close to the edge of the strip they abandoned all caution and broke into a run. But not before Teleman said, with glowing admiration in his eyes: "I knew what you had in mind. But I never thought it would work. You shattered her emotionally. Better than a blow until it wears off."

"Much better," she agreed. "You see, darling, I'm an emotional therapy specialist. And it works both ways. You can use it to heal—or bring about a kind of sick shock reaction. A self-induced hypnosis."

"Bitter frustration can explode in the brain like a time-bomb, if you know how to light the fuse," she added, pride in her specialization making her voice ring out triumphantly. Then she was running at his side.

THREE

The travel strip overlooked a spacious lawn adorned with neatly trimmed hedgerows and stately trees. Behind the gleaming waters of a fountain three peacocks walked to and fro, their tails spread resplendently in the dawn light. There was only one dwelling visible from the strip, the white stone residence of an agricultural supervisor.

In the near distance there loomed a stretch of open countryside, the bright waters of a small lake and several acres of densely forested woodland. A long range of distant hills was also visible from the strip, their domed summits sparsely covered with tall firs and hemlocks and scrub oaks that grew in circular clusters.

At the edge of the moving strip there was a thirty foot drop, straight down to soft grass and earth spongy enough to cushion the jolt of a carefully calculated leap and diminish the risk of a sprained ankle or an even more serious injury. But the risk could not be lightly dismissed, and Teleman hesitated for an instant, holding Alicia very tightly to him.

"We've got to chance it," she whispered. "We've no choice."

"All right," Teleman said. "I'll go first."

He kissed her. She returned the kiss with fervor, pushing her lips hard against his mouth and running her fingers through his hair. She let out a long sigh when he released her and moved quickly to the edge of the strip, measuring with his eyes the distance from strip-edge to grass, getting the feel of the distance.

"Don't tighten up too much," he said. "Leap out just a little and tell yourself you're going to land on your feet. Watch how I do it."

"Don't worry, darling. I'll make it."

"It won't hurt to be sure. All right—here I go."

He leapt out and down, landing on his feet. But the jolt was severe, throwing him off balance. He sprawled forward on the grass, picked himself up and stared up in concern, rubbing his right shoulder vigorously and flexing his knees.

The slight stiffness and bruised feeling evaporated almost immediately, but not his alarm. "Wait," he shouted. "It shook me up a bit. I'm going to catch you. Do you hear? Catch you in my arms. That's the best way."

"I'm lighter than you are!" she shouted back. "I won't land so heavily."

"I still think—"

"No, darling. Here I come."

His breath caught in his throat when he saw her spinning through the air. But she landed without mishap, and with a lightness which a professional acrobat would have envied. She swayed a little but did not fall, and she was smiling when he reached her side. He took her in his arms and they remained motionless for an instant, breathing harshly, their hands entwined. Then she buried her face in the muscular rib-

cavern of his chest and clung to him in a fierce and impatient way, as if even in that moment of great danger she would have welcomed the coming of the night.

There was a stirring in his loins and a restless tide of passion surged through him. But he contented himself with stroking her hair and whispering words of reassurance.

"We've got to keep moving. Agricultural supervisors don't go about armed so I'm not worried about being stopped before we reach the forest. Probably he's indoors sleeping. If he comes to the door I'll tell him we've got a hunting permit. If he demands to see it, a blow to the jaw will give us all the time we'll need."

He took her firmly by the shoulders and held her at arm's length, a warm gratefulness in his eyes. "We've got to keep moving," he said. "I haven't time to say all the things I'd like to say to you, not one small part of all the wonder-talk. Do you understand? The guilt feeling is gone, washed away."

She nodded, her eyes shining. "No regrets, darling. I'm glad for both of us."

They moved swiftly in the dawn light, across the wide lawn and between the towering trees, sending the gold and emerald peacocks fluttering into the shadows of titan oaks and cedars, their own smaller shadows lengthening on the dew-bright grass.

Teleman straightened in sudden wariness as they drew near to the white-stone dwelling of the supervisor. He reached out and took his companion's hand, and they moved with even swifter steps past the east wall of the building. No one appeared in the doorway and there was no stir of movement behind the half-shuttered windows with their orange awnings and projecting sills.

Then the dwelling was behind them and they were moving across a stretch of open woodland, weaving in and out between tumbled, lichen-encrusted boulders and the gray, bark-denuded boles of century-old trees. One of the larger trees had been lightning-blasted and several were mere rotting stumps looming ghostlike and isolated against the dark green foliage of the denser forested region just beyond.

A golden-winged hawk, startled by their approach, arose with a tumultuous flapping of wings and went soaring southward, and from a shadowed pool less than twenty feet in diameter there came a sudden splashing and the hoarse croaking of frogs.

Teleman bent, picked up a small pebble and tossed it into the dark water, standing motionless as he watched the ripples spread out and slowly disappear.

"Why did you do that?" Alicia asked, coming to an abrupt halt at his side. Her hurrying steps had brought a flush to her cheeks and she spoke almost breathlessly, her eyes wide with alarm.

"The scanners," he said. "The instant she alerts the guards they'll put scanning beams on us and pinpoint every move we make. They'll know exactly where we are. But we're safe so far."

"Safe? How can you be sure? You mean that pebble—"

He nodded. "Infra-beam electronics just happens to be part of my specialty. If they were scanning us now the rhythm of those ripples would be quite different. You'd get a more pronounced jerkiness—a jerkiness I've learned precisely how to identify at a glance. That kind of hair-trigger recognition is part of my job. You can't build a good bridge without such knowledge. Not even a good bridge, let alone more complex structures."

"Oh, darling," she whispered. "I'm glad we're both specialists. It may help us in a far more important way. If we can outguess them all—"

"We have a fighting chance," he said, his fingers tightening on her hand. He picked up another pebble and tossed it into the stream. The rhythm of the ripples remain unchanged.

"Love," he whispered. "Our new specialty, my sweet beloved. It's new, but I think—I think we know more about it right now than they do. Compared to us, even the love-privileged are jaded, blind to the bursting wonder, the glory of a fulfillment so complete that it changes everything we think and say and do. Do you mind if I call you my life and my bride?"

"Of course not," she breathed, coming into his arms again and drawing his head down until it rested in the soft hollow between her breasts. She swayed a little, her eyes closed, her moist red lips parted. Then she drew in her breath convulsively, and slipped from his embrace, still caressing him with her eyes.

"We're in the deadliest kind of danger and you're acting like a moonstruck boy," she said. "Don't you realize—"

"I only know that I love you," he said. "The guilt feeling is gone now, washed away. I realize we haven't a moment to lose. You don't have to remind me. But you've changed the world for me and I had to tell you. I had to make sure that you feel as I do. A man who flees for his life in a parched wilderness loses nothing if he pauses for an instant to quench his thirst. When he is renewed and refreshed, more life and strength flows into him."

"But we'll be much safer when we're deep in the forest," she said. "They'll still know where we are if they pick us up with the scanners. But we can weave about, hide in a cave, make it more difficult for them to overtake us."

"We won't hide," he said. "We'll keep moving until our strength gives out. There are ways of defeating the scanners. If we can get far enough away we may be able to disguise ourselves, take on a new identity."

"I don't see how—"

"Just wait and trust me. Talking about it right now will only delay us."

He reached out and took her hand. "You're right about the need for haste. Come on."

"One more kiss first, darling!"

Her lips burned against his again for an instant. He opened his lips and her tongue darted like a wet lash into his mouth and her hands dropped to her side in

passionate surrender. She moaned a little and then pushed him away from her, letting out a long sigh.

"I was the impulsive one that time," she whispered. "Forgive me, darling."

They were out of breath again from running when they reached the heavily forested region. The dark barrier of vegetation which loomed before them cut off two-thirds of the sky and seemed filled with a vast murmuring, as if a thousand small furry creatures were breathing in unison while the wind sighed between the trees and owls hooted from the higher branches.

Quickly they passed into the dark wilderness between the trees, over areas of moist peat moss and across gigantic, hollow logs overgrown with ghost-pale creepers that seemed dreamlike and unreal in the half-light. A faint luminescence streamed from a few of the ground-hugging fungus growths and there were vapor shrouds everywhere, hanging suspended in the air and coiling sinuously about the boles of trees so massive that they resembled redwoods in girth and height, and conveyed an even more awesome impression of hoary age.

They were perhaps eighty feet beyond the edge of the forest wall, well within its pulsing heart of darkness, when they heard the thrumming.

It was faint and far-off at first, but it grew steadily louder, causing Teleman to halt abruptly and stare upward in alarm. High above his head the interlocking branches formed an almost solid ceiling of dark green foliage stirred only slightly by gusts and flurries of wind. Suddenly, as he stared, a gust of unusual force blew two of the branches apart, revealing a narrow patch of open sky.

Across the patch a shape moved, glinting metallically in the sunlight.

The flying machine hung poised almost directly overhead, like a great, hovering hawk with its wings wide-spread. It was moving, but slowly, slowly, as if seeking out prey in the forest aisle, the thrumming of its twin turbines sounding very much like the steady beating of wings.

The foliage overhead stirred again and the patch of open sky disappeared.

"They know where we are," Teleman said, standing very still. Alicia shivered and moved a little closer to him, her lips white. Above their heads the thrumming sound grew in volume, drowning out all the small voices of the forest. Almost at their feet a startled hare broke from cover and went scurrying into the shadows.

"If they're scanning us now it will be easy for them to send a para-guard after us," Alicia said, her eyes sharpening as she stared upward. "He'll be carrying a hand-scanner, and a hand-gun. He'll have no scruples about opening fire."

"They may drop more than one para-guard," Teleman said. "We'd better head for cover fast!"

He swung about, his gaze sweeping the forest aisle with detail-observing accuracy. There were several fallen branches directly in his line of vision, and a thin shaft of downstreaming sunlight glistened on a tangled mass of vegetation. His lips

tightened when he saw the log. Huge, grayish and half rotted away, it stood out like a giant's thumb against the clotted greenery.

He gripped Alicia's arm and gestured. "That log looks hollow. If we can crawl inside it will be as good a blind as any. Hand-scanners aren't as accurate as big scanners. Not half as accurate. We've got to guard against being taken by surprise, caught defenseless in the open. If we can get far enough into that log they'll have to search. It will give us a breathing spell."

"It's worth trying!" Alicia breathed. "Come on!"

They were half way to the log when they saw the para-guard descending. There was a glistening high up between the trees and they saw the dangling, rust-colored boots of the airborne man before his head and shoulders came into view a hundred feet above the forest floor.

They crawled into the big log on their hands and knees, clearing a space for themselves by thrusting vigorously with their shoulders and scooping out handfulls of damp, weevil-shredded wood and clinging vegetable mold.

They wedged themselves deep into the log, their bodies pressed so close together that their breaths commingled and they became aware of each other's heartbeats. Cheek to cheek in stifling darkness they clung to each other, flesh bruising flesh in an intimacy so strange and unexpected that for an instant it drove all thought of danger from their minds.

Lines from a half-forgotten poet in one of the old books flashed into Teleman's mind, giving that intimacy a timeless aspect, making it seem eternal.

"Bound limb to limb
And breast to breast,
And I would give my soul for this
To burn forever in burning hell."

It seemed incredible, but they could still breathe. It was almost suffocatingly cramped in the narrow space into which they had wedged themselves. But there were eroded patches in the half-decayed wood which let in the air and by controlling their breathing they could avoid straining their lungs to bursting and turning and twisting in a tormented way.

As they clung together time lost all meaning, for moments perhaps dangerously long. They were only aware of each other's nearness, and the sweetness of not caring, not even allowing themselves to think and grow fearful again.

What aroused them to an acute awareness of danger drawing near they never quite knew. The snapping of a twig in the forest gloom, perhaps, or the screaming of a bird winging skyward, or the slow, steady clump of boots where the ground was not soggy and the stillness magnified sound.

From whatever cause arising, Teleman's alertness became instant and all-pervasive. Alicia, too, stiffened in alarm, her fingers tightening on his arm.

"Listen," she whispered. "Did you hear—"

"Be quiet," he warned. "I think he's close to the log. If we stay just as we are he may pass us by."

Silence for a moment. Then, unmistakably, another sound—a grunt of anger and frustration close at hand. It came clearly to their ears and suddenly, to Telemán, further waiting in complete stillness seemed an affront to his dignity as an angry and embattled man. It was intolerable and could no longer be endured.

Recklessness and defiance overcame him. He raised his fist and pressed firmly and with all his strength against the rotting inner surface of the log. He did not forget to exercise caution, tried not to make a sound. He knew that he was taking a very great calculated risk, but a peep-hole was vital. Complete sightlessness was no longer to be endured.

The wood crumbled under the steady pressure, flaked away in a patch a little wider than his hand. Sunlight flooded into the log, and the sudden brightness dazzled him for an instant. Then his vision steadied and he realized that the brightness was caused by a single shaft of sunlight slanting downward across the log. Beyond the shaft the forest was still gloom-enshrouded, bathed in a half-light that made the flickering shadows seem grotesquely alive, waltzing nightmare shapes caught up in a *danse macabre*.

In the midst of the shadows a silent, gray-uniformed figure stood with his back to the log, a hand-gun gleaming at his hip, his heavyset body, shaven head and bull-like neck giving him an aspect of primitive brutishness.

Security guards, whether airborne or not, were specialists of an unusual sort, with a biogenetic heritage of brutal callousness which made them unique. Callous from birth, they were under compulsion to exercise restraint, killing only when necessary. They were dangerous and deadly at all times, accurate in the use of weapons and completely sure of themselves. But the deadliness had to be triggered by a Monitor's command, set in motion by desperate men and women in flight.

Pity was alien to their nature, for compassion of any kind seemed monstrous and abnormal to them and human frailty they could not even understand. And yet ... there was something quiet, dark and inwardly tormented about them, a restlessness, an unease, as if they could not quite bring themselves to believe that they were not as other men.

The figure did not move as Telemán stared, did not even change the position of his head. There was a small gleaming instrument in his right hand and the hand was half raised and he seemed to be listening. Telemán knew that the instrument was a small, portable scanner and that he was using his eyes alone. Sound did not interest him, and there was no need for him to listen with his ears.

In a sense, though he *was* listening, with his entire body, standing tense and alert, and watching a tiny needle oscillate and vibration frequencies register on the scanner's luminous dial.

It had to mean that he was overstimulated in a deep, preoccupied way, caught up in such a trancelike intensity of concentration that it would take a shout to arouse him or the crash of a falling branch. He would be unlikely to hear small sounds. The splintering of wood even—although rotting wood does not splinter and it can be peeled away in damp fragments or torn loose with a violent wrench.

It wasn't the first time that Teleman had watched a para-guard stand immobilized and entranced and abnormally on edge, but in an almost infantile way. The brutish simplicity of their natures predisposed them to devote all of their energies to one thing at a time, to make progress slowly and in step-by-step fashion. Now luck—blind luck perhaps—was making that limitation play directly into his hands. The para-guard was abnormally preoccupied, and he was facing away from the log. *He was facing away, his back was turned.*

Teleman used both hands to tear a wide gap in the rotting wood. The decay was not uniform and the outer bark remained firm here and there. But he managed to rip apart enough of the soggy, flaking wood to clear a space for his head and shoulders. He widened the gap further by swaying vigorously from side to side, half propelling, half dragging himself from the log to the forest floor.

The leaves directly beneath the log cushioned his descent, but did not crackle as he rose swiftly and agilely to his feet. He turned just as swiftly, his eyes darting to Alicia's white face framed in the gap, and pressed a finger to his lips. There was a look of wild startlement in her eyes but she managed to nod in quick understanding, answering his look of reassurance with a thin, tight smile.

FOUR

Less than thirty feet separated him from the para-guard. He covered two-thirds of the distance without haste, moving stealthily, his muscles tensing in preparation for a leap. Ten feet from the guard he abandoned all caution, not caring if the man heard him and turned. He preferred to grapple with a slightly alerted opponent. It was the surest way of measuring an antagonist, of estimating the quickness of his reflexes with hair-trigger accuracy. It was also the surest way of getting just the right grip on him from the start.

A twig snapped beneath Telemán's no longer cautious tread and the para-guard swung about with a hoarse cry. He was still turning when Telemán flung himself upon him. Telemán's left arm whipped around the guard's waist and tightened. He drew back his right arm and sent his fist crashing against a meaty jaw. He swung the man around and went staggering with him across the forest aisle, hitting him again and again with all his strength, jabbing at his stomach, his nose, landing solid blows on both sides of his face. He had the advantage of surprise and refused to relinquish it, putting a savage fury into each blow, giving the other no chance to regain his breath.

But it was far from a one-sided struggle. The guard was armed and that knowledge alone can speed the recovery of a man caught off guard and forced on the defensive. He also outweighed Telemán by thirty pounds, had a longer reach, and a thick-muscled strength which no city-bred man could hope to equal.

He got in a jarring right hand blow to Telemán's jaw before he broke free, loosening the lighter man's grip by kneeing him in the stomach and shattering it completely by twisting his torso sideways with a violent lurch. Telemán went staggering backwards, blood bubbling from his mouth and running down his chin. He wiped the blood away with the back of his hand, shook his head to clear it and kept his distance for an instant, his eyes on the para-guard's right hand.

The guard's bony-knuckled hand was darting toward the weapon at his hip when Telemán moved in close again. He lashed out with both fists, directing one blow at the guard's battered, bleeding nose and splaying his fingers to spread the blood over the man's rage-inflamed eyes. The other blow caught the guard on the wrist and was aimed with such accuracy that the weapon remained where it was.

He gave the thick-muscled brute no time to absorb punishment and go on the offensive again. He lashed him twice across the face with the edge of his hand, stamped on his foot and, because more than his own life was at stake, abandoned all scruples, and kned him in the groin with such vigor that he groaned, bent almost double and went reeling backwards.

Telemán darted after him, whipped the hand-gun from its sheath on his hip, reversed it, and brought the weapon down sharply on a very thick skull. The guard slumped to his knees, shivered once convulsively and fell forward on his face. He lay still.

Teleman stood staring down at him for an instant, breathing harshly, black nausea clawing at his stomach. Then the wave of giddiness passed and he bent, unbuttoned the slumped man's uniform at the throat and slipped his hand down over the cold flesh directly over a heart that still appeared to be beating steadily, with no break in its rhythm.

Teleman waited for a moment to make sure, swayed a little, straightened, shook his head for the second time, and walked unsteadily back to the log.

Alicia arose from the log, ran to him and locked her hands behind his neck. She drew his head down and kissed him so passionately on the mouth that it increased his unsteadiness and almost stopped his breathing.

He was still clasping the hand-gun which he had taken from the guard and he tapped her gently on the shoulder with it, and ran the long steel muzzle gently up and down her spine, hoping that the firm, bizarre caressment and the cold feel of it would calm her and enable them both to recover a little from shock and strain and torment, and decide what they still must do to save themselves.

"If I'd been armed I could have taken him completely by surprise and knocked him unconscious without a struggle," he whispered. "I've managed to knock him unconscious, all right, with his own weapon. But I had to be as brutal as he was. It went against the grain somehow."

"But you had no choice," she breathed in vehement protest. "Darling, you had no choice at all. It was your life or his. And he's not dead, is he?"

Teleman shook his head. "I'm pretty sure he'll recover. But I couldn't just give him a light, friendly little tap on the skull. I had to make sure he wouldn't just blink his eyes and come at me again."

"You made sure. You did very well, darling. I'm proud of you."

Teleman sighed. "You've no reason to be," he said. "There must be a better way of solving human problems than going at it tooth and claw like beasts of the jungle. You'd have a right to feel proud of a man who could think out a way. I'm afraid it's beyond me."

"But we have to resist tyranny," she said. "We have to fight with every weapon we can seize hold of—with our naked fists when there's no other weapon. That's simple common sense, human nature being what it is."

"I've heard that argument before," Teleman said. "I'm not sure that it completely convinces me. But I haven't got what it takes to think out a better answer. Someday a man will be born who will have such a great, calm, wise mind that it won't even seem like a problem to him. He'll *know* the answer, and other answers as well, to other life-destroying and beauty-destroying and peace-destroying problems. Answers must be found or Man will go down into everlasting night and darkness."

"The man you speak of. He'd have to be ... a very great scientific specialist."

"He will not turn his back on science. You can be sure of that. Without science there can be no truly great and enlarged world view, no perfect society, no Utopia

worth building. But he will be more than a scientist and more than a specialist. He will know how to create a completely new kind of human being."

"And love? Will he leave that out?"

"No, I am sure that he will not. It will be the cornerstone and the arch, and the gateway to all splendor. He will remove all the blindfolds, free all the captives who are imprisoned now by a cruel, needless hatred of beauty."

