The Hellflower

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Cover: Poppy and Sparrow, Utagawa Hiroshige, 1833, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

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The book had been thrown at Charles Farradyne. Then they had added the composing room, the printing press, and the final grand black smear of printer's ink. So when Howard Clevis located Farradyne working in the fungus fields of Venus four years later, Farradyne was a beaten man who no longer burned with resentment because he was all burned out. Farradyne looked up dully when Clevis came into the squalid rooming-house.

"I am Howard Clevis," said the visitor.

"Fine," mumbled Farradyne. "So what?" He looked at one of the few white shirts in a thousand miles and grunted disapprovingly.

"I've got a job for you."

"Who do you want killed?"

"Take it easy. You're the Charles Farradyne who--"

"Who dumped the Semiramide into The Bog ... and you're Santa Claus, here to undo it?"

"This is on the level, Farradyne."

Farradyne laughed shortly, but the sound was all scorn and no humor. While the raw bark was still echoing in the room, he added, "Can it, Clevis. With a thousand licensed spacemen handy everywhere, willing to latch onto an honest buck, any man that comes halfway across Venus to offer Farradyne a job can't be on the level."

Clevis eyed Farradyne calculatingly. "I should think you might enjoy the chance."

"It doesn't look good."

Clevis smiled calmly. He had the air of a man who knew what he was doing. He was medium tall, with a sprinkle of gray in his hair and determined lines near the eyes and across the forehead. There was character in his face, strong and no doubt about it. "I'm here, Farradyne, just because of the way it looks. But the fact is that I need you. I know you're bitter, but--"

"Bitter!" roared Farradyne, getting to his feet and stalking across the squalid room towards Clevis. "Bitter? My God! They

haul me home on a shutter so they can give me a fair trial before they kick me out. You don't think I like it in this rat hole, do you?"

"No, I don't. But listen, will you?"

"Nobody listened to me, why should I listen to you?"

"Because I have something to say," said Clevis pointedly. "Do you want to hear it?"

"Go ahead."

"I'm Howard Clevis of the Solar Anti-Narcotic Department."

Farradyne snorted. "Well, I haven't got any. I don't use any. And I don't have much truck with those that do."

"Nobody is on trial here--nothing that you say can be used in any way. That's why I came alone. Look ... if I were in your shoes I'd do anything at all to get out of this muck-field."

"Some things even a bum won't do. And I don't owe you anything."

"Wrong. When you dumped the Semiramide into The Bog four years ago, you killed one of our best operatives. We need you, Farradyne, and you owe us for that. Now?"

"When I dumped the Semiramide no one would listen to me. Do you want to listen to me now?"

"No, I don't."

"I got a raw deal."

"So did the man you killed."

"I didn't kill anybody!" yelled Farradyne.

* * *

Clevis eyed Farradyne calmly, even though Farradyne was large enough to take the smaller, older man's hide off if he got angry enough. "I'm not here to argue that point," said Clevis, "and I don't intend to. Regardless of how you feel, I'm offering you a chance to get out of this mess. It's a space job, Farradyne."

"What makes you think I'll play stool pigeon?"

"It's no informer's job. It's space-piloting."

"I'll bet."

"You bet and I'll cover it a thousand to one."

Farradyne sat down on the dingy bed and said, "Go ahead and talk, Clevis. I'll listen."

Clevis dug into his brief case and brought out a flower. "Do you know what this is?" he asked, handing the blossom to Farradyne.

Farradyne looked at it briefly. "It might be a gardenia but it isn't."

"How can you tell?" asked Clevis eagerly.

"Only because you wouldn't be coming halfway across Venus to bring me a gardenia. So that is a love lotus."

Clevis looked a bit disappointed. "I thought that maybe you might have some way--"

"What makes you think I'd know more than a botanist?"

Clevis smiled. "Spacemen tend to come up with some oddly interesting specks of knowledge now and then."

"So far as I know, there's only one way of telling. That's to try it out. Thanks, I'll not have my fun that way. That's one thing you can't pin on me."

"I wouldn't try. But listen, Farradyne. In the past twelve years we have carefully besmirched the names and reputations of six men, hoping that they could get on the inside. For our pains we have lost all six of them one way or another. The enemy seems to have a good espionage system. Our men roam up and down the solar system making like big time operators and get nowhere. The love-lotus operators seem to be able to tell a phony louse when they see one."

"And I'm a real louse?"

"You've a convincing record, Farradyne."

Farradyne shook his head angrily. "Not that kind," he snapped. "Your pals sloughed off my license and tossed me out on my duff to scratch, but no one ever pinned the crooked label on me and made it stick."

"Then why did they take away your license?"

"Because someone needed a goat."

"And you are innocent?"

Farradyne growled hopelessly. "All right," he said, returning to his former lethargy. "So just remember that I was acquitted, remember? Lack of evidence. But they took my license and tossed me out of space and that's as bad as a full conviction. So where am I? I'll stop beating my gums about it, Clevis."

* * *

Clevis smiled quietly. "You were a good pilot, Farradyne. Maybe a bit too good. You collected a few too many pink tickets for cutting didoes and collecting women to show off in front of. They'd have marked it off as an accident if it hadn't been Farradyne. Your record accused you of being the hot-pants pilot, the fly-fly boy. Maybe that last job of yours was another dido that caught you. But let's leave the ghost alone, Farradyne. We need you, Farradyne."

Farradyne grunted and his lips twisted a bit. He got up from the unmade bed and went to the scarred dresser to pour a stiff jolt from an open bottle into a dirty glass. He took a sip and then walked to the window and stood there, staring out into the dusk and talking, half to himself. Clevis listened.

"I've had my prayer," said Farradyne. "A prayer in a nightmare. A man fighting against a rigged job, like the girl in the old story who turned up in her mother's hotel room to find that every evidence of her mother's existence had been erased. Bellhops, and cab driver, and the steamship captain, and the hotel register all rigged. Even the police disbelieved her, remember? Well, that's Farradyne, too, Clevis. My first error was telling them that someone came into the control room during landing. They said that no one would do that because everybody knew the danger of diverting the pilot's attention during a landing. No one, they said, would take the chance of killing himself; and the other passengers would stop anybody who tried to go up the stairs at that time because they knew the danger to themselves.

"They practically scoffed me into jail when I told them that there were three people in the room. I couldn't look around, you

know. A pilot might just as well be blindfolded and manacled to his chair during landing. So I heard three people behind me and couldn't look. All I could do was to snarl for them to get the hell out. Then we rapped the cliff and dumped the ship into The Bog, and I got tossed out through the busted observation dome. They salvaged the Semiramide a few months later and found only one skeleton in the room. That made me a liar. Besides the skeleton was of a woman, and then they all nodded sagely and said, 'Woman? Well, we know our Farradyne!' and I got the works.

"So," Farradyne sounded bitter once more, "they suspended me and took away my license. They wouldn't even let me near a spacer; maybe they thought I might steal one, forgetting that there's no place to hide. Maybe they thought I'd steal Mars, too. So if I want a drink they ask me if it's true that jungle juice gives a man hallucinations. If I light a cigarette I'm asked if it is real laughing grass. If I ask for a job they want to know how hard I'll work for my liquor. So I end up in this God-forsaken marsh playing nursemaid to a bunch of stinking toadstools." Farradyne's voice rose to an angry pitch. "The mold grows on your hide and under your nails and in your hair and you forget what it's like to be clean and you lose hope and ambition because you're kicked off the bottom of the ladder, but you still dream of someday being able to show the whole damned solar system that you're not the louse they made you. Then instead of getting a chance, a man comes to you and offers you a job because he needs a professional bastard with a bad record--and its damned small consolation, but I'll take it just to show you and everybody else that I'm not the hot-rock that I've been called."

* * *

Farradyne sniffed at the glass and then threw it into the dirty sink with a derisive gesture. "I'll ask for a lot of things," he said, quietly now. "The first thing is for enough money to buy White Star Trail instead of this rotgut."

"That can be done, but can you take it?"

"It'll be hard," admitted Farradyne. "I've been on this diet of soap and vitriol too long. But I'll do it. Give me a month."

"I can't offer you much," said Clevis. "But maybe this can be hope for you: help us clean up the hellblossom gang and you'll do a lot towards erasing that black mark on your record."

"Just what's the pitch?"

Clevis took a small leather folder from his briefcase and handed it over. Farradyne recognized it as a space-pilot's license before he opened it. He read it with a cynical smile before he asked, "Where did you get it?"

"It's probably the only official forgery in existence. The Solar Anti-Narcotics Department has a lot of angles to play, Farradyne. First, that ticket is made of the right paper and printed with the right type and the right ink because," and Clevis smiled, "it came from the right office. The big rubber stamp 'Reinstated' is the right stamp and the initials are put on properly, but not by the right man. The license will get you into and out of spaceports and all the rest of the privileges. But it has no listing on the master log at the Bureau of Space Personnel. So long as you stay out of trouble, the only people who will check on the validity will be the ones we hope to catch. When they discover that your ticket is invalid, you may get an offer to join 'em."

"And in the meantime?"

"In the meantime you'll be running a spacer in the usual way. We've a couple of subcontracts you can handle to stay in business, and you'll pick up other business, no doubt. But there are two things to remember, always. The first is that you've got to play it flat, Farradyne. No nonsense. Just remember who and what you are. To make sure of it, I'll remind you again that you are a crumb with a bad reputation. You'll be running a spacer worth a hell of a lot of dough and there will be a lot of people asking a lot of other people how you managed the deal. Probably none of them will ever get around to asking you, but your attitude is the same as the known gangster whose only visible means of support for his million-dollar estate and his yacht and his high

living is his small string of hot-dog stands. That he owns these things is only an indication of thrift and good management."

"I get it," grinned Farradyne.

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Clevis snapped, "This is no laughing matter. What goes along with this is important. You'll play this game as we outline it to you and in no other way. The first time we find you playing hanky-panky we'll have you by the ears in the morning. And if you cut a dido and get pinned for it, there you'll be with a forged license and a spacer that will have some very odd-looking registration papers so far as the Master Log runs. And no one is going to admit that they know you. Certainly the SAND office won't. And furthermore if you do claim any connection at any time for any reason whatsoever, we'll haul you in for attempting to impersonate one of us. You're a decoy, a sitting duck with both feet in the mud, Farradyne, and no damned good to anybody until you get mired deeper in the same stinking mud. Now for the second item."

"Second? Weren't there ten or twelve in that last?" grunted Farradyne.

"That was only the beginning. The second is this: do not, under any circumstances make any attempt to investigate that accident of yours. The game you are going to play will not permit you to make any attempt to clear up that mess. As a character of questionable background, your attitude must be that of a man caught in a bad show and forced to undergo visible suffering long enough for the public to forget, before you can resume your role of professional louse. Got this straight?"

Farradyne looked at Clevis; gaunt has-been looking at success. The window was dark now, but there were no stars visible from the surface of Venus; only Terra and Jupiter and Sirius and Vega and a couple of others that haloed through the haze. The call of the free blackness of space pulled at Farradyne. He turned back from the window and looked at the unmade bed, the insect-

specked walls, the scarred dresser, the warped floor. His nose wrinkled tentatively and he cursed inwardly because he knew that the joint reeked of rancid sweat and mildewed cloth and his nose was so accustomed to this stink that he could not smell it.

Inwardly Farradyne came to understand, in those few moments while Clevis watched him quietly, that his oft-repeated statement that there were some things that even a bum wouldn't do was so much malarkey. Farradyne would join the hellblossom operators if it gave him an opportunity to get out of this Venusian mire. He turned to Clevis, not realizing that only a few seconds had passed.

"Let's go," he said.

Clevis cast a pointed look at the dresser.

"There's nothing in the place but bad memories," said Farradyne. "I'll leave them here. Good, bad or indifferent, Clevis, I'm your man no matter how you want it played. For the first time in years I want a bath and a clean shirt."

II

He was rustier than he had realized. It was not only the four years away from the levers of the control room and the split-second decision of high speed, it was the four years of rotting in skid row. His muscles were stringy, his skin was slaty, his eyes were slow. He was flab and ached and off his feed. He was slow and overcompensating in his motions. He missed his aim by yards and miscalculated his position and his speed and his direction so badly that Donaldson, who rode in the co-pilot's seat, sat there with his hands poised over the levers and clutched convulsively or pressed against the floor with his feet, chewing his lips with concern as Farradyne flopped the sky cruiser roughly here and there like a recruit.

It took him a month of practise on Mercury to get the hang of it again. A solid month of severe discipline, living in the ship and taking exercise and routine practise to refine his control. He

found that making the change from the rotgut jungle juice to White Star Trail was not too hard because his mind was busy all the time and he did not need the high-powered stuff. White Star Trail was a godsend to the man who liked the flavor of fine Scotch whiskey but could not afford to befog his coordination by so much as a single ounce of the pure quill.

Eventually they 'soloed' him; Donaldson sat in the easy chair in the salon below talking to Clevis, and he could hear them discussing problems unrelated to him. Their voices came over the squawk-box system clear enough to be understood. It gave Farradyne confidence. He took the Lancaster Eighty-One into the sky, circled Mercury and began landing procedure. For a moment, then, he relived that black day in his past:

He had called the spaceport, "Semiramide calling North Venus Tower."

"Aye-firm, Semiramide, from North Venus Tower."

"Semiramide requesting landing instructions; give with the dope, Tower."

"Tower to Semiramide. Beacon Nine at one hundred thousand feet, Landing Area Twelve. Traffic is one Middleton Seven-Six-Two at thirty thousand taking off from Beacon Two and one Lincoln Four-Four landing at Beacon Seven. Keep an eye peeled for a Burbank Eight-Experimental that's been scooting around at seventy thousand. That's all."

"Aye-firm, Tower."

Then had come the voice of a woman behind him. Just a murmur--perhaps a sigh of wonder from a woman who had just been shown for the first time in her life the intricacies of rack and panel of meter and gage and lever and shining device that surrounds the space pilot to demand every iota of his attention during take-off or landing. In Farradyne's recollection, there were two kinds of people: one kind stood in the center of such an array and held their hands together for fear of upsetting something; the other couldn't keep their damned hands off a button or a lever even if it meant their own electrocution.

There were thirty-three people aboard, thirteen of them women, and Farradyne wondered which of them it was. He didn't care. "Get the hell below," he snapped over his shoulder.

A young man made some sound. Farradyne was even sharper; a woman might wander up, interested, but a man should know that this was a deadly curiosity. "Take her below, you imbecile," he snarled.

An older man chimed in with something that sounded like an agreement to Farradyne's order; there was a very brief three-way argument that lasted until one of them fell for the lure of a dark pilot-lamp and an inviting push-button. The Semiramide bucked like a wasp-stung colt and the silver-dull sky over North Venus Spaceport whirled--

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Farradyne was shocked out of his vivid daydream by the matter-of-fact voice of the Mercury Port's dispatcher: "Lancaster from Tower, you are a half degree off landing course. Correct."

Farradyne responded, "Instructions received, Tower. Will correct. Will correlate instruments after landing."

"Aye-firm, Lancaster Eighty-One."

Farradyne's solo landing was firm and easy; almost as good as he used to do in the days before--

He put it out of his mind and went below to Clevis and Donaldson. The latter asked him what had been the matter with the course.

"I hit a daydream of the Semiramide," admitted Farradyne.

"Better forget it."

"I came out of it," said Farradyne shortly.

"Okay?" Clevis looked at Donaldson. The pilot nodded. "Okay, Farradyne, you're ready. This is your ship; you're cleared to Ganymede on speculation. You'll play it from there. There's enough money in the strong-locker to keep you going for a long time on no pickups at all, and you'll get regular payment for the Pluto run. Just remember, no shenanigans."

"No games," promised Farradyne.

Clevis stood up. "I hope you mean that," he said earnestly. "If nothing else, remember that your--er--misfortune on Venus four years ago may have put you in a position to be a benefactor to the same mankind you hate. I hope you'll find that they are as quick to applaud a hero as to condemn a louse. Don't force me to admit that my hope of running down the hellblossom outfit was based on a bum hunch. Don't let me down, Farradyne."

Clevis left then, before Farradyne could find words. Donaldson left with him, but stopped at the spacelock to hurl at Farradyne: "Luck, fella."

An hour later Farradyne was a-space between Mercury and Ganymede. On his own in space for the first time in four long aching years. Not quite a free man, but at least no prisoner. He took a deep breath once he was out of control-range and could put the Lancaster on the autopilot. Gone were the smells and the rotting filth of the fungus fields; here were the bright clear stars in the velvety sky. Here was freedom--freedom of the body, at least. Maybe even freedom of the soul. But not freedom of the intellect, yet. He had a tough row to hoe and the tougher row of his innocence to turn up into the light of day.

But for the first time since he'd been thrown flat on his face, Farradyne felt that he had a chance.

III

Ganymede was in nightfall and Jupiter was a half-rim over the horizon when he landed. He checked in at the Operations Office and listed his Lancaster as available for a pick-up job. The clerk that took his license to make the listing raised one mild eyebrow at the big rubber stamp reading 'Reinstated' across the face of the card, but made no comment. Farradyne's was not the only one so stamped. Pilots had been suspended for making a bounce-landing with an official aboard or coming in too slantwise instead of following a beacon down vertically.

He folded the leather case and slipped it back in his pocket. He looked at the pick-up list, which was not too long. He had a fair chance of picking up a job, and that would add to whatever backlog Clevis had left him. Farradyne found himself able to figure his chances as though he had not spent his time digging mushrooms on Venus. The pilot that owned his ship outright was a rare one. The rest were mortgaged to the scupper and it was a touch and clip job to make the monthly payments. Some pilots never did get their ships paid off but managed to scratch out a living anyway. A pilot with a clear ship could rake in the dough, and could eventually start a string of his own. This was the ultimate goal which so many aimed at but so few achieved. With no mortgage to contend with, Farradyne could loaf all over space and still make out rather well, picking up a job here and a job there.

He waved a hand at the registry clerk and went out into the dark of the spaceport.

Rimming the edge of the field were three distant globs of neon, all indicating bars. One was as good as the next, so Farradyne headed towards the nearest. He entered it with the air of a man who had every right to land his ship anywhere he pleased and then hit the nearest bar. He waggled a finger at the barkeep, called for White Star Trail, and dropped a ten-spot on the bar with an air that indicated that he might be there long enough for a second.

Then he turned and hooked one heel in the brass rail, leaned back on the mahogany with his elbows and surveyed the joint like a man with time and money to spare, looking for what could be found. The glass in his hand dangled a bit and his posture was relaxed.

It was called 'The Spaceman's Bar,' like sixteen hundred other 'Spaceman's Bar's rimming spaceports from Pluto to Mercury. The customers were about the same, too. There were four spacemen playing blackjack for dimes near the back of the room. Two women were nursing beers, hoping for someone to come and of-

fer them something more substantial. Two young fellows were agreeing vigorously with one another about the political situation which neither of them liked. One character should have gone home eighteen drinks earlier, and was earning a ride home on a shutter with a broken nose by needling a man with a lot of patience, which was running out. A woman sat in a booth along the wall, dressed in a copy of some exclusive model that had neither the cloth nor the workmanship to stand up for more than the initial wearing, and looked already as if she had worn it often. The woman herself had the same tired, overworked look. She was too young to have that look, and Farradyne looked away, disinterested; he favored the vivacious brunette that sat gayly across the table from a young spaceman and enticed him with her eyes. Farradyne shrugged; the girl had eyes for no one else and she probably couldn't have been pried away from her young spaceman by any means. It occurred to Farradyne that, judging by the way she was acting, if some other guy slipped her a love lotus, the girl would take a deep breath, get bedroom eyed, and then leave the guy to go looking for her spaceman. Farradyne grinned at the idea.

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As far as Farradyne could tell, there was not a love lotus in the place, which hardly surprised him because he did not really expect to find one in a place such as this. He turned back to the bar for a refill. When he got it, he turned to face the room again and saw that a man had come in and was standing just inside the door, blinking at the lights. He was eyeing the customers with a searching look.

Eventually he addressed the entire room: "Who owns the Lancaster Eighty-One that just came in?"

"I do," said Farradyne.

"Are you free?"

"Until the third of August."

"I'm Timothy Martin of the Martian Water Commission. I'd like to hire you for a trip to Uranus."

"My name is Charles Farradyne, and maybe we can make a deal. What's the job, Mr. Martin?" Farradyne eyed the room furtively, wondering if the mention of the name would ring any cracked bells among the spacemen. It did not seem to, and Farradyne did not know whether to be gratified at the forgetfulness or depressed at his lack of notoriety.

"Three of us and some instruments," said Martin.

"That's hiking all the way to Uranus empty, you know."

"I know, but this is of the utmost importance. Government business."

"It's up to you; I'll haul you out there on a three-passenger charter, since you probably haven't enough gear to make it a payload. Okay?"

"It's a bit high," Martin grunted, "but this is necessity. Can you be ready for an early morning hop-off?"

"You be there with your gear and we'll hike it at dawn." Farradyne turned to the barkeep and wagged for a refill, then indicated that Martin be served. The government man took real bourbon but Farradyne stuck to his White Star Trail. The two of them clinked glasses and drank, and Farradyne was about to say something when he felt a touch against his elbow. It was the girl in the over-tired cocktail dress. Her glazed eyes were wide and glittering, her face hard and thin-lipped.

"You're Charles Farradyne?" she asked in a flat voice. Beneath a tone of distrust and hatred the voice had what might have been a pleasant throatiness if it had not been strained.

Farradyne nodded.

"Farradyne--of the Semiramide?"

"Yes." He felt a peculiar mixture of gratification and resentment. He had been recognized at last, but it should have come from a better source.

* * *

She shut him out by turning to Martin. "Do you know who you've hired?" she asked with the same flatness of tone. Profile-wise, she looked about twenty-three at most. Farradyne wondered how a woman that young could possibly have crammed into the brief years all of the experience that showed in her face.

Martin was fumbling for words. "Why, er--" he said lamely.

"This rum-lushing bum is Charles Farradyne, the hot-rock that dumped his spacer into The Bog."

"Is this true?" demanded Martin of Farradyne.

"I did have an accident there," said Farradyne. "But--"

The woman sneered. "Accident, you call it. Sorry, aren't you? Reeking with remorse. But not so grief-stricken that you'll not take this man out and kill him the way you killed my brother."

Farradyne grunted. "I don't know you from Mother Machree. I've had my trouble and I don't like it any more than you do."

"You're alive, at least," she snarled at him. "Alive and ready to go around skylarking again. But my brother is dead and you--"

"Am I supposed to blow out my brains? Would that make up for this brother of yours?" demanded Farradyne angrily. Some of the anguish of the affair returned. He recalled all too vividly his own mental meanderings at the time, and the feeling that suicide would erase that memory. But he had burned himself out with those long periods of self-reproach.

"Blow your brains out," advised the girl sharply. "Then the rest of us will be protected against you."

"I suppose I am responsible for you, too?" he asked bitterly.

Martin gulped down his drink. "I think I'd better find another ship," he said hurriedly.

Farradyne nodded curtly at Martin's back, then looked down at the girl. He felt again the powerful impulse to plead his case, to explain, to show his innocence. But he knew that this was the wrong thing to do. Martin had refused the job once Farradyne had been identified. This might be the start of what Clevis wanted. Farradyne could louse it up for fair by saying the wrong thing here and now. So instead of making some appeal to the

woman, Farradyne eyed her coldly. There was something incongruous about her. She looked like the standard tomato of the spacelanes; she dressed the part and she acted it. The rough-hewn language and the cynical bitterness were normal enough, but they should not have been expressed in acceptable grammar and near-perfect diction. He had catalogued her as a drunken witch, but she was neither drunk nor a witch. Nor was she a thrill-seeking female out slumming for the fun of it. She belonged in the "Spaceman's Bar" but not among the lushes--

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And then he caught it. He had been too far from it too long. The glazed, bored eyes, the completely blase attitude were the tip-off; then the fact that she had become animated at the chance to start a scene of violence. Dope is dope and all of it works the same way. The first sniff is far from dangerous, but the second must be larger and the third larger still until the body craves a massive dose. With some dope the effect is physical, with others it is mental. With love lotus it was emotional. The woman had been on the emotional toboggan; her capacity for emotion had been dulled to such an extent that only a scene of real violence could cut through the scars to give her a reaction. Someone had slipped the girl a really top-notch dose of hellflower!

"Who are you?" he asked.

"Norma Hannon," she snapped. "And I don't suppose you remember Frank Hannon at all."

"Never met him."

"You killed him."

Farradyne felt a kind of hysteria; he wanted to laugh and he knew that once he started he could not stop easily. Then the feeling went away and he looked around the room.

Every eye in the place was on him, but as he met their eyes they looked down or aside or back to their own personal affairs. He knew the breed--spacemen, a strange mixture of high intelli-

gence and hard roughness. Farradyne knew that to a man they understood that the most damaging thing they could do was to deny him the physical satisfaction of a fight. He could rant and roar and in the end he would be forced to leave the joint. It would be a lame retreat. A defeat.

He looked back at her; she stood there in front of him with her hands on her hips, swaying back and forth and relishing the emotional stimulus of hatred. She wanted more, he could see. Farradyne wanted out of here; the girl had done her part for him and could do no more. To take her along as a possible link to the hellblossom operators was less than a half-baked idea. She would only make trouble, because trouble was what she relished.

"I've got it now," she blurted. Her voice rose to a fever-pitch, her face cleared and took on the look of someone who is anticipating a real thrill. Norma Hannon was at that stage in the addiction where bloody murderous butchery would thrill her about to the same degree as a normal woman being kissed good-night at her front door. "I've got it now," she said and her voice rang out through the barroom. "The only kind of a rascal that could dump a spacer and kill thirty-three people and then turn up with another spacer is a big-time operator. You louse!" she screamed at him. Then she turned to the rest of the room, calling:

"Fellows, meet Charles Farradyne, the big-time hellflower operator!"

* * *

Farradyne's nerves leaped. He knew his spacemen. A louse they could ignore, but a dope runner--

Their faces changed from deliberate dis-recognition of him to cold and calculated hatred, not so much of Farradyne as of what he represented in their minds. Farradyne knew that he had better get out of here quickly or he would leave most of his skin on the floor.

Something touched him on the shoulder, hard. He snapped his head around. The bartender had rapped him on the shoulder

with the muzzle of a double-barrelled shotgun.

"Get the hell out of here," said the man from between narrowed lips. "And take your rotten money with you!"

He scooped up the change he had dropped beside Farradyne's glass and hurled the original bill at him. It went over the bar and landed in a spittoon between the brass rail and the bar.

"Pick it up," growled the barkeep coldly. He waved the shotgun and forced Farradyne to retrieve the soggy bill. "Now get out--quick!" Then his voice rose above the growing murmur of angry men. "Sit down, dammit! Every bloody one of you sit the hell down. We ain't going to have no trouble in here!" He covered the room with the shotgun to hold them.

Farradyne left quickly. He burned inwardly, he wanted to have it out; but this was the game Clevis wanted him to play--it was the price of his freedom from the fungus fields. He took it on the run to his Lancaster, knowing that the barkeep would hold the room until escape was made.

He took the ship up as soon as the landing ramp was retracted and only then did his nerves calm down. He seemed to have started with a bang. If Clevis wanted a decoy, what better decoy than to make a noise like a small guy muscling in on a big racket?

The word would travel from bar to bar, from port to port until it reached the necessary person. Time was unimportant now. The word must get around. So instead of driving to some definite destination, Farradyne set the Lancaster in a long, lazy course and let the big ship loaf its way into space.

IV

Big Jupiter and tiny Ganymede were dwindling below by the time Farradyne was finished at the control panel. He was hungry and he was tired and so he was going to eat and hit the sack. He turned from the board and saw her.

Norma Hannon sat in the computer's chair behind the board. Her hands were folded calmly and her body was listless.

Farradyne grunted uncertainly because he was absolutely ignorant of her attitude, except perhaps the feeling that she would enjoy bloody violence.

"Well?" he said.

"I caught the landing ramp as it came running in," she said quietly.

"Why?"

"You owe me a couple," she told him. "You're a lotus runner, you can give me one. Simple as that."

"How do you figure?"

"You killed my brother," she said. There was more vigor in her tone as the anger flared again.

"What makes you think--"

"Another thing," she interrupted, "I wanted to come along with you."

"Now see here--"

"Don't be stupid," she said sharply. "I've no passion for you. I'm a love-lotus addict, remember?"

"Then why--?"

