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THE SENTINEL STARS

IT WAS A WORLD OF SLAVES, SODDEN AND CONTENT UNTIL ONE MAN DARED REBEL! THE SHATTERING NOVEL OF A HUGELY PROBABLE FUTURE!  BY LOUIS CHARBONNEAU



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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE SENTINEL STARS ***

THE SENTINEL STARS

**A NOVEL OF THE FUTURE BY
LOUIS CHARBONNEAU**

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evidence that the U.S. copyright on this publication was renewed.]**

**With love to
Helen and Bruce**

TRH-247

That meant he was the two-hundred-and-forty-seventh citizen with the name Thomas Robert Hendley. His name, of course, was never used. The Organization found numbers more efficient than names.

Only, TRH-247 wasn't any other citizen. He was himself, different from anyone else, and he had to do something about it.

So he quit work; smuggled himself into the forbidden pleasures of a Freeman Camp; found boredom and nonidentity there, too; committed the ultimate rebellion, using a false number; and got the ultimate punishment—banishment.

He took the girl with him, for her crime was equal to his. The only problem he had to face now was—survival!

A PROPHETIC NOVEL OF AN
EASILY FORECAST FUTURE
WHEN A CITIZEN HAD TO FIT
THE MACHINE—OR PERISH....

THE SENTINEL STARS
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1

The morning after. In the underground streets and the wide arcades lined with shops, curling colored streamers rustle under the feet of night workers hurrying home to their rooms. Automatic street cleaners snuffle at plastic cups and empty bottles strewn outside of vending bars and recreation halls—snuffle like some curious animal, suck, devour and move on, their fat wheels whispering on the pavement. Marquees overhead still wink with last night's slogans:

ONE FOR ALL—ALL FOR ONE!
WORLD HAILS MERGER!

The Merger is complete. East is West, and black is white. Now the talk can cease. Now the viewscreens, the discussion forums, the recreation hours, the coffee debates, the public opinion polls, the conversations of lovers can turn to other things.

The Organization is One. Freedom is all.

Rebellion can be a bomb or a cry of pain, a shout of defiance or a mute, sullen face.

Or a man lying in bed, motionless.

The building in which TRH-247 lay was a circle of apartments bounding the Architectural Center, where he worked, like the ring around Saturn. Its outer façade was windowless, a curving face of concrete thirty stories high. The windowed inner circle looked across a broad courtyard toward the concentration of offices in the Center. Moving walks joined the residential ring to its activity core like spokes in a wheel. Because of the blind outer wall, common to all buildings in the Organization, the sun was visible to those living and working in the Center for only a brief period at midday.

The sunrise belonged to the Free.

Yet, through the unease of his hangover, TRH-247 was aware of the coming of day. Without opening his eyes he had been conscious of the gradual dilution of the room's darkness into gray, of the pink glow creeping from the corners of the room to spread up the walls, and at last of the splendid aurora of brightness climbing the east wall. Had he been asleep, he would have been gently conditioned to wakefulness by the artificial dawn.

Feeling the weight of light and warmth harsh upon his lids, he waited for the bird call which came every morning at precisely six o'clock. In spite of the fact that he was anticipating it, the tuneful whistle made him start. His eyes flew open. He felt a slow draining away of tension.

The psychology of it was wrong, he thought. Anything as naturally unpleasant as an alarm to wake you should be simply and directly jarring. The bird song, monotonously cheerful every morning, was actually a depressant.

He wondered if a real bird singing would have the same effect.

The question was idle, and he wasn't sure why it had occurred to him. But a great many such speculations, equally idle, had been disturbing him lately. All, he supposed, because of the Merger.

The Merger. His mind rejected the word like an assembly machine spitting out a defective part. In a deliberate effort to detour that line of thought he nudged the button which turned on the viewscreen set into the south wall. It brought into focus a picture of a parklike setting in the early morning, a green glade drenched in sunlight. The camera's eye moved close to a cluster of flowers and focused sharply on a single red rose glistening with dew. Beyond the trembling rose, blurred but distinguishable, two naked figures appeared, running. A man and a woman. His hands caught her from behind and the pair tumbled together onto the wet grass. A shrill peal of woman's laughter rang. The background music soared to a joyous crescendo, and the camera turned discreetly away to embrace the sky, vaulting in a breathless leap from horizon to horizon.

The final chord of music crashed. The picture faded out abruptly. An announcer appeared, smiling cheerfully. "Good morning, you late and early viewers! You have just seen 'Tender Shoots,' a Freedom Play written by...."

TRH-247 clicked off the sound. He turned impatiently from the screen to stare at the blankness of the ceiling. Always the same fadeout, he thought. The same idyllic setting, the same sensuous appeal, the same bronzed hero and heroine finding joy unconfined and forever after in a Freeman Camp. Why not? It was society's dream. It had always been his own. What was wrong with it now? Or with him?

He shook his head angrily, as if the gesture would help him shrug off his restlessness. "Thomas Robert Hendley," he said aloud, "you should get up."

The habit was recent—not talking to himself, a practice so old he found it perfectly natural, but the indulgence of thinking of himself in the old-fashioned names instead of his official designation. For some reason he found it strangely pleasing to think of himself as Thomas Robert Hendley. It didn't matter that there had been, in the history of the Organization, two hundred and forty-six other Thomas Robert Hendleys. None of them had his particular set of brown eyes, his hard-to-comb black hair, his six feet of angular frame, his aches, his memories, his four inches of childhood scar on his right forearm, his restless dreams, his hopes, his mind.

They weren't *him*.

Frowning, Hendley continued to stare at the ceiling. He knew that he barely had time to bathe, wipe off his beard, dress, eat, and still get to work on time, even though his office was less than five minutes away and he was not due until seven. He moved slowly in the mornings. He couldn't gulp down his breakfast, and he liked to linger over his coffee and his first cigarette. Still he did not move.

Unwanted, a trickle of memories sifted into his mind. Fragments of the previous day's celebration. People shouting, drinking, dancing. The whole city a bobbing, swirling sea of color, noise, confusion. Joy, joy—and one unsmiling mouth, one pair of sober eyes, one arm unraised in salute. His.

Well, he had taken care of the sober eyes. He had got drunk with the rest of them. And he had still felt alone, apart.

All along he had felt out of it—through all the weeks of endless news coverage on the home and public viewscreens, the interminable debates at work, the hotly argued discussion forums. No one had talked of anything else. And there had been a strange intensity in the endless great debate,

which often erupted into angry words and shaking fists and red faces, as if everyone sensed a significance in this last Merger, a special importance that was neither voiced nor even consciously realized.

Once it had been voiced: Hendley remembered one discussion forum for his group a week before. He had been sitting between RED-498, his Assigned, the woman he was soon to contract with, and a short, fat man in the yellow coverall of a 2-Dayman. The round man had constantly been rising to demand the floor, grabbing his seat mike and shouting so loudly that his words over the loudspeaker were distorted and often incomprehensible. His round, full face had a squinty look, the triangle of eyes and nose being squeezed close together like a cluster of dots in the center of a circle. Even his eyebrows added to the effect—blond tufts of hair thick next to the bridge of his nose but disappearing as they fanned out. Below this concentration, a small red mouth pursed angrily.

"They just don't remember," he complained to Hendley. "They don't remember!"

He jumped up as another speaker finished. "Now listen!" he cried. "Think a minute. Just think! What is it that has made this Organization great? It's growth, that's what it is. Being big enough to do more things for more people, and do them better! What did we have before? I'll tell you what we had! A lot of little organizations, all squabbling among themselves, and the worker caught in the middle. There weren't any Freeman Camps then. There wasn't any chance for a man to get his tax debt paid off, not a chance in the world. Now we all have that chance, every one of us. *That's* what's important!"

The fat man sat down, breathing hard as if he had been running. He nodded with emphatic triumph at Hendley and RED-498. "This Merger is the greatest thing that could happen," he declared. "You'll see if it isn't!"

Others spoke. A tall, broad-shouldered man in the respected beige coverall of a 1-Dayman, adorned with the stitched emblem of an athlete, rose to deliver a speech which was quickly diverted from the Merger to the virtues of competitive sports as one of the Organization's finest forms of recreation. A plaintive voice wondered if maybe the Organization wasn't just getting so big that it oughtn't to get bigger. A woman with the calm, crisp voice of an intellectual pointed out that the Eastern and Western Organizations had for

many years been moving steadily toward the Merger—had actually been merged in innumerable ways, not the least of which was the Executive Exchange Program, of which she could speak personally as one who had been proud to work for a year in the Eastern society. And there was one voice from the back of the hall, from someone who remained seated so that Hendley could not see him, whose words made Hendley stiffen and listen attentively.

"What we're trying to do," the unknown man said, "is to pretend that history never was. We're saying it doesn't mean anything to be born a Westerner. Maybe it's right that we should forget that our ancestors fought against the East, and a lot of them died to make sure we wouldn't all be swallowed up. But that doesn't mean we should let ourselves get swallowed up now...."

The fat man beside Hendley had growled with anger. Even RED-498 had been indignant, her ordinarily placid face flushed. "That's silly!" she had cried. "Tell him, TR! Tell him!"

But Hendley had remained silent. The unseen speaker's words had touched a sensitive nerve. We shouldn't let ourselves get swallowed up. By what? What difference did it make to the bottom of the mountain when the banks of snow shifted on a peak perpetually shrouded by clouds? In its immediate effects that's all the Merger really meant—a reshuffling of men at the top. Down at the bottom you wouldn't feel it. You would go on eating the same food, catching the same copter or sidewalk, pushing the same buttons, paying off the same tax debt. Nothing would change.

Hendley had left that meeting deeply disturbed. When RED-498 somewhat surprisingly took the initiative in suggesting that they visit a nearby Public Intercourse Booth for the weekly hour allowed to Assigned, he had pleaded fatigue. Back in his room alone, unaccountably tired, he had drifted into and out of the fringes of uneasy sleep. He could recall thinking that they were taking away the last symbol of personal identity. Everything was to be reduced to One, like those ancient religions in which man strove to lose himself completely in his God and be One with Him. But the new god was one vast, all-encompassing, impersonal Organization.

At last sleep had come. And with it, from some deep recess of his mind, emerged a scene from the old world before the Organization, a world preserved on flickering films in the Historical Museum, a world where men

once walked freely on the shores of a great sea. In the mysterious logic of the dream, it seemed quite natural for TRH-247 to be there, walking on a wide sandy beach, white under a brilliant sun by a blue sea. In the distance there was another distinct beach, and beyond that another—individual crescents of sand succeeding one another. But there were no people. He was alone. He ran in the wet sand close to the water, feeling its coolness and firmness. He ran so fast that his feet hardly seemed to touch, and his heart pounded with exhilaration. Coming to the end of the curving beach, he stopped. And as he stood there watching, the sand moved, lapping outward like the waves of the sea, reaching toward the next beach. And that golden crescent in turn expanded. Hendley felt a nameless terror. He turned and raced back along the shoreline. But at the opposite end the beaches were already meeting, hungry fingers of sand interlacing like lovers' hands. Staring into the distance, Hendley saw that everywhere the sands were flowing into each other, pushing back inland, filling every crevice, covering every footprint, burying every stone, until at last he could see no marking, no line of difference, no beginning or end. And he knew that all of the beaches of the world had merged into one. His heart filled his chest with a painful drumming. Looking wildly all around him, he saw with terrifying clarity that the area where he stood was no longer like a beach at all. There was no beach, nothing anywhere but a great empty desert bordering the sea....

It was past 6:40 in the morning. TRH-247 lay in bed staring at the ceiling. If he got up now, he thought, if he did without a shower, without breakfast or coffee, he could still be at his drafting board on time.

And something would have ended.

How did you rebel? How did you protest against a system that knew you only as a number? How could you defy a vast network of computers that knew what you were going to do before you did it—knew, and saw your defiance merely as an equation to be speedily solved. How did you change directions on a one-way street?

In his own work, architecture, when perfection left a residue of discontent you introduced a flaw. You broke one of the rules. And maybe what you ended up with would be better than the perfect thing, in its flaw as flawless as an artist's distortion of the world to his own image of it. Hendley had done it himself, taking pure harmony and proportion of form and trying to make it individual. He had....

"No," he muttered aloud. "You only pushed a button."

For if one line could be altered, the master computer in the basement of the Architectural Center had already worked out the six hundred and sixty-eight ways in which that single change could be made without weakening the resulting structure. The Organization encouraged that kind of individuality. It wasn't originality at all.

Yet the principle was valid. You had to break one of the rules. You had to get out of step.

And there was a way. Work was the foundation of the Organization—the work day, the work hour, the work minute. This was the basic commodity, the medium of exchange, the measure of social status. Work to pay off your tax debt. Work to climb the rungs on the ladder that led to freedom.

Simply lying there, without lifting a hand, he could create a flaw.

2

About ten o'clock that morning TRH-247 stood on an underground pedestrian ramp watching the crowds flow past him—shoppers, tourists, workers, going and coming, stepping with the ease of long habit from the slow to the fast strips of the moving sidewalks. All the faces were different, Hendley thought. He was less than a five-minute rise from the Architectural Center, but it was quite probable that he had never once seen any of these faces before. These people might live in the same building, eat from the same venders, visit the same Rec halls, even work at the Center. But under the carefully staggered schedules in the structure of the Organization's work pattern, schedules which enabled 32,000,000 people in this particular City No. 9 to live in a circumscribed area without trampling one another underfoot, the chances were good that none of these people had ever crossed Hendley's path before. Simply because he had never been in this spot at this hour on this day of the week.

Hendley was a 3-Dayman. His identifying coverall was blue. He worked on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays except during his assigned vacation month, when he customarily used his travel pass to visit one of the tourist recreation centers in another of the major cities. It was unthinkable that his vacation time would find him this close to home, and it was equally unlikely that he would be there on any of his four free days of the week, for even these days were quite taken up with the designated periods of recreation, education, physical therapy and discussion. In fact, Hendley was experiencing the rare sense of freedom which came from having nothing to do.

This was what it must be like in the Freeman Camps, he reflected—seven days a week to enjoy the luxury of complete choice, of having each day stretch before you like a blank sheet of paper onto which you could dictate absolutely anything you wanted.

Exhilarated by the freshness of the moment, he stared in fascination at the passing faces. It was like trying to study the waves of the sea. They dissolved even as you glanced at them and were instantly replaced by

others. He began to feel a little dizzy from the effort of isolating the moving figures. You could only know a wave, he thought, know its form and strength and motion, by riding it.

He stepped onto the slow strip of the sidewalk.

Instantly the faces which had been streaming past him were arrested. He studied the man standing closest to him. He had Eastern blood, to judge by the Oriental caste of his features, the thick shock of black hair, the full upper eyelids. Hendley suspected that he caught the reflection of permalenses coating the dark eyes. The stranger wore a green coverall over a small, wiry body. A commissary worker, Hendley guessed, on an eleven to seven day schedule, going to work. Or a finish carpenter, skilled in manipulating the buttons which caused graceful designs to be carved in plastic and metal, on his way home from a two until ten morning shift. Middle-aged, with an unusual Eastern name that would have a low number after the initials. Devoted to his Assigned, the father of a brood of black-haired children, perhaps a boy to inherit his craft.

This latter fancy evaporated. The stranger wore green. A finish carpenter would be further advanced than a 4-Dayman, would be closer to paying off his tax debt.

That was one of the troubles with the color designation of the universal coverall, Hendley thought. It instantly established status. It explained the way the Easterner's black eyes kept flicking forward with an expression of mingled respect and envy toward the beige coverall of a man several steps ahead—a tall, confident-looking man with carefully combed gray hair that matched the gray sleeve emblem identifying him as being in Administration.

Beige. A 1-Dayman. One step away from Freeman status. Son of a successful father, undoubtedly also an Organization official, who had passed on only a small tax debt to his fortunate son. Within a few years his debt to the Organization would be paid off. He would be free to enjoy the lifetime privileges of a Freeman Camp.

Hendley felt a twinge of—was it merely envy?

A flash of red caught his eye, speeding past him on the rapid sidewalk strip. On impulse he stepped to the side of the slow lane and made the short jump

to the faster strip, using the standard technique of a few quick running steps before leaping. The blur of red he had glimpsed was a good distance ahead of him by the time he had completed the maneuver. But the red figure was standing motionless on the speeding walk. By threading his way forward through the crowd, Hendley was able to narrow the gap.

He stopped when he was ten feet behind the girl.

His first fleeting impression was confirmed. The red coverall shaped itself to her body under the gentle pressure of the air currents as she rode. Hendley couldn't help contrasting the figure of his Assigned—tending already toward plumpness, sturdy of calf and thigh, heavy of neck—with the slender grace of the girl in red. Her hips were round, but they flowed inward to a narrow waist. Below, her legs were long and straight; above, her back was a supple curve, her neck a beautifully feminine column of white. Her hair was gold, cropped close to the nape of her neck.

Hendley moved two steps closer. He wanted to see her face. Would it match the sensitivity of her body? Would it be fine of feature, vivid and alive? Or would her body's promise be blunted by coarseness in her face?

It seemed more important than it should have been. It was as if the girl was part of this morning's freshness, its sense of escape from—something. He didn't want her eyes to be vacant or stupid or self-satisfied. He wanted her mouth to be neither prim nor slack, neither sullen nor fixed in an empty smile.

Another step brought him to her side. For a moment he didn't turn his head. He stared forward, the rushing air cool against his eyes, his neck growing stiff with the effort of remaining still. Then he looked at her.

Her eyes were a warm brown with flecks of green. They were full on him, as if she too had been staring. They were neither appraising nor aloof—but they weren't empty. They seemed to be waiting, as he had been waiting. He felt his heart begin to labor. You are searching too, he thought. You are hoping for something different.

In the long moment while their eyes held, it seemed to him that the soft, wide curve of her lips began to bend upward at one corner in a tentative smile. He wanted to speak but hesitated.

Then she was gone. Frantically he looked back over his shoulder. He was in time to see her nimbly adjusting her forward movement to the pace of the slow lane. Before Hendley had time to move she was stepping onto an off-ramp, already well behind him.

Damn! He jumped recklessly from the fast strip. He had been so absorbed that her quick action had caught him by surprise. In his haste he failed to take the few running steps that would have countered the sudden braking when his feet hit the skidproof surface of the slow lane. His shoes caught and he plunged headlong.

He skidded face down on the sidewalk. Someone was laughing. A hand gripped him under the armpit to haul him to his feet. A black-browed face grinned into his.

"When did you learn to ride the walks?" the man jibed. "You'll never live to be a Freeman that way!"

Hendley grunted in shamefaced appreciation for the help. He felt embarrassed and angry with himself. The laughter did not annoy him. You had to expect that if you took a spill. Knowing how to gauge the sidewalks was as basic as walking. You couldn't expect sympathy when you forgot. What angered him most of all was the possibility that the girl in red had seen him fall.

He alighted at the next off-ramp. On the preceding incline almost a hundred yards away, a steady stream of people flowed out to the street and spilled into the torrent of pedestrians there. It was impossible to pick out the girl. Her bright coverall was now a disguise rather than a beacon. Red, the designation of the 5-Dayman, was the most common color. It suddenly seemed as if the whole street was splotted with red.

He hurried back, astonished at the sharpness of his disappointment. There had been something about the girl—something more than the beauty of her face or the curving suppleness of her body—that had made him want to know her. Or had he imagined a reflection in her eyes of his own discontent, his own yearning?

The street was lined with the Organization's bewildering variety of shops, service outlets, offices, vending cafes, entertainment centers. Crowded arcades tunneled under one of the great cylindrical work centers. Nearby a

series of escalators trundled down to the tube station on the next level. Hendley heard the rumble of a departing train.

She could have gone anywhere. Even if she had entered one of the nearby shops or office buildings, even if he had known which one, he would have had little chance of finding her. He could recall no emblem on her coverall that would suggest where she worked or what she did.

He stopped at the foot of the ramp where the girl had disappeared. It was hopeless. An accidental collision of two specks in an interminable dust storm of people, almost instantly blown apart. What were the odds against another....

She was standing in the arched entry of a building, staring at him. As he pushed his way toward her she started to turn, averting her gaze, taking one step as if about to leave. The motion was arrested, and she seemed to be suspended there, poised on the verge of flight. She didn't move until he spoke.

"I was afraid I'd lost you."

"Were you?"

"Why did you try to get away?"

"I don't know what you mean. I work here."

Hendley glanced at the sign over the doors: AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH CENTER. Above them, above the barren crust of the earth, another eyeless concrete cylinder thrust upward toward the sky like a raised fist.

"You're working today?" he asked.

She was studying him now. "Yes."

It was strange, he thought, how much was already understood between them, how much had no need to be said.

"When can we meet?"

"I—that wouldn't be wise."

"When?" he demanded. "This afternoon? Tonight?"

"No, no." She licked her lips nervously. "I'm late. I have to go. Please—we're not of the same status. There's no use—we'd be seen."

His hand went out quickly to grip her arm, and she flinched sharply. His fingers held her, tight on the soft flesh under the coarse red fabric. "Don't you want to see me again?"

She glanced anxiously toward the doors of the building, as if afraid that an Inspector might be watching them. "That doesn't have anything to do with it. It—it's impossible." Then she seemed to wilt, her weight sagging against his supporting hand. "Yes," she said helplessly, "I do want to see you."

"What time? When are you free?"

She hesitated. "Four o'clock this afternoon. But—"

He had already been casting about for a place. "The Historical Museum," he said quickly. "Main floor. As soon as you can make it after four. Do you know where that is?"

She nodded. There was wonder in her face, crowding out the tension of worry. "What's your name?" she asked.

Automatically he started to give his official identity. "TRH—" He broke off. "Hendley," he said abruptly. "Call me Hendley."

His hand slid down her arm to examine the identity disc on her bracelet. Her number was ABC-331. He smiled, for the combination of letters was rare. "What does the 'A' stand for?"

Startled, she stared at him for a moment before answering. "Ann," she murmured. "But nobody ever—"

"I know. That's why I want to call you Ann."

Their eyes held for several seconds. He could feel the pulse beating in her wrist. Her red lips were parted in an expression of surprise. Suddenly she pulled her hand free.

"I have to go," she said. Whirling, she ran toward the doors of the Research Center.

"Four o'clock," he called after her.

But she didn't look back.

For several minutes after the girl had disappeared, TRH-247 lingered near the entry to the building, reluctant to leave. Excitement made his skin prickle and tighten sensitively. Ann, he thought. Her voice was soft, light, musical, her wrist so slim his fingers had overlapped when he'd held it. Shadows enlarged her eyes, and fear, too. She was afraid, but she would meet him. She wanted to.

Across the way from the Research Center there was a sidewalk vender with a cluster of tables. He charged a cup of coffee, showing his identity disc to the machine to be photographed, and sat at one of the small tables.

Why had he been attracted to her so quickly? Why this keen anticipation? Was it just because she was pretty? He didn't think so. And it was not the simple need of sex. Organization knows, RED-498 was willing enough, and the once-a-week hour they were allotted in one of the PIB's had always seemed satisfactory.

But only that, he corrected himself. A habit, a routine like the discussion forums and the sports and the therapy hours. Satisfactory, but never exciting.

Perhaps it was the fact that he had found the girl in red himself. RED-498 had been selected for him almost a year before by the Marital Contract Computer. His complete dossier had been fed into the computer. The process of choosing an appropriate partner for the contract from all the women available in City No. 9 of the proper age, size, intelligence, and personality traits, weighing also such factors of compatibility as the size of the tax debt carried by the woman and the man, had taken the computer exactly thirty-two seconds.

It surprised Hendley a little to realize that he felt no guilt, no sense of betrayal of RED-498. The reason was simple. There was no emotional involvement between them—only a comfortable arrangement. She was passive by nature, casually accepting their impending contract. The computer had selected them for each other, and it would never have occurred to her to question or approve its judgment. With a feeling of chagrin, Hendley realized that, were he to disappear, his Assigned would

experience no more than a brief period of concern, which would end as soon as the computer selected a more dependable partner for her.

There ought to be more between a man and a woman, he thought—something more than the body's casual hunger, more than good will, more than the careful balance of factors weighed by a computer.

And maybe he had found it.

He finished his coffee. He had been sitting at the table by the vender for no more than ten minutes. When he glanced across the way at the Research Center, idly wondering what ABC-331 did there, he saw her. She was standing at the fringe of the entryway, peering up and down the street with an air unmistakably furtive. Hendley jumped to his feet and started toward her. She had not seen him. Before he could fight his way through the mass of pedestrians between them, the girl slipped into the crowd, walking rapidly.

Hendley reached the entry where she had stood a moment before. She was nowhere in sight.

For an hour Hendley wandered the area where the girl in red had vanished. A dozen times he thought that he glimpsed her face in a crowd inside a shop or across a street or on one of the overhead walks. Each time he was mistaken.

He tried to tell himself that her actions didn't mean that she had lied. Perhaps she'd been sent on an errand. For all he knew her job with the Research Center might be as a messenger, who would enter and leave the building a dozen times during the day. But he couldn't shake the impression that she had been looking for *him* when she emerged—looking anxiously, afraid that he might still be there.

His pleasure in the day's defiant freedom was gone. It seemed pointless to wander the streets. The time that had stretched before him like a blank sheet of paper now seemed merely empty, the sense of freedom a futile gesture. What had he hoped to gain? Surely he had known from the beginning of the

day that, sooner or later, he would have to return to his room, to the only life he knew, to the inevitable reckoning that waited for him.

A flashing marquee caught his eye. SEE THE INTERIOR OF A FREEMAN CAMP! the sign shrilled. REVEALING! EXCITING! AUTHENTIC!

Hendley hesitated. It was a come-on, he knew. Very little that was revealing or exciting would be shown. But the possibility teased his mind. Even a brief glimpse was better than nothing. And he was tired of walking.

He presented his identity disc to the ticket machine. The show was expensive, costing 30D, or thirty minutes debit against his work time, but he felt reckless. He recognized the symptom as dangerous. Sometimes workers went completely berserk under the same impulse, going off on wild sprees that could run up many years debit, nullifying an equal period of work and prudent self-denial. Hendley had known one man in his own department at the Architectural Center who had fallen back from 3-Day to 4-Day status as the cost of a free-spending one-month vacation. Recognizing the danger, Hendley deliberately shrugged it off.

He had arrived at a bad time. A newsreel was being shown, devoted almost entirely to coverage of the great Merger. After the news he had to sit through a poorly produced, badly written and ineptly acted Freedom Play, no better than those he could see without cost on his own room viewscreen. But at last the feature attraction began. Hendley sat erect in his seat, watching intently.

The pictures were authentic enough. They had been taken through the telescopic lens of a long-range camera. The first views showed only a long, unbroken wall about fifteen feet high, above which trees could be seen. Real trees, Hendley thought. Then, from a higher vantage, the camera peeked over the wall.

The section of the pictures showing the interior of the Freeman Camp had been greatly enlarged at the cost of sharpness of detail. Nevertheless Hendley was able to define beyond the high wall a cleared area perhaps a hundred feet across, ending at a grove of trees and thickly growing bushes, broken here and there by foot paths. For several minutes little more could be seen. Hendley's heartbeat slowed to normal. He began to feel an edge of

disappointment. He'd seen this much before. Everyone knew about the closely guarded wall and the security clearing beyond it, a protection against anyone trying to sneak into the camp unlawfully. At the very least he had expected something new....

His throat went dry. A cluster of white-clad figures materialized from the green mass of the woods, moving into the cleared area. One of the figures ran ahead of the others, who set off in pursuit. These were Freeman, evidently playing some kind of a game. A ripple of excitement ran through the theater. The pursuing men in white caught up with the leading figure, and they all converged in a writhing, tumbling mass, arms and legs flying. The spectacle was so violent it resembled a battle. One of the men broke free—the same one? Hendley wondered. Perhaps he was "it" in the game. His white coverall was torn, flapping as he ran. One of the other men dove after him, catching him by the ankles and tripping him up. The pursuers closed in....

The screen blurred, out of focus. An audible groan filled the theater. Hendley's heart was thumping. When the picture cleared, one of the Freeman was lying casually on the grass alone, apparently staring up at the sky. It was the one with the torn coverall. The others were racing off into the distance. They disappeared under the cover of the trees.

That was all. For a little while after the Freeman vanished, the camera continued to probe the line of trees hopefully. Hendley kept wishing it would return to the man lying in the clearing, but it did not.

Another sequence began in the film, but it merely showed some of the camp facilities. No Freeman were visible. Hendley's thoughts kept going back to the men he had seen. What carefree game had they been playing? What must it be like to engage in such openly abandoned sport? To lie endlessly on cool grass, watching the sun? To follow any impulse at will, with no thought of the cost?

Perhaps all the years of work and waiting were worth while, if in the end you could be truly free, your tax debt paid off and limitless recreation yours to enjoy. Was he willing to throw that away—to exchange it for a brief affair with a girl he didn't know, whose brown-green eyes probably held only what he wanted to read into them?

The remainder of the picture was short and unrevealing. When the screen went dark Hendley felt a sudden surge of anger. They teased you with freedom, he thought, just as the theater's marquee promised untold delights and offered instead a spoonful of stolen pleasure. And in the meanwhile they housed you in a blind room in a blind building, kept you busy pushing buttons in work that made you no more than a mechanical extension of a much more clever machine, and regimented your days and hours so that you wouldn't have time to think that there might be more to life than this—more even than the dream of ultimate ease and endless games.

No, he thought. It was more than the lure of hope in a girl's eyes that attracted him. To seek her out, to meet her again, was simply to give specific direction to the day's gesture of defiance. What he hoped to accomplish by it, he didn't know. Where it would all end didn't matter. It was something he had to do.

But she might not come.

He checked the time. It was after three o'clock. With a sense of urgency he rose and left the theater.

3

There was something unusual about the Historical Museum, oddly unsettling, and it was awhile before Hendley realized what it was. The place was almost empty. Here and there a few individuals or small groups of people shuffled slowly before the exhibits. A guide was pompously discoursing before a model of one of the old, exposed cities wiped out more than a hundred years before in the short war that scoured and blackened half the earth. His voice seemed loud only because the museum itself was so strangely silent in contrast with the hubbub and confusion outside in the streets.

Hendley had made a quick survey of the main floor of the museum, his eyes alert for the red coverall ABC-331 had worn. She was not there. It was well past four. He stared blankly at an exhibit of old weapons, trying to dull his mind against his bitter disillusionment.