Teleman turned and stared at the slumped and unstirring para-guard, his lips tightening in grim apprehension. "We're cutting down our chances by standing here talking," he said. "I've never talked to a woman before with such a complete baring of my inmost thoughts. It made me forget for a moment where we are, and what has happened, and how great the danger is. We may not be alive a week from now to talk again in this way, with complete trust and understanding. It's a strange, new, intoxicating kind of fulfillment. If we were not in love and you were not so very beautiful—"

She nodded, her eyes shining. "I know," she said. "I forgot the danger too. We'd better bind him before we go on. I could tear a strip of cloth from my dress."

He shook his head, bent and quickly unlaced one of his medium-length civilian boots. "There are no laces on his boots," he said. "They're the kind you pull right on. But this will do to bind his wrists together. I'll cut the other lace in half and make it do double duty—half a lace for each of my boots. Seven or eight threaded eyelets will keep a boot on securely enough."

Despite the grimness of their mood, a faint smile flickered across Alicia's lips. "All right. But don't blame me if your boots fall off. A girl can only offer. I could as easily—"

"You'd be just as beautiful if you were in tatters," Teleman said, grateful for the way the banter in her voice had relieved his tension, and matching it with a levity that wasn't entirely forced. "Just as beautiful, give or take a few inches of added glamour. But I like you the way you are."

"You'd see more of me!"

"If you'd said that when I first met you and there was a para-guard to bind I'd have begged you to go ahead and rip your dress to shreds. I'd tell you I needed eight or ten strips of cloth at least."

"You mean you're becoming jaded, lover?"

"Not exactly. But you can't improve on a snow-white lily in all of its natural glory. Not when you've once seen the lily."

"That just goes to show how blind you still are in some respects. If a woman's attire is unusual and exciting, it's more exciting when she takes the dress off. Of course some women wear black to conceal all of their charms because that's exciting too in a different way. I read that in one of the old books. But it must be true, because all of our experience confirms it."

Teleman reached out and took firm hold of her hand again. "We've got to keep moving," he warned. "They'll be dropping another para-guard any moment now."

"I know," she breathed. "They'll surround the forest. We'll be completely at their mercy, with all escape cut off."

"This stretch of woodland extends for miles," Teleman said, his fingers tightening on her hand. "If we can find an isolated dwelling we'll have at least a fighting chance. There are certain ways of making scanner readings come out wrong. There are neutralizing techniques. With all of the household equipment of a dwelling to work with I may be able to confuse them completely. They'll have to search every square foot of the forest to get to us, and an exhaustive search takes time. With fifteen or twenty hours of grace, I may be able to work out some plan of escape that will get us to a crowded center undetected. We'll see!"

"But even if we lose ourselves in a crowded center they'll find us in the end," Alicia protested. "I want desperately to believe we'll have at least a fighting chance. But I'm too much of a realist—"

"Just don't think about it, darling," Teleman whispered. "Not right now. Trust me and believe in miracles. Just enough, anyway, to stay right where you are while I bind our friend."

The forest grew increasingly dense as they continued on, the foliage-filtered sunlight suffusing the darker recesses with an eerie, emerald glow. The droning of the flying machine had diminished and they heard it only as a faint, far-off echo.

They moved swiftly but cautiously, picking their way between tumbled masses of fallen foliage, huge, brightly-colored mushroom growths, and boulders overgrown with moss. They were five or six miles from the bound para-guard when they emerged quite suddenly into an acre-wide clearing and saw a small, stone-walled dwelling glimmering in bright sunlight.

FIVE

Fifty miles from the densely forested area where Teleman and Alicia had taken refuge, and completely unknown to them, another rebellion was causing the Monitors concern.

It was the first open challenge to their rule that could not be met with measures limited in scope: the drone of flying machines in pursuit of individual fugitives, the billowing of parachutes above airborne security guards, the slow, relentless descent of guards under instructions to kill if the fugitives resisted arrest or became too stubborn and resourceful.

On the bright waters of a land-locked harbor a pleasure boat two hundred feet in length was moving toward the harbor's only outlet, a narrow, winding channel which threaded its way between high banks to the open sea.

The boat, like a thousand similar craft on a hundred rivers and bays, was graceful in all of its aspects; graceful when the gleaming dark hull caught the sunlight and it veered slightly in its course, its many brightly-colored pennons fluttering in the breeze, graceful in the slant of its brow, the beauty and perfection of its high, glass-encased central cabin, and the rail of burnished bronze which completely encircled its foredeck.

It was designed for pleasure, but the pleasure was limited in scope, confined by Monitor vigilance to athletic activities which were strenuous and energy draining and to games which required intense concentration and intellectual skill.

No prolonged relaxation was permitted and any indulgence in pleasures which were taboo was instantly reported and punished. No beguiling of the senses was tolerated and spectator-entertainment on any level did not form a part of the recreational needs which the pleasure boats had been designed to serve.

There were no lighted screens with men and women in romantic roles standing on high balconies in a sunset glow and indulging in pleasures which could stir the imagination in unlawful ways. No dazzling drama and poetry and wild laughter, with lovers' hands entwined and lips pressed to eager lips in passionate abandonment in scenes too pulse-stirring for the non-love-privileged to endure.

Absolute sobriety was insisted upon. To the non-love-privileged such dramatic portrayals were not only taboo, they were an affront to the dignity and self-respect of industrial or scientific specialists in any field. There was no temptation in a strict sense, or so the Monitors were still determined to believe. If, in a few men and women outside the mating centers sex was beginning to rear its primitive head, and the old, dangerous impulses were making themselves felt, no such danger had existed when the pleasure boats had first been launched. Even now, such impulses were just beginning to manifest themselves, and the criminals could be exposed and brought to justice.

It was not too late, and the pleasure boats' recreational regimen had been designed to give such criminal impulses no encouragement at all. The original plan had perhaps been wiser in that respect than an earlier age had realized. Or perhaps the Monitors who had ordered the pleasure boats to be built and launched had feared that such impulses might someday arise, and had taken precautions to make sure that the recreational taboos would be strictly enforced.

There were security guards on all of the pleasure boats, but they wore no uniforms and mingled freely with the other passengers. Some were disguised as athletes, others as members of the crew or participants in one or more of the many intellectual games and archery contests.

In the pleasure boat which was now moving toward the open sea, its hull resplendent in the sunlight, one such guard stood on the open foredeck. He was a splendid figure of a man and quite unlike most security guards in build and carriage, with the slender hips and broad, straight shoulders of a trained athlete. There was nothing brutish or over-muscular about him, and he had handsome features and keen blue eyes. He was naked to the waist and wore about his loins an abbreviated, dark-blue tunic fastened at the waist with a silver buckle.

He stood motionless, staring at the high banks of the seaward-winding channel which the pleasure boat was just entering. Across the deck toward him another man was moving with an almost catlike agility, his hand at his waist, his face set in harsh lines. He was a little taller than the disguised security guard and outweighed him by fifteen or twenty pounds. The swiftly advancing man was accompanied by a woman whose face was contorted in a grimace of hate, a grimace so extreme that it marred the beauty of her features and gave her an almost demoniac aspect. Her dark hair, whipped into wild disarray by the wind and her flashing dark eyes made her seem even more like one of the Furies, a woman distraught and thirsting for vengeance.

The man at the rail did not hear the approaching pair until they were almost upon him. And by then he could do no more than swing about and stare at them in horror. The woman's companion had drawn a long, gleaming knife from the belt at his waist and the instant the security guard turned he plunged it into the startled man's stomach with a vigorous downward thrust, whipped it free and plunged it even more deeply into the security guard's side, giving him no time to ward off the attack with his hands or take a swift step backwards.

The guard groaned and began instantly to slump, a crimson stain spreading across his stomach from the gaping wound which the first thrust had left in the white flesh just above his tunic.

The face of the knife-wielder was dark with rage and the veins on his temples stood out like whipcords. He did not even permit the security guard to slump completely to the deck or to groan again and relieve a little of his torment. He caught him under the arms as he slumped, lifted him up, and slammed him back against the rail.

He shifted his hold on the mortally wounded man's body, gripping him firmly about the knees and bending him backwards across the rail until the sagging weight of his shoulders outbalanced the lower part of his body.

After that there was no need for the knife-wielder to shove vigorously to send the security guard toppling into the bay. But he did shove vigorously, in an excess of rage, breathing heavily as he watched his hated victim throw out one arm in a last futile effort to save himself. The woman screamed and covered her eyes as the guard went plunging downward.

The sound of the guard's body striking the water was drowned out by the drone of the pleasure boat's engines. There was a shower of spray and a bubbling froth on the water for an instant and then the bay was smooth again. They could not even see his slowly turning body as he sank, for the pleasure boat was moving rapidly.

The man turned abruptly and caught the woman in his arms. He gripped the hem of her garment just above the neckline, and with a choking sob tore it from neck to waist, completely baring her bosom. He buried his face in the hollow between her breasts and strained her to him, his hands unyielding on her naked shoulders. So fierce was his embrace, so firm and impetuous the pressure of his finger-tips in love's behalf that she cried out in pain but did not plead with him to release her. Instead she found his hand and clasped it tightly, whispering: "Yes, yes, I know. Yes, my darling. It was hard to do, and terrible. But you had no choice."

He released her after a long moment and began slowly to caress her hair, smoothing and rearranging it a little as he did so, making the dark, wind-ruffled tresses look less unruly and twining one strand around his finger in gentle love-play.

Gradually, as the gentleness of his caresses blurred the memory of a hateful violence, the color returned to her cheeks and she drew close to him again and kissed him on the lips.

"It was his life or ours," he said. "And the lives of every man and woman on this ship. We discovered the identity of that guard just in time. If he had kept silent, if he had not revealed his identity to you, he would have sent out a message which would have destroyed us all, for we are all in revolt. That is the great miracle. We drew strength from one another and love-making no longer seems criminal to us."

"It was never criminal," she said. "Only to the warped minds of the Monitors would anything so beautiful seem less than what it is—life's most generous gift to men and women everywhere. It breaks down all barriers, dissolves all hatreds."

"It dissolves all unjust hatreds," the man said. "But I hated that security guard because of what he said to you. Even though I knew the wonder of your love, I could not quite drive hatred from my mind. But that is not why I killed him, and perhaps it is a fault in me. I am only human."

"I hated him too," the woman acknowledged. "No, I do not think it a fault in you or in me. We have a right to hate treachery and hypocrisy and deceit. If that guard had sent a message of warning to the Monitors and they had ordered us all destroyed I

would not have held him responsible, even though you had to kill him to save the lives of a hundred men and women. He would have simply been carrying out orders. What I hated him for was his betrayal of the Monitors, not out of sympathy for us, but to gain a cruel and brutal advantage for himself."

The woman tightened her lips and her eyes flashed again in bitter anger. "I hated him because he made brutal advances to me, clasping me like a ruffian while I struggled to free myself, and insisting that I endure a night of shame and horror in his embrace—demanding *that* as the price of his silence. I did not submit and he had to free me, but his loathsome kisses still burn my mouth. If love is forced on a woman by a man not of her choice how can it be other than intolerable and degrading to her integrity as a human being?

"What woman does not desire, in her secret heart, to have for a lover a man who is capable of virile love-making, who is not afraid to embrace her as you did just now, with such ardor that she cries out, and wishes almost that he would take his questing hands and burning lips away and yet is swooning with the sweetness of it, and would never forgive him if he became less vehement before hot tides of passion flow in the moment of love's supreme fulfillment. What woman would not welcome such love-making, would not rejoice in it? But what woman, by the same token, wishes to be taken against her will by a man whom she does not love? There is an ugly word in the old books for that kind of love-making. It was called rape."

The man's face had gone very pale. He said: "If I had known that he had dared to embrace you I would not have stabbed him. I would have seized him by the throat and killed him with my bare hands."

"I told you that he did not harm me. His rough embrace was hard to endure, but it was over in a moment and an embrace is not a ravishment. A thing like that can happen to any woman, and often does. It need not cause you torment. And he has paid, hasn't he? You have avenged me to the full, although you killed him for a different reason."

"I believe I would have killed him for that reason alone if I had known about it."

"You are very jealous, my darling, very hot-headed. No man, no matter how much of a brute he may be, deserves to die if he merely seizes a woman briefly and presses rough kisses upon her lips, however unwelcome those kisses may be. I do not feel that I have been seriously soiled or degraded. He was a coward and his cowardice recoiled upon himself. He was afraid that I would betray him to the Monitors. If I could offer proof that he had made me pregnant his fate would have been sealed along with ours."

The man's face was deathly pale now. "Do you have to talk like that? Do you have to say such things? You know what it does to me."

"I simply wished to make you realize that you are torturing yourself quite needlessly. I remain a virgin still. We are new to love, darling—you and I. We have

never experienced the full glory of it, not in an intimate way. Because I am new to love I speak perhaps with too much candor. I do not even know how to choose the right words, the delicate words that a woman should perhaps use when she speaks of such matters. I do not know—I am not sure. There is so much in the old books that I do not completely understand. You must teach me, darling, teach me the exact meaning of the forbidden words and just what words a woman should choose."

He stood looking at her for a moment in complete silence, the color coming back into his face, his eyes on her young, full-bosomed beauty. He could not take his eyes from the twin mounds of her firm, tip-tilted breasts and the rosy pinkness that suffused her exquisite throat.

"I will teach you the meaning of more than just the words," he said. "There is so much that I should like to teach you if you are willing to be taught. We are new to love, as you have said, but I feel, somehow, that I know more about it than you do."

"Are you saying that because you are a man?" she asked, and her voice held a tantalizing hint of mockery.

"I'm not sure," he said. "But I do feel that. What does it matter? Do you really wish to know more?"

Her eyes answered for her, increasing in brightness and tenderness, fastening on his face with a look of surrender and appeal.

He stepped forward and gathered her into his arms. He carried her across the deck toward the glass-encased central cabin, murmuring endearments, his arms tight about her. She rested her head on his chest, pressing her lips against the hollow of his throat, moving them back and forth with the exciting eagerness, the fierce impatience, of an amorously aroused woman abandoning herself to an anticipation of love's delights.

"I will take you to my cabin," he whispered. "It is ill-equipped for the exploration of an experience new to us, for the strange, bright wonder of love's complete fulfillment. There are darts and a circular target on the wall, a double bar on a metal support for morning exercises, a wooden board on a table that I yesterday overturned in rage, because the game of *trig*, which I have never really liked, seemed to me to have eight ivory-inlaid figures too many and my opponent was more skillful than I. It is a sparsely furnished cabin, an almost Spartan cabin, for the athlete and rather dull-witted agricultural specialist that I thought myself to be."

"Until you fell in love," she whispered.

"Yes, darling, until I fell in love. And there is no man on this ship and no woman who does not now feel as we do. Our rebellion is a courageous one, unalterable in purpose. The ship is ours and we shall take it to sea. We shall know all of love's delights for many days and nights and the Monitors will be powerless to interfere."

They had entered the central cabin and he had set her down and she was walking now with one arm about his waist, her head resting against his shoulder.

The cabin was dimly lighted and on both sides of them the strangest of murmurings arose. They could not see clearly into the shadows, but what they could not see they sensed—the presence everywhere of men and women like themselves, walking back and forth in a trancelike stillness, enraptured by the preliminary intimacies of love. They caught a glimpse of white limbs in the shadows, of bodies pressed breast to breast or even more amorously intertwined, with lips joined to lips and hands interlocked, and there were a dozen lovers standing motionless and making no sound at all.

"Why do they not all go to their cabins?" the woman whispered, brushing with her lips her companion's ear. "You would think they would be consumed with a fierce impatience. There are many things about love that I do not understand."

"They are consumed with impatience," the man replied. "But they wish to prolong what would otherwise be over too quickly. I'm afraid there are many things about love which you have yet to learn."

"Did I not just say so? You are my teacher, are you not?"

"I am, my darling," he whispered. "But you will also be my teacher. There is no end to the things a woman can teach a man about love."

"I have only one question to ask you now. Shall we tarry here as these others are doing?"

"No, I am incapable of such restraint. My impatience is too great."

"Very well. We will go directly to your cabin and you will teach me as you have promised to do. I hope that I will be an accomplished pupil and not disappoint you in any way."

"I hardly think that you will disappoint me, my darling."

"How can you be sure? The old books say that a woman like myself, a woman who has always been—"

A slow flush crept up over her cheeks and she gripped his arm tightly. "Oh, I cannot say the word."

"You said it once before. A woman who is still virginal. That is not unusual at all. In fact, all of the non-love-privileged have been virginal, and only now—I am myself a virgin, although the term sounds a little ridiculous when it is applied to a man. But I cannot help that, and it is no disgrace, really, for it is common to us all. It is an absurdity which we shall soon put an end to."

"You mean to say—"

"Let us not be technical about it, my darling. According to the old books a man who has preserved his chastity is also called a virgin."

"And you have preserved yours? Are you telling me the truth?"

"A woman's curiosity. Well—"

"Tell me the truth. When did you first experience the stirring?"

"Perhaps a month ago."

"And in the past four weeks you have never—"

"Well...."

"Do you think it would make me love you less?"

"No, I do not think that. And I will be honest with you. I—"

"Never mind. Do not tell me. I do not want to know. It is only natural for a man to lie a little about that, according to the old books, and I will not hold it against you. But make sure that you love me tonight, darling, make sure that you love me well."

"I will," he promised. "I will, darling. I will."

The cabin was in total darkness, but the man switched on the light as they entered, and the sparse furnishings leapt into instant relief, three chairs and a table, the athletic cross-bar he had mentioned, and in the corner a couch.

The woman did not linger in the doorway staring at the furnishings of the cabin. She went directly to the couch and reclined upon it, saying in a quiet voice, "Sit down beside me, darling. Lie down if you wish. You look very tired. It has been a terrible ordeal. The taking of a human life is never easy, even when it is justified, and for the sake of others. I had no right to ask you to make love to me. I had no right to expect it."

He turned off the light before he crossed the room to sit beside her. After a moment she was in his arms, her lips seeking his in the darkness. Their lips were quickly joined, and in another moment he gently removed the tunic which encircled her loins. The root of his manhood came vigorously to life and her body seemed to melt beneath the demanding ardor of the caresses.

Her loins quivered and flesh bruised flesh in the tenderest of bruising. Complete fulfillment came to them both at the same moment, and for a full minute they neither moved nor spoke, content to remain locked in each other's arms in the warmth and melting languor of passion's afterglow.

They slept at last, content, at peace, unaware that all about them terrible dark storm clouds were gathering.

The flying machines came in swarms, encircling the pleasure ship without warning. They came trailing jets of liquid fire, and assembled in circular formation directly above the ship. Around and around they flew, black mechanical hawks with iron talons, their crews on the alert and awaiting orders, their spread wings darkly silhouetted against the red disk of the sun.

They swooped and soared, but did not open fire. Far below the ship continued on its course, as if their presence in the sky in no way concerned the men and women on board. Sleeping men and women for the most part, made drowsy by the aftermath of love, reluctant to stir and greet the dawn when it was so much more pleasant to rest in the arms of a beloved partner.

So much more pleasant to rest and sigh contentedly and turn over and go to sleep again, while in the air death hovered and the air was filled with the steady drone of wings.

No one on board the pleasure boat knew that the body of a slain security guard had been washed ashore further along the coast and a message found on him. They would not have succumbed to panic if they had known, for their rebellion had strengthened their courage and they had known from the first that the ship would be in danger during every moment of the voyage.

Escape to a desert island in the untraveled traffic lanes of the South Pacific had been the one thread of hope they had dared to take seriously. From that slender thread they had woven a fabric of shimmering bright colors—an island colony which the Monitors would never discover, small white dwellings on a coral atoll, a world in miniature where the right to love and be loved could not be taken from them, a new world in the making.

But first the long voyage, the long honeymoon beneath the stars. Days and nights of rapture, of almost continuous love-making while the constellations wheeled above them and new strength flowed into them.

They had dared to dream and to act boldly, but from the first they had been prepared for the disaster which had now come upon them. The Monitors had been warned and the air above the ship was black with wings and there could be no escape now, for each flying machine carried a deadly cargo.

The order to open fire was given twenty minutes after the black mechanical hawks had assembled in battle formation above the slow-traveling vessel.

The message was in code and it was quietly communicated to the pilot-commander of each flying machine, by a uniformed man with an expressionless face standing stiffly at attention. The message bore the signature of three Monitors and was countersigned by the entire council of Monitors with the code letters which the Council used when it was summoned into emergency session.

There was no escape from that message. It was delivered in completely undramatic fashion and there was no drama in the quiet response of the commanders. The bearers of the messages were simply dismissed with a nod and when they returned to their battle stations their faces were still expressionless.

A little tightening of the lips here and there perhaps, the faintest glint of sympathy and compassion in eyes ordinarily cold and duty-disciplined.

On the flying machines there were a few men who had experienced the stirring and so could have wished that they were not security specialists and could meet and mingle with women, know the soft caress of a woman's hand and look with tenderness into a loved face and abandon themselves to all the delights of the dark as the rebels far below had done.