"Don't you give a damn for the lives of the people you sell those things to? Run your dope and get your dough and skip before you have to see the ruin you bring." The flare of anger was with her and she wriggled in her chair with an animal relish that was close to ecstasy.

"But I can't--"

"Keep it up," she said. "You'll satisfy me, one way or another." She eyed him critically. "You can't win, Farradyne. I've had my love lotus, and all that is left of my feelings is heavy scar-tissue. Pleasure and surprise are too weak to cut through; only a burning anger or a deep hatred are strong enough to make me feel the thrill of a rising pulse. I can get a lift out of hating you, but if you kissed me it would leave me cold." She paused speculatively, "Now, would it? Come here and kiss me."

"Why?"

"Because I hate your guts, Farradyne. Of all the people in the solar system, I hate you the most. I can keep telling myself that you killed Frank, and that does it. And I add that you are a love-lotus runner and in some way part and parcel of this addiction of mine and that builds it up. Now if you came over and kissed me, I'd let you, and the very thought of being kissed and fondled by such a completely rotten reptile as Farradyne makes me seethe with pleasant anger." Farradyne recoiled.

"Afraid?" she jeered, wriggling again. "You know, as a last thrill I might kill you. But only as a last thrill, Farradyne. Because then the chance to hate you actively would be over and finished and there could be no more. So between hating your guts and getting an occasional hellflower from the man I hate, making me hate you even more, I can feel almost alive again."

* * *

Farradyne shook his head. This sort of talk was above and beyond him. No matter what he said or did it was the wrong thing, which made it right for Norma Hannon.

He did not know much about the love lotus, and that from hearsay. But it did not include this sort of illogical talk. Seeing this end-result actually made Farradyne feel better about the lot he had been cast in. If Clevis was the kind of man who boiled inwardly from a sense of outraged civic responsibility, Farradyne was beginning to feel somewhat the same.

He looked at Norma Hannon more critically. She had been a good looking woman not too long ago. She had probably laughed and danced and fended off wolves and planned on marriage and a gang of happy children in a pleasant home. Someone had cut her out of that future, and Farradyne felt that he wanted to get the man's neck between his hands and squeeze. He shook himself and wondered whether this addiction to hatred and violence were catching.

He said softly, "Who did it, Norma?"

Her eyes changed. "I loved him," she breathed in a voice that was both soft and heavy with another kind of anger than the violence she had shown just a moment before. This was the resentment against the past, while her previous flare of anger had been against the physical present. "I loved him," she repeated. "I loved the flat-brained animal, enough to lead him into the bedroom if that's what he wanted. But no, the imbecile thought that the only way I would unfreeze was with a hellflower. So he parted with a half-a-hundred dollars for one. He could have rented a hotel room for a ten dollar bill," she added sourly. "Or bought a marriage license and had me for the rest of his life for five."

"Why didn't you refuse it?" he asked. "Or didn't you know that it wasn't a gardenia?"

Norma looked up with eyes that started to blaze, but they died and she was listless again. "Maybe because people like to flirt with danger," she said. "Maybe because men and women don't really understand each other."

"That's the understatement of the century."

There was no flicker of amusement in her face. "Look at it this way," she said. "I did say I loved him. So naturally he wouldn't be the kind of man who would bring me a lotus. Or if he did I could wear it for the lift they bring without any danger, because any man worth loving would not take advantage of his sweetheart while she's unable to object. So I wore it and when I woke up after a real orgy instead of a mild emotional binge, I was on the road toward having no feelings left. I've been on that road ever since and I've come a long way."

She looked at him again. "So you see what you and your kind have done?" she demanded. Farradyne knew that she was whipping herself into a fury again. "I was a nice, healthy woman once, but now I'm a burned-out battery--a tired engine. It takes a spot of violence to make me feel anything. Or maybe a sniff from a lotus. Maybe by now it would take more than one."

"But I haven't any."

She bared her teeth at him. "You can afford to part with one stinking flower."

"I haven't--"

* * *

Norma leaped out of her chair and came across the room, her face distorted, her hands clawing at his face. Farradyne fought her away, and saw with dismay the look of animated pleasure on her twisted face. It was an unfair fight; Farradyne was trying to keep her from hurting him without being forced to hurt her, while she went at him with heel and fingernail and teeth.

He gave up. Taking a cold aim at the point of her jaw, Farradyne let her have it.

Norma recoiled a bit and her face glowed even more. He had not struck her hard enough because of his repugnance at hitting a woman. She came after him again, enjoying the physical violence, looking for more of the same. Farradyne gritted his teeth and let her have it, hard this time.

Norma collapsed with a suddenness that scared him. He caught her before she hit the metal floor and carried her to the salon where he placed her on the padded bench that ran along one wall. His knowledge of things medical was not high, but it was enough to let him know that she did not have a broken jaw. Of one thing there was no doubt: Norma was out colder than Farradyne had ever seen man or woman.

He carried her below, to one of the tiny staterooms.

He stood there, contemplating her and wondering what to do next. He would have been puzzled as to the next move even if Norma had been a completely normal person. As it was, Farradyne decided that no matter what he did it would be wrong. The cocktail dress would not stand much sleeping in before it came apart at the seams, but she would surely rave if he took it off to save it for tomorrow. If he left her in it, she would rave at him for letting her ruin the only thing she had to wear. He

shrugged and slipped the hold-down strap across her waist and let it go at that.

Then he went to his own stateroom and locked the door against any more of this ruckus and confusion. He slept fitfully even though the locked door separated him from both amour and murder--either of which added up to the same end with Norma Hannon.

V

It was a sixty-hour trip from Ganymede to Mars. Each hour was a bit more trying than the one before.

Norma bedeviled him in every way she knew. She found fault with his cooking but refused to go near the galley herself. She objected to the brand of cigarettes he smoked. She made scathing remarks whenever he touched an instrument, reminding him of his presumed incompetence as a pilot. She scorned him for refusing to open his hold and bring her the love lotus she craved.

By the time Farradyne set the Lancaster Eighty-One down at Sun Lake City on Mars, he had almost arrived at the point where her voice was just so much noise.

He landed after the usual discussion of landing space and beacon route with Sun Lake Tower, and he found time to wonder whether the word about his affiliation had been spread yet. The Tower operator paid him no more attention than if he had been running in and out of that spaceport for years.

He pressed the button that opened the spacelock and ran out the landing ramp.

"This is it," he said flatly.

"This is what?"

"The end of the line."

"I'm staying."

"No, you're not."

"I'm staying, Farradyne. I like it here. You go on about your sordid business, and see that you get enough to spare a couple for me. For I'll be here when you get back."

The woman's eyes glinted with hatred and determination.

Farradyne swore. She had moved in on him unwanted and had ridden with him unwanted. If she wanted to, she could raise her voice and that would be it. One yelp and Farradyne would spend a long time explaining to all sorts of big brass why he was hauling a woman around the solar system against her wishes.

So grunting helplessly, Farradyne left her in the Lancaster and went to register at Operations. He was received blandly, just as he had been received on Ganymede. Then he headed into Sun Lake City to stall a bit. He went to a show, had a drink or two, prowled around a bookstore looking for something that might inform him about the love lotus, bought himself some clothing to augment his scant supply. He succeeded in forgetting about Norma Hannon for a solid four hours.

Then he remembered, and with the air of a man about to visit a dentist for a painful operation, Farradyne went reluctantly back to his ship.

* * *

The silence that met him was reassuring. Even if she had been sound asleep, the noise of his arrival would have awakened her so that she would come out to needle him some more. He looked the ship over carefully, satisfying himself that Norma Hannon was not present.

This was too good to miss.

He raced to the control room, punched savagely at the button that closed the spacelock, and fired up the communications radio.

"Lancaster Eighty-One calling Tower."

"Go ahead, Lancaster."

"Request take-off instructions. Course, Terra."

"Lancaster, is your passenger aboard?"

"Passenger?"

"Check Stateroom Eight, Lancaster. Your passenger informed us that she was going into town on an errand, that you were not to leave without her."

"Aye-firm. I will check." Farradyne grimaced at the closed microphone. Willfully marooning a passenger would get him into more trouble than trying to account for the presence of his guest. Norma had done a fine job of bolting the Lancaster to the landing block in her absence.

He waited fifty seconds. "Tower from Lancaster Eighty-One. I will wait. My passenger is not aboard."

"Lancaster. Hold-down Switches to Safety, Warm-Up Switches to Stand-By. Power Switches to Off. Open your port for visitor."

"Visitor, Tower?"

"Civilian requests conference about pick-up job, Lancaster. Are you free?"

"I am free for Terra, Tower."

"Prepare to receive visitor, Lancaster. Good luck on the job."

"Aye-firm. Over and off."

Farradyne went below and rode the bottom step of the landing ramp on its way out of the spacelock. He reached the ground with the arrival of a port jeep, which brought his visitor to him.

"You're Charles Farradyne? I'm Carl Brenner. I'm told you are free for Terra. Is that right?"

"That's right."

Brenner nodded. He looked around. The jeep was idling and making enough noise so that the driver, sitting in the machine, could not possibly hear anything that was being said. The driver was not even interested in them; something in the distance had caught his eye and he was giving it all his attention. Satisfied, Brenner leaned forward and in a low voice said: "Let me see what you've got."

Farradyne shook his head. "Who, me?" he asked, as though he did not know what Brenner was talking about.

"You. I'm in the market. If they're in good shape, we can make a deal."

Farradyne felt that this was as good a time to play cagey as any. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said.

"No? I hardly think you're telling the truth, Farradyne."

Farradyne smiled broadly. "So I'm a liar?"

"I wouldn't say that."

"Look, Brenner, I don't know you from Adam's Off Ox. From somewhere, you've got the idea that I am a hellblossom runner and you want to get into the act. Well, in the first place I am not a runner, and in the second place you have about as much chance of getting into a closed racket with that open-faced act of yours as you have of filling a warehouse with heroin by asking the local cops where to buy it."

* * *

Brenner smiled. "I can see you're cagey," he said. "I don't blame you. In fact, I'd not have come out here asking like an open-faced fool if I hadn't been completely out of stock. I'm a bit desperate." He went into an inside pocket and came out with an envelope. "This is a credential or two," he said. "When you return this way, we can maybe do business. The usual way, you know. No questions asked--nor answered. And no witnesses. Okay?"

"I'll be back--maybe--mister--er, Brenner?"

"You get the idea."

"I'll--"

Farradyne's voice trailed away as he caught sight of the object that had held the interest of the jeep driver. It was Norma Hannon, who came around the fins of the Lancaster with the sun behind her.

Her errand had been shopping. The overworn cocktail dress was gone and in its place was a white silky number that did a lot of fetching things to her figure. She had also taken the complete course at some primp-mill. She was another woman; not even Farradyne, who had seen her in her worn clothing for days, could

have been convinced that this sort of beautiful perfection was not Norma's usual appearance.

Farradyne was silent. But as Brenner caught sight of her coming around the sunlit tail of the Lancaster, and with enough sun shining through her to make the pulses jump, he made a throaty discord.

"Hello," she said brightly, as though she and Farradyne were close acquaintances, but in a tone that indicated that she was paid-passenger and he the driver of the spacer. "I've some packages being delivered in a bit. We'll wait, of course?"

Farradyne nodded dumbly.

Norma nodded coolly to Brenner and went up the ramp, displaying a yard of well-filled nylon stocking at every step.

The roar of the jeep's engine snapped Farradyne's attention back to Brenner--or where he had been standing. The jeep was taking Brenner away in a cloud of spaceport dust.

Farradyne shook his head. That was not the man he wanted. Call it close but no cigar. Farradyne did not want a man to buy love lotus, he wanted a seller, a character from the upper echelon.

* * *

With a sigh, Farradyne went into the Lancaster. Norma rose from the divan along the edge of the salon and whirled like a mannequin, her silken skirt floating. She stopped and let the silk wrap itself around her thighs. "Like it?" she asked.

"It's very neat," he said flatly. "But where did you get the wherewithal?"

"I figured you owed me something so I took it out of the locker in the control room. You left the key dangling in the lock?"

"What's the grand idea?" he asked.

"You're a cold-blooded bird, Farradyne. You don't give a hoot that you and your cowboy spacing killed my brother and that you and your kind made it possible for some wanton to dope me. I'm told that half-decent gangsters send flowers to a rival's funeral,

but you wouldn't even part with a love lotus. So if you won't give me one, I'm going to force it out of you."

"But--"

"You get the idea," she said, smoothing down a non-existent wrinkle over one round hip. "But I'm honest. You've some change coming." She put her hand down in the space between her breasts and brought forth a small roll of bills which she handed to Farradyne. Dumbly, he took them.

They were warm and scented with woman and cologne, and would have been hard on Farradyne's blood-pressure if it had not been for the anticipatory glitter in Norma Hannon's eyes.

There was a small commotion at the spacelock. Farradyne looked to see three men coming in with fancy-wrapped boxes.

He groaned, and went aloft to the control room. Norma had run the gamut.

VI

Farradyne sat before his control panel with his head in his hands. There had to be some way out of this. The alternative was to go on hauling Norma back and forth, being the target of her needling and her vicious desire and getting nothing done because of it. The mess had started off badly enough, but now it had deteriorated.

Norma's needling and goading had been hard enough to bear. He was willing to bet his spare money that the boxes she was now receiving contained whatever could be purchased of the most seductive clothing she could find. And included in her basic idea was, most likely, a sharp appreciation of what Farradyne would consider exciting. Acres of exposed skin or rank nudity would pall on him. So she would come out with little items that might cover her from toe to chin in such a way as to make him wonder about what was underneath; probably simple stuff with a lot of fine fit and a lot of semi-transparent quality that compelled the eye. If she coupled this program with a soft voice, as she was

most likely to do now that she had shucked the sleazy costume, Norma Hannon would be almost irresistible. Before this happened, Farradyne had to park her somewhere that would be binding.

Had she parents? Friends?

He hit the control panel with his fist. He hated to think of it, but if push came to shove he might be able to drop her in one of the sanatoriums that had been set up for love-lotus addicts. They did little good for the victims but did keep the addicts out of other people's hair.

It seemed that it should be parents, first.

Farradyne's forefinger hit the radio button viciously.

"Tower? Connect me to the city telephone."

"Aye-firm, Lancaster. Wait five."

A few seconds later Farradyne was asking for the Bennington Detective Agency, an outfit that was system wide. He got a receptionist first and then a quiet-voiced man named Lawson.

Farradyne came to the point. "I want any information you can collect about the family of a man named Frank Hannon who was killed in the wreck of the Semiramide in The Bog, on Venus four years ago."

"You're same Charles Farradyne?"

"Maybe--but is it important?"

"It might be, but it will be held confidential. I'm asking because I prefer to know the motives of clients. I'd like reassurance that our investigation will be made for a legal reason."

"I'll put it this way: I know Frank Hannon was killed in the wreck. I have reason to believe that he had a sister that disappeared shortly afterwards. If this is true, I want to know it--but I haven't time to find out through the usual channels. Fact of the matter is that I want no more information than I could get myself if I had time to go pawing through issues of newspapers of four years ago. No more."

"I will look through our list of missing persons and see if such is the case, Mr. Farradyne. I suggest that you either call back in a

couple of hours, or better, that you call in person here at my office. There will be no charge for the initial search, but if this evolves into something concrete--well, we can discuss the matter when you call. Is that all right?"

"It's okay and I'll be in your office at four o'clock."

* * *

Farradyne hung up and considered. If Norma Hannon had a couple of grieving parents, he could hand her over to them and that would be the end of that. He lit a cigarette and smoked for a moment, then got up from the control console and started for the spacelock.

He met Norma in the salon. She had changed into a heavy satin housecoat that molded her arms to the wrists, clung to her waist and breasts and throat, and outlined her hips and thighs. Painted toenails were provocatively visible below the hem as she sat there with her legs crossed, tossing her foot up and down.

"Thought we were about to take off again," she asked. Her voice was soft and personal and friendly. She was plying the affectionate line as smoothly as an experienced woman could.

Farradyne shook his head. Having a plan of action made him feel better. "Got a call from the tower," he said. "More business. I'll be back in a couple of hours."

Norma held up her hand for his cigarette and he gave it to her. She puffed deeply and offered it back. Farradyne refused it. The memory of her needling and her desire for violence had not had time to fade. Another twenty hours of this calmness and he would begin to look upon the sharing of a cigarette as a pleasant gesture of companionship.

Norma shrugged at his wave of the hand in refusal. "I'll be here when you get back," she said comfortably, wriggling down against the cushions and giving him the benefit of an inviting smile.

Farradyne left the salon swearing under his breath. If this parking of her did not work, Farradyne was licked.

* * *

He walked. He did not like walking, but he preferred walking to remaining in the Lancaster with Norma for the next couple of hours. He tried to think, but he could not come to any conclusion because he had all his hope tied on the Bennington outfit and what they might turn up.

He was shown into the office of Peter Lawson, who was a bright-eyed elderly man with a body surprisingly lithe for his years.

"Now, before we go any further," said Lawson pleasantly, "I'd like to hear your reasons for becoming interested in this case."

Farradyne nodded. "As I told you, Frank Hannon was killed in an accident on a spacecraft I owned. That was four years ago. Recently I met Norma Hannon in a gin-mill on Ganymede and she fastened onto me like a leech as a person to hate. You know the results of love-lotus addiction?"

"Yes, I do."

"Well, it occurred to me that one way of getting rid of Miss Hannon would be to turn her over to some relative or friend who would be deeply interested in her welfare. Does this add up?"

"Quite logical. Miss Hannon is where you can find her?"

Farradyne nodded with a sour look on his face. "She's sitting in my salon waiting for me to come back."

"Why not just turn her over to the police?" asked Lawson with a careful look at Farradyne.

"Look," said Farradyne testily, "I don't enjoy Miss Hannon's company, but I can't see jailing her. She isn't truly vicious, she's just another unfortunate victim of the love-lotus trap. Maybe I feel a bit concerned over her brother. Anyway, take it from here."

"Very well. I shall. The facts are these:

"Frank Hannon was a lawyer with a limited but apparently lucrative practise. Norma acted as a sort of junior partner. The case-history says that Frank Hannon had been on his way to Venus to place some case before one of the higher courts, the

nature of which was not a matter for public discussion. I don't know what it was myself.

"Then Frank was killed, and Norma dropped her study of law. Her brother's death seemed to be quite a blow to her. Before, she had dated at random, with nothing serious in mind. But afterwards she seemed to develop a strong determination to marry, perhaps as a substitute for the gap left by the death of her brother. A man named Antony Walton became Number One boy friend after a few months and they were together constantly and seemed devoted. She disappeared after a dinner-date with Walton, and Walton is now serving a term on Titan Colony for possession of love-lotus blossoms."

Farradyne shook his head. "The louse," he said feelingly.

"Everybody agrees."

"I don't know as much as I might about lotus addiction," said Farradyne. "It all seems so sudden to me. One moment we have a well-bred young woman with ideals and ambition and feelings and the next moment--"

"It is a rather quick thing," said Lawson. "The love lotus is vicious and swift. I've studied early cases. They all seem to have the same pattern. And oddly enough, love lotus is not an addictive drug in every case. It is not only an aphrodisiac; it also heightens the physical senses so that a good drink tastes better and a good play becomes superb. The touch of a man's hand becomes a magnificent thrill. And here is the point where addiction begins, Mr. Farradyne. If the woman's senses and emotions are treated only to the mild appreciations of food and drink and music and a gentle caress, her addiction may take years and years to arrive at the point where she cannot feel these stimuli without a sniff of hellflower. But if she should be so unlucky as to have her emotions raised to a real passion during the period of dosage, it is like overloading the engine. You burn her out."

* * *

Farradyne nodded. "I see. And there is no cure?"

"Some doctors believe that a long period of peace and quiet under conditions where only the mildest of stimuli are available may bring the addict back. I am of the opinion that such a place does not exist. They fasten onto hate as an emotion that cuts through their burned-out emotions and if you should place them among completely bland surroundings they would find it possible to hate those that incarcerated them. It becomes almost paranoiac; anything you do is wrong."

"So I've discovered. But what do I do with Miss Hannon?"

"At the time of Miss Hannon's disappearance, her family offered a reward of five thousand dollars for her return."

"I'd be happy to deliver her FOB her own front porch," said Farradyne. "Can I hand her over to you and let you take it from there?"

"She would put up quite a ruckus," said Lawson. "I doubt that she will go home willingly. It is my opinion that Miss Hannon's response to Walton's lovemaking was extremely high, so that the result was a quick blunting of her normal capability for feelings. After this, anger and shame would cause her--a proud woman of education and breeding--to hide where she could not be known, where she could possibly get the hellflower she needed for her next desire to enjoy the lift of emotions. This would not be in the home of her parents. So she would not go home willingly--and the alternative is an appeal to the authorities." Lawson smiled. "I heard your offer to deliver her free to her home."

"But--"

"You've depended upon us and you will be helped. We will have an operative collect Miss Hannon at the Denver Spaceport. All you have to do is live with this trouble for about fifty hours more. We have done quite a bit of work on this case already, and we are willing to do more. For delivering your information and for taking Miss Hannon to Denver, we will be happy to divide the reward."

"I'll deliver Miss Hannon to Denver," said Farradyne, thinking that for twenty-five hundred he could stick cotton in his ears and

sweat it out at about fifty dollars an hour.

"Good, Mr. Farradyne. I'll make arrangements to have our Mr. Kingman meet you at Denver."

Lawson handed Farradyne a few pages of dossier on the case and then showed him out of the office. Farradyne took a deep breath and decided that what he wanted was a drink to his good fortune. He could look forward to getting rid of Norma Hannon. He made the street, glanced around, and headed for a small bar, to relax and think.

VII

At a small table with a tiny lamp he opened the papers that Lawson had given him, to read them more thoroughly. The waitress was high breasted in a manner that invited him to look, but he merely barked, "White Star Trail" and went back to his reading.

"Spaceman?" she asked.

Farradyne nodded in an irritated manner. She flounced off after a moment of futile effort to beguile the spaceman.

So when, a moment later, someone slid into the bench beside him, Farradyne turned to tell her to please vacate the premises because he wasn't having any, thanks. Instead of looking into a vapidly willing face, Farradyne's eyes were met with an equally cold blue stare from the face of a hard-jawed man dressed in a jacket tailored to half-conceal the shoulder holster he wore. Farradyne blinked.

"Farradyne?"

"So?" said Farradyne. He tried to think, but all he could cover was the idea that someone was now playing games with guns.

"Hear tell you're running blossoms, Farradyne."

"Who says?"

"People."

"People say a lot of things. Which people?"

"Well, are you?"

"Who, me?"

"Can it and label it," snapped the newcomer.

Farradyne shrugged angrily. "What do you want me to do?" he asked in a mild tone. "You've got the jump on me. You slide into my seat and bar my exit and without introducing yourself you start asking questions that could get me twenty years in bad company, poor surroundings, and no pay."

"Pardon me. You may call me Mike. Michael Cahill is the name."

"Maybe I'm glad to meet you, Mike. Have you any identification that doesn't bark for itself?"

"It's usually good enough."

"Probably. But the numbers on its calling cards are someone else's."

Mike laughed. "That's not bad, Farradyne. But so far as I know, your number isn't among those present."

"I'll bet you could change a number fast enough."

"Could be," nodded Cahill. He turned around over his shoulder and called at the waitress: "Hey, Snooky. Make it two instead of one."

"Mine's White Star."

"That's all right with me. It's easier to drive this rod with a clear head."

"No doubt," said Farradyne. "So now that we are about to drink together, let's face it. You had more in mind than to pass the time of day with a nervous spaceman who wanted to be alone."

"Correct. Or as you birds say, Aye-firm. How's the hellblossom business?"

"That's easy to answer. The answer is that I haven't any, and I'm not in the business."

"People say you are."

"People are wrong."

"Sometimes, but not always."

Farradyne grunted. "Not too long ago, someone accused me openly. The story started when someone suggested that the only

way a guy could come from down on his bottom to the top of the heap in one large step was to be among the big-time operators. The heavy-sugar know-how. To the limited imagination, this meant running love lotus."

* * *

Mike Cahill was silent while the high-breasted waitress brought their drinks. After she left, Cahill lifted his glass to Farradyne. "Is you is or is you ain't?" he chuckled.

"I ain't," said Farradyne, drinking with Cahill.

"Stop sounding like a parrot. The tomato in the bar on Ganymede must have known something. You spent four years as flat on your duff as a musclebound wrestler and then you come bouncing along in a last-year model Lancaster. So since we know damned well that you're no hellblossom runner, where did you get the stack?"

"Thrift and good management."

"Maybe it's a rich uncle?"

"I'm just a capable operator."

"The label is sour, Farradyne."

"Then what do you make of this?" asked Farradyne, handing Cahill his license folder.

"It looks nice and legal, but it's as phony as a ten-cent diamond and both of us know it. So how did you get it--and the Lancaster to go along with it?"

Farradyne sipped his drink. "Look, Cahill, it just happens that I don't care to tell. This is a gentler version of the old bark, 'None of your blank business!' which I've always considered rude and which has started a lot of fights. But the fact remains that I am not telling."

"It might make a difference if you did."

"Let's stop fencing. I may be of use to you. It might be that you are a SAND agent and it might be otherwise, but I still may be of use to you either way. But the first time I start shooting off my trap, you'll get the idea that I'm not close-mouthed enough for

whatever job you have in mind for me. So let's leave it this way, huh? I got a ticket that gets me in and out and a spacer that takes me there and back."

"And that's your story?"

Farradyne nodded, sipped his drink, and offered Cahill a smoke which Cahill took.

"We've had a rather moist spring," observed Cahill.

"It was moister on Venus," commented Farradyne.

"It's on Terra that the weather is fine," said Cahill. "The crops are coming up, I'm told, excellently. Nothing like fresh vegetables."

Farradyne nodded. "No matter how well we convert the planets to Terra-condition, nothing grows like on earth."

"Ever enjoy lying on your back in the sun in a field of flowers with nothing to do but get sunburned?"

"Not for a long time."

"Funny how a guy gets out of his kid-habits," mused Cahill. "And even funnier how he wants to go and do it all over again, but it's never quite the same."

"Yeah."

"Farradyne, you're not sold-up on this next jaunt to Terra, are you?"

"Just one passenger going to Denver."

"Mind if I buy a stateroom?"

"Not at all."

"I want to go pick flowers on Terra," yawned Cahill. "If you like, maybe we can pick some together."

"Maybe we can," said Farradyne, draining his glass and starting to get up. Cahill got up too and led the way out. Farradyne flagged down a taxicab. "Spaceport," he told the driver. "Coming?" he asked Cahill.

"Yeah."

VIII

Farradyne took the Lancaster up and set the course to Terra. As soon as he could spare time to think of anything but handling the ship, he began to wonder about Norma and Mike Cahill. She had not been visible when they arrived, but no doubt by now she had made her presence known. It bothered him a bit because he was as certain as a man can be that Cahill was a hellflower operator, and he did not want the man to get cold feet because Farradyne was connected with an addict, if even for a short hop.

So as soon as he could leave the board, Farradyne went down into the salon.

They had met. Norma, for the first time in her trip with Farradyne, was presiding over the dining table. She was wearing a slinky, sea-green hostess gown that scarcely existed above the waist and was slit on both sides to just below the knees. Her white, bare legs twinkled as she walked and almost forced the eye to follow them. She was giving Cahill all the benefit of her physical beauty, and Cahill was enjoying it. Farradyne had a hunch that Norma was about to start slipping him the old jealousy-routine. He wondered about his reaction. He was extremely wary of Norma, but he did feel a sort of responsibility for her. She might make him jealous, but it would not be the jealousy of passion or desire, but the jealous concern that stems from a desire to protect.

Norma's lissome figure vanished toward the galley, and Cahill wagged a forefinger at Farradyne.

"That dame's a blank," he said in a low voice.

"I know. She's not my woman, Cahill."

"Maybe not, but it sure looks like it from a distance. What are you doing with her?"

"Delivering her to her parents in Denver."

"That all?"

Farradyne nodded. "She latched onto me on Ganymede; she's the dame that made the loud announcement of my being a

hellflower runner."

"Maybe she'll be right sooner or later. But you get rid of her, see?"

Farradyne nodded vigorously. "That I'll do. She's been hell on high heels to have around the joint."

"Looks like she might be fun."

"She hates my guts."

Cahill nodded. "Probably. They usually end up in a case of anger and violence. Tough."