The weapons were from another world beyond understanding—a world of great weapons of destruction, and of small, frightening individual weapons, from knives to clubs to firearms. That had been a time of personal achievement and personal crime. Now the only real crime was against the Organization and its rules—rules which demanded obedience to the Organization, its directives and its officers; forbade sexual relations between partners not Assigned or otherwise designated by the Organization; made unlawful the theft of Organization property for personal use, or the taking of the life of any person indebted to the Organization. Few would break these or the many refinements of the Organization's rules of order (including, Hendley thought, reporting for scheduled work days). Crime carried within itself its own punishment: it cut one off from ultimate freedom and the joys of pure recreation. Detection in an all-seeing, all-controlling, almost completely automated Organization was too certain, the penalty too great.

Hendley smiled wryly. He had joined a select group in his act of rebellion. And if the girl named Ann had come, he had been prepared to....

"Hello."

Hendley spun around. He gaped in astonishment into the warm, green-flecked eyes of ABC-331, and then at the blue coverall she wore, matching his own.

"I didn't think you'd come," she said.

"And I didn't think you would."

Suddenly they were smiling at each other. Hendley turned abruptly toward the weapons exhibit, staring without seeing. The girl moved close to his side. His mind was full of questions, but he didn't ask them. There would be time for that later. "Stay close to me," he murmured, not looking at her. "Just follow what I do."

Without consciously working it out, he found that he had already planned where they would go. The knowledge had been at the back of his mind when he first suggested the Historical Museum as a meeting place. He had been involved with the building's design in his work at the Architectural Center. He knew its floor plan above and below ground—its provisions for utilities, its security precautions, its entrances and exits.

Casually he began to walk among the exhibits, pausing to study some of them, then moving on, the girl following silently. They reached a stairway leading to a lower floor. Hendley nodded at ABC-331. Downstairs there were other exhibits, but he quickly located a corridor leading to some storage rooms and, beyond these, to another stairway.

Moments later they were moving quietly through the low-ceilinged room which housed the building's heating and air-conditioning plant. A steel door led to a narrow passage, which opened onto an underground tunnel carrying a maze of pipes.

"There's a service exit," he said. "It leads outside."

"Outside?" Her eyes showed alarm.

Hendley nodded. The safest place was in the sun.

He found the winding metal staircase he was looking for. He led the way up the stairs. Another steel door at the top was secured, but it opened from the inside. Hendley swung the door open. Sunlight blazed down on them. The girl gasped. Her hand came up to shield her eyes. Hendley quickly climbed through the opening and pulled her up after him. He stripped the belt from

his coverall and used it as a wedge to keep the steel door from closing completely behind them. Then he stood in the naked sunlight and looked down at her.

"They'll never look for us here," he said.

The girl did not reply, but her slim, small hand slipped into his and squeezed gently. She was squinting against the harsh glare. The sun was a white, hot eye rolling in the sky. Its light reflected in a massive blaze of white from the unbroken curve of concrete towering for some thirty stories above them. In the distance other great concrete cylinders glared in the sunlight. A flat table of bare, baked earth, pale and shimmering, stretched between the featureless buildings like the floor of an enormous oven. Far above, sealed, windowless helicopters droned over the city in a steady stream, their blades beating like wings.

She was trembling.

"It's quite safe," Hendley said. "They've been letting people come out for years now, even here. And the Freeman Camps are all exposed like this."

"I know," she said. "It isn't that."

Her smile was apologetic. Her face was still squinting, eyes almost closed, lips drawn back in a bow, and the expression was youthfully innocent and appealing. A strange complex of emotions—compassion, tenderness, delight—engulfed him. Where her mouth was bowed, as if she were about to fling an arrow of words against the white target in the sky, he kissed her. Her lips were soft and dry. A tremor communicated itself from her spine to his hand.

Suddenly she tore her lips away and fell against him, her face turned down, pressing against his chest. "Oh, Hendley!" she cried. "How I've wanted you to do that!"

He held her tightly, a little dazed by the passion behind her words, so unlike the unemotional, almost indifferent acceptance of his Assigned....

He broke off the thought. He didn't want reality, past or future, to intrude on them. It was as if, emerging from the tunnel into the open sunlight, they had removed themselves from the real world, shutting it behind them with an act as simple as closing a door. The Organization existed behind the thick

concrete walls, in the network of underground streets and moving walks—but only there. Not outside. Not in the sun.

Except for the Freeman, he thought unexpectedly.

He put one hand to the girl's hair, feeling its softness bristle at the nape of her neck where it was cut short, then turn soft as water when his fingers passed through the longer curls.

His hand stopped. "Your head is hot," he said. "We'd better get out of the sun."

"I'm all right."

"No. Neither of us is used to this much sun. It'll be shady on the other side."

He led her by the hand, keeping within arm's reach of the curving wall. Here and there they passed steel doors set flush with the smooth concrete, and once a slab of steel in the ground about ten feet from the wall, similar to the one from which they had emerged. He thanked the luck which had made him remember these exits and how to find them.

They reached shade, sharp and definite as black ink on white paper, painting the shape of the building long and flat across the bleak landscape. Coolness struck his face and hands as crisply as a slap. He drew the girl close to the building. Together they sank to the ground.

"Are you sure no one will find us?"

He put his arm around her shoulders. "No one will be looking."

She stared past him at the wasteland extending in every direction between the tall buildings and beyond. "It's so—so empty," she said nervously. "I've never been out before."

"Not many workers have."

"It frightens me."

"Don't look at it."

She looked up at him, and something in her eyes seemed to melt. She quivered spasmodically as he folded her into his arms. Her eyes were wide as his face loomed near, but when he brought his lips to hers, the fringed

lids closed over her eyes like shades drawn against the light. And suddenly her hands were strong and hard on his back, urgent and demanding....

The sun, invisible to them now behind the building, touched the horizon. The bleached earth turned brown, and its surface, apparently flat before, shaped itself into small, shadowed rises and ridges. The air was cooler.

"I saw you leave the Research Center this morning," Hendley said. "Where were you going?"

For an instant something like dismay was naked in her eyes. "You must have seen somebody else," she said quickly.

"Do you think I'd mistake anyone else for you?"

Her face was pink, and now she didn't meet his eyes. "Oh, I—I don't really work there." The words spilled out in a rush. "I was—afraid of you—and I didn't know what to think. So I said I worked there. I really work up the street—I'm a clerk in a dress shop." She looked up at him beseechingly. "I shouldn't have lied."

He was so relieved that he found it easy to forgive her. "You didn't have to be afraid."

"I know that now."

Smiling, he caressed the round curve of her shoulder. The fabric of her coverall, which was still open at the front, was smooth to his touch. Her red garment had been rougher, cheaper....

"Why did you wear blue?" he asked suddenly.

"Because you do. Then if we were seen together, we wouldn't be noticed especially. It's illegal for a 3-Dayman to go out with a girl in red. You know that."

"It's illegal to wear the wrong color, too. Where did you get it—this coverall?"

"From a—a friend."

"She's bigger than you are—here. I like your waist."

"She's not bigger here."

"No." He smiled. "I like that too." He regarded her objectively. "You're very beautiful."

"Don't say that."

"Why not? It's true."

"It's what I'm supposed to be." Her mouth had a sad, reflective curve.

"What does that mean?"

"Just tell me—do you like me?"

"Very much. Don't you know, Ann?"

"Tell me that."

He told her. And the sun went down completely beyond the unseen horizon, leaving behind a gray world. The concrete cylinders loomed larger in the dusk, more forbidding. A wind whined across the unprotected land.

"It's been wonderful out here," she said. "I'll never forget it. At first it scared me, but—not now."

"You'll come out again."

She smiled, staring off into the distance. "Yes, of course."

He felt her shiver. "You're getting cold. We'll have to go in."

"I'm not really cold." She gazed at him seriously. "I'm glad we were both free this afternoon."

He weighed his answer, wondering how she would react. "I wasn't," he said. "Today was a work day for me. I didn't report."

She frowned, staring at him without comprehension.

"It's true," he said. "This wasn't a free day. But I'm glad I didn't work. I'd never have met you."

She was instantly concerned. "You'll be penalized!"

"I suppose so." He smiled at her shocked expression. "What do you think would happen if we were caught together out here? Or if you were found wearing blue?"

"That's different! They'd have to catch us—but they'll *know* you didn't work!" The full implications of his action had reached her, and her eyes were round with dismay—and wonder. "Why? What made you do it?"

"I can't really explain it. Maybe it has something to do with—" For a moment he was withdrawn, searching his own mind. Then he asked, "What do you think about the Merger?"

"I don't think about it much," she said slowly.

"It doesn't mean anything to you?"

She shook her head. "Why should it?"

"It's what started me off. But that was just the"—he thought of the firearms in the Historical Museum exhibit—"the trigger. I was trying to be ... *me*."

She regarded him apprehensively. "What will they do to you?"

He shrugged. "I suppose there's a whole team of computers and technicians somewhere in the Organization that handles these things. I don't imagine I'm the first one."

"Don't do anything like that again," she said urgently. "Promise me you won't."

He said it to please her, not knowing what he meant to do. The world beneath the surface and inside the cylinders was still unreal. "I promise," he said.

Darkness was closing in when they once again circled the wall, looking for the steel door he had wedged open. When they came to it he felt the first real tug of fear. The door seemed tight. He knelt quickly. The heavy weight of the steel had crushed the fabric belt flat—but there was still a narrow opening. The inside latch had not caught.

Hiding his relief, he rose and once more took Ann into his arms. "Don't give back that blue outfit," he said.

"No," she whispered. "No, Hendley."

He kissed her. When he opened the door and took her hand to help her step down, she said, "We should go separately."

Surprised, he pondered the suggestion a moment. "I don't think we were noticed. And the museum is open all night. We can just go back—"

"It would be safer," she insisted. "I—I'll meet you in front of the museum in five minutes. I can find my way out."

He caught the appeal in her voice. And she might be right after all. If they were to use this meeting place again, it was just being sensible to come and go separately.

"All right," he said. "You go first."

Her hand gave his a convulsive squeeze. She dropped down into the tunnel, her steps ringing faintly on the metal staircase. He waited until the sounds had faded off. The sky was a deep blue now, and a single bright star was visible above the horizon. What must it be like to see the whole span of the sky lit up with stars? Now that he knew the way, he could come out and see. There was nothing to prevent him. There had never been anything but the habit of obedience.

When five minutes had passed he stepped onto the stairway, pulling the steel door shut behind him and locking it. He had taken only a couple of steps down the winding stairs when he heard a distinct, flat sound. He went rigid. Motionless, his muscles taut, he waited, listening intently. The narrow aisle along the floor of the tunnel was dimly lighted. High on the stairway he was almost lost in shadows. The sound had been that of a door closing gently under its own power—or slowly eased shut. No more than the click of a latch, magnified along the tunnel. Now there was only silence.

He didn't want to be caught here. No explanation would be accepted without an investigation—and there would be signs on the surface revealing that two people had been out together, a man and a woman.

Slowly, setting each foot cautiously onto the metal steps, he began to descend. When he was low enough he leaned down and away from the staircase to peer along the tunnel. The service tunnel fed into a larger passage. There was a door at this opening, and another between the passage and the air conditioning-heating room. The door at the end of the tunnel was open.

Perhaps Ann had left the farther door slightly ajar, and a slight current of air had caused it to click shut. Still....

Hendley reached the bottom of the stairs. Keeping close to the maze of pipes along one side, he edged forward. A shadow moved across the face of the tunnel. Hendley squeezed close to the pipes. One of them carried hot water, and he had to suppress a gasp as his hand touched the hot metal.

After a long moment he moved his head out a few inches—just far enough to catch a glimpse of the opening at the end of the tunnel. A shoulder came into view, bearing the emblem of a security guard on a green sleeve. Hendley eased back against the pipes, setting his teeth against the heat from the one pipe that seared a bar of pain across his back. If the guard took one or two steps into the tunnel—or even leaned through the door to get a better angle of view—Hendley would be visible to him.

Hendley breathed very slowly and silently. His legs were beginning to quiver from the strain. Either the guard didn't suspect his presence, or he was unwilling to enter the tunnel alone, making himself a vulnerable target. What had drawn the man there? Had Ann been seen leaving? Surely not—the guard's investigation would be more thorough. Had he heard a suspicious noise then, the noise Hendley had made closing and locking the outside door? Or was this simply a routine inspection?

The tunnel darkened suddenly. The steel door clanked shut, sealing the tunnel off from the adjoining passage. In the dim light remaining from the tunnel's own illumination panel, Hendley stepped away from the pipes into the center of the aisle. He let out a deep breath.

He was safe enough for the moment. But obviously he couldn't risk leaving the building the way he had entered. The guard might be going on his rounds—or the closing of the door might be a ruse. Frowning, Hendley tried to sort out in his memory the various functions of this utility tunnel. If he remembered correctly, it led to a large water pump station, and there were branches along the way feeding into smaller underground facilities. It should be no trick to find another way out.

He could hear the water pump when he was still a good distance away from the station. It would probably be routinely guarded. He chose at random one of the branching tunnels. A few minutes later he stepped into the heating

room of what he guessed was an arcade. The heating and air-conditioning unit was of a size and type designed to serve a series of small shops and offices.

No one saw him when he emerged from the room into a walkway behind a row of shops. He strode casually along the walk and stepped out into a crowded street.

Orienting himself, Hendley found that he was only a quarter of a mile from the museum. He began hurrying through the noisy evening crowd. Theater and sports arena marquees were winking. Throngs filled the busy arcades, the sidewalk vendors, the discussion halls, the public gyms. A news announcer's voice blared from a street corner viewscreen. Still talking about the Merger.

Hendley saw the steps of the museum ahead. He didn't know exactly how long his roundabout escape had taken. He had given Ann a five-minute start. Add about fifteen minutes to that, he guessed. She would be anxious now, worrying.

A few people were entering the museum. A guard stood by the entry, watching the crowd on the street below with apparently casual interest. A young woman emerged from the museum. She wore a yellow coverall and her hair was dark.

Baffled, Hendley walked slowly past the museum steps. ABC-331 was not there.

The guard at the Historical Museum's entry was watching him now. Hendley merged with the flow of pedestrians, allowing himself to be carried along. He had been wandering back and forth in front of the building for twenty minutes. Long enough to draw attention to himself. Longer than necessary to know that Ann was gone.

He couldn't understand her actions. The chilling fear kept recurring that somehow she had been detected leaving the tunnel. But reason argued that in that event the museum guards would have made a careful search for her male companion.

Then why had she vanished? Looking back, trying to recall everything that had happened between them, every word that had been spoken, Hendley recognized evasiveness in some of her replies, duplicity in some of her actions. She had been trying to avoid him when she left the Research Center early that day. Moreover, she had suggested that they leave separately. She had planned to disappear.

Yet she had come to meet him—she had given herself to him joyously.

Tired and discouraged, Hendley stopped at a sidewalk vending unit. He hadn't eaten since breakfast. He selected a hot meal, pressed the appropriate buttons, and presented his identity disc. A red panel of light flashed on.

Startled, Hendley stared at the machine. He tried again. Once more his charge was rejected.

Someone was watching him curiously. Hendley quickly left the vender. Safely in the crowded street again, he found that he was trembling. Now it begins, he thought.

He tried to enter a theater. The ticket machine rejected his identity disc. He went down the escalator to a subway station. There was a line of people before the gate. By the time Hendley reached it, a number of other people had lined up behind him. His hand shook as he held his identity disc out to the ticket machine. Again a red light flashed.

The people behind him grew restless. "Come on, hurry up!" a man said. "What's the trouble?" another asked. "Look!" a woman cried. "Something's wrong! That red light is on!"

Hendley slipped out of the line, his face hot and his heart bumping wildly against his ribs. He heard a shout behind him as he reached the escalators. He plunged up the moving steps.

Back on the street, he was afraid to enter another crowded place to use his disc again. He waited until he found a small, old-fashioned coffee machine tucked away in a quiet corner of an arcade. No one was watching him.

The antique vending machine whirled, vibrated, and began to buzz loudly. Hendley ran.

As long as he kept to the crowded streets, he was safe from detection—providing he didn't attempt to use his identity disc. That way they could

track him. But if his disc was useless, he couldn't eat, he couldn't enter a recreation hall, he couldn't take the subway, or sleep in a rented room. He couldn't find rest or refuge in a theater. He could only keep moving.

In the middle of this well-fed city, he could be starved. Free to move about at will, he was trapped.

The day of rebellion had come full circle. He could wait it out until the need of food or sleep dragged him down. He could make them find him. If Ann had been with him, if the machines had rejected her too, he might have kept going as long as possible.

Alone, he knew that he didn't want to. He had known all along this would happen. He wouldn't give them the satisfaction of making him run until he was exhausted, until he was forced to crawl to them, hungry and frightened.

Hendley went up the nearest ramp to the moving sidewalks, grateful that these at least were a free service. He would not have relished walking all the way back to the Architectural Center.

When he reached the Center he stood outside the entry for several minutes. It was almost midnight, but you couldn't determine that from street level. At surface level, from the courtyard between the office core and the sleeping unit, you would be able to see the night sky overhead. Elsewhere the day was all one. Activity was the same at any hour, involving different work shifts, different people, but essentially the same.

Hendley felt an inner chill as he entered the residential wing and made his way up to his room. No one stopped him. His room had no lock on the door. The room was undisturbed, silent, empty.

On the small plastic desk to the left of the entrance was a slip of white paper. The note, which had been delivered through the mail chute opening in the wall just above the desk, directed him to report to the infirmary. It was stamped with the time of delivery: *9:35 A.M.*

In sudden anger Hendley tore the note into shreds and threw the white strips of paper into the waste chute. As they disappeared, fluttering madly in the suction, he had the odd impression that they were like the tiny figures of the Freeman he had seen in the film, vanishing into the trees.

There was a knock on the door.

The tall, silver-haired man in the beige coverall had a genial face, dominated by sympathetic gray eyes. He was big-boned and heavy, but he carried himself easily. His voice had an impressive rumble.

"Good evening, TRH-247," he said. "You've had quite a day, haven't you?"

The emblem on his sleeve, brown with a white background, showed a design of staff-and-serpent. Lettered in brown stitching were the words MORALE INVESTIGATOR.

"You will come with me," the Investigator said. With a faintly indulgent smile he added, "I trust you are not going to give us any trouble?"

Hendley shook his head. He had stopped running. As he stepped from his room into the bright corridor, he felt an odd tug of regret for the close security he was leaving. The room was too small, blind-walled, impersonal, uninviting. But it was a place familiar and known. It held no surprises.

Naked, TRH-247 sat on a cool white plastic bench and repressed a shiver. The room was not cold, but gooseflesh stood out on his arms. Though he was now alone in one of a series of examination rooms to which he had been taken, he felt ill at ease in his nakedness—an effect no doubt carefully calculated, he reflected, to increase the insecurity anyone must feel in the Morale Investigation Center.

Everything in the Center was designed to create the impression that here nothing was—nothing could be—concealed. The walls, the ceilings, the floors, the spare furnishings, the instruments—all were a gleaming, immaculate white plastic, bathed in clear white light. Even the attendants and nurses, as well as the gray-haired Investigators, donned white robes over their uniforms when they entered the Center.

Hendley had not seen the first Investigator since they parted at the beginning of his processing. But in the course of his tests—psychological, intelligence and reaction tests, a humiliatingly thorough physical examination, along with other tests unfamiliar to him—he had met two other men identified as Investigators. Each might have been cast from a single mold. In the small interrogation rooms they seemed to grow, looming larger to the eye like figures on a viewscreen expanding as the camera moved in for a closeup. They were all big men, all distinguished, all gray-haired, all easy of manner—big, handsome, confident men, like idealized father-images.

Suddenly, sitting on the cold white bench, hugging his body with his arms against the unreasonable chill that shook him, Hendley remembered an incident long forgotten, a fragment from that strangely blank period of pre-work—he thought of it that way; not as childhood, but as pre-work. It had been a negative time, like a period of non-existence in preparation for existence. If it had seemed then a time of freedom, that illusion prevailed only because the concept of freedom was not understood. In fact those days had been strictly regimented, filled with classes, recreation hours, group games, prescribed activities from waking to sleeping.

But on one occasion, at least, there had been a kind of escape into life. Hendley hadn't been alone in the daring escapade, although he could not recall the numbers of the other two boys, or even their faces. One had been fat and very blond, with an intense dislike of exercise not of his own choosing. The other had been a small, slender, lively, black-haired boy whose memorable characteristic in Hendley's mind was a flashing smile and a high-pitched, squealing laugh.

The idea had been the blond boy's in the beginning, Hendley was sure, but there had been no sense of being led. For all three boys the action had been spontaneous, unpremeditated, without malice or special meaning. One moment they were walking toward their classroom along an underground street—it was morning, but there was no awareness of time then, in a pre-work day beneath the surface—and the next moment they were opposite a pedestrian ramp leading to the sidewalk strips and the fat blond boy was yelling, "Let's go for a ride!" And in the instant they were racing exuberantly up the ramp, dodging among the uniformed men and women, excitedly jumping onto the moving walk, pausing only when they were safely together on the walk to stare at each other in flushed, panting triumph. A glitter of challenge had danced in the fat boy's eyes—Why could he remember that exact expression, Hendley wondered, but not the face which shaped it?—and he had made a reckless, clumsy leap to the fast strip. Hendley and the slender boy had hurtled after him, the latter's shrill peal of laughter trailing behind them. In that moment when he was airborne between the strips, his heart bumping with fear, Hendley experienced a surge of happy exhilaration such as he'd never felt before. Suddenly the thoughtless flight acquired a sharp spirit of adventure. Soon it was he who took the lead, challenging his companions to new and more intricate maneuvers on the walks, bolder excursions into the bustling center of the city.

They stayed out all day, wandering through the crowded, noisy arcades, exploring the colorful stores, filing in wonder through the great stone plaza in the middle of the business district past the giant statues and sculptured stone trees and strange marble animals. When the sightseeing began to pall, they boarded the walks again, riding them to remote parts of the city. It was only at the end of the day when, tired and hungry, they tried to retrace their way and found themselves lost, that the realization came to them slowly

that they had done something unheard of, something very wrong, for which they were sure to be punished.

They had strayed far from the sidewalk strips, and in their search for the walks they came upon a clearing which ended in a high, blank wall. Curiosity gaining the better of their increasing nervousness about the day's adventure, they followed the line of the wall, speculating about it.

"I know what it is," the fat boy said confidently.

"I'll bet you don't!" the smallest of the trio said.

"What is it?" Hendley demanded.

"He doesn't know," the slender boy jeered.

"I do too! It's where people go when they're old!"

"No, it isn't," the slim one said quite seriously. "That isn't where they go. They die."

"I didn't say dead people!" the fat boy retorted. "It's where you go when you don't have to work any more, when you're free!"

And then Hendley remembered. His father had talked about the Freeman Camps, during those early years which Hendley remembered only as a brief and pleasant interlude before he was taken from his parents and enrolled in the Organization's training schools.

The three boys walked in silence alongside the high wall for a while. The fat boy said, "I bet we could get over if we really wanted to."

"How?" Hendley wanted to know.

"We could climb it."

"No, we couldn't. What would you get hold of?"

"We could use a rope."

They reached a break in the wall, which turned out to be a high, metal-barred gate coated with an opaque plastic between the bars so that you could not see through it. There was no one around.

"Look!" the slim, black-haired boy said, pointing.

Near the bottom of the gate there was a tear in the plastic film between two of the metal bars. Even when the film was pushed aside, the opening was only a few inches wide—but it was an opening. (How strange it was now to recall the easy accessibility of the camp to three curious boys! But in those days the surface was not yet considered safe for human life, and even the camps had to be underground, located on the outskirts of the great cities.)

"I bet I could get through there," the slim boy said.

"What would you want to do that for?" the fat, blond boy scoffed, covering his chagrin, for it was evident that he could never squeeze through the opening.

"Well, you wanted to climb over."

"No one's supposed to go in there," the fat boy insisted.

The declaration was like a dare, and the black-haired boy reacted to it instantly. "I'm going to!" he asserted with his quick, flashing smile. "I bet you're scared," he said to Hendley.

"No, I'm not!"

"I'll go first," the other boy said. And with a darting glance along the wall in both directions to make sure no one was watching them, he crouched before the narrow opening and began to worm his way through. The damaged section of plastic film tore easily, but the bars were so close together that the boy winced as he struggled to wriggle between them.

"You'd better not!" the fat boy warned apprehensively.

But the small, slim body gave another twist and suddenly the boy was gone, disappearing through the opening into the mysterious place beyond the wall.

"Come on!" they heard him call excitedly. "Hurry up! Wait'll you see it!"

Hendley tried to follow him. Halfway through the opening he could go no farther, no matter how much he shoved and twisted. His chest was skinned and bruised by the effort, and he had trouble breathing. "I—I'm stuck!" he cried.

Beyond the wall the slender, black-haired boy's shrill laughter rang briefly. It broke off. There was a moment's silence. Hendley and the fat boy

listened. Anxiously they began to shout. There was no answer from within the camp. And then it seemed to Hendley that he heard a muffled, whimpering cry.

At that instant a huge, heavy hand fell on the fat boy's shoulder. The two boys by the wall had been so intently absorbed that they had failed to see or hear anyone approaching. Hendley stared up in fright at a broad, towering figure in a beige uniform with a small emblem on one shoulder. A big hand seized him by the arm and effortlessly pulled him free of the bars....

They were taken to a white building, where they were separately questioned. Hendley had vowed to himself that he would say nothing about the day's events, but he found himself at first frightened and then awed by the huge, gray-haired man who talked to him. The man spoke gently, reassuringly, and after a while Hendley was blurting out the whole story, trembling and stammering, moved at last to tears by the mystery of his small friend's fate.

The following day he and the fat, blond boy were taken back to their school. Oddly enough, Hendley could not now remember what their punishment had been. A week deprived of recreation hours, he supposed. It couldn't have been very bad or he would remember.

Stranger still, the black-haired boy who had vanished behind the wall did not return to school. Hendley never saw or heard of him again.

A door opened into the white room where Hendley sat on the cold bench. A nurse entered. She glanced at him with clinical objectivity. In one hand she carried a small vial and a hypodermic needle.

"What's that?" Hendley asked sharply.

"Protective inoculation," the woman said with brisk indifference. "Hold out your arm."

Conditioned from childhood to frequent inoculations, Hendley raised his arm. The nurse was as efficient as her manner. He hardly felt the prick of the needle.

"Now you will follow me," she said, after deftly removing and discarding the detachable needle.

The room to which she led him turned out to be a large office, facing the typical open courtyard around which all of the central building towers were constructed. Drapes were drawn back over a broad window. Pale moonlight filtered through the courtyard from the invisible sky above. A large white desk dominated the room. Behind it sat the Morale Investigator who had come to Hendley's room.

The door closed and Hendley was alone with the Investigator, who gestured toward a comfortably upholstered, backless couch to the left of the desk. "Sit down," the big man said. And then, solicitously, "Are you cold? I can raise the heat level."

"No," Hendley said stiffly. "I'm not cold."

It was only after he had sat on the couch that he realized how low it was. In contrast, the wide, high desk and the large swivel chair behind it seemed higher than normal. Hendley found himself looking up at the Investigator. The inferior position, he reflected. He remembered from his architectural studies that in some of the offices in Administration buildings the floors were actually angled, so that an official at his desk would always be on a somewhat higher level than any caller.

"Would you like to tell me about it now?" the Investigator asked. His tone was mild, personal, inviting confidence. Hendley studied him more closely. The impression of size still predominated, but with it there was a clear effect of controlled, well-muscled, even graceful movements. The man's features were large but well balanced. His complexion was ruddy. There was about him an aura of well-disciplined strength. Here was a man you could trust—a man you could lean on.

"There's nothing to tell," Hendley said, stalling, wishing again that he had his uniform on, unable to shake the feeling that, with his body exposed to the most casual scrutiny, the workings of his mind must also be visible.

The older man smiled. "Perhaps you don't realize how much we know."

Hendley thought suddenly of ABC-331—of Ann. Did they know about her? Had she found someone waiting when she returned to her room? Or had she been caught even earlier?

The Investigator swiveled in his chair to face Hendley directly, looking down at him, his expression tolerant and benign. "As of the moment you failed to report to the infirmary in response to the notice delivered at—let me see—9:35 this morning, your number was fed to the master board for automatic recording and analysis." The Investigator smiled. "Would you care to know exactly what time you had coffee in the vending cafe across from the Agricultural Research Center? Or just when you entered that newsview theater this afternoon?"

Hendley parried the smile with one of his own. He knew that the information was supposed to impress and frighten him. But he thought: They can only track the identity disc when I used it, or tried to use it. That wouldn't tell them about the meeting with Ann. Aloud he said, "I guess you know the whole story then. There isn't much point to all this."

"We are less interested in what you did than why," the Investigator said. "Though of course knowing precisely what your activities were helps us to understand their pattern." He leaned forward confidentially. "There is a gap—between the time you left the theater and the time you tried to have dinner. You might as well tell me about it, because I'll find out as soon as all the reports are in."

Relief flooded through Hendley. They didn't know about Ann! How foolish to try to take him in with so transparent a warning—as if the computers needed time to correlate reports!

"You must have found her very attractive," the Investigator said suddenly.

Hendley was caught unprepared. In his relief he had begun to relax into overconfidence. Now, stunned, he felt the blood draining from his face—a sure betrayal of his emotions. "Her?" he questioned automatically. "I—I don't understand." But his thoughts darted this way and that in his skull like trapped particles. The guard at the museum, he thought. But there had been no careful search for Hendley there. She *must* have escaped. How did the Investigator know about her? Was it a trick? Was he only guessing? Had

Hendley then given himself away, letting his reaction to a simple ruse betray him?

"You needn't bother to pretend," the Investigator said. His expression remained kindly, sympathetic, warmly understanding. In spite of his predicament Hendley felt drawn to the man. But that was the idea, he caught himself. Gain the confidence of the adult as you did of the child. Make him feel helpless in the face of superior knowledge, superior skills, superior forces. Helpless—but with nothing to fear.