But on none of the flying machines was there any hesitation or open rebellion when the order to open fire was given.

The carrying out of that order was immediate and cataclysmic. The entire sky seemed to burst into flame. There was a roaring and a screaming and the black mechanical hawks careened down the sky, each dropping an egg on the water below

and wheeling and returning and dropping more eggs until the thunder of their wings became deafening.

The eggs did not explode instantly. They bobbed about for a moment in the water on both sides of the smoke-enshrouded ship and in its screaming wake and directly in front of it.

Then, one by one, the eggs stopped bobbing. Each gave birth to a mushrooming monster, a shape of flame that went spiraling skyward.

The air about the ship seemed to quiver and flow inward, as if to fill a vacuum that was all flame and thunder. A blinding glare united the mushrooming spirals, spread out and beyond them until sea and sky became enveloped in a swirling incandescence.

When the incandescence vanished the ship was gone. Nothing at all moved upon the waters.

SIX

The dwelling had an abandoned look. There were drawn blinds on all of the windows, and the flower beds running parallel with the front lawn were heavily overrun with weeds. Tall asters drooped on wilted stalks and most of the plants of brilliant bloom had withered and turned sere.

Teleman and Alicia approached with caution, however, keeping their voices lowered and treading softly until they were standing directly under the dwelling's projecting eaves.

The metal entrance panel was massive and overgrown with clinging vines. When Teleman depressed the switch to the right of it a faint, humming sound arose.

They stood in the shadows that clustered thickly at the base of the dwelling's two-story facade until the panel glided completely open, and the main-floor interior came into view. From the entranceway they could see almost the whole of a large, square room with two windows, furnished simply but tastefully with several chairs of natural wood, a center table and plants in copper urns.

Teleman tapped Alicia lightly on the arm. "I'll go first," he said. "We'll speak in whispers. We've got to move cautiously until we're absolutely sure that the place is as deserted as it looks."

"I'm not too worried," Alicia said. "Only an ordinary citizen would live in a dwelling as modest as this."

"Ordinary or not, he could be armed and dangerous," Teleman pointed out. "Particularly if we're taken by surprise."

Alicia nodded. "You're right, of course. Go ahead, darling. What I really meant was, I'm not worried because we're together. If we run into trouble we'll know how to deal with it."

The light which streamed into the room from the two windows dappled the floor in patches, and they took care to stay close to the right-hand wall and well out of the light as they moved from the entranceway to the base of an ascending stairway. The stairway, like the chairs and table, was of natural wood and each of its ten or twelve steps was covered with a thick coating of dust.

Teleman started and grew instantly alert, his eyes narrowing as he stared down intently at the first four steps. There were markings in the dust, faint but unmistakable. Someone had ascended the stairs quite recently, leaving elongated impressions which were completely free of dust. *And that someone had not come down!*

Teleman drew in his breath sharply. That the elongated impressions had been made by the soles of boots he could not doubt. Ascending boots, for the toes pointed forward and there were no opposite impressions with the toes pointing toward him. Not all of the impressions were clear but there was faint corrugations in the dust even on the one step where, at first glance, he had noticed only the dust.

"What is it?" Alicia whispered. "What are you staring at?"

"There's someone upstairs," he replied, keeping his voice lowered but gripping her wrist tightly to make sure that she would remain completely still. "Footprints in the dust. See them? Don't move, even slightly. I'm going up a few steps, but I'll be very careful."

She nodded, her fingers creeping over his hand and tightening for an instant. "Yes, be careful. If the stairs should creak—"

"They won't. Stay right where you are and don't worry."

Teleman ascended cautiously, testing each step before he passed to the next by resting his weight upon it guardedly, his ears alert for the slightest sound. The wood did not creak and he reached the top step in complete silence.

The stairs ended in a circular corridor bisected by a narrow beam of sunlight which filtered down from a small, diamond-shaped window high in the wall. The footsteps did not end at the top of the stairs, but continued on down the corridor to vanish in total darkness.

Teleman had intended merely to check each of the dust-covered steps to make sure that all of the footprints pointed in one direction. But now, having satisfied himself in that respect, he abandoned all caution.

Returning down the stairs only to ascend again after a moment or two of calm thought would be wasting precious moments. Better, he told himself, to go on immediately and put an end to all uncertainty. He was quite sure that Alicia would understand and not attempt to follow him.

He glanced quickly back down the stairs, saw her slender form crouching in the shadows and waved to her. Without changing her position she returned the gesture, her eyes shining in the half-light.

Reassured, he turned and advanced across the circular corridor, taking care to move stealthily. The corridor terminated in a hallway so narrow that his shoulders grazed both sides of it when his tread became slightly hesitant and he shifted his equilibrium in the darkness.

The hallway was as black as pitch. With no glimmer of light to guide him he continued on, straining his ears as he traversed the narrow passageway and the upstairs room which he was almost sure he would find at the end of it.

Then, quite suddenly, he stopped trying to visualize the room arrangement on the second floor of the dwelling. It ceased to matter, ceased to seem important. He was only aware of the voices.

The voices came drifting toward him out of the darkness, halting his cautious step-by-step advance, causing him to stand utterly motionless, with every nerve alert.

A man's voice and a woman's voice. He heard the woman's voice first, vibrant with emotion, both languid and intense, as if, in some sudden awakening after a dream of rapture, there was a need for words to make happiness and fulfillment as complete as possible.

"We came back because we had to, my dearest one, my beloved," the woman was murmuring. "And you carried me upstairs, just as you did on our bridal night. It all seems so unbelievable even now. We dared to be recklessly romantic, true lovers in the old, half-forgotten way—we dared to be true to ourselves. We had the courage, we dared."

"I know," the man whispered, his voice tender and exultant. "And when we refused to pass our first night together in a mating center. We soared to heights that had to be scaled again. We are too desperately, madly in love to accept a lesser glory. We had to be alone together in this simple, beautiful cottage in the woods. Only here can we pluck the uttermost rose of love, surrender ourselves one to the other in a secret place of our own choosing. Only here can we know how the poet felt when he wrote: 'Love is like a shining river, its banks flower-bright, with secret shrines and bowers which lovers alone may enter and become imperishably entwined. Love is a flowing, a radiance in the night.'"

"I'm glad that we came back last night," the woman murmured. "If we had waited we might have lost a little of our courage and any loss might have made us hesitate to defy the Monitors and risk everlasting disgrace. In a way, I feel like a woman who is not love-privileged, who has been denied the fulfillment of a woman's greatest need."

"A man's greatest need too, my darling," came in quick reply. "Remember that, always. No man can live without love and be creative in the highest sense. He cannot be bold and far-seeing and dare the stars. He needs the embrace of a woman, the undying love of a woman, a mutual sharing in all of love's secret delights or he will shrivel in his inmost being. He will become a mockery and a sham—a walking sepulchre filled with dry bones that rattle in every passing gust. He will become a tyrant and fool, venting his inner frustration and his rage on those weaker than himself—the helpless, the defenseless, the socially maladjusted who in many ways are often superior to himself."

The voices fell silent. But there were sounds in the darkness, a stirring, a moving about and to Teleman, still standing motionless, it was easy to imagine what was taking place in the room at the end of the hallway.

He did not wish to intrude. He would have struck down and perhaps attempted to kill anyone intruding on Alicia and himself, had the situation been reversed.

But now the need for immediate, drastic action forced him to thrust all such considerations aside. The man and woman in the room just beyond were sex-privileged and that fact alone had suggested a daring course of action which he had no right, if only for Alicia's sake, to postpone.

It was a scheme so audacious that the first move had to succeed and the second and the third. Each would be charged with danger, and the stakes would be survival or almost certain death.

The man making love in the room at the end of the hallway was for the moment defenseless, unaware that an intruder had entered his home and was listening to his every spoken word. If there was a weapon in the dwelling it was probably not within his reach. He would have to leap out of bed and cross the room to get his hands on it. It might even be in the room downstairs.

He appeared to be the kind of man Teleman would have been proud to number among his friends. The woman too was exceptional; warm-hearted and courageous. But Teleman could not risk appealing to them directly. Their sympathy and understanding might bridge all gulfs and lead to a lasting friendship. But he would still have to ask too much of them and expose them to too much danger. They would have to agree voluntarily to a plan which would place their own lives in jeopardy.

He had no right to force such a choice upon them, no right to make an appeal which their own generous natures might prevent them from refusing. Unless they were found in the dwelling bound and completely helpless the Monitors would refuse to believe that they had not taken part in a criminal conspiracy to aid two fugitive lawbreakers.

They might still have difficulty in explaining their presence in the dwelling, for the love-privileged were required by law to spend their nights in the mating centers. But recreational leaves were sometimes granted and the man and the woman were highly intelligent, and would know how to speak with eloquence in their own defense. Their lapse was not a serious one, and Teleman was quite sure that they would know how to turn aside the wrath of the Monitors. It took great courage to do what they had done. But they would not be subject to the death penalty, and would escape with no more than a stern admonition.

To mar the happiness of a man and woman so desperately in love even for a day and a night made Teleman sick at heart. But he had no choice. All of the Monitors' rage would be directed against Alicia and himself and he could not let Alicia die....

He moved cautiously forward, dreading what he must do, and was not aware that he had reached the door of the room until he saw the white sheets of a bed gleaming faintly in the darkness.

He stood for a moment in the doorway, unseen, unheard, waging an inner struggle with himself. Should he make some slight sound to warn them, risk that much before he advanced upon the bed to make his presence known in an unmistakable way?

The man would have to be ordered from the bed and threatened with the handgun which Teleman had taken from the para-guard. Teleman hoped that he would not have to use the gun as he had used it against the guard to exact instant compliance from the man. But he was prepared for any contingency, no matter how desperate.

SEVEN

Monitor 6Y9 stood staring at the electronic scanner-glass, her gaunt body stooping a little, her face half in shadow. Behind her the high white wall of a Security Observatory towered, totally blank from floor to ceiling and shining with a dull lustre. At her side stood a bearded young man in the somber black garb of an Advisory Specialist, his face almost as gaunt as the woman's and scarcely more masculine in aspect, for the woman was an Amazon in build and strength despite her leanness.

"They have escaped," the gaunt woman murmured. "See there! That blind, stupid pig of a para-guard lying bound and nothing but a stretch of dense woodland beyond with no scanner pickup anywhere."

"No reason to take it so much to heart," the bearded man said, a slight smile on his thin, almost bloodless lips. "You seem to hate them for personal reasons, and that surprises me. I'd advise you to keep how you feel to yourself. If they have committed the grave crime you've charged them with—and attacking that guard was just as grave a crime—they will have to answer for their criminal behavior with their lives. Doesn't that satisfy you? To feel personal animosity toward a lawbreaker is inexcusable in a Monitor. It would be inexcusable in me."

"You are a fool!" the gaunt woman said, turning upon him with a gesture of angry defiance, her dark eyes flashing. "I am not obliged to take your advice, for my authority is superior to yours."

"You might do well to heed it," the young man said. "Your authority is not superior to the Supreme Council of Monitors in full, law-making session. And an Advisory Supervisor, even an Advisory Specialist, can strongly influence the voting."

"And why should you influence the Council in a manner unfavorable to me," the gaunt woman demanded. "Have I not always been your friend? Don't forget, it was I who elevated you to your high station. If you turn against me now you will regret it."

The young man inclined his head. "Perhaps. I do owe a great deal to you. But personal animosity can distort judgment, and further threaten our supremacy. I do not like it. We must act coolly and without bias."

"How can I act coolly when those two accused me of—" The gaunt woman hesitated and tightened her lips, a deep flush creeping up over her cheekbones. "On the travel strip they accused me of secretly harboring criminal impulses as monstrous as their own," she went on in a sudden, uncontrollable burst of rage. "They dared to affront my ears with outrageous and shameful insinuations. They said that I too had experienced the stirring and that I refused to face the truth about myself and that the repression of that baseness in me had made me cruel and vindictive. They said I was envious of what they did openly and without shame, in the full light of day."

"Was it really as bad as all that?" the Advisory Specialist asked, his voice not entirely lacking in sympathy. "Well, I can understand how you must have felt. But at

least they only made love openly when the travel strip was deserted for many paces and when you were still in the distance. You told me so yourself."

"I could still see them. The security guard could see them as well."

"It might have been better if you had shut your eyes to what you saw. The rebellion is spreading rapidly and we encounter many such criminal transgressions daily, even on the travel strips. Those two were unusual in many ways, more daring than most of the others, willing to take greater risks. To defy a Monitor as they did, threatening her with physical violence and to leave the strip and take to the woods in a daring bid for freedom, skilfully eluding pursuit, displaying extraordinary intelligence, outwitting us at every turn. Surely you must realize that it has set a dangerous example which others may not be slow in following!"

"That is why they must be caught and brought to justice!" the gaunt woman cried, her fury making her tremble and congesting the whites of her eyes. "The death sentence must be imposed as quickly as possible. They must stand before the Supreme Council, stripped naked, exposed in all of their shame, and they must be forced to make a full confession. Oh, we shall not spare them. *I* will not spare them. I shall demand that right.

"I shall force them to reveal all of the monstrous details of their nights together in the dark: the criminal moments of unlawful love-making, her wantonness, his amorous abandonment to her every illicit whim. It is the woman who is always the most to blame. She has led him on and destroyed him, for no man can resist a woman skilled in all of the wiles and enticements of the harlot. Yes, yes, yes ... I will use that old, almost forgotten word. I have read the old books and I know what a harlot was and what a harlot did. I will fling the word in her face. Harlot and courtesan, strumpet and destroyer of men!"

"There is another word, a more ribald word, that you had best not say," the young man advised. "You must try to control yourself and exercise calm judgment when you make the charge. Otherwise the Council will accuse you of bias."

"Let them accuse me! I will speak my mind."

"I have advised and warned you," the young man said. "I can do no more. And I'm afraid you're forgetting that they must first be captured. Look at the glass. More para-guards are descending and the scanner beams are moving again. Another stretch of woodland is coming into view. Their capture may not be long delayed. There is consolation in that—it is an encouraging step forward. The pursuit has been resumed."

The gaunt woman swung about to face the glass, her eyes brightening, a rapacious eagerness in her stare.

In the depths of the brightly illumined glass the forest seemed elfin and remote, enveloped in a weaving interplay of light and shade. Five para-guards were descending slowly above a boulder-strewn stretch of forest floor, brightened here and there by red and yellow fungus growths and moss-covered logs that glowed with a faint phosphorescence in the shadowed hollows between the rocks.

One by one the para-guards reached the ground, threw off their cumbersome air-suspension equipment, and checked the firing mechanism of their hand-guns, their faces harsh and grimly purposeful in the downstreaming light. Two of them were equipped with portable scanners and as they moved the instruments about the scene shifted and another stretch of woodland filled the glass. A patch of open sky swept suddenly into view and across it a flying machine darted, looking, in the glass' miniature reproduction of the scene, not unlike an enormous, blue-black hornet.

"They must be taken alive," the gaunt woman breathed. "With success so near I would be a fool not to change my original orders. Even if they resist they must not be attacked with weapons. I will issue new orders immediately."

"I would advise you to give it careful thought," the young man said. "You will be risking the lives of five para-guards. The man is armed now and—"

"Be silent. I shall do as I please. The death of five guards would be a very cheap price to pay for the apprehension alive of such monstrous criminals."

The young man sighed. "Have it your own way, then. But the Council may not take a kindly view of such head-strong behavior. After all, human life has *some* value."

The gaunt woman's eyes flashed again in anger, but before she could reply the entrance panel on the opposite wall of the Security Observatory glided open, and an armed guard stood framed in the aperture. He stood stiffly at attention, his hand raised in salute, his expression tense, but deferential, as if the news he had to convey would have burst from his lips if he had dared to ignore discipline.

The Monitor regarded him irately for an instant, and although the anger in her eyes was not meant for him it caused him to take a swift step backward.

"What is it?" she demanded. "Don't just stand there. Speak up."

"We followed your instructions and dropped seven para-guards at the opposite end of the forest," he said. "They have captured a man and a woman. They may be the two you seek, though it is hard to believe they could have covered so many miles. They were dragged from a tangle of underbrush, locked criminally in each other's arms. They are not sex-privileged."

The gaunt woman stood very still, her lips paling a little, an indescribable look, of shock and triumph commingled, perhaps, coming into her face.

"Where are they?" she demanded, her voice so choked with emotion that the guard had to strain to catch the words. "What have you done with them?"

"They are here," he said. "I knew that you would want me to bring them here immediately. They are just outside—"

"Bring them in! You try my patience. Bring them in and be quick about it."

The guard swung about and was gone for a moment. When he returned he was accompanied by a man and a woman, both securely gagged and with their hands tied behind them.

The woman was dark-haired and dark-eyed, with exotically beautiful features, her eyes almond-shaped, her skin so fair and delicately textured that it seemed almost transparent. The man was well past his first youth, but still in his prime, with a lithe strength in his build and posture, an absence of excess weight, which made it hard to think of him as a man approaching middle age. He was deeply sun-bronzed, and had the look of a man who has lived most of his life under open skies. There was great strength in his features as well, features too rugged to be thought of as handsome but radiating a strange kind of sensitivity, as if he were both an athlete and poet, man of action and dreamer of dreams.

The woman was shaking her head violently in an attempt to dislodge the gag, her dark eyes flashing with anger, but the man stood very still and straight, regarding his captors with a coldly defiant stare. There was contempt in his gaze as well, a proud disdain which he made no effort to conceal.

The gaunt woman stood staring at them for a moment with a look of bitter, rage-envenomed disappointment on her face. Then, quite suddenly, her eyes clouded over and became almost opaque, like the eyes of a cobra poised to strike.

"I had never thought to encounter such stupidity," she breathed, more to herself than to the uneasily staring guard. "Why were they brought here? They do not in the least resemble the other two. I have never set eyes on them before. They are complete strangers to me and strangers who stand accused of the most revolting of crimes should not be brought into my presence at this time. It is more than I can endure."

The guard's ruddy face changed color, becoming almost pale. "We had their description, nothing more," he said, quickly and defensively. "No likenesses were transmitted, since you yourself could only describe them. We had to make sure. We thought it was just barely possible—"

"Silence, you fool. I have heard enough. Give me your whiplash. I will not need your hand-gun. Just the whiplash."

"You are not going to—" The guard's face was deathly pale now. "No, no, try to understand. I have not merited—"

"You blundering stupid fool! It is not you I am going to chastise. It is these two. I will listen first to what the woman has to say. Then, if she has no shame, if she will not confess her guilt and admit that she has been justly accused, as all criminal offenders must do, I will punish her. Give me the whiplash."

"Yes, of course," the guard said, unbuckling from his waist the flexible metal rod terminating in five catgut thongs which the gaunt woman was now regarding with a fixed, almost hypnotic intensity. Some of the color had crept back into his face and he breathed a long sigh of relief as he handed it to her.

It was the Advisory Specialist's turn to look at her in consternation. He stepped quickly forward and laid a restraining hand on her arm.

"You must be quite mad!" he said, warningly. "The Council will not overlook or forgive the use of a whiplash by a Monitor in a private interrogation. The very

word you used—*chastise*. It is a brutally primitive word, a word out of the old books, a completely unscientific word that should be strictly excluded from the vocabulary of a Monitor. You will bring ruin and disgrace upon both of us. I will not be a party to it."

"Then go!" the gaunt woman cried, almost screaming the words. "I have always suspected you were nothing but a coward. Go, leave me. I can no longer endure the sight of you."

Without a word, his face as pale as the guard's had been, the young man turned and left the Observatory, the entrance panel closing behind him with a dull droning.

Grasping the whiplash firmly, the gaunt woman stepped quickly forward and tore the gag from the dark-eyed girl's mouth.

The girl recoiled a step, and stood for an instant motionless, her shoulders held straight and her eyes still blazing with anger. She did not seem to want to be the first to speak, for she kept her lips tightly compressed and her chin tilted defiantly. So fierce was her pride and uncompromising dignity that for the briefest instant the gaunt woman hesitated, as if some vestige of human feeling, of compassion and respect deep in her nature was urging her to be merciful. Then, as quickly as it had arisen, the impulse vanished, and the enraged Monitor unleashed a torrent of vituperation, her voice trembling with fury.

"Lascivious wanton, lewd temptress, abandoned harlot! How many men have you betrayed? How many men have you aroused unlawfully, tempting them to engage in acts of criminal carnality which all of the lessons of their childhood and early adolescence had given them the strength and wisdom to withstand? And the glandular injections, the wise, sane quieting of desire, its almost complete eradication in high-minded specialists in a hundred fields whose social dedication has made our society what it is—how dared you flaunt your brazen primitiveness openly and destroy what it has taken centuries to create?