Norma came back with a tray and set food on the table. They ate in silence, with Norma still giving Cahill the full power of her charm. Cahill seemed to enjoy her advances, although he accepted them with a calloused, self-assured smile. Once dinner was finished, Norma jumped up and began to clear the table. This act annoyed Farradyne because he could not account for it, and the only thing that seemed to fit the case was the possibility that Norma was acting as she did to soften his wariness of her; but she was carrying the thing too far.

* * *

As she left again, Farradyne turned to Cahill and asked, "How can a man tell a love lotus from a gardenia?"

"That takes experience. You'll learn."

"The thing that stops me," said Farradyne, "is that the Sandmen have been trying to stamp out the things for about forty years and they can't even tell where they come from."

"They'll never find out," said Cahill. "Maybe you won't either."

"But I--"

"Better you shouldn't. Just enjoy living off the edges. It's safer that way."

"Where are we going after we leave Denver?"

"I'm not too sure we're going anywhere."

"But--"

"I'm none too sure of you, Farradyne. You've some holes to fill in." Cahill lit a cigarette and leaned back, letting the smoke trickle

through his nostrils. "I don't mind talking to you this way because it would be your word against mine if you happen to be a Sandman. Some of your tale rings true. The rest sticks, hard."

"For instance?"

"Well, let's suppose you are a Sandman. Humans are a hard-boiled lot, but somehow I can't see killing thirty-three people just to establish a bad reputation. So that tends to clear your book. As to the chance of your laying low for four years until the mess blew over, I might buy that except for the place. A guy who can ultimately turn up with enough oil to grease his way into a reinstated license and a Lancaster Eighty-One isn't likely to spend four interim years living in a fungus-field."

"Maybe I hit it rich?"

Cahill laughed roughly. "Dug up a platinum-plated toadstool?"

"Maybe I just met up with the right guy."

"Blackmail?"

"That's a nasty word, Cahill."

"Sure is. What did he do?"

"Let's call it malingering. Let's say he played rough at the wrong time and might have to pay for it high at the present." Farradyne looked at the ceiling. "And maybe that isn't it."

Cahill laughed. "Have it your way, Farradyne. Tell me, do we have a lay-over at Denver or is it better if we take off immediately for Mercury?"

"Cinnabar or Hell City?"

"Cinnabar, if it makes any difference."

"Mercury, Schmercury, I didn't know there was anything there but the central heating plant for the solar system."

"Isn't much," admitted Cahill. "But enough. The--"

* * *

His voice trailed away as Norma's high heels came clicking up the circular stairway back toward the salon. "I thought I'd have a cigarette and a drink with company before I go to bed," she announced in a tone of voice that Farradyne had not heard her use

before. With gracious deftness, she made three highballs of White Star Trail and water and handed two of them to the men. She let her fingers linger over Farradyne's very briefly, and over Cahill's longer. She lounged in a chair across the room from them, all curves and softness, with only that strange disinterested look in her eyes to give her away.

The evening had been a series of paradoxes; Norma's change from the vixen to the lady of languid grace did not ring true. He had been aware of her ability to reason coldly, brought about by her burned-out emotional balance which was so dulled that her thinking was mechanical and therefore inclined to be frightfully chilled logic. Norma had claimed that she knew the emotions by name and definition; that once she had felt them but now she only knew how they worked. Farradyne found it hard to believe that she was so well schooled in her knowledge that she could put on the act of having them when she obviously did not.

Yet it was only the blankness in her eyes that gave her away this evening. Otherwise she might have been a very charming companion.

She did not even force herself upon them; when her cigarette and her drink were gone, Norma excused herself quietly and went below.

"Me, too," said Cahill.

Farradyne led him down to a stateroom and waved him in. "See you in the morning," he said. Cahill nodded his good-night and Farradyne went to his own stateroom to think.

He hadn't done bad, he thought; he had been on the trail for less than a hundred hours and already had a lead. Obviously the Semiramide disaster was the tip-off; no Sandman would go that far to establish a shady reputation.

Farradyne was prepared to go on as far as he had to. The idea of actually running love lotus was not appealing, but the SAND office had been fighting the things for a half century, watching helplessly while the moral fibre of the race was being undermined, and somehow it was far better to let a few more lives be

wrecked by hellflowers than to save a few and let the whole thing steamroller into monumental destruction. Farradyne still had to duck a few people who might like to nail his hide to a barn door, but sooner or later he would come out on top and then he could look his fellow man in the eye and ask him to forget one bad mistake.

Being on this first step eased his mind somewhat. He would be rid of Norma tomorrow morning and on his way with Cahill. He went to sleep easily for the first time since that meeting with Norma at Ganymede.

He dreamed a pleasant dream of freedom and success that ended with the bark of a pistol.

IX

Shocked out of his sleep, he lay stunned and blinking for a moment, then leaped out of bed and raced to the corridor. The light blinded him at first, but not enough to stop him from seeing Cahill.

Cahill came along the tiny corridor listlessly, blood dribbling from under his left arm, running down his fingers and splashing to the floor. On Cahill's face was a stunned expression, full of incomprehension, semi-blank. Blood ran down his leg, across his ankle, and left red footprints on the floor.

Through whatever haze clouded Cahill's eyes, he saw Farradyne. He stumbled forward and reached for Farradyne, but collapsed in midstep like a limp towel, to stretch out at Farradyne's feet like a tired baby. His voice sighed out in a dying croon that sounded like a rundown phonograph.

Behind him came Norma Hannon. Her eyes were blazing with an unholy satisfied light and her body was alive and sinuous. A tiny automatic dangled from her right hand. Her lips curled as she came up to Cahill and poked at the man's hand with her bare foot.

"He--" she started to cry in a strident tone. Then the semi-hysteria faded and she looked down at Cahill again, relishing the situation.

Farradyne shuddered. What had happened was obvious. Cahill had tried to force himself upon Norma; she had killed him. Apparently Cahill had not been able to do more than clutch at the deep neckline of Norma's nightgown, which was slightly torn.

He leaned back against the wall and saw things in a sort of horrid slow motion. Under any normal circumstance, no jury in the solar system would have listened to an attempt to prosecute her. Under any normal circumstance, Farradyne could bury Cahill at space and report the incident at the first landing. But Farradyne couldn't stand too much investigation. And Norma Hannon was a love-lotus addict--a 'blank,' in Cahill's words.

"Now what?" asked Farradyne bitterly.

"He--" Her eyes opened wide again as she relived the scene and relished the violence.

"Have your fun," Farradyne growled. "What did you do? Let him get all the way in before you plugged him? No warning at all?"

"I hoped it was you," she said. "I wouldn't have killed you." Her voice was calm; she might have been saying 'kiss' instead of 'kill'. "Him I did not like."

"And you like me?"

"You I save to hate tomorrow," she said matter-of-factly.

"Why didn't you save him?"

"What was he to you?"

"He was my source."

"Source?" Norma looked blank. Then understanding crossed her face. "Hellblossoms," she said with a sneer that twisted her face. She stepped past Cahill's body and handed the tiny automatic to Farradyne, who took it dumbly just because it was proffered. She went on into the salon and sat down.

Farradyne wanted to hurt her, to reach through that wall of emotional scar and make her feel something besides anger.

Remorse, perhaps.

"Source," he nodded, following her. "Love lotus. I'd have given you one, Norma."

She made a sound like a bitter laugh. "No good, Farradyne. What good is one love lotus?"

"I don't know," he said simply. "I've never had one."

Her laugh was shrill. Then she bawled at him like a fishwife, "What an operator you are, Farradyne! You big fumbling boob with your stolen spacer and your forged license, making like a big wind and blowing like a breeze! Fah!"

She got up as suddenly as she had sat down. She paused on her way down the corridor to kick Cahill's head with her bare foot. The man's head moved aside limply.

* * *

Farradyne stayed where he was until he heard her door slam shut. Then he got up and went toward his own room, pausing at the door to look at Cahill. He should be moved, thought Farradyne.

He found himself looking down on the dead man with a strangely detached feeling, as if he were watching a rather poorly plotted play. He relived the scene although he tried to shut it out of his mind. Shutting out would not work, and so he went through it detail by detail, minutely, from the sound of the pistol shot to the last dying groan from Cahill's tortured throat. The memory of that dying sound jarred on Farradyne's nerves. There had been something strange about it--

It had been a discordant cry.

Farradyne found himself making a completely useless analysis, itemizing things that surely could not matter. The cry had been a discord.

His mind wandered a bit as he considered the word. A series of atonal notes do not make a discord. A discord comes when atonal notes are sounded at the same time. The former can be pleasant to the ear, the latter not.

And then a chill hit him. He felt like a man who has just been told that he had one more question to answer before winning the prize on a quiz show.

Cahill's moan had been a full discord.

With a sudden leap of the mind, Farradyne was back in the Semiramide, hearing three voices behind him. They had found one skeleton afterwards. Then his mind leaped to Brenner, who had emitted an approving grunt when he saw Norma come around the tail structure of the Lancaster with the sun shining through her skirt. He had no proof, no proof. Brenner's grunt had no discord but none the less a mingling of tones. Three voices? Maybe more?

Maybe he was not sure of the first. Brenner's sound had been very brief--maybe he was convincing himself. But Cahill's death-cry had been most certainly polytonal. And they both were love-lotus operators.

It might mean something or it might not. Farradyne put his head back and tried to make a series of sounds. He moaned. He gargled, and he tried to hum and say something at the same time. Maybe the stunt could be cultivated after much practise, and maybe it was used as a password.

More than anything Farradyne needed corroboration.

It was a weak hope, but he stepped over Cahill's body and rapped on Norma's door.

She opened the door after a moment and said, "Now what?"

* * *

He looked down into her glazed eyes, hoping to see some flicker of expression that showed some interest in anything. "Norma, you've a good logical mind--tell me, did you notice anything about Cahill's last cry?"

"No."

"Nothing odd?"

"I've not seen men die very often. What was strange about it?" The eyes unglazed a bit, but Farradyne could not tell whether

this was awakened interest or merely the recapture of the feeling she had enjoyed before.

"It sounded to me like a discordant moan."

"It was discordant."

"Not the way you mean. It sounded to me like there were three or four distinct tones all going at once."

"Stop beating that dead horse," she told him flatly. "It's the same chorus you used to sing about the three people in your control room, remember?"

"Brenner made a sound like that, too," he said.

"A piglike sound," she said scornfully. "Forget it, Farradyne. Your evidence consists of one man surprised at the sight of a good-looking woman and one man whose throat was coming apart in death. Forget it." She shut the door to her room in his face abruptly.

Farradyne looked down at Cahill's body with regret. A gunman and a love-lotus operator was not likely to have his absence noticed among the kind of people who could afford to start asking questions of the officials, and there might be a chance that Cahill's absence would cause the same people to ask a question or two of Farradyne.

Farradyne would have liked to keep the body. But hauling a slain corpse--he did not consider it murder--into a doctor's office and asking for an autopsy on the throat could not be done. Nor could Farradyne do it himself. He could perform a fair job of setting a broken bone and he could treat a burn or a cut, but he would not recognize a larynx if he saw it.

Grunting distastefully, Farradyne hauled the body to the scuttle port and consigned it to space with a terse, "See you in Hell, Cahill!"

Sleep did not come to Farradyne for a long time.

X

The Lancaster came down at Denver; before Farradyne had the landing ramp out, a spaceport buggy came careening across the field to stop almost at the base of the ship.

"Farradyne?" said the man.

"You're the Bennington man?"

"Sidney Kingman," said the other, showing Farradyne a small case with an identification card and license. "Where is she?"

"Inside."

Kingman handed Farradyne an envelope. He pocketed it and led Kingman into the salon. Norma was there, sitting on the divan, smoking.

"Miss Hannon, Mr. Kingman."

"Another one of your friends?" she sneered.

"No. He's one of yours."

"I have no friends."

"Yes, you have, Miss Hannon. And you have parents--"

Norma leaped to her feet angrily. "You good-for-nothing bum!" she screeched at Farradyne.

"You wouldn't leave me alone, Norma," said Farradyne tiredly. "So I've brought you home."

"I'll come after you," she snarled.

"Not if I see you first," he told her. "This is it."

"I won't go!"

"You'll go," said Farradyne harshly, "if I have to clip you on the chin and help Kingman carry you out on a shutter."

For the first time, Farradyne saw tears of genuine sorrow. There was anger at him, too; but remorse was there a-plenty. "Why hurt them?" she asked. "Why can't they just call me dead and let it go at that? I'm worse than dead."

Then her face froze again and she looked at Kingman. "All right," she said in a hard voice, "let's go and hurt my folks to death. You money-grubbing ghouls."

She started towards the spacelock. Kingman followed. Her face wore a coldly distant expression as she left the Lancaster. Kingman's driver took them off. She did not turn back to look at Farradyne.

And that was that. Farradyne retracted the landing ramp, closed the spacelock, and not long afterwards hiked the Lancaster into the sky and headed for Mercury.

XI

Cinnabar was inside of the sunlight zone by a thousand miles and its sun was always in the same spot of the sky. It was a well-contrived city, built so that the streets were lighted either directly or from reflections. Cinnabar was also one of the show-cities of the solar system; but Farradyne found that it did not show him the right things. He could have learned more about hellflowers on Terra because New York had a larger Public Library than Cinnabar.

Farradyne tried everything he could think of but made no progress. His trail had turned to ice after Cahill's death. He loafed and he poked his nose in here and there and drank a bit and varied his routine from man-about-town to the spaceman concerned about his future. There was only one bright spot: his listing had been tentatively taken up by a group of schoolteachers on a sabbatical, who had seen Mercury and now wanted a cheap trip to Pluto. Farradyne accepted this job for about three weeks later. It gave him a payload to Pluto, and when he got there it would be time to do the subcontracting job Clevis had set up as a combined source of revenue and a means of contact. Once each month Farradyne was to haul a shipment of refined thorium ore from Pluto to Terra, a private job that paid well. In the meantime, Farradyne could nose around Mercury to see what he could see. Then he could haul his schoolteachers to Pluto and pick up his thorium, which definitely made his actions look reasonably normal to the official eye.

On the end of the drums of refined thorium there would be a spot of fluorescent paint, normally invisible. He was to wash this spot off so long as he had nothing to report; if it remained then something was wrong with Farradyne, or he had something to report. Clevis would know what to do next.

And so Farradyne watched the date grow closer and closer and his hopes of having something to report dimmed.

He cursed under his breath at the futility of it, and realized that his curse must have been audible when he felt a touch on his elbow and a voice asking, "Is it that bad?"

He turned slowly, his mind working fast to think of something to say that would not be leading in the wrong direction. "I was--" he started, and then saw that the voice, which had been low-pitched enough to have been the voice of a rather small, thin man, had come from the throat of a tall dark-haired woman who sat beside him at the bar. "--just wondering what strangers did for excitement on Mercury," he finished lamely.

"Spaceman?"

"Yes."

She laughed in her low contralto. "I guessed it. Is Cinnabar so inhospitable?"

"To strangers it seems so."

"To me it seems quite normal. It makes the rest of the solar system sound like a very exciting place."

"Born on Mercury?"

"No," she said, shaking her head. "I was born on Venus. I spent four years on Terra before my folks brought me to Mercury. But my last space trip took place when I was nine. Tell me, what is New York like?"

"Buildings and people and mad rushing around. Any change in the last hundred years has been for taller buildings, more people, and a higher general velocity of humanity."

"But--"

"I know, the way I put it sounds a bit harsh. But anybody can find anything they want somewhere in New York if he has the

money to buy it."

* * *

She smiled calmly. "I'll show you that Cinnabar is not an inhospitable place," she said. "You may take me to dinner if you wish."

"I wish," he chuckled. "And since we haven't a mutual friend to introduce us, I'm Charles Farradyne."

"How do you do?" she said solemnly, putting a lithe hand in his. "I'm Carolyn Niles." She took a little step out from the bar and made him a slight curtsy. He saw that she was almost as tall as he was, and he grinned as he thought that her figure was far better than his.

"How shall we meet?" he asked.

"We shall not meet," said Carolyn. "You shall drive me home where we will have cocktails with my folks. You will be an old friend of Michael's, who is a sort of school-chum of my brother. After cocktails I will change and you will make polite conversation with my family--none of which eat personable young men, though they may scare them to death by having father show them the fine collection of Terran shotguns he owns. Then we will go out to your spacecraft, and you will change while I roam around and investigate the insides."

"Done," agreed Farradyne.

Something rapped him on the elbow and he had to look down before he saw a boy of ten or so with a green-paper lined box containing flowers. The young merchant had an eye for business; he eyed Farradyne knowingly and smiled at Carolyn fetchingly. "Corsage? One dollar."

Farradyne grinned--and then almost recoiled before he realized that nowhere in the solar system could a love lotus be purchased for a dollar. These were definitely gardenias. He bought one to cover up his confusion, and as he handed it to Carolyn he wondered whether having a good-looking woman in a car outside a florist shop might not be the password to the purchase of

the hellflower. Carolyn pinned the gardenia in her dark hair as she smiled her thanks, then led him from the bar to an open roadster almost as low and long as the curb it was parked against. Carolyn handed him her keys and Farradyne drove according to her directions until they came to a rather large rambling home just outside of the city limits.

* * *

He was received graciously. Her father was a tall, distinguished man with a dab of gray at the temples and a rather stern face that became completely friendly whenever he smiled, which was very frequently. Carolyn's mother was tall and dark with only a sprinkle of gray; Carolyn's stature seemed natural in that tall family. The brother was not present, which made it completely easy for Farradyne who could not have given any account of his friendship for the unknown Michael.

Mr. Niles mixed a pitcher of martinis and inquired about the spaceman business. Farradyne explained how it was. Mrs. Niles laughed at his story about fish one day and fins the next and said that she thought it couldn't be that bad, really. Farradyne grinned. Mr. Niles observed that a man who can operate a spacer and pay off a mortgage on the craft must not be entirely penniless or without prospects.

Mrs. Niles added, "I suppose it takes money to operate, Mr. Farradyne."

"A fair amount. A spaceman begins to think in large figures so much that he wonders how he can get along on a more humanly reasonable amount. To clear a reasonable standard of living, a rather staggering amount of money comes in one hand and goes out the other. Operating expenses are high, but so are charges."

"But do you land on Mercury often, Mr. Farradyne?"

Farradyne smiled. "Perhaps less frequently in the past than in the future."

"Now, that's sheer flattery," laughed Carolyn.

"Better enjoy it," observed her father with a chuckle. "Charles, you are welcome here any time you land."

"Thank you," smiled Farradyne. "But all things considered, I should think that you'd take a dim view of any man that brought your daughter home wearing a gardenia."

"Gardenia--oh. You mean that it might be--" Mr. Niles laughed. "I think that Carolyn has enough judgement to take up with the right kind of young man, Charles."

"Of course," said Mrs. Niles. "Robert and Michael wouldn't stay friends with the wrong kind."

"So, you see?" laughed Mr. Niles.

"By the way," asked Mrs. Niles, "how is Michael?"

"Quite well, the last time I saw him," said Farradyne, knowing that this was the right thing to say at any time.

"You're sure?"

"Of course."

"I'm very happy to hear it," said Mrs. Niles. "We knew he was with you, but we didn't know how long he stayed."

Farradyne gulped imperceptibly, and hoped that they did not notice. "You did? Then he must have mentioned me."

"Oh, he did. Tell me, Charles, what happened to Michael?"

"Did something happen to him?"

Mr. Niles eyed Farradyne rather pointedly. "Mike took off with you from Mars. He did not land at Denver, Mr. Farradyne. So what happened to Mike Cahill?"

Farradyne gulped, and this time it was a full-throated gulp that left him with his Adam's Apple high in his throat. Carolyn cooed, "Yes, Charles, what happened to Michael Cahill?"

XII

Farradyne felt a muscle-loosening tingle of fear. His thinking mechanism stopped functioning. His mind buzzed with a frenetic insistence that he say something, but being so completely unprepared he could not say anything. And he dimly knew that his long

speechlessness was as damning as any story he could have prepared after such a pause. Perhaps he would have been stunned short this way even if he had concocted some story on the off-hand chance that someday the question might come up. But it had come like this, from an unexpected quarter and he was both shocked and unprepared.

Then it occurred to him that he need not say anything. The die had been cast and he stood accused, twice; once by the Niles Family and once by his own shocked reaction. He must act for the next moment, because the passed moment was irreparable. Farradyne laughed at his own simplicity--a brief scornful bark.

"What is funny?" asked Mr. Niles.

"It just occurred to me that you people are either innocent or guilty."

"Very sage," commented Niles, drily. "Now, what happened to Cahill?"

Farradyne leaned back, trying to relax. He took a sip of his martini, not that he wanted it, but to see if his hand were still trembling. It wasn't.

He said, "If you knew Cahill and his whereabouts, you also know quite a bit about me. You'll have heard that I was recognized in a bar on Ganymede by a woman named Norma Hannon, who is a love-lotus addict. She hated my guts because her brother was among those present when I had the accident in The Bog. She hung onto me for the emotional ride it gave her. I succeeded in locating the home of her parents and was going to take her home when I met Cahill. He came along. Then during the night, he made a pass at Norma, and she shot him for it. I put his body out through the scuttle port."

"Cahill was always a damned fool," nodded Niles. "He was a dame-crazy idiot and it served him right. Some men prefer money, power, or model railroads, Farradyne. Women are poison."

"I seem to have followed one of them like the little lamb," said Farradyne. "But I was picked up and brought here for a purpose,

so let's get down to cases."

"You're a rather quick-on-the-trigger man, aren't you? What gives you to assume that this purpose was anything beyond finding out about Cahill?"

"Because you've tipped your hand," said Farradyne, feeling more at ease. "You could have accomplished the same thing by tipping the police and waiting for the case to be newscast. If Cahill admitted to hellblossom running, it was for a purpose, too, Niles."

"Please. *Mister* Niles. I'm a bit your senior, Farradyne."

"All right. Mr. Niles. I've learned one thing so far: I can tell a love lotus operator from the rest of the system."

"How?" They all leaned forward eagerly.

"Because it is the real operators that take an amused view of my alleged machinations. They know the facts."

"Very sage. You are a bit brighter than you appeared a moment ago."

"May I ask why you let me cool my heels for almost a month before you hauled me in?" He looked at Carolyn with a wry smile. "I would make a mild bet that you weren't more than a few hundred feet from me all the while."

"You're a blind man, Farradyne," she said.

* * *

Mr. Niles smiled knowingly. "There are a lot of unexplained items in your past, Farradyne. We never could be too sure that you were not a Sandman. So we've been checking up on you and for that angle you are clean. Then comes the question of Cahill. It might be that you thought turning in a love-lotus operator would help to smoothe your lot in life, mayhap get you a bit of reward. So we waited. No Cahill. Cahill started to bring you here; he would have turned up either with you or without you. Unless he were dead. You would know the answer."

"No more than I've told you. Cahill came and made me a sort of sidelong offer."

"That much of it rings as true as the other. But there are still holes in your story."

Farradyne nodded. "Let's put it this way: There are ways of getting money and things. I found one way, which is an obvious fact. But I've been told time and again that the first entering wedge to a full confession is a willingness to talk. Do you follow me?"

"I do. But--"

Farradyne smiled. "I don't care to face it. Not in company, Mr. Niles." Farradyne's emphasis on the 'Mister' was heavy with sarcasm.

Niles looked at him piercingly. "You are a bit belligerent and a trifle sure of yourself. Close-mouthed and apparently able to get along. You'll be out on a lonely limb for some time, Farradyne, but we can use you."

"I can use the sugar," said Farradyne.

"Naturally. Anybody can use money. In fact everybody needs money, and so, Farradyne, what visible means of support have you?"

"I've a subcontract. Once each month I'm to lug a load of thorium refines from Pluto to Terra."

"It's a start but it isn't enough."

"I'll pick up more."

* * *

Niles leaned back and put the tips of his fingers together pontifically. "One of the hardest jobs in this business is to justify your standard of living. The financial rewards are large and the hours involved are small. It is patent that a man who has not been granted a large inheritance, or perhaps stumbled on a lucrative asteroid, cannot live in a semi-royal manner without having to work in a semi-royal fury. One of the great risks in this business is the accepting of a recruit whose appearance causes discussion. The day when a man can build a fifty thousand dollar home on a five thousand dollar salary without causing more than a raised

eyebrow is gone. If a man has a large income, he must appear busy enough to warrant it--or at least provide a reasonable facsimile."

"This I can understand."

"For a job like this," Niles went on, "we prefer the natural-born spaceman, with sand in his shoes or space-dust in his eyes. Because the man with a bad case of wanderlust always looks busy even when he is idling. You seem to be that sort, but we can never tell until it's tried. Unless, of course, you turn out to be woman-crazy."

"I'm a normal-enough male," said Farradyne. "I'll remind you that Cahill was the guy who tried and failed."

"How normal are you? We'd have less liking for a misogynist than for a satyr here."

Farradyne smiled serenely. "I had enough sense to keep my hands off Norma Hannon, but I have enough red blood to come home with Carolyn. That good enough?"

Niles thought a moment. "Could be. Anyway, we'll find out. We'll try it and see. Now, when do you go to Pluto?"

"I've some schoolteachers to haul out there tomorrow."

"Good. Gives you a good background, without much labor. Now, when you land on Terra, you'll not post your ship because you have already contracted for a job. Carolyn will be there on a business trip and will have chartered your ship for a hauling job back to Mercury. During this trip you will get some more details on how you are to operate. This much I will tell you now, Farradyne: you'll be an inbetweener. Advancement may come fast or slow, depending on you. You'll get the details later; as for now, however--" Niles leaned back in his chair and smiled. "Farradyne, you met my daughter in a cocktail lounge and several people heard the two of you planning an evening together. So you will go dancing and dining and from this moment on you will be Charles and I will be Mister Niles and we'll have no nonsense, understand?"

Farradyne nodded.

"Good. Now, let's have another martini while Carolyn dresses for dinner."

Niles poured. Carolyn disappeared. Mrs. Niles leaned forward slightly and asked, "Charles, why did you become a spaceman?"

* * *

Farradyne blinked. His impulse was to ask in turn why they had become hellflower operators. He stifled the impulse because there was something strangely odd about this set-up. Her question was quite normal to the background she appeared to fill as matron of a happy, successful family.

The aura of respectability extended far, to include the home and its spacious grounds, so that Farradyne burned with resentment at the social structure whereby he, who had committed no more than a few misdemeanors, should be less cultured, less successful, less poised than this family of low-grade vultures. If anything, the attitude of Mrs. Niles shocked him more than the acts of her husband. Men were the part of the race that played the rough games and ran up the score while women occupied one of two positions: they were either patterned after Farradyne's mother or they were slatterns and sluts who looked as well as acted the part. It offended Farradyne's sense of proportion that Mrs. Niles was gracious and well-bred instead of being loud and cheap.

Farradyne labeled it a form of hypocrisy and yearned to pull the pedestal out from under them and dump them into the mud where they all damn well belonged.

Farradyne matured a bit in those few moments of thinking. He had often wondered why a clever man like Clevis would work at a dangerous, thankless job in complete anonymity when he could have put his efforts into business and probably emerge wealthy and famous. He began to understand the personal gratification that could be his in working to rid the human race of its parasites. In Niles' own words, some men like money and some want power and others build model railroads; neither money nor

power were god to Farradyne, who had always been restlessly happy with just enough money and power to exchange for the fun and games to be found in being alive.

Farradyne was just discovering the threshold of a new outlet for his wealth of nervous energy, and he looked forward to it eagerly.

Blandly, he started to outline a semi-humorous tale of his life and adventures to Mrs. Niles, exaggerating his own early fumblings in a casual way. She listened with amused interest, just as any mother might use in hearing the background of a young man who was interested in a daughter.

But in the back of Farradyne's mind was the niggling fear that he would not be able to act the part of convincing suitor to the girl whose background, attitude, and character he detested. He knew that a man can lie in his teeth and play the role of spy convincingly, but he believed that the truth of his feelings would be evident when it came to making love to the enemy.

And then Carolyn came down the stairs in a white strapless evening dress and Farradyne changed his mind. It was going to be extremely easy for him to put his personal attitudes in a small compartment of his mind and slam the door.

"You've got to dress too, Charles," she said in a soft voice. It was low and intimate, unlike a woman of her type.

He nodded and got up.

Carolyn tucked her hand under his elbow and gave a little squeeze; the last image of Norma Hannon's lackluster eyes faded out of his mind and Farradyne became the man his role so urgently demanded.

XIII

In the salon of the Lancaster, Farradyne smiled knowingly. "The plan was to let you investigate the ship while I dressed," he said. "But I gather that you've seen you share of spacers."