"It's generally a woman," the Investigator went on. "You shouldn't feel that you're the only one who's been tempted. There are certain women"—he spread his hands in a gesture that said: We are both men of understanding. We know about these things. There is nothing to conceal from each other—"usually 5-Daywomen who have lost sight of the true goal, who think only of today's physical pleasure. Often we can help them—when we find them. Such women are generally young and quite attractive, even beautiful. Beauty in a way is their undoing. They are unable to see beyond it." He coughed apologetically. "Just as men are sometimes unable to see beyond it. It's easy for them to make a man forget *his* goal."

But Hendley was no longer listening. Beautiful, he thought, remembering how ABC-331 had seemed to protest when he tried to tell her how beautiful she was. What had she said? "It's what I'm supposed to be." Almost bitterly, her soft lips twisting wryly. What had she meant? Was she one of those women the Investigator referred to? No! That, too, was a trick to make him talk.

"There was nothing like that," he said firmly. "There was no woman. I'm already Assigned."

"And you're perfectly happy with your Assigned?" the older man shot at him quickly.

"Of course."

The Investigator frowned. Disappointment and disapproval were clearly reflected in his gaze. "I'm trying to help you, TRH-247," he said slowly. "But you must cooperate. What you have done is a grave infraction of the rules of order of the Organization. You must know that. I had hoped you'd

be frank with me, as I have been with you. Together we might find some way of lessening the penalty. But—"

"Would the penalty be less if there had been a woman? Is that what you mean?"

There was a slight stiffening of the Investigator's handsome features, hardly visible to the eye, yet subtly altering his friendly aspect into something sterner, colder. "You choose not to talk?"

"All I said was that there was no woman."

"You must have had a reason. Are you asking me to believe that you acted purely on a whim? You failed to report for work, TRH-247! You threw away an entire day's work credit against your tax debt and risked far more in penalties! No sane man would do that without a reason. And I have checked your examination reports thoroughly. You're in excellent health, mentally and physically. There is no evidence of emotional instability. This is the only defection in your record for the past ten years. Otherwise I would not even be trying to help you!"

He was too angry, Hendley thought with surprise. Was he so unused to defiance? Was it always easy for them? And suddenly Hendley knew what he was going to say. In a flash of insight he saw behind the shallow façade of fatherly wisdom before him. Here was only another man trapped by the system, another button-pusher who knew only the answers fed to him by his computer, a man too eager to be sure and safe, too anxious to have everything come out right and gain new tax credits for him. He had only to be told something he could understand—something that would fall into a familiar pattern.

"I had a reason," Hendley said.

"What, then?"

"The Merger."

Startled, the Investigator gaped at him, his composure abruptly shattered. "The Merger?"

"Yes. Maybe it was foolish, but I didn't report for work today as a protest." Hendley paused, reminded of one of the exhibits in the Historical Museum.

"It was like a—a strike. That's something workers used to do long ago when they wanted to protest."

"Yes, yes, I know—go on!" the Investigator broke in eagerly.

"You wanted to know where I was this afternoon. I was in the Historical Museum. I like to go there. I like to know how things used to be. I was against the Merger all along. It—it's like we're all being swallowed up in something that's too big even to know we exist. In the old days being a man meant something important in itself. Our ancestors—they weren't just parts of a machine!"

"Ah!" The Investigator almost beamed. His eyes held a gleam of pleasure. "An ideological protest!"

"I guess you could call it that," Hendley said slowly, wondering at the reaction his words had produced. "Surely I'm not the only one who's ever felt this way."

"Yes, yes, you're quite right," the gray-haired man said with some enthusiasm. "But an active protest! That is rare in this entire section. Why, I've had only one similar case in three years as a senior Investigator!"

Hendley nodded soberly, concealing a satisfaction which held a trace of malice. Tricks could work both ways. And yet what he had said was not really dishonest. He had merely selected that part of the truth which he wanted to reveal. Strangely enough, less than twenty hours earlier, as he had lain in bed while his vaguely formed protest crystallized into a decision, the feeling and the ideas he had just expressed had seemed all-important. Now it was more vital to protect a woman who had lied to him and disappeared—whom he might never be able to find again, even if she wanted to be found.

"This puts an entirely different complexion on your case," the Investigator said, his enthusiasm no longer restrained. "Entirely different! Tell me, when did these symptoms first begin? Obviously they didn't appear overnight. When did you first feel this intense dislike of the idea of the Merger?"

"I don't know," Hendley said honestly. Should he mention the childhood escapade? Had that been significant even at so early an age? Evidently the morale computer didn't think so, for at some stage the fact had been

eliminated from his record. Presumably it had appeared to be a meaningless youthful prank.

He thought of his dream of standing on a beach and seeing all of the other beaches within sight blend into one vast, featureless desert. On impulse he recounted the dream, deliberately going into great detail. As an added embellishment at the end he said, "I've had the same dream several times."

"Splendid!" the Investigator exclaimed, as if Hendley had passed some kind of a test. "But surely, as a student of history, TRH-247, you must realize that the Merger was inevitable, that it is the culmination of centuries of social progress under the Organization?"

"Inevitable doesn't mean good," Hendley said. "*If* it was inevitable."

"An excellent point," the Investigator said warmly. "But in this instance irrelevant, of course. Aren't you willing to admit that freedom is good? That it has always been, in different guises, man's real dream? That an Organization which makes this possible for all men is the true fulfillment of that ageless dream?"

The Investigator's eyes glinted with a zealot's fever. He was so close to Freeman status, Hendley thought, so close to the goal. How could he believe anything which might stain or vitiate that prospect?

"Consider the record of history," the gray-haired man said, his broad hand emphatically slapping the smooth white top of his desk. "The development of the Eastern and Western Organizations was a natural evolution. The very fact that in the end each arrived at the same concept of society's structure and purpose is proof enough! Why should the two forms of Organization remain separate when the unalterable pressure of man's own desires had made them finally the same in everything but name? Why shouldn't they merge into one great and final Organization, one supreme affirmation of man's right to freedom!"

Hendley was silent. The truth was that he had no clearly formulated answers. Even in his own mind he was divided. The lure of freedom could not be shaken off. And he could not argue with the fact that, along their separate routes over the years, East and West had arrived at the same social and economic structure, the same ordered relationship between the individual and the mass of society, the same ultimate goal of freedom. War

between the two had ended not because weapons and opportunities ceased to exist, but because, during the century of recovery after the great atomic war which had left both societies weak and vast areas of the earth barren and uninhabitable, differences had gradually eroded until they ceased to be a source of conflict.

"How much do you really know of our history?" the Investigator demanded. "How much do you know, for instance, about the tax debt and how it all began?"

"Not very much," Hendley admitted. "The general facts—"

"But you must go beyond the general facts, TRH-247!" the Investigator declaimed. "Consider the brilliance of that single concept—the very foundation of the Organization as we know it today!"

With animation the gray-haired man launched into a discourse on the stroke of genius which had launched man on his upward journey toward Freeman status. Once, it was true, there had been a time when men worked for themselves, were conscious of their individuality, and were paid in some form of money according to their capacity to earn. That money was used by all men to buy the services and necessities of life now provided entirely by the Organization—and to pay for recreation and leisure, the twin aspects of freedom. But few could afford more than a limited glimpse of these pleasures. Many never achieved them at all. Men fought one another for them, and the weak were crushed by the strong.

Somewhere along the line a point was reached when the money received for work was not enough to pay taxes to the government, which was the clumsy, early form of the Organization, and still buy the necessities of food, clothing, and lodging, to say nothing of leisure and recreation. The limited inhabitable land was one problem. Exploding population and ever-increasing automation complicated the situation. At that time an anonymous government worker originated the revolutionary concept of the tax debt. Every worker was allowed to carry over part of his taxes as a debt to the government, thus keeping more spendable money for himself and his needs. This preliminary measure proved inadequate. There were too many workers, labor was inefficiently used, and the spiraling cost of even that early form of Organization could not be held down. A point of balance was passed. It became impossible for the tax debt to be paid in the old way. It

was only natural that in the end the worker should be employed directly by the Organization—that he should finally work not for money, but for credit against his debt.

The Corporate Tax Debt followed closely upon the origin of the personal debt—with the same result. Within the span of a few generations the Western Organization arrived at the crude, rough form of an economic and social structure already realized in the East. The Organization owned, controlled, supplied, managed everything. Concurrently with that first century of the Organization's growth to maturity—and in large part because of its development—automated efficiency came into its own. Computers came more and more to dominate life. Under their guidance, wasteful and unrewarding ventures were gradually eliminated from man's work and his dreams—like the costly and unsuccessful attempts to invade outer space. Man's world narrowed—but man flourished.

Then came the war—a residue, the Investigator asserted, from the hostilities of the pre-Organization world. Only the wisdom of the computers enabled civilization to survive, for, a score of years before the first bomb fell, the computers on the Peace Planning Boards of both East and West had directed the movement of the cities underground.

The second century was one of recovery from the war, of continuing progress toward a more streamlined, automated and efficient society, and of the slow but steady return toward the surface of the earth. But if those years presented unusual obstacles—new ways of producing foods had constantly to be found, new methods of decontaminating air and water, new systems of construction and transport, new ways to accommodate a population which entered another phase of explosion in spite of the limitations of underground life—if there were difficulties, there were also advantages.

"At last the opportunities were present," the Investigator cried with unflagging vigor, "for a truly controlled progress. Even the strictures of space underground became an aid rather than a deterrent. Controls were easier to put into effect, easier to enforce. And we had the tools, TRH-247—the computers to guide our way. No longer were we stumbling blindly, planned progress was possible!"

"But *is* it progress?" Hendley interjected defensively, for the first time breaking into the Investigator's narrative. "Haven't we lost a lot of things?"

That's what I feel. It seems to me those early societies had something we don't have. They were always moving outward, discovering new horizons, exploring—even if they blundered, they tried. We're not trying. Our world isn't expanding, it's shrinking. It has less—less meaning."

The Investigator's smile was patronizing. "You say they were always questing—of course they were. Blindly, inefficiently, between their wars. But who benefited, TRH-247? All men? No. A few favored ones. And what were they really searching for on their new horizons?" He thundered the question. "What those favored few had! What is now possible for all of us! Man's real goal, TRH-247, always known but never really understood—freedom! Freedom from the burdens of indebtedness and the necessity to work! Freedom for total leisure and recreation! The freedom which the system of the tax debt and the structure of the Organization has brought within the reach of all men—Freeman status!"

Breathless, the Investigator paused. Hendley felt an urge to protest further, but he was not sure of his ground. He wanted to say that efficiency should not be the only yardstick of achievement. He felt that there might be more to human endeavor than the pursuit of pleasure. He would have deplored the shriveling of a commodity which had no place in the Organization's impersonal, automated world—man's curiosity. But he was confused and uncertain. His growing confusion, in fact, seemed greater than could be accounted for by the Investigator's argument. Hendley had to make an effort to focus his gaze on the older man's face.

The Investigator resumed in a calmer tone. "I realize it's hard to assimilate all of this at once," he said, "and to see it in all its beauty and truth. Emotional reactions often resist reason. But you will be convinced, TRH-247. The first step has been made. Because you've told me the reasons behind your confusion, I think I can now help you. You believe the Organization doesn't know and understand you. You're wrong. The Organization exists for the individual—it has no other purpose. It is *your* Organization, TRH-247! It doesn't seek to punish or hold you back, only to help you reach your goal. The Merger is no more than another giant step in that direction. If you could understand that, you'd realize how foolish you've been."

Hendley stared at him. Where was all this leading? He didn't see what the historical discussion—or indeed the whole interrogation—had solved other than the Investigator's own immediate problem. *He* at least had found the answer he wanted—a pattern into which Hendley's rebellion would neatly fit—for which there would be a specific, predictable number of solutions already worked out by the morale computer. Did the Investigators gain special tax debt credits for solving a difficult case? Probably not. In the Architectural Center there were debits for failure but no extra credits for success. Success was simply expected. But when you were a 1-Dayman like the Investigator, the avoidance of any debits would become enormously important.

How simply the system worked! But it had made the Investigator too anxious to discover an unusual case for his record. And too eager to find an orthodox interpretation.

"I'm going to make a recommendation in your case, TRH-247," the big man said gravely. "You understand, it is only a recommendation, but I believe it will be accepted. Because of the far-reaching implications of the Merger, and its manifest importance for all mankind, the Organization is prepared to deal very generously with emotional disturbances which have occurred as a result."

"I see," Hendley said, not understanding at all. Why was he finding it so difficult to concentrate?

"Now," the Investigator said, with the air of a parent about to produce an unexpected tidbit. "That newsview you went to see this afternoon—it was about a Freeman Camp, wasn't it?"

"Well—yes," Hendley said, puzzled by the abrupt change of subject.

"You've always wished that you could see inside a Freeman Camp, haven't you? Don't be embarrassed. It's a natural wish."

"I guess everyone would like to."

"It's quite impossible for that universal wish to be granted, of course. Privacy is one of freedom's obvious privileges," the Investigator said. "And the unrest that would result among those still far removed from Freeman status, if they were to see all they were denied, would be detrimental to

general morale. That's a risk I'm taking in your case, TRH-247," he added. "But I think it's justified."

Hendley wondered what the man was leading up to. The smug air of benevolence was compounded by an evident relish for the secret about to be revealed. Or was it a secret? Hendley's heart began to beat rapidly as a glimmer of understanding came. The possibility so overwhelmed him that he felt faintly dizzy.

"In cases like yours," the Investigator said, "where there is clear indication of perplexity created by sincere doubts and understandable confusion, there is a precedent for the recommendation I'm going to make." He paused with deliberate drama. "You probably didn't know this, but there are circumstances in which visitors are allowed in Freeman Camps."

"No," Hendley said, his heart hammering now, "I didn't know."

Was this what he wanted? Had the incident with ABC-331, the adventure under the sun, been merely a substitute—a prelude?

"There will be a penalty, of course, for your failure to report for work. That cannot be erased. But I think I can promise you it won't be too severe. And I think you'll feel that the price is well worth paying."

"A—a Freeman Camp?" Hendley stammered.

The Investigator rose. His towering figure seemed to fill the room with an overpowering presence of Authority. *This* was the personification of the Organization—huge, benevolent, kindly, all-knowing, all-powerful. "You will be one of the few fortunate ones, TRH-247," the gray-haired man said triumphantly. "You will see what freedom really means. You will know the goal for which you work—to which we all aspire. You will see it with your own eyes—what even I have never seen! You will visit a Freeman Camp!"

The room began to swim around Hendley, and the immense figure blurred into a great gray mass bending over him. He grasped for the top of the desk but his fingers slipped on the smooth surface and he knew that he was falling, and as he fell the gates in a great wall opened for him and he toppled through. He felt a wild surge of exhilaration, but then he was spinning through a dazzling whiteness that was like the naked sun, and at the end of the white tunnel a brisk, tight-lipped, white-robed nurse moved

toward him with a giant needle. A sense of outrage engulfed him. He cried out: "I've been drugged!"

Then he was shooting toward a tiny pinpoint of darkness at the end of the white tunnel. He threaded the black hole neatly with his body and emerged into total darkness....

"You will answer my questions as directly as possible," the Investigator said. "Do you understand me?"

"Yes."

"Now then—tell me what you think of the Merger."

He groped for words. It was terribly important to answer the questioner truthfully. The need to talk was irresistible. His mind was like a dam whose floodgates were slowly opening. A torrent of words surged toward the widening gap, spilling through one by one, then with gathering force and relentless pressure, gushing out, a cascade of words so wonderful to speak, so compelling....

The eruption of words slowed and at last was still.

"You had never seen this woman before then?" the Investigator asked. Such a calm voice, so marvelously soothing!

"No."

"Yet you were willing to risk everything to take her outside?"

"It was beautiful out there. I—I found something. It was like—freedom."

"Ah!" The quiet voice breathed satisfaction.

"We gave ourselves so completely. I never felt so complete, so—so free!"

"You want freedom very much, don't you?"

"Yes. I—I think so."

"This woman—you kept calling her Ann. What is her real name? Do you remember it?"

A struggle was taking place deep in the recesses of Hendley's being. He wanted to speak, to answer, but something was straining to contain the words. Her name—her number....

"What was her real name?"

"It was"—the word burst out—"Ann!"

"Ann?" The Investigator frowned. "That's all she told you?"

"Yes." The struggle was renewed. Inwardly Hendley writhed. He wanted to speak truthfully, to murmur the complete name: ABC-331. It beat against his skull, waiting only for the question to be repeated. If the Investigator would only ask once more he could speak and end this terrible pressure.

"Hmmm. Clever of her," the Investigator said. "It will be difficult to trace her without the complete name. But of course she knew that. Some of them are very cunning."

He fell silent. Hendley waited, yearning for the question to be asked again, but it never came. The feeling of compelling eagerness to speak began to wane, as if the deprivation of that one need to answer had weakened the entire structure of desire. The compulsion began to break up, to weaken, to dissolve into less forceful fragments of need....

"Hypno-serum," Hendley said bitterly.

"Naturally," the Investigator said, flashing his tolerant smile.

"Why did you go through with the rest of it?" Hendley demanded. "Why bother with direct questioning when you were going to get all the answers anyway?"

"It was necessary to know what you would tell us voluntarily," the gray-haired man said. "And then to corroborate or disprove your statements by comparing them to your answers under hypno-questioning."

Hendley's stony expression concealed a sense of wonder. He had heard of cases in which individuals were able partially or completely to resist the truth drug for limited periods. He marveled at the struggle of will he had

endured, and at the lucky chance which had enabled him to give Ann's archaic first name instead of the complete number. But his feeling of relief was diluted by a lingering disappointment.

"Was it necessary to make that promise of a visit to a Freeman Camp under the circumstances?" he said a little caustically. "What did you gain by that device?"

"Device?" The Investigator showed surprise. "But that is still my recommendation." He beamed at Hendley's astonishment. "The hypno-questioning confirmed the genuine sincerity of your ideological protest and verified my diagnosis completely. Oh, there is the woman, of course, but she is merely symptomatic. These women prey on confusion and uncertainty, on the need for a love-object—or, as you so aptly suggested, TRH-247, a freedom-object. Your rebellion, as you call it, is motivated by a true desire for freedom. It merely needs focus and understanding to be directed toward intelligent channels. Your case will go to the morale computer for review in the morning, but I think I can assure you...."

The rest of his words were lost in the roaring which filled Hendley's ears. He sat abruptly on the slab couch across from the Investigator's desk, his legs trembling. The extreme reaction, coming immediately after his bout with the truth serum, left him feeling weak and giddy, his thoughts churning confusedly, his emotions a stew of incredulity, relief, and elation.

It was some moments before he thought again of Ann. His elation dimmed. Now there would be more delay—he didn't know how long—before he could begin to search for her.

Or was the Investigator right? Was she no more than an objectivization of a deeper hunger? Would he, after knowing the reality of freedom, still feel the same way about her—still want her, regardless of the cost?

From his low couch TRH-247 stared up at the graying father-image in the high swivel chair, who returned his gaze with sympathetic understanding, and he felt a helpless doubt....

5

"I envy you," the Morale Investigator said.

The copter landing station was a huge circle cut into the earth to a depth of two levels, but open to the sky. The field was suitable only for copters, but, in accordance with the truce made a century before between East and West, these harmless planes were the only air vehicles in existence. After the holocaust of atomic war, there had been no resistance to the banning of dangerous aircraft. In weather so inclement that the copters were grounded, massive plastic panels closed over the entire station, sealing it tightly at surface level. But on this day, midmorning of Hendley's second day in the custody of the Morale Investigating Department, the sun shone brightly and was reflected with glaring brilliance from the smooth surface of the landing field.

The field's perimeter was completely enclosed. Hendley stood in a boarding area with the Investigator looking out at the field through thick plastic windows. The circle of the open roof line cupped a patch of blue sky. Once in the copter he would see nothing until he arrived at the Freeman Camp. The pilotless, instrument-guided planes had no windows.

"This is your ship now," the Investigator said.

One of the copters glided close to the boarding area where Hendley waited. It hovered a few feet above the ground, supported on columns of air. As an enclosed boarding ramp swung out to meet the ship, a panel in its side slid open to receive the ramp.

"You have your visitor's card?" the Investigator asked.

Hendley nodded, but he fished automatically in his pocket for perhaps the twentieth time to check the card. It bore an impression of his own identity disc. Its authorization was for twenty-four hours from time of arrival at Freeman Camp No. 17. Idly Hendley wondered how many camps there were, and how many Freeman enjoyed the pleasures of each.

"I may not see you again," the Investigator was saying. "Other assignments are waiting for me, but you can be sure I'll check on your progress reports. Enjoy your freedom, TRH-247. Experience it! For one day you will know pure pleasure!"

"Pleasure Is Pure," Hendley murmured, echoing one of the familiar Freeman slogans. "Freedom Is All."

"Open your heart to it," the Investigator urged him warmly. "I know you'll come back a dedicated man."

Before the big man's enthusiasm Hendley felt a confusion of emotions. The Investigator so obviously believed in what he was doing. It seemed to Hendley that he should at this moment voice some grateful phrase, give some evidence of excitement felt and eagerness shared. But the words were blocked by the ambivalence of his reaction, as if his instinct warned him that the freedom he was shortly to discover was itself some kind of trap, like an exotic plant whose beauty concealed a deadly poison.

"I guess it's time," he said. "They're signaling for passengers to board." And then, hesitantly, "It's all happened so quickly—"

"There's no need to say it." The Investigator smiled. His huge hand swallowed Hendley's shoulder and gave a reassuring squeeze. "Your rehabilitation will be all the satisfaction I need."

The phrases rolled easily from his lips. Too easily, Hendley thought uncomfortably, as if the words composed a slogan learned, memorized, converted into an act of faith by repetition. Even the reassuring hand was a practiced gesture. Category: Friendship. Purpose: To Instill Confidence. Method: Place Hand On Shoulder....

The door to the boarding ramp stood open. A metallic voice spoke over an intercom. "Last call for Flight Three-four-seven. Boarding now. Repeat. Last call for...."

"Good luck!" the Investigator said.

Then Hendley was stumbling down the ramp, turning once to wave awkwardly.

There was no sensation of motion beyond a vibration so faint that it could almost be put down to imagination. Yet the knowledge that the copter was in flight gave Hendley, sitting in the blind-walled passenger cabin, a strange feeling of being helplessly adrift. Deprived of the sight of land below, he had no way of knowing whether the ship rose or fell, moved forward or backward, and no point of reference by which to judge its speed. He might have been in a runaway rocket, plunging out of control through space, like those legendary vehicles of an earlier world a century dead.

After a while he recognized the sensation of being watched. Eyes probed like feelers at the back of his neck. When he glanced around, the nearest passenger, a man seated across the center aisle and one row behind, quickly averted his gaze. Only then did Hendley realize that he was sitting apart from the other passengers, who were tightly grouped to the front and rear, as if they had consciously avoided the seats close to him. A woman several rows ahead masked her interest guiltily, pretending to stare over Hendley's head—fascinated by the empty baggage rack.

Puzzled, Hendley frowned. He felt self-conscious enough in this strange uniform....

Understanding came. Of course! The other passengers wore blue, yellow, in two instances beige. His was the only white coverall. The curiosity, the averted and envious eyes, the careful avoidance of adjoining seats were suddenly explained. Freeman were never seen in the city—as far as Hendley knew they never left the Freeman Camps. The fact had never before struck him as unusual. Chances were that none of his fellow passengers had ever seen a white uniform before except on a viewscreen. And it was extremely doubtful that any of them would recognize the meaning of the red sleeve emblem—the only mark, Hendley had been told, distinguishing his coverall from that of a permanent Freeman.

He settled back in his seat, half-amused, aware of a peculiar sense of pleasure, of—what was it?—superiority. If only they knew he was to be free for only twenty-four hours! But they would undoubtedly envy him still. How many had the chance to know what freedom was really like?...

He gave himself up to the feeling of being adrift, carried helplessly along. For the first time since his rebellion began he had time to think. On that first day too much had happened too fast. Even at the Morale Center he'd had no

time for the luxury of collecting his thoughts. It had been close to morning when the Investigator's astonishing pronouncement ended his questioning. Hendley had had no rest for twenty-four hours. Exhausted, he had slept through most of the day. Shortly after waking he learned that the morale computer had approved his visit to the Freeman Camp. When he expressed a desire to return to his room to prepare for the trip, the Investigator demurred politely. "That won't be necessary," he said.

"But I'll need a fresh uniform, at least—"

"Not at all. Whatever you need will be supplied. And in any event, you'll wear white...."

The Investigator had explained. No one was allowed to visit a Freeman Camp in other than the prescribed white coverall. Any other color would attract too much attention, even hostility. The precious right of freedom was an exclusive privilege. Moreover, to move freely—the Investigator chose the word with obvious care—to know what it was like to live as a Freeman, it was essential that Hendley should pass unnoticed. The red sleeve emblem would identify him to official personnel as a visitor, but to most Freeman it would have no significance. Hendley would go into the camp empty-handed as any permanent Freeman would. Even his watch would be left behind. There were no clocks in the land of the free.

"Those of us who work are shackled to the clock," the Investigator said. "The day, the hour, the minute measure our distance from freedom. To be free is to be liberated from the need to recognize time...."

So Hendley had been unable to leave the Morale Center. The manner of refusal was so gentle, so persuasive, so reasonable that not until he was alone that night did he think of his custody in the Center as a form of imprisonment. Even then, with his morning departure imminent, he was unable to relax or to analyze what was happening to him and what it meant.

Now, sitting by himself in the cabin of the copter, he tried to sort out his reflections. They refused to be channeled. Bits and pieces of the previous two days skittered into and out of his consciousness. From the disordered montage one face kept emerging: Ann's. He tried to capture it, to hold it before his mind's eye. It danced from light to shadow, changed, slipped elusively away from him. What was wrong? The brief hours with her under

the open sky had made him feel more vividly alive than all the experience of his lifetime. Her disappearance could not change that. Her inexplicable behavior couldn't change it. He would find her again—he *had* to find her. But now he was unable even to recapture her image. It faded as he reached for it. The spirit of their adventure—its warm intimacy, its sense of escape, its essential *newness*—was already dimming. Why? Hendley couldn't accept the Investigator's view of her. *He* hadn't held Ann in his arms. *He* hadn't felt her tremble. *He* hadn't seen the mingled joy and pain in her eyes.

Pain, Hendley thought. Why pain?

"Mind if I sit here?"

The strange voice dissolved Hendley's confused reverie. He glanced at a beige uniform clothing a stout figure. His gaze rose to include a fleshy smile and small, bright, eager eyes.

"No, of course not," he said.

"I didn't know—never met a Freeman before. Not in uniform, I mean." The seat next to Hendley groaned and shifted to accommodate the balloon of flesh. "Mind you, I've known some who've become free. I'm a 1-Dayman myself, as you can see," he went on. "I'm not so far from freedom. Plenty of those in my line—I'm in Distribution, recreation equipment is my specialty—have paid off the tax debt and gone over."

Hendley merely nodded, awash in the high tide of words.

"You're young," the fat man said accusingly. "That's what gets me. You must have had it easy from the start."

"I wouldn't say that."

"You can't kid me. Nobody gets over the hump that quick unless he's got a head start on the rest of us. Family, I'll bet. That's usually the answer."

Hendley was tempted to reveal his real status, in spite of the Investigator's instructions about concealing his visiting privilege. But the fat man's belligerence checked the urge to explain and defend himself. Let the man think what he wanted.

"Now I'm one who'd really appreciate freedom," the fat man declared. "I've had to *work* my way up. Started as a 4-Dayman. Yeah, it's true. That

surprises you, don't it? You wanta know how I've done it? *Work*, that's how! No time off, no vacations, no extracurricular recreation. Sure I distribute game equipment, but I don't get to use much of it, except in prescribed recreation hours. Look at me! You think I eat a lot, I bet. Everyone thinks so. Well, half rations is all I eat—to save the credits! It's glands, that's why I'm heavy like this. You think it's been easy?" he demanded angrily. "Well, it ain't! It's been all work for me—I didn't have it handed to me on a tray!"

The swiftly generated violence of the attack left Hendley speechless with surprise. Then the irony of the situation struck him so forcibly that he started to laugh.

"What's so funny?" The fat man's face turned faintly purple with rage. Above the bulging cheeks veins crawled across his temples like swollen worms. "Sure, you can laugh! You never had to work for yours!"

"You don't understand!" Hendley protested. "I'm not laughing at you. It's just...." He shook his head helplessly.

"I'll bet they're all like that!" another voice cut in. It belonged to the woman near the front of the cabin. She had risen to confront Hendley, her long face pinched tight with hostility. "Making fun of the rest of us!"

A third passenger intruded. "Fair's fair," he said. He was a 3-Dayman, like Hendley himself, attired in the familiar blue coverall. "It isn't his fault he's young. Somebody had to work to pay off his tax debt. That's the system, and it works the same for all of us."

"*He* didn't do the work!" the fat man retorted. "Look at him! Gloating over us. I'm sixty-two years old—I've worked all my life. Never let myself have anything I didn't need. And it'll be two, maybe three years before I make it. How much time will I have left?" His red face thrust close to Hendley's. "But why should you care? You've forgotten what it is to work!"

"They have all those women!" the pinched-faced woman up front cried shrilly. "I've seen them on the viewer. That's all they ever think about!"

Hendley's laughter had long since evaporated. He could only gape in amazement at the swollen anger of the fat man, the shrill resentment of the woman. He wondered how widespread was this envy of the free. Had he been so absorbed in his own unrest that he hadn't looked around him? And

what soothing platitudes would the computers in the Morale Center recommend to patch this crack in the Organization's perfect structure?

Had he felt this same resentment himself? The question pulled Hendley erect in his seat. Was his rebellion rooted in a common envy? The possibility made him uneasy with himself. It offered an explanation for the way in which the idyllic moments with ABC-331, which had seemed so intensely important, should so quickly have receded in his memory. He had been offered a chance to glimpse the true freedom, the goal of all. Did everything fade into unimportance before that dream? Had his protest, disguised as the yearning for individuality, been no more than a subtler face of envy?

"Don't have much to say for yourself, do you?" the fat distributor in the beige uniform muttered.

Hendley turned to meet the bitter little eyes with a level gaze. In sudden anger he forgot the Investigator's insistence on silence. "I started as a 2-Dayman myself," he said flatly. "I'm not even a—"

The copter dipped abruptly. Hendley broke off. A faint pull in his stomach told him the ship was descending. That brief tug released a tingle of excitement through his body.