"You have committed the most terrible of crimes. You have discovered in your wickedness that here and there, among a few men who are criminals at heart, the old, dangerous impulses are stirring again and perhaps have never been wholly subdued. And because they are stirring in you, because you are an abandoned creature lost to all shame, you have led many such men along pathways of gross sensuality, of unlawful desire. How many? A hundred, a thousand? You do not need to tell me. I can guess. It is always the woman who is most to blame, even when she consorts with men who are themselves criminals, as is this man here."

The girl spoke then, for the first time. She did not raise her voice and the anger which flamed in her eyes did not make her words come in a rush, as the Monitor's words had done. She spoke with dignity and each word was chosen with care and each word fell on the gaunt woman's ears with the force of a stinging rebuke.

"If you had wisdom and warmth and understanding you would have said, quite simply: 'He is a man—you are a woman. No woman can live without love and give to

the world the best that is in her, and increase the world's store of radiance and tenderness and beauty. And no man can live without love and be complete in his inmost being, and have the courage of his beliefs and build proud new worlds on the ashes of a world such as this, a world which is dying."

"If our world is dying, you have helped to kill it!" the gaunt woman cried, her face dark with rage. "Do you hear? You have helped with your wantonness. You were caught making love in the forest like—like wild animals."

"No, you are mistaken," the dark-eyed girl said quietly. "We were making love with dignity, tenderness and beauty."

The gaunt woman's rage could no longer be constrained by anything short of violence. The words that came to her lips in reply were never uttered. She could no longer articulate and the words became a low muttering which continued even when she seized the hem of the girl's white garment and ripped it from her shoulders, baring her back from neck to waist.

She raised the whiplash and brought it down with all her strength on the girl's naked back. Three times she raised the punitive weapon and brought it down with relentless violence, her breath wheezing in her throat.

The thongs cut cruelly into the girl's flesh, raising long crimson welts, and sending her staggering forward. She raised her hands to her face and dropped to her knees, but she neither cringed nor cried out. She remained kneeling in an upright position, in an attitude that only great courage could have enabled her to maintain. She was trembling a little, but she continued to hold her shoulders straight and did not even moan when the whiplash descended for the fourth and last time.

The gaunt woman was raising the weapon for another blow when the man hurled himself against her, battering her with his shoulders and elbows until the whiplash went clattering and she collapsed backwards against the electronic scanner-glass, shaking but not shattering it, and sank with a groan to the floor.

She remained sprawled out on the floor for a full minute, clutching at her side, twisting about in pain, and trying several times to rise, her eyes darting in desperate appeal toward the guard. Her lips moved but no sound came from them, for her throat had been bruised so severely that her vocal cords throbbed dully and she could not even take a deep breath, or summon the strength to speak.

The girl's enraged lover came and stood over her, glaring savagely down at her and shaking his head in a vain attempt to dislodge the gag. He was not aware that the guard had caught and correctly interpreted the Monitor's unspoken message and was now standing directly behind him with a small, metallicly gleaming hand-gun in his clasp.

The guard raised the weapon slowly and took careful aim, centering its double sights on a small mole in the middle of the enraged man's back.

The report of the weapon was loud in the Observatory, shaking the scanner-glass as violently as the Monitor's heavily collapsing body had done. The impact of its

energy charge lifted the enraged man up and hurled him back against the wall. His body struck the wall and rebounded, hurling him forward to the floor.

He was dead before he struck the floor, but his lifeless body continued to move about erratically for a moment, from the impetus of the energy charge, and its slow dissipation throughout every organ and tissue of his body.

The girl screamed and ran to him, and threw herself upon him, cradling his head in her arms, swaying despairingly from side to side.

Getting at last to her feet, the gaunt woman experienced a moment of terrible remorse, of such acute awareness of what had happened and could not be undone that she swayed also and covered her face with her hands.

In that moment she knew that no one, not even a Monitor, could escape a feeling of guilt for an act of cruelty and violence that could have been avoided, that need not have taken place at all.

For a moment a noose of savage tightness seemed to wrap itself around her heart, making it impossible for her to breathe. Then, gradually, the old hardness reasserted itself and she told herself that she was a fool to feel any sympathy for the girl or remorse over the death of her lover.

Were they not both criminals whose rebellion was a threat to the entire structure of society? Was not the stamping out of such an evil the first duty of a Monitor and could that duty ever be shirked?

What was the girl saying? The girl had raised her eyes and was staring at her, but she couldn't seem to catch the words.

Suddenly she did hear them and for an instant the noose feeling returned, the savage constriction around her heart.

"You will pay in your own way in your own time," the girl was saying. "If there is any justice left in the world, you will pay for what you have done. I no longer even hate you. There is a dark horror in the depth of some minds that destroys everything that is radiant and beautiful in life. In your mind there is such a horror. And in the end it will destroy you, for great evil feeds upon evil until there is nothing left at all."

The Monitor had only the vaguest recollection of speaking to the guard, of gesturing and saying: "Take her away. And remove the body of that criminal from this room. When I return I shall expect to find them both gone."

EIGHT

"The glass," Monitor 6Y9 murmured, aloud to herself. "I must go back and look at the glass again. I must see how the pursuit is progressing, the pursuit of the two worst criminals of all. When they spoke to me as they did on the travel trip a strange premonition came upon me. Those two are my real enemies, for there is in them a will to resist such as I have never encountered before. When I met them a voice seemed to whisper deep in my mind: 'It will be their lives or yours—and the security of all of the Monitors, and the Advisors and all of us who rule will hang in the balance until they are captured and brought to justice. There is in them a power, a defiance, so fierce and intractable that it could disrupt all of the binding energies of our world just as an atom can, by exploding, destroy all matter in its path. A single atom, and when two such atoms are joined....'"

The gaunt woman stopped walking and looked up at the high white walls of the corridor she had been pacing, back and forth, like a caged tigress.

"No ... no ... no," she murmured. "I cannot go back and look at the scanner-glass until my mind has grown calmer, and my will has been strengthened, and I am more completely myself again. Perhaps the pursuit has failed and they can no longer be traced. Perhaps they have already been surrounded and have escaped from the trap by a stroke of blind luck, or because some strange destiny has set them apart from all others. Perhaps all of the para-guards are lying dead in the forest."

The gaunt woman drew herself up, a look of stern self-reproach coming into her eyes. "Enough of such fears and misgivings. *They will be captured.* I will find the strength to pursue them relentlessly, night and day, to pursue them until their will to resist has been shattered and they stand broken and defenseless before the Council. If I should need more strength than I possess—and I have great strength—I will draw upon the strength of our world. Wait, wait, let me think. It may help me now to look well upon that strength. The new bio-chemical techniques for changing the structure of the human body, altering its glandular functioning, eradicating the need for love—yes, that great, genius-inspired key, the solution perhaps to all of our problems.

"The experiment in Research Laboratory 79 H! A completely new kind of man—woman later if the experiment is successful, a man without any love impulses at all, but strong and robust, high-minded and socially dedicated. For three centuries we have tried to eradicate the love impulse by rigorously controlled selective mating of the least amorous, until we thought we had succeeded in creating a great and enduring society of completely non-amorous specialists. But we were tragically mistaken and everywhere the old, dangerous ugliness is weakening the very foundations of our world and threatening us all with destruction. And all because our best minds were not sufficiently genius-inspired.

"We knew a great deal about glandular therapy and had even employed it experimentally, in a cautiously limited way, to make the long-range results of

selective mating more effective and permanent. But even there we were at fault. We did not proceed boldly enough. We drew back from gland surgery and from combining carefully controlled glandular injection therapy with the newest and most brilliant developments in surgery. We did not have the boldness of vision, the courage and foresight, to create a completely new kind of man—to alter the physical structure of the human body as it has never before been altered in the entire history of our race, except very occasionally by accident and disease.

"A new race of men! Why should we draw back from that, why should we hesitate now when our peril is so great, and we may all go down into everlasting night and darkness?"

The gaunt woman drew herself up. She seemed to draw strength from the vehemence of her own convictions, which she continued to express aloud to herself, as if she were herself a listener and needed to hear her own voice affirming what she knew to be true.

"The experiment in Laboratory 79 H! For six months now we have waited patiently to be told whether it is a success or a failure. We have waited long enough. The Council may condemn me if I go now and demand that the final test be made at once, in my presence. But I shall take that risk. I have the right to demand, I will make my authority felt. The subject has undergone six months of glandular therapy; four of surgery. They might prefer to postpone the final test for another week, but I am quite sure it will not endanger the subject if it is performed at once. I shall be the first to know!"

The gaunt woman stopped pacing and directed her steps toward the end of the corridor, and from there passed quickly down the shorter corridor which branched off from it, and threaded a maze of ten more blank-walled corridors until she came to the closed entrance panel of Laboratory 79 H.

The panel opened with a dull droning when she dialed the code numerals on the combination lock, and she passed quickly into the silent, high-ceilinged compartment and remained for a moment motionless, letting her eyes adjust to the dim light and steeling herself for the stern exercise of her authority which she knew would be required of her, for surgical specialists could be very stubborn.

There were four surgeons in the laboratory, and so absorbed were they in their immediate task that they remained for an instant unaware that the door had opened and closed and that a Monitor stood silently watching them.

It was perhaps just as well that they did not know, for her presence might have unnerved them at a critical moment. In almost the precise center of the laboratory a tall form, swathed in bandages, reposed on a white metal table, and the surgeons were busily engaged in removing the bandages from a pair of legs that seemed abnormally long and from arms that terminated in thick-fingered, hairy hands and were not so much long as abnormally muscular and strong-sinewed.

The shoulders of the man on the table seemed abnormally muscular too, and so broad that they resembled more the shoulders of a giant than those of a man of average weight and stature. The surgeons were whispering to one another as they unwound the bandages, as if the gravity and importance of their task had bound them over to silence or a few words of necessary conversation for so long a period that to raise their voices now, when so critical a moment was at hand, would have seemed like a desecration.

It was the gaunt woman who raised her voice, breaking in upon the whispering with sharp words of command, and causing the surgeons to swing about in consternation.

"You appear to have exceeded your authority," she said. "You were instructed not to remove the bandages or conduct the final test before notifying the Council. I can think of only one explanation and it does not heighten my respect for you. It diminishes it greatly. You so dreaded the possibility of failure that you preferred to conduct the final test in complete secrecy, for a failure that takes place in the absence of witnesses can sometimes be covered up with a fine flow of excuses. Well, there will be no excuses now. I am here to witness everything that takes place and I will report what I have seen to the Council."

The tallest of the four surgeons and the one nearest to the Monitor, a darkly bearded man with eyes so pale that they seemed almost colorless, was the first to recover his composure.

"We were about to conduct the final test," he said. "We were removing the bandages to study the responses of the subject preliminary to the test, which will not take place today. He must be injected with drugs first, so that when he awakens he will not know precisely where he is, and behave accordingly. We wish him to think himself in a mating center or, better still, a temple of love where nothing amorous is forbidden. There were many such temples in the ancient world, as you know, and before we subjected him to glandular surgery we made sure that he would read the ancient books and become familiar with all of the rites and practices which would awaken, even in the kind of man he was originally, amorous impulses of a criminal nature.

"He was, as you also know, a non-sex-privileged man who had experienced the stirring to a moderate extent but had not succumbed to it, and we selected him for that reason. We thought—"

"I do not care what you thought!" the gaunt woman rasped, her impatience making her tremble. "Just tell me what you hoped to accomplish."

"Very well. I will try not to confuse and bewilder you by discussing in detail the surgical aspects of the problem and all of the difficulties which we encountered. Quite simply, our problem was to bring about such a profound physical change in his somatic and glandular functioning that he would experience no amorous emotion at all when he looked upon a woman. We have known for a long time that the pituitary

gland exercises a profound influence on the love-impulse. When the gland is very active the love-impulse is inhibited or destroyed completely.

"When the gland is very active the entire structure of the human body changes. The body becomes more massive, particularly the jaw, wrists, hands and ankles. In the past this condition has occasionally been brought about by disease, and the victims of this disease were known as acromegaliacs. When it occurs in childhood it produces a very unusual kind of human being—a pituitary giant. A pituitary giant is robust and virile-looking enough in outer aspect but his amorous impulses are extremely sluggish and in some cases completely absent.

"In this subject we have not only increased the activity of the pituitary gland, we have used many other surgical and glandular injection techniques to alter the functioning of virtually every gland in his body. And we have made some more generalized somatic alterations too, and employed some of the newer chemicals in a very daring kind of body-changing and brain-altering experiment.

"He is truly a new kind of human being. His appearance may do violence to our preconceived ideas of what constitutes good looks in the male, particularly in the eyes of a sex-privileged woman. But if the experiment is a success we shall soon become accustomed to seeing many men of this kind moving about and assuming a dominant role in our society. We shall have solved our greatest problem and removed a threat to our entire way of life."

"And the final test?" the gaunt woman demanded. "You say you were planning to conduct it tomorrow. Could you not conduct it now, in my presence? I have allowed myself to be impressed, despite my better judgment perhaps, by what you have just said. As a ruling Monitor, I could bear witness to your success, if you do succeed, as few others could do. And if you fail my testimony as to your complete honesty of purpose would carry great weight with the Council."

NINE

The tall surgeon stood very still, regarding her for a moment with a level, noncommittal stare. Then, slowly, a look of calculated risk-taking came into his eyes and he turned to the others with a slight shrug. They nodded in assent and he turned back again to face the Monitor.

"I believe we can conduct the test now," he said. "We can inject the illusion-producing drugs now and they take effect almost immediately. We could have wished for more time but—" He shrugged again. "We need not send for the girl. She is here and—"

"The girl?" the gaunt woman cut in sharply.

For answer the tall surgeon turned and walked across the laboratory to a small panel set in the wall. He gripped the projecting knob of the panel and turned it about in his hand and the thin partition of metal glided back into the wall, revealing a glimmering square of radiance.

"You may come out now," the surgeon said. "We have decided to conduct the final test immediately. You have received your instructions and should be prepared to display your great beauty without fear and without shame."

A soft, feminine voice, so strangely beautiful and well-modulated that it seemed almost musical came in reply from deep within the radiance but the Monitor could not catch what was said. She heard only the surgeon's words as he turned, stepping back from the panel aperture and facing her again.

"She has been schooled in every amorous enchantment," he said. "She knows how to dance and sing, and use her body's grace as only the love-privileged can do, when they have been taught far more than the love-privileged are permitted to know. Even when they abandon themselves to love in the mating centers the love-privileged know that what they do must be veiled in secrecy, hidden from the light of day. They know that what they do is really shameful, a necessary evil, and that it would bring a blush to even the virginal cheeks of a woman such as you."

"Only this girl has been schooled in all of the ancient rites, the forbidden mysteries of love. Only this girl can tempt a man to madness without degrading herself in any way. For what she does she does voluntarily, as a great sacrifice, and in the interests of science. If the experiment is successful we will honor her for her courage and even though she is one of the sex-privileged we will think of her as pure. We will think of her as a dedicated specialist, just as selfless in her devotion to all that is best in our society as an engineer or surgeon or skilled industrial worker, and we will know, and be grateful deep in our hearts, that she has helped to save us all."

The gaunt woman's cheeks had flushed scarlet and anger flamed in her eyes. But before she could reprimand the surgeon for speaking so immoderately—was he secretly the girl's lover?—the woman he was defending emerged from the panel

aperture and stood with the radiance at her back and her head held high, her eyes darting from the Monitor and the four surgeons to the still form on the table.

The gaunt woman stared at her with a sharp intake of her breath. That a beauty so dazzling should dare to flaunt itself in proud defiance before the eyes of a Monitor who had never given a thought to her own beauty or lack of it, seemed outrageous, too intolerable to be endured.

So great was the girl's beauty that it seemed almost to pass beyond perfection, to envelop her in an aura that was individual and unique, setting her apart from all other women, and igniting a spark of ardent responsiveness in the four surgeons which was plainly visible in their eyes. That the surgeons had looked upon the girl's loveliness before, the Monitor could not doubt, and that very realization increased her anger until she could no longer breathe.

She began violently to tremble, her gaze passing from the girl's lustrous dark eyes and full red lips to her white shoulders and firm young breasts and then downward to the thin gauze garment that did not at all succeed in concealing what seemed the worst affront of all—thighs that seemed fashioned for the caresses of a lover's hands and a darkness in a shadowed hollow that only such a lover, whispering softly in the night, would have felt the slightest impulse to explore, with degradation stamping him for what he was, a passion-aroused beast.

The surgeon turned with quiet dignity and addressed his three associates, his determination to ignore the Monitor's rage clearly evident in the firm tones of his voice.

"Remove all of the bandages, and make the injection before he begins to stir. Remove the bandages first. He has been conscious for several hours now, but perhaps not fully conscious. You will know how to awaken him, but be sure to make the injection before he opens his eyes. It will take effect in twenty or thirty seconds."

For the next five minutes no one in the laboratory spoke. Neither the surgeons, who were too busy carrying out instructions to even exchange glances or the two women who stood facing each other with dagger-points dancing in their eyes.

The girl seemed to sense what the Monitor was thinking and to resent it as a matter of pride. But she remained silent and self-contained and only the tightness of her lips and the dark hostility with which she parried the gaunt women's accusing stare betrayed a vulnerability which her pride could not quite overcome.

What broke the stillness at last was the strangest and most unnerving of all sounds: a groan from the man who had not moved even under the administration of the figures in white hovering over him, a man who had lain as if dead for so long that it seemed impossible that he could stir, and open his eyes and let out his breath explosively after so short an interval of time.

The man on the table sat up. He sat up so quickly that the surgeons withdrew from him in consternation, as if they had not anticipated so instant a response to the

gentle massage which they had applied to his chest, and the swiftly following injection.

The Monitor turned pale and took a quick step backward and the girl seemed equally shaken, although she did not remove her eyes from the tall, gaunt figure who sat looking at her with his chest rising and falling and his hairy legs dangling. Only the surgeons retained their composure, recovering quickly from their first shocked recoil and regarding the figure without horror.

The man on the table was both a giant and a monster. His chest was barrel-shaped and ridged with three bands of muscle which completely encircled his body and rose and fell with his breathing. His massive shoulders were ugly and misshapen, the shoulders of a giant whose too rapid growth had brought about the cruelest kind of deformity. His arms, which were matted with coarse black hair, seemed abnormally foreshortened and were less than half the length of his lower limbs, which were very long and only slightly less hairy.

Even more repellent than the giant's ill-shaped body was the almost Neanderthal-like primitiveness of his face. The jaw was massive, the features coarse and the brow sloped as sharply backward as the brow of an ape. But there was nothing apelike in the burning intensity of his deep-sunken eyes, or the intelligence which animated the rest of his features as he fastened his gaze on the girl who still stood silently regarding him, her fingers pressed to her throat.

"Start dancing," the tall surgeon whispered, tapping her gently on the arm. "We'll soon know whether or not he can be stirred in an amorous way. I would have spared you this ordeal if I could, but there is no subterfuge which would enable us to postpone it in the presence of a Monitor. She is envious of your beauty and will not like what you must do. But she will have to watch. The success or failure of this test touches her at too vital a point. She is a Monitor and must become a judge—a cold, impersonal maker of decisions. I am not like that, but—"

"I know," the girl whispered, grasping his hand and pressing it warmly. "If you were love-privileged you might have taken me into your arms and covered my lips with burning kisses. And I should have liked that. I should have liked that very much."

The surgeon tightened his lips and turned away from her, a look of torment on his face. "Dance," he whispered again. "There is no time to be lost. In a few moments the effects of the drug will begin to wear off."

The girl nodded, and walked toward the center of the laboratory. The eyes of the man on the table followed her and when she was standing almost directly in front of him, and less than eight feet from the table, his rigidly erect body seemed to stiffen still more and a look of bewilderment came into his eyes.

The girl began to dance.

Her movements were slow at first, and although no music accompanied the slow turning of her body and the graceful weaving motions of her arms, she seemed to

be dancing in response to rhythms sensuous and beguiling and audible to her alone. It was almost as if her inner ear had become attuned, at the very beginning of the dance, to melodies unheard and she was pirouetting about to the accompaniment of measures that, beginning as a series of widely spaced chords, would soon change their tempo and became in an instant tumultuous and wild.

That instant was not long delayed. Faster and faster her movements became and she was suddenly whirling and swaying in utter abandonment, her head thrown back, the veins in her throat pulsing as she whirled.

Faster and faster she moved, until she seemed not so much a living woman as a shape of flame, her thin gauze tunic floating up above her knees and exposing her shapely legs and the milk-white flesh of her thighs.

Then, abruptly, she ceased to whirl, and stood poised on the tips of her toes, like a bird in flight coming miraculously to rest amidst a fluttering tumult of beating wings and spinning, skyward-ascending feathers. Her arms were bent sharply at the elbows and she was clutching at both of her breasts and arching her torso backwards.

For a full minute she remained on her toes, her eyes half-closed, her moist red lips opening and closing; as if, hovering in the air above her, an invisible lover was draining the sweetness of her lips between moments of trancelike rapture.