"I admit it," she replied. "For that I'm sorry, Charles."

"Well, park yourself somewhere while I get into whites."

She sat down and stretched. "A highball and a cigarette?" she asked.

"The cigarette is easy," he said, handing one to her and flipping his lighter. While she puffed, he went on, "But the highball may be more difficult. I've nothing but White Star Trail aboard."

She nodded at him. "With water," she said. She relaxed into the cushions. Farradyne went and mixed her highball. She sipped it and nodded approvingly. He turned to go.

"Charles?"

He stopped. Carolyn put her glass on the tiny tray and parked her cigarette. She rose and came forward, lifting her hands to put them on his shoulders. He stood woodenly. "Charles," she asked in a soft voice, "Are you unhappy because I am not the girl you hoped I'd be?"

"How many men have you played this role for?" he asked.

Carolyn smiled, a wry smile that twisted her face. "I should slap your face for that," she said. "Because when I tell you the answer you won't believe me."

Caution came to him. He was the rookie hellflower operator, not the young man who has discovered that his girl has been playing games behind his back. He tried to fit himself into her picture and decided that according to her code of loused-up ethics she might possibly be thinking of a future: a pleasant home with rambling roses and a large lawn and a devoted husband and maybe a handful of happy children all creating the solid-citizen facade for dope running, just as her parents were doing. If this were the case, Farradyne must carry roses for his wife in one hand, toys for the kids in the other, and his hip pocket must be filled with hellflowers.

He played it. He relaxed and put his hands on her waist. "I admit to being a bit of a louse," he said, with a brief laugh. "But that's because I'm a bit new at a very rough game."

She leaned forward a bit. "Even rough games have their rules."

"I'll play according to the rules--as soon as I learn them."

She looked up at him. "You know them," she said quietly. "All men and women learn them at home, in school, in church. They're sensible rules and they keep people out of trouble, mostly. If you adhere to the rules, people will have nothing to attract their attention. That's what father was trying to say when he suggested that you provide a visible means of support for yourself. Play by these rules and we'll get along. It's especially important when we must not have people looking in our direction, Charles."

She sighed and leaned against him softly. "You asked me a question. The answer is three. One of them preferred a blonde and they are living quietly and happily on Callisto. The second couldn't have jelled because he was the kind of man who would work eighteen hours a day. Some men are that way and some women like it that way, but not me. The third, Charles, was Michael. Mike didn't last long. Only long enough to prove to me that he was a woman-chaser. The fourth could be you, and maybe there mightn't be a fifth."

"Three men in your life," he said.

She smiled up into his eyes. "Three men in my life--but, Charles, not three men in my bedroom." Carolyn cocked an eyebrow at him knowingly. "The only way the fourth will get in is to make sure there won't be a fifth. So now you know. You can play it from there."

* * *

His arms did not slip around the slender waist, but the hands pulled her close to him. He kissed her gently, and for a moment she clung to him with her body. Her response was affectionate but only bordering on passion. Then she leaned back and smiled into his face. "You need a shave," she told him. "So let go of me until you can kiss me without scratching." Then to prove that she didn't really mean it, Carolyn kissed him, briefly, and ended it by rubbing her forehead against his chin.

Farradyne went to his stateroom and showered. He shaved. He dressed carefully in white slacks and shirt and the last remaining holdover from a Victorian period, a dark necktie. He returned to the salon to find Carolyn finished with her highball and cigarette and waiting for him calmly and patiently. She looked him over, then got up and rubbed her cheek against his and cooed pleasantly, but moved away when he tried to kiss her.

She tucked her hand under his elbow and said, "Dinner, manthing."

Farradyne chuckled. "Dinner," he repeated.

She hugged his arm. He led her down the landing ramp and into her car, and at her direction drove to her choice of a dinner spot. The food was good. Carolyn was a fine dancer with a high sense of rhythm and a graceful body. Farradyne decided that if this were a thankless job that gave no chance for fame and fortune, there were plenty of very pleasant facets to it. Her shoulder rubbed his as he drove her home hours later.

He handed her out of the car and walked to the front door with her. She gave him her key and he opened her door and she walked in, to wait for him just inside. She came into his arms as the door closed behind them and she clung to him, returning his kiss and his embrace; matching his rising fervor with a passion of her own. They parted minutes afterward. Farradyne moved her slightly, settling her body into a more comfortable fit against him.

"It's late," she breathed.

Farradyne chuckled. "With the sun shining like that?"

She kissed him, amused. "It's always like that, silly. You're on Mercury, remember?"

* * *

Farradyne held her close and kissed her again. A minute passed before he came up for air. He looked down at her, leaning his head back so that he could see her face without looking cross-eyed. "I'll bet you're a real mush-face in the dark."

Carolyn laughed, and shook her head. "Like all the rest of the women on Mercury, I'm scared to pieces of the dark. But it's late, Charles, and you've just got to go." She hugged his head down so that she could look at her wrist watch on the arm about his neck. "It's five o'clock and you're to take off at nine. Charles, please don't crack up just because of lack of sleep."

"Okay," he said regretfully. "Okay."

She held him close. "It's been a nice evening, Charles. So kiss me good bye, and remember that it won't be long until I see you on Terra."

"It gets dark on Terra," he told her. He tightened his arms and she pressed against him.

Against his lips she murmured, "I might not be afraid of the dark--Charles."

The promise in her last embrace stayed with him. There were only three hours of sleep between the time he left her and the time of awakening to prepare for the take-off, but dreams of Carolyn filled all of them. They were pleasant dreams and unpleasant dreams; he saw Carolyn coming to him with her past renounced, he saw her coming to him as a secret agent who was in the hellish business for the same reason as he was. And he dreamed of her waving him a good-bye with her dark eyes filled with tears as she was taken off to the Titan Penal Colony. He even entertained notions of joining them, justifying himself by thinking that people who fall in with love-lotus addiction were the weaklings of the human race anyway, and could be eradicated to good advantage of the general level. This reasoning he recognized as sophistry.

But be it as it may, Carolyn was an attractive woman, and if her companionship could only be known for a very short time, it was none the less pleasant. It was a rough game they were playing and many people were bound to get hurt. But more people--innocent people--would get hurt if he called it off. So by the time Farradyne and his dreams came to the conclusion that he could afford to take what pleasure out of life this situation offered for

the moment and let Tomorrow exact its tribute when Tomorrow came, it was time to get out of his bed and start the pre-flight check-off.

He had work to do. Schoolmarms to haul to Pluto and some refined thorium ore to bring to Terra. He would make no signal this trip; he was still far from being on the inside. Maybe the next. Or the one after that, depending on his progress. But in the meantime, he would be seeing Carolyn Niles on Terra.

Farradyne began his check-up, already anticipating the reunion.

XIV

Farradyne watched them carefully as they came aboard and after he had seen them he breathed a sigh of relief. There was something prim and straitlaced about them all, and they would give him no trouble. It was going to be a breeze.

There were a few whose faces and names correlated; the rest became a confusing background of nonentities, uninteresting and bland. Professor Martin was an elderly gentleman who herded them all into place efficiently, and who knew enough about spacing to handle the job. He took over and left only the running of the Lancaster to Farradyne. There was a Miss Otis who giggled like a fifty year old schoolgirl; a Mrs. Logan who probably had all of the boys in her class drooling; a Miss Tilden who was old enough to be Farradyne's mother and a Miss Carewe who was old enough to be Miss Tilden's mother and who also knew her way around space, apparently. Miss Higginbotham was the she-dragon type and Mr. Hughes was the know-it-all type.

He left them alone. They ran the galley and policed the joint and made the beds, and one of them made a small water-color to hang in the empty space over the tiny bar and Miss Carewe requested an oilcan because she hated squeaky doors.

Beyond that, Farradyne saw little of them. He used his spare time tinkering down in the tiny workshop, or demonstrating how the atomic pile was controlled by the damper rods.

He was happy and free from care, even though the bunch of them took over the more comfortable parts of the ship and left him only the control room above and the lower reaches of the ship, below the salon and the passenger's cabins.

He sat for long hours, thinking idly. He was lulled by the noises of the ship itself; the faint sound of metal on metal, an occasional groan of a plate or the creaking of a point. The moaning cry of a motor winding up to take care of some automatic function and the click and clack of relays and circuit breakers and the peculiar hum of the servodynes that maintained the correct level of pile activity. The muted sibilance of the reaction motor created a threshold level of something like a constant heavy exhalation or the sound of seashore from a distance.

And then a few hours before turnover there came another sound that bothered Farradyne. It was a faint ringing in his ears.

He knew that ringing in the ears can come of too much alcohol, a box on the side of the head, certain diseases--or a change in air pressure. He was healthy, had not been drinking, no one had clipped him; but he had spent a number of years in an environment where the air pressure was damned important--

He sneezed and brought forth a tiny trickle of blood!

He couldn't believe it; any such change in air pressure would make alarms ring like the crack of doom all over the ship and there would be a lot of activity from the air-pressure regulators.

He hurried aloft to the control room, pausing briefly to listen to the snoring along the curved corridor of the passenger's section.

* * *

Lamps told him the story in a series of quick appraisals, because of some long-forgotten genius who had insisted that, whenever possible, warning devices should not be fused, should

not be turn-offable, should not be destructible. The Lancaster was a fine ship, designed well, but a frontal attack on a panel with metal-cutting tools consists of making the exception to the 'wherever possible' part of the design of warning signals. The ship's bell-system had been opened like a tin can.

But there was another warning system: the pilot-lamp system, which was strung here and there behind the panels and it would have needed a major overhaul to be ruined; the saboteur would have spent all night just opening cans instead of doing his dirty work inside them. Farradyne should have been asleep; then he would not have noticed the blazing lamps, which told him exactly what was amiss in the ship, and where.

They told him the tale in a glance:

The low-pressure center of the ship was down in the pile-bay, and the reason was that one of the little scuttle-doors was open. The pressure in the reaction-mass bay was low, and now that Farradyne had come aloft, opening the upper levels, the pressure here was as low as down in the reaction-mass bay.

As he watched, another one of the scuttle ports swung open and its warning lamp flared into life.

Farradyne went into action. He ripped open the cabinet that held his spacesuit and clawed the thing from its hook. He started down the stairway on a stumbling run, getting into the suit by leaps and jumps and pauses. He realized that he could have moved faster if he stopped to do one thing at a time, but his frantic mind would not permit him to make haste slowly. He stumbled and bounced off walls, and the tanks on his back rapped against his shoulder blades and the helmet cut a divot out of the bridge of his nose.

He had zipped up the airtight closures by the time he reached the little workshop, and he ducked in there to get a weapon of some sort. He reached past the hammer, ignored the obvious chisel because it was not heavy, even though it were sharp, and picked up a fourteen-inch half-round rasp. He hefted it in his gloved hand and it felt about right.

The air-break on the topside was still open, and Farradyne closed it. He fretted at the seconds necessary to equalize the pressure, but used them sensibly to check the workings of the space suit. He also located the cause of the air-leakage; normally the air-break doors were airtight. A sliver of wool or cotton string lay in the rubber gasket and produced a channel for the escape of some of the air into the pile-bay. Farradyne stooped, as anyone will, his attention attracted by this trifle. It was neither wool nor cotton, but a match torn from a giveaway book.

He threw it aside and went in, his attention once more on the important business before him. He ran along the curved corridor--

And there, a figure in a spacesuit was quietly levering one of the control rods out of its slot and preparing to hurl it into the void.

* * *

Farradyne understood the whole act in one glance; it was the sort of thing that he would do if sabotage had been his intention. The single scuttleport had been opened first by hand. Then the saboteur had scuttled the stock of spare control rods, and since the Lancaster was reasonably new, there had been quite a batch of them. Furthermore they were long, unwieldly, heavy things that took time to handle. Naturally, this was the first act, because the next act would cause the ship's acceleration to rise. The rise in acceleration would make the rods too heavy to carry and would also cause investigation as soon as people became aware of the increasing pressure.

Then the working rods would be hurled out, leaving the ship heading hell-bent out of the galaxy at about eight gravities of acceleration. The passengers and crew would be helpless.

Maybe two or three rods had been scuttled already. The rest, functioning on the automatic, would be shoved in further to compensate; Farradyne could feel no change in the acceleration pressure. But once the working rods were all the way home, the

removal of the next would cause the ship to take off, literally, with the throttle tied down. Farradyne was willing to bet the rest of his life that the safety-valve that furnished the water-mass to the pile was either welded open or damaged in such a way that supply could not be stopped.

Then--and Farradyne had to admire his precautions--the vandal would make his way to the escape hatch, hit the void, and let the helpless passengers go on and on and on.

The saboteur was well prepared. His suit was a high-efficiency job capable of maintaining a man alive for a long time in space. It had a little radio and a small and expensive chemical motor for mild maneuvering. The man had friends, obviously, lying in wait out there ahead, who would pick him up.

A passel of ice-cold-blooded murderers.

Farradyne saw the man through a red haze that clouded up over his eyes. His evaluation of the act was made in a glance, in the bare instant that it took for Farradyne to see the man and then get his feet in motion. He plunged forward with a bellow that hurt his own ears.

The airlessness kept the sound in; the killer was not aware of Farradyne until the heavy file crashed down on the top of his helmet, putting a half-inch dent in the steel.

XV

The man whirled and sent a heavy-gloved hand back against Farradyne's face-glass. Farradyne lifted the file for a second swing and caught the gleam of a heavy knife just as it swung upwards at his face. The blade jabbed at the face-glass and blunted slightly before Farradyne's eyes. The glass crazed, clouding Farradyne's vision.

Farradyne's second swing caught a shoulder-pad and sent the man staggering back; the knife came up again and the gleaming edge sliced space close to Farradyne's arm. The man stumbled and fell, and Farradyne moved forward. The long lever used to

handle the radioactive control rod chopped against his shins and cut his feet out from under him; he landed on his face in position to let the other man kick out with heavy spaceboots. The heels rammed Farradyne's helmet hard down into the shoulders and the top of the helmet hit the top of Farradyne's head, stunning him slightly.

The other scrambled forward and landed on Farradyne's back. He pulled up and back on the fittings of Farradyne's helmet until the pilot's spine ached with the tension. Then the man thrust forward and slammed Farradyne's face down on the deck. The safety glass cracked further and there came the thin, high screech of air escaping through a sharp-edged hole.

Farradyne lashed out and around just in time to parry a slash of the knife. Blade met file in a glint of metal-spark and both weapons were shocked out of and gloved hands to go skittering across the deck.

The man left Farradyne to scrabble across the floor after his knife. Farradyne jumped to his feet, took three fast steps and leaped to come down with both feet on the man's back. The other collapsed and Farradyne fell, turning his right wrist painfully underneath him. The other made a kick that caught Farradyne in the side, turning him over. And as Farradyne rolled, his bent hand touched hard metal and he came up out of the roll clutching a heavy pair of spaceman's repair pliers.

He faced the killer, standing again, armed again; spaceman's pliers against assassin's knife. He plunged forward and felt the knife bite against his suit; he swung the pliers as a club and caught the killer's upper arm, then opened the jaws and bit down, twisting and pulling.

A three-cornered patch ripped and came away between the jaws as the heavy outer cloth gave way. The knife came up and bit through Farradyne's suit across the knuckles of the hand that held the pliers. Farradyne kicked, sending the killer staggering, and followed him, probing at the tear to get at the thin inner suit beneath. The other man struggled, hurled Farradyne away; but

when Farradyne staggered back, it was with the thin lining between the jaws of the spaceman's pliers. The other's suit ripped and there came a puff of white vapor as the air blew into the void.

The struggling killer stopped as though shocked by an electric current; he stood there stiffly, his hands slowly falling to his sides, limp. Farradyne took a step back, breathing heavily.

He could see, now that his head was not jerking back and forth behind the cracked glass. He peered, in time to watch the froth of blood foam out of Hughes' nose.

Hughes!

Farradyne wondered whether Hughes had cried out in a polytonal voice--

* * *

He hauled Hughes into the air-break and slammed the door shut. He valved air into the break and ripped Hughes' suit off. He felt for a pulse and found one fluttering; he turned Hughes on his face and pumped on the ribs in, out, in, out, wondering whether he was wasting his time.

Hughes groaned painfully. His voice echoed and re-echoed in the tiny air break, but Farradyne could not hear more than the groan of a man badly hurt. Hughes stirred and opened one eye halfway. Then he closed it again and moaned under his breath. Farradyne checked the heart and found it beating weakly; the pulse was not fluttering any more, and the breath was coming naturally, even though the man's chest heaved high and dropped low and there was a foghorn sound in the throat as he gasped huge lungfuls of air.

Hughes would give Farradyne no trouble for some time. He carried Hughes to his stateroom and stretched him on the bed. Then he went below and closed the little hatches and reinserted the control rod, wondering again whether missing a few would louse-up his landing.

He went to the control room and replaced the wiring torn out of the audible-alarm panel. The phalanx of warning lamps had

winked out, and the clangor of danger did not sound.

Farradyne went back to Hughes' stateroom. "Can you hear me?" he demanded.

Hughes awakened slightly. He looked up, his eyes dim but aware.

"You're a back-biting s.o.b.," snapped Farradyne. "And I'd have let you die if it hadn't occurred to me that you might be good for some information. What makes, Hughes?"

"Wiseacre," came from Hughes' lips in a whisper.

"What's the game, Hughes?"

"I don't know what--you're talking--about."

"I can break all your fingers and slip a hot soldering iron under your armpits until you yelp loud and clear."

"You'd better kill me, then," breathed Hughes. "Because you aren't smart enough to hold me."

"No? Hughes, you're wrong." Farradyne continued to smile as he went into the medicine-bay and came up with an ampule and a hypodermic. He filled the needle deliberately, eyed the dose critically and adjusted the quantity by causing a droplet to ooze out of the needle until the plunger was exactly at the mark.

"This is a fine pain-killer," he said. "Marcoleptine. Know it, Hughes?"

Hughes began to mouth curses. Farradyne paid no more attention to the curses than if Hughes had been delivering benedictions. He caught the man's arm, quelled the resulting struggle easily and locked the arm in a cruel arm-bar between the elbow and the wrist beneath his arm-pit. Farradyne lifted, and Hughes came up from the bed slightly; the arm was both rigid and still because to move might break the arm. Hughes glared; Farradyne put on more pressure.

Then, as deliberately as he had measured out the dose, Farradyne slid the needle into Hughes' elbow, probed briefly for the vein and delivered the shot. He withdrew the needle quickly and swabbed the ooze of blood with cotton dipped in an astringent.

* * *

He dropped Hughes on the bed and sat down on the chair beside the bed and relaxed a bit.

"Marcoleptine," he said conversationally, "is a fine pain-killer--and habit-forming as hell. You'll blank out in a few moments, and when you come to it will be about this time tomorrow. You'll see me, because I'll be here with another healthy needle full of the stuff. By the time we get to Pluto, you'll be willing to sell your eyeballs for a jolt, Hughes."

Hughes' eyes were heavy-lidded, but beneath them pure hatred looked out.

"As for the reason you're here, that's easy. I can almost quote the Spaceman's Guide to Diagnosis of Common Ailments. I think it's on Page two forty-four." Farradyne did not really remember, but he wanted to keep a drone of speech running to lull Hughes' mind--and also to help keep himself awake until Hughes blanked out under the marcoleptine. "Coryosis, one of the nine allied infections formerly grouped under the ambiguous term 'Common Cold,' is contagious but not fatal except in severe cases of extreme sensitivity. Treatment consists of isolation of the patient plus frequent intravenous injections of MacDonaldson's Formula 2,Ph-D3;Ra7. Nobody will want to spend much time with you for fear of infection themselves, which would be both hazardous to them and to you because of the danger of reinfection.

"I heard you coughing and sneezing and I came to help and found you in severe pain. Good Old Samaritan Farradyne is going to take care of you and he will also lug you back to Terra. You wouldn't want to stay on Pluto where it's cold even despite the Terraconversion program. There's only one thing more. They'll want to see you even though it's only a peek in through the door, so you've got to look presentable."

Farradyne ran hot water into the lavatory and soaped a cloth. He slapped the hot cloth over Hughes' face and let the soap and water soak in. Then he began to scrub vigorously.

The caked blood came away from Hughes' face easily. And so did dark pigment: makeup. The dark-complected Hughes turned paler; the lines of his face faded as the reinforcing pigment washed away. Schoolteacher Hughes came off on the soapy washcloth.

"Brenner!" exploded Farradyne.

* * *

But the man on the bed was out cold. Farradyne cursed his enthusiasm with the marcoleptine, for his questions would fall on deaf ears and torture would hurt only numbed nerves. He would have to wait; but there would be plenty of time to pry certain answers out of Hughes-Brenner.

He left the doped man and went to his own stateroom and to bed. Oddly enough, he fell asleep immediately and slept dreamlessly until it was time to get up.

Warily he faced his passengers over the breakfast table, eyeing them one by one. He explained about Hughes--"heard him moaning in the night and found he had a nice case of coryosis. He's under treatment now and he'll probably be out colder than a mackerel for some time."

There was no response that Farradyne could put down as strange or odd. Either Hughes-Brenner had a confederate that was very cagey and capable of running a good ad lib, or the crook was operating alone. Farradyne felt that it was not impossible for the hellflower gang to have a second operator on his ship to take over if Brenner failed, perhaps unknown even to Brenner. But there was no evidence of such--no more than there had been evidence of Brenner until the disguise was removed--and so Farradyne decided to play cagey too.

He learned only one thing: the difference in attitude between himself and normal people. Where Farradyne would not have accepted a statement of sickness without taking a sample of Brenner's sputum or blood, these people believed it easily and complimented Farradyne on his willingness to help a fellow man.

Farradyne carried this even farther by asking Professor Martin about 'Hughes' and his home.

Hughes, according to Professor Martin, taught Ancient History in a school in Des Moines, Iowa, but none of them knew much about him because the teacher had joined them on Mercury not much before they had contracted for this trip.

Farradyne then buttered up the program by suggesting that he take Hughes back home to Terra, because a sick man would not find Pluto a pleasant place. There was relief in their eyes; good and as honest as they were, all of them were happy to be relieved of the responsibility of a sick comrade. Some of them went with him to peek through the door while Farradyne gave Hughes his medicine and they remarked on how pale he looked. He was also weak enough to be convincing and he went back to sleep as soon as the drug took hold.

Farradyne set a photoelectric alarm on the stairway below the passenger's section; but if Hughes-Brenner had any cohorts from the rest of the hellflower outfit aboard, they laid low. Farradyne kept Brenner under dope until Pluto was looming in the sky, and then went to him just before landing.

XVI

Farradyne poised the needle. "Ready for another jolt?" he asked. "Feel the craving yet, Brenner?"

Brenner grunted.

"Say it in that triple-voiced tongue of yours," snapped Farradyne. "Let me hear you sing, Brenner!"

"Go to hell. I don't know what you're talking about."

"No? I'm surprised ... you mean there's something I know that you don't know?" Farradyne loaded the hypodermic with slow deliberation, watching Brenner's eyes to see if there was any sign of longing for the drug. "Maybe I'll know more than I do now, pretty soon. I'm taking you off the dope as soon as we get rid of the customers, so they can't hear you screaming your lungs out

for a jolt. You'll talk, all right. Put up the arm, Brenner. Quietly and nicely--or I'll break it off at the arm-pit and shove the needle into the other one."

"You're a devil from hell."

"And you're an angel, ripping out the damper rods to take us to Heaven?" sneered Farradyne. "I owe you the works for that one. You'll get 'em! Feel any craving?"

"No!"

Farradyne waved the needle in front of Brenner's face. "Maybe I should think it over for a bit," he said.

"You wouldn't dare."

"No?"

"Look, Farradyne, no matter how smart you think you are, you won't get anything out of me. And you'll not stop me from leaving this ship when I want to leave."

"Trying to sidelong-urge me into slipping you your slug?" taunted Farradyne.

Brenner held up his arm. "Shoot me the sugar, Farradyne. I could hold out, but you couldn't afford to have me wide awake while we're on Pluto. I know that as well as you do."

"You're not too bad off so far," said Farradyne, slipping the needle into Brenner's arm. "But you're coming along. We'll find out how long your nonchalance lasts after we get rid of the school-folks."

"Just go away and let me sleep."

"Have a nice dream," said Farradyne. "Because your next one will be a wake-mare."

Farradyne waited until the eyelids closed heavily and Brenner's breathing became deep and regular. Then he left him to explain to the rest of the passengers that 'Hughes' was resting easily but that the lack of sunshine on Pluto would impair his recovery-time. Then Farradyne went aloft and into the landing pattern, one wary eye poised for danger.

The Lancaster came down easily, and while the landing was as good as any Farradyne had ever made, he was a jittering wreck

from three hours in the chair worrying about a recurrence of the Semiramide affair.

He checked in; the spaceport bus snaked out to meet them as they came trooping down the landing ramp.

"All here?" called the driver.

"All that's coming," replied Farradyne.

"But the roster-count was--"

"Mr. Hughes has an attack of coryosis," offered Professor Martin. "He is going--"

"--to be a bit late, but here I am," said a voice behind them. They whirled to see Hughes-Brenner coming down the ramp, his bag packed, a smile on his face.

* * *

Brenner laughed and his voice was hearty. "I kept telling Mr. Farradyne that he was going a bit heavy on the rest-cure. I'm really quite all right." He slapped Farradyne on the shoulder. "Coryosis is not as dangerous as the books say it is," he said. "Certainly it is nothing to keep a good man flat on his back!"

"But--"

"Sleep and isolation did the job," chuckled Brenner. "And now I'll be happy to let any doctor on Pluto look down my throat. I'm a bit pale, I suppose, but I assure you I'm quite well again."

He climbed into the spaceport bus, still thanking Farradyne for the medication that had kept him quiet, and waved back gayly as the bus sped off across the Pluto Spaceport.

Brenner had become 'Hughes' again to his friends, and had disappeared under the protection of a group of people above reproach.

He was a very extraordinary gentleman, Farradyne thought glumly; he had been able to walk off the ship with his eyes bright and his system hale, when he should have been flat on his spine with a brain full of marcoleptine--one of the most completely paralyzing drugs that had ever been synthesized. He had feigned

doped slumber and helplessness, then had walked away, knowing that Farradyne had not the legal right to raise a cry against him.

Hughes was a very remarkable fellow.

Farradyne watched the truck bringing out his shipment of refined thorium ore, with a sneer directed at himself. Outpointed and outsmarted--the evidence he had was very meager. Evidence? It was more of a belief than evidence.

What did he have to fit together? A common pattern of love-lotus background. A man who died with a discordant moan. A man who grunted in a polytonal when surprised by a woman, and who could take a paralyzing dose of marcoleptine and then walk out jauntily. An apparent well-to-do family with a proud place in the community, and a girl who worked hand-in-glove with love-lotus operators but who had never had her nose in one of the hellish things.

He sat bolt upright. Could Carolyn be immune to hellflower as Brenner was to marcoleptine? And did she make with three-toned cries when she was surprised?

The thought that he had been avoiding came back again. Obviously, since he himself was susceptible to marcoleptine and women like Norma were susceptible to hellflower perfume, and neither of them could sing a trio unaided, there must be two kinds of people!

XVII

Farradyne wondered how soon the fuss would start once the drums of refined thorium ore went under some hidden beam of ultra violet light. He watched the drums being trundled off and disappearing. He watched and waited until it was evening, but no one came on the double-run to ask him leading questions.

He finally took off about nine o'clock, and made the looping run from New Jersey to Los Angeles in time to get there just about dusk.

He checked into the control Tower at seven o'clock, and went over to the mail-listing window. "Anything for Charles Farradyne?"

"Expecting something?"

"At least one. A payment voucher from Eastern Atomic. Come yet?"

The mail clerk disappeared; came back with one envelope. "Nothing from Eastern Atomic," he said. "But here's a letter for Charles Farradyne, Pilot of ship's registry Six-Eight-Three, a Lancaster Eighty-One. That must be yours."

"It's mine. But keep an eye peeled for a landwire payment voucher, will you? I had to leave Newark before it was ready and the guy at the shipping office said he'd notify the company that the stuff was received at the 'port, and that I'd be in Los Angeles. Okay?"

"Aye-firm."

The letter was from Carolyn; a brief note telling him that she would be ready for the trip on the morning of the fifth. This suited Farradyne; he had been afraid that Carolyn might be waiting at the spaceport for him, and that they'd be taking off before Clevis had a chance to find out about the unwashed drum-ends.