A stewardess appeared from the lounge, wearing a tight-fitting green uniform and a vacuous smile. She advanced straight to Hendley's seat. "You will go forward now, sir," she said, her tone a little too eager, too flatteringly awed. "The private debarking platform is through that door."

Hendley rose. Glancing down once more at the fat passenger who had been so angered by the white uniform, he thought: It's just as well you don't know the truth. Envy grew vigorously enough without nourishment, as a weed forced its way through the smallest crack in solid pavement.

He turned abruptly and made his way along the aisle to the narrow door at the front of the cabin.

Just before the outer panel swung open Hendley donned the sunglasses he had been issued. Even this protection did not keep his eyes from aching as the full glare of sunlight struck them. He stepped from the copter onto a concrete apron. The exit panel instantly closed behind him, and a moment later the copter rose swiftly and quietly, blasting Hendley with a column of hot air.

He shut his eyes against the sun's glare and felt its weight for a long moment after the copter's funnel of air had spun away. When he opened his eyes again, squinting, he surveyed a desolate, empty world. A broad expanse of concrete—cracked, broken, uneven, erratically patched—stretched to the fringe of a brown desert, which rose in smooth shallow steps to a ring of brown mountains hazy in the distance. In all that wilderness there was neither sight nor sound of life—nothing but the deteriorating white concrete of the landing strip, the brown earth, the aching sunlight.

Panic closed on him. He whirled. The sight of the familiar massive wall of a Freeman Camp brought sharp relief. The landing was outside the wall, of course, to prevent any unauthorized glimpse of what lay beyond that barrier. But one thing about the wall was puzzling. Like the concrete landing field, it was visibly crumbling and neglected.

The broad sweep of the wall was broken by a single gate. A lone attendant in a beige uniform sat in a small glass-walled cubicle beside the narrow gate. He glanced up without interest as Hendley approached.

"I'm a visitor," Hendley said. "This is my card."

The attendant gave the card a cursory inspection, consulted a list and nodded perfunctorily. As he made a notation on the list, Hendley was moved to break the heavy silence.

"Your landing strip isn't in very good shape, is it?" he commented lightly.

"People don't complain," the attendant said laconically. "It's what's inside that counts." Without looking up he gestured toward the windowed slot indicating the presence of a computer set into the wall next to the gate. "Check in," he said. "Then report to Administration."

Hendley lifted his wrist to present his identity disc to the machine. It responded with a low hum, followed by a click. The gate swung open.

Hendley walked through.

Before him was an expanse of green lawn, extending in a smooth, unbroken carpet a hundred feet wide to a grove of trees, shadowy and inviting in the sunlight.

The gate clicked shut behind him.

6

A sign, black letters on a white board, pointed the way to ADMINISTRATION, along a narrow footpath which plunged into the belt of trees. As Hendley entered the shadowed grove he felt a renewal of excitement. The leaves above whispered musically in the wind, an unfamiliar rushing sound which was strangely pleasant. An intricate lacework of light and shadow played over the leaves and branches and trunks of trees. As he broke out of the woods onto another stretch of green lawn, a bird darted from a high branch above his head, swooped in a spectacular arc, incredibly light and swift and beautiful, and dove out of sight into another leafy cavern.

It was the first live bird Hendley had ever seen. He stared up in wonder at the foliage where the bird had disappeared, wishing that it would dart out again. At last he turned away. His breath caught.

The entire Freeman Camp seemed to be spread out before him. The natural screen of trees formed a line repeating the great circle of the outside wall. Within that frame of woods was a rolling green carpet dotted here and there with colorful play areas, pools of water winking in the sunlight, outdoor cafes and bars. Beyond this parklike setting were the residential areas—row upon row of identical two-storied buildings, each lavishly windowed—every room, Hendley marveled, must be open to the light! In a narrower circle beyond these residential buildings were structures of varied shapes and sizes and colors, shops and stores and theaters and game centers of every kind. Crowning the top of a hill almost in the center of the camp, overlooking another immense park lush with trees and flowers and more game areas, was a huge yellow building, a cement mushroom turned light and graceful by inset arches of glass.

The camp was a world all bright and glittering, golden in the sunlight, endlessly varied and enchanting.

Hendley stood rooted, his senses alive to all the strange new sounds and smells, for a long time. Then with quickening anticipation he hurried along the path toward a concentration of squat, windowless buildings immediately before him. He gained admittance through a right-angled corridor which cut

off any view of the outside. Here he found himself in familiar surroundings, the sealed-in, air-conditioned world of the worker in the Organization. The check-in procedure was a model of the Organization's pattern of streamlined, impersonal, highly automated efficiency. Hendley was briskly ushered through a receiving line, identified, briefed on the geography of the camp, given a key to his assigned room, a map, and a schedule of the day's "entertainments." No one expressed surprise or special interest in his visiting status.

At the end of the line an official told him, "You will report here an hour before your departure time, which is at twelve noon tomorrow."

Hendley smiled at an unexpected thought. "How will I know what time it is?"

The official's eyebrows rose. "The sun is directly overhead at noon."

"I see," said Hendley, feeling properly squelched.

"You are free to go anywhere in the camp you wish," the beige-clad official said crisply. "And you may use any of the facilities of the camp for recreation, food, drink or, ah, whatever you choose." His manner unbent as he lowered his voice confidentially. "The PIB's are painted red. And if I may make a suggestion, sir, you shouldn't miss the entertainment at the main Rec Hall. An excellent casino, and I've heard that the show tonight on the stage is, ah, shall we say, unusual?" He smiled with a lewd relish, so unexpected that it was shocking. "You can't miss the Rec Hall. It's the big yellow building on the hill."

Hendley started to mumble his thanks, but, after his brief lapse, the official was once again impersonally efficient. "Official personnel are not allowed out of the administration and service buildings—which are, of course, windowless. Service facilities are underground. The camp belongs to the free. You are one of them—until noon tomorrow." He smiled mechanically, then added, making the phrase more a pointed suggestion than a casual dismissal, "Have fun!"

A door opened at the end of another angled corridor, and Hendley walked out into the bright, green land of the free.

It was perhaps two hours later—he was already conscious of missing his watch, unable to shake a lifetime dependence upon measured time—when Hendley paused to rest under the shade of an umbrella at a vending cafe set in the central park. He ate a light meal and relaxed with a tall whiskey and soda, enjoying the luxury of eating and drinking expensively without having paid. He could not remember when he had last had a whiskey in the middle of the day—and this tasted like grain whiskey, not the chemical variety. Possibly it was the rarity of the event—or the fresh air and the stimulation of the camp's bewildering activity—which made the drink so satisfying.

Camp was an inexact word, he thought. The Freeman Camp was, in fact, a huge, complex city, served by what must be an equally complex underground service network, and gaining its atmosphere from being oriented entirely toward pleasure—in a dazzling variety of sports centers, swimming pools, gambling casinos, social clubs, theaters, PIB's, museums, lavish restaurants, and bars as well as the more casual outdoor cafes. Rapid conveyor sidewalks whisked the pleasure-seeker from one part of the camp to another, although most of the time Hendley had walked, anxious to see everything. His feet and legs ached from the unaccustomed exercise.

Crowds thronged the streets, the walks, the parks, but there were, unlike the underground cities, uncrowded areas: quiet havens in the parks away from the activity centers, deserted footpaths through the woods encircling the camp, and out-of-the-way nooks where you could savor the delicious sensation of being alone in the open.

Hendley had briefly visited the room assigned to him for the night, on the second floor of one of the countless rectangular buildings. In spite of the airy spaciousness and inviting comfort of the room, he had not lingered there. There was too much to see, and too little time to enjoy it.

The vending cafe where he had paused was one of the few uncrowded ones he had come upon. There were a dozen outdoor tables, each with its brightly colored umbrella. Only one other table was occupied. The man sitting there had glanced Hendley's way without apparent interest, though his eyes were hidden behind the dark glasses worn by the majority of the camp's residents. He was a slender, lithe young man, about Hendley's own height and build, with skin darkened by long exposure to the sun. Hendley

envied the youthful stranger his casual, indolent air. Quite obviously he was used to all this; he could take it for granted.

Fifty yards away a game of some sort was in progress in an outdoor pool. Shouts and sudden cries and bubbling laughter drifted across the green lawn. On impulse Hendley downed the last of his drink, rose and walked slowly toward the pool.

The scene might have been in a Freedom Play on the viewscreen in Hendley's old room. Men and women in white uniforms sat around tables on a broad patio surrounding the pool, or relaxed in lounge chairs, caressing drinks while they talked or idly watched the action in the pool. Sunlight sparkled on the blue water, which was churned into foam where the swimmers tangled in a spirited struggle for a round ball. The swimmers had doffed their uniforms and wore only thin strips of white plastic mesh. One man had lost his flimsy cover in the course of the game, but neither he nor the spectators appeared to pay any attention to the loss.

The game was unfamiliar to Hendley. There were goals set up at each end of the pool, and the object of the skirmishing seemed to be to carry the ball to one of these goals and push it through a round hoop. The players were divided into two teams.

Hendley looked around for a vacant lounge chair. A girl sitting at the far side of the pool, her legs over the edge, caught his eye. She was clad in the wisps of white mesh around her breasts and hips, exposing a large expanse of smooth, deeply tanned skin. Her slender brown legs dangled in the water. Looking up, laughing, she saw Hendley watching her. The laughter faded. Her eyes, large and dimly visible behind tinted glasses, seemed to hold his, their expression unreadable. When a sudden explosion of action in the water drew her attention, Hendley took the opportunity to walk around the pool. He paused a few feet away from the girl, staring down in admiration at her sleek, brown-skinned body.

She glanced up with a slight smile made sensual by full red lips. "Why aren't you in the game?" she asked.

"I don't know how to play." He squatted beside her, watching the agile leap of a swimmer out of the water to spear a loose ball. "Is it easy to learn?"

"Anybody can do it," she said with a careless shrug, "as long as you can swim."

"I swim a little."

"You're new, aren't you?"

"How could you tell?"

Slowly she removed her tinted glasses. Large brown eyes regarded him candidly. "You're so white," she said.

Hendley flushed. It was true, though he hadn't thought too much about it before. His recent arrival in the camp would be obvious to everyone. He felt a strong wish to belong, to be one with these brown, happy, uninhibited people, to merge with them. And just as suddenly the harsh reminder came: he wouldn't have time. He had less than a day.

The girl was no longer watching him. Hendley rose from his crouch, but he didn't move away. She was about Ann's age, he thought. But Ann would never be so brown-skinned. He frowned, guiltily conscious of a comparison unfavorable to Ann, wondering why he had thought "never."

The swimmers converged at that moment near one of the goals. In the tangle of brown bodies and boiling water it was impossible to follow the action closely, but there was a sudden scream of pain, choked off as a mouth filled with water. A whistle shrilled. The players drew apart, surfacing, treading water, drifting to the sides of the pool. One body stayed down, motionless near the bottom, appearing to undulate gently with the rippling of the water. The other swimmers made no move toward him, but even as alarm tugged at Hendley he saw two stiff-legged figures trotting briskly toward the pool from a beige-colored building in the background. With a start Hendley realized they were humanoids, robots so flawlessly imitative of man that, across the width of the pool, only a certain rigidity of movement betrayed their origin. Without hesitation they dove into the pool.

"Why don't the others do anything?" Hendley exclaimed. "That man'll drown!"

"They're not supposed to," the tanned girl said. "Rules of the game. Besides, it's the robots' job. They're better at it."

"But I don't—" Hendley broke off. The robot rescuers surfaced with the limp body of the injured player. With practiced efficiency they eased him onto the deck beside the pool.

"That answers a question I had," Hendley said thoughtfully.

"What's that?"

"About how some of the services are performed in the camp. I didn't know you had robots."

The girl lost interest. "They're handy, even if they are kind of creepy."

A small crowd now huddled around the unconscious swimmer. "Do you suppose he'll be all right?" Hendley wondered aloud.

"Looks like he's only got a broken arm," the girl said indifferently. "They'll bring him around."

Hendley stared at her, startled by her lack of concern. Before he could speak a broad-shouldered man with blond hair burned almost white by the sun heaved himself from the water to flop onto the deck beside the girl. "Two-minute break," he said loudly. "Bad luck. MTL-619 was a good guard."

Becoming aware of Hendley standing nearby, he glanced up. "Hey!" he exclaimed. "How about you? We need a player."

"Oh, I—I don't think so," Hendley demurred.

"Why not? It's fun!"

The girl was watching Hendley. Her brown eyes seemed to hold a challenge. "You'll never learn unless you try," she said.

Hendley hesitated. "All right," he said, surprising himself. "Where do I get one of those suits?"

"They'll give you one at that service building," the blond young man said, waving toward the beige structure from which the robots had appeared. "We'll have to start without you, but hurry up!"

He pushed off the lip of the pool into the water. Hendley glanced again at the girl. She was smiling, but the sunglasses hid her eyes once more and he wasn't sure what the smile said.

A dispensomat was built into one wall of the beige service building. A row of panels, each with an order button, listed various kinds of sports equipment. Hendley pushed the button after SWIMMING TRUNKS—MALE, and gave his size in answer to a metallic voice over an intercom. The white mesh trunks, wrapped in plastic, slid down a chute into view.

Since no facilities seemed available, Hendley guessed that he was expected to change clothes in the open. He undressed hastily, wondering at the insane urge which had made him agree to join the game. He became exaggeratedly conscious of the warm current of air caressing his body, and he felt a prickling of anticipation. He wished that he were not so dead white.

Returning to the pool, Hendley hovered near the edge, not sure what he was supposed to do. With chagrin he saw that the brown-eyed girl did not appear to notice him. Almost immediately the dripping head and shoulders of the husky young swimmer burst from the water, blond hair plastered to his skull. "Come on!" he shouted.

"What do I do?"

"That's our goal! Just don't let them score. And if you get the ball, throw it to me!"

He went under. The action was now concentrated at the far end of the pool. Hendley chose the moment's safety to dive in near his appointed goal. He wondered if the girl was as oblivious of him as she pretended, but within seconds the other players were plunging and wrestling all around him and there was no more time to think.

The rudimentary rules of the game soon became clear. There were five players on each side. Two were guards—Hendley's position—stationed near the goal to block an attack. The other three roamed the pool freely, battling for possession of the ball. That much was simple. What Hendley was unprepared for was the game's other basic rule: no holds were barred. To score or prevent a score, anything went.

His first lesson came when the ball squirted from a player's grip and bobbed loose within Hendley's reach. He got one hand on it. Something slammed into the back of his neck. A knee, missing his groin, sank into his stomach.

Strong hands twisted his arm until it seemed ready to pop from its shoulder socket. He swallowed water.

Coming up gagging, he gulped frantically for air. His arm hung limp. As he grabbed the lip of the pool for support, he saw that the ball had moved halfway down the length of the pool. Across the way the brown-eyed, brown-skinned girl was laughing. More than that. She was clapping her hands. Applauding.

Grimly Hendley turned to meet another attack. This time he didn't try for the ball. He kept busy defending himself. One attacker got an arm around his throat, but Hendley had caught the flash of muscular arm from the corner of his eye. He was able to wrench free with no worse than a bruised neck.

Hendley surfaced, pleased with himself. The blond young man came up for air a few feet away. He glared at Hendley with hostile eyes. "You let 'em score!" he snarled. Then he was gone.

For a while Hendley was angry—with the blond man and with himself—but after a short time he no longer felt anything but a desire to get out of the water alive. Yet when the attackers threatened his goal, he threw himself at the nearest one with savage determination. His arms and legs grew heavy with weariness. His head ached. He wondered how long the game lasted, and he longed for the end with a deep yearning. He had forgotten all about the girl watching from the side of the pool.

Then another player was injured and carried from the pool. He was on the opposing team. It appeared that the attackers had used up their substitutions. The game went on, unevenly matched. Hendley's team went to work to exploit their advantage. They scored once. Moments later another of the opposing swimmers drifted senseless near the bottom of the pool. Five players to three. It would soon be over.

Hendley had grown numb to the meaning of what was happening. He was too tired to feel pity or outrage. The chief emotion he felt as the game resumed was an increased sense of security. The odds were improving.

That safe feeling lulled him into carelessness. When the other team, in spite of being outmanned, seized the ball and launched an attack, three of Hendley's teammates ganged up on the man with the ball. It bobbed free.

Hendley made the mistake of playing the ball instead of protecting himself. Two men struck at him simultaneously, one at his head, the other from below. They dragged him down. One seemed to be trying to twist his leg off at the knee. The other, more direct, was also more effective. His first blow rocked Hendley's head. The second drove a tooth through his lower lip. The sun seemed to go down suddenly and the blue water turned dark. A band of pressure tightened around his neck. He clawed at it. It was an arm. It wouldn't come loose. His struggles became weaker. He wondered why his teammates didn't come to his aid. Then the man who'd been working on his knee changed tactics, raising the level of his attack—about eighteen inches. Hendley felt a rocketing pain. He followed its crimson burst. When he reached the center of it, it turned to water and he was drowning....

"He's coming around."

Hendley tried to open his eyes, but the lids were stuck. He stopped trying and concentrated on his pain. His knee was aflame, and his neck and jaw and stomach and other, more tender parts ached. Someone seemed to be kneeling on his chest. But he could flex his toes and fingers. He could breathe, if wheezingly. He seemed whole—and he was alive.

His eyelids struggled open. He looked into a smooth-skinned brown face and brown eyes that seemed to devour him. The girl's full, wide mouth was open. Her expression was no longer indifferent. It was—eager.

He stared past her rounded shoulder at the sky, and at another familiar face which he did not immediately place. The face smiled.

"Close call," the young man who owned the face said. "But with a little rest you'll be good as new."

The statement did not seem very credible, but Hendley was unequal to argument. "What happened?" he asked.

"You won!" the tanned girl said enthusiastically.

"I did?"

"FLN-962—he's my Contracted—said you did very well. The team won. They're playing a rematch now."

"Oh." The victory did not matter. What mattered was being out of the game in one piece. He said, "They must be out of their minds."

"FLN is a nut about water polo," the girl agreed.

"I thought I was finished."

"He pulled you out." With a toss of her head the girl indicated the stranger watching over her shoulder. Hendley tried to identify the faintly sardonic smile, the cool ascetic face with its expression of weary boredom. He noted that the man's uniform was soaking wet.

"The robot rescue team was on another call," the man said diffidently, dismissing his action. "I thought they might not get to you in time."

Hendley closed his eyes. "Thanks," he murmured. He felt terribly tired, but the pain in his groin had dulled a little and the other aches were bearable, even the knee. Suddenly he remembered the young man's face. He had been sitting with his air of indolence at a table near Hendley's in the outdoor cafe. Hendley looked up again. The young man was gone.

"Where did he go?" Hendley asked.

"Never mind him," the brown-eyed girl said soothingly. Gently she massaged his neck. "Do you think you can get up?"

"I don't know."

"I'll help you."

Somehow he managed to struggle to his feet with the girl's help. "You need to relax," she said. "Come with me." Too weak to protest or even to wonder why it was necessary to move, Hendley allowed himself to be led away from the pool area. They were on grass, and she steadied him as he sagged against her. Then they were under a canopy of trees which screened the sunlight. The cool shade felt good. Sounds of play in the pool had diminished.

"Lie here," the girl murmured in his ear.

Hendley did as he was told. It was wonderful to lie on the cool grass, to let his abused muscles relax, to close his eyes, to feel the soft breath of air against his body....

He tried to sit up. He wasn't in his uniform. He wore only the minimal cover of the white mesh bathing trunks, and the girl's hands were busily divesting him of this garment.

"You're so white," she breathed, lowering herself to the ground beside him. "You don't know what that does—it's been so long since I've seen anybody so white. And you're hurt. I'll make you feel better—you'll see."

"Wait!" Hendley protested weakly.

"Mmmm," the girl said, her mouth seeking his. "I don't know what it is—when I see a man hurt...."

"TLL! TLL!" Someone was calling. A man's voice. "TLL—where are you?"

"Oh, damn!" the girl said.

"TLL?" The voice was coming closer. Hendley's scalp prickled as he recognized the voice. The muscular blond swimmer, her Contracted! If the man found them like this, he'd never believe....

"Where the hell ... are you in there?"

With a sigh the girl sat up. Hendley tried to rise to his knees, fumbling for his trunks. Bushes parted. The tall, broad-shouldered figure of the blond man loomed over them. "There you are!" he said. "Didn't you hear me?"

"I heard," the girl said petulantly.

The man gave Hendley a cursory nod. "Come on! I hear a hunt's getting up. Soon as it's dark."

"A hunting party?" There was a subtle change in the girl's manner and her voice. Hendley glanced into the large brown eyes. The glitter he saw there made him uneasy.

"Hurry up! We'll have to eat and get ready!" The man for the first time looked directly at Hendley, who made a halfhearted effort to cover himself with the white mesh trunks, knowing the gesture was futile. "You did all

right in there for a beginner," the blond swimmer said heartily. "Hope you'll keep showing up. Always need good players!"

He gave the girl his hand to pull her to her feet. "Just let me get my uniform," she murmured, casually adjusting the halter of her swimming garment. She glanced back at Hendley and said, with what seemed like regret, "So white...."

Then the couple was striding off and the girl was saying, "We haven't had a good hunt in so long. Who's the target? Is he playing now?"

Their voices trailed off. Hendley gaped after them. They were Contracted—but there had been neither jealousy nor disgust in the man's attitude. He had practically caught Hendley and the girl violating one of the Organization's first rules of order—and he hadn't cared!

Hendley caught hold of a heavy branch of the nearest bush and dragged himself erect. The ways of Freeman were going to take some getting used to, he thought. Remembering the girl's eyes when she had heard about the hunting party, he shivered involuntarily. What kind of woman would react so strongly to a man's pain? And what did they mean by the hunt?

He glanced down at his pale body, unused to the sun, and shivered again. Even when he emerged from the shade into the warm sunlight, he still felt cold.

Participation was a compulsive act. Less than an hour after Hendley left the swimming pool in the central park, once more clad in his visitor's white uniform, he found himself lingering beside a fence enclosing a series of tennis courts. A shower, a rest, another whiskey and soda had refreshed him. Walking had loosened bruised, stiff muscles, although he still limped, favoring his right knee. Except for the knee and a swollen lip, he felt almost normal. Ready for action, in fact. Tennis, however, seemed a little too strenuous, even such indifferent tennis as that being played here. The players lobbed the ball back and forth listlessly, hardly trying when a shot went out of reach. Odd. A number of the activities Hendley had watched were carried on with the same indifference: lawn games, a bowling match,

boating. In the parks and on the streets many Freeman stood around with vacant expressions. Yet the water polo players had thrown themselves into their game with a vengeance Hendley could attest to. Some participants in a football game he'd paused to watch for a while had piled into each other with an audible crunching impact. Even a group of cyclists racing around a circular track had competed with real fervor. They weren't very good riders, for Hendley had witnessed two collisions on a far turn in the brief time he watched. But they were enthusiastic.

Contact sports, he thought....

He walked on. The afternoon was waning, though the sun remained well above the horizon. How little the Freeman seemed to notice the sun! He never saw any of them staring up at the sky, while Hendley frequently paused to survey that awesome immensity. They brushed heedlessly past vivid flowers in bloom, trampled upon bushes, failed to turn their heads when a bird sang from a tree, while Hendley found these things fascinating. Perhaps in time you became used to them. They might come to seem ordinary. Even the vaulting sky might fail to make you feel small.

He came to an area of carefully tended lawns broken here and there by patches of white sand, defined by rough stretches of taller grass and shrubbery. Small groups of players strolled in the distance, pulling carts or carrying bags containing slender sticks. Something tugged at Hendley's memory. He had seen such a place in a miniature display in the Sports Museum. In the underground cities there was not enough space for such a layout, but it made a pretty picture in the late afternoon in the spacious Freeman Camp.

Near one of the familiar beige service buildings a player was setting a small white ball on the ground and preparing to strike it with the weighted end of one of the slender poles. He was a stocky, vigorous man twice Hendley's age, his skin reddened rather than tanned by the sun, his thick arms choked with dense gray hair, his head completely bald. Behind him another player hovered, watching, a tall angular man of much the same age, with a prominent Adam's apple, knife-edge nose, remarkably long arms, and an angry scowl. Calling on an old habit, Hendley attached the nickname Curly to the bald man with the hairy arms, and Happy to his scowling companion. Nicknames were easier to remember than numbers.

Curly glanced up from the white ball as Hendley came near. "Join us?" he called cheerfully. "It's better with three."

"Humph!" the other grunted.

"I'd like to," Hendley said. The exercise, which seemed mild, would help to limber abused muscles a little more, easing the soreness in his arms and neck. He was issued a bag of clubs and three white balls at the service building. When he joined the other players, Curly was waiting, prepared to hit his ball.

"If you don't know how to play, you can just watch us," Curly said.

Hendley nodded. As Curly faced his ball, Hendley hefted the slender plastic club with its flat-faced head and tentatively swung it.

"Not until I start my swing!" Curly snapped sharply.

Hendley desisted, not sure what he had done wrong. The stocky man flexed his hairy arms and drew his club high over his head. He remained frozen in that position for several seconds. Then he swung, the clubhead lashing down in a swift arc. At that moment the dour-faced player suddenly stabbed out with his club toward the ball. He missed by inches. Curly's club smacked the ball solidly and, following through, banged into his opponent's stick before it could be withdrawn. The club shot from Happy's hands. He grabbed his fingers, grimacing with pain. Curly laughed gleefully. "Caught you that time!" he cried.

The ball had flown almost out of sight down the playing field. The three men watched it until it came to rest. "That's the fairway," Curly explained. "Try to hit it there. Over there, that's called the rough. And those sandy patches are traps. Object is to get to the green—see it way off there?"

Hendley peered into the distance, wondering how he was ever going to hit the ball that far. Then the angular player stepped over to place his ball on the ground, scowling more savagely than before. Curly took up a position behind the taller man. He winked at Hendley.

A pattern of play emerged. One player was allowed to stand behind the one driving his ball. He could attempt to dislodge the ball, but only after the driver had begun his swing. Happy's first maneuver turned out to be a feint. He began his swing, checked it suddenly and brought his club into position

for a direct overhand smash. But Curly had anticipated him. His stab at the ball was also a feint. Happy was left holding his club aloft with no chance to hit his opponent's stick. Curly laughed until his eyes were moist. "Cost you a stroke!" he chortled.

Happy managed to make his drive, but he used a short, vicious stroke. The ball sped out in a low trajectory, hooked sharply, and disappeared into the tall grass of the rough. Happy muttered angrily to himself.

Hendley, innocent in the tricks of the game, became an object of amusement to his fellow players. They took turns interfering with him. Three times they managed to knock his ball away just before Hendley's clubhead could strike it. On the fourth try Hendley not only hit the ball but had the satisfaction of catching Curly's club as well. He could feel the shivering impact.

His drive, with his three misses, he was informed, cost him a total of four strokes.

Hendley was not sure that he cared much for the game, but he was now determined to stick it out. At least his companions played in earnest. Curly took a keen delight in every phase of the game, but his cheerfulness did not disguise the intensity with which he played. Happy's long face grew longer and darker as the game progressed, his hawk nose seemed to sharpen, his mouth tightened into a thinner, grimmer line. His derision over Hendley's atrocious play seemed to be the only pleasure he found in the game. Hendley wondered why, with so many other sports and entertainments in the camp to choose from, the tall man should persist in one which merely made him angry.

At the beginning of the fourth hole, as each successive step in the game was called, Curly bristled when Happy's club, trying to stab the ball, struck the stocky man's shin. They exchanged heated words. Happy raised his club threateningly, but Curly brandished his own and faced the other down. They played on in sullen silence.

Hendley, the last to hit his ball successfully as usual, knocked it once more into the rough. This time the other two players contemptuously left him to hit out by himself without interference. They played on ahead. By the time Hendley managed to knock ball onto the close-cropped grass of the fairway, his companions were both on the green, a circle of very fine grass visible in

the distance. Hendley paused a moment to watch them. He would quit after this hole, he reflected. With daylight almost gone—the sun now rested at the tops of the trees ringing the camp—he had no time to waste on pointless pleasure. He lacked the fiercely competitive approach of the other two men, perhaps because he was so inexperienced.

On the distant green something had happened. Curly was shaking a fist at the taller man. They stood so close their chests bumped. Hendley could not hear them, but he watched the silent tableau of their anger with a feeling of apprehension. Suddenly Happy's thin, sharp-angled figure bent, lashing out like a whip. He snatched the other man's club from him, dropping his own. He brought the slender plastic rod down viciously across his bony thigh. To Hendley's surprise the plastic rod bent. At a second blow it snapped in two. With malice evident in the gesture Happy threw the two broken pieces onto the green.

Hendley had started toward them. For a moment nothing happened, the two men seeming to glare at each other in impotent rage. Hendley's pace quickened to a trot. It was a lucky thing that Curly had such a cheerful disposition....

Hendley started running. The stocky man had suddenly scooped up Happy's club from the ground. The tall man lunged for it. Curly eluded him. "Stop it!" Hendley shouted, but he knew he could not be heard. Curly dodged away from the surly player, whirled, raising the club, lashing down....

Hendley pulled up short. He seemed unable to breathe. The two figures on the green were motionless in the bright sunlight. Slowly the dour-faced man's tall body began to collapse, sliding toward the ground as if it were strung together in loosely attached sections. The silent impact of the lean figure hitting the ground prodded Hendley into action. His mind was still stunned, but his legs moved without his volition, automatically propelling him toward the green. Far off to the right another group of players had paused to stare. Hendley waved at them urgently, but they did not move.

What happened next no longer had the power to shock or terrify him. As he raced closer to the green, the stocky, good-humored Curly raised the plastic club in his hands and with careful, deliberate aim brought the weighted head down to crush the fallen man's skull.

Near the sand trap at the edge of the green Hendley paused to be sick. When he was able to stagger onto the smoothly clipped carpet of grass Curly was thoughtfully wiping the clubhead on the grass. Not far away a small, beige-painted vehicle was speeding toward them. The stocky man hardly glanced at Hendley or his victim. He made no attempt to escape.

He's mad, Hendley thought, facing him across the green. But at any rate he wouldn't get away now. The beige vehicle was approaching swiftly. Hendley stared at the dead man, whose face no longer scowled. Happy, he thought. Sickened again, he turned away.