Then her body was in motion again and as she turned slowly about on her toes she unfastened the hem of her tunic and let it slip from her.

White and unblemished and tormentingly beautiful was her unclad body, and in the splendor of that complete baring of all her charms gross sensuality seemed to turn coward, to flee her presence and to hide its face, so that for an instant she seemed almost virginal, a creature of fire and air untouched by passion.

The moment might have passed and changed her again to a woman of flesh and blood, voluptuous in all of her movements, infinitely demanding and infinitely desirable. But before the illusion could be shattered the man on the table cried out hoarsely and descended to the floor with a slow swaying of his entire body.

He advanced upon her with his arms extended, his cavernous, dark eyes aflame with desire—a desire so fierce in its stark, primitive directness that it was pure animal. He caught her in his arms before she could cry out or leap aside, and crushed her to him.

He lowered his head and kissed her lips hungrily and his arms became iron bands that bruised her flesh cruelly. She screamed and struggled and tried to free herself, but there was no escaping from the terrible, primitive strength of those arms or from the hands that had begun to explore every part of her body.

There was no escape and she felt herself to be sinking down into a dark sea filled with horrible nightmare shapes that could only in the end deprive her of reason and cloak a little the horror that was about to come upon her.

It was not a man's strength which saved her, causing the giant to groan and release his grip upon her, causing him to take a staggering step backwards and sink to

the floor with a convulsive grimace. It was an instrument of science, a long, sharp needle, jabbed into the giant's right shoulder by a man of cool presence of mind in a moment when a blow would have been worse than useless.

It was the same man who spoke calmly, in reply to a woman's voice raised in a terrible, accusing anger.

"You have failed and the Council will want to know why!" Monitor 6Y9 was screaming. "You will pay for your failure, never fear. The Council will not forgive stupidity."

"No, I am afraid the Council will call us all to account," the man said in reply. "But we did our best. We tried."

It was horrible. She could hardly breathe and every nerve in her body seemed to be in rebellion, causing her temples to pound, her heart to beat tumultuously.

In all her life the gaunt woman had never known such torment of mind and body. Returning to the Observatory she had staggered twice and almost fallen and even now her knees seemed about to give way beneath her.

She clung to the metal frame supporting the scanner-glass and looked deep into the glass and saw nothing that pleased her. A dark expanse of woodland, nothing more. No para-guards moving between the trees, no flying machines in the narrow stretch of sky overhead, nothing.

And then, quite suddenly, she did see something and straightened in stunned disbelief, the wild beating of her heart subsiding.

The trees had thinned out and a clearing had come into view between the trees. In the center of the clearing was a small white dwelling and the scanners were moving slowly toward it.

TEN

Teleman had no way of knowing that the scanners had picked up his trail again as he stood listening to the whispered conversation of the dwelling's two occupants.

Despite the absolute darkness and Teleman's stillness the woman became suddenly aware that she was not alone with the man at her side. Her startled gasp was unmistakable and the stirring and shifting of position which followed immediately left no possible room for doubt. All of the sounds were sounds of agitation and swiftly mounting alarm, a whispered reply from the man which Teleman could not catch, another gasp from the woman, a rustling of the bedclothes, a creaking of the bed as one of the two lovers, probably the man, either sat bolt upright or propelled himself toward the edge of the bed with a violent lurch.

What prompted the woman to switch on the light at precisely that moment Teleman had no way of knowing. It was an act of folly, for it placed them at a disadvantage. The light streamed down from a lamp directly above the bed, flooding the entire room in an instant and defeating any hope which the pair might have had of using the darkness as a shield.

Both the man and the woman were completely unclothed. The woman had drawn the sheets up to her waist but the way the clinging fabric molded itself to her hips and thighs with every tremulous movement of her slender young body would have convinced even a not too observant man that no night garment, however thin, intervened between the sheets and the undraped loveliness which she was striving, in her modesty, to hide.

And Teleman was not an unobserving man. Though he hated himself for it he could not stop staring, for her firm young breasts, suffused with a tender rosiness, her white and beautiful throat and her even more beautiful face excited him physically. It was the face of a young girl just blossoming into womanhood, a face of such unusual loveliness that his breath caught in his throat and he could only stare in enraptured silence.

Her long, unbound hair, pale auburn with glints of gold, descended to the pillow at her back, fell partly over one white shoulder and nestled in the cleavage between her breasts, each strand a shining glory. Those magnificent breasts were swollen with love, the tips standing out dark and proud, and there was a red mark on her lovely throat that could have been made only by a love bite. Her lips were slightly parted and though her eyes were wide with fright there was about her still an aspect of drowsiness, as if she had just awakened from a dream of love—a sleepy-eyed nymph in a forest glade resting on a bank of snow-white flowers, half-asleep and yet aware in her inmost being of love's rapture and more desirable than any completely awakened woman could ever be.

He stood for a moment entranced, unable to move or speak, and that strange paralysis of all his faculties except one, the wondrous miracle of enraptured sight, almost led to his undoing.

The man leapt from the bed with a cry of rage and advanced upon him. There was no escaping the outraged lover's fury or the first grazing blow of his fist, which sent Teleman reeling backwards. There was no escaping the second blow either, delivered just as quickly or the third, which landed squarely on Teleman's jaw and made him sway dizzily for an instant.

But the man had been aroused too quickly from drowsiness and love's languors to bring all of his strength into play, and Teleman was able to back away and keep his distance until a favorable opportunity presented itself.

For a brief instant the other lowered his guard and gave Teleman an opening and Teleman took full advantage of it. He stopped thinking of his opponent as a man whose anger he could understand, a man he could have liked and respected if circumstances had been less harsh and unrelenting and thought of him only as a threat to Alicia's safety.

He saw him as a danger that had to be removed, as an automaton with flailing fists, soulless, mindless, and no longer a man of flesh-and-blood with a just grievance who had every right to attack him with fury.

His fist became a magnet and his opponent an iron robot with swiftly moving appendages and when the magnet crashed into the iron the appendages jerked convulsively and the robot figure went toppling backwards.

It was a swift, terrible blow, delivered with such force that it tore the flesh of Teleman's knuckles, and half-paralyzed his arm from wrist to shoulder, producing a temporary numbness. It caught the other on the point of the jaw and took him so completely by surprise that his face, as he collapsed backwards, did not contract in pain, but bore only a look of stunned bewilderment.

His expression may have changed as he lay sprawled out on the floor at Teleman's feet. But his face was turned away and as he neither groaned nor stirred Teleman felt convinced that he had lost consciousness and swung about to face the woman. He was breathing harshly and there was a throbbing fullness at his temples and he could not quite shake off a shock-produced, almost nightmarish feeling of unreality.

The woman had not moved. Her eyes were wider than they had been and the fear in her eyes was no longer overcast with uncertainty. It had sharpened into a more intense fear, a fear verging on stark terror. Her eyes darted from Teleman's distraught face to the slumped form of her lover and then toward the door, as if she dreaded what the darkness might hold even more than she feared the man who had come out of the darkness to put an end to her happiness.

Suddenly she moaned aloud and covered her face with her hands.

The words came then, words which Teleman had not intended to speak. He did not quite understand why he abandoned all caution, and spoke as he did, freely and without restraint, keeping nothing back, baring his inmost thoughts. It may have been her great beauty, which had held him so entranced for a moment that it had placed him at a disadvantage and endangered his life. Or it may have been the overwhelming sympathy which he now felt, seeing her so pitiful and broken and despairing.

"I am a fugitive like yourself," he said. "There is a woman with me, and we are both in great danger. We are not fugitives for a night, as you are, for we have never known the freedom of the mating centers, a freedom which you found incomplete and love-destroying. We are not sex-privileged, and the penalty for our rebellion, if we are overtaken by the savagery which the Monitors call justice, will not be a severe reprimand or even a long term of imprisonment. The penalty will be death.

"We cannot hope to escape the death penalty. We offended one of the Monitors, a frustrated old woman who will never forgive us for telling her the truth about herself. And I fought with a para-guard, disarmed him and left him bound and helpless in the forest a few miles from this dwelling.

"We thought this dwelling deserted and took refuge here because we hoped to find here a few metal utensils or household tools which I could use to construct some kind of hastily improvised mechanical device powerful enough to misdirect and mislead the scanners. My specialty is bridge-building and I have enough technical knowledge to construct such a device if I can get my hands on a coil of wire and a few utensils of pliable metal.

"It was a desperate hope at best, the odds against it overwhelming. Even if I had succeeded the Monitors would have located us in a few days, possibly in a few hours. But it was the only hope we had until—"

The woman had uncovered her eyes and was staring at him with a little of the fear gone from her gaze and he paused in relief, hoping that she would not let her thoughts stray from his words to the limp and still unconscious man on the floor. He was almost sure that the man had not been seriously hurt, but if her thoughts returned to him too quickly, if memory of the struggle came flooding back, nothing that he could say would convince her that he spoke with complete sincerity. The shock would be too great. She would give way again to panic and stark terror and his words would fall on deaf ears.

He went on quickly, keeping his eyes on her face, his words taking on the eloquence of a deeply moved man who speaks only the truth with no attempt at evasion.

"We did not think we would find anyone here. We were quite sure that we would not be taking a great risk, or deliberately walking into danger, for the place, as you know, looks abandoned. But I came upstairs to make sure.

"I was standing in darkness at the end of the hallway when I heard you speaking. I would have gone back downstairs if your words had not given me so great

a shock, for to intrude on your privacy at such a moment would have been the act of a man lost to all honor. But your words were strange beyond belief. I had never thought to hear such words from the lips of the sex-privileged.

"You were also in revolt. You had come here to escape from the tyranny of the Monitors, to experience again joys that would not be tolerated in the mating centers. To you love and romance were inseparable parts of one imperishable experience and without tenderness in love, without complete freedom of choice, love becomes a mockery. The deep, undying love of one man and one woman—that was something we too could understand.

"Her name is Alicia, and I love her more than my own life and I would give my life gladly to spare her suffering. As I stood in the hallway listening I thought: 'I cannot let her be taken captive. She will be condemned to death and I will die a thousand deaths before my own life is ended. Even if I am executed first, I will die a thousand deaths just knowing that she will die too, and I will be powerless to save her.'

"I came to a decision then, a decision that was forced upon me. I would take you both captive, bind you and make the Monitors believe that you had fought desperately to resist capture. I would overturn furniture, leave this room in wild disorder. Then you would not be accused of complicity and we would have at least a fighting chance of outwitting the Monitors. We would be safe not for a few hours or a few days, but long enough to make new plans for evading capture.

"We would take refuge in a mating center. We would put on your garments and wear your insignia and carry with us the identifying seals that cannot be counterfeited, for the scanning of seals is so accurate a process that a forged seal would be instantly detected."

She was looking at him steadily now, her breathing rapid and her lips slightly parted but all of the dread had vanished from her eyes. Her expression had softened, and there was a strange mistiness in the depth of her pupils, as if from some secret reservoir of strength she had drawn the will to listen and understand.

He thought he saw sympathy begin to grow in her eyes as he went on. "I did not want to resort to violence. But circumstances sometimes compel us to do hateful things to protect those we love. The choice was a hard one and I am not even sure I could have used violence against a man I would have been proud to call my friend if he had not mistaken me for a criminal intruder and left me no choice."

"No choice?" she whispered, "Yes, I believe you. But if he is hurt badly—"

For answer Teleman turned and went to the man on the floor and bent above him.

Teleman had felled the man with a powerful blow, but it had not been a blow to his skull and could not have resulted in a concussion. And he had not hit his head against the floor in falling. But in the back of Teleman's mind was the fear that the man might still have been hurt severely. That fear diminished the instant he felt the

other's pulse and found that it was beating strongly and regularly. It diminished still further when the man stirred and opened his eyes and stared up at Telemán.

A look of bewilderment came into the man's eyes for an instant. Then his right eyelid twitched, his jaw muscles tightened and the look changed to one of slowly dawning recognition.

In a moment the man's eyes were blazing with a fury that Telemán hardly knew how to contend with, for he could not bring himself to resort to violence again, but knew that calm reason, or anything he might say, would be worse than futile. The man had regained his strength and the full use of his limbs, and was struggling violently to free himself from the tight grip of Telemán's hands on his shoulders.

The woman had left the bed and crossed the room so silently that Telemán was not aware that she was at his side until he saw her white arm crossing his in a gesture of caressment and felt the weight of her slender young body pressing against his right shoulder. The woman was running her fingers through the man's hair and gently stroking his face in an effort to calm and reassure him. She seemed unaware of her nakedness. Telemán was unable to tear his eyes away from those magnificent breasts, grazing her husband's chest and nestling in the hollow of his neck as she bent over him.

"It's all right, darling," she whispered. "It's all right. This man is not a Monitor or an agent of the Monitors and he bears us no ill-will. He is not a criminal either, darling. He is not a housebreaker who came here to rob us or who came—and I know you feared this above all—to force his love upon me, to take me by brutal violence, to kill you and make me his woman. That is happening everywhere now, when men who are brutal and cruel and think only of themselves are turned into beasts by the strange, new stirring which has come upon so many.

"Darling, darling, you must try to understand. This man feels as we do. There is a woman with him, and they both feel as we do about love. They are both as desperately, as badly in love as we are, and they are fleeing because they have aroused the anger of a Monitor. That anger that is so implacable, so blind and unmerciful, so full of envy and malice and fear. Some of the Monitors have experienced the stirring. But they are all too greedy for power to allow their supremacy to be swept away, and those who have experienced it shut the glory of it away in a dark corner of their minds and there it continues to glow brightly. But they cannot endure the glow and warmth, because it shames and humiliates them, and makes them more tragically aware of how wretched they are.

"This man and the woman with him had every right to take refuge here. They were being pursued through the forest by para-guards as if they had committed some monstrous crime when all they did was make love as we have so often done with the tenderest of embraces in the night. They have walked in beauty and know the full splendor of love's fulfillment.

"They have more to fear than we. They have taken far greater risks, for they are not love-privileged and if they are caught they will pay for their rebellion with their lives. Will we have the courage to do what this man hesitated to ask of us—allow ourselves to be bound and when the Monitors question us say that we struggled to defend ourselves but were overpowered by this man's criminal strength? Will we have the courage to lie to save them, my darling? Will we have the strength? I do not know. I am myself all too human and when I think of the price that even we would have to pay—I do not know."

The man had ceased to struggle. He lay very still, a strange quietness in his gaze and Teleman rose slowly to his feet, aware of the risk he was taking, but somehow trusting the woman, knowing that, despite the human frailty that had been revealed in the complete baring of her thoughts, she was speaking in his defense, earnestly pleading with her lover to give her strength.

"To allow ourselves to be bound is only a part of what he wants us to do," she went on quickly. "He wants us to give him and the woman with him our garments and our insignia, so that they may take refuge in a mating center and for a short while remain there disguised as a love-privileged man and woman. It will give them the time they need to make new plans. The Monitors will not think of searching for them in a mating center."

The man spoke then, for the first time. "Yes," he said. "Yes ... I understand."

There was a great weariness in his eyes, as if the suffering of all the world's outraged and disinherited rested upon his shoulders alone.

"Will we have the courage, darling? Or is it too much they ask? Without your love to give me courage I would lack the strength of purpose and even with your love I am not sure. Because, darling, your happiness is more important to me than—"

The man silenced her with a quick look of tender understanding and a firm hand on her arm. "You need not tell me," he whispered. "I know. It is very strange how love such as ours can give us the strength not to think only of ourselves. And perhaps we will only be doing what nine lovers out of ten, completely sure of each other, knowing their love to be undying, would not hesitate to do. No, he does not ask too much of us. We will escape with a stern censure, nothing more. It is the least we can do."

He arose to a sitting position on the floor, took firm hold of the woman's shoulders and drew her to him, kissing her hair and lips and eyes, his hands caressing her back, her hips and thighs, without embarrassment. "We will do as he asks," he whispered. "Tell him that our garments and insignia are in the wall cabinet by the window; our identification seals as well. There is some heavy cord in the cellar. Tell him to overturn the furniture to make the Monitors believe that we put up a furious struggle. And he had better gag us."

A brief, warming smile appeared on her woman's lips. "He thought of all that. Oh, darling, this is what I wanted you to say, what I secretly hoped you would say, deep in my heart. But my woman's frailty—"

"I know, I understand. You need not tell me. But tell him that there is no time to waste. He must be a man of great resourcefulness and courage or he would not be here at all. It is difficult to confuse the scanners and they are almost certain to pick up his trail again."

The man got to his feet, his arm encircling the woman's waist and helping her to rise with him, his lips pressed to the small cluster of curls just above her right temple.

Teleman stood very still, his eyes shining, too deeply moved to speak for a moment. He had overheard all of their whispered conversation and they seemed to sense that he had, for neither said a word in explanation or apology.

The man simply extended his hand and Teleman clasped it, the gratefulness in his eyes speaking for him, telling the man and the woman all that needed to be said and making speech unnecessary.

ELEVEN

The explosion came abruptly, shaking the entire room, hurling Teleman to his knees and sending the man and the woman staggering backwards. It did not come from within the room, but from somewhere in the forest outside the house. But close, close ... Teleman could feel its nearness in his bones, the shock waves and the concussion, as the thunder of it roared in his ears, half-deafening him, and a bright burst of accompanying flame danced and flicked on the vibrating panes of the window.

For an instant the panes continued to vibrate and then, abruptly, the glass was shattered and fell in tinkling fragments to the floor. But one of the spinning fragments was hurled with such violence from the window's upper frame that it did not drop to the floor. With the speed and flashing brightness of a tiny, keen-bladed spear, thrown with a deadly accuracy of aim, it went flying through the air to bury itself in the woman's chest, just above the heart.

The woman moaned and raised her hand to the soft flesh of her bosom, then let it fall limply to her side again. The sliver of glass had pierced deeply, but there was only a tiny dot of crimson to mark that mortal wounding and mar the whiteness of her skin. Her eyes, wide with shock and pain, remained unfocused for an instant, then sought the face of her lover. Realization seemed to come to her slowly, tormentingly, as if it carried with it a burden, to one so deeply in love, that could not be accepted at once and must not be too quickly shared.

It was not her own pain which seemed to overwhelm her, but the grief and agony which would come to her lover when she was no longer at his side. There was love and compassion and overwhelming tenderness in her eyes as she swayed, reached out with one hand to steady herself against the wall at her back, and then sank without a murmur to the floor.

The man cried out and threw himself down beside her, taking her into his arms and holding her tightly, whispering to her words of love and pleading with her to tell him how grievously she had been hurt, how deep the wound.

"Darling," she whispered, her fingers moving lightly over his face, her lips white and trembling. "Darling, I—"

She went limp so suddenly that the man seemed unaware that he was no longer holding a living woman in his arms. He continued to whisper to her pleadingly, and even the glaze which had overspread her pupils could not make him accept the tragic and terrible finality of his loss. Only after a long moment did he cover his eyes with his hands and begin to sob.

The echoes of the explosion had died away completely and the room was silent again when Teleman heard footsteps ascending the stairs and moving swiftly toward the room along the upstairs hallway. The relief which he experienced was sudden and

overwhelming, but it did not keep him from crossing the room and laying a firm hand on the sobbing man's shoulder.

"There is nothing I can say," he whispered, his voice tremulous with emotion. "Nothing to ease your pain. She was your whole life and when a man's life is at an end ... it will not be forever, but that, too, mocks grief at such a moment. There is nothing that a stranger can say that will be to you more than the words of a stranger. Even someone very close to you, a father or a brother, could not ease your grief in any way. Just know that you have befriended a man and a woman who needed help desperately, a man and a woman who will never cease to be grateful to you. In all this world, I will never have a better friend, or meet a man I would be prouder to claim as a friend. You are no longer a stranger to me."

The man said in a choked voice, "I can feel nothing now except a terrible sense of emptiness, of loss ... the dark gulf that separates me from my beloved. Can it ever be crossed, do you think? Is there any hope at all?"

"I do not know," Teleman said. "It is something that every man must find out for himself. I have no right to speak with assurance, for I am as human as you are and as fallible. I possess no wisdom that you do not possess and false confidence is no comfort at all."

"I am grateful for your honesty," the man said. "It *has* helped me a little. Go now, quickly. I would like to be alone with her. Take the garments and the insignia and go. We will have no further need of them. Fight. Fight for your love as I would have fought for mine, for if you lose her you will have nothing. You will be as despairing and empty as I am. I will always think of you as a friend."

When Teleman turned he saw Alicia standing by the window, her face drained of all color, her eyes on the dead woman and the man who was cradling her in his arms. The man had begun to sob again.

"The explosion!" she whispered, her voice barely audible. "Did it—kill her? I thought it was outside the house. It shook the stairs and I was afraid for you, terribly afraid. I wasn't sure I could climb the stairs. I had no strength at all for a moment—"

"Are you all right now?" Teleman asked, his voice harsh with concern.