She also suggested in a postscript that she would be in her hotel and free any evening after nine o'clock. Farradyne looked at his watch and decided what to do with the intervening two hours: he was going to buy a love lotus, to check on the question of her immunity.

On this problem Farradyne had to admit a lack of experience. He wandered for some time, entering one florist-shop after another and getting nowhere. He could buy a gardenia for five, but the fifty he offered for a 'Corsage' could only buy something resembling the garland they put on Kentucky Derby Winners.

And then as his two hours were about gone, a seedy-looking character sidled up alongside and said, "Lookin' for somepin', Jack?"

"Who isn't?"

"Might be able to fix y' up, Jack. Got a few?"

Farradyne looked at his watch. "I've got fifteen," he said.

"Won't take that long. Just try the stand in the Essex, and tell 'em Lovejoy sent you to pick up his corsage. Cost ya half a yard, Jack. Got it?"

"Got it."

The character slipped away leaving a faint aroma of decaying cloth and a trace of gardenia, making what Farradyne considered a God-awful mixture. Farradyne did not look to see where he went, but started for the Essex immediately.

The flower-shop attendant was a dark, handsome woman in a low-cut dinner dress. She gave Farradyne a mechanical smile as he entered.

"I'm a friend of Mr. Lovejoy," said Farradyne significantly. "He said he'll be late, and asked me if I'd stop by and pick up his corsage on my way."

"Oh. Of course. Just one moment." She disappeared for a few minutes and came back with a fancy transparent box containing a gardenia--or a love lotus. "That will be five dollars, sir," she said.

Farradyne took a fifty from his wallet and handed it to her. The girl rang up five on the register but put the whole fifty in the till.

A few minutes later, the desk clerk at Carolyn's hotel informed him that Miss Niles was expecting a Mr. Farradyne and he should go right up to Room Seven Twenty-Three.

* * *

Carolyn greeted him warmly, took him by the hand and drew him into the room. Once the door was closed she came into his arms and kissed him, not too fervently but very pleasantly, with her body pressing his for a long moment. Then she moved out of his arms and accepted the flower. "Lovely," she breathed.

She opened the box and held the white flower at arms' length, admiring its beauty. Then she held it to her nose and took a deep breath, letting the fragrance fill her lungs.

Farradyne's mind did a flip-flop. First he felt like a louse--and he felt that it was only what she and her kind did to other women, and it was damn well good enough for her. She smiled at him over the edge of the blossom, still breathing in its fragrance.

"Maybe," she said archly, "I shouldn't dare do this."

The badinage was the same as it had been a couple of weeks ago, but at that time both of them knew the blossom was pure gardenia. Now Farradyne knew that it was not, and this knowledge made him wary. He hoped his smile was honest-looking. "You're hooked already," he grinned wolfishly.

Carolyn tucked the blossom in her hair and came into his arms, leaning back to look in his eyes. "I'm not afraid of you, Charles," she said in a low, throaty voice.

"No?"

Carolyn laughed at him and slipped out of his arms. She went to a tiny sideboard and waved an inquiring hand at a bottle of Farradyne's favorite liquor. He nodded. As she mixed their drinks, she said quietly, "Don't disappoint me, Charles."

"How?" he asked, wondering what she was driving at, and feeling that this had nothing to do with hellflowers.

She handed him the highball, and sipped at her own drink. "I think you know that my family is a long way from poverty. And I hope you'll forgive me if I point out that I know I am rather well equipped with physical charms. I also flatter myself that I have a mind large enough to absorb some of the interesting factors of this rather awesome universe."

"I will grant you the truth of all three."

"Thanks," she said, smiling at him over the top of her glass. "But the point is, Charles, that a girl with a bit of money in the top of her stocking--and a brain in her head--wonders whether the gentleman is interested only in the money, or in the shape of her stocking. She'd like to feel that the gentleman in question would still be interested if the shape of the stocking went a bit gauche with age, and the money disappeared."

Farradyne looked at her and wondered. Carolyn was a consummate actress. The hellflower was still in her hair, and Farradyne wanted very much to take his face in his hands and ponder this problem deeply: Carolyn Niles was the daughter of a hellflower operator, and, by all that was holy, at least her parents should have taught her how to recognize a hellflower at ninety paces in a dusky smoke-filled nightclub.

But he knew that he could not take the time to think this out now. He had to reply. He walked across the room and took Carolyn by the shoulders and shook her gently. "Let's leave it just that way," he said. "Sooner or later something will give me away--and then you'll know whether I'm after your body, your money, or your mind." Farradyne kissed her lightly. "Until you *know*, nothing I say will convince you of anything."

Farradyne still had her shoulders under his palms; Carolyn moved forward into his arms and rested herself against him. She put up her face for his kiss and held herself close against him. Then she said dreamily, "You're a nice sort of guy, Charles, and I'll be very happy to leave it that way. Maybe you'll be the one who stays."

* * *

Farradyne recoiled mentally and hoped that this instinctive reaction was not noticed. It was too easy to forget what Carolyn represented, when she went soft and sweet and eager. Inwardly he cursed himself and his all-too-easy ability to forget that this was not a personal conflict.

Then he relaxed and decided that if this was what he had to do to cut the hellblossom ring out of human culture, it was nice work if you could get it. The job would have been much less pleasant if Carolyn Niles had been a gawky, ugly duckling with buck teeth and a pasty complexion.

"Charles," she breathed, "take me out into the dark?"

He laughed lightly. "Whither?"

She leaned far back in his arms, arching her fine body. "I want to go to some dark and smoky gin-mill, and dance among the natives, to the throbbing of tomtoms!"

Farradyne led her towards the door. The hellflower she wore in her hair would do as much to her in a crowded nightery as it would if she were forced to spend the next four hours in a closed telephone booth. He wondered briefly whether he really wanted the damned thing to work; he would much prefer to have her come to him without it--

The he forced himself to remember that she wore this hellflower not because of his frustrated lust, but because he wanted Carolyn, alive and vivid and charming, to change into the lifeless and futureless woman that Norma Hannon was.

Their evening was a repetition of the evening on Mercury, except that on Terra it was dark outside. They danced, and there was a steak dinner at midnight, and there was Carolyn relaxed in his arms in the taxicab on the way back to her hotel.

He took her up to her room and she handed him her key. They went in, and Carolyn came into his arms again, soft and sweet. When he kissed her, her response was deep and passionate in a mature sort of way that Farradyne was not prepared for. It was not the mindless lust he had expected. The woman in his arms was all woman and there could be no mistaking the fact--but there was also the mysterious ability of the woman to know when to call a halt at the proper height of the lovemaking. She smiled a little, and put her hand on his chest.

"It's been wonderful again, Charles," she said quietly.

Farradyne rubbed his chin against the top of her head. Then Carolyn swirled out of his arms. "It's incredibly late again, too," she told him. "I'm going to come aboard your ship at seven tomorrow night so we can take off before the crack of dawn. This much I'll tell you and no more, now."

"But--"

"Easy, sweetheart, easy. Take it slow and lovely. Tomorrow night. Tonight I need my beauty sleep."

He eyed her, saying nothing, and she laughed happily. "Charles, do me a favor. Put this gardenia in the icebox for me. I'd like to wear it for you tomorrow. Please?"

Farradyne nodded. Dumbly he nodded. Had that character bilked him out of fifty dollars for a gardenia by calling it a love lotus? He watched Carolyn put the thing into its plastic box, he watched her tie it up in its original ribbon. She handed it to him, and then came into his arms again for one last caress.

"Go," she told him with a wistful smile after she let him out of her arms. "Go and dream about tomorrow night."

He went, half-propelled by her hands, his reluctance partly honest and partly curious. But he went.

* * *

Farradyne walked into his spacer feeling like a man who had put his last dollar on the turn of a card and lost. One moment he was on top of the world with everything going according to plan; the next, his world was kicked out from under him and he was dropped back into the mire of fumbling, helpless ignorance.

When he entered the salon of the Lancaster he stopped short, because the last peg had been pulled out of the creaky ladder of his success.

"What's the matter, Farradyne? Aren't you glad to see me?"

There was plenty the matter and he was not glad to see her. But she sat there as though she had every right to bedevil his life. Her eyes widened a bit and she came up out of her chair and towards him. "Farradyne," she said with more eagerness in her voice than he had ever heard before, "you've brought me a love lotus!"

Norma lifted the flower from its nest in the box, eyed it with relish, and then buried her nose deep in the center of the blossom and inhaled with a deep, shuddering sob. Her eyes closed, then opened slowly to look up at Farradyne from beneath half-closed lids.

Then, oddly, she relaxed. The tension went out of her body and she sank back against the cushions. Now Farradyne could see her face more clearly. Her features had lost their chiseled immobility and her eyes had lost the glassy stare. Her face became alive and mobile, and pleasant color flooded it. Her lips parted slightly and curved into normal lines.

The hand that held the flower lay idly on the seat beside her, the other hand lay palm up on the other side. She looked like a young girl that has just been kissed.

"Thanks, Farradyne," she said softly. She looked up at him with a mixture of impishness and friendliness. "You're a sort of nice guy, Farr--no, Charles. Probably a big lumbering bumble-puppy that doesn't really mean any harm."

Farradyne's mind at first refused to work on any but the single thought: Why didn't it work on Carolyn? Then he wondered whether Norma, so obviously normal now, would react to any gesture of affection, and absently he took a step towards her. He felt once again that flush of pity for her, and anger for the rotten devils who had done this to her; he wanted to comfort her. She had changed visibly from a hardened, lackluster woman whose beauty was stiff and unnatural, to a girl whose loveliness was vivid enough to shine through the hard facade of heavy makeup.

"Norma," he said.

She smiled at him warmly but shook her head. Her arms raised as she tucked the love lotus in the heavy hair over one ear. The gesture slimmed her waist and raised her breasts, and through the triangle of her arms he could see her eyes. They were sultry, but they rejected him as she shook her head slowly.

"No," she said, and Farradyne stopped. "You're a nice sort of idiot, Charles, and I've stopped hating you for the moment, but that doesn't mean that I want you to make love to me." The smell of the love lotus, identical to the heady perfume of a gardenia, permeated the room. Norma breathed it in, lifting her face as she inhaled and closing her eyes. "The smell of this is all I want."

She put her head back, and rested. A smile crossed her face, and Farradyne realized that she had dozed off in an ecstasy of relaxation. He wondered what to do next; his mind was torn between the desire to protect her by letting her sleep off the effects of the love lotus, and the certain knowledge that if he did, Norma would never leave him in time for his meeting with Carolyn Niles tomorrow night. And of the two, the latter was by far the more important.

XVIII

As Farradyne stood wondering what to do, a knuckle-on-metal rap came at the spacelock entrance and he turned to see Howard Clevis coming in. Clevis said nothing, for he had caught sight of Norma. He stopped stock still and looked her over from hair to heels. His face grew bitter and hard, and he turned away from her to face Farradyne.

"Farradyne, this isn't the contact you've managed to make?" The tone was heavy with scorn.

Farradyne shook his head sourly. "She's the one that got me started," he said. "But--"

"You've started," snapped Clevis angrily. "That's a real hellflower she's doping, you know."

"For God's sake listen!" yelled Farradyne.

"You listen to me!" yelled Clevis, louder than Farradyne.

Their voices rang up and down the corridors of the ship and Norma's eyes opened. She looked happily at Farradyne, but when she saw Clevis her eyes clouded.

"Howard," she said quietly.

"Why did you run away, Norma? Your folks--"

She shook her head slowly. "I know," she said. "There's even a reward out for me that Farradyne tried to collect. I couldn't sit around and watch my mother and father eating their hearts out. A son killed and a daughter ruined--both by hellflowers. So here I am again. For their sakes I wish I were dead--but that wouldn't

cut the hide of a hellflower operator, would it, Howard?" Farradyne gulped.

Norma went on: "Charles, may I have my old room for the night? I gather that you two would like to talk business."

After she had gone, Farradyne said, "So you know her?"

"I knew her brother rather well," said Clevis quietly, "and I've known Norma for some time. I knew her before--before--" He shook his head as if to shake the thought away. "I gather that she thinks you are a hellflower runner."

"That's right. But what does she think you are?"

"She thinks I'm a stockbroker. A former client of Frank Hannon's. Where did you pick her up?"

Farradyne explained how Norma had announced his connection with the hellflower racket, and how Cahill had been killed; how he had been picked up by Carolyn Niles, and the subsequent sabotage by Edwin Brenner, and all the rest of it. At the end he spread out his hands and said, "This isn't all hard work and good management, Clevis. But here I am. And now I have a couple of questions that I'd like answered."

"Yes?"

"Carolyn Niles wore that hellflower for six or seven hours without turning a corpuscle. Norma Hannon proved that it was no gardenia. There's something fishy here, Clevis. Does medical history indicate any immunes to the love lotus?"

"Some. Not many. A few doctors have even gone so far as to claim that the hellflower is no more dangerous than tobacco."

Farradyne swore. "Not according to Norma Hannon it isn't," he said harshly.

* * *

Clevis eyed Farradyne carefully. "You're not a bit soft-headed over Norma Hannon, are you?"

"I doubt it," said Farradyne honestly. "She's a poor kid that got clipped, and it makes my blood boil. I want to bundle her up in my arms and tell her that it'll be all right, and I want to go out and

rap a half-dozen scum-brained heads together for what they did to her. Normal, she'd be the kind of woman I could fall in love with, and I'm not denying it. But Norma Hannon is a real blank, and any man that married her would end up by trying to make her normal, and then what? Y'know, if you doped up enough women with hellflowers, the birth-rate would take a decline that would alarm a concrete statue."

"That's a hard thing to think about," nodded Clevis.

"Of course, I've never seen a woman just after she has taken her first sniff, so I don't know how long after it a woman's libido is still capable of being excited. But by the time they get to Norma's state, a love lotus only changes their scar-tissued emotional system to something barely normal whose only desire is to sniff the flower." Farradyne shook his head angrily. After a few moments' thought he went on, "Anyway, you might have a couple of ships follow me day-after-tomorrow morning. We're going out somewhere--destination unknown--to make a rendezvous with someone high-up in the business, I think. And no matter what, Clevis, I think it wise for your fellows to keep on my trail, because at least one faction of their gang is out to clip me hard. Sooner or later they'll be sending someone of large proportions to clobber me and then I'd like to have your gang move in fast."

"There's more to it than that," suggested Clevis.

"Well--"

"Go on."

"All right, I will. Remember the cock-and-bull story that nobody believed?"

"The three people in the control room of the Semiramide?"

"That. Well, Clevis, now I know that there was only one person in the control room."

"Oh? Look, Farradyne, you're not trying--"

"No, I'm not. This came by accident. I've heard the same kind of three-voiced cries--once when Cahill died, once when Brenner caught sight of Norma Hannon in bright sunlight. I've

been wondering since whether it might be some sort of concocted language."

"Granting that for a moment, just how would you use such a language?"

* * *

Farradyne eyed Clevis thoughtfully before he spoke. "I couldn't," he said. "You'd have to take some statement like 'I've been shot!' and break it down to utter the 'I've' in the upper register, the 'been' in the middle tones, and the 'shot' in the bass region."

"Make talking fast--but difficult."

"Make it impossible," said Farradyne pointedly, "for a human being with normal vocal chords."

"What are you trying to say?"

"Maybe it's another race, Clevis."

"A what?" exploded Clevis.

"Item: Carolyn Niles is immune to hellflower. Item: Brenner is immune to marcoleptine. Correlation: they're both hellflower operators."

"Based on a grunt and a cry and an exclamation ... you're asking a lot of me, although we've spent years following less tangible evidence than this."

"I'll add one more item. Where do hellflowers come from?"

"We don't know."

"But you have combed the system for them?"

"Hell, yes--but there are a lot of places that have never been explored. We can't cover all of them. So what's the next step?"

"Taking off with Carolyn Niles. During the next few days I'm going to startle her, and I hope she grunts in three notes. Then I'll have a nice tie-up."

"How so?"

"She has a hellflower-operator background. She'll have a three-noted cry. And she's immune to the damnable flowers her gang deals in."

"Okay, that's your game, Farradyne. But in the meantime what are you going to do about Norma?"

Farradyne eyed Clevis carefully. "You're going to drive her off in your car," he said. "Because one of the games I'm playing is nosey-nosey with Carolyn Niles, and there's going to be no addict cluttering up my spacer. Norma is a bundle of trouble when she's not relaxed with a snoot full of love lotus. She could louse-up the deal for fair if she stayed."

"But what do I do with her?"

Farradyne shrugged. "Take her to a sanatorium," he said. "That'll keep her out of everybody's hair, especially mine."

Clevis scowled. "I hate to put her in a sanatorium."

"What else can you do?" asked Farradyne, spreading his hands.

"Not much; but I feel that I owe her more than that kind of handling. Those sanatoriums are little better than jails, you know."

"So I've heard. But what can you do for people cursed with a disease that nobody knows how to cure?"

"Segregate 'em," sighed Clevis. "Well, let's see what we can do about carting her out of the ship and into my car. About the ships--you'll be followed at extreme military radar range, Farradyne. I won't be there, but you'll have very hard-boiled company watching you."

They went below and found Norma. She was sleeping, relaxed as a kitten, with one leg drawn up to uncover the other shapely leg. Her hands were outstretched over her head, her breathing regular and normal. The hellflower still cast its heady perfume through the room, and Norma was smiling in her sleep, probably dreaming some completely normal woman-type dream.

Farradyne plucked the flower from her hair. "This I'll need," he said quietly. Clevis nodded.

Farradyne stooped down, but Clevis waved him away. "I'll carry her." The Sandman picked Norma up gently. She sleepily protested, but put her arms around Clevis' neck and let herself be carried from the salon.

Watching from the port, Farradyne saw them leave. They looked like a happy party-couple, leaving after too many cocktails, with the girl dozing on her man's shoulder.

Farradyne grinned sourly and shrugged. Clevis had bought himself a bundle of trouble. When Norma really awakened, she would be without her love lotus and would be back to her former self. She would pick Clevis as a target for the only emotion she could really feel. Norma would hate Clevis for taking her away from the man she could really hate in spades. Redoubled. Farradyne shrugged again and went to bed.

* * *

Carolyn came aboard the next evening and her first request was for her "gardenia." She put it in her hair and stood there inviting Farradyne with her eyes. He kissed her briefly and waved her to a seat.

"Tired of me, Charles?"

"I've had no time to get used to you, let alone tired of you," he told her. "But I'm more than a trifle curious about this trip we'll be taking in the morning."

"Why not let it wait until then?"

Farradyne looked at her boldly, made no attempt to hide his careful appraisal of her figure and her face. She accepted his brazen eyeing, although she colored a bit. At last he said, "Let's admit it--there's nothing I'd rather do than spend the night making love. It's one of my favorite indoor sports. It's fun outdoors, too. But there are at least two things against it."

She frowned.

He smiled. "You've made affectionate noises, but also a few statements regarding your previous affections that lead me to believe you would not applaud me if I slung you over one shoulder and carried you down to your stateroom for a spot of seduction. Second, the way to get ahead is to marry the boss' daughter, not make a mistress of her. Gentlemen do not take kindly to daughters' lovers. So we've got to think of something like chess or tid-

dledy-winks for the next few hours, because I haven't enough ice in these hardened arteries to keep my hands off you otherwise."

She leaned back and laughed. "That's the nicest compliment I've ever had--in a backhanded way," she said.

"Then behave, Carolyn. Turn off the lure unless you really want the man you're luring."

The laugh was still in her voice when she asked, "But how can I behave myself when you've given me a love lotus, Charles?"

Farradyne's mind raced in a tight circle. He cursed his impulse to find out whether Carolyn were immune, because it had now led him into the problem of trying to square it with his role of a young and ambitious man who felt deep regard for her. He parried for time:

"Love lotus?"

"A real one."

"But you--I--you wore it all last night! It can't be."

"It is."

Farradyne felt almost certain that Carolyn did not know of Norma's visit, which had verified the hellflower's potency. "How can you tell?" he asked blankly. "You did not react, and I--"

"I'm immune," she said flatly. "Why did you give it to me, Charles?"

"I bought it for a gardenia, Carolyn. Hell, I can't tell 'em apart."

"It's a genuine love lotus. How much did you pay for it?"

Farradyne almost felt a glow of cheer. He fumbled in his pocket and came up with the cash register receipt. "The usual five dollars," he said.

"Someone must have been trying to start another addict," she said in a hard tone.

He looked at her. "But why did you wear it?" he asked.

"I wore it because I know I'm immune and I wanted to see how you reacted. If it was for the usual reason, I was going to lead you on and then send you packing." She looked up at him shyly. "I didn't want it to be for the usual reason, Charles, but I was confused."

"But how do you tell them apart?"

"That I'll not tell you until tomorrow."

Farradyne shrugged. "Okay," he said, taking the love lotus out of her hair and tossing it down the disposal chute. "So what'll it be? Chess, or tiddledy-winks?"

"Astronomy," she said with a smile. "We can see no stars from where I live on Mercury, you know."

He followed her up to the control room and stood behind her as she peered through the spotting telescope. She leaned back against him and rubbed her cheek against his chin.

"None of that, woman," he said sternly.

She turned in his arms and melted against him. He held her close for a bit and then turned her around again to the telescope. "Remember my creaking blood pressure, Carolyn."

Astronomy is a pleasant hobby. It took Farradyne's mind away from the problem at hand, although the problem was inclined to lean back in his arms frequently while he was readjusting the setting wheels; or to rub his ear with her chin while he squinted through the finder to locate another celestial view.

At midnight, Farradyne showed her to her stateroom--and kissed her good night at the door.

He went to bed congratulating himself that he had succeeded in playing the tender, high-minded, thoughtful lover.

* * *

At six a.m., Farradyne checked out for space, still wondering where they were going. Tower signed him off with a few crude remarks about damned yawning people in the morning, and cited himself as a man finishing a hard night's work. Then contact was closed and Farradyne was free of the board.

He had two choices.

He could either wake her up because he wanted to be near her, or he could let her sleep because he did not want to disturb her. He chose the second and went down to the galley and had a

heavy breakfast. Afterwards he loafed in the salon, trying to plan his future.

She appeared about ten o'clock and reproached him for not calling her. Then she asked, "Where are we?"

"About a half million miles out," he said after a moment's thought. "But the important thing is that we're on our way but your pilot doesn't know where he's going."

"Can you strike a line between Terra and Polaris at a distance of three hundred million miles?"

"Duck soup," replied Farradyne. "But how fast?"

"Zero with respect to Terra at three hundred million."

"Let's go up and start computing," he suggested. "I'll construct you some grub after we get the first approximation and get the ship on the preliminary correction course."

He led her up to the course computer in the control room, where she added the time of rendezvous to the rest of the figures. He plunked at the keyboard steadily for a minute, then sat back while the calculator machine went through the program of arithmetical operations for which it was designed. He took the punched paper strip from the machine and fed it into the autopilot, and then said, "Now we'll go below and eat."

"You haven't been waiting for me, have you?"

He nodded, hoping that he looked a bit lovesick.

"You shouldn't have."

She led him below and eyed the dirty dishes with womanly amusement. "You're a sweet sort of liar, Charles," she said, turning and coming into his arms.

He returned her kiss, thinking: "*these are the dames that try men's souls*."

XIX

Carolyn's eyes were fastened on the telescope. There was a tiny signal-pip at extreme range on the long-range radar that controlled the telescope, but the object was still too far away. The

range was closing slowly; they would meet somewhere out there three hundred million miles above Terra to the astronomical North.

Farradyne knew his instruments and his attention was therefore free to think of other matters. Very quietly he slipped a long fluorescent lamp from its terminals and stood it carefully on one end beside him. He balanced it exactly, and then took a couple of silent steps toward Carolyn before the tube lost its balance and fell to the floor with an ear-shattering explosion.

Carolyn Niles reacted like a person stabbed with a red-hot spear. Every muscle in her body tensed and she stood there for a full ten seconds as stiff as a figure of concrete, while the shock gripped her. Then, as she realized there was no real danger, Farradyne could see the relaxation of her body taking place, almost inch by inch. Her breasts began to fall in a shuddering exhalation. She made a wordless sound of relief--*and her voice was a quavering trill in three lilting tones*.

Farradyne's attention snapped into full awareness and he felt the thrill of exultation run through him.

Carolyn relaxed against a brace, holding one hand under her left breast and breathing heavily. "What on earth--?"

"Lamp fell out of its moorings," said Farradyne. "My fault. That's one of the pre-flight check-ups that I didn't have time to take this morning. Stay where you are and I'll clean up this mess of broken glassware."

"Do you mind if I sit down?"

"Park yourself in the pilot's seat," he said. "But be careful. Broken fluorescent tubing can be dangerous."

She nodded, and picked her way through the glass to the pilot's chair. She looked up at him and said, "You don't seem to have been startled at all."

"I had a few millionths of a second to get my nerves in readiness," he said. "I saw it come down." He laughed. "Someone told me once that when a person is excited he reverts to his native tongue."

Her eyes widened and her mouth started to open, but Farradyne went on talking as though he hadn't noticed. "I didn't think your native tongue was Upper Banshee!"

* * *

Her eyes half-closed and her mouth snapped from slackness back to self-control. "What did I say?" she asked.

"It sounded like 'I am slain to pieces,' but I don't know Upper Banshee very well."

"You're making fun of me," she complained.

"No, I'm not. Anybody can be scared right out of his skin when something like that happens."

"All right," she said, and her eyes were cold. "So you're not making fun of me. You've been playing a very serious game with me, haven't you?"

Farradyne blinked. "What makes you think--?"

"Let's drop our masks, Charles."

"Masks? Look, Carolyn, I'd better clean up this glass."

"Sweep it up, then. But while you're cleaning up the mess we'll talk seriously."

"About what?" He got a brush from the locker and a square of cardboard from the bottom of a ream of paper, and started to collect the debris.

"What do you know about our language?"

"Damned little," Farradyne said bluntly, all pretense gone. Suddenly he was trembling with rage that wanted release. "Frankly, I've had only a suspicion, up to this moment."

"So I gave it away myself?"

"Yes, damn you--you gave it away!"

"What do you want of me?"

"What do I want of anybody?" he whispered in a voice that was almost lost in cold fury. "I had four brutal years clipped out of my life by a three-voiced party-unknown who wanted to commit suicide bad enough to take thirty-three innocent victims along with her. They blamed it on Hot-Rock Farradyne, the spur-wearing

spaceman." His voice came back, and he was half-roaring. "I've seen the results of love lotus! A wrecked personality that might have been a brilliant and gracious woman. I've seen a man plugged through the middle, to die at my feet. And on top of that, I've seen a family prosper and calmly make its place in society by dealing in the stinking things that bring ruin and death! What do I want of you? Your lovely, flawless hide peeled alive and spread out before a fireplace!"

She shrank from him; looked wildly at the stairway and then back into his face as she realized there was not a place in the spacecraft where she could hide.

He sneered at her fear. "I'm not going to commit violence on you," he said. "It would only give you pleasure to know that violence was my last resort." He looked at her closely. "What kind of person are you, anyway?"

Carolyn drew herself together; somehow her self-confidence had returned. "Why take your hatred out on me?" she asked.

"You?" he asked harshly. "Why shouldn't I? How in hell should I know what slinky game you're playing? One of your kind was responsible for the Semiramide affair, but who's to prove it? Am I the character that started tossing the con-rods out of the Lancaster? What was your former boy-friend doing on my ship? Setting me up for another kiss-off? Hell, woman, you'll be asking me next not to take these things personally!"

"You shouldn't. They're the fortunes of war."

Farradyne roared, so loud that his voice echoed and re-echoed up and down the ship: "Fortunes of war be god-damned!"

Then he stopped suddenly and looked at her again. "War?" he asked. "Between who and whom or between what, and where?"

When she did not answer, he sat down and put one hand to his head. Carolyn started to say, "Charles--" but he looked up and said, "Shut the hell up and let me think!"

"But I--"

"You don't want me to think?" snapped Farradyne. "Shut up or I'll slap you shut!"

* * *

He had enough evidence to make a shrewd guess if he could only sort out the hodge-podge, and hang the material end to end. Some of it had to do with combined suicide and wanton mass-murder in a wrecked spacecraft. There were the Niles, who probably went to church on Sunday, belonged to the Chamber of Commerce and the Ladies' Aid, and considered running hellflowers a proper business. And daughter Carolyn, who wanted marriage and a bunch of kids to bring up into the same hellish business run so well by their grandfather.