The beige car, a motor-powered van carrying two beige-uniformed attendants, drove directly to the edge of the green. As the men hopped out Hendley expected Curly to run—or to prepare to resist. To his astonishment the two attendants paid no more attention to the stocky man than to Hendley. With silent efficiency they scooped the dead body onto a stretcher, carried it to the rear of the van, and slid it inside. Without a word they retreated around the car and began to climb back onto their seats.

"Wait!" Hendley shouted, running toward them. "Aren't you going to do anything about *him*?" He pointed accusingly at Curly, who was making practice swings with his borrowed club. The stocky man looked up.

One of the attendants was already in his seat, but the driver paused. His head swiveled toward Hendley—stiffly. "He was murdered!" Hendley shouted. "I saw it! You can't let him get away with it!"

The driver's face completed its turn. It was blank, shining, impersonal, and, in spite of its perfection of feature, inhuman. Hendley stared in stunned incredulity. Robots! Cleaning up the human debris on the golf course as they rescued drowning swimmers from the pools. No wonder Curly had remained indifferent!

The vehicle drove off while Hendley stared after it. Swinging around, he tried to find the distant group of players who had paused in their game to watch what was happening. He saw them far off on another fairway. Their interest had turned back to their game.

Hendley swung back to confront Curly. Revulsion shook him. The whole affair was impossible—it couldn't happen! "What kind of a man are you?" he shouted, hardly knowing what he was saying.

To his horror the stocky man smiled with his usual cheerfulness. "These things happen," he said. "He never liked the game really. I told him he shouldn't play it, but...." Curly made another idle swing with his club, the head whistling in the air. "Don't think about it. You'll soon feel better. Shall we get on?"

Hendley gaped at him. "Get on with what?"

"The game," Curly said blandly. "I'll wait for you while you hit up to the green."

Hendley's disbelief burst like a seed pod, spilling out angry words. "You're insane!" he cried. "You've just murdered a man! If you think we're going on with this farce—"

"But you have to play," the bald man said, unperturbed. "Rules of the game, you know. Have to play at least six holes through." He smiled again, his red face unmarked by concern. He said, "Obviously you're new here, and there are some things you obviously don't understand. But anyone who plays golf accepts the risks involved. And the rules." He hefted his plastic club with his hairy, muscular arms. "You'll play," he murmured. "Unless you'd rather fight it out here."

In an arrested moment of stillness in which no bird sang and the air itself ceased to stir, Hendley faced the murderer on the sun-washed green. It *was* happening, he thought stupidly. It could not possibly happen, but it was.

For some reason he looked up toward the sky, the great blue dome blazing with fire on the western horizon. Then, his brain numb, his steps wooden, he turned and walked back along the fairway toward his ball.

The first star of evening rested like a jewel against the night's dark throat. The moon had not yet risen. At surface level in the Freeman Camp, away from the gaudy main streets and the floodlit play areas, the shadows were deep. The clumps of woods and bushes in the parks, so fresh and cool and inviting during the day, were now black, forbidding caves.

At night the camp was different. Under the day's warm sun and dazzling sky, it was a vivid and colorful panorama of flowers and trees and green grass and gaily painted buildings, with a leisurely pace and a pervading atmosphere of carefree pleasure which could not be destroyed by the occasional bizarre incident. With the coming of darkness the tempo of activity became more frenetic, its spirit caught by the shrill cacophony of the music blaring from viewscreens and the computer bands in the better cocktail lounges and dance halls. There was a keener, more penetrating edge to the sudden peals of laughter, a more insistent note in the gay, sophisticated talk around the cafe tables and in the bars, an urgency to the hurrying steps of the crowds pushing along the streets, a sweaty impatience pervading the lines forming outside the red-painted PIB's. By day the Freeman were a family group enjoying lawn games and relaxing by the pool, and the family could hardly be blamed if a mad uncle brandished a golf club. At night the party started.

The main thoroughfares were thronged with Freeman. They clustered on street corners. They jammed the lavish restaurants and spilled out of the tiny bars. They swarmed through the glowing theater lobbies and filled the recreation halls with noisy confusion. Their merriment had a voice. It was high and artificially frightened, ringing through the tunnels of the electronically thrill-packed fun houses. It was hoarse and raw with savage excitement in the banked spectator rows of the miniature bird fight arena, where two leggy, long-beaked birds—rare mutations of an earlier species—controlled by slender string leashes secured to metal rings around their necks, goaded by electronic impulses from the whiplike metal rods held by their handler-trainers, pecked and slashed at each other with their curved

sword-beaks. It was low and suggestive behind the drawn curtains of the private booths in the peekie-houses, where the latest erotic films were created by thought impulses on the individual screens.

Assaulted by the voices, jostled by the crowds, TRH-247 wandered through the camp. The driving tempo of its gaiety infected him, stealing into his blood stream, quickening all his senses into a kind of exaggerated awareness. Several drinks had blurred the residue of horror left from the scene he had witnessed on the golf green, and diluted the angry tension of the last two holes played out in the fading light. In the evening's party atmosphere he could almost forget—although, like someone holding a door closed against a ghost, he avoided the shadowed places and the dimly lighted side roads which separated the rows of residential buildings, seeking out the open, crowded centers and the bright lights.

On those final two holes of golf Hendley had required thirteen strokes. The number would not easily be forgotten, for each time he had addressed his ball, the stocky, bald-headed player had stood behind him, chuckling softly, tapping his weighted clubhead in his hand or casually lifting it. Hendley had had to fight down panic. His shots had been erratic and uncontrollable. To his lasting shame, on the last hole, as he placed himself behind his amused opponent in position to interfere with a drive, he had found himself thinking: If I struck now, I could get him first.

But nothing had happened. Hendley had not acted, and the man he called Curly had been content to smile at Hendley's nervousness and to mock his ill-concealed anger and revulsion. At the end of the sixth hole the stocky man had chuckled, saying, "Beat you by nineteen strokes. You're not much competition." And with that he had picked up his ball and walked away, leaving Hendley to stare after him bitterly, galled by the intense relief that left him quivering, unable to walk steadily, his hands shaking so he had trouble retrieving his ball.

Time, the serene beauty of the camp, and two quick whiskeys at the nearest refreshment counter quieted Hendley's nerves and helped him to gain perspective. Obviously there must be some form of internal force for law and order among the Freeman. Outsiders presumably couldn't interfere with that internal rule. To do so would be to deny freedom. When Hendley found out how the system worked, he would have to report the dangerously mad

golfer. Something would be done. Surely the risks of golf mentioned by Curly didn't include cold-blooded murder!

As reason asserted itself—and the drinks took effect—he began to feel better. He was able to sip his third drink slowly, enjoying it, savoring with it his first full view of twilight, painting a stark black filigree of leaf and branch against a luminous sky. The spectacle left him breathless. What overwhelming grandeur the world offered! And here in the Freeman Camp it was continuously on display. The sky itself seemed to thunder the joys of freedom. Against this awesome splendor the overzealous enthusiasm of a group of swimmers, the sexual whim of an impressionable girl, even the petty violence of a deranged mind shrank into insignificance.

There was so much to enchant the eye and ear. A man would never have his fill of it. If freedom meant no more than the opportunity—and the leisure—to enjoy all this to his heart's content: the beauty of a bird soaring, the sparkle of a sunlit pool, the intricate texture of a tree trunk, the cool sweep of a green lawn, the vaulting leap of sky from horizon to horizon—it would be enough. Endless pleasure. No need to devour it hungrily (except for him, Hendley thought, checking his rapture). For the others, the truly free, there would never be the necessity to hurry away to the appointed task, the appointed recreation hour, the appointed woman. (He hadn't thought of RED-498, his Assigned, with quite that cold objectivity before, but it was true.)

Darkness came. The insistent beat of the crowded pleasure centers caught first his ear and then his need to participate, to discover more of the lures of freedom. He was drawn along the crowded streets, looking, smiling as the groups grew more boisterous and here and there an early drunk reeled from a bar, absorbing the sights and sounds as he had savored his last whiskey. Only occasionally—passing near the dark, silent, empty places—did he shiver, as if he sensed there the lurking shadows of pain and insensate cruelty.

At last he was hungry. There were many restaurants to choose from, but he remembered the reception official's reference to the main Rec Hall on the hill. He had no trouble locating the hill or identifying the massive yellow building, whose walls were thrown into sharp relief by a battery of lights in its spacious gardens. As Hendley rode a moving walk up the steep incline

he could feel the lifting pressure in his thighs. It had been a long day with far more physical activity than he was accustomed to.

Up close the Rec Hall was even more impressive than it had seemed at a distance. From a central spindle, itself as large as an ordinary recreation hall in the cities, curving escalators rose to the main theater or exhibition hall, whose domelike roof vaulted outward on concrete spines like a huge umbrella. Lesser wings on ground level contained varied game rooms. There was one section off to one side which was concealed behind a high wall. On a lower level, also reached from the central lobby by winding escalators, was the great casino. A floodlit pool was set into the lush green gardens surrounding the building complex.

Even the lobby was luxurious with an opulence Hendley had never seen before. Living trees bloomed next to the great concrete pillars. Ornate plastic and real wood furnishings, intricately worked, were placed in conversational groupings centered around colorful three-dimensional paintings and depth sculpture. One entire luminous wall shed a soft, flattering blue light over the whole room.

Inquiring at the main desk, Hendley learned that a wide selection of food and entertainment was available. A computer-clerk blinked out a descriptive layout of the Rec Hall on its message panel. There was a main dining room on a balcony, where a computer band played discreetly and a dance floor was jammed with couples doing the Sidewalk Hop. Hendley chose a quieter cafe in one of the wings on ground level.

The service was excellent. He ordered a martini, punched several buttons for his meal and sat at the designated table. Just as he finished his drink a tray carrying his hot dinner slid smoothly off the conveyor belt which ran past his table. The meat-sub was marvelously authentic, tender and juicy. Somewhat to his own surprise he devoured the meal greedily.

Relaxing over coffee and an after-dinner liqueur—which was excellent, without a trace of chemical taste or side effects—he glanced around the cafe with a feeling of well-being. Something—a delayed tug of recognition—brought his gaze back to a young man at an adjoining table. When their eyes met the young man smiled and nodded. Hendley returned the greeting. It was the same youth who had saved his life that afternoon by promptly pulling him from the pool.

With the careless slouch and bored manner of someone long used to freedom's luxuries, the young man picked up his drink and approached Hendley's table. "Join you?" he murmured. "You look as if you've been enjoying your first day in camp."

"It's been quite a day," Hendley admitted. "There's so much to see and do."

"That's the usual reaction," the other said, faintly patronizing.

Hendley flushed. With a self-conscious laugh he said, half-defensively, "I didn't say it was *all* good."

The stranger was surprised. "Now that's unusual."

"Well, I've seen some peculiar things," said Hendley. "Even that water polo match where you fished me out—by the way, I didn't have a chance to thank you properly." The young man brushed aside his gratitude. Hendley went on talking. "They play kind of rough. One of those men came out with a broken arm. It's hardly what you'd call playing for fun."

The young man raised a quizzical eyebrow—one only in an exaggerated arch. The controlled boredom of his expression was deceptive. His face was in fact remarkably expressive, but each reaction seemed deliberately languid. He was, Hendley guessed, several years younger than Hendley's own thirty-three years, but he gave the impression of a sophisticated worldliness which Hendley could not approach.

"You call hurting people fun?" Hendley demanded.

The young man smiled lazily. "Some people do."

A sudden, vivid image of a golf club, glinting in the sun as it slashed down in a vicious arc toward a limp figure on the green, jolted Hendley. The defenses which he had built up with drink and reason to contain that demoralizing reality abruptly shattered. "There was something else," he said soberly. "Maybe you can help me—it's something that happened today in a game. It—it's hard to believe, but it *did* happen!"

He recounted the incident as rationally as he could, trying to keep his voice steady. The young man's face failed to register the shock or disbelief Hendley had expected. As he listened the youth fingered his glass and pursed his lips. His expression was grave, but that might have been only in

deference to Hendley's obvious emotion. When Hendley had finished, the young man's sole comment was to raise his glass to his lips and drink.

"Don't tell me that sort of thing happens every day!" Hendley protested, stung by the lack of response.

"Hardly," the other replied. "Though golf bugs are pretty unpredictable, and it's true about going into the game at your own risk. But murder is frowned upon, of course, even in golf."

"*Frowned* upon!"

"Oh, yes. We're not all barbarians here." The young man smiled.

"Isn't there something that can be done? Aren't there any Investigators—any penalties?"

The young man's tone was cool. "We are the free," he said. When Hendley continued to stare at him, he explained, "Oh, your bald friend went too far. There's no denying that. And he won't get away with much of that conduct. The community will take care of him. We have our own ways. But you must see that what you're suggesting—Investigators, penalties, courts of order, that sort of thing—is quite out of place here."

"But there has to be some order! Violence, murder—such things are unheard of outside!"

His companion smiled again indulgently. "Isn't everything we have here unheard of outside?"

Hendley had no answer. The Freeman's casual acceptance of equally casual crime was another shock. Yet he could not argue with the simple assertion that freedom did not admit arbitrary external controls, even those guaranteeing order and safety. But perhaps—he grasped the young man's passing reference with a kind of desperation—such methods as group pressure, ostracism, some form of social coercion did work. They must. Otherwise....

"You have a lot to learn," the young man said.

"I guess I have," Hendley said, shaking his head.

"Tell me," the other said abruptly. "That red emblem on your sleeve—it means you're a visitor, doesn't it?"

"Yes. I was told no one would know."

"I guessed. I've seen that emblem before, always on strangers. And they've always disappeared quickly. It wasn't hard to figure out. How long are you here for?"

"Just till noon tomorrow."

"You need someone to show you around, give you the guided tour. Someone to help you keep things in perspective."

Hendley was not sure whether or not the diffident remark was an offer. "I'll admit I wasn't very well briefed," he said. "The Morale Investigator who got me this visiting privilege didn't tell me much."

"Of course not," the Freeman said. "They don't know."

"What do you mean?"

"Just that. Few outsiders are allowed in here. There aren't as many exceptions as you might think. Chances are your Investigator doesn't know anything more about freedom than you did before you came here. He only knows what it's supposed to be."

"But there are official personnel right here who aren't free—in the administration building, for instance."

"They're not allowed into the camp proper. They can't even see into it. And the underground service facilities are connected only to windowless buildings on the surface. But just to make sure, those people are all on life tenure here. They're 1-Daymen without much time to go, and they don't go back to the cities." The young man's lips curved in a reflective smile. "Funny, isn't it? The whole Organization is dedicated to getting into a Freeman Camp, but no one outside has any idea what it's really like." He laughed outright. "We did have a kind of official tour once—before the Merger. Bunch of Easterners being given the high level treatment. We all put on a good show for them. But they didn't see what it's *really* like. You've got to know your way around for that."

"I guess you know your way around."

"I ought to. I've never been out."

"Never?" Hendley exclaimed, startled.

"I was born here."

The brief statement carried a world of significance. Born free! Never to have known work, worry, regimentation, routine, discipline. Never to have wanted anything. Never to have breathed the sterile, chemically purified air of the underground cities, never to have been contained in the blind-walled towers, never to have been deprived of the sun and the stars! Hendley thought of childhood with the parks and the trees and the sunlight—delightful prelude to a whole lifetime of leisure and play, with every whim or need indulged, catered to, satisfied. No wonder the young man wore his Freeman status with such nonchalance!

"It must have been a wonderful life," he said, awed by the prospect.

"I guess you'd say so. Sure," the Freeman said composedly. "But I never thought of it that way."

"Your parents were both here when you were born?"

"Uh-huh."

"Then you grew up with them." Hendley felt a different envy. "I was taken away from mine after the first few years. I hardly remember them. That's the way it's done outside. I didn't see much of them after I was six. From then on it was schools, work training—you never had that."

"Oh, I had schools," the young Freeman protested. "The best. Nothing's too good for a Freeman, you know." He laughed. "Those school computers—they tried to drill it into us. I guess I didn't learn as much as I should have, but I was exposed to it, anyway. As for my parents, I never saw much of them. They were always too busy getting their jolts. This was all new to them when I was a kid. Like with you."

"Jolts?"

"Laughies. Fun. Pleasure-pures. You know."

"Are they still here? I mean—alive?"

"They're around somewhere," the young man said indifferently. "I saw the old boy on a hunt about six or seven suns ago."

"A hunt! That's where that girl—" Hendley broke off. "I heard someone talking about a hunting party. What's that all about?"

"You don't know about the hunt?" The young man looked at Hendley oddly.

"No. How could I?"

"That's right." The Freeman hesitated. "We'll get to the hunt later. First you have to get the dimensional view—you, with depth. Behind the scenes. And I'm just the little Freeman who can push the right buttons. How about it?"

"I'm with you."

The Freeman grinned. "We ought to have names. What's yours?"

"TRH-247."

"Mine's a laughie. NIK-700. You can call me Nik," he said. "Everybody does. We don't run a very tight ship here," he added with humor. "That's an old saying. I heard it from a computer in one of those back-time courses in school."

Hendley was unfamiliar with the phrase, but he guessed its meaning. As he rose with his new friend he thought: The Organization is a tight ship. As tight as computer ingenuity can make it. Freedom is escape from that, too.

"You have casinos in the outside world, I suppose?" Nik asked.

"No," Hendley said. "The Organization outlawed them many years ago. Too many people would gamble away a life's work credit. Compulsives, they used to be called. The Organization acted to protect them from themselves."

"Gambling is a favorite pastime here," Nik said. "And the casino here in the Rec Hall is generally considered to be the best. It never closes, day or night. That's why it's below ground level—so you don't see the sun."

The main floor of the casino was a half-dozen steps below the entrance where Hendley and his companion stood. They looked out over a scene of feverish activity, distinguished as much by the low volume of sound as by the air of tension. The casino was divided into a series of diminishing circles. The first and widest circle was the most crowded, containing row upon row of small gambling machines—computers with illuminated screens across whose faces paraded a pattern of designs and figures. Every

one of these machines was in use—the majority of the players being women, Hendley noticed. The gambler could halt the dancing pattern on the screen by pushing a button. Winning relationships of designs and figures paid off with a distinct buzzing and a cascade of round white chips into a cup at the base of the screen. Throughout this crowded circle the players fed their white chips into the machines with the automatic, somnambulant attitude of robots, never pausing, never looking up, seldom reacting to win or loss.

"We have our compulsives, too," Nik said. "Some of them never leave the casino. They fall asleep in the lounges, wake up, go back to the machines. Until they run out of chips."

It seemed incredible to Hendley that Freeman would voluntarily choose to shut themselves off from the sun and the open sky, once having gained them, but the hypnotized faces of the gamblers were convincing. Shaking his head, he looked beyond the first bank of machines toward the inner circles. At various kinds of green-topped tables hordes of Freeman gambled with cards, dice, electronic wheels, light-sticks. The circles shrank to an open aisle, wider than the others, near the center of the huge room. Here a single large table occupied the exact center. A robot sat immobile at the table. No one was playing. Hendley saw that robot dealers monitored all of the tables, their impassive metallic faces immediately recognizable by their light-reflecting quality.

Nik seemed to divine the direction of Hendley's interest. "We used to have human croupiers and dealers," he said. "But they couldn't be trusted. They'd hold out chips—fix games for their friends—things like that. Robots work much better. They can't cheat. And they can't be bribed or threatened."

Hendley was frowning. "What I don't understand," he said, "is what you gamble for. What do you get out of it? You have everything you want or need provided for you. How can all those people go on gambling, and feel like that about it"—he nodded toward the first circle of feverishly intent players—"when it's all so meaningless? What do they have to win or lose?"

Nik hesitated. "Maybe it's hard to understand, but ... do you see those white chips?"

"Yes."

"The casino issues only a limited number of them—each casino has its own chips. There are never quite enough to go around. And they're the only things you can use to gamble. Objectively they mean nothing—they have no value. But they've come to have a special value here. A compulsive gambler will do almost anything to get more chips, especially if he's a heavy loser. Without chips he can't gamble. That's why there are some things you can buy with chips that you can't get any other way."

"What could you possibly buy that isn't already free?"

"Oh, quite a few things." The young Freeman smiled tolerantly. "There's the weed, for instance."

"The weed?"

"A form of opiate. Habit-forming. Quite deadly in the long run, but some people get hooked on it and have to have it. No one knows how it's smuggled into the camp. Some say it's grown here, but no one has ever found out where. It can be bought—if you have white chips."

"But why?" Hendley exclaimed. "I've heard of addicts outside—but here there are no pressures, no worries, no frustrations. Why would anyone be driven to using drugs? It's incredible!"

"Well, there are other things you can get with chips that aren't so incredible." Nik was obviously amused by Hendley's naive astonishment. "For instance, do you see that blonde girl down there, the one standing beside the fat gambler at the wheel in the third section?"

Hendley peered toward the inner circle indicated. He had no trouble identifying the statuesque blonde Nik was referring to. Like a number of the women in the casino she wore her white coverall zipped open to the waist—a custom not permissible in the outside Organization. Her smooth white skin, surprisingly untanned as if she took care to avoid the sun, and the remarkable ripeness of her exposed figure, enabled her to stand out easily in the crowd. The face that went with her more arresting features was like a robot doll's—flawlessly beautiful, sweetly vacuous. Hendley could not help staring at her. His face began to feel warm.

"Beautiful, isn't she?" Nik said, laughing.

"Very!"

"She belongs to that gambler next to her. They're Contracted. He's a big gambler; what you call a compulsive." Nik's smile was worldly, amused at mankind's overfamiliar decadence. "You may already know that there's a lot of interchanging of partners in the camp, but not with her. She's available, but only at a price. She's one of the things you can buy with white chips."

For a long moment Hendley continued to stare at the tall, lush blonde, so obviously bored, and at the squat, heavy-set gambler, so evidently ignoring her, consumed by his gambling passion to the point where other desires had ceased to exist. Hendley thought of the years the man must have worked before he had at last paid off his tax debt and won his way to freedom. And this finally was all it meant to him. Hendley let his gaze roam over the casino, aware of its peculiar hush, sensing in the intense absorption of the gamblers a spreading, contagious sickness. Oppressed, he turned away.

"Let's go outside," he said. "I'd like to see the stars."

"We'll go back for the main show," Nik said. "It's worth seeing."

"What kind of show is it?"

"I'll let you find that out for yourself," the young man grinned. "But I saw the way you stared at the blonde. You'll like the show."

Hendley felt a trace of annoyance, but he let the remark pass. The girl had been stunning, and he had stared. All of a sudden he was remembering ABC-331, seeing her face lifted up toward his, and he was strangely uncomfortable with the memory.

They rode the slow sidewalk strip downhill from the Rec Hall to the concentration of entertainments in the camp's pleasure center. Hendley wondered what other special revelations his companion had in store for him. High above, the night sky soared in a breathtaking leap of black space, stabbed by stars. His gaze followed the great black arch over his shoulder until it vanished behind the Rec Hall on the hill.

"That big table at the center of the casino," he said suddenly. "What is it? No one was playing."

Nik was strangely silent. When he finally answered Hendley had the impression he was being evasive. "The stakes are too high at the big table," he said, "But someone will play there before the night is over. Someone usually does. The smaller the circle the higher the bet," he added quickly, not giving Hendley a chance to press him further. "That's why the outer circle gets the most play." He paused, then added reflectively, "I tried the big table once. Sooner or later you get the urge to give it one whirl. I won."

"What are these high stakes?" Hendley asked, curious.

But Nik failed to hear—or chose to ignore the question. "I know where there's a private party tonight," he said. "We'll have time to get there and back for the show. I think you'll enjoy it. Some interesting types. Very arty and all that."

From the bottom of the hill the moving walk sliced through a section of the central park. The way was brightly lighted, but beyond the ribbon of light the park was dark. At one point Nik stepped off the walk, motioning Hendley to follow suit. They faced a narrow path leading through the shadowed park. Nik stopped. He seemed to be listening for something. Puzzled, Hendley started to speak. A quick gesture silenced him. From somewhere along the twisting path there came a scuffling sound.

Nik grinned. "I thought so," he said. "We take the long way around."

Boarding the walk again, they rode through the park to the main street of the entertainment section. "What was that all about?" Hendley asked.

"You have to watch the park after dark," Nik said. "And be careful on any dimly lighted side streets, too, even in the residential area."

"You mean it's dangerous?" It took a moment for the implication to sink in. There was no place in the cities of the Organization where one could not ride or walk safely at any hour. If Hendley hadn't carried with him an all-too vivid memory of the violence that could occur in the Freeman Camp, he would have been sure his companion was joking.

"I keep forgetting," Nik said. "You don't have crime outside, do you?"

"There are rules infractions, of course," Hendley said, "but nothing like what you're suggesting." Hearing again in his imagination the soft scuffling

sound floating from the dark path, he gave a shudder. What had caused the noise? Running footsteps? Fighting?

"There is some individual crime here," Nik said casually. "Robberies, mostly, or sexual attacks. But lately there's been more and more trouble with gangs. Unruly packs who roam the parks and back streets at night."

"Robbers?" Hendley asked in disbelief, finding the concept difficult to accept.

But the young Freeman slowly shook his head. His smile was sardonic. "They're called Pleasure Packs," he said. "Robbery is only a superficial motive, if at all. I guess you'd say they're just looking for something different." He searched for a way to make Hendley understand. "It's like sex. You wouldn't expect sex crimes here. There's plenty of entertainment available along that line. There are the PIB's and the showgirls—you'll see them later. But after a while the ordinary thing isn't enough. That's one of our major problems...." Nik's voice trailed off, as if he had suddenly become aware of what he was saying and regretted his frankness. "We change here," he said abruptly, executing a nimble jump to an intersecting walk that rode off at a tangent from the main street.

Following his new friend awkwardly, favoring his stiff knee, Hendley puzzled over his words. There had been too many revelations to absorb all at once. Surely the crimes NIK-700 had mentioned must be isolated instances. The whole life of the Organization, all human pursuit, rested on the base of freedom's desirability, its ultimate satisfactions. The suggestion that it could give rise to a kind of anarchy, that Freeman would seek to dispel boredom and ennui with barbarous acts of violence, left Hendley with an uneasy feeling, as if a firm surface had quite illogically, unaccountably, turned spongy and uncertain underfoot.

The moving walk wound along a street dividing the entertainment center from the rows of low-level housing. Hendley wondered if, with so little time left to him, he would spend much of it in the bright and airy room assigned to him. Along their way Nik pointed out places of special interest. "People tend to seek out their own kind, wherever they are," he said. "See that cafe? You'll find scientists there mostly. A strange lot. Stick to themselves, and most of them never go to the casinos or the shows. They've rigged up a regular laboratory—taken over one of the rec halls—and they

dabble in experiments of one kind or another. Useless, of course, with the limited equipment they have, but it seems to keep some of them happy. That gray building is one of the old clubs. You'd probably find my father there. All the old-timers belong. Of course, in theory everything in the camp is open to everybody, but that isn't the way it works out. You're just not welcome in the club until you've been here years and years." Nik spoke with a trace of contempt. "They have their private parties and their ritualistic games. I'm a member really, by birthright, but I seldom go there. Last time I went my mother was playing one of their little games." He laughed mirthlessly. "She was trying to take off her uniform while riding in a rubber raft in the pool, without tipping the thing over. If you got dunked, that made you fair prey." He glanced at Hendley sharply, almost suspiciously, as if he were afraid of laughter. "She didn't remember me," he added curtly, "but I think she'd been on the Weed."

Hendley's head whirled. The complexities of Freeman behavior left him bewildered. He doubted that he could ever be restless here. There was too much to do and enjoy without needing to seek out artificial stimulants and bizarre pleasures. But could he be wrong? Did he know even himself that well? Everything seemed to change in the perspective of freedom....

"Here we are," Nik said, leaving the walk.

They stopped before a low, circular, relatively small building from which came a remarkable volume of sound. As they entered, the noise burst over them like the resounding coda of a symphony. The main orchestration was supplied by human voices erupting in every range of pitch and intensity. Behind these could be heard the whine and sigh of a computer band. And, bursting up through a center stairwell around which wound a circular escalator, to crash against Hendley's ears like a solid wave, came an instrumental thunder of party noises: the explosion of falling glass, the shudder of the overloaded stairway straining with its burden, the shifting of a hundred feet, shrieks and shouts and trills of laughter.

Nik grinned at him. "I'll get us a couple of drinks."

"I could use one!" Hendley said, raising his voice a couple of notches to be heard.

"You know how artists are," the Freeman shouted back. "They like to make themselves heard!"

Hendley didn't know. The only art fashioned in the Organization was created by efficient craftsmen applying known principles—acting under the direction of a computer. They worked as Hendley worked in the Architectural Center, by pushing buttons. Order, harmony, proportion, emphasis, representation, meaningful distortion, suspense, metaphor—the essential ingredients of the various arts were measurable quantities, reducible to mathematics. Or so Hendley had thought. What he saw now was a different art, created by another kind of artist. Free art, he thought with fresh excitement.

It was also a disturbing art. Directly before him, dominating the lobby, was a dimensional painting. If he had thought of Freeman painting before, he would have envisioned representational art of trees and flowers and blazing skies. Or a concern with light, so essential a part of the free life. What he saw, vibrating with peculiar inner tension, was a gray mass which seemed to deny both light and color. It was a shapeless blob, pulsating with—Hendley groped for the nature of his response to the painting, seeking to find the cause through the effect; it was—pain.

"Crass," someone said. "Vulgar." Another voice retorted, "Color isn't *everything*!" Words and phrases collided and ricocheted and split into fragments. "—isn't supposed to *mean* anything. It's supposed to *be*." "Quite mad—that's the beauty of it...." "Genius...." "The inner planes are brilliantly suggested...." "Erotic, of course...." "Feeling!" "Essence...." "I don't *like* it. That's the real criticism...." "—see how he used intersecting curves. Marvelous illusion, don't you think?" "Not *new* at all...." "—so much life...." "... death!"

Unnerved, Hendley turned away from the painting. Nik was beside him again, shoving a drink into his hand. Hendley took a brief swallow, needing it. The rising crescendo of party noise seemed to diminish as the drink coursed through his body. Its taste was unfamiliar to him, but before he could question it Nik was steering him through the crowd toward the escalator.

"The main party is downstairs," Nik said. "You can see some of the exhibits along the way. The place is bigger than it looks, isn't it?"

"Yes, from outside—"

"It wasn't built as a gallery, but it's been converted. Used to be a service building of some kind. Say, I've got to smile at a few faces I know. See you downstairs on the bottom level. Take a look around as you go down."