"Yes, I am all right. But that woman—"

"She was killed by a flying splinter of glass. The dwelling is probably completely surrounded by para-guards. They must have picked up our trail again and are dropping bombs near the house, perhaps to frighten us and force us to leave. They must want to take us alive or they would have bombed the dwelling itself. They would have no trouble pin-pointing it as a target for demolition bombing.

"Then we'd better stay here as long as we can. You have a hand-gun and you could pick them off as they come through the door from the top of the stairs."

"No, that would only delay our capture by a few minutes. They'll drop fifty guards, if necessary. We'll have to do what they expect us to do, risk capture by trying to get past them in the open. They're probably under orders not to blast us down,

unless we give them no alternative. And every circle of armed guards has to be widespread. There'll be some unguarded, foliage-choked pathways leading deep into the forest on the far side of the clearing, pathways as black as pitch. If we can just get to one—"

"But can we?" Alicia cut in. "Suppose they've stationed guards in a tight circle a few yards from the dwelling, with only a few feet between them. Every circle *doesn't* have to be widespread, if it's near enough."

"If there was a circle of guards directly outside they would never have dropped a bomb so close to the dwelling," Teleman said, impatiently. "Darling, we're wasting precious seconds. Take off your clothes. Quickly, strip yourself naked."

Alicia's eyes widened in shocked dismay and she stared at him wordlessly, as if she feared that he had suddenly become bereft of his senses.

"It's another string to our bow," he said, quickly. "We're disguising ourselves as a sex-privileged man and woman. The garments are here, and the insignia."

"The garments? You mean—"

For answer Teleman went to a built-in wall cabinet on the opposite side of the window, jerked it open and removed all of its contents: two knee-length tunics of pale blue fabric, two identification disks with corrugated surface markings, and two shining silver insignia, bearing the emblem of the sex-privileged, a nude man and woman locked in an embrace that made them seem almost to blend into a single reclining figure.

"These garments are a gift to us," he said. "Surrendered freely and with nothing asked in return by a man who has become, in just these few moments, a friend I shall never forget. When the gift was made he did not know that the garments would mock his grief and be of no further use to him. Let me never be cynical, and doubt human nature, darling, its capacity for generosity and unfaltering courage in moments of shared danger."

Teleman explained to her swiftly how the garments would be used, and why the mating center plan had a better chance of success than any of the other plans he had thought of as second-choice possibilities.

She was quick to agree and was removing her garments before the second blast came. The room shook again, but this time there was no glass to splinter and it seemed less loud than the first explosion. A dropped bomb falling into a pond and detonating under water perhaps, or a small bomb hurled by hand. Teleman had no intention of letting it unnerve him and he gestured reassuringly as Alicia paused to stare at him with fear in her eyes, a tangle of dropped garments at her feet and her nude body bathed in light from the window—a light so dazzling it made her blink furiously—she had the white-limbed grace of a statue carved in stone.

She was naked for a moment, for Teleman tossed her one of the two garments he had taken from the cabinet, and she caught it deftly, a smile appearing for an instant on her lips, and put it on, loosening the belt at the waist a little and adjusting

the bosom-sheaths until they fitted snugly over the twin mounds of her gently swelling breasts. There was a flame-colored sheath lower down, where the garment became more tight-fitting, and this she adjusted carefully too, smoothing out the cloth here and then and twisting her body about until she appeared to be wearing a garment which had been made for her. There was no fold out of place or too tight-fitting, and when she raised her arms the garment seemed to mold itself even more perfectly to her slender torso, its smooth-flowing, silken texture enhancing her body's grace.

Teleman removed his own garment while she was fastening the insignia to her breast and put on the man's tunic, experiencing, despite the grimness of his mood, a slight twinge of amusement at the embarrassment he was quite sure they both felt. How strange were the ways of love, when a man and a woman who had surrendered completely to love could still feel the tug of modesty when the occasion in no way concerned love!

Teleman transferred his hand-gun to the left pocket of the new garment and glanced once more at his benefactor. The man's shoulders were still bowed in grief, and he had not looked up. A last goodbye and a final word of thanks arose to Teleman's lips. But he decided that silence would be better. The man would know and understand, and Teleman could not bring himself to further intrude on his grief.

"Come on," he whispered, taking firm hold of Alicia's hand. "Try not to see anything in the forest that isn't there. Just stay close to me, and remember—flickering shadows can look very much like advancing para-guards."

TWELVE

In the darkness and silence of the dwelling's upper hallway, and the shadowed gloom, no longer pierced by shafts of early morning sunlight, of the main-floor room, it was hard for them to realize that it was still broad daylight outside the house. But the instant they emerged from the dwelling's paneled doorway the brightness of the sky and the almost shadowless clearing made them instantly aware again that only the forest was a gloom enveloped sanctuary.

They stood for an instant motionless in the doorway, dazzled by the brightness and experiencing a sharp stab of apprehension. If a para-guard had been crouching at the edge of the clearing, with steady eyes and a leveled weapon, blasting them both down would have presented no problem. They had to trust to their instincts solely, the feeling that they both had that the house was not yet completely surrounded. Or that if it was, the guards were under orders not to open fire, but to take them by stealth, withholding all violence until they moved around and away from the house and reached the high wall of wind-stirred foliage at the rear of the dwelling, where the forest began again and the shadows clustered thickly.

Teleman pressed Alicia's hand and whispered: "We've got to move very fast and keep moving. They may close in on us the instant we're between the trees, so we'll have to keep our wits about us, and watch out for the slightest stir of movement. If we see a guard I'll know what to do. Trust me."

"I will, darling!" she breathed. "And I'm not too frightened to think clearly."

"All right. Here we go then."

They did not break into a run immediately, but waited until they had moved cautiously around to the back of the dwelling and were facing away from it, with an open space that could be quickly crossed stretching out in front of them. The forest wall was less than eighty feet away and could be reached in a matter of seconds. Teleman's hand had darted to his pocket and he was firmly clasping the stock of the hand-gun.

They exchanged no words, but started across the clearing at once, running swiftly with only a few feet separating them. They were out of breath when they reached the trees, but paused only for the barest instant, their eyes darting toward a patch of weaving darkness where the foliage was dense enough to provide instant shelter but not too close to keep them from tearing a few of the branches apart with their hands and clearing a wide enough space to move about in until they could find a natural path in the underbrush or beat their way through it toward a more open stretch of forest.

They were several feet inside the foliage screen, breathing harshly and keeping their heads lowered to avoid the stinging backlash of whipped-apart branches, when the para-guard came crashing toward them. There was blood on his face and he was cursing savagely and in an instant briefer than a dropped heartbeat there flashed into

Teleman's mind an image of the man waiting for them, crouching in the underbrush and prevented by the dense growth from leaping instantly out at them.

The image blurred and vanished and Teleman saw only the man himself, the looming, dangerous bulk of him. The hand-gun was recoiling in his clasp, its roar deafening, in what seemed no more than another split second of time, so quickly that Teleman had no clear recollection of whipping it from his pocket, only of leveling it and firing it at almost pointblank range.

The para-guard screamed and went staggering backwards, his hands clutching at his chest. Light from the expiring energy charge bathed his head and shoulders for an instant in a ghastly, pale green radiance, making him look almost ghostly as he sank to his knees, and fell forward on his face. His arms jerked convulsively for a moment, and then the trembling and twitching ceased and he lay completely still, a crimson gleaming appearing in both sides of his body and spreading outward over the dry leaves of the forest until they resembled leaves but recently fallen, all of their autumn brightness restored.

Alicia swayed and turned deathly pale. Teleman went to her, drew her into his arms and held her tightly, stilling her trembling with a few, calmly spoken words.

"If I hadn't killed him, if I had just wounded him, he might still have had the strength to go on fighting. He might have seized you and used you as a shield, or grabbed me by the legs and dragged me down. He was too near, coming right at us. It was his life or ours."

"Yes, I know," she breathed, her arms tightening about his shoulders with an understanding that went deeper than words. "He was only obeying orders, but they were brutal orders and it would have been madness to take risks with a man so enraged. If we had resisted, he would have killed us without hesitation. He might even have tried to ravish me. Did you see his face?"

"I saw it," Teleman said. "We've got to get through the forest and try to reach one of the travel strips on the other side before another face like that has a chance to wear the kind of smile that means he's won and we're either dead or bound hand and foot. That hand-gun blast may bring a dozen guards down on us before we can get far. But we're not giving up, or stopping to let the possibility weaken what we've got—a strength that comes only to lovers. It's a very special kind of strength and we've got to believe in it. Is that clear?"

"Yes, darling, very clear."

"Then the only important thing right now is to keep moving. Our luck has held so far. And there are seven more charges in this gun. I'll shoot to kill as many times as I have to."

The forest was alive with shadows and almost night-dark where the trees towered in groups of five or six, gigantic oaks with interlacing branches that completely blotted out the sky. Even the few, downstreaming shafts of sunlight had

become fewer and more widely scattered and the gloom was so all enveloping that it brought a chill to Alicia's heart.

They were a mile and a half from the thick tangle of underbrush where the guard lay with his body half in shadow and the leaves about him turning dark again when they heard the rustling. It was faint at first, but it came swiftly nearer and for an instant Teleman thought that more para-guards were descending to the forest floor through the rustling canopy of leaves and interlocking branches directly ahead of them.

He stopped advancing abruptly and gripped Alicia's arm, drawing her quickly into the deep shadows which clustered about the base of a moss-grown oak so huge that its bole had the girth of a dozen slenderer trees fused by some strange freak of lightning into a massive whole, its charred surface completely hidden by the bright emerald moss, and circular patches of darker coloration where the moss had shriveled and died.

The rustling had taken on a strange and disturbing loudness, hard to associate with just the swaying of the foliage about the descending boots of para-guards, and the dry leaf crackle of their tread on the forest floor. It was accompanied by clickings and a dull, droning sound, and suddenly, as Teleman stared with a coldness creeping up his spine, light flashed between the trees and a deafening blast echoed and reverberated through the forest, shaking the ground and filling the aisles of the forest with a swirling shower of leaves.

Teleman was hurled back against the oak and Alicia was thrown with such violence to the ground that she lay for an instant motionless, too stunned to cry out or free herself from the tangle of charred creepers and smoke-blackened leaves which had descended upon her face.

Teleman dropped to his knees and dragged himself toward her, his temples pounding, a dull ache in his back. He cleared away the clinging vines with a single sweep of his arm and lifted her up, holding her tightly and gently massaging her cheeks with the back of his hand.

Her eyes opened and she stared up at him, her eyes wide with fright.

"Hurt bad?" he whispered, afraid of what her answer might be and wishing that he did not have to ask the question at all.

She shook her head. "No, I'm all right. Help me to get up. What was it? Another bomb? For a moment I thought—"

"Don't try to talk," Teleman said, his voice sharp with concern. "I think I know what it is, and it's coming toward us fast. We've got to get away from here!"

He helped her to rise and they stood for an instant swaying a little, still too shaken to do more than stare. Teleman was the first to speak decisively, and with all uncertainty driven from his mind by the ground-shaking tread which had come to his ears.

"It's one of the new walking ground-warfare machines," he said, his fingers tightening on Alicia's arm. "All metal, segmented, and equipped with scanners and atomic blast tubes. They weigh several tons and are fifty feet tall. Too heavy to be transported here in a flying machine. It must have been set in pursuit of us right after I killed that guard and has apparently circled around in front of us and is blasting the trees directly ahead in an effort to halt our advance. It is operated by remote control and its scanners have probably flashed back our exact position. We'll have to try to break that circuit in some way. I still think they're trying to capture us alive, but we can't be sure."

"How long have we got, darling?"

"I don't know. It's very near. We'll have to do some circling back ourselves. They'll expect us to flee in the opposite direction, back toward where we were. But if we make that mistake we'll be welcomed by a dozen or more armed guards. We'll have to move sideways, circling back just a little but keeping almost parallel to this tree."

"But what if that—that terrible machine follows us. If it's equipped with scanners isn't it certain to follow us?"

"It's certain to, yes. But if we can find—never mind, we haven't time to talk about it now. It's coming straight toward us. It may still be several hundred feet away, because that was a restricted atomic blast and all we felt were the vibrations at the edge of it. Those charred leaves were blown toward us from a considerable distance."

"But the sounds! I can hear its tread!"

"That rustling sound may have been made by terrified birds and small animals directly in its path. Its tread we can hear now because it is very near and is moving ponderously. But it could still be a considerable distance away. We'll have time to get out of its path if we hurry."

"Do you think it can overtake us, if we run? How fast is it moving?"

"I don't know," Teleman said. "I've never seen one of the machines in action and I just don't know. I don't think it's moving very fast, but it takes enormous strides. It will overtake us in ten or fifteen minutes at the most, unless we can mislead the scanners. Come on, let's get started."

They were just turning when the foliage lighted up again, but this time there was no thunderous detonation. The foliage at the far end of the forest aisle, a hundred feet from the massive oak tree, was merely enveloped for an instant in a blinding glare that spread outward until it filled every shadowed crevice and swaying vine-canopy between the tree and its point of origin. As it spread it became more diffuse and less blinding, until every boulder, plant and fallen log that it touched began to glow with a cold, almost spectral radiance.

The foliage at the far end of the clearing burst into flame as the great, robot-like figure came into view, a metal giant with long, segmented legs and globular body-box, surmounted by a conical head with almost human features.

That the ground-warfare machine looked both intelligent and terrifyingly humanoid in aspect would not have surprised or startled anyone familiar with the psychological subtlety which the Monitors were capable of exercising. It had been built with the terror motif in mind, and if it was an almost unbelievably efficient mechanism of destruction it was equally efficient as a shape which could inspire such fear in the beholder that he would become completely demoralized, particularly if he harbored rebellious impulses or thought of himself as a criminal.

But Teleman and Alicia did not think of themselves as criminals and Alicia had been forewarned by Teleman's description of the machine and had visualized it as both formidable and terrifyingly robot-like.

That the actual machine surpassed in hideousness the mental image she had formed of it was not a sufficiently shock-producing circumstance to make her succumb to panic, and after the first moment of shock her strength of will carried her past the danger point and enabled her to look upon the machine simply as a very dangerous weapon of warfare that threatened her life and the life of the man she loved, but in no way menaced her sanity.

It was Teleman who for a moment experienced the most acute fear, not for himself but for the safety of the woman at his side. He gripped her wrist tightly and urged her forward, moving away from the tree with such rapid strides that she had to run to keep up with him.

For ten minutes they fled through the forest in silence, climbing over logs and lichen-encrusted boulders, and sinking ankle-deep at times in soggy patches where damp leaves in heavy layers and the moisture in the soil made walking difficult and running impossible. They had put a mile between themselves and the towering ground-warfare machine when they were brought up short by a pool of still, dark water.

THIRTEEN

The gaunt woman was staring into the scanner-glass, and gripping the metal frame so tightly that her knuckles had a mottled look.

"At last!" she breathed, leaning sharply forward. "Those machines have never proved their worth until now. What a fool I was to oppose the project on the grounds of economy. Only two machines when we could have had twenty. But never mind, the two are doing very well."

"Are they?" said a quiet voice at her side. "I would not be too sure. The man is clever as well as courageous. And the woman knows how to keep fear at arm's length, always. You have met your match in that pair."

The woman swung about, an angry flushing suffusing her face and accentuating the boniness of her cheekbones. The flush was of short duration, for fear and anger seldom walk hand in hand, and pallor is very likely to accompany fear.

The Chief Monitor smiled thinly, his eyes also intent on the glass. "I'm afraid that you have merited a reprimand," he said. "From what I have heard your conduct this morning was inexcusable. Without first securing permission from the Council you witnessed a surgical experiment which turned out very badly. Your own rash haste may have been responsible for the failure. The surgeons were not yet ready to conduct the final test but you frightened them into complying with your demand. I do not like what happened. I do not like it at all."

The Chief Monitor was not only soft-spoken. He was so mild-mannered and non-aggressive in aspect that it seemed incredible that he could have risen to a position of authority so great that he could have reversed a century of enlightened human progress with a single spoken word. He had pale brown hair and pale eyes, and he did not look at all like a man accustomed to issuing commands. But then, quite suddenly, the brown eyes would flash with an ice-crystal brilliance and hardness and in such moments his supremacy was not difficult to understand.

His eyes were ice-crystal cold now.

"I have often wondered," the Chief Monitor said, speaking with a candor that sharply increased the gaunt woman's fear, "How I would feel if I had experienced the stirring. Would I rebel as courageously as that pair?"

The gaunt woman knew how dangerous it was to share the inmost thoughts of a man so powerful, but she could do nothing to turn the conversation into safer channels and was afraid to oppose him even slightly.

"I see I startle you," the Chief Monitor went on calmly, the slight smile still on his lips. "But should we not all examine ourselves critically from time to time, and ask ourselves the really great and important questions. We all are what we are, and only a fool is afraid to face the truth about himself."

The gaunt woman remained silent, her pallor so pronounced now that it resembled the pallor of a corpse.

"The truth will come out," the Chief Monitor said, and sighed and turned from the glass. At the door he paused to deliver a few parting words of advice.

"Personal animosity in a Monitor is an unforgivable offense," he said. "Without a full and honest confession it could, in special circumstances, justify the death penalty."

When the door glided shut the gaunt woman stood for a moment as if turned to stone. Then some of the animation returned to her eyes and she returned to the glass and watched a towering ground-warfare robot joined by a second robot beside an oak tree of massive dimensions. She saw the two machines turn and start walking away from the oak tree, their conical heads turned toward a more distant part of the forest, the revolving disks of their eyes flashing with electro-magnetic, spectroscopic rays.

She watched them move forward through the forest, saw the forest vista changing. The canopy of foliage overhead changed shape and color. Now it became less dense, now more luxuriant. They skirted areas of quagmire, where the forest floor was strewn with wet leaves, carefully seeking firm footing, guided by their spectroscopic vision which could pierce beneath the surface layers of earth with rays of invisible spectrum wave-length.

Suddenly one of the metal giants halted and a flash of blinding light darted from one of the three atomic blast tubes projecting from its globular body-box. The roar of the limited atomic blast was not audible in the scanner-glass, but its violence shook the forest, sending five gigantic trees toppling and tearing a yawning gap in the canopy of foliage overhead, through which the sunlight streamed in wavering banners.

The first robot had gone on ahead, the scanner-glass which projected vertically from its conical head vibrating as it transmitted to the scanner-glass a continuous sequence of images. Suddenly it halted, as the other robot had done, in obedience to a transmitted message from a flying machine hovering directly overhead and waited until its companion came abreast of it again. Then both robots resumed their ponderous and slow advance, carefully testing each foot of ground before they rested their weight upon it.

The gaunt woman drew in her breath sharply. "In a moment now—only a moment more!" she whispered aloud to herself. "They must be very close to them by this time. They have traveled a considerable distance. The moment I have waited for so long is here at last. If I am brought to judgment, even if I am condemned to death, this moment of triumph will be worth all the humiliation, all the harsh injustice I may be forced to endure. I will go to my death with my head held high, knowing that I alone had the strength of will to root out and destroy an evil that the others attacked half-heartedly or found excuses for. These two are the worst offenders, the most brazen in their defiance of the law. If I succeed in destroying them—and I will—I will set an example that the others will have to follow. They will have no choice, for a martyr in a stern and just cause has many followers when the noose is drawn tight."

The two towering robots had halted again. They were standing very still, their conical heads turning slowly from right to left. Their spectroscopic eyes cast dull circles of radiance on the ground in front of them and their aspect was somehow vaguely disturbing, hard to explain. They seemed bewildered and confused, if human emotions can have any counterpart in a robot of metal and glass and whirring internal gadgetry.

Suddenly one of the metal giants turned and retraced his steps for a few yards, his conical head still turning slowly back and forth, in a manner that would have seemed comical to a less tense onlooker. The gaunt woman's throat felt constricted and she strained fearfully forward, her eyes glued to the glass.

The second robot joined the first in his backward exploration of ground already traversed. They stood with their heads close together, as if trying to decide what should be done next. But that, of course, was absurd and the gaunt woman was completely aware of how preposterous it was. A machine could not think for itself, a machine could not feel.

Her conviction was well-founded and the two metal monsters had put their heads together quite accidentally while avoiding a near collision. The avoidance of the collision had been directed from the flying machine by remote control and there was actually nothing human in the behavior of the robots at all.

The gaunt woman knew all that, but the knowledge could not prevent a knot of cold horror from contracting about her heart. The two metal monsters were at a standstill. Unmistakably they had reached a dead end and could search no further. They no longer knew where to look, or even what they were looking for.

The scanners which projected from their conical heads ceased suddenly to vibrate, and the instant the vibrations stopped the scanner-glass went dark.

A voice spoke out of the blackness. "I regret to report that the ground-warfare machines can no longer function. Their scanning screens have lost track of the two fugitives. The pickup mechanism has gone dead."

For an instant the gaunt woman could not swallow, could not even breathe. Her throat felt parched and constricted and there was a horrible tightness in her chest.