And something important hinged around this triple-toned voice, which now had been proven more than a hasty impression under stress and excitement. Women who were immune to the solar system's most devastating narcotic, and used their immunity to deal in the things with safety, were bringing ruin to other women. It was a form of warfare, and indicated an organization large and well-integrated; capable of outmaneuvering capable men who had dedicated their lives to stamping out the racket--and who died under the juggernaut instead of destroying it.

Well, there it was.

No, there was more to be added. Brenner, who had tried to remove the control rods of the reaction-pile, and who was immune to marcoleptine. That was an odd-shaped piece of the jigsaw puzzle that suddenly dropped into place with a click.

Farradyne tried to put himself in the position of Professor Martin, who might have been a survivor if the Lancaster had foundered. Martin might ask why someone had tried to kill him--just as Farradyne had often asked himself why Party X had tried to kill Farradyne in the Semiramide. The answer was that Martin would have been an innocent victim in the second episode just as Farradyne had been in the first. Party X had wrecked the Semiramide because there was someone aboard with dangerous knowledge!

Farradyne came to one decision: there was a coldly-operating group of persons who were themselves immune to drugs, and who were efficiently undermining the rest of the human race by preying on weakness, lust, and escapist factors that lie somewhere near the surface in the strongest of human characters.

He raised his head and looked at Carolyn Niles.

She faced him squarely and asked, "Have you got it figured out?"

"I think so," he said coldly. "There are a couple of gaps yet which you can fill in."

Carolyn shook her head in a superior manner. "You didn't just *discover* this thing, you know," she said calmly. "You were shown most of it deliberately."

"Indeed?" His voice was sarcastic.

"We knew that someone high up and undercover had furnished you with a spacecraft and a forged license, hoping that your reputation would establish you as a racketeer. He used you efficiently, and so we merely used you more efficiently. There are two ends to a fishline, Charles, and we caught Howard Clevis on the wrong end of the line, so to speak. We also--"

"You caught Clevis?"

"As soon as we knew who your contact was we pulled him in. So if you're expecting a flight of military spacecraft to come racing up in time to intercept the rendezvous ship out there, forget it. The military is still on the landing blocks at the spaceport."

* * *

Farradyne whirled and peered into the radar. The single pip was close and closing the range swiftly, but there was nothing else on the 'scope. It was a huge ship, if the size of the radar response meant anything, and Farradyne peered into the coupled telescope.

Nothing like it could ever have been built in secret anywhere among the habitable planets of the solar system. The size of it was such that the purchase of the metal alone would have cre-

ated some notice, and the rest of the project would require the resources of a planet to feed it and the men that built it.

Farradyne turned away from the telescope.

"Baby, what a sucker you played me for!" he jeered. "So I was to be your lover, your husband? Together, hand in hand, we go to cement the first interstellar union. The mating of a jackass and a triple-tongued canary, that the fruit of such union will be half-ass and bird-brained! Well, if it's war your gang wants, we'll give it to 'em!"

Farradyne strode across the room toward the controls, and as he came, Carolyn's hand moved swiftly, catching up the microphone and bringing it to her mouth. She cried a singy-songy rhythm into the mike. It reminded Farradyne of an exotic trio chanting a ritual celebration.

He slapped the microphone out of her hand. It hurtled out to the end of its cord and jerked free, crashing against the far wall and leaving the cord-ends dangling open like a raw sore.

He caught her by the hair and lifted her out of the seat and hurled her across the room. She fell and went rolling in a tumble of arms and legs until she came up hard against the wall beside the microphone. She scooped it up and hurled it at Farradyne's head; he caught it in one hand and dropped it to the floor.

He dropped into the seat and hit the levers with both hands. The Lancaster surged upwards, throwing Carolyn back to the floor in a painful heap. The acceleration rose to three gravities and then to four.

"This trick we take," he gloated.

Carolyn moaned; it sounded like attempted laughter.

He looked into the radarscope and saw that despite his four gravities of acceleration the monstrous spacecraft was matching him and closing the range.

XX

Farradyne watched Carolyn uncaringly as she fought herself out of her crumpled position and succeeded in flopping over on her back. She spread-eagled on the floor, and her chest labored a bit with the effort.

"Forget it--Charles--" she said with some difficulty. "You can't--run away from a ship--that can go--faster than light."

"I can try."

"You can't--win."

The radio speaker came alive: "Surrender, Farradyne! Stop and submit or we fire!"

Farradyne fought the controls so that the ship slued sidewise, putting another vector in its course. He twirled the volume knob to zero on the radio with a violent twist of his wrist.

"They're your friends, but they don't mind killing you," he sneered.

"I'm not--afraid to--die."

"I am," grunted Farradyne. "I have some dope that I don't want to die without telling."

His hands danced on the levers and the Lancaster turned end for end and sped back at the huge spacecraft almost on a sideswiping course. Out here intrinsic velocity meant nothing; the only thing that counted was the Lancaster's velocity with respect to the velocity of the enemy spacecraft. He had the advantage of surprise. He could go where he pleased and the other pilot must follow him; and since Farradyne's changes of pace and course would come without warning, each switch would take a few fractions of a second to follow. On land a few fractions of a second mean nothing; in space they mean miles. On land a quartering flight meant closing of the range; in space where the pursuit could not dig a heel into the ground, quartering flight meant adding another vector to the course.

He widened the gap.

On the third pass, Farradyne realized that the interstellar drive of the enemy ship must be some unknown 'all-or-nothing' device, or force field, or something that demanded that ordinary interplanetary maneuvering be done without the superdrive; and that once the gadget was turned on, the enemy ship would dart into the next galactic sector in a wink of the eye.

So long as he could dodge more agilely because of his smaller mass, they could not catch him. They wanted him alive, naturally, and his only danger was in the final escape. Then he would have to dodge the target-seeking missiles they would launch at him under several hundred gravities, capable of turning in midflight if he succeeded in ducking the first pass.

He wished desperately for a cargo of bowling balls or steel castings that he could have strewn in his wake. He cursed his lack of foresight in not having the spare control rods replaced, because a few of them might do the trick.

Farradyne stopped cursing.

Recollection of Brenner and the depredations in the pile-bay had started a train of thought that he followed with growing interest. It was long and it was involved, and it depended upon a large amount of luck, good planning, and ability.

He struggled to the computer and played a long tune on the keys, ignoring the fact that the huge spacecraft had finally lined up on his course from behind and was closing the range.

The Lancaster made one more complex turn as the end of the punched tape entered the autopilot. If Farradyne's computations were correct, the Lancaster's nose was now pointed at Terra. The spaceliner behind made a swinging turn and began to pick up the space it had lost.

* * *

Farradyne saw he had plenty of time. He waited until the punchings on the tape cut the drive a bit, then went below and came back into the control room with Brenner's space suit. He got out patching material and carefully repaired the triangular

rip. Then he set about checking it, testing the air supply and purifier, filling the food pouch and the water tank. Men had been known to last seventy-two hours in a suit like this without any discomfort other than the confinement; the primary danger was running out of oxygen and the secondary danger was water starvation.

When the suit was checked to Farradyne's satisfaction he took time out for a last cigarette. He lit one and puffed before he spoke. "Honey-child, I could outguess that gang of yours until Sol freezes over. But sooner or later they'll get tired of the chase and end it by launching a target-seeking missile, and that will be that. I have no intention of sitting here and waiting for it."

"So what are you going to do?"

Farradyne reached up and stopped the clock. "I've punched a very interesting autopilot tape. It'll dodge and swoop along at about four gravities in the cockeyedest course, and lead your pals a long and devious way from where you and I part company. Four gee is heavy enough to keep you flat, so you can't louse it up. You can't measure time too accurately, so when they grab you you won't be able to tell 'em just when I took off. They'll have a fine old time combing space for a man-sized mote, making his course to Terra."

"Charles--?"

Farradyne snubbed his cigarette out and dropped on his knees so that he could look down into her face. "You've pitched me many a low, soft curve to the inside," he told her quietly. "This is one battle you lose, I think. So we'll meet again to take it up later."

He bent down with a cynical smile and kissed her on the lips. To his surprise he found them responsive.

"So long, Carolyn," he chuckled. "Some of this has been a lot of fun!"

He donned the space suit and with a careless wave of his hand went down the stairs. She was not looking at him, but at the ruined microphone and the radio equipment far out of her reach.

Panic showed in her face and gave her some strength, but not enough to fight the four gravities that held her flat.

Then as Farradyne lost sight of her, his jaunty self-confidence faded. He was far from the bright character he had portrayed. Up until not-too-long-ago, Farradyne had been complimenting himself on being able to find out more about the hellflower operations than the Sandmen, and it had not occurred to him that there was a reason for it. Now he knew. It became obvious that fighting a gang of cutthroats, and fighting an enemy race of intelligent people, were two different things. About as different as Farradyne was from the brilliant operator he had begun to think he was.

It required that he change his plans for escape. He knew that he could flee the big ship and have a good chance of being picked up by a Space Guard scooter as soon as he could get within calling-distance of Luna. But the chances were just as high that the hellflower people would have their entire undercover outfit alerted, and at the first radio call would be swarming the neighborhood to pick him up.

He paused by the spacelock and cracked the big portal, thoughtfully eyeing the huge starship, a tiny dot far below, visible only because of its reaction-flare. Then he closed the lock and went down and down in the Lancaster until he found the lowermost inspection cubby. He crawled in, closed the inspection hatch behind him, and settled down to wait.

* * *

Time creaked past, and the Lancaster turned and curved according to the punchings on the autopilot tape. Farradyne had only one prayer, now: that the enemy ship would not get tired of the chase and fire a target-seeking missile, ending the whole game with a wave of intolerable heat and indescribably bright light. Carolyn's presence aboard the Lancaster might prevent that until the last moment.

The hour-period ended with the Lancaster pointing up on a quartering course from Terra and Sol--a long way from the point of his supposed escape. Not long after that, Farradyne heard the clink of magnetic grapples.

He tensed again. Would they fine-comb the Lancaster? Or would the question-and-answer session with Carolyn convince them that he had abandoned ship? If so, would they take her off and blast the Lanc' or would they deem it of value and keep it?

His mind went on with unanswerable questions: how good was their radar? How alert was their radar operator? Were both good enough to state unequivocably that there had been no object leaving the Lancaster on a tangential course? Or would there have been the usual clutter of noise and interference, so that no one would doubt that he had left the ship? And, assuming that the enemy considered a spacecraft valuable, where would they take it and what would they do with it?

Far from feeling gratified at his maneuver, Farradyne felt only satisfied to be alive and temporarily out of the hands of the enemy. What happened from here on in must be played by ear against an unknown score for three voices.

The drive of the Lancaster dropped from four gravities to about one, and Farradyne could hear dimly the clumpings of heavy feet. Then the drive diminished again, remaining at about a quarter-gravity or maybe less, and there were sounds of feet above his head. He tasted the acid in his mouth; he found his heavy automatic and clutched it clumsily in the heavy space-glove and prepared to give back whatever they gave him. Capture might be preferable to death--but Farradyne had every right to believe that the enemy could not permit him to stay alive with what he knew about them, even though it was precious little.

The cubby he was hiding in was annularly shaped; to one side was space beyond the hull-plates. Inside was the water-jacket that cooled the throat of the reaction motor. Farradyne moved quietly around the central pillar until he was on the opposite side from the inspection hatch and settled down to wait.

On the plates above his head was the scraping of something heavy being hauled across the deck.

He heard the sound of triple-toned voices in both musical and discordant sounds, distorted and muffled by the deck and by the helmet he wore. Someone fiddled with the inspection hatch; and Farradyne found the scuttlebutt and valved air out into space so the enemy would have a hard time cracking the hatch. Whoever it was gave up after a moment; and then came the sound of drilling on the deck-plates above him. A cloud of whitish vapor spurted downward and the sound of alien voices rose sharply as the drill came through. Three more spurts of escaping air blasted downward in whitish vapor that skirled around the annular room and went in a fading draw towards the scuttlebutt.

Plugs filled the four holes and Farradyne turned his head-torch on them. They were heavy self-tapping bolts being turned in from above. There was a softer sound of scraping, and the clumping of feet; then the sound of men at work faded away.

Farradyne took a deep breath and realized that his skin was itching from the cold perspiration that bathed him. The taste in his mouth was brackish; his heart was pounding and his breath was shallow and rapid. He opened his mouth to gasp and discovered that he had been clenching his teeth so hard that his jaw ached.

He closed the scuttlebutt, but did not valve any air into his hiding place. He put the top of his helmet against the deck-plates above him and listened. Far above he could hear them, still at work; but they were going higher and higher in the ship.

He relaxed, waiting.

Three more hours passed, as nerve-wracking as any Farradyne had ever spent. Then, with absolutely no warning, the drive went off completely. He floated from the deck and scrabbled around to grab a stanchion, finally getting his magnetic shoes against a girder where they held him at an odd angle.

The drive went on to a full one-gravity and hurled Farradyne flat against the bottom of the cubby, wrenching his ankles

slightly. The drive went off again, and then on, and finally off. This time it stayed off.

Floating free, with only his feet for mooring, was like resting in a tub of body-temperature water; and as the lulling, muscle-freeing sensation went on and on, Farradyne's mind lulled and he dozed. From the doze, he dropped off into a deep slumber.

XXI

Farradyne awoke to the pressure of about one-gravity and began to wonder how far the Lancaster had carried him under its jury-rigged drive. His watch said that fourteen hours had passed since weightlessness had come, but this was no good for an estimate of distance.

The whole thing was incomprehensible to him. Interstellar travel in a matter of hours made his mind reel, and the idea of installing a gadget that made it possible with the ease of installing a radio in an automobile only added to the inconsistencies. All he could grasp of it was that the gadget the alien race had must be some sort of force-field generator that worked independently of the basic reaction motor and therefore could be turned off or on at will. He gave up trying to theorize and began to consider the more personal problem of his location and what he could do.

He cracked the scuttlebutt and found that the ship was a-planet. He listened and heard nothing, not even the familiar sounds of a ship in warm-up. He cracked the hatch of his cubby and looked out. The small corridor was as dark as the grave, and as silent. Boldly he stepped out and looked around under the light of his spacesuit torch.

Bolted to the floor were four rectangular boxes of metal connected together by a heavy cable, and from one a second cable ran to a standard connector set in the wall of the Lancaster.

Like all other Solarian spacecraft, the Lancaster was well-supplied with a network of cables running up and down the length of the ship to serve as test connections and spares for this or that

equipment when needed. So the enemy had re-connected their multi-line cable to one of the standard Terran connectors and plugged the cable into the Lancaster's cable-plate.

Farradyne could see nothing about the metal boxes that would tell him anything, so he left them and went aloft, cautiously. He doffed the spacesuit at the next level and hung it neatly in a suit locker, before he continued up the stairways.

Out of one porthole he could see the spaceport. It was broad and dark except for a bouquet of searchlights that drilled into the sky around the rim, a wash of floodlamps that surrounded one of the vast starships a mile or so distant, and the far-off blurs of bright red light that probably read "Spaceman's Bar" in whatever the enemy used for a printed language.

He left the viewport and went higher until he came to the salon. He peered into it from floor level, but it was dark and untenanted. The spacelock was open and Farradyne looked out of the big round opening across the field to another huge starship standing a few hundred yards from the Lancaster. The other ship was as dark as the Lancaster, except for one small porthole that gleamed like a headlight in the darkness.

The problem of where he was sent him to the control room. He looked into the sky, hunting for familiar constellations. The Pleiades were there, but warped, and Farradyne found that while he knew they were distorted as an aggregation of stellar positions, he could not remember their proper relationship. Orion was visible, but the hero had hiked his belt up. The Great Bear was sitting on his haunches, and the Smaller Bear had lost his front feet. Sirius no longer blazed in Canis Major. Procyon had taken off for parts unknown, while several other bright stars dotted the skies in places where no stars had been on Terra.

He tried to recall visits to the big stellatarium in New York where the lecturer displayed the skies as seen from various well-known stars that were within a half-hundred light years of Sol; but he found that he evidently had not been as attentive as he might have been.

* * *

Finally he gave up hoping to establish his whereabouts by visual inspection, and took his first look at the control room. He could see nothing changed at first; then he found a small auxiliary panel beside the pilot's seat, which contained a bar-topped toggle switch and three pilot lamps quite different in appearance from the rest of the Lancaster's standard equipment. He felt an urge to try the toggle, but fought it down; it was too much like playing with toy building blocks made of subcritical masses of plutonium, and Farradyne wanted to stay alive long enough to *watch* the ruin of the enemy, not become a part of it.

He got his 20-power binoculars from the locker and went down to the spacelock. The near-by starship was as abandoned as the Lancaster, except for that one bright porthole. Through it he could see nothing but one corner of wall and ceiling.

A sudden flash of light made Farradyne drop to the floor of the salon and wriggle forward cautiously to the edge of the door.

A vehicle of some sort had turned in at the spaceport from the rim, and its headlights had flashed against his face. He looked at it through the glasses but could not see beyond the glare of the headlights; the car was coming swiftly toward the Lancaster.

Farradyne gathered himself to make a grand rush for his cubby, but stayed to watch because he could make safety after he was certain that the car would stop at the Lancaster. Instead, the vehicle swung around the interstellar ship and stopped by the landing ramp. Three men and a woman got out--

"Norma!" breathed Farradyne.

High in the enemy ship, one porthole winked off and the one beside it winked on, and a few minutes later Farradyne saw the same trio of men escort Clevis from the landing ramp and hand him into the spaceport jeep. The engine roared and they took off for the rim of the port.

Farradyne looked around the spaceport and wondered. It seemed such a cozy place, completely unguarded so far as he

could tell. This undoubtedly meant that the port was a restricted zone and anybody permitted inside the boundaries was known and recognized before he got in.

The jeep disappeared, and Farradyne came down his landing ramp and scooted across the flat spaceport to the starship.

Inside the spacelock was a small ante-room with an elevator and some stairs. Farradyne did not trust the elevator; he turned and raced up the stairs, ignoring the warnings of his own mind that this was a completely foolhardy stunt.

Up and up he went, around circular corridors, past dark doorways and sealed hatches, until he was both winded and muscle-weary from climbing. He paused from time to time to orient himself by a quick look out of the nearest porthole that faced the Lancaster, until he found that he was at the right level above the control room of his own ship. The next level above brought him to a door that had a thin line of light along the bottom.

Across the door was a metal bar, but the slide-aside keeper, with a hole in it for a lock, hung open; the enemy had not considered it necessary to lock the door against outside tampering.

Farradyne slipped the keeper aside and lifted the bar.

* * *

Norma stood there just inside the door, waiting. Her hands were on her hips and there was a cold glitter in her eye. It flickered and failed as she recognized Farradyne.

"Well!" she snapped. "If it isn't our Boy Scout and Man-about-space who claims he doesn't know where hellflowers come from!"

"I didn't--but I'm learning fast," he told her. "Maybe you can help. Do you know where we are?"

"Your friends asked questions. They didn't tell me anything."

He looked at her sourly. "I wish I'd known the other light in the window was Clevis," he said.

"So you didn't know?" she cried angrily.

Farradyne waved a hand sidewise and it shut her up. "Stop making like a fishwife and think! You have a good mind--for God's sake, use it!"

She looked at him calculatingly. "Just what do you expect me to assume?"

"Let's assume that I'm what I said I was," he said. "And let's assume we're fighting an undeclared war against a powerful enemy. An enemy that is running down the moral fiber of our race so they can walk in and take over without an open battle. Does that make sense?"

Norma considered it a moment. "Of course. Nobody wins a shooting-war. But which side are you on, Farradyne?"

He grunted. "Norma, just who was your brother?"

"Frank was one of Howard's best men," she said simply.

"More of the pattern clearing up," he sighed. "They killed your brother, getting a lot of innocent bystanders in the process. They tried to kill me the same way, although I didn't have anything more than a crude idea to go on."

Norma looked at him soberly. "I hate to admit it, but I've heard this three-tongued language of yours. So that makes you right on one count anyway."

"We're not fighting only a well-integrated mob," he said. "We're fighting a complete stellar culture."

"You say 'we' so blithely. Tell me how you managed to turn up like the proverbial bad penny."

"I outguessed 'em, finally. I was right, for once--" He explained how it had been done in a few rapid sentences.

"We saw them catch the Lancaster, and wondered why you suddenly went dead at the board after dodging them so well. Damn it, Farra--er--Charles, you've done it."

"Done what?"

"Convinced me. You aren't here to play the friend-in-need act to get more information out of me, after loading me to the gills with stuff out of a needle that makes me babble like a marmoset. So you're here for what you say."

"Why did they bring you back here?" he asked. "It seems to me they'd toss you in the locker."

"That's for later. Right now they're comparing my story with Howard's, and after that we'll both be taken to their 'Detention Planet' in some other stellar system and kept as last-ditch hostages in this war. There seem to be a lot of people who got too bright for the enemy and they're all there, too."

Farradyne swore. "The stinking bastards--!"

Norma shook her head coolly. "That's emotion, Charles. I don't know exactly what their purpose is, but I do understand that this is a conflict for eventual survival, and for the rule of an economic empire."

"But--"

Norma shook her head slowly. "Put the shoe on the other foot, Charles. Suppose you and your kind had come upon these people--how would you see them?"

"As possible allies and friends, and--"

"Balderdash. You'd have seen them as possible customers, and people to be exploited, and maybe enemies after you knew their history. Their attitude is as arrogant as ours, and their personal justification is as high. By some lucky break they got to interstellar travel before we did and so they automatically place us in an inferior position; but they know that this doesn't make us a pushover. We are scientifically capable of discovering their interstellar drive at any moment, and why we haven't is probably just a matter of our not combining the right sciences. Our knowledge of medicine is far wider than theirs, for instance."

"How can you know this?" he asked.

* * *

Norma slipped open a few buttons at her throat and slipped her dress down from one shoulder. There was a tiny circular white bandage stuck to one spot. "They took a sample of me," she said, "because I seem to be immune to several diseases that should give me trouble. When I asked about this, they told me

that they hoped to discover just what cell-change takes place when we take our anti-cancer immunization. That thing they have yet to discover."

"But--"

"Oh, they use our immunization," she said, slipping the dress up. "But they use it as an African witch doctor might use a typhoid serum. The thing you have to remember, Charles, is that if Terrans had gotten there first there would have been the same conflict, but started by the other side."

Farradyne shook his head angrily. "We're not inclined to ruin--"

"Stop sounding like one of King Arthur's knights. Men of sense and good judgment don't request their enemies to meet them on a field of honor. Instead, a state of war is assumed and from that instant on 'A' is looking for a chance to stab 'B' in the back because he knows that 'B' will cut him off at the hips if he turns his back for a moment. So both sides know that open warfare means total destruction and the process is one of boring from within, or gnawing at the foundation. But this is no place to get involved in a discussion of ethics, Charles. Where do we go from here?"

"If I knew how to run that ka-dodie in the Lancaster we'd head for Sol--if I knew where Sol was."

"And how about Howard?"

"I don't know about Clevis," he told her. "The thing to do would be to hike it home as fast as we could and spill our tale to the people who'd know what to do. Let's face it, Norma. They can mingle with Terrans because they can speak our language. But I couldn't mingle with them to locate Howard. I'd be picked up in a minute."

"So how do we get back?"

"Why do you think they brought the Lancaster?"

"Probably to fit her out as a bona-fide hellflower runner."

"Okay, then, we'll hide out in my cubby until they run her back."

"You hide out," said Norma. "If they find me missing from here they'll know that something smells."

Farradyne chuckled. "They're as arrogant as the Gods of Olympus. Part of their gang is still expecting me to turn up near Terra on an escape course, and the only smart thing I've done in this game is to be where they didn't dream I'd be. So we'll be where they don't expect us, and maybe we'll get away with it. Come on, let's hide out."

XXII

Halfway down the stairs in the Lancaster, Farradyne put out a hand and whispered, "Trouble."

"I don't hear anything."

"Someone's tinkering with something down below. See the dim light?"

"Oh," she nodded. Farradyne waved her back, and stole down the stairs and peeked cautiously around the corner. A man sat on the floor with his back to Farradyne, probing into one of the mysterious boxes with a long-handled tool.

He went back to Norma. "They're tuning up the drive."

"What do we do now?" she asked.

"Hide somewhere until that guy is finished."

"We can wait it out," said Norma thoughtfully. "Then if trouble comes at the last moment, I can slide out of here like a startled rabbit and draw the chase away from you."

"But I'm--"

"Stop being noble. You're not known to be here--you might get away with it. Besides--"

The sound of an engine cut them off. From not too far away came the rapid sing-song of triple voices, and, following the chant, the irritated voice of Carolyn Niles: "Stop that, you imbeciles. Speak Terran!"

"Why?" came the insolent reply.

"Because I don't want to get into the habit of speaking out of turn. I did it once and you know what happened."

"I merely asked when we were taking off."

"As soon as we get aboard."

"Okay. Okay."

Farradyne nudged Norma with his elbow and whispered, "The cargo hold. We're pincered!"

He led her to the cargo hold and helped her down the service ladder. He followed, closing the door behind him; then, before he snapped out the dim lights, he reached up and removed one of them, saying, "I don't think we'll have an inspection, but if we do, one lamp missing will make a shadow that might help."

Huddled down in the corner of wall and floor, they sat with their feet pulled up beneath them, not daring to say a word. They waited in the dark silence, listening, and occasionally tensing when someone clumped past the wall outside or near the cargo hatch above their heads. There were voices and calls and running feet from time to time, and then the humming sound of the belt-conveyor.

The hatch above was opened wide but the lights were not snapped on.

From the end of the loose-cargo conveyor came tumbling a shower of love lotus blossoms. They landed on the floor in a conical pile and kept on coming until both Farradyne and Norma were sitting shoulder deep in the flowers. The air filled with the thick, syrupy perfume. Farradyne felt a dizziness from the heady odor and wondered with horrified interest just what effect this completely unpredictable overdose of dope would have on Norma.

The shower of hellflowers came on and on, and Farradyne was forced to stand up because of their depth. Still they came, and he found himself swimming in them; it reminded him of treading in a haymow. The rain of blossoms ceased as the hold filled, and the lights went on briefly for an inspection.

Farradyne was propped neck deep, his head barely below the ceiling, and he felt quite safe from detection unless the inspectors put their heads down into the hatch to peer around the edges of the cylindrical cargo hold. He looked at Norma. She had scrabbled up a-top of the pile and was lying on her back with her arms thrown up over her head. Her eyes were closed, but as she drew in a deep breath, the lids went half-up and she looked over at Farradyne and smiled.

The hatch slammed down, and she said, huskily, "Such nice friends you have, Charles. This is--" Her voice trailed away.

* * *

Pressure came upsurging and Farradyne knew that the Lancaster was on its way to space and perhaps back home. In the midst of the take-off pressure she found his hand and drew it towards her, snuggled her face against his palm. Her free hand came over and touched his cheek, then ran back around his head. She pulled him forward until she could rest her head against his shoulder.

She kissed his cheek, a brief invitation; then he could feel the soft breath from her lips, parted an inch or so from his, waiting.

His voice was harsh, "Invite me to make love to you after we get this affair settled and find you a cure."

Her lips cut off his voice, soft and warm and vibrant. Her fingers ran through his hair and pressed his face to her. He struggled a bit; his hands closed on either side of her waist but instead of moving away, her body came forward against his.

Then, abruptly, the pressure of the drive went off and they floated free.

Their weight upon the cushion of flowers was released and the springiness of the hellblossoms thrust them up, hard, hurling them at the ceiling.

Norma's hands were dragged free of his head and, in clutching at him frantically, her fingernails raked his cheek slightly. The pressure he held against her waist thrust her away as soon as she

lost her leverage. Her head hit the ceiling with a dull thunk. A sigh came from her lips--the sigh of an unconscious person.

The hold was filled with love lotus, floating free and spread apart by the tiny pressure of the ends of their leaves and petals; Farradyne fought them away frantically but only succeeded in digging himself deeper in the room.

Eventually he found the service ladder and clung to it, waving himself a breathing-space by pushing the floating blossoms back.

Norma's inert hand touched him limply.

Farradyne toyed with the idea of reviving her but gave it up instantly; let her sleep it off. He gave the hand a push and she floated from him in the dark.

The exertion had called upon his reserves and he drank in lungfuls of air that was sticky and cloying. It made him dizzy again. He scrabbled up the ladder and found the hatch, and opened it cautiously. It was as dark outside as it was inside. Farradyne pushed the hatch up more and put his face in the clean air and took a deep breath. Then, because he felt better, he climbed out of the hold and floated free in the air above the hatch. He grabbed a handrail and closed the hatch carefully with a breathed, "You like 'em, Baby, you breathe 'em until I get back!"