He was gone. The stairway wound slowly past different exhibits of paintings and sculpture. Knots of Freeman clustered before each work, talking and arguing and laughing. Curiosity forced Hendley off the stairway at the first level below the lobby. He edged his way into a crowded room whose walls and ceiling were covered with paintings. Their effect, even at first glance, was vaguely alarming. It took him a while to make a full circuit of the room. By the time he reached the last painting, a bewildering exercise in spatial relationships in which ribbons of color entwined like mangled intestines, he was badly shaken. The art was strikingly personal, each portrait a private image. The paintings seemed without form or coherent meaning. They ranged from wildly vivid explosions of light and color to somber experiments in deliberate dullness. They lacked any common viewpoint. But in spite of their singularity, they had a sameness. What they shared, what gave the exhibition a cumulative impact, was the creation in paint and plastic and metal of a world disturbed, threatened, and threatening, a world of unimaginable chaos, devoid of tranquillity or joy, a sensual world which denied the evidence of the senses, an emotional world terrorized by its feelings.

Hendley wanted to escape. He plunged through the babble and confusion, fighting his way back to the central escalator, where he leaned over the railing into the open center well like a man gasping for air. He was still carrying his glass, forgotten after the first sip in his absorption with the Freeman art, but in the crush of the crowd half the drink had been spilled. He raised the glass.

A girl pressed close to him. Her face was daubed with streaks of bright paint. "Isn't this frantic?" she breathed.

Hendley nodded. "It's that," he agreed dryly.

The girl smiled. The pupils of her eyes were shrunk to small black pinpoints in a blue field. "You're cute," she said. With a deft movement she speared his glass. Tilting her head back, she drank deeply. Her throat worked as she

drained the glass. Then she held it out very carefully beyond the railing of the stairway and dropped it down the center well. The polished glass winked with light as it tumbled through the air. The sound of its shattering was lost in the general noise below.

"I hate empty glasses," the girl said, laughing.

An arm dragged her away. The crowd closed around her like doors shutting. Then the escalator reached the bottom level and Hendley was carried through a wide archway into a much larger room. Here there was less heated discussion, less attention paid to the paintings lining the walls, more hilarity and shrill excitement. The computer band blared from the far end of the room. A group of Freeman milling around in the center turned out to be dancing couples—many pairing men. There were bars set up on either side of the entrance. Both were jammed. Most of the dancers and many of the others in the crowd wore strangely cut-out uniforms, their bare arms or chests or faces smeared, like the face of the girl on the stairway, with dabs and streaks of color.

Hendley eased past the naked, painted back of a girl locked in an embrace with a man whose encircling arms were striped with crimson paint. Suddenly Hendley wished that he were out in the cool evening air, away from the noise and heat and confusion. But his throat was painfully parched and his head was spinning. He needed another drink. He didn't want to think any more. He didn't want to hear the strident note in the merriment spilling around him. He didn't want to speculate on the meaning of the bizarrely painted bodies of free artists, whose lives seemed as desperate as their art.

He fought his way to the nearest bar, jabbed the first button within reach, and seized the drink that slid from a chute onto the counter. It was weaker than his previous drink, but it warmed his stomach. He ought really to be drunk by now, he reflected. Never in his life had he had so much alcohol in one day. And as a matter of fact he was dizzy. His eyes were not focusing well. Faces swam across his vision, jelly faces, without bones. One of them was....

Nik. The young Freeman was smiling his sardonic smile, but his eyes were speculative. He thinks I'm drunk, Hendley thought. It's all right for him to laugh. But he forgets that I have only one day. No. One night, what's left of it. Then I go back....

"—find it interesting?" Nik was talking to him.

"Very," Hendley said. His tongue struggled with the single simple word. "Don't understand," he muttered vaguely, not sure whether he meant the painted artists or their shapeless works or his clumsy tongue.

There was a commotion nearby. Briefly the crowd parted, falling back. A girl had crumpled to the floor. She tried to push up with her arms but didn't make it. Then she was rolling on her back, writhing in evident pain, her hands balled into fists that dug into her midriff. As helping hands reached down toward the girl, the crowd closed around her like a spider enveloping its prey, walling her off from Hendley's view once more.

"Know her," he said. "Funny...."

"What's that?" Nik's fingers tightened on his arm.

The gesture annoyed Hendley. He didn't like to be grabbed. He shook his arm free.

"What did you say?" Nik demanded.

"That girl. Met her on the stairway. She stole my drink," Hendley said sadly.

For a brief instant the lean, indifferent posture on his friend's face tightened with emotion. The expression was gone almost at once, but not before Hendley had recorded it. He was puzzled. Why should a stolen drink make Nik angry? There was more where it came from. All you could drink.

"I'll get you another," Nik said with a light laugh. "Can't have girls getting drunk on your liquor. I guess your drink was one too many for her."

"Wasn't that," Hendley said with a certainty that surprised him. He stared in the direction of the girl who had fallen. Something in his mind struggled toward shape and meaning. The thought resisted form, remaining as incoherent as a Freeman painting. But Hendley knew that he had to leave. Whatever the amorphous conviction was, it had something to do with the stolen drink, and it conveyed fear. "I'm going," he blurted.

"But—your drink!" Nik protested.

"No more." Hendley started away. Nik grabbed his arm. Hendley whirled on him in sudden anger. "I'm leaving!" he cried. He took refuge in the

young Freeman's earlier words, not wanting to voice a nameless fear. "You said there was a show I shouldn't miss. I'm going back to the main Rec Hall!"

He lurched free of his friend's grasp and plunged through the yielding crowd toward the escalator. The center well was like a tunnel burrowing up toward the open sky, the sweet night air, the heavy garden scent of freedom.

8

Halfway back to the hotel, Nik caught up to him on the moving sidewalk. The fresh air had cleared Hendley's head a little and helped to relieve his feeling of oppression. But he turned at the young Freeman's call with a defensive resentment.

"You took off in a big hurry," Nik said.

"So what?" Hendley snapped.

Nik shrugged. "Thought you'd get a jolt or two out of our would-be artists," he said indifferently. "They can get on your nerves though. Say, do you feel all right?"

"Why shouldn't I?"

"I wondered if maybe you weren't used to our drinking habits. Takes awhile. You were looking a bit green back there."

Hendley relaxed a little. The Freeman's manner was typically at ease, his gaze turning away from Hendley to rest with amused tolerance on the befuddled struggles of a festive group trying to stage an "iggy" race on an enclosed track past which the sidewalk ran. The clumsy, thick-hided, tailless iguana mutants, oversized descendants of one of the few desert species to survive into the Organization world, reared and threw themselves from side to side, trying to unseat their intoxicated riders. Nik's casual attention to this drunkenly comic sport did more than anything else to divert Hendley's temper and lull his vague suspicion. He was forced to admit, after all, that he had been drinking heavily. It was hardly strange that he should have begun to feel the effects. Nik couldn't be blamed for that, any more than a girl's drunken collapse could be charged to a single drink.

Suddenly the darkly shadowed landscape of the Freeman Camp blurred. The whole star-bitten sky reeled, tilting on its edge, tipping....

Nik was at his side in time to save him from falling off the moving walk. They were riding the slow strip, but a tumble could have been nasty all the

same, even dangerous. "I say, you're still rocky," the young Freeman said. "We'd better get you some place where you can rest."

Hendley shook his head. The spasm of dizziness was passing almost as quickly as it had come. He tried to breathe deeply, leaning against his friend's supporting arm. He was a good fellow, Hendley thought. Never should have run off and left him like that. Funny, the notions that could get into your head. Not even an idea, really, just a—a feeling.

"My quarters aren't far from here," Nik said. "We can go there. Give you a chance to recuperate."

"I'm all right," Hendley protested. "Just dizzy for a minute. I'm feeling better already."

"But you need—"

"No," Hendley said firmly. With an effort he pulled himself erect, disengaging his friend's arm. "This is my only night here. If I rest now I'll sleep, and if I sleep I won't wake up until it's time to leave. You said the show at the hotel was worth seeing. I'm going to see it."

Nik did not answer, but the exasperation on his face was so transparent, and so unexpected, that Hendley laughed. "Humor me," he said. "And stick close. You can catch me if I fall."

He grinned at the young Freeman, and after a moment Nik began to join his laughter. "I'll be imprisoned if I don't think we'll make a real pleasure-purist out of you yet!" he exclaimed.

Arm in arm, they leaned against each other, laughing uproariously, as the moving walk carried them through the central park toward the main Rec Hall on the hill, a brightly lighted yellow mushroom painted against the night's endless promise.

"Tell you what I'm going to do," Hendley said.

"All right, name it."

"I'm going to have another drink."

Nik chuckled. "Don't say I didn't warn you."

"To the desert with your warnings. Drink is pleasure, and pleasure is all." The familiar Organization slogan came easily to Hendley's lips. "Bring on the girls! Are you sure this is a good seat?"

"The best. There's a materializer right overhead. And you have a good view of the main screen over the stage."

Hendley stared at an opaque plastic cylinder suspended from the ceiling of the great circular auditorium. Less than twenty feet away, the cylinder was just big enough to contain a grown man. It might have been a decorative fixture, its smooth surface reflecting a multicolored flow of light from the auditorium's glowing panels. There were about two dozen of the cylindrical objects spaced throughout the theater, overhead for those seated in the balcony, along the sides for the audience on the main floor. It was difficult to get seats close to the stage, Nik had explained, unless you arrived very early, but with the materializers you didn't need front-row seats. The man-sized cylinders brought the stage to you. Moreover, from a middle distance, and especially from the balcony, you had a better view of the huge thought-screen, the giant father of the materializers in shape, mounted directly over the stage and almost at Hendley's eye level. This huge screen was also dark.

Drinks arrived on a conveyor belt just as the main lights in the auditorium began to dim. From his balcony perch Hendley stared down as the curtain of light obscuring the central stage slowly dissolved. The stage revealed was in semidarkness.

A spatter of applause broke into thunder as a cone of light slashed down to sculpture a living bronze—a nude woman standing motionless on a revolving dais. For an instant the striking figure was enveloped in brilliant white. Then the light began to change from pink through rose to a garish red, until at last the figure seemed to be bathed in blood, unrelieved except for a small white circle lying at the top of the valley between the woman's red breasts. From the balcony it was impossible to distinguish the white circle clearly, but on the materializer, so close to Hendley's seat, it was easy to discern a thin necklace, the clear outline of a white tag, and the number 1 printed on the tag, which had evidently been treated somehow to reject the red light. The crimson figure was reproduced slightly larger than life within the plastic cylinder, and with a breathtaking illusion of reality, as if she were

physically imprisoned there. It was not like looking at a viewscreen, even a dimensional one. It was as if the living flesh in its garish costume of light had been transported from the stage into the plastic cocoon.

A second white cone stabbed down through the darkness, pinning a second nude figure upon the stage. Again the light changed by degrees to red. Almost imperceptibly a low, sensuous beat of music had begun to make itself heard. And with that the audience became more vociferous. As another and yet another red figure was revealed on the stage, a persistent murmuring grew. Audible gasps ignited fresh crackles of applause as each new model appeared. They were all young, shapely, beautiful. In the brief flash of white light as they were first seen, their bodies were visibly pale, like Hendley's own, the white sheen of skin unburned by the sun. When the light changed, they became, in their bizarre red envelopes, both more vivid and less human. Hendley could not tear his gaze away as the procession continued. His throat grew dry, and he drained his glass.

Twelve girls in all took their places in the red spotlights. Hendley missed seeing the eleventh one closely. He had glanced down at the stage just before she appeared in closeup on the nearby materializer. By the time he looked back from the general tableau below to the intimate revelation on the cylinder, the girl's image was already fading. And her back was toward him. He had only a glimpse of a slender, willowy body, narrow-waisted, of long slim legs, and of a nest of short curls above a graceful neck. She was a red vision from a dream, but something other than admiration stirred in his mind.

"I missed that one second from the last," he said to Nik.

"A pretty thing," Nik said appraisingly. "Quite well equipped, too." His hands shaped an imaginary bosom.

"She looked—I'm not sure—familiar."

Nik laughed. "That's not unusual. There's a blue girl—she'll be coming on shortly—who once reminded me of my mother. I suppose one of your Morale Investigators would say that was significant. But it's not, really. A beautiful girl seen in the distance, or not clearly, will always remind you of someone."

"Only if that someone matters," Hendley said with surprising clarity.

The young Freeman made a mock grimace of pain. "Hmmm," he murmured. "I should have thought of that."

"What's a blue girl?"

"Same as in your outside world. You see, the showgirls are all outsiders. Red means a 5-Daygirl. Green a four, blue a three. Obviously they don't wear their uniforms while they're performing."

Hendley smiled absently. He wished that he had had a clearer view of the eleventh girl. Even in the distance of the stage, and in the strangely erotic distortion of the colored spotlight, she seemed familiar. But whom could she remind him of? There was only....

"What's wrong?" Nik asked. "Feeling dizzy again?"

"No," Hendley said hoarsely. "It's not that."

As if to prove his statement he reached for his glass, only to find it empty. The resemblance was superficial, he assured himself. That was all it could be. Ann could not be here. But the nagging impression that the girl on the stage was enough like her to be a double unnerved him. He was chagrined to realize how seldom he had thought about her since his arrival in the Freeman Camp. Perhaps that was understandable enough—the clockless hours had been full—but this defense did not dispel a twinge of guilt. Forgetfulness argued a shallow emotion, undermining the importance he attached to his hours with ABC-331.

"Ah, here come the greens," Nik said. "And I've ordered us a couple refills on the drinks. Don't take it if you don't think you can handle it."

Hendley didn't answer. He wanted the drink, and he had a feeling that he would need it.

The pattern of presenting the showgirls was repeated, except that the second set were washed with a startling green light. And each girl wore an identical male face-mask. The slow but insistent beat of the background music quickened slightly, acquiring a harsher, more driving rhythm. A perceptible tension of excitement quivered in the air of the auditorium.

There were twelve girls in green. "They're the males," Nik said unnecessarily. "You'll be surprised how you get to think of them that way, the obvious physical evidence to the contrary."

Hendley started to ask what all this was leading up to, but before he could speak the tempo of the music changed. The twenty-four girls formed a wide circle near the apron of the stage. Their spotlights faded until they were only dimly visible. Attention shifted to the center of the stage. Light panels dropped into place, figuring suggestively the setting of a pre-Organization city. The technique and the scene were immediately familiar to Hendley. They were traditional in the presentation of a Freedom Play.

Quietly a cast of characters appeared. The play was presented in pantomime, its drama heightened by music and dance. Every move and pose had its traditional meaning. The all-female cast was also a tradition. Only the nudity of the performers was different, and that one fact subtly altered the effect of the play.

Through it all—the early scenes of man's frustrations and drudging labor, the spectacular fireworks and sound effects of the great war which climaxed the third act, the final scenes which depicted man's building of a new world underground and the gradual emergence of his dream of freedom from something unattainable to an immediate goal—Hendley's attention kept going back to the line of showgirls ringing the stage, specifically searching for the one who had seemed so familiar. He thought he saw her but in the dimmed spotlight could not be sure. Only in the triumphant dance number climaxing the play did these showgirls participate, functioning as a dancing chorus in the background. In the confusion of movement Hendley could not find the one he sought.

Applause greeted the end of the play. It was loud and warm, but Hendley had the feeling the audience's enthusiasm was as much for what it knew was coming as for the performance it had just seen. A steady buzz of excited comment continued long after the freedom players had exited, leaving only the original chorus of showgirls on the stage.

"What now?" Hendley asked.

"You'll see," Nik said with a grin. And he added, shoving a glass toward Hendley, "Here's that refill."

The murmur from the audience grew louder. A computer band, simulating the sounds of old-fashioned man-played instruments, raised a triumphant peal. Abruptly a single spotlight speared the center of the stage. A section of

the floor slowly folded back, and into the spotlight rose a naked woman, aggressively feminine, her legs spread wide, her magnificent bosom high, her head thrown back to let long hair stream down over her shoulders. The light turned swiftly to blue, and the spontaneous audience applause turned into a roar.

Above the noise Nik cried, "Remarkable woman! I won her once! Tremendous!"

Startled, Hendley stared at him. "You *won* her?"

Nik waited until the crowd's uproar had begun to subside. "In the drawing," he said then. "That's what those little white tags they wear are for. There's a filter over the tags, by the way—that's what screens out the colored rays. You have that ticket you got when we came into the theater? Well, there'll be a drawing. Winning tickets are matched to the girls. All of them. Red ones go first, then the green, the blue last." He grinned reminiscently. "That's really the part of the show that's special. Oh, the dancing and the rest are all right, and the thought-screen is interesting—that'll be starting up soon—but wait till the drawing!"

Hendley felt sick. His stomach stirred uneasily. He swallowed hard. A sad, enigmatic statement kept running through his head: "That's what I'm supposed to be." Beautiful, he thought. Selected because she was beautiful. Trained to please with her beauty. Trained, too, to simulate passion.

No, it was impossible! What he feared couldn't be true! He had drunk too much, and his mind was as unsettled as his body. The resemblance was superficial, deceptive, a trick of lighting.

But the sick fear could not be reasoned away.

A group dance number began. The woman painted in blue light was taller than the others, more blatantly sexual, dominant. Now she raised one arm, holding up a slender metal rod. Her wrist flicked. A string of white light danced across the stage like the lash of a whip. Where it snapped off a red dancer cringed, cowering, pantomiming fear. Or was she acting? Was the whiplash real?

Using her sting of light the blue woman drove the dancers robed in red and green light through their routine. Each girl stayed within her narrow frame of light—or rather, the cones of color nimbly followed the girls as if

attached to them. Hendley tried to single out the girl tagged number 11. He kept losing her, searching, finding her again, afraid of what he would see, helpless to turn away.

For a brief instant she passed through the field of the materializer and was reproduced in the cylinder no more than twenty feet away. She turned her head, seeming to glance over her shoulder directly at Hendley. The slight gesture brought a stab of pain to his chest. She had tilted her head exactly that way toward him when he found her outside the Agricultural Research Center. No two women would have that precise balance of grace and reserve, that particular angle of the head in turning. He knew that dip of waist, that soft swell of breast, that slender column of neck—that hidden sadness.

ABC-331 looked into his eyes without seeing him, whirled and spun away.

Nik was talking. His voice seemed muffled, coming through a filter of numbness. "I suppose you're wondering why these women are brought here. You see, they found out long ago that there aren't enough women in the camps—there never are. Fewer make it here than men. The Organization knows why, I don't. Most of those who are here are Contracted. That doesn't always mean very much, but it adds to the shortage. Obviously Freemen couldn't be denied the singular pleasures women can give. So there's a fresh batch brought in every month to stock the PIB's, and there are the showgirls. They come once a week. There's something about showgirls, about having a woman a thousand other men have stared at and wanted...."

He paused. The pattern of the dance had changed. Under the lash of the blue woman's mysterious whip the green and red figures separated into matched pairs. The green, with their male face-masks, were bolder, more aggressive, threatening in attitude. The dancing red figures expressed in their movements a coquettish withdrawal, timidity, that peculiarly feminine blend of provocation and elusiveness.

And now the first flickering of light and motion showed on the giant thought-screen over the stage. The images became clearer, a sinuous mingling of red and green light, shaping to the forms of human bodies, writhing and twisting.

"Amazing thing, really," Nik said. "The thought-screen, I mean. I suppose the rest of it is pretty much what shows have always been, even in pre-Organization time. The female figure, dance, music, pantomime—they've always been basic ingredients of entertainment. The materializers aren't that special either. Just a more complex kind of viewscreen, bringing the stage closer to you. But the thought-screen, that's something else!"

"What does it do?" The meaning of the images on the giant screen was not yet clear. Hendley spoke painfully, almost against his will.

Nik seemed surprised. "You have peekies on the outside, don't you?"

"Yes. They let you create your own thought-pictures. But that's private. One, at most two people."

"Much the same concept, though. This is just vastly more sophisticated—and more effective. It doesn't mirror what's actually happening on the stage. It reflects the audience's reaction to it. I don't pretend to know how it's done, but the screen—or the computer complex directing it—records the impulses of all our thought waves, selects and synthesizes them. What comes out, though it's often a montage, is not one viewer's reaction, but the total reaction. Ah! You see? Those two dancers on the left—see them down on the stage? Now look at the screen!"

Hendley saw. The tempo of the dance had quickened, the pantomime of the dancers had become more daring. But the stage performance remained essentially suggestive. The version of it which appeared on the thought-screen was a blunt and strangely hideous extension of that suggestion into the realm of the obscene.

Hendley tore his gaze away from the screen.

"Unbelievable, huh?" Nik murmured. "I've sometimes wondered if it might all be a hoax." When Hendley glanced at him sharply the young Freeman shrugged. With an urbane smile he said, "Why not? Whatever it is, it's a remarkable machine. But it could simply be showing what a very clever computer *says* the audience reaction would be. That would be much the same as showing the actual thoughts, wouldn't it? Who could tell the difference?"

Hendley closed his eyes. Any pleasure he might have found in the spectacle had long since vanished. But he could not shut his ears to the sensual

rhythms of the music or erase the lurid images which danced in the darkness behind his eyelids. In the end he had to open his eyes—to seek out the willowy girl stained with crimson light, to torture himself with a glimpse of lips parted in a smile, a fleeting motion of long slim legs nimbly scissoring, a bobbing nest of short soft curls, now dyed from gold to red. He knew now why Ann had been evasive, and why she had run away. He had many answers now. What he did not know—and what continued to torment him—was whether or not everything that had happened between them, every sigh, every caress, had been no more than the dance on the stage—a pantomime of passion.

In the middle of a chord the music crashed to a stop. The dancers were motionless, frozen in various attitudes of pursuit and withdrawal, like figures on an urn. The audience, after an initial stir of talk and restless movement, became hushed, waiting. Slowly the woman in blue looked over her entourage. Her light-whip rose, whirled above her head, and struck across the stage. A kneeling figure, stung by the lash, obediently stood and walked to the center of the stage. She was the first girl who had appeared—her white tag bore the number 1. Around her the lights dimmed until there was only a single spotlight, fixing her in its bright red gaze. In the cylindrical materializer her beauty was imprisoned with startling realism. Her eyes and her lips smiled. Her head bent in sweet resignation.

Many times larger than life, the girl's image appeared on the giant screen directly over the stage. Above her head on the screen a number suddenly blazed in red light: Z11-3460. It blinked off, then on again. A woman's soft, caressing voice purred the number over the speaker system. From somewhere on the main floor came an excited shout. There were a few cheers, a sprinkling of laughter. But through most of the audience there rippled a sigh, as of held breath slowly released.

The lights went out briefly. When the spotlights stabbed on again, the girl in the center of the stage was gone. The dance took up as if it had never been interrupted. Hendley sank back onto his seat, unaware until then that he had half-risen. He felt limp, exhausted. And he could hear—he could feel—a change in the audience. It was quieter, abnormally still, betraying tense expectancy in the remark unmade, the weight unshifted, the glass untouched.

Hendley shook his head as if to break the spell. Deliberately he raised his own glass and drank. He knew he shouldn't. The dizziness had begun to return. He was passing the point of control. Watching the gyrations of the dance, the erotic version of it appearing in monstrous detail on the thought-screen, made his eyes ache, his head whirl. Knowing that Ann was a part of it brought a sting of anguish....

Crash! The music died, the movement on stage was arrested once more. Lights dimmed and a second girl took her place at stage center, a tall girl whose shapely contours were carved in provocative red shadows. Another ticket number stabbed its crimson message onto the screen above the stage. Another delighted yelp was heard, another general sigh.

Hendley's eyes sought the familiar outline of Ann's figure. Suddenly, as the dance resumed, she appeared in the materializer nearby, pausing with her arms extended in a graceful pose suggesting the beginning of flight. A green figure bent close to her, his hands reaching out....

Hendley turned to Nik. "Where do they go?" he demanded.

"You mean the winners?" Nik raised an eyebrow. "They're not allowed to take the girls into the camp, of course. There are some private rooms behind a wall off the garden—maybe you've noticed them. The girls are brought there through underground tunnels. To get in, you have to have a winning ticket. Why? Are you feeling lucky?"

"I have to talk to that one girl—number eleven."

"Plenty of time to talk," Nik grinned. "They stay all night. Well, you might be a winner at that. It's a long shot, but somebody has to win. Eleven, did you say? I haven't been paying her enough attention. Which—oh, yes! Hmmm. Kind of thin for my taste, but—"

"I don't want to be lucky," Hendley said harshly. "How do I get to that girl?"

Nik did not move and his expression did not seem to alter visibly. Yet his indolent manner dropped away in some mysterious fashion, as if a trick mirror which had been reflecting one image had subtly shifted to present another angle of vision from which the reflected image was quite different, although the features remained exactly the same.

"That would take some doing," the Freeman said.

"Could it be done?"

Nik pursed his lips thoughtfully. "Maybe."

"You've been here as long as anyone—or almost. If it could be brought off, you could do it."

"And what do I get out of it?"

Hendley took a deep breath. What could you offer a man who had everything, who had known complete freedom all his life? "If there was any way I could...." He fumbled desperately for a magic word, an unexpected gift. He had nothing to offer. Lamely he said, more to himself than to the watching Freeman, "I know her."

Suddenly Nik smiled. He was himself again, worldly wise, cynical, amused. "Why not?" he said. "If you hit the right man, you can buy anything with white chips. Maybe I could bring it off. So you'd get the girl and I'd get a few laughs. Why not?"

Hendley felt an overwhelming gratitude. "Thanks," he said. "I don't know how to—"

"Forget it. Anyway, all I said was we could try to bring it off. You can't fix the drawing, that's not the way to do it. We have to get lucky and hope the winner is a gambler." He rose quickly. "I'll have to dig up some chips, enough to look better than a naked showgirl. Haven't much time. You wait here until they're drawing number nine or ten. Then go downstairs. You'll find a back exit from the lobby behind the escalators. Wait for me in the garden near the gate in the high wall. You got that?"

"I've got it. Is there anything else I can do? After all, this is my idea—"

"Just try to keep from falling on your face," Nik said with a grin. "That girl might not be able to catch you. The rest just leave to me. I haven't found anything that interested me so much in a handful of moons."

With a sardonic wave of his hand he turned away. Hendley watched him thread his way along the aisle toward the nearest exit. Silence caught his attention. He swung back toward the stage. Another girl stood alone in the center spotlight, her head bent submissively. They all used the same pose, Hendley thought bitterly. They had all been taught well.

How easy it must have been for Ann to play her role!

He continued to stare down at the stage as the lottery went on. His eyes felt dry and grainy from staring. This, too, was a part of freedom, he thought. What did it prove? The worker classes served the free, assured them their pleasures. Had it always been the same, through all the misty centuries of pre-Organization time? Was this a better way simply because more people could hope to follow it? Was better merely a matter of numbers?

Or was it possible that pleasure was not pure—that a freedom synonymous with pleasure was not all?

The garden was dimly lighted. Unused to live trees and bushes, especially at night, Hendley had to steel himself against the impression that things moved in the deep shadows. Or was this an effect of all his drinking rather than the strangeness? He shook his head.

The gate in the high wall was guarded by a computer. The winning numbers flashed to the audience in the auditorium would simultaneously be fed to this computer outside, Hendley guessed. The computer would then automatically adjust to open the gate when the properly numbered tickets were presented. Hendley had been in the garden when the previous winner, holding a ticket for girl number 10, passed through the gate. Since then nothing had happened. The garden leading up to the wall was deserted. No sounds filtered into the garden from the auditorium.

The door behind him opened suddenly. A knife of light slashed across the lawn, rendering a shadowed clump of bushes innocent. A figure broke the slash of light. The door closed.

"Pulled it off," Nik said, his teeth gleaming in a grin. "I hope she's worth it. You'll find a row of separate units after you get beyond the gate. They're all numbered. She'll be in number eleven, of course. Same as her tag. Here's your ticket."

"How—how did you manage it?"

Nik shrugged. "No trouble. The winner had his Contracted with him in the theater, and she wasn't very happy about his good luck. They'll both be happier in the casino."

Hendley took the ticket. He had no words adequate to convey his thanks. "Forget it," Nik said. "Maybe I'll get a chance to see you before you leave tomorrow. If not..." He gave an offhand salute. "Freedom is all," he said. White teeth flashed.

He let himself back into the lobby of the Rec Hall, and Hendley was alone. For a moment he stared at the closed door, a little bewildered by the young Freeman's strange generosity. The memory of his earlier vague suspicions made him flush. He turned abruptly and strode across the garden.

The gate opened noiselessly to the signal of its electronic brain when the winning ticket was fed into a slot. Hendley faced a long row of small concrete units, each with a single door. There were no windows, but there were open air curtains between the horizontal wall line of each unit and its curving roof shell. The air curtain would keep out heat and cold, but it failed to smother all sounds. Walking along the path Hendley heard giggling laughter and small, muted, unidentifiable rustlings and murmurs. A small panel of light beside each door illuminated a number. He walked quickly in the shadow of the high wall until he came to the unit marked 11.

The room was a simple rectangle with a built-in bed, seat bench, and clothes rack. Its interior was dim, catching only the light from the night sky and the stars, visible through the arches of the air curtains at front and rear. There was a connecting door in the right wall. Hendley heard water running. He waited, his heart beating rapidly.

When the girl emerged from the washroom its light panel was behind her, throwing the slender contours of her body into sharp relief. The light began to fade automatically, controlled by the opening of the door. In a moment it disappeared. Hendley neither moved nor spoke. Had she recognized him? Or were her eyes still adjusting to the main room's dim light? He felt an absurd relief that her nude body bore no stain of red.

She took a sudden step forward, one hand reaching out. Halting, she seemed to shiver. "Oh, no!" she whispered. "No!"

Hendley's voice was harsh. "Yes, it's me."

"But how—?" She was bewildered. "What are you doing here? You're a 3-Dayman. You couldn't be here!"

Hendley laughed without humor. "No, I'm not a Freeman. I'm a visitor. Therapy. It was supposed to be good for my morale. I'm learning all about freedom." He stared at her deliberately. "You're one of the special pleasures I didn't know about."

She turned away, trying to cover herself with her hands and arms. The gesture was pathetic and appealing. His instinctive compassion angered him. "Why are you so modest now?" he demanded. "You didn't mind parading on that stage!"