Suddenly all the tightness was gone and a scream, terrible, prolonged, welled up in her throat and issued from her lips. It stopped once abruptly and then went on and on, and only ceased when she seized a metal chair and smashed the scanner-glass to fragments, and collapsed in a heap at its base.

The forest was enveloped in weaving shafts of light. The light stabbed downward, moved between the trees, cascaded across brightly gleaming fungus growths and the boles of century-old trees and logs which forest mold and weevil beetles had turned into vegetable skeletons.

The forest was clamorous with voices. Para-guards moved between the trees, searching with flashlights that sent tunnels of radiance boring into the depths of

shadowed crevices and deep caves and even between the tangled roots of titan oaks half-torn from their moorings by freakish bolts of lightning.

A hundred feet from the edge of the forest a guard more venturesome than his fellows descended into the depths of such a tangle, the bole of the oak looming enormous above, and found himself in the strangest of gnomelike dwellings, with winding corridors bathed in a pale blue light and his raised voice echoing from every corridor. It was a house of enchantment, a house underground and easy to people with all manner of elfish creatures.

But the two fugitive lovers had not taken refuge there. The beam of the guard's flashlight shone on emptiness and desolation and no trace of hidden lovers.

There was no way of tracing them, of ferreting them out. Cunning could not do it, or any kind of subterfuge. Voices offering Monitor truce, Monitor pardon, beguiling and deceptive, could not flush the two lovers from cover.

Where were they? No one knew, no one dared to boast that he thought he knew, for para-guards and their more cautious commanders lived in mortal fear of the Monitors, even though they served them dutifully and claimed the rewards which were a security guard's due: the right to creep at nightfall into the mating center compartment of a sex-privileged woman and take her by force if she resisted his advances.

There were a few para-guards who refused to conform to that pattern of behavior, but their forbearance was not admired by the majority of their fellows.

Through the dark the tracer beams moved, the flashlights flickered, but no one knew what had become of the fugitive lovers. And the penalties could be dire, for the Monitors did not readily forgive failure.

Everywhere the search continued, through every aisle of the forest, in every recess between the rocks, in every hidden nook and cranny.

But not quite everywhere. Deep in the forest gloom a pool of still black water mirrored the moonlight and in the pool two naked lovers clung breast to breast, thigh to thigh, waiting in stillness for the night to pass.

In the darkness of that strangest of nights the man whispered: "I never thought we would spend our bridal night in this way. I never thought we would leave our clothes on the bank, concealed and neatly folded, and shiver the whole night through. But at least we are completely safe, completely secure. The scanner beams are deflected when they pass too close to water and the water itself absorbs some of the rays. If they should find this pool by accident we will know what to do."

"Why are you telling me all this again, darling, when you have spoken about it before?"

"It helps me to talk. Remember—if we hear footsteps we will move closer to the bank and hide ourselves in the reeds. We will be safe as long as we hold tightly to each other and stay here until the sun rises again."

"Oh, darling, I love you so much, even when you worry needlessly about me, and seem to feel that if we find ourselves in danger again I will not know what to do. I will know exactly what to do. I will know exactly what to do. Can't we talk about more important things?"

"Are all women like that, Alicia? I mean, do they get upset and angry when a man is practical and puts first things first and does all that he can to safeguard and protect them? I know so little about women, because I have never before been in love, and all of the women I have met—"

"Never mind the women you have met. All women in love are difficult at times, my darling, and you must try to know exactly what to do. Can't we talk about more important things?"

"Darling, I do love you. You must believe me."

"Kiss me then. Kiss me passionately. I have waited so long for this moment, when we would be completely alone together in the night. But it has come at a strange time. I am not even sure that I can respond now as a woman should. The water is so cold."

"We can climb out on the bank if you wish. It will be taking a risk that I should prefer not to take, for your life is more important to me, more precious, than even that moment of complete fulfillment which seems to lovers not minute-long but eternal. But if that alone will please you...."

"Darling, what a way for a lover to talk! Do you no longer desire me?"

"You know better than that."

"Then prove it to me, now!"

He was the first to ascend the bank, drawing her up after him. They stood for a moment at arm's length, hands clinging, each feasting on the sight of the naked body of the other. The moonlight gleamed on Alicia's white flesh, and shining droplets of water trembled on the tips of her jutting breasts. Bending down, he clamped his lips to hers, his tongue searching. She responded with ardor, and clung to him so fiercely that they both toppled backwards on the soft grass of the bank.

Their love-making was so passionate that their lips remained constantly joined, and all of the tender explorations which accompany love were accomplished with the artful movements of hands that clasped and unclasped and darted with an eagerness that could not be restrained, to the most secret citadels of Aphrodite, and the pleasure gardens of Eros enshrined.

When the pulsing warm moment came when two become one the night seemed to hold its breath and only the woman's wild cry of ecstasy broke the stillness of the sleeping forest.

FOURTEEN

The long, blank-walled anteroom of the mating center was crowded to capacity with love-privileged men and women who had been granted short emergency leaves and were waiting to have their identification disks checked.

Teleman and Alicia stood very quietly in one corner of the large room, forcing themselves to remain calm and hardly glancing at the men and women about them.

They did not even allow their thoughts to dwell on the final stages of their almost miraculous escape—their unobserved ascent to a travel strip on the far side of the forest in the early hours of the morning, their journey on the strip in garments new to them, their self-consciousness when they glanced down at the insignia which proclaimed that their destination was a mating center and that they could walk openly in the sunlight as lovers, and pass a security guard or a Monitor without fearing that they would be stopped and questioned.

Had they wished they could have even paused and embraced openly on the strip, exchanging light, casual caresses, but that they had not done. Their love was neither light nor casual and the memory of the fulfillment which had come to them above a star-mirroring pool of still water was still too vivid and glorious to permit them to engage in the more superficial varieties of love-play.

Those varieties would occur later as a natural accompaniment of love, for even the deepest and most genuine love must have its lighter aspects, but for the moment they had been content to walk quietly on the strip hand in hand, their eyes shining with a memory-glow that had caused a few of the pedestrians to turn and stare at them in envy which they had not attempted to disguise.

They waited now with the glow still in their eyes, while the check-in security guard placed identity disks into a machine which quickly tested their genuineness and ejected them with a faint, whirring sound.

He sat at a desk in a far corner of the anteroom, a harassed and very busy man, with a look of boredom on his face and a restless impatience in his eyes.

"Too many leaves," he muttered, so loudly that his voice carried to everyone in the room. "It makes quite unnecessary work for us. If I had my way I would permit no love-making outside of a mating center. But I am not a Monitor and I suppose I have no right to complain. I suppose that in exceptional cases some kind of safety-valve must be provided for the disgusting thing which you people are always talking about. Romance! It used to be a taboo word, but now you use it quite openly."

He paused an instant, then went on complaining, the whirring of the machine making it difficult for Teleman and Alicia to catch all of his words.

"Of course, strictly speaking, no emergency leaves are granted on that basis. But I, for one, am not deceived. I know precisely why so many of you ask for emergency leaves. Illness, a death in your immediate family, the need to visit long-

neglected relatives and friends. Faugh! If I were a Monitor I would accept no such excuses."

He raised his eyes suddenly and called out two names. "Richa Malgroon. Taja Ramole. Your identification disks are in order. Come here and take them, and go quietly to your compartment in Section 9Y66. For all I care you can make love romantically all night long—right here in the mating center. That should content you, I should imagine. Why should you go to a vine-covered dwelling in the forest? It's all down here. You have a dwelling in the forest where you spent your—revolting word out of the old books—honeymoon. This time you were granted five hours leave. You took a day and a night. But I have instructions not to censure you. It seems your original excuse was accepted and the Monitors can be very lenient. Too lenient, if you want my honest opinion."

He coughed to clear his throat. "All right, come and get your disks. I have a feeling that you spent the night in that cottage, unlawfully. But I have no way of proving it, and the Monitors have given me instructions which I am duty-bound to accede to."

Alicia nudged Teleman's arm. "He's talking to us," she whispered. "Quick, darling. Go to the desk and take the disks, and try to act completely composed, as if we had been here many times before and are not in the least offended by his rough manner and outspokenness. I have never heard a security guard speak so frankly. It is very strange. I believe he is himself secretly rebellious and that his words have a double meaning."

Teleman nodded, pressing her hand and stepping quickly to the desk. He accepted the disks in silence and returned to where Alicia was standing.

"We can go now," he said. "Section 9Y66, compartment 66. We go through the door on our left. We'll find someone who can direct us to the right section and compartment. It will be no problem. But we mustn't act as if we didn't know."

They walked across the room and through the door and found themselves in a dimly-lighted corridor which was, for the moment, completely deserted.

They walked to the end of it, turned right and traversed another equally deserted corridor. As they walked along it Teleman found that he could no longer keep to himself thoughts which had badly shaken him and forced him, for Alicia's sake, to pretend otherwise.

"I'm afraid that we have made a mistake in coming here," he said. "We did not know that the couple whose identity we have assumed had such a completely documented past history. *The Monitors know about the dwelling!* They know that we took refuge in the dwelling. Don't you realize what that means? We may have walked into the deadliest kind of trap. We thought the couple had escaped from the mating center by stealth, without having been granted any emergency leave at all. But apparently they had a five hour leave and simply took the risk of extending it. *And the*

Monitors know about the cottage. They know we were there, so every guard here must have been alerted. The guard at the desk must know exactly who we are."

"I did not want to alarm you," Alicia said. "But the same thought occurred to me. Darling, what shall we do? If we *are* trapped—"

She moved into the circle of his arms, and he silenced her for a moment with a kiss. Alicia rubbed her body against him, and Teleman felt a strong urge to tear the garments from her body and take her there in the corridor, to press her down on the hard floor ... but he pushed back the tide of desire and spoke quickly.

"I'm afraid we are. I'm afraid we're in the deadliest kind of danger. Why they did not seize us immediately I do not know. Perhaps they intend to seize us in the privacy of our compartment, without causing any commotion, without letting the others here know what is going on. It is entirely possible that they planned it that way. That frustrated old woman we encountered on the strip; if she is the Monitor in charge such a capture might appeal to her in a cruelly whimsical way. To let us think ourselves safe and then to take us by surprise!"

"If you are right, darling, what shall we do?"

"We'd better not go to our compartment. I had no intention of doing so, but I spoke as I did in the anteroom because I didn't want to frighten you. I wanted to get you out of there as quickly as possible."

"You still haven't answered me. What shall we do?"

"We've got to escape from this place in some way. But first we've got to find out more about it. How many deserted corridors are there, how many doors and windows, how many compartments where nothing but records are stored, or mating center furniture. How many compartments which are seldom visited, where we can hide...."

Had Teleman known, events were to take place in the next forty hours which were to shake the entire structure of the society of which he was a part, and make all of his desperately seized-upon plans for escaping from the mating center completely unnecessary. But he had no way of knowing, no way of even suspecting that he was to become an instrument of destiny and overthrow a tyranny unique in human history.

Had he known, he would not have believed that such an event could take place and that his own very human qualities and the courage of the woman at his side would elevate them both to greatness.

In the world of the Monitors, the human factor was very precariously balanced. Certain basic human instincts had been repressed or denied. But they could not be repressed forever and the most basic impulse of all could not be repressed without building up tensions volcanic in intensity.

The instinct which could not be repressed could not even be discussed in the world of the Monitors. Its denial and repudiation was basic to the survival of that world. All reference to it in the old books had been stippled out, and when men and

women talked of love they did not know that they were treading on dangerous ground in respect to that impulse, which was a woman's crowning glory.

Even Teleman, despite his historic role, did not know or suspect until he emerged from another corridor into a compartment so large that it must have filled two-thirds of the building's interior. He did not know until he was standing in the entranceway, staring through a pale blue radiance at tiers upon tiers of cribs encased in sterile glass. He did not know until he saw the babies.

Tiers upon tiers of cribs and in each crib a sleeping human infant.

And in a few cribs a crying and a reaching out of tiny hands for arms that were not there, the arms of the mothers.

In each crib a man or woman of the future, still in swaddling clothes, but beginning to become aware of the world that he or she would someday inherit.

A thousand tiny faces stared up into the blue-lit immensity above the sterile cots, some rosy-cheeked and smiling, and fully awake, but most sleeping soundly. There were thin and peaked faces as well as rosy ones, contented faces and hungry-looking faces, and faces that looked completely innocent and faces that resembled the countenances of little old men, worn by years of toil, and faces that asked questions and faces that were content to express neither anger nor fear nor high intelligence but wore a look of untroubled innocence.

Teleman was too shaken to do more than stare silently and it was Alicia who put what they both felt into words, her eyes shining with a bright, newly-experienced kind of tenderness.

"I've heard about them but I've never seen them before. How beautiful they are, even the very thin ones and the angry ones! All of the future is here. But there is something lacking also. I feel it—I know it to be so. We are told that they will grow to manhood and to womanhood lacking nothing, but I cannot believe that the Monitors do not lie about that.

"There is something that should be here that is not here. They have a need, a need that is just as strong and complete in itself as the love which we have for each other."

The sobbing was so far away and so low that they scarcely heard it at first. It came from the opposite side of the enormous room, and they could not see the woman with bent back and tearstained face who was kneeling beside one of the cribs, and tenderly caressing the cheeks of a sleeping infant.

FIFTEEN

They heard only the sobbing for a moment and then the voice of the woman rang out in the stillness. There was pain and bitterness in her voice, and frustration, and a terrible unhappiness.

"He is my child!" she cried. "I know he is my child! You took him away from me, and put about his neck a chain and a metal tag bearing only two letters and a serial number. Cold, cruel letters engraved on metal!

"A serial number only, to mark him forever as lost and abandoned, a child who will grow to manhood knowing nothing of a mother's love, a mother's selfless devotion.

"You have cheated us and denied us the right to think of ourselves as the mothers of men. You have denied us the great and wonderful joy of looking upon the face of a sleeping child and knowing that the child has need of us. We cannot take our own flesh into our arms and cradle the tiny, precious new life that love has brought into the world and feel, because every mother is proud in a wholly wonderful way, that we have been privileged beyond all other women."

"We cannot suckle and nourish that life with the sweet flowing of a mother's milk. We can never know the tenderness and joy of feeling that the love which we bestow can never be wasted, that it is a gift given freely and without stint, and that all we ask in return is to feel the tug of tiny hands at our breasts and the moving about of a small body in gentle, contented drowsiness."

"You have cheated us in another way. You have made even love's beginning seem ugly, by stripping it of all tenderness, all romantic glamour. You have set us apart from the rest of society, you have veiled what we do, looking upon it as a necessary evil, and you have turned your faces from the mating centers in shame, as if loving were a crime and an abomination.

"You have made it a crime in the eyes of society. The non-love-privileged who would be as we are you look upon as the most depraved of criminals. When they have the courage to rebel openly you track them down unmercifully, as our ancestors tracked down and destroyed the wild beasts of the jungle. Some of them behave like beasts, because they have never known love and in them there is also a burning hatred, an anger that is primitive and cruel. But others are men and women of dignity and strength, who give themselves to each other in tenderness, and who know how love can transform the world about them, and everything that is in the world, until the whole of life shines with undying splendor. They can never—"

The accusing voice of the woman was drowned out abruptly by the metallic rasp of an entrance panel opening and closing and another voice so filled with rage that it rose almost instantly to a scream.

"What are you doing here? Who gave you permission to come here? Did you bribe a guard by the lewd display of your charms, or a promise to sleep with him? All

of these infants belong to us now, for we are the guardians of the future. *Now* did I say? They have always belonged to us, even when they were still in the wombs of women such as you, women who perform a necessary but hardly to be admired function in our society.

"You are nothing but wantons and evil temptresses, skilled in all the arts of the harlot, and the men whom you seduce with your charms are no better than jungle savages. How dared you come here? You have no right to look upon a single one of these infants, for they have ceased to be attached to the primitive matrix out of which they have emerged, and we will teach them all that they need to know."

"You will teach them to be as you are!" the kneeling woman cried, a reckless defiance in her voice. "You will do your best to teach them to be harsh and merciless, vindictive and consumed with envy. You will not wholly succeed, for some of them will not surrender their birthright, and will discover for themselves that life without love is too harsh a burden to be endured. They will never know a mother's love, but even without that love a few will have the strength to resist the harshness and the hate that comes from never having experienced a moment of tenderness and affection in childhood."

There was a moment of silence, followed by the sound of a sharply administered slap, and a cry of rage so sharpened by the boiling up of all that was cruel and vindictive in the woman who had been forced to listen to words that had stung her to the quick that it resembled the cry of an animal.

It was Alicia who came to the kneeling woman's rescue, darting so swiftly across the enormous room that she was gripping the enraged woman by the arm and twisting her about before the shock and pain of the blow vanished from the eyes of her accuser.

From the opposite side of the room the two women had resembled shadow-enveloped phantoms, their features barely distinguishable, their identities masked by distance. It was as if Alicia had emerged from one room into another, the first filled with light and the other enshrouded in darkness.

Only when she gripped the enraged woman's arm and swung her about did the gaunt face with its cavernous dark eyes and prominent cheekbones cause her eyes to brighten with the shock of complete recognition and the anger which that recognition aroused in her.

It was an anger that went far beyond the hot indignation which had sent her darting across the room to the kneeling woman's rescue. It was an anger impossible to control, an anger that flamed and shuddered in the depth of her mind until she feared it would consume her.

Recognition came into the Monitor's eyes at almost the same instant, and she tried quickly and desperately to free herself by jerking her arm violently backwards. She had never before doubted her own strength, and it was hard to believe that so frail-looking a woman could grip her wrist with the bite of steel in her fingers. It was

even hard to completely believe in that frailness, for her own gaunt body with its man's strength had made her a poor judge of the physical qualities of a normally developed woman.

She seemed to realize suddenly that Alicia was not particularly frail and had a strength now that she would not have possessed had she been less enraged and less certain that she could do what the gaunt woman feared most—strike her with such violence that she would drop to the floor unconscious.

The blow, when it came, was quick and incisive. Alicia's tightly-clenched fist caught the gaunt woman just below the ear and made her sway dizzily. But she did not fall, and Alicia had to strike her once more, on the point of the jaw, to win a complete victory.

The gaunt woman groaned and sank to the floor, a dull glaze overspreading her pupils. Alicia let go of her wrist and took a swift step backward, staring down at her slumped and unmoving body with a look of startled disbelief on her face and a slight diminishment of her anger.

Her anger flamed hotly again when she turned toward the woman by the crib and saw the swelling red welt which the gaunt woman's brutal slap had left on her right cheek.

The woman by the crib was no longer kneeling. She had gotten to her feet and was looking at Alicia with a warm gratefulness in her eyes.

"You and this man," she said. "You had the courage to come here, too. The others would come if the great longing to look upon our babies which we all share could be strengthened by example and a greater firmness of purpose. All, all would come. Is one of these babies yours?"

Her eyes had rested on Alicia's face for a moment, but now she was looking at Teleman, who had moved quickly to Alicia's side.

Alicia turned in surprise, for she had completely forgotten that she was not alone and would never be alone again. For the barest instant she had forgotten, not realizing that a man's stride would hardly permit a woman to outdistance him in the rapid crossing of a room.

"No," Teleman said to the woman by the crib. "We are not love-privileged and are here for the first time. Many months will pass before we are parents, I'm afraid."

The woman's eyes widened in stunned disbelief. "Not love-privileged. Then why are you here?"

"We are fugitives," he said. "And if we are captured we will be sentenced to death. Our presence here is known, and that woman—" he gestured toward the slumped form on the floor—"was planning to take us by surprise. She would have entered the compartment we were instructed to occupy with armed guards and we would have had no chance at all to save ourselves. We were not quite sure until now, but as she is here in the center there can be no doubt as to the kind of surprise she had in store for us."

The woman by the crib looked at Teleman for a long moment with a growing bewilderment in her eyes. "But how did you get those garments and that insignia? If you are not love-privileged—"

Alicia said: "If we were not in such danger we would tell you more, for there is nothing we would not want you to know. A few words perhaps, we can risk that. But if she begins to stir—"

"I'll see that she doesn't get up," Teleman said grimly. "She has forfeited all right to be treated as a woman."

Alicia nodded and moved quickly to the other woman's side. She whispered to her for a moment and the look of bewilderment vanished from the dark-fringed eyes that a few moments before had been wet with tears.

She turned abruptly, her shoulders held straight, her eyes shining in a strange way. "My name is Leguria," she said. "I am known throughout the center as one who holds her own life of small account, if in a moment of crisis others can be persuaded not to draw back from a dangerous undertaking. I will tell you something which you may not know. Not only this center but all of the centers are seething with unrest. A widespread revolt, a revolt that would sweep away all opposition, needs but an added spark and total victory will be within our grasp. It can come overnight, if just the right spark is applied."