* * *

He sat in midair with one hand hooked around the rail and tried to think of what to do next.

After a while he prowled the cargo-hold level, floating along the circular corridor, knowing that it was not the safest thing to do, but preferring almost anything to a return to the hold.

An hour passed, and Farradyne was growing bolder by the moment. He had covered the entire lower level of his Lancaster and had stopped above his former hiding place, speculating.

He decided, and went floating upward through the ship until he came to the stateroom level. He floated around the corridor, noticing that the little flags that indicated that the door was locked from the inside were all down except one. One of his

'guests' did not trust his fellow-travellers. He wondered how many rooms, and which ones, contained the rest of the enemy gang.

He floated on upstairs to the salon and almost ruined his silent flight by trying to put on the brakes. On the divan lay a man, restrained by the hold-down safety-strap, sound asleep.

Farradyne floated over, and taking hold of the strap to keep himself from flying free with the motion, he deepened the man's slumber with a vicious chop of his hand.

He floated into the control room, where the silent and distant stars watched. Some of them were moving down, while the rest stood as immobile as he had always known them. He would have liked to stay and watch the effects of traveling faster than light, for the sky directly above was very strange in color and in constellation, but he had a job to finish.

He took a roll of two inch adhesive tape from the medical supplies and taped the unconscious man's wrists and ankles, and slapped on a length that covered the mouth. Then he went down to his own quarters and opened the door slowly.

A second man slept there; Farradyne slugged him and applied tape effectively and quickly.

That made two.

* * *

He considered the situation carefully. So long as his batting average stayed at one thousand percent he was in fine shape. The ship ran itself; there was nothing to watch; and so the crew did what all spacemen do: sleep. If he could catch them one by one--

He opened Stateroom One. It was empty.

That put a different light on things. Maybe this was not a fully-loaded transport. Maybe it was just like the average cargo-haul with only a couple of passengers.

He opened Stateroom Two and found it empty.

That sort of proved it. He opened Stateroom Three and found a man asleep in the bunk. He was stirring as Farradyne scanned

the room, and he moved just as Farradyne launched himself across the cabin. Haste ruined his aim and his down-slashing hand clipped the enemy on the skull instead of hitting him alongside the ear. The man grunted and swung out blindly, hitting Farradyne and moving him up and away. Farradyne caught the upright of the bunk and stayed his free flight, levered himself around and swung again.

The enemy parried the blow and then let out a triple-tone roar. Farradyne pulled himself down and around, then kicked out with both feet, catching the enemy in the face and chest. The force drove the enemy deep into the mattress, from which he rebounded to fold up over the hold-down strap and flop up and down, limp, an inert mass caught between two springs. The same force drove Farradyne toward the open door.

His aim was still bad; his outsweeping hand caught the leading edge of the door and he and it swung on the hinges until he came flat against the wall behind the door. Then he fought his body around and came out of the stateroom feet first.

He caught at the handrail and stabilized his flight, then took notice of his surroundings.

A door down the hall opened and a man came sailing out. He caught sight of Farradyne and launched himself down the hall at the spaceman. Farradyne met him with a slash, which was parried by a block of the man's forearm against Farradyne's wrist. It stopped the enemy's flight, and tore Farradyne's hold loose.

Farradyne let the enemy peer down the barrel of his gun. "Hold it," he snapped.

The enemy, about to kick himself forward, took a firm hold on the handrail behind him and retracted his feet from against the wall.

"You can't get away with it, Farradyne."

Farradyne smiled grimly. "I can try, Brenner. So happy to meet you again."

XXIII

Warily he listened. There were no other sounds along the corridor but the one he expected, and soon the little flag on the lock went in and the door opened. Carolyn Niles came out in pajamas and coat, her eyes blinking slightly. "What's the--" Then she gasped. "Charles!"

"Howdedo. Any more hiding in the dark, Carolyn?"

"How did you get here?"

"I walked," he said flatly. He turned to Brenner. "You stay there, school-master. I'm scared to death and therefore a bit touchy."

Brenner shook his head, eyeing the gun. "Sure, you're scared. I'm scared, too."

"Relax--but do it slowly. Now turn around and make it hand over hand along toward the salon. You follow the gentleman," he said to Carolyn.

Farradyne followed them both, mentioning that if Brenner tried any tricks, Carolyn might get in the way of the shot intended for him. They went up the stairway, one, two, three, and floated into the salon, Farradyne having a bit of a time of it because of his full gun-hand. He hooked his legs around the guardrail and eyed them coldly.

"Carolyn, let's see how good a job you can do on Brenner's wrists with a chunk of this tape." He tossed the roll at her and she went to Brenner, who held his hands behind him while she ran tape around the wrists.

"I'd be willing to bet that's a slipshod job," said Farradyne. "But it will probably hold for a while. Carolyn, coast over here and sit in the straight chair."

Farradyne taped her to the chair by her wrists and ankles, and took a slight hitch in the hold-down strap. He added some security to Brenner's bonds and taped the man's ankles to the legs of the divan. Then he propped the still unconscious man up near Brenner and taped him similarly.

Now he took time to go below and collect the third man from his cabin and bring him up; the man struggled against the wide tape and glared at Farradyne over the plaster on his lips. Farradyne hurled him backside first at the divan and followed him, catching him on the rebound. He taped the man as he had the others, and then took a small flight to the bar, where he perched on top by hooking his feet around one of the bar stools.

"Aren't we a good-looking bunch?" he chuckled. "Shall we sing?"

"Stop it, Farradyne," snapped Brenner.

* * *

Farradyne's twisted smile faded.

"I'm telling who to do what, Brenner. We'll play this game according to my rules for a while."

"You can't get away with it."

"Nuts. I should think you would feel a bit awkward, for a conqueror."

"I can stand it for a time. But the sooner you free us, the--"

Farradyne laughed, one loud humorless bark. "So I'm still your prisoner?"

"In a way. You wouldn't want to die without telling what you know about us. You'll do anything to stay alive."

"You damn well bet! And I'll do anything to learn a bit more about it, too."

"You can't make me talk."

"Want to bet? I don't think I could squeeze anything out of you by torture, Brenner, but I have a hunch you'll sing loud and long after you watch me take Carolyn's fingernails off with long-nosed pliers, and listen to her screaming."

Carolyn looked at Farradyne coldly. "Charles, I don't think you have enough sadism to perform that operation on me."

Farradyne looked at her. He held enough dislike of what she stood for to do almost anything; but she was still a woman and he

knew that she was right: he simply didn't have the requisite sadism. Even though it would be a just retribution.

Carolyn sniffed cynically, and Farradyne realized that he had mumbled the last few words of his thoughts. She repeated them: "Just retribution, perhaps, Charles--but have you the guts?"

He looked down at her. "No, it seems I haven't. But I've someone with me who might."

He took aim and sailed down the stairs. He soared around the stateroom corridor and ran full-tilt into someone coming the opposite way. He hurled the figure from him and recoiled, and when he caught himself again, he had one hand braced against the handrail and the pistol aimed at the middle of Norma's stomach. He let out his breath and relaxed his gun hand.

She looked at the gun and her face went white with the realization of how close it had been. She looked at him searchingly, as if seeking company for her fright. She apparently found it, for her face relaxed and she took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Then she fought the hem of her skirt down again and blushed.

Farradyne chuckled shakily. "Go into Number Four and swipe a pair of Carolyn Niles' pajamas," he said. "They don't float. Then come on up to the salon."

He turned and headed back slowly, stalling until he heard her return to the corridor.

* * *

He went up first and helped her make the curve around the railing at the top. Solicitously, Farradyne steered her to the divan and fastened the seat-strap.

Then he faced Carolyn and the rest. "Speaking of retribution," he said slowly, "I'd like you to meet a woman I know. Miss Norma Hannon. She's a love-lotus addict, you know. Whatever she is and whatever she does is basically your own damned fault." He said directly to Carolyn, "I couldn't do it. But I think that Miss Hannon might enjoy a bit of an emotional binge with the people

who fed her the first hellflower and caused the death of her brother."

Farradyne turned and sailed across the salon to land at Norma's side. He reached out and removed the love lotus from Norma's hair, and re-crossed the room to hurl it into the disposal chute.

"Just sit there quietly until the effects of that thing wear off," he told her. "I'm going to make a tour of inspection."

Farradyne turned and dived down the stairway again. He did not know how long it might take, especially after Norma had been literally sleeping in a smothering roomful of the things for hours. Probably take long enough for them all to get the whim-whams just thinking about it, he concluded.

He conned every stateroom on his way down. He was reasonably certain that the ruckus would have awakened them all, but he wanted to make sure that no one of them was lying doggo until he could make his bid. They were all empty. Farradyne went on down in the Lancaster, checking the supply-rooms, the galley, the workshop, the other cargo lock, the storage room. He looked into the inspection cubbies and wiring hatches until he had covered every nook and cranny in the Lancaster that was large enough to contain a human being.

The ship was clean.

He stopped once more to eye the four metal cases bolted to the floor. He went up, then, all the way.

"Any talk?" he asked brightly as he soared through the salon.

"Farradyne, you can't do this!" rasped Brenner.

Farradyne ignored him. Norma was still sitting on the divan, in the same position. But her face was losing its softness and her attention was no longer diverted so easily. "I'm waiting," she told him as he passed upward to the control room.

Somehow, Farradyne believed that she would not have very long to wait.

XXIV

Farradyne again ignored the oddness of the sky to examine the small auxiliary panel fastened to one edge of the main control panel. It contained a small meter calibrated in arbitrary units of three colors. The needle stood high, about three-quarter scale, in the middle of the blue region. Below the meter was the toggle switch, and on either side of the switch were flat buttons, blue to the right and red to the left. Behind the panel was a metal box; emerging from the box a cable no longer than a lead pencil snaked away into the maze of wiring behind the main equipment.

He considered the thing carefully. Booby traps were unlikely, but there were destruction-charges used to prevent the capture of secret equipment.

The destruction triggers usually were protected switches, placed in such a position and built in such a manner that when the crew wished to destroy their secret devices, they had to do it deliberately.

So Farradyne eyed the small panel critically and decided that while there must be some destruction-device included in such a highly secret piece of gear, it was not on the front panel where it might be pressed accidentally or in the heat of excitement. He was even certain that not very much could happen if he tinkered with the switches, so long as he was in space and a few light years from anything large and hard. It was also extremely unlikely that any gear of this sort would be easy to foul-up. The destruction of the gadget in space would leave the ship and crew marooned in the void between the stars.

He took the cross-bar toggle in his hand and pulled. It resisted his efforts, and so he tried pushing. It moved down in a wide arc and as he moved the switch down, the pressure of the drive suddenly caught up with the seat of his pants and Farradyne was sitting in his pilot's chair instead of floating above it by a fraction of an inch. He thrust the toggle all the way down and a full one-gravity of force came on.

Above his head the stars resumed their familiar appearance.

The needle on the meter stayed where it was, at three-quarter scale.

Farradyne chuckled aloud. *He had it now.* One button to start the equipment for warm-up period; the toggle to control its functioning; and the other button to cut the gear off when the flight was concluded. It was as simple as that, and although Farradyne had sat in many a spaceman's bar and heard arguments as to the possibilities of exotic operation of alien equipment, he knew that mechanical and electrical principles are universal and that their exploitation would most likely lead toward universal simplification.

Then, being practical, Farradyne dropped the subject and began to think about where he was, where he had come from, and where he was going. He put his eye to the point-of-drive telescope and caught a small star on the cross-hairs. This was undoubtedly Sol, considerably tinier than its appearance from Pluto, but of the right color. A true stellar point, it was, which meant that he must be light years from it.

He squinted through the point-of-departure periscope and cut the drive so that the flare would not blind him. Behind was the constellation of Lyra and on the cross-hairs was another tiny star of no particular consequence.

He got out his Spaceman's Star Catalog and opened it to Lyra. Among the listings were several semi-dwarfs of the F, G and K classifications and one of them, about twenty-seven light years from Sol, was located in the right position, so far as Farradyne could determine--

The sound of a whimper cut into his thoughts, and he remembered the possibilities of the scene down in the salon. He snapped on the intercom and listened, wondering whether he could actually sit there and let Norma go to work on Carolyn. Man's inhumanity to man was a pale and insignificant affair compared to the animal ferocity of a woman about to settle up a long-standing account with another woman.

His curiosity got the better of him. He sauntered down the stairs. Norma stood before the bound Carolyn, her eyes glassy and her face impersonal. In one hand she held a small bottle of acid from Farradyne's workshop and in the other hand she held a little pointed glass-bristle brush. As Farradyne came down the stairs, Norma dipped the brush in the acid and approached Carolyn, holding the brush as she would a pencil.

Farradyne said, "Wait."

* * *

Norma looked at him. "Don't stop me," she said. "I'm going to write 'Hellflower' across that alabaster forehead."

Farradyne shuddered. His imagination had stopped working at the point of removing fingernails and applying cigarettes to the skin. Now it leaped forward. A formerly flawless skin covered with scar-tissue lettering of accusals, viciousness, and probably lewdness.

"Are you ready to talk?" Farradyne asked Carolyn.

"I'll talk. I'll talk because you'll never get a chance to use the information."

"You talk, and I'll take my chances on that."

Norma frowned. "Please, Farradyne?"

"Maybe later," he said soothingly. "Go sit down and wait."

Norma turned and headed for the divan.

"Spill it," he said to Carolyn. "What the hell's going on, and why?"

"This is war," she said.

"Like hell it's war. This is backstabbing. But it'll be war as soon as we can fight back."

"It is war," she repeated. "The process should not be unfamiliar to you; you've done it yourselves time and again. First you weaken the enemy by undermining his resources, by lowering his resistance, by turning his efforts towards advancement against some stumbling block. Then--"

"I presume that doping the women of a race with hellflowers is an honorable practise?" sneered Farradyne.

"It is better than dropping a mercurite bomb. We got to interstellar space first and met another people as racially jealous as we are: your people. We could have made a landing openly, but if we had, the warfare you're threatening would have happened long ago. And there would be nothing left of either of our people but smouldering planets to mark the meeting-place of two stellar peoples."

"You can say this, knowing that no Solan has the barest inkling of how this doodad in the hold can permit us to travel faster than light?"

* * *

Carolyn looked at him contemptuously. "You're an idealist, Charles," she said. "I'll tell you what would happen. You'd greet us with cheers and invite us in--long enough to steal our warp-generator. You'd trade us your medical science for our chemistry and your electronics for our gravities, and then you'd meet us face to face to prove to yourselves that even though you got a second-place start, you could move faster and hit harder than we could. You'd carry your war to us, and we'd carry our war to you, and there would be cause and effect, and attack and retaliation, with each blow a bit more vicious until your people would be planting mercurite at the same time we were. And then, as I say, the next interstellar race to visit this region of the sky would find the radioactive remains of two ex-cultures. I know, because both our people come of the same stock."

"All right," he snapped. "So you've justified your actions to yourself."

"*Of course.* Everybody is self-justified."

"And you justify the doping of our race by calling it better than meeting us face to face."

"Remember your own history. Even before the First Atomic War everybody realized that warfare was a bankrupt measure, to

be undertaken only after all else failed. You conducted your conflicts under cover, by boring from within, by undermining the national structure. Similarly, when your people have been lowered in resistance, we shall move in quietly and make of you an asset to our economy, instead of a ruined structure that must be helped."

"Wonderful. However, I don't cotton to the idea of being an abject supplicant to your superior kind."

There was a yelp from behind him and he whirled to see Norma Hannon about to letter something on Brenner's forehead.

He raced across the floor and caught her hand just before the acid-laden brush touched Brenner's skin. "Norma," he said quietly. "Don't."

She looked up at him reproachfully. "You promised me--"

"Later."

"That's what you're always saying," she complained. "Then all you do is talk a lot of guff with that female over there."

"Okay. I forgot." He turned to Brenner. "Next question: how do we navigate that ka-dodie of yours?"

Brenner laughed harshly. "You know so much, why don't you go ahead and try it?"

"Now, Farradyne?" pleaded Norma.

"Not yet. I'm going to try his suggestion." Farradyne inspected the tapings and satisfied himself. Then he turned toward the stairway.

"Wait," said Brenner testily. "Take her with you, dammit. I don't want my face lettered with words found in washrooms."

"Somehow it seems appropriate."

"All right. The toggle fades the generator on and off. The red button stops the equipment. The green button is for start. Wait until the meter reads in the upper block before using the toggle. The speed for this particular equipment is approximately two light years per hour in Solarian measurement. We're about six hours from Sol now. Go ahead and run us close to Sol so we can finish this gambit."

* * *

Farradyne took Norma by the hand and led her up the stairs. She protested and hung back--but once in the control room, she crossed briskly and turned the intercom so that sound from the salon would come through clear and strong, but sound from the control room would not go out. Then she turned from the panel and faced Farradyne with the beginning of a soft smile on her face.

"That was the hardest job I've ever had," she breathed.

Visibly, she relaxed. An aliveness came around her eyes and her mouth spread into a brief smile. She snapped her bottle of acid into one of the many spring-holds in the control room. Then she walked over to the co-pilot's seat and dropped into it. She rested, with her head tilted back.

Farradyne watched with puzzlement. "Norma," he asked, "how long after a sniff of love lotus does the effect last?"

"Seldom more than an hour. I have been free of it for quite some time."

"But you had a hell of a dose."

She took a deep breath. "I could feel it leaving," she said. "The effects faded after you took the flower out of my hair, but instead of fading away with a dulling of the senses, the urges I felt diminished without leaving me emotionless. I think I'm cured of it."

Farradyne recoiled a bit.

"No, Charles, this is no trick. This is not an attempt to lead you on. I'm cured, I think, honestly."

"But how?"

"One thing no one has tried is to place the addict in a veritable bath of the things. Perhaps that did it--an overdose--Anyway, it's wonderful to feel normal again." She sat up in the chair and leaned toward him. She reached for his hand and drew him forward and kissed him on the lips. For a moment they clung together, then she moved away from him slowly. "It's all back again," she said quietly. "The quickened pulse and the pleasant

tingle. I'm a woman again, Charles. Let's go home so I can enjoy it."

It was almost too good to be true--but it had to be.

Farradyne gave her hand a squeeze. "Done!" he said. His other hand lifted the cross-bar toggle, and the pressure of the springed seats threw them up against their hold-down straps.

Two light years an hour. Farradyne ran the Lancaster for exactly six hours and then cut the superdrive. Together, they inspected the heavens and found a brilliant yellow star on their quarter. Farradyne turned the Lancaster to face it and raised the toggle slowly; Sol changed color, racing toward the blue and the violet first, then turning a dull red and raising through the spectrum again until it became violet once more. It went through another spectrum-change and grew in size like a toy balloon hitched to a high-pressure air line, until its flare frightened the pilot. He shoved the toggle down and Sol winked back into the familiar disc of blinding white, about the size as seen from Mars.

Farradyne oriented himself, consulted the spaceman's ephemeris and pointed at a large unwinking point. "Home," he said.

Two light years an hour. Farradyne went to the computer and made some calculations. He returned, pointed the Lancaster at Terra and flicked the toggle up and down, counting off a few seconds for drive. Sol whiffled past, changing in color as its position changed in the astrodome; and when Farradyne drove the toggle down, Terra was a distinct disc in the sky above them.

XXV

Farradyne said, "Norma, hike below and see that our visitors stay taped to their chairs. I'm going to land this crate without interference."

Norma nodded and went down to the salon. "They're still penned," she reported over the Intercom.

Farradyne said "Aye-firm," and then made his first ranging-radar contact with Terra. He set his declaration drive accordingly and the integrator-needle crept over to the center-scale zero, informing Farradyne that zero separation from the surface of the spaceport would result in zero velocity of the Lancaster.

Then Farradyne fired up the radio and called: "Washington Tower. This is a Lancaster Eighty-One requesting landing instructions. Registry Six Eight Three. Farradyne piloting."

"Tower to Six-Eight-Three. Take Beacon Nine at one twenty thousand, Landing Area Five. Traffic is zero-zero, but eight, repeat, eight, Spaceguard cutters are in formation at sixty thousand." The voice changed in tone slightly. "Spaceguard, Code Watchung. Calling Watchung."

"Watchung to Tower, go ahead."

"Tower. Watchung, ware away from Beacon Nine. Lancaster Eighty-One coming in. Give position and course."

"Watchung to Tower: position azimuth six-seven zero, altitude sixty thousand, distance nine miles. Course twenty-seven North azimuth. Will miss Beacon Nine by thirty-three miles. Recheck?"

"Recheck and aye-firm, Watchung. Tower to Six-Eight-Three: did you follow that?"

"Aye-firm!" called Farradyne.

"Watchung to Six-Eight-Three: pilot identify yourself."

"Pilot Farradyne here, Watchung."

"Aye-firm. Watchung Five, assume command of Six, Seven, and Eight. Take alert pattern at two hundred thousand feet and stand by, Watchung Two, Three, and Four compute and take closing course on Six-Eight-Three and convoy to Landing Area Five. Farradyne, prepare to accept convoy."

"Deny, Watchung. Request reason."

"Prepare to accept inspection, Six-Eight-Three."

Farradyne growled angrily and dropped the radio formalities. "Why?" he snapped.

"You are suspected of hauling a cargo of love lotus. Prepare to stand inspection upon landing."

From down in the salon came the sound of cynical laughter. Brenner said, "We'll let your own people punish you, Farradyne. Hellblossom running, resisting arrest, kidnaping, operating with a forged license, a ship with a questionable registry!"

Farradyne knew what Brenner meant. Taped tight in his ship were Carolyn Niles, daughter of one of Mercury's leading citizens, and a schoolteacher named Hughes. There would be a lot of other witnesses prepared to perjure him into three hundred years of hard labor on Titan. He wondered how the enemy managed this; certainly they had not been prepared to lose their captured spacecraft so quickly. Yet the counter-preparations looked as though such an eventuality had been expected.

"Six-Eight-Three, respond!"

Farradyne snapped his mike-switch and said, "I resent the accusation, and demand an explanation!"

"There is no accusation, Farradyne. We have an anonymous tip-off. You are not accused of illegal operations, only suspect. Will you permit inspection?"

"No!" snapped Farradyne. "Deny!"

"Code Watchung: intercept Six-Eight-Three! Prepare to fire."

"Fire and be damned," said Farradyne in a growl. His hand reached for the toggle and shoved it home for ten seconds. When he turned the ultradrive off, they were far a-space and the radio was silent.

"Give it up, Charles," said Carolyn from below.

"Go to hell!"

Brenner said, "You might as well, Farradyne. No matter how you figure it, you'll either be grabbed by your own people or get picked up by ours. We can't lose."

* * *

Going below, Farradyne faced them. "And what happens if I dump you out of the spacelock and your cargo of hellflowers with you?"

"You could do that to Cahill," said Carolyn, "because Cahill was not registered as a paying passenger. I am, and when the authorities find me missing you'll be called to account."

"Just what do you suggest?" Farradyne asked.

"Surrender and turn this ship over to us. You will be detained as a prisoner of war and imprisoned among your own kind."

"Doing what kind of prison labor? Growing hellflowers?"

"Not at all. That, we wouldn't consider ethical."

"It's a cockeyed code of ethics you jerks have," growled Farradyne. "I suppose you want a gold medal for doping our women instead of dropping mercurite bombs and killing them."

"Let's not discuss ethics now. Surrender, and you'll be placed on a Terra-conformed planet, with every freedom among your own kind except the right to space flight."

"No, thanks," said Farradyne dryly. "I had four years of slogging in a fungus marsh. I'm disinclined to give up after one miss. It--"

"Charles!" cried Norma through the squawk-box. "Radar trace!"

Farradyne turned and raced up the stairs just in time to see the long green line of the radar settling down to a solid signal-pip at the extreme end. He flipped the switch that coupled the telescope to the radar and looked through the eye-piece. At the extreme range of the radar beam was a spacecraft, either the same starship that had chased him before or its sister ship. It was closing in fast.

Farradyne dropped into his chair and snapped the belt. He turned the Lancaster by ninety degrees and grasped the toggle on the ultradrive. Ten seconds later he resumed normal flight for a few seconds and then, at another angle, used the ultradrive again.

He paused long enough to take his space bearing, and then plunged the ship down between the orbits of Jupiter and Saturn, far to the South of the ecliptic.

"Norma," he asked quietly, "who is Howard Clevis' boss?"

"Howard reports to Solon Forester directly."

"Oh, fine," groaned Farradyne. "Getting to the Solon is no picnic. How do we go about it?"

* * *

A flick of color caught his eye and he turned to look at the radar. The line had wiggled slightly and as he watched, its extreme end formed into a signal-pip. Farradyne looked through the telescope and saw the starship again--or another one. Whether they had one with supervelocity tracking methods, or several hundred covering the solar system like an interception net, it made no difference. The enemy was on his trail.

Farradyne played with the high-space drive again and cut some more didoes back and forth across space, ending up this time not too far from Mercury.

From below there came a rapid conversation in multi-tones, like someone dusting off the keys on a pipe organ played in mute.

Farradyne swore, and then he sat there looking at the big chronometer on the wall, counting off the seconds. Seventy of them went under the sweep hand before the radar trace hiked up into the same, familiar extreme-range warning.

Deliberately, Farradyne turned his ship towards Terra and hit the ultradrive. "They called me a hot-pants pilot," he gritted.

Yellow-green Terra raced up and up and up through the spectrum and burst in size from an unwinking pinpoint of light to a shockingly-large disc that zoomed towards them. They saw its roundness come out of the sky in a myriad of colors until it filled the dome above them. Norma screamed; but by the time her voice had stopped echoing through the control room, Terra was past them by a good many miles of clean miss, and Farradyne had cut the ultradrive. He grunted unhappily because he was now as far from Terra on the other side as he had been before he took the chance. This mad use of the enemy ultradrive in ducking around the solar system was like trying to make a fifty-ton clamshell digger split a cigarette paper. At two light years per hour, their speed was enough to take them from Sol to Pluto in

one second flat. He could not control it finely enough to do more than zoom off out of sight of the starship.

Farradyne shrugged, and patted Norma on the shoulder. "I doubt that my aim is good enough to hit the thing," he said. He turned the Lancaster end for end abruptly and tried a quick flick of the toggle. Once more Terra leaped at them, a swirling kaleidoscope of color, looming into monster size and then flicking past.

When they came out of it, Terra was behind them by a few million miles. Farradyne thought for a moment. "Maybe we--" he reached out and pressed the red button on the auxiliary panel--"are being tracked by the generator doodad they put below."

"But what are we going to do now?"

"Hit for Terra!"

XXVI

Farradyne set the drive for Terra and then sat there, tense and waiting. The radar wiggled into its warning trace, almost dead ahead.

They moved to intercept him, but Farradyne raised the drive to four gravities and plunged on. The starship grew, and behind it Terra grew. The radio burst into sound and Farradyne grabbed the microphone and said, "Come and get me, fellows!"

"Stop," came the demand, "or we fire!"

"I've been fired at by experts," said Farradyne. "Start a shooting-match out here and you'll have all of Terra wondering why the fireworks."

"Stop!"

Farradyne touched a lever. "Maybe you'd like to polish a few rivets?"

The Lancaster turned ever so slightly until the starship was directly on the point-of-drive. His other hand touched the drive and the acceleration increased a bit. Caustically, Farradyne said,

"Go ahead and shoot! You'll find your own living room full of by-products if you do!"

He was right. The Lancaster was on collision course with the starship and if the Lancaster was blasted at this moment, shards and fragments of the spacecraft would spread like a shotgun charge. If the starship escaped being hit with a rather uncomfortably large mass of jagged metal it would be sheer luck.

"Veer off!" came the strident cry.

The starship moved aside. Farradyne's hands levered his handles with a velvet touch and the starship of the enemy returned to the cross-hairs.

"Veer off!"

"I'm going to ram, goddam you!" roared Farradyne.

The starship flared at its tail and at the same time a torpedo-port winked as a missile blasted-off. Farradyne gauged the missile and the starship and kept his nose on the starship's lead. Gritting his teeth, he watched the missile come at him; and at the last moment the missile veered aside, obviously controlled. It was a war of nerves; the enemy did not dare hit him at this moment and on this course, but they hoped to scare him.