"That was different. That's—part of my work."

"Work!"

She whirled. "Yes! What did you think it was? Fun? Maybe it's fun for you—for the people out there watching. I don't know about them. I don't even see them! It's just an assignment for me. It's what I have to do."

"You know about the men who come to these rooms—you see them!"

"Yes," she said, her voice dull and flat. "I know about them. Not just men. Some of the winners are women. And some of them are worse than the men."

He stepped forward quickly. Seizing her by a bare shoulder, he swung her around. His hand withdrew as if burned by the warm flesh. "Why do you do it?" he cried, "In the name of the Organization, why?"

Her reply was caustic. "In the name of the Organization. Why else would I do it?"

"What does that mean?"

"Did you have any choice about being an architect? No, of course not!" Her voice gained strength as she saw the shot strike home. "You were chosen. That's what you were suited for. It was all decided for you, wasn't it? The tests when you were in school, isolation of your aptitudes, more tests, special training—*they* made you an architect. Did you have anything at all to say about it? Did you ever wish you were something else?"

"That's different!"

"What's different about it? It's all right for them to make you an architect, but it's not all right for them to make me what I am. Is that it? You have your aptitudes. I have these!" She threw her arms back. The movement thrust her high, full breasts forward. She went on defiantly. "I have long legs and I'm athletic and I can dance. And I have a pretty face. I was picked out when I was ten years old. Every day since then I've done the right exercises and eaten the right foods and had the right skin creams massaged into me. Every day! Some of the girls are lucky. They stop growing too soon, or they get dumpy or their skin ages too quickly, or they just don't turn out to be as pretty as they seemed in the beginning. They're transferred out of our section. I wasn't." Her eyes met Hendley's directly. "I'm still a 5-Daygirl. Do you know what we do on four of those days? We work at making ourselves beautiful. That's all. That's what we're for. The fifth day we go out—on assignment."

Her eyes and her voice were challenging, but her words demanded understanding, even pity. Hendley wanted to give them to her, but his own pain pushed and shoved him into a bitter accusation. "What were you doing that day we were together in the sun—practicing? I thought that meant as much to you as it did to me! I thought we'd found something together. I should have known when I found you'd lied to me—when you ran away—that it was all a pretense with you. But I couldn't have guessed that it was just—exercise!"

"Oh, Hendley, Hendley!" Her eyes would no longer focus on his. Their lashes were dark, heavy, and wet. "How could I expect you to understand? Don't you know that day was different? To have someone want me—me, not just a body that other men have gaped at, not just a beautiful ornament, not a prize in a lottery! I never expected to have that. It was wonderful. I'll never forget it—no matter what you think or feel now. But I knew it couldn't go on. We're watched all the time. It was just luck that I was able to sneak away and meet you that one day in the museum. Even then I was late getting back, and I had to make up a story. I got only two days' debit. But we would have been caught if we'd done it again. You'd have been punished, and I was afraid you'd wish you'd never seen me. I didn't want that. I wanted you to remember the way it was that afternoon—"

Her voice broke. She pushed swiftly past Hendley, stumbling blindly toward the bed. Her knees struck the edge of the plastifoam layer and she

fell forward face down onto the bed. Her body shook, and her fingers dug into the covering. Her sobs were muffled.

Slowly Hendley's anger drained out of him. He felt dry, exhausted, like eyes empty of their tears. Ann's slim figure seemed smaller lying crumpled on the bed. Her nakedness made her seem merely vulnerable, exposed to abuse and pain and shame. He could not shake out of his mind the image of her on the stage—and especially the projection of the audience's reaction on the huge thought-screen—but she was not to blame. He should have known that, just as he should have known that the honesty of her surrender on the warm sand of the surface outside the museum could not have been simulated.

The rest didn't matter, he thought. She hadn't chosen a way of life for herself. Only that afternoon had she chosen freely.

Crossing the room, he stood over the bed looking down at her. The Organization! he thought savagely. The efficient world of machines, coldly manipulating lives, juggling people as if they were no more than the numbers in which the machines dealt.

He looked down at ABC-331. How much more than a set of numbers she was! He sat beside her. His hand touched a smooth white shoulder. This time he did not withdraw the touch, turning it into a caress. "I'm sorry," he said gently. "Can you forget what I said just now? It was the surprise—the shock of seeing you on that stage. All that's over. Can we go back?"

For a while she didn't move, but she ceased to cry. Her body no longer trembled.

"You're beautiful," he said. "I know you don't like to hear that, but you are. I've never seen anyone like you. You're not just beautiful the way a statue is beautiful. It's a different quality—something soft and warm inside you that shows through, that gives the other things"—he smiled—"a special beauty. It makes them *mean* something." With a gentle pressure of his hand he rolled her onto her back. Her eyes, dark with lingering tears, stared up at him, huge in her pale face. In the dim light he could not see their color, but he remembered fans of brown laced with green flecks. "You're lovely in the way a computer measures loveliness, too. I can see why you were singled out to do—what you have to do. But being beautiful isn't just having a

certain shape or size or texture...." His fingers brushed the swell of her breast and moved down to trace the deep cut of her waist. Roughly, because suddenly he wanted her, he said, "Your beauty is alive. It's real. That's like the difference between a piece of plastic with wires woven through it, and another that looks similar but has a live current that makes it into a glowing light."

"Oh, Hendley," she whispered. Her hands reached up to pull him down beside her. "I never wanted to be beautiful before! If only I didn't have to —"

"Shhh!" He laid a finger across her lips. "Don't say it. We'll find a way out for you—for us. We're going to be together."

"But you're here—you're free!"

"No. Only for tonight." Quickly he sketched the events that had brought him to the camp after his day of rebellion. At the end he added, "So you see, you're partly responsible for my being here. We have to stick together."

"It's too dangerous!"

"Maybe it's dangerous. Nothing could be *too* dangerous."

Impulsively she hugged him. "Careful," he warned her with a nervous laugh, "Women have been attacked for less."

"Really?" She stretched herself luxuriously. "You're frightening me...."

With an effort he moved a few inches away from her. He spoke firmly. "We have too much to talk about first. Tomorrow I'll be going back. We have to decide what we're going to do."

"What can we do?" Her tone was wistful, but without real hope. "Once you asked me what I thought about the Merger. I guess it meant something to you. It doesn't to me. Whether there's one big Organization, or two or twelve, doesn't make any difference. Nothing changes."

Hendley sensed the conviction behind her words, but he wouldn't accept their hopelessness. Stubbornly he insisted, "We have to do something. Where can we meet? At your room? Mine?"

"No."

"The Historical Museum then. That will do for now. Maybe we can find a better place later. If you're not sure when you can get away, I'll go there every day I can—we'll have to be more careful now, I'll have to report for work when scheduled—and I'll wait for you. Come when you can. Four o'clock? Is that a good time?"

"It's no use, Hendley."

"Four o'clock?"

She could not fight him. "All right," she said. "But I don't know what day —"

"Whenever you can," he said. "We'll work it out. And meanwhile I'll do some thinking. There has to be a way to have your status changed or—or something."

She did not answer, but one of her hands found his and squeezed. "It doesn't really matter," she said softly. "Not now."

"Freedom isn't everything," he said, half to himself. "I've found that out. When I had the chance to come here to the Freeman Camp, I thought I'd find an answer that made the whole Organization worth while. Now I'm not so sure."

ABC-331 smiled. It was a woman's smile at the man she loves—tender, amused, indulgent. "Did you really believe that freedom was all?"

"It's what everyone works for, what everyone wants."

"Not everyone. Do you think the really top men want to come here? This is for the rest of the world—for the workers, people like you and me. This is to keep everyone happy, to make them think they have something to work for." Ann spoke simply, directly, her vision unclouded, her tone matter-of-fact. "The top men, the ones you never see or hear about, don't come to Freeman Camps. They have all the freedom they want outside. This isn't what they dream about."

"What *do* they want?"

She shrugged. "Power, I suppose. Other things. But not this."

"How do you know all this?" Hendley felt the ground shifting under him once more. She couldn't be right. To suggest that the Organization was

corrupt at the top went far beyond his own questionings. It made the entire society a fraud. It made all work futile, purposeless.

She was silent, studying him. "Do you know about architects on a higher level? What happens to them?"

Hendley frowned. "They get better assignments, more important ones. They work on the bigger projects. They get to do the more creative work. A 4-Dayman is a draftsman, for instance. A 2-Dayman designs."

"It's the same with us," Ann said simply. "We know about the girls above us. The ones who are assigned to the Freeman Camps are like me. Mostly 5-Daygirls, some 4's, a few 3's. Almost none higher." She paused. "Where do you think the best girls go? Who do you think gets them?"

Hendley was sitting up now. His head was spinning. He didn't want to hear any more.

"The really beautiful girls," Ann said, "the ones who are much more attractive than I am, are pulled out of the group. They don't get the routine assignments. They're saved. When they're ready, they go on special order. Usually we don't see much of them after that. But we know where they go. We don't talk much about it, but we know." She pulled Hendley toward her again. Her voice was earnest. "You mustn't worry about these things, Hendley. There's nothing anyone can do. It's just the way things are." Her hands were urgent, pleading as her voice pleaded. "We've talked enough. There isn't much time left tonight. Love me, Hendley!"

He clasped her with a kind of desperation. The warmth of her body, the resilient softness of the bed, the close dark intimacy of the small room—these were real, a speck of sanity careening through a universe of chaos, without sun or stars, without order or meaning.

The texture of Ann's skin suddenly felt rough under his hand, prickling with cold. "You're cold," he murmured. He started to smile. "Or is it—?"

He paused. A draft touched his body like cool fingers. But the air curtains shut out cold. And the door ...

He twisted away from Ann, rolling toward the edge of the bed. He was too late. Heavy hands caught his legs. An arm encircled his neck tightly. As he struggled to break free someone fumbled at the left sleeve of his coverall,

rolling it up. The technique was practiced, deft, quick. He felt the prick of the needle, but there was little pain.

"Release him!" a voice spoke. There was amusement in the voice, a controlled, urbane mockery.

"You!" Hendley stumbled to his feet. There were three men in the room. Two were strangers to him, including the one slipping a hypodermic needle into a small case. Recognition of the third man stung him to incredulous anger. "How did you get here?"

Nik laughed. "I haven't lived in this camp all my life without learning a few of the ropes."

"Is this your idea of pleasure-pure? Get out!"

But Nik made no move. "Sorry, old boy. I wish it didn't have to be you. But you'll get to like it here." He glanced past Hendley at Ann on the bed, whose frightened eyes were on Hendley. "Too bad I had to come at the wrong moment. I thought I'd given you time for a few jolts. Seemed like the fair thing to do. But this gentleman"—he nodded toward one of the men standing behind him—"really was the winner. I promised him we wouldn't tie up his prize all night."

"But you said—you bought him off!"

"Now, now, mustn't get excited. It'll only make the drug work more quickly. I did have to stretch the truth a bit, but you'll understand why."

Hendley's rage exploded. He lunged toward the Freeman. His legs were heavy and thick, refusing to obey the command of his mind. He dragged them clumsily. Nik's face seemed no closer than before. Hendley struck at the thin face with its sardonic smile. His fist found only air. With a violence born of desperation he hurled himself forward. The young Freeman dodged. Hendley's clawing fingers scraped tantalizingly along Nik's sleeve just before he pulled out of reach. The momentum of the clumsy charge cost Hendley his balance. He fell heavily to his hands and knees.

"You're just making it worse," Nik said. "Don't fight it. There's nothing you can do now."

Hendley tried to get up but his limbs refused to obey. "You tried to drug me before," he said thickly. "At that art exhibit. The drink the girl took."

"Yes. She complicated things for me. It would have been so easy there—I had it all set up. This unpleasantness wouldn't have been necessary. Oh, don't worry about that girl, by the way. She'll be fine in a day or so. So will you. The drug is quite harmless. You'll wake up sometime tomorrow, and you'll soon be as fit as ever." Nik's foot reached out to nudge Hendley's side, pushing him over onto his back. He was unable to resist. His arms had lost their strength. Helpless, he stared at Nik's face as it loomed over him. The Freeman said, "Just think of it this way. You'll be free! You'll have what you've always wanted. And I'll have what I want. I've waited years for this—waited for just the right one to come along. I've had it planned for a long time, every step. I knew you were the one the first moment I saw you in the park with that red emblem on your sleeve."

"What—what are you saying?"

"We're changing places, old boy. I'll be you, and you'll be NIK-700. That's all there is to it."

"Can't," Hendley mumbled. "Identity discs. You'll never get away with it."

"Ah, but I've worked that all out. We're only numbers, you know. We're not faces—or people. What makes you you, and me me? That little disc on your wrist and this one on mine. That's all. Otherwise, we're much the same size, and close to the same age. That's all that's necessary."

"People will notice—friends."

Nik laughed. "Do you really think anyone will make a fuss? In any event, I'll ask for a transfer of work assignment as soon as I'm out to eliminate any problems or unnecessary questions. They'll give me one, won't they?"

Hendley did not answer. He knew the transfer would be granted. It was a common enough request, and Nik would come up with plausible reasons for it.

"You have a woman outside, don't you? I'll have to think about that. I can claim we're incompatible—I won't even have to see her. Or do you think I should? Maybe she'd like me...."

Suddenly Ann tore free of the man's grasp holding her on the bed. She leaped at Nik. Her fingers raked at his face. "You can't do it!" she cried. "Leave him alone!"

"Stop her!" Nik raged. "Get her off me!"

Hands dragged ABC-331 away from Nik and threw her down on the bed once more. Her cries were abruptly muffled. Hendley struggled to rise but Nik's foot pinned him to the floor. The Freeman grinned at him.

"This gentleman here, who used his needle so efficiently on you, is a doctor. His tools are in that little bag. I've already had my own identity disc altered. The bracelet folds open. Doesn't show, but I can slip it on or off anytime. As for yours—well, a small operation, I'm told. Might have to break the bones in your hand to get the disc off. But the hand will be set properly, and in no time it'll be as good as new. I promise you that. I'm spending all my white chips to make sure you get a good job. The least I can do. And I won't need chips on the outside, will I? Sorry I can't leave you well-fixed here, but you'll manage. And you're welcome to my room and anything you find there. You'll find it quite comfortable. We'll be taking you there in a few minutes now...."

The voice faded away. After a moment it came back, but Hendley could not understand the words any more. The room was fuzzy. He heard a distant cry. Have they started on me? he wondered. Is that scream mine, so thin and—no! It was Ann!

He tried to fight his way out of the thickening web which enveloped his senses. He had to get to her! His hand struck something. The fingers found the edge of the bed. He dragged his head up. Bodies were grappling in the murk before his eyes. Ann was screaming. "No! You can't do it! You can't be him!"

"But, my dear, it's necessary, I assure you." Nik's voice came through again with sudden clarity. "Doctor, can you quiet her down? Not too much. Don't want to spoil the winner's pleasure completely, do we? After he was so helpful..."

Hendley attempted to crawl onto the bed. He didn't make it. Something—someone—pushed him back. He flopped onto the floor. Ann was no longer screaming. The vapor which seemed to fill the room became more dense. Through it Nik's face appeared, white and bloated.

"Still conscious?" Nik asked. "You have a lot of resistance, I must admit. But it won't be long now. Believe me, there's no need to worry. Just relax."

"Why?" Hendley wanted to shout the question, but he wasn't even sure that he had spoken aloud. His throat was tight, his vocal cords paralyzed. Why, why, why?

"Why? Is that what you're asking?" Nik's distorted features twisted into an even more grotesque shape. "Because I want out! I'm sick of this prison, sick of freedom, sick of the boring pleasure-pures!"

"You're mad!" The words dribbled through Hendley's loose lips.

"What's that? Mad? Of course I'm mad! Who wouldn't be after a lifetime in this place? You'll find out. Or maybe you won't. Maybe you'll be one of those who likes it. Stupid fools! You don't know what you have on the outside. To have work! Something to do! Someplace to go! Something with a purpose, a meaning—"

No, Hendley wanted to tell him. You don't understand. There is no meaning. It's all a hoax.

Nik was laughing. His face floated away. His voice came to Hendley from a great distance. "I won't be seeing you again, old boy. Sorry, you're not making any sense when you try to talk. Can you hear me all right? Just want to say, have fun! It's all yours—the stars and the sun and the pleasures of freedom! If you ever get out, look me up at the Architectural Center. Just ask for TRH-247..."

His laughter thinned out like a piece of string. Hendley wanted to reach for it, to get his hands around the thin white throat of laughter. He could not move. He was alone under a vaulting black sky, without stars, without light of any kind. He was drifting through space. Ann! He called her soundlessly in the cavern of his mind. I'll find you. Wait for me!

But his last conscious thought was the realization that she could not hear him. She would never know what he had said.

9

As he had done each evening—he had missed only one night, awakening after dark on the day NIK-700 left the Freeman Camp in his place—Hendley sat at a table in the central park, a half-empty glass before him, and watched the sunset. There were clouds above the horizon, and against this billowing canvas the sun painted a dazzling richness of colors—fiery red, gold, lavender, vivid streamers of yellow. Hendley shifted restlessly in his chair. So quiet! he thought impatiently. There had been nothing of interest going on through most of the day.

Unmoved by the spectacle on the horizon, he let his gaze wander across the tops of the distant line of trees, indifferently over a green expanse of lawn, to come to rest at a swimming pool near the foot of the slope. A girl was standing by the pool, wearing only the thin white strips affected for bathing. Hendley's eyes lingered on the ripe curves of her body. He wondered if she could be the same girl he had met on his first day in the camp almost a week before, the one who had led him off among the bushes. That chapter had been unfinished. Her Contracted had interrupted them. Hendley thought that he really ought to look her up some day....

His good hand reached absently for the inevitable glass with the inevitable whiskey. His left hand rested on the table, still held in its rigid plastic braces, still wrapped with a cumbersome white bandage. There was little pain now, unless he grew careless and brushed the hand too hard against a table edge or door frame. And the doctor had assured him that the bones were set properly, that they were slowly knitting together and would eventually be almost normal. No deformity would result.

Hendley could think of the event now without having the bile of anger rise to his throat, and without beginning to tremble. That first night, pushing aside the lingering shreds of the drug's effects as he struggled to consciousness, he had begun to rave wildly. He'd banged his head in his furious thrashings, and had almost fainted with the pain. The doctor—he'd worked in the medical center of City No. 7 before coming to the Freeman Camp, Hendley learned later, and enjoyed keeping up his medical activities

just for amusement—had given him an opiate to put him to sleep. The next afternoon Hendley had been more rational. He had been allowed to sit outside in the park and watch the sun go down, his awe in the vision tempered by the raw bitterness that remained in his mind and heart.

Ann had gone. Hendley had been unable to learn anything about her, but the doctor had assured him that she would have departed with the troupe of showgirls on the morning after the show. At noon on that same day, Nik, wearing Hendley's identity disc adapted to his wrist with a concealed expansion mechanism, had left on the copter for the city, clothed in the uniform with the visitor's sleeve emblem.

"There's no point in exciting yourself now," the doctor had told Hendley cheerfully. "It's done, and you might as well accept it."

"He'll be back!" Hendley had retorted. "He's insane to think he can get away with impersonating me. Why ever did he do it? I still can't understand!"

"There's some don't take to freedom," the doctor said. "But he knew what he was doing. Insane he might be, but he's very levelheaded about it." The chunky man chuckled at the paradox. "He planned this all out for a long time."

The doctor, whose name was JMS-908, but whom Hendley always thought of simply as the doctor, was an amiable, very hirsute man a head shorter than Hendley, with thick hairy arms and stubby hands covered with mats of black hair across the backs, even along the fingers. They were hands whose sure delicacy of touch always seemed incongruous. After the first day Hendley was unable to hold any enmity toward him. The affair had not been of the doctor's doing.

"I like to keep in practice," the doctor said more than once. "If you don't, you lose your touch. Man's not a machine that can be started up any time you feel like it by just pushing a button...."

The operation on Hendley's wrist, for which Nik had paid him handsomely in white chips, had been a welcome diversion for the little man. The postoperative services he offered Hendley were free. "I just like to see my patients come along," he said. "Don't have many of them any more."

He was a compulsive gambler. On the day Hendley lay drugged, the doctor lost all the white chips Nik had paid him.

When he began to feel better, Hendley expressed curiosity about the expansion device on Nik's identity disc, which now circled Hendley's left wrist above the bandage. "Simple enough," the doctor explained. "See? A little tug and lift at the same time and it opens up. If you merely tugged, or just lifted, it wouldn't work. Very neat."

Hendley was impressed. The tampering with the disc was completely invisible except on very close inspection. "He'll be caught anyway," he said with certainty. "They'll know at the Architectural Center that he's not me. And at the rec halls. Somebody's bound to notice!"

"That may be," the doctor said agreeably. "Still, people are out of the habit of questioning things any more. And when I try to remember my patients, when I think back on them, it's strange, but I don't remember their faces. I remember only some of their numbers...."

For the next few days Hendley kept waiting for NIK-700 to be returned to the camp. The Organization would conclude that he needed morale therapy, of course, for wanting to escape from freedom. Hendley would undoubtedly be penalized for being a party to the switch, no matter what story he told. Strangely enough, the prospect of losing his borrowed freedom did not disturb Hendley. He had only one good explanation for this: Ann was outside.

No word came. Incredulity turned into uncertainty, then apprehension. Surely someone would have reported Nik as an impostor by now. RED-498 would have made inquiries about her Assigned. (But she wouldn't really care, Hendley realized uncomfortably. If Nik had been shrewd enough to act quickly to break the contract, RED-498 would have been temporarily disturbed, but only until the Marital Computer assigned another partner to her. Nik might have brought it off without ever seeing her.) At last the suspicion that no one would be concerned about the change, as long as Nik was obedient to the Organization's scheduled routine of work and play, grew into conviction.

Hendley was free.

Now, nearing the end of a week in the role of a Freeman, he watched the last color on the western horizon fade into a thin red streak. His eyes no longer really saw the marvel. A bird winging overhead, swooping in a wide

bank toward the trees near the camp's perimeter, did not make him turn his head. Ennui weighed on him. He was able to get about the camp at will, he could engage in any play that struck his fancy, as long as it didn't require two good hands. There was fine food and drink available whenever he desired them. He had sampled only a small fraction of the camp's varied entertainments. There had been a series of parties each night, there would be others already starting for the new period of darkness ahead. And—he was restless, uneasy with his leisure. The day had seemed interminably long. The night would be even longer—until it ended, as each night did, when, alone in his inherited room, he woke shivering, bathed in sweat, hearing the echo of Ann's anguished screams.

Hendley's hand shook as he pushed a refill button for his drink. The whiskey was necessary. It dulled physical and mental pain. It helped to pass the unnumbered hours.

There was a rustling in a clump of bushes nearby. Peering, Hendley was able to make out two figures lying on the ground. He guessed the couple had been there for a while. He simply hadn't paid them any attention. The shadows being not yet deep enough for him to take the precaution of moving to more open, safer areas, he remained where he was. Idly he watched the spirited wrestling going on behind the partial concealment of leafy foliage. It broke up in laughter. There was low, hurried conversation, too low to be understood at the distance. The couple scrambled up from the ground. Hendley started to look away.

A gleam of white caught his eye. He flicked a glance back toward the spot where the couple had been lying. Yes! Something was there. A rapid hammering filled his chest. But the man would remember, he would come back, or the girl would turn for a last fond glimpse of the place where their lovemaking had begun and she would see the flat white circles pale against the grass.

Hendley restrained the urge to jump up and hurry behind the bushes. The movement might draw the couple's attention. They were still in sight, half-embracing as they walked away. In a short while they would drop behind the rise. That would be time enough to act. Not before.

Hendley's heartbeat skipped. At the top of the shallow rise of land the man and woman had paused. They looked back toward Hendley and the clump

of bushes not far from his table. The man was pointing as he spoke. He'd remembered. Hendley groaned aloud.

Seconds later the couple turned away and began to sink beyond the line of the rise. Elation swept over Hendley. His bandaged, rigid left hand thumped nervously against his thigh. His gaze remained fixed on the receding figures until there were only two heads bobbing against the sky above the rise. Then even these were gone, dropping out of sight like two golf balls vanishing into their cups.

Stumbling in his haste, Hendley did not even circle around the bushes. He plunged directly through the tangle of branches to the clearing behind them. He dropped to his knees. His fingers scurried eagerly over the grass, scooping up the small quantity of white casino chips which had fallen from the departed Freeman's pockets.

The casino's stimulating effect was really quite remarkable, Hendley reflected during a brief pause as the robot-dealer cleared the table of losing bets and pushed the winners' chips toward them. It was as if Hendley's whole system had been toned up. Blood which had flowed sluggishly now tingled in his veins. His mind was alert, ranging ahead to dissect possible plays on the table like a quick, keen instrument. The steady whirl of wheels, the clink of chips, the murmur of low-pitched talk through the casino as bets were called and players reacted audibly to the click of a ball into place, the buzz signaling winning patterns on the outer row of betting machines—all blended into a controlled current of suppressed excitement that was highly contagious.

Hendley kept his chips arranged in neat, equal stacks. His luck had been good. The original handful of chips had grown to a tall stack, then two, three. The fingers of his right hand tapped anxiously on the edge of the table. As if in answer, the hard fist of the frozen-faced robot struck the warning board. All bets down. Quickly Hendley slid a small pile of chips onto the black square bearing the number five. On a hunch he hedged the bet with smaller groups of chips on the four and six squares. The robot-dealer pressed a button. A bar of light whirled through its circular spin,

holding the eyes of the players hypnotically, giving the illusion, like light on water, of bobbing up and down. It slowed, hopped, stuck. Black five! Hendley had made his side bets, and the five paid two to one. His stack of chips had grown to four!

Grinning, Hendley raked in his winnings. "I can't lose!" he exclaimed to no one in particular, unmindful of the malevolent glare he received from the player at his side who had been losing heavily. Hendley's thoughts darted around the board, measuring possibilities, calculating risks. His eyes gleamed. Though the room was comfortably cooled, he was perspiring faintly....

An hour later Hendley suffered his first major setback. By then he counted nine full stacks of chips before him, and even a reckless bet resulting in the loss of one full stack did not disturb him. Luck rode on his shoulder. She might look the other way for a moment, but she wouldn't leave him. Boldly he pushed out another full stack, bent on recouping his loss. There was a confident smile on his face as the light-wheel went into its hypnotic dance. "Nine," he whispered eagerly. "Big red nine!" The bar of light revolved slowly, skittered over a section of numbers, hesitated exactly over a red nine—and jumped three more spaces. Even Hendley's cover bets had been passed over.

Chagrined, he checked his winnings. Still seven stacks. He could pull out now while he was way ahead. But he'd been close to having ten stacks, and it wouldn't take much to regain that position. He would have to be a little more conservative, however. He couldn't afford to risk full stacks every time. Just a few more spins to see if luck really was deserting him. He couldn't believe that it was. Besides, he didn't want to quit now....

The run was on. With a swiftness that left him no time to pause, no time to reflect, that generated a kind of unrealizing madness in which he fed chips automatically to the hungry wheel as if he had no choice, Hendley lost everything. Stunned, he watched the impersonal fingers of the plastic rake extending from the indifferent arm of the robot-dealer scoop his last few chips across the green table.

In desperation Hendley turned to the player on his right, grasping his arm. "Let me borrow a few chips!" he urged. "I'm due now! Overdue! I'll pay them back—I'll pay you double!"

Stonily the Freeman shrugged off Hendley's grasp and pushed in front of him. "Go to the desert," he said curtly. "I've heard that tale before."

"Just a couple of chips," Hendley begged.

The player did not bother to answer. Hendley felt anger boil through him. His jaw muscles knotted tightly. His lips pulled back over clenched teeth. Only his deep conditioning against violence kept him from spinning the surly player around and smashing his fist against the contemptuous mouth. A thin, weak current of warning trickled through the haze of anger. There were too many people watching. The Freeman had done nothing to him. He was angry because he had lost. To create a scene might get him into trouble, perhaps jeopardize his chance to play in the casino when he did obtain more chips.

Hendley stalked away from the table, pushing quickly and rudely across the crowded floor of the casino. He didn't want to watch the action. He had to be able to play, to feel the keen whisper of excitement as the light-wheel danced, to ride with it, his whole being attached to the streaking bar of light, coaxing it, urging it, soothed and excited by it as if he were its lover. Unless he could be part of that, he could not bear to see the fever of hope and fear in other faces.

Outside the main Rec Hall the air was cool, actually chilly against his sweat-dampened body and his flushed face. He shivered. Oddly, even after the first involuntary spasm had passed, he continued to feel a faint quivering in his arms and thighs. With it came a tug of discomfiture, the first pull of a nagging guilt. Defensively he brushed it aside. The casino was only one of the Freeman Camp's many pleasures. As long as he was here, he might as well enjoy them all. That's what freedom was.

He stopped abruptly. Less than ten steps away, broad-leafed foliage at the edge of the grounds surrounding the Rec Hall stirred in the night breeze. The area was dark, ominously dark. Hendley turned away and strode quickly toward the bright ring of light thrown by the floodlights in the garden. Six days of freedom had taught him better than to stray alone into shadowed places. At night the pleasure-packs roamed freely in the parks and side streets, sometimes even striking boldly and quickly in well-lighted, crowded streets. The motive often seemed to include robbery, but the packs appeared to take an equal pleasure in beating their victims, even those who

carried nothing valuable. If he hadn't been disturbed, preoccupied, Hendley would never have wandered into the remote, empty corner of the thickly planted grounds. The realization that he'd done so left him uneasy, his imagination conjuring up visions of sudden brutality. He tried to shake them off.

Ahead of him a drunken Freeman was having trouble boarding the slow-moving walk that ran downhill. Twice he fell off. On the third try he managed to stay on the strip. Hendley rode down behind him, idly watching his precarious leanings. The drunk was singing to himself in a quavering but enthusiastic voice. Hendley thought: With the announcement you're making of your condition, old man, you'd do well to mingle with crowds. Don't wander off by yourself.

He did not pursue the thought further. Yet, at the bottom of the hill, when the drunken Freeman headed across the central park for the noisy entertainment section, Hendley followed suit. Near the edge of the park the drunk stumbled off the walk. Hendley prepared to disembark behind him. Without conscious purpose he slowed his own natural pace as he followed the man into the crowded main street, lagging well behind. At one point the drunk swiveled his head. Hendley jerked his gaze away, pretending to peer at the sky. The night was particularly dark. There was no moon, and clouds hid the stars. What are you doing? he asked himself. Stalking him?