She did not look at Teleman alone, but let her gaze pass from his strained and questioning eyes to the eyes of the woman who stood facing her.

"You could be the spark," she went on, her voice calm but vibrant with a deep undercurrent of strong emotion which gave her words a kind of passionate eloquence. "Both of you. Your rebellion must have caused a great deal of talk. I had not heard of it, but at times I keep very much to myself, and events of great importance remain unknown to me for days. Do you know who that Monitor is? She is the second most powerful Monitor on Earth. She can be over-ruled by the Council and the Chief Monitor but otherwise her power cannot be questioned by anyone."

"I do not know why she has pursued you so implacably. Perhaps you provoked her beyond endurance, in some wholly accidental way. But the reason does not matter. Only the fact that she has pursued you as few others have been pursued—has singled you out and accused you of the blackest of crimes."

"Don't you see? She has played right into our hands. She has provided us with a weapon. Your flight is by now known to thousands, all that you have endured at her hands. And you are not criminals. You have only to talk freely, to bare your inmost thought, and all of the love-privileged in this and the other centers will know what kind of man and woman you are. You cannot hide dignity and courage, generosity and quiet strength. A criminal is known by his words the moment he opens his mouth. You have said but a few words to me, but they have not been the words of a criminal. No one will believe her. They will believe you. Even if you had remained silent I could have discovered the truth about you, just by looking steadily into your eyes."

"But how can we talk openly to the men and women here?" Alicia asked. "Every minute we remain here we are endangering our lives. We would accept that risk gladly if our voices could pass beyond the walls of this room and reach a hundred men and women, or even a handful. But in a place as well-guarded as this how can our voices be heard?"

"They will be heard. And you will talk not to fifty or a hundred men and women, but to all of the love-privileged. A third of the guards here are on our side and will not hesitate to help us. I will speak to the ones we can trust. The center is very large, and it would take hours to make a complete search of every room, medical unit, and storage vault. You will be well-concealed until we can set up a transmitting instrument and make a few other necessary arrangements. Your image will appear on a hundred screens, in every one of the mating centers. A coded message will be sent to all of the centers, and everywhere, when you are ready to speak, the recreational halls will be crowded. In all of the halls there are screens, for there has never been a ban on visual entertainment for the sex-privileged, and the meetings will take place so quickly that the guards will be taken by surprise and will not have time to interfere. When the Monitors become aware of what is happening it will be too late. In every center there will be guards we can depend on. I do not think that we will fail."

Leguria stopped speaking, and touched the red welt on her cheek. But there was no bitterness in her eyes, only the stern and unyielding look of a woman wholly dedicated to an undertaking that must not be permitted to fail.

It was Telemann who voiced a doubt, but only because the tribute she had paid him seemed too flattering.

"Even if they are convinced that I am not a criminal," he said, "will that ignite the spark? I am just one lawbreaker among many, even though I have antagonized a Monitor who wields unusual power. Many men and women have been unjustly accused and condemned to death. Will just one more act of injustice anger them so much that it will give them the will and the strength to revolt?" He shook his head. "I would like to think so, but I can't. It may anger them a great deal. But it will not be enough by itself. You must appear with me on the screen and talk to them as you talked just now. Tell them about the children who will grow up cut off from all love and warmth and tenderness. Tell them about the babies which they will never see. Then Alicia will talk to them too. You are both very beautiful, and it is a mistake to ignore beauty or to think of it as unimportant when you are making that kind of appeal.

"When I speak to them I will follow your advice. I will tell them the simple truth. Then I will have something to add that will be certain to carry weight. It will not be an untruth, for I will be looking ahead into the future and I will be thinking of my son. I will speak to them as a father."

SIXTEEN

The Chief Monitor stood up and walked to the window and stared out over the sleeping city. The woman on the couch stirred drowsily and changed her position on the couch, letting her sleeping garment fall open, and revealing a long, white, sensuous body that many men had found attractive, but never before a Chief Monitor.

"I'm cold, darling," she whispered. "Please come back and cover me up. And I wish you would rub my back a little more. You have such strong and beautiful hands—the hands of an artist."

The Chief Monitor did not turn. He continued to stare out across the city and after a moment a tiny muscle in his jaw began to twitch.

"Is it really my hands you like," he said at last. "Or the way I kiss you, or the words I speak? Or do you talk that way because you know I am susceptible to flattery and it would be a very great blow to you if I should decide that another woman would please me more?"

A slight pout appeared on the woman's face, but she did not appear to be offended.

"How many women have you had, darling?" she asked, her voice tantalizingly low-pitched, so that the Chief Monitor had to strain to catch the words. "Do not be afraid to tell me. No man who can make love with such perfect understanding of how to best please a woman could have passed many nights alone. How many, darling? Fifty, one hundred?"

"You know better than that," the Chief Monitor said, still not turning. "I have loved a dozen women perhaps ... no more."

The woman on the couch sighed. "Well, a dozen is not too bad for a man who tells everyone that he has not loved at all. How long can you keep up the deception, darling? You behave so impetuously at times. Almost like one of those mad lovers in the old books. Who would think to look at you that you could become so masterful in bed!"

The Chief Monitor turned abruptly, his eyes blazing with fury. "I will not listen to such talk. I do not have to listen. Don't think for a moment that I do not know that you secretly despise me. You are two-faced, and there is a thinly-veiled mockery in everything you say, even when you appear to be paying me a compliment!"

The woman sighed, changed her position again, and stretched out white arms in the darkness. "Don't be silly, darling. That is not true at all. Come here. Have I not always succeeded in convincing you that the harsh things you say to me at times are completely untrue? Have you ever held a more responsive woman in your arms. Tell me! Have you?"

"You are responsive only when it is to your advantage to convince me that you are not as cold and cruel and calculating as I know you to be. You are incapable of

loving anyone. You tempt a man beyond endurance and then turn completely cold. You have done that time and time again."

The woman arose from the couch, unfastened the hem of her sleeping garment and let it fall to her feet. She stood completely naked before him, her body gleaming white, her red lips slightly parted.

"Come here, and stop being a fool," she said. "I demand that you come."

The Chief Monitor shook his head and turned back to the window. In all his life he had never felt quite so angry or experienced at the same time so strong a stirring of desire.

He could not take his eyes from the woman's reflection in the window pane, but he did not want to turn and go to her.

He was still staring when he saw it—a tiny red flare in the distance, in the very heart of the sleeping city. It did not alarm him at first, for there were many ways of explaining it, even though he had never seen anything precisely like it before.

It did not alarm him until it grew swiftly larger and brighter and another flickering red flame appeared on the outskirts of the city and still another close to the first, and a darting streak of fire ran along the roof of one of the nearer buildings and lit up most of the sky.

Even then he might have managed to maintain almost complete mastery over his nerves, if the flares had not been accompanied by a far-off murmur, as if many voices had suddenly broken in upon the stillness of the night and were shouting in anger or in overwhelming fright, and converging toward some central point to join with other voices in producing an even greater volume of sound.

"What is it?" the woman demanded. "What are you staring at? Does the city at night fascinate you so that you forget that there are women out there whom even your power could not seduce? They are asleep in the arms of their lovers and might not find you as attractive as I do. There are some women—"

The blasts cut her off in mid-speech, five, evenly spaced blasts that shook the bed and rattled the windowpanes. The Chief Monitor's control broke completely. He swung about and crossed the room without even looking at the woman, who was staring in dismay at the red glare that was creeping into the room from each of its three tall windows.

The tele-panel set in the wall hummed when the Chief Monitor clicked it on, and a moment later the small screen lighted up and a face that he had never seen before stared at him out of the radiance.

"Security Alert," came in a troubled voice. "There are fires and explosions taking place all over the city. We do not yet know what is causing them. An aerial attack is one possibility. Most of the fires are in the vicinity of the mating centers. And people are assembling in the streets. Most of them are armed and they are shouting threats."

The Chief Monitor clicked off the panel and the radiance dimmed and vanished. He had an impulse to rush from the room and take steps which would bring all of the Monitors together in emergency session. But he forced himself to think calmly. He had to be sure first and two or three minutes was not a very long time to wait.

He paced the floor for five full minutes, deciding that the more he knew the more swift and certain would be his mastery of the situation when he was in full possession of the facts. He completely ignored the woman who lounged on the couch, the luscious curves of her body deliberately exposed to his eyes.

It was necessary, he told himself, to know exactly what was happening. He could not afford to blunder, for the slightest mistake in a situation as unbelievable as this could destroy him. An armed uprising? A rebellion of the non-love-privileged? Or a rebellion in the mating centers? A rebellion of security guards? Who had launched the aerial attack, if it was an aerial attack? Was it a revolt or a counter-revolt? Perhaps a revolt had started somewhere in the city and immediate steps had been taken by Security Alert to counter-attack from the air.

No, no, that had to be ruled out. He had just been in communication with Security Alert and if they had ordered a counter-attack they could hardly have remained in ignorance of it. Unless the operator he had talked to had not been as fully informed as the Alert's emergency command.

It was just barely possible.

He had stopped pacing and was turning to click on the tele-panel again when a blinding white glare filled the room, and a sheet of flame wrapped itself around him, burning the flesh from his bones and causing his face to shrivel and blacken until its lineaments dissolved in a weaving spiral of fire.

SEVENTEEN

It seemed to monitor 6Y9 that an eternity had passed since she had picked herself up from the floor of the sterile-crib nursery and found herself alone. She could remember how she had felt at that moment—the red blaze of fury that had danced before her eyes, the sickness at the pit of her stomach, the waves of nausea which had made her reel and almost fall to the floor again. She could remember all that very clearly. But the search that she had ordered conducted through every room in the center, that futile and fruitless search was a hazy blur in her mind. Her emotions had been so overpowering that they had almost blotted the details of that terrible failure from her waking mind at least, and if she remembered them at all it would be only in dreams, dreams from which she would awaken screaming and bathed in cold sweat.

She remembered more clearly the three faces on the lighted tele-screen, mocking her. The hated pair had eluded her vigilance and concealed themselves somewhere in the center until the terrible moment when they had appeared on the screen and stirred ten thousand men and women with their dark lies and accusations, blackening her character until she wanted to scream and could no longer endure what they were saying about her.

The revolt. The terrible, criminal revolt that had started in the mating centers and was now sweeping the city, and would spread to other cities if it were not put down immediately.

How clever they had been, how wise in their criminal depravity! They had dared to put *that woman* on the screen and she had spoken of motherhood and love, as if a harlot could have any understanding of such things.

But it was not too late. There was still time. Now, now, all would be avenged.

The hideous flood of memories dwindled and fell away and she looked down through the thrumming, transparent floor of the flying machine's cockpit and let less appalling memories take complete possession of her mind.

How quick she had been to act, to assume command, to bypass Security Alert and the Chief Monitor and to order an aerial counter-attack!

This was surely her greatest moment, for no one could stop her now from bombing every one of the mating centers, bombing them into smoking heaps of rubble.

And the men and women in the streets, criminals all, she would see that not one of them escaped.

Oh, she would make very sure. Armed rebels on foot could not hope to escape alive when the bombs started falling. And they would find themselves trapped in a raging inferno and the rebellion would be crushed forever and no one would ever dare rebel again.

A firm hand on her arm caused her to turn. An aerial fleet commander stood at her elbow, a look of deep concern in his eyes. He was a tall, handsome-looking man,

darkly bearded. He held himself very straight and she could not help admiring the breadth of his shoulders and the attractive curliness of his hair.

"The last machine in the line of flight has dropped four bombs," he said. "And we have just—"

The gaunt woman straightened, cutting him short with an abrupt, angry gesture.

"Four bombs! What are you talking about? I heard no detonations."

"The last machine is flying very low and it has fallen behind," the commander replied, the look of concern still in his eyes. "That's why you didn't hear the bombs explode. But that is not what I am worried about."

The gaunt woman's stare sharpened. "Just what are you worried about?" she demanded.

"He has dropped the bombs far wide of the targets," the commander said. "That in itself would not be a grave cause for concern, for it would indicate merely poor marksmanship. But he appears to have—perhaps it was not deliberate, but—"

The commander paused, realizing that he was putting all this very badly. But the woman before him was no ordinary Monitor and her formidable aspect made him feel unusually nervous and ill at ease. The news he had to convey was disturbing, and he was a little afraid of alarming the Monitor unduly.

He coughed to clear his throat and tried again.

"He has not only dropped the bombs wide of the targets," he said. "He has dropped them on the *wrong* targets."

The gaunt woman stared at him for a moment in stunned disbelief. "What are you trying to say? Have you taken leave of your senses? How could he?"

"It is hard to explain. It's as if he had deliberately managed to miss a target and direct the bombs to another target close by, so that you could only accuse him of missing one target and accidentally hitting another. But it almost seems as if more than just poor marksmanship is involved, because every bomb destroyed an important communications center, or administration building. Not a single bomb hit a mating center or any of the public squares which you gave us instructions to bomb."

The gaunt woman gripped both arms of the revolving metal chair in which she had been sitting and descended to the metal platform which ran the full length of the cockpit. She stood very still, transfixing the commander with a terrible, accusing stare.

"You fool!" she cried. "You slow-witted imbecile! Of course it was deliberate. *That man is a traitor.*"

The commander had turned deathly pale. "But it doesn't make sense," he said, defensively. "If he is a traitor, why doesn't he leave the squadron and bomb strategic targets without so cleverly masking his intentions that it is difficult to charge him with treason?"

"You are a worse fool than I thought. It is to his advantage to stay with the squadron. If he were alone in the sky he would be a perfect target for our long-range aerial projectiles. We could bring him down in a matter of minutes. But if he appears

to be merely a bad marksman another man who is a stupid commander will play right into his hands. There is a dangerous traitor in the squadron and you have done absolutely nothing about it. Do you know just what targets he bombed?"

"As I told you—all vital centers."

"How vital? Major centers?"

"No, it isn't quite that bad. But we are flying very close to the Council building now, and that's why I thought—"

"Never mind what you thought. Are you sure he only dropped four bombs?"

The commander hesitated, gnawing at his underlip.

"Well?"

"We can't be completely sure. The atomic diffusion bombs do not detonate and their trajectory is invisible from the air. He could have dropped one and we would not know."

"The deadliest kind of bomb!" The gaunt woman shuddered. "The heat destroys everything in its path. A white incandescence, hotter than the Sun's photosphere. It burns through flesh and bone, reducing the human body to charred ash in a matter of seconds. I would not wish such a fate on my worst enemy."

The flying machine shuddered suddenly, as if it had flown through a raging windstorm and was being buffeted from both sides. The cockpit trembled throughout its entire length and the metal chair spun about on its support so violently that if the gaunt woman had still been sitting in it she would have been hurled with violence to the floor.

The blast which followed close on the first convulsive lurch of the machine could be heard even from the air. The sound penetrated the glass-enclosed cockpit and made the gaunt woman's ears ring and the red flare which accompanied the blast was so bright that it dazzled her eyes.

Looking down, she could see the terrible core of the explosion beginning to expand, thinning a little as it spread outward and enveloping the surrounding streets and buildings in a fiery glow.

"The Council Building!" the commander groaned, his voice almost a sob. "He must have unloaded a rack of at least eight bombs."

The gaunt woman's face was a colorless mask, her lips distorted in a grimace that drew the flesh so tightly together on both sides of her mouth that it gave her features an almost mummy-like look. She remained for a moment rigid, unable to move or speak, and so abnormal was her aspect that the commander wished that he had kept silent and let realization come to her slowly.

He was even more appalled when she reached out and fastened her hands on his wrists. She tugged at him, drawing him toward her. She twisted his wrists savagely and then released him with a violent shove.

"Blast him down! Order the entire squadron to attack him with projectiles at once! They are to abandon all strategic bombing. Do you understand? If his machine

does not go spiraling down in flames within the next five minutes you will pay for your stupidity with your life."

The commander nodded and withdrew, his throat so dry that he could no longer swallow and his gait so unsteady that he arrived in the gunnery compartment reeling like a drunken man.

Gradually the gaunt woman regained control of her shrieking nerves and some of the color crept back into her face. She reseated herself in the revolving chair and strained forward, waiting for the sky to light up with the bright flare of projectiles and the still brighter flare of a flame-enveloped and tailspinning flying machine.

She knew that she would not be able to see the actual destruction of the machine, for it was the last in line and, as the commander had informed her with his stupidity heavy upon him, flying very low. But she would know quickly enough, for the commander would not be slow in breaking the news when one or more of the projectiles found its mark.

She waited and as the shock and rage which she had experienced on seeing the Council building blasted to rubble began to wear off, she became more reconciled to what had happened. It was just possible that the Council—all of the Council—had been within the building, summoned into emergency session by the Chief Monitor. That was perhaps too much to hope for, but she saw no reason to let the unlikelihood of that darken her mood. At least half of the Council would be gone, for half of the Council resided in the building. It greatly reduced the number of her enemies and immeasurably enhanced her prestige.

There was the sudden, blinding flare of a projectile and she stiffened in anticipation, her eyes darting to the empty sky immediately above her and then sideways, hoping that the target-tagged machine with its traitor-pilot would increase its speed in a last-minute escape maneuver and come into view for a moment. If only she could witness the direct hit, could see it explode in the air!

Her hopes soared until she could scarcely breathe. But the traitor did not come into view. There was another bright projectile flare and the second machine in the squadron came abreast of the cockpit window, flying parallel at a distance of eighty or ninety feet.

There was something wrong with the way the second machine was flying. It had put on a sudden burst of speed, but now it was slowing down and wobbling from side to side.

It was unmistakably in trouble. Its cockpit seemed to sag, as if one of the interior struts had given way or the entire structure had been half shot away, on the side that was hidden from her.

Heavy black smoke began suddenly to spiral from the machine's middle section, coalescing into a thick black cloud in the air above it. It wobbled more violently from side to side and then, quite suddenly, it was plunging downward, twisting and turning in a zigzagging tailspin as it went spiraling toward the earth.

The gaunt woman was given no time to recover from the shock of that totally unexpected defeat. Another machine came into view in the sky above her and burst almost instantly into flame. Two more projectile flares lit up the sky, turning the bright silvery sheen of a third machine's wings to crimson as it turned completely about in the air and plummeted downward like a wounded falcon, its tail feathers in wild disarray.

The fourth defeat she did not see. News of it came to her through a speaking tube, in a voice that she recognized, a voice that brought a hot flush of anger to her cheeks.

"The squadron leader is dead. He's shot down five machines so far. There's nothing we can do. He keeps outmaneuvering us at every turn. There are eight or ten different ways a really brilliant pilot can hold his own and be more than a match for a whole squadron. He knows all of them."

The gaunt woman slammed the speaking tube down with such violence that it abraded the flesh of her knuckles, causing her to wince in pain.

She steeled herself to endure without complaint what she feared would be coming—the destruction of a sixth machine and a seventh. And after that? There were only nine machines in the squadron.

It was even worse than she had imagined it might be. Two of the four remaining machines were shot down almost simultaneously. She did not see them fall but the two bright flares that lit up the earth far below left no doubt as to what had happened.

Feeling a dull, hollow ache in her chest, she found herself wondering whether the machine in which she sat, would be next, or would tragedy overtake the only other remaining machine first?

She was not left long in doubt. A dull concussion shook the cockpit, and she was thrown violently forward. For an instant a kaleidoscope of changing colors seemed to spin and whirl about her. With the spinning came a dizziness and black nausea clawed at her throat.

She dragged herself to her feet, and clung to the long metal rail on the right side of the cockpit, staring out through a splintered surface of glass at nothing at all.

For a moment nothing and then she saw him. She saw the machine that had outfought and outmaneuvered an entire squadron and in the cockpit a pilot who wore upon his chest the bright insignia of the love-privileged.

She saw the pilot's face.

Clearly, clearly she saw it, and he must have seen her face, for he was staring straight at her.

It was the face, the one face above all others that she hated with every breath she drew and would hate until she ceased to draw breath.

For one awful moment she looked into Teleman's eyes and saw Teleman's lips move in pity.

Then she was falling. Down and down into a swirling abyss of emptiness, falling with the broken and burning machine ... falling, falling.

EPILOGUE

"The revolt can't be stopped now," Leguria said. "We shall have our new world and we shall all be a part of it."

She drew herself up, her eyes shining, and smiled at the man and woman who had just climbed down from a smoke-blackened flying machine, a machine which only an aerial engineer who had built bridges in the deep jungle would have known how to maneuver with skill in an hour of decision.

Dusk was falling and its purple glow, deflected downward from the shining glass of the machine's cockpit, aureoled Leguria's hair in a soft radiance.

"I may have seemed to you a strong-willed and determined woman," she said. "But I am not really like that at all. It is just that circumstances change people."

She nodded and fell silent, and Teleman and Alicia were content just to be together in the peaceful quiet of the countryside, until the twilight deepened and gave birth to a wild rush of stars.

They lay down together under those stars, and let passion creep over them slowly, knowing that they had time now, and freedom to love.