The starship loomed big in the astrodome and Farradyne aimed the Lancaster amidships. The interstellar monster grew rapidly until the individual plates could be seen; then with a silent, dark flicker that was as shocking as a loud blast and a searing flare of light might have been, the starship ceased to exist as an obstacle in front of them. The enemy had resorted to the ultradrive. The sky was clear--

Except for the missile, seeking them and with no control to stop it.

It had curved in a vast circle behind them and was now closing in on a curving course.

Dead ahead was Terra, looming huge; the tactic of the enemy was clear. In order to escape the missile Farradyne would have to drive hard and long, which would carry him far beyond Terra and into the hands of another enemy ship on the other side of home.

To turn and attempt a landing would be to invite atomic death in the depths of space far above the planet.

He chuckled, and Norma looked at him wonderingly.

"Get set for some terrific acceleration," he said. "Hunker down in the seat!"

* * *

His hands ran across the board. The Lancaster turned slightly and the drive went up and up. The flare brightened and lengthened behind them, aimed at the missile below.

The missile followed its homing gear and came speeding up the reaction-flare. The Lancaster drive was a reaction motor, a rocket with a reaction mass of water heated by the atomic pile to an energy that cracked the water down to sheer gamma and particle radiation and tossed it rearward into a condition where the word 'heat' has no meaning unless there is some body able to absorb the ravening energy.

The missile absorbed the energy.

Its nose melted and its homing circuits mingled with the flare of the Lancaster's drive; then there was a minute puff as the missile was consumed before its atomics could be joined in fission.

Farradyne cut the drive and took a deep breath; but his relief didn't last long. Terra was before him, a monstrous blue-green globe just to one side--close--close--

Beyond, the enemy ship was waiting.

The thin scream of atmosphere cried at their ears and there came a braking pressure that threw them against their seat straps. The accelerometer went crazy, reaching for the peg-stop on the left.

The blood rushed to their heads and Farradyne fought the pressure that tried to raise his arms.

Then the screaming stopped as the Lancaster passed beyond the atmosphere into space again. Farradyne hit the drive hard again.

But if the enemy was expecting him to come past on a line-course, they were wrong. The touch of the upper air, thin as it was, had deflected the Lancaster's course into a long ellipse and hurled the ship far to one side of the expected line of flight. The course wound out and around and back and plunged the ship into the upper air again. Terra rotated madly below and then dropped beneath the level of the edge of the control room dome as the Lancaster speared out into space once more. Again they went out and around and down into the upper air, and this time they went around in a tight ellipse with the air screaming at them all the way. Four times around Terra they went, and then Farradyne turned the tail of the Lancaster straight down and started to drop like a plummet.

He was kept busy checking the controls and the autopilot and the computing radar altimeter as he aimed the Lancaster for the southern edge of Lake Superior; they came down in a screaming fall like a meteorite.

The flare parted the waters of the lake and sent up a billow of steam for about a hundredth of a second. Then the autopilot cut the drive and the violence ceased as the Lancaster sank into the deep cool waters, to stop, to come rising buoyantly towards the surface again.

* * *

Farradyne hit the switch that opened the scuttlebutt of the water tanks and the lake waters rushed in, killing buoyancy.

The astrodome porpoised once, gently, and then the Lancaster sank very slowly. Farradyne waited until the ship was resting tail down on the bottom; then he turned it slightly to one side and opened the drive by a bare fraction. Water churned below them and the ship moved loggily sidewise, towards the shore. He spent an hour testing and trying the depth along the shore until he found a place that was just deep enough to let the Lancaster stand upright with its dome an inch or two below the surface.

A small fish goggled hungrily at the shining metal.

Farradyne stretched and said, "We got this far anyway!"

Norma looked at him dizzily. "How?"

"My pappy used to tell me about this sort of come-in," he said. "Seems as how he once knew a gent who had piloted one of the old chemical rockets that used braking ellipses for landings. That was a heck of a long time ago, before we had power to burn. Anyway, it wasn't expected, because we succeeded."

"Now what?"

Farradyne tuned the radio to a local broadcast station, and waited, relaxing in his seat, until the music stopped and the latest news flashes came on. Then the announcer said, "The system-wide hunt for Charles Farradyne, the notorious love-lotus operator, still goes on. The search has been narrowed down to North America because of several reports, some official and some unofficial, of activity a-space in this region.

"Farradyne is also to be charged with complicity in the disappearance of Howard Clevis, high undercover operative for the Sand Office. It is believed in some circles that Farradyne may be much higher in the love-lotus ring than a mere handler or distributor. Some officials have indicated that Farradyne may be Mister Big, himself.

"An early interception and arrest is anticipated. Keep tuned to this station for the latest news."

The music returned.

XXVII

Brenner said, "Very neat. Glad you made it." His smile was serene, and it made Farradyne want to push his face in. Brenner grinned at Farradyne's expression. "I wouldn't like to die in space. Now that we've landed it's going to be easier to pick you up."

"No doubt you have your henchmen neatly planted in many of the high offices. But you can't cover them all."

"But how can you tell which is which?" laughed Brenner. "And if you could, how could you prove it? If you should be stupid enough to try to point out the number of people who are plotting your downfall, who are trying to apprehend you--dead or alive--you'll sound like a howling case of paranoia."

Carolyn stirred and groaned. Farradyne looked at her as she opened her eyes. "Can't take it, eh? But how you can dish it out!"

"Where are we?" groaned Carolyn.

"Wouldn't tell you on a bet," he snapped. "You might be telepathic as well as multi-tonal. I--"

Farradyne's eye caught a flicker of motion and he whirled. The other two men were struggling against the tape that bound their wrists and ankles; they glared at him over the white strip of tape beneath their noses, and made three-toned honking noises.

"Shut up!" roared Farradyne.

They stopped struggling.

Brenner said, "Just what do you hope to do?"

"I've got my ideas." Farradyne lit a cigarette and relaxed. "We'll wait until dusk to be sure," he said.

Hourly, the radio went on telling how Farradyne was being cornered. Radar nets and radio-contact squadrons were scouring the North American continent with special attention being given to the North Middle-West. Another report said, "Charles Farradyne, sought for many charges involving love-lotus operations, is implicated in the disappearance of Carolyn Niles, according to her family. Her father indicated that Miss Niles did not return home after a date with the criminal. Be careful! This criminal is cornered and desperate. He will not hesitate to shoot, and he may even bomb a village or neighborhood if his freedom is threatened!"

Brenner and Carolyn did not even jeer at him. The situation was obvious; Farradyne and his white flag would be shot to bits before he could take three steps, let alone make explanations.

By now it was dark outside. The stars were bright above the dome, and danced with the motion of the water. To one side a

wavy trail passed across the sky, and high above was the flicker of a space patrol crossing the sky at fifty or sixty miles. The radio was alive with reports, and the police bands were busy with their myriad of reports and directions. Farradyne pricked off their calls on a map, with a drawing pencil. Ground and air patrols were combing a vast area. For a very brief interval, Farradyne could hear a distant network in operation which indicated that the same sort of search was under way in other districts across the face of the continent.

He inspected his map and hoped he had them all. Then, very cautiously, he lifted the nose of the Lancaster above the waterline and eyed his radar. Pips showed here and there, a couple within a few miles of him. He waited until they turned away, waited until they went beyond the radar horizon.

"Now," said Farradyne for all of them to hear. "I can't do this job fair, so I'll do it foul!"

Using just enough power to waft the Lancaster into the air, Farradyne placed the ship in a gully a few hundred yards from a state highway. The trees covered it from direct observation at night and the flat hills and ravines would cover it from radar detection.

* * *

It was almost two o'clock in the morning when a lonely moving van came along the highway. The brakes screeched as the driver caught sight of a crumpled body lying by the road. Redness smeared along a length of white thigh, uncovered by a ripped skirt. More redness dribbled wetly from a corner of Norma's mouth. The driver piled out of one door and his helper from the other. They ran to kneel by the woman's side.

Then they smelled the ketchup and stood up, raising their hands promptly in anticipation of the command.

"That's not blood spilled," said the driver loudly. "Let's keep it that way, whoever you are."

The driver's helper said, "This is a bum job, friend. We're carting second-hand furniture, not gold."

"I don't want your load," said Farradyne, stepping into the glare of the headlights while Norma got up and dusted herself off. "I want your truck."

They looked at him and he saw recognition in their faces. Probably every newscast had his picture presented in full color.

"What's the next move, Farradyne?" asked the driver in a surly tone. "Do we take the high jump?"

"No, I just want your truck. Driver, what's your name?"

"Morgan. This is Roberts."

"Morgan, you drive the truck down into that ravine, and Roberts will play hostage. Get it?"

"Behave, Al," pleaded Roberts.

"I will, but I think we'll get bumped anyway."

Morgan got into the truck and drove it slowly from the road, down through the trees, until they came to the Lancaster. Both men goggled at the ship parked there, and Farradyne, who had walked alongside with Roberts and Norma, let them look at it for a moment. Then he waved his gun. "Unload it," he said sharply.

It took them an hour to move the load from the truck to the ground, and Farradyne spent that hour in nervous watching. He could not trust them not to make a break, nor could he hope to explain. When the van was emptied, he faced Roberts against it and said, "Norma, tape Morgan's hands behind him; then Roberts'. Then we unload our cargo."

* * *

The two truckmen glowered as the conveyor belt came out of the cargo lock and the white hellflower blossoms tumbled along it to drop into the back of the van. Farradyne left them sitting there on the ground after the loading was finished. He and Norma went into the salon and he faced Brenner. "Better take this quietly," he said.

The radio made him pause:

"Ladies and gentlemen, the late news: the system-wide search for Charles Farradyne is hurrying to a close. Indications are now that the infamous love-lotus chief is hiding in the Lake Superior Region, and all forces are being hurried to that area to create the most leakproof dragnet in the history of man's man-hunts. A special session of the planning committee of the Solar Anti-Narcotic Department has been called to deal with the problem. Any information pertaining to Charles Farradyne may be delivered by picking up your telephone and calling Sand, One-thousand.

"This information is being disseminated freely. We know that Farradyne is listening to this broadcast, and the Sandmen have instructed all radio stations and networks to deliver the following announcement:

"To Charles Farradyne: A reward of fifty thousand dollars has been offered for your capture dead or alive. You cannot escape. The forces that are blanketing the Lake Superior Area are being augmented hourly by additional men and *matÃ©riel* brought in from all corners of the solar system. You will be arrested and brought to trial for your life. However, the reward of fifty thousand dollars will be turned over to you to be used in your own defense if you surrender at once."

Farradyne grunted. "Very tasty dish," he said sourly. "Very competent people you have, boys and girl. Someone really thought that one out most thoroughly. Can you picture me walking up to a patrol and saying, 'Fellers, I've come to give myself up so I can have the reward.' And then I'd go in, sure enough--on a shutter, and the patrol would divide the loot. To hell with you, we'll play it my way. Norma, go ahead."

Norma slipped off one high-heeled shoe and advanced upon Brenner. The enemy agent tried to shy away, but Farradyne went over and caught his head between the palms of the hands and held Brenner fixed. Norma swung the slipper and crashed the heel against Brenner's jaw.

Brenner slumped, and the heelprint on his jaw oozed a dribble of blood mixed with mud.

Farradyne slung Brenner over his shoulder and carried the inert man out. He propped Brenner in the helper's seat and handed Norma into the driver's seat. He stood on the running-board and watched Norma strip the tape from Brenner's wrists and replace it with fresh tape from the truck's own first-aid kit.

"The ankles too," he warned her. "You've got to cover up the tape-burns."

Norma taped Brenner's ankles. Then she looked up at Farradyne. "I'm shaky."

"I know," he said. "But you've got to hold yourself together until this gambit is played out."

She smiled wanly. "That's what's holding me together," she told him. "Charles, wish me luck?"

He leaned into the truck window and put his lips to hers. It was a very pleasant kiss, and while they both knew that this was their first kiss of real affection and mutual confidence, it lacked a compelling passion. But for the present it was satisfying, and complete.

Then Farradyne swung down from the truck with a wave of his hand and Norma put the big engine in gear with a grind that set his teeth on edge.

The truck turned onto the highway and roared off into the night.

Morgan said, "What do we do now?"

"We wait in the spacer," Farradyne replied.

XXVIII

They went up the landing ramp and into the salon; the truckmen stopped short as they saw Carolyn and the other pair.

"Quite a collection you have here," said Morgan. "Is this Carolyn Niles?"

"I am," replied Carolyn. "Aren't you going to do something about it?"

Morgan showed her his taped wrists. "Not in this garland."

Farradyne smiled and left them. He went aloft and returned the Lancaster to the lake. "Now," he said, "we'll wait it out."

Morgan shook his head. "With the net they've set up you'll never see your girl or your truck or your hellflowers again."

"Maybe I want it that way."

"Oh? Putting the finger on the bird you carted out of here?"

"Precisely."

"And how about the dame?"

Farradyne laughed. "In this cockeyed society of ours," he said, "even a streetwalker can rip her dress open, point at a man, and holler 'help!' and half of the community will start yelling 'Lynch the sonofabitch' without looking too hard at either of them. She'll get by, but it may go hard with him."

Morgan and Roberts were scornful, angry, and ready at any instant to do whatever they could to overcome him. Only the tape kept them from trying. But on Carolyn's face was an expression of mingled defeat and admiration. She knew as well as Farradyne that Brenner was in for a rough time.

Farradyne lit a cigarette and mixed himself a highball. Carolyn groaned and tried to flex the wrists that were secured to the arms of the chair. Morgan growled at the sight of her helplessness and asked if Farradyne had harmed her.

Her face took on a cynical smile. "I happen to be immune to love lotus," she said.

"Scorpions," said Farradyne, "are immune to their own poison."

* * *

Once again the radio music faded: "And here is the latest news on Charles Farradyne: within the past half hour the area of search has been narrowed down to a tiny ten-mile circle, by the interception of a moving van laden with love lotus. The arrest was made by a state highway patrol with the aid of a woman who gave her name as Norma Hannon.

"Miss Hannon was in a state of hysterical collapse after days of imprisonment at the hands of the love-lotus ring, brutal physical

assault, and threats of being forced into love-lotus addiction. The driver of the truck was carrying a license made out to Walter Morgan, but information from the Bureau of Identification indicates that Morgan is also known as Lewis Hughes, a prominent teacher of Ancient History in a Des Moines school. During the struggle Miss Hannon succeeded in rendering the criminal unconscious by hitting him on the jaw with her slipper, after which she taped--"

Farradyne chuckled. "You see?"

Morgan grunted: "My license!"

Roberts cried: "Our truck!"

Carolyn said, "And what's it got you, Charles?"

"--the first-aid kit," went on the announcer. "Morgan or Hughes is being held on a John Doe warrant, charged with love-lotus possession, abduction, illegal restraint, assault and battery, and driving an interstate truck with an improper license.

"Miss Hannon collapsed after driving the truck to within sight of the dragnet set out for Farradyne. Her statement will be taken by the Sand Office as soon as she has recovered. The point of hospitalization has been kept secret by the Sandmen, who are now confident of an early arrest. Indications are that Hughes or Morgan (also known occasionally as Carl Brenner) has turned state's evidence and is willing to inform on his racket-boss Farradyne."

"Hah!" said Carolyn nastily.

"Did you a lot of good, didn't it, Farradyne?" snarled Morgan.

Farradyne ignored Morgan and spoke to Carolyn. "Unless Norma is being tended by someone of your gang, this is the end, baby."

She eyed him superciliously. "How long will they believe her after they discover she's a love-lotus addict herself?"

"She isn't. She's cured, remember?"

Carolyn laughed. "Everybody knows there is no cure."

"And how about our pal Brenner-Hughes-Morgan?"

"You leave me out of this!" snapped Morgan.

"Sorry," said Farradyne with a smile. "I didn't mean to include you, Walter."

Carolyn said in a confident voice, "Brenner is one of us. He is just as willing to die for our cause as--"

A searchlight swept across the lake and its light, refracted downward from the waves, caught Farradyne's eye. He left them in the salon and raced up the stairs to the control room. Through the astrodome, distorted by the water, Farradyne could see the headlamps of the big truck. The searchbeam crossed the water again and flashed ever so briefly on the slender rod of the antenna. The truck paused in its course, the beam swept the woody shore and stopped; then the truck turned and rumbled off through the trees.

* * *

The radio music died again. "Ladies and Gentlemen, we are about to bring you a very unusual program. John Bundy, our special events newscaster, has joined the forces scouring the Lake Superior region for Charles Farradyne. Inasmuch as an early arrest is expected, and possibly a running gun battle, John Bundy will now take the air with an on-the-spot account. Mr. Bundy:

"Hello; this is John Bundy. Our convoy of trucks, men, guns, radar, and radio control resembles a war convoy. We have everything from trench knives to one-fifty-five rifles aboard as we scour the Northwoods for the criminal who has been so successful up to this time. We arrived at a point along Lake Superior which must be close to the point of Farradyne's operations, according to the information given us by the arrested truck driver. Sand and mud from Miss Hannon's shoes correspond to the district.

"Flying above us now are eight squadron bombers carrying heavy depth-charges, since Farradyne is believed to be hiding his spacecraft in the waters of Lake Superior. A submarine from the Great Lakes Geodetic Survey has been hastily equipped with

some ranging sonar from the War Museum at Chicago and is seeking Farradyne's submerged spacecraft. It--"

There came a distant crash in the radio and seconds afterwards the Lancaster resounded with the thunder of an underwater explosion.

"One of the depth-charge patterns has been dropped," explained Bundy excitedly. "Perhaps this is--no, it is not. Sorry. The submarine has covered the explosion area and reported only an underwater mountain peak instead of a hidden spacecraft. Nothing will be left unsearched--"

A thin, pure, ping, of a pitch, so high it was at the upper limit of Farradyne's hearing, came and lasted for less than a tenth of a second. It came again in about twenty seconds, and repeated itself in twenty seconds, and again and again and again. The interval dropped; the volume of the ping increased noticeably until the singing tinkle, something like tapping a silver table knife on a fine glass goblet, was coming fast.

Ping! Ping! Ping!

Farradyne looked above and saw the sky-trails of jet bombers, making ghostly patterns in the night sky. There came another flash of the searchbeam against the antenna. Ping! *Get through, wherever you are!*

Along the shoreline something blossomed with an orange flash. Seconds later there was an eruption fifty yards from the Lancaster that shook the big ship hard enough to make the plates groan. A trickle of lake water oozed through the sealing of the astrodome.

The pinging came louder.

Underwater bursts racketed and flashed and hurled their gouts of force against the Lancaster, coming closer.

The radio was rambling on and on as John Bundy gave the world a blow-by-blow description of the action.

"--to those people who have stood out against the expenditure of monies for arms and training, I say they should witness this attack upon an enemy of society. They are evacuating the area,

now. Farradyne is trapped and unless he surrenders within the next half hour, atomic weapons will be used. And then we will never learn the thoughts of the mind that has directed the decay of the moral fiber of our people. We will never know why a man, given the opportunities that many finer men have been denied, chose as his life's work--"

Carolyn laughed hysterically and Farradyne went below for a look.

Morgan and Roberts were waiting on either side of the door; they fell upon him and pinned him to the deck and held him there, and Carolyn stood above him gloatingly.

The Lancaster shook with the throb of depth-charges.

XXIX

Farradyne struggled against his captors. He'd been as blind a fool as he always had been, to let them sit there together. "Let me up!" he stormed. "Let me up so we can escape--"

"Shut the hell up!"

Farradyne struggled.

There was a blasting roar that stunned them all; it shook the Lancaster viciously. The trickle-sound of water through the astrodome was covered by the ear-splitting thunder, but when the tumult died the trickle had become a full stream that came running down the control room stairway in a cataract.

There came another blast, closer still. The lights flickered as the shock of the ship snapped the relays back and forth. Carolyn cried, "Hurry!"

The enemy pilot, lame and cramped from hours of being taped, struggled up the stairs. A moment later, deep in the ship, relays and circuit breakers clicked home.

Farradyne roared, "You fools! Stop that guy aloft! Why do you think I sent Norma Ha--"

Morgan cuffed him backhanded and drove his head hard against the deck. His senses reeled and the sheer physical shock

of the next burst made his head roll from side to side.

An upsurge of pressure told Farradyne that the enemy pilot had started to take off from the lake bottom. Flashes of bursting explosive winked at the ports; then the blasts came less shockingly loud as the Lancaster hiked into the open air.

Farradyne fought himself awake. "Let him escape and we--"

Carolyn's shrill laugh drowned his weak voice.

* * *

The radio went on, as accursedly unanswerable as always:

"Farradyne's spacecraft has been trapped and fired upon, and now has been flushed from cover. The criminal is hoping to flee through the most thorough sky-cover that has ever been assembled. He cannot hope to win through, ladies and gentlemen. I wish we had video here in the early morning light, so that you could see this vivid spectacle of the eternal battle between the forces of good and evil!

"But we'll all be there when Farradyne goes down to the death in flame he so richly deserves. Above him now are the jet bombers and above them are squadron upon squadron of Terran Space Guard ships, and above them lie the Interplanetary Space Guard to fire the final coup de grace if Farradyne can run this gauntlet of righteous wrath that far.

"His flare trail is dimmed by the pinpoints of flashing death that seek him out. On every side of me are ships spewing torpedoes, guided missiles with target-seeking radar in their sleek noses, that will end this reign of terror once they find their mark. It--"

The radio clicked audibly and a forceful voice came on:

"Attention! Attention all listeners! Attention Spacecraft Lancaster and Charles Farradyne! This is the office of The Secretary of Solar Defense, Undersecretary Marshall White speaking. All persons, whether official or unofficial, whether citizen or military, are hereby charged with the safety of Charles Farradyne and the Lancaster model Eighty One in Farradyne's

possession. This is a 'Cease Fire' order. All persons are hereby ordered to offer Charles Farradyne whatever he may request in the nature of manpower, machinery, supplies, protection, and safe-conduct; so that he may deliver his spacecraft to the Terran Arsenal at Terra Haute, Indiana."

Morgan scowled at Farradyne.

Carolyn cried, "Friends in the high places!"

The undersecretary's voice went on: "Within the hour, Miss Norma Hannon, onetime associate of Howard Clevis, undercover agent attached to this office on free duty, has presented irrevocable evidence to show that the love-lotus operations have been part and parcel of an unsuspected plot against humanity by denizens of an extra-solar culture. Since Farradyne's spacecraft contains the only known device enabling matter to exceed the velocity of light, its delivery to the Arsenal is deemed Top Priority. All persons are charged--"

Farradyne shrugged himself out of the grip of the truckmen. "Get the hell aloft and grab that bastard running the ship!" he snarled at them.

* * *

The other enemy rushed forward. Roberts caught a hard fist on the jaw and reeled back. Farradyne chopped in a wide swing with the edge of his hand and sent the enemy back against the little bar in the salon. Morgan looked stunned, but he turned and started for the stairway at a dead run.

"So I couldn't get through?" asked Farradyne bitterly. "So I'm licked?"

Carolyn looked at him, but said nothing. The stillness outside was so marked that her silence was almost painful after the noise of the bombardment.

Then she shrugged. "You poor fool! You've just bought your own doom."

"So," said Farradyne, "by digging out the rats that gnaw at our roots we've toppled our tree?"

Carolyn nodded soberly. "We'd hoped to win you by stealth, but we're prepared. The starships are loaded with mercurite right now."

"I hate to start quoting Patrick Henry," snapped Farradyne. "So I'll just suggest that you think over the reason why they want me at the Arsenal."

She looked at him.

"We've always been handy with a screwdriver," he said. "Our race. And we know we couldn't copy this drive before the mercurite starts to fall. But there is enough time to load up my Lancaster and take it out." He roared with harsh laughter. "You didn't mind dying if you could take me with you. Well, maybe Solans won't mind dying if we can rid the universe of a bunch of lice, either."

"And what alternative do you offer?" she whispered, white-faced.

"Complete surrender," he snarled. "Complete surrender!" And then he recalled the history he had been forced to learn as a schoolboy: history, a subject of dry dates and dry events, a factual symposium of war and war and war--of conflict and hatred and death. Then had come the realization of Peace, which started to turn the course of history from attack and reprisal, and war and defeat, and victor and vanquished. A just peace, started in the Twentieth Century, which ended oppression and subjection.

Farradyne looked at Carolyn with a cynical smile. "We demand unconditional surrender," he said bitterly. "Then we move in and number off your people. With a careful tally of our own losses, we choose a similar number from a fish-bowl. So many men to be cold-bloodedly murdered. So many virgins to be ravished. So many wives left without husbands, and so many husbands left without wives. Children to such-and-such a number left homeless, and a certain quantity made to stand in the street so that automobiles can run them down." His voice rose to a roar. "Damn it, woman, do you think we're vultures? You've pushed us around for fifty years, but now you know damned well that we

have what it takes to kick back." His voice fell back to normal, even lower, as he said, "It's me asking you, now. What'll you have?"

She looked at him. "What am I?" she asked, just as quietly as he. "A species of louse to be pinched out, or an adversary vanquished? An un-victorious warrior?"

"You're what you want to be."

Carolyn turned and went up the stairs to the control room where Morgan was standing behind the pilot with a strong hammerlock closed tight. Farradyne was close behind her.

"I'll be the defeated warrior," she said. She uttered three words in her native sing-song and the man in the pilot's chair stopped struggling. She went to the radio and picked up the microphone and started to broadcast.

It was a long series of staccato sounds that were sometimes musical and just as often discordant, as the tones rose and fell seemingly without pattern. Then she turned to face Farradyne.

"You win. Again you win," she told him. "Somehow you always do, and maybe--maybe--I'm glad it's over!"

Tears spilled down her cheeks as she stumbled away from him.

* * *

Farradyne looked down at the face, as pale and wan as the hospital sheets. Her eyes opened slowly and saw him. Her smile was genuine, but far from robust. Farradyne squeezed her hand gently and said, "Relax, Norma. It's all over."

"You're sure?"

"As sure as any man can be. There's been a batch of meetings and conferences, and lots and lots of gold braid and striped trousers. I got strictly left behind when the top-level boys moved in. So now all you have to do is get well."

Her eyes were large and hurt-animal luminous. "I know. It's not the excitement. It's the cure. I had to hang on to my nervous

system too long after being freed, they tell me. It's left me washed-out--but I'll be all right, Charles."

"Good. You've got to be."

"You talk," she said. "I'm--tell me what happened?"

"First thing, they sat on the guys that were in the Lancaster with Carolyn and among them they discovered a space engineer. They held them as hostages against my return, and several of us went to Lyra with Carolyn as interpreter. We made 'em cough up Clevis and about thirty-five other boys who'd been too smart for them to let free. It's all been concluded nicely. I have my license back for honest, and just between you and me, I have enough contracts already to make a mint of moola out of the interstellar business. I can buy more spacers soon, and then I can let someone else go a-spacing. Maybe I'd like to retire, honey--"

She looked up at him and smiled. "Is that a proposal of marriage?"

He nodded.

Norma pulled him down and gave him her lips. Then as he stood up again, he saw that her eyes were filled with tears.

"Norma--?" he said plaintively.

"Charles, it wouldn't work."

"But--"

Norma smiled gently through her tears. "Not that, Charles," she said. "You were thinking about Frank, and the years of hate. Since then I've come to know you and admire you, but I can't really love you. I--"

He saw something glow momentarily in her eyes and he waited patiently.

"Howard is a strong man," she said simply. "He used Frank, and then he used me, and finally he used you. And hellflowers took me away from Howard, and then they took Howard. And you brought me back and now you've brought Howard back to me, and--"

Farradyne interrupted her: "Be happy, baby!" He bent down and kissed her. Then he turned on his heel and left the room. He

paused long enough in the corridor to shake the vacuum out of his feelings and then went down to the waiting room.

"Howard? She's awake and feeling fit, even though weak. A bit of the sight and touch of you would work wonders. She wants you."

* * *

Clevis nodded and started for the door. Farradyne caught him by the arm and turned him around. "Look," he said with a crookedly amused grin, "I want to be second-best man."

"Any damned day in the week, Charley," said Howard Clevis.

Farradyne sat down in a chair and waited. He lit a cigarette and blew smoke at his toes. Somehow he felt disappointed in himself; he should have been despondent instead of content.

And then the plume of smoke curled around a pair of slender ankles and Farradyne realized what his unfinished business was.

The waiting room resounded gently with a delicate musical chord, operatic in quality like a trio of angel, hoyden, and devil singing a bacchanal. He smiled and looked up at her. "Any damned day in the week," he promised, getting to his feet.

Against his face, softly, Carolyn laughed. "But you don't even know my name!"

"I'll find out," he promised. "Later."

■ ■ ■

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