He felt a cold pressure at the base of his skull. When he glanced again at the drunken Freeman it was with harder eyes and a sharpened interest. The man was moving on again, ignoring Hendley. Good.

The drunk paused before an entertainment arcade, apparently debating with himself. After a moment he walked on, weaving unsteadily. He hesitated only briefly before a restaurant. At the third stop, a newsview theater, he went inside. The theater was less than half-filled. Hendley was able to take a seat a few rows behind the Freeman's now-familiar nodding head with its thinning strands of gray hair.

A large, circular viewscreen formed most of the wall surface of the theater, surrounding the viewer. Hendley paid little heed to the turbulent crowd scenes on the screen. The news was all about the Organization outside, which explained the nearly empty theater. Few in the camp followed the events of the working world with any interest, Hendley had already caught

the prevailing attitude. The camp seemed completely isolated. Even the word "Merger!" repeated several times in a newscaster's rich drone did not distract Hendley's attention from the man he had followed. Finally, just when Hendley had begun to fear that the drunk had fallen asleep, his stoop-shouldered figure rose in silhouette against the viewscreen. He was leaving!

The Freeman stopped at a nearby bar for a superfluous drink. Hendley walked on by without even a sidelong glance. He had to be careful now, do nothing to arouse suspicion. Outside a peekie-house he mixed with a small crowd, as if considering the blatant suggestions on the announcement board: YOUR INNERMOST THOUGHTS REVEALED! one said, and another leered: FREE YOUR HIDDEN DESIRES! And what are your hidden desires? Hendley asked himself. Care to look at them? Angrily he brushed the questions aside. The constraints of the outside world had no place here. Pleasure was all!

The drunk left the bar. Coldly determined now, Hendley waited until the man was a hundred feet ahead of him, half-screened by late night traffic, before he set off in pursuit. Sooner or later his prey would become careless, wander into the park or off into a quiet side street. The only worry was that he might have a room in one of the buildings immediately bordering the main street. Then there would be no chance to catch him alone.

The drunken Freeman took another brief ride on a moving walk. When he alighted he stumbled to his knees. He was an older man with thinning hair, but he was stocky and well muscled, Hendley noticed, even though drink had slowed his reflexes. He scrambled up readily. Hendley let the distance between them narrow, in spite of the fact that the crowd was thinning out away from the main entertainment complex. He didn't want to lose the man now, and he was convinced that the Freeman was too drunk to notice him. Dusting himself off, the stocky man looked around in a bemused way as if he were lost. Then, purposefully, he headed for a side street leading into the residential section.

Hendley ran to the intersection. The drunk was trudging slowly up the inclined road between rows of two-storied dwelling units. The street was partially lighted, patches of darkness deepening between the occasional light panels. There were no other pedestrians. Hendley kept close to the wall of the apartment building on his left, taking advantage of every

concealing shadow. Quickly he began to close the gap between him and his victim. He was no longer disturbed by thinking of the man ahead as a victim. He thought only of the need for silence, speed, caution. There were only fifty feet separating the two men now. The drunk had not turned. He was muttering to himself, his voice clearly audible in the quiet street. Hendley's foot scraped the pavement and he flattened himself into a doorway opening. The drunk did not look back. Hendley eased away from the doorway, berating his clumsiness. He could take no more chances. He would have to cover the last steps in a rush....

The drunk staggered close to the wall of the building across the way and suddenly vanished as if a trapdoor had opened. For an instant Hendley stared in bewilderment, his heart pounding. Then he saw the black gash of an opening between buildings, the entrance to a narrow walk. He raced forward. No time for caution now. The dark passageway was the perfect spot to attack. Chances were he wouldn't get another. The drunk must be close to his room....

Blundering recklessly around the corner into the tunnel-like blackness of the passage, which was no more than an armspread wide, Hendley was saved only by a last-second instinctive hesitation. A blow grazed his cheek, striking his shoulder with glancing impact. The force was enough to slam him into a cement wall.

The Freeman he had followed faced him squarely, grinning with drunken malice. "Caught you!" he said gleefully. "Thought I didn't know you was after me, huh?"

He struck again before Hendley could recover. Hendley's chest seemed to explode. Reeling, he thought fleetingly that no fist could hit with such weight or force. The drunk must have found a rock or club. If he landed another blow, the fight would be over. Hendley crouched and dodged, sick with the knowledge of his foolish blunder.

"Think you're so smart!" the drunken voice rasped in the darkness. "I carry this just for smart ones like you!"

But the man's drunken aim was erratic. Something heavy and metallic clanged against the cement wall of the passage. The solid, heavy sound quickened fear in Hendley for the first time. The blow had been close

enough to fan the air against his neck. In desperation he came out of his crouch in a sudden, furious rush. One of his fists landed with a meaty thump. The drunk's breath wheezed. He swung wildly, missing Hendley's head by a foot. For a moment he was off-balance, staggering as his momentum carried him forward. Hendley saw the squat, black shadow stumbling past him. He lashed out at the exposed head and neck. The drunk went down with a soft gasp. He did not move.

Legs trembling, Hendley stood over the fallen man, drawing breath in great gulps. His chest ached and his shoulder felt strangely numb. His first impulse was to run. Instead he dropped to his knees. When the Freeman had hit the ground, there had been a faint, familiar clink. Hendley slapped at the man's pockets squeamishly, choking back a threatening sickness. He had to roll the inert figure over onto his back to reach the breast pocket. The same clinking sound answered his tentative probing. Feverishly now his fingers dug into the pocket and closed around a small nest of chips. He drew them out. Their white gleam was visible in the darkness of the passageway.

A hasty search of the drunken man's remaining pockets turned up no other casino chips. Hendley stumbled to his feet. The man was alive, he assured himself defensively. He hadn't been seriously hurt. He'd collapsed as much from drunkenness as from Hendley's blows. And the white chips were fair payment for Hendley's own bruised chest and shoulder. A small length of heavy metal pipe lay on the pavement near the fallen man's hand, mute evidence of how close Hendley had come to having his skull crushed.

He peered nervously along the side street from which he'd entered the passageway. The street was empty. No curious spectators had been attracted by the fight. But now, conscious of the white chips he carried, Hendley felt apprehensive. No telling what he might run into on a dimly lighted side road. The bright channel of the main street was a full hundred yards away. He started toward it. Before he'd taken a half-dozen steps he was running, panic riding his heels.

Not until he was safely in the brightness of the main thoroughfare did Hendley slow his headlong pace. Even then he quickly boarded the moving walk that would carry him to the more crowded pleasure center. It took a long while for the labored heaving of his chest and the furious hammering of his heart to subside. By the time he had calmed enough to think

rationality about what he had done, he was in sight of the main Rec Hall on the hill. Its rounding yellow shoulders pushing against the night sky were like a woman's invitation, promising warmth, closeness, pleasure. He stared up at it, hearing in his mind the seductive whisper of the casino's action. The weight of the small cluster of chips lay heavy against his thigh. For this he had done violence. For this, like some pre-Organization animal, he had stalked another man in the darkness....

Revulsion seized him like a giant fist. Half-falling, he stumbled off the moving walk. The grip of anguished self-contempt tightened painfully, crushing every defensive protest, destroying the barriers he'd erected so easily to contain an image of himself he could not face—the picture of a greedy pleasure-seeker scrabbling on the ground, pawing through the pockets of a helpless drunk. His eyes squeezed shut, as if their closing curtains could form a merciful new shield against the harsh vision of what his freedom had come to mean. He opened them to stare bitterly at the great wheel of sky which had meant so much to him in the beginning.

A last, dry-eyed, cold, and empty, he turned back along the route he'd taken in fear and panic. There was a different urgency in him now, prompted by the feeling that he had somehow forged an unbreakable link between his life and the fate of the drunken Freeman. As if he were—responsible. The concept was quite new to him, foreign to anything he had known in the automated world of the Organization, but he could not deny it.

Weary, aching, disturbed by the strangeness of his emotions, Hendley searched for the quiet street where he had followed the Freeman. He rode past it once, retraced his steps, and at length found an inclined road which seemed familiar. The narrow, dark passage appeared where he remembered it. Cautiously he stepped through the opening.

The way was empty.

Frantically Hendley searched the area. Had he found the wrong street—the wrong passage? The dwelling units were so completely identical that it would be easy to mistake them, but he was sure that he'd identified the street correctly. There must be some mark of his presence in the passageway, some trace of the fight. His right hand probed the wall. There—could that gash have been made by the Freeman's metal weapon? The man had fallen here—yes!

Relief washed away Hendley's consternation. A single white chip had fallen into a drift of dust at the edge of the wall. Such a find, even though it lay half-buried, would not have remained through a half hour of daylight. The fresh imprint of a hand had been made in the dust. And at Hendley's eye level as he knelt, a raw gouge was visible in one wall, recently made by a sharp, heavy blow. This was the right place. It was doubtful that anyone finding the drunken Freeman there would have bothered to carry him away. The length of metal pipe was gone. The drunken man must have recovered enough to leave under his own power.

Hendley emerged from the darkness of the passageway. The street was still quiet and empty. A thinning trickle of traffic rode the moving walk at the bottom of the long incline. Beyond, bright concentrations of light identified the pleasure centers. And in the farther distance, a deeper black against the sky, the camp's fringe of trees was visible. How moved he had been by his first glimpse of those trees as he came through the gate in the wall!

Now he wanted only one thing: to be outside that wall.

Slowly he dug the cluster of chips from his pocket. He stared at them wonderingly. In a sudden spasm of disgust he drew back his arm and hurled the white chips far down the street, where they bounced and skittered and rolled, making a thin clatter in the silence. As Hendley started down the inclined street, one of the chips, still rolling on its edge, crossed his path, wheeled, lost momentum and tipped over. Deliberately he ground it under his heel.

10

The early morning mist which blanketed the park was already burning off when Hendley made his way toward the concrete beige shells of the administration buildings at the east end of the Freeman Camp. Detouring across a stretch of lawn, he quickly found his shoes soaked through from the heavy dew. The wet grass was a vivid green. Leaves and bushes glistened in the hazy sunshine. Singing birds made a cheerful din high among the trees.

He would miss these things. But the atmosphere of the camp was so corrupting that its beauty was soon forgotten or ignored, blurred out of focus by the astigmatism of the free....

What Hendley felt as he neared the beige buildings was not regret but a kind of relief. Perhaps if ABC-331 had been with him, if they could have shared the sunlight and the carefree hours of leisure, life as a Freeman might have been different. And again it might not. Was this kind of freedom, as Ann had seemed to suggest, a monstrous deception? He was not sure what he believed. All he knew for certain was that he had to get out of the camp.

And he had to find her.

He felt no misgivings as he reached the administration building through which he had passed on the day of his arrival. There would be questions about his failure to report Nik's assumption of his identity. The prospect of stiff debits against his tax debt no longer had the power to frighten. Even the possibility of more severe penalties, whatever they might be, did not matter.

There was a reassuring familiarity in the whir and drone of office machinery inside the beige building. One of the uniformed personnel behind a counter looked up brightly. He had an air of eagerness accentuated by prominently bulging blue eyes that reminded Hendley of a frog's. "*Good morning, sir!*" the clerk piped. "What can we do for you? Not that there's much we *can* do for the free, eh?"

Hendley decided there was no point in avoiding the issue. "I'm not a Freeman," he said bluntly.

A startled look crossed the face of the clerk, whose pop-eyes blinked. The surprise gave way to amusement. "Ha! Ha!" He was pleased to share Hendley's joke. "That's *quite* good, sir."

"It's not a joke. I'm here by mistake. I mean, I don't belong here. I'm only a visitor."

"Oh!" The clerk managed a nervous smile. "For a moment I thought—but you're not wearing a visitor's *uniform*!" he exclaimed. "I don't understand."

"My name is TRH-247," Hendley explained patiently. "You'll find me in your records. They'll show me leaving a week ago—but I didn't leave. Someone else left in my place—a Freeman."

The clerk was bewildered, his protruding eyes growing larger than ever. "I—I think you'd better talk to the Office Manager," he said quickly. "If you'll wait just a moment..." Breathless, he almost ran for the glass door of an adjoining office. In a few seconds he reappeared, flushed with excitement, pointing Hendley out to a beige-uniformed official. Hendley was relieved to recognize the brisk, efficient man who had given him his final briefing when he entered the camp.

"Now then," the Office Manager said with a genial smile which failed to cover an acute inspection. "What is this about a confusion in status? I'm afraid my assistant was a bit, ah, excited."

"It's simple enough," Hendley said. "I'm a visitor. I shouldn't be here. A week ago I—"

"I think we'd better be concerned only with the, er, the present," the official said with a touch of impatience. "I see you're not wearing a visitor's uniform. Can you explain that?"

"Another man switched uniforms with me," Hendley said. "And more than just uniforms!"

The Manager frowned. "I see. It's irregular, of course, but no great harm done, I suppose. You were scheduled to leave today? What is your number?"

"TRH-247," Hendley said. "And I was scheduled to leave a week ago!"

The assistant, still hovering nearby, gasped. His superior eyed Hendley coldly, turned to the shocked clerk, and snapped, "Check that!" To Hendley he said, his manner now less carefully polite, "I think you'd better explain."

"I've been trying to," Hendley said evenly. "I was a visitor. A week ago I was attacked by a Freeman. He took my uniform and switched identity discs with me. He left camp in my place. That's all there is to it. I know I should have reported this sooner, but—"

"Here it is, sir!" the clerk said, rushing up with a section of tape from a computer. "But he left!"

The Manager glanced at the tape. When he looked up at Hendley his expression was disapproving, his eyes cold. "Now then," he said, "I think you'd better tell us your real name. If you'll let me see your identity disc—"

"I just told you my name!" Hendley said angrily. "TRH-247!"

"TRH-247 was a visitor to the camp. I gather you knew that. He left as scheduled at noon six days ago."

"This is ridiculous!" Hendley cried. "You're not listening to me! The man who left was an impostor! Look at this hand—they broke the bones to get my identity disc off! I'm wearing his. NIK-700 is his name. He's the Freeman! I'm only a 3-Dayman sent here for therapy."

The clerk did not need his superior's curt nod. He was already hurrying off to question a computer.

"This, ah, ruse has been tried before," the Manager said to Hendley, his voice deceptively soft.

"I suppose it has. I'm just surprised you didn't catch him when he left," Hendley said. "After all, you were the one who processed me in yourself. You must remember. You suggested that I take in the show at the main Rec Hall."

"I tell that to everyone who enters the camp," the official said. "And I don't remember you. I was not referring to any illegal departure from the camp as a ruse—I meant your obvious attempt to claim another identity. Our records, I can assure you, do not show mistakes. The machines cannot make

errors. You must be aware of that. The visitor, TRH-247, left on schedule—that much we can be sure of. As to your identity, sir—"

The assistant reappeared. This time the Manager barely glanced at the section of tape from the computer. He waved the pop-eyed clerk away. When he faced Hendley his manner was distant, his voice clipped. "I trust you will not try this again, NIK-700," he said. "Freemen are not permitted to re-enter the Organization. You are familiar with the rule."

"You're a fool!" Hendley burst out. He waved his broken hand in front of the official's face. "Doesn't this hand mean anything to you? Haven't you heard a word I've said?"

"Bandages are easy to make," the official said remotely. "Even broken bones are simple enough to manage, I suppose, if you're, ah, desperate enough. I'll recommend that you receive morale therapy, of course. We are quite familiar with the, er, aberration which occasionally makes a Freeman lose his, ah, perspective and wish to leave the camp. But I can assure you it's quite impossible."

"But I'm not a Freeman!" Hendley raged, gripped by a kind of terror.

"I'm afraid I will have to ask you to leave the Administration area," the Office Manager said coldly. "Except for necessary business, it is out of bounds for Freeman."

Hendley stared at him in stunned disbelief. It was incredible that the man would not remember him—even more inconceivable that he would attach no plausibility whatever to Hendley's story. Numbers were all that mattered—the set of symbols setting forth a man's identity, establishing his status, certifying his existence, a combination filed away in an electronic brain which could, on demand, reveal who and what a man was.

"You've got to listen to me," Hendley said with an effort for control. "I'm Thomas Robert Hendley. TRH-247. I'm not a Freeman. There's been a switch—"

"I'm sorry, sir," the beige-clad official said in brisk tones that contained no sorrow, only a curt dismissal. "Our computers do not make mistakes."

Hendley backed away. The unknown, unnameable terror shook him. It was the demoralizing fear which might have been felt by some very clever,

almost human machine which had been taught every emotion a man could feel except this one, and which, confronted with the unknown, began to clash and grind to a halt, stripping its intricate gears, shattering its neatly made cogs and bolts, flying into a thousand pieces, until it was no longer an almost human machine, but merely a collection of unidentifiable pieces of something that did not exist any more.

Terrorized by a glimpse of non-existence, Hendley burst from the administration building and ran across the cool, wet, and slippery grass toward the beckoning shadows of a grove of trees.

Hendley crouched at the edge of the woods where a low growth of bushes crowding against tree trunks was dense enough to hide even a white uniform. All day he had loitered in the woods, at first in dumb panic, later in despair, and at last with a growing determination. He had spent the afternoon measuring the depth of the grove, verifying the fact that it followed the exterior wall of the camp along its entire length, following each footpath to see where it led—and watching the wall. He had learned several facts he had not known before. The wall was patrolled by robots. Its surface was somehow sensitized, the slightest touch setting off an unheard alarm which in less than a minute brought mobile robots trundling along the wide, flat top of the wall. The interior surface of the wall, unlike the outside, was well maintained. There were no cracks, no soft crumbling places to provide holds for hand or foot. A group of men might have made a human pyramid, from which the topmost man could have reached the top of the wall. But before this feat could have been accomplished, a robot would have appeared with silent efficiency. Hendley did not know what action the robot-guards would take, but it was certain that they would have been trained to act firmly and decisively. Resistance would be futile.

On two occasions, once during the early afternoon, again near dusk, he had deliberately scraped the wall with a broken-off branch. Each time he had scurried back to the cover of the woods to watch the robots. Each time he had barely reached the first line of trees before the guards appeared. They made no attempt to leave the wall and gave no sign of having seen him.

Watching their impersonal inspection bitterly, he thought about the wall. It did more than keep out unauthorized persons and screen from the curious the activities in the camp. Walls worked two ways. While Freeman blissfully pursued their endless pleasure, the wall made their camp a prison.

Waiting for total darkness, Hendley let his reflections range beyond the wall to the bleak prospect of the endless desert. Would he find food and water in that wasteland? Would he lose himself in its vastness without ever finding his way to the nearest city? Angrily he brushed aside his doubts. Frightening as the desert might be, it could be no more terrible than a meaningless freedom.

In the last light Hendley made his preparations, stripping leaves and thin useless branches from the long slender trunk of a fallen sapling he had found earlier in the day. He doubted that this rude pole-ladder would reach all the way to the top of the wall, but it would bring him close enough. He would have to clamber up in frantic seconds. And if he failed, there might be no second chance.

At last he was ready. The darkness was deep. He crept to the edge of the woods, dragging his improvised ladder. For several minutes he crouched motionless, searching the wall. Something had disturbed his eye. Not movement, but a sense of something foreign in the darkness, a shape....

He went cold. Directly opposite his position, immobile on top of the wall, sat a robot-guard. Against the night sky its gray shape was almost invisible. How long had it been there? It must have come while he was busy cleaning off the tree trunk. But surely its station opposite him was a coincidence.

Stealthily Hendley retreated into the woods, taking great pains to pull his pole-ladder silently through the undergrowth. Not until he had covered an estimated fifty yards to the left of his original position did he angle again toward the edge of the woods facing the wall. This was still too close, but it would give him a check against the tactics of the robot wall patrol. He had to know how many of them were on guard, and how they functioned.

Reaching the cleared strip, he peered toward the wall. A robot—silent, impassive, tirelessly observant—sat exactly across the way.

Hendley plunged back among the trees. Running blindly, indifferent to the branches which stung and scratched his face and arms, he covered another

thirty yards, this time without his makeshift ladder. He slowed his pace, stole forward another ten paces, then approached the clearing. The robot-guard was ahead of him. Its silent posture on top of the wall seemed to mock the labored heaving of Hendley's chest, the clamorous protest in his mind.

He sank to his knees. "They can't be everywhere," he whispered aloud. But he knew in his heart that, wherever he approached the wall, the guard would be waiting. Whatever move he made would have been anticipated. The pattern of his actions during the day in testing the wall had been recorded. A computer would have analyzed the sequence. The robots would have been briefed accordingly.

There was no escape.

The warning voice seemed to be coming over a loudspeaker, magnified and distorted. The voice was some distance away when Hendley, lying on the damp ground in the woods, first heard it. As it approached, its droning message was repeated at regular intervals. "Clear the woods!" the voice urged with metallic emphasis. "This is a warning. All persons not engaged in the hunt must vacate the woods. Repeat: Clear the woods...."

Slowly the urgency of the warning penetrated Hendley's despair. Several times he had heard of the hunt, but he'd never learned exactly what it was. Obviously there was danger of some kind involved. He supposed that a prey—he'd heard the word "target" used once—was let loose in the woods. What kind of target? An animal of some sort? Was the danger real, or was it all simply a game with a formidable imitation of reality?

Hendley rose and made his way out of the woods. As he emerged into the open lawn of the park contained by the belt of trees, a group of Freeman—as many women, it seemed in the darkness, as men—were crowding toward the dark labyrinth he had left. "Hey! What were you doing in there?" one of the men called. And another said, with laughter that had an almost hysterical edge, "Lucky you got out when you did! The hunt's starting any minute!"

Hendley stopped to stare at the group. He was tempted to join them in their hunt. Curiosity pulled at him. They seemed an eager, exhilarated group. In the excitement of the chase he might even be able to forget the day's events. He might lose himself.

In anguish he turned away. He was already lost. No artificial pleasure could alter that shattering truth. Nothing could change it.

He walked without aim or purpose. Careless of the menace lurking in deeply shadowed places, he was protected by his very indifference—or perhaps by the distant activity of the hunt. No yelling band of attackers burst upon him. He wandered through the camp, pausing here and there at a bar to gulp down whiskey he neither tasted nor felt. His whole body grew numb, and his thoughts became mercifully fuzzy, with only a small projection of reality poking up through the haze to bring him pain.

At last he came reeling along the street leading to the dwelling unit he had inherited from Nik. Hazily he thought: it is mine now. It is really mine. And mine is his, as if I had never occupied it. With painful perception he realized that the room in which he had lived for so many years in the outer ring of the Architectural Center bore no mark of his personality, no stamp that made it his. Everything in it belonged to the Organization. Everything had been issued—not to a man, but to a number. To a faceless tool which had been taught a limited pattern of activity.

A tall figure loomed in Hendley's way. He stopped, trying to focus his gaze. A strange face, youthful in outline but lined and reddened as if the skin did not react well to the sun's direct rays, smiled at him. "I say there," the man cried cheerfully. "Out having your jolts, eh?"

Hendley tried to stumble past him, made vaguely uneasy by the stranger's hearty manner and forced good humor. But the tall Freeman caught his arm. "What's your hurry?" he asked, his tone cajoling rather than resentful. "The night's young!"

"I've had enough," Hendley mumbled.

The grip tightened on his arm. The man's fingers were not still. Hendley became aware of a gentle kneading of his bicep. "I can teach you some real pleasure-pure," the tall man suggested, suddenly coy. "A new experience! I'll bet you haven't—"

"No, I haven't!" Angrily Hendley jerked away from the overfriendly grasp.

"But you don't know what you've missed!" The young-old face was eager. The "s" sound hissed through his teeth in coquettish invitation. "You'll never know unless you try. I can show you!"

Hendley struck furiously at the simpering smile. Something of the long day's frustration went into the brutal blow. The Freeman staggered back. Through bleeding lips came an outraged protest. "Beast! You have no sensitivity, no imagination! I should have known it!"

Hendley spun away. He wanted only to reach the privacy of his room, to find the oblivion of drugged sleep. But before he had traveled a hundred feet his legs gave way and he crumpled to the pavement. He lay where he had fallen, head whirling, the ground revolving slowly. He had a sense of flying, and then of the surface on which he was borne beginning to tip at an angle until he felt sure that he would slide off into empty space.

"You poor thing! Let me help you." Gentle, insistent hands plucked at Hendley's sleeve. Yielding helplessly to the pressure, he rolled over onto his back. A woman's face rocked slowly across the sky of his vision, like a pendulum with painted features. Pale face, capped with wavy hair defined by a row of bangs across a wide forehead. A red mouth smiled. The lips moved. "Dear boy! You need to rest. Do you live near here?"

Hendley nodded. The woman's tone was sympathetic, soothing. Her fingers were not demanding. He tried to sit up, and with the woman's help he managed it. Soon he was standing, leaning against her. She was quite short, her head no higher than his shoulder, her body a neat, well-rounded package, compact and strong. A full breast pressed warmly against his arm, but the woman seemed to be oblivious of the contact.

"I'll help you," she said. "Is it this way?"

Hendley mumbled directions. He felt better now that he was back on his feet and moving. When he reached his room he was prepared to thank the plump-bosomed stranger, but she gave him no chance to speak. "I'm not going to leave you alone until you're safe in bed!" she admonished him firmly, as if talking to a child.

He made no protest. Though he wanted only to be left alone, he was grateful for her help. He wasn't sure that he could have made it to his room

on his own.

The woman led him to his bed. "What a pleasant room!" she murmured. "Just lie down now. No, don't fight me, relax."

Deftly, efficiently, it seemed impersonally, she stripped him of his uniform. Hendley was too absorbed in the problem of remaining in place to feel more than mild surprise at her attentions. Then, without his realizing how it had happened, the woman was beside him on the bed, her uniform gone, her warm body an unexpected abundance of sweetly scented, swelling hills and dipping valleys.

"He tried to pick you up, didn't he?" she whispered huskily. "I saw him."

"What? Oh." Hendley realized obscurely that she was referring to the tall blond Freeman with the red face.

"You didn't like him, did you?"

"No. Listen, I didn't mean for you to...." His feeble protest trailed off. There was no resistance left in him.

"He's always following me," the woman said resentfully. "Trying to take men away from me. But you like me better, don't you?"

"You—you know him?"

"Oh, yes. We're Contracted." The woman's hands stroked Hendley's weary body. They floated together on the slowly drifting bed. Hendley had a sense of unreality, of existing in the distorted world of a dream. The woman's voice purred in his ear, her breath warm. "I'm glad you like me better. Wait'll I tell him. Won't he be jealous!" She chuckled. "What's your name?"

Hendley groped for an answer. He couldn't think. His flesh was betraying him, betraying his weariness, denying his hopeless despair.

"You do have a name, don't you?" the woman asked with a low giggle. "You must have a name."

"Yes, it's...." At last the answer came to him. With a cry that might have been a gasp of pain, he said, "NIK-700!"

11

"Are you going to the show tonight?" the doctor asked cheerfully.

"I don't know."

For two weeks Hendley had waited anxiously for the show to return. The first time Ann had not appeared with the troupe. The following week she had been there. He had recognized her the moment she appeared in the red spotlight. That night had been worse than the other. He could only watch at a distance. There was no way to communicate with her. When the audience reaction began to clarify itself on the giant thought-screen, Hendley could not watch it. Then the lottery began....

"I think we can leave the bandages off now," the doctor said. One by one he flexed the fingers of Hendley's left hand. "How does that feel?"

"It hurts."

"But not too bad, eh? You'll find it stiff for a while, and you'll have to be a little careful of it, but it's coming along fine. You're lucky. You mend quickly."

Only the body mended, Hendley thought. The other, the deeper wound, did not heal. "Tell me something, Doctor," he said abruptly. "What's wrong with me?"

"Eh? I just told you. You're coming along much better than we had any right to expect."

"I don't mean the hand. I mean—why am I different? Why do I feel things that others don't seem to feel? Not just here in the camp—I know there are some who don't adjust to freedom—but outside, too. Why didn't I fit in? Why did I feel that something was wrong?"

The doctor sat gingerly on the edge of the bed in Hendley's room, as if the question made him move with caution. "What makes you think you're different?"

"I *know* I am! Nik was different, too, but not in the same way."

"Freedom sickness," the doctor said absently.

"But you can't call mine freedom sickness," Hendley argued. "I haven't been here long enough. And I didn't belong in the outside Organization either. I don't belong anywhere! To me the whole system seems wrong, but why am I the only one who feels that way?"

"You're not the only one."

"Maybe not, but there aren't very many like me. I told you how that Morale Investigator reacted. I was a prize specimen to him. I was something new! That's why I was sent here."

The doctor sighed. "This is a little out of my field," he said thoughtfully. "But I think I can make an educated guess about your trouble."

"Then guess, for Organization's sake!"

"I suspect that your genes failed to respond to the pre-birth treatment in the Genetic Center."

"What does that mean?"

"Well, you know that the chemistry of the human cell is organized in a very specific pattern. Research proved long ago that artificial mutations could be produced in the genetic material of the cell. What is not so widely known is that the series of tests in the clinics of the Genetic Center, which every expectant mother undergoes in the second month of pregnancy, are actually a course of treatment."

"What kind of treatment? And what does this have to do with me? Are you saying that my genes are mixed up?"

"In a way. But not exactly."

"You're not making sense!"

"Be patient." The doctor began to pace the room. His habitual good humor had given way to an absorbed frown. He stopped suddenly before Hendley. "Why do you suppose that Organization society has remained so stable for so many years? Because the system works best for the most people? That doesn't explain it. Human hereditary factors, left to themselves, are too complex. But once it was proved that the basic molecular pattern which determines the direction life will take—determines form, shape, inherited

characteristics, temperament, in short makes *you* what you are—could be altered, the way was clear. Through early treatment unwanted characteristics, psychological as well as physical, could be eliminated. That's why there is virtually no physical deformity or mental illness within the Organization. A tremendous achievement, my friend, but the treatment goes beyond such genetic errors. It is also designed to eliminate unstable personality traits. That's why the Organization has so few anarchists, so few rebels, so few questioning enough to perceive that they might be unhappy or their lives useless." The doctor paused, then added, "The treatment is not infallible, of course."

Hendley stared at him. "It failed with me? I'm one of the—the imperfect ones?"

"I wouldn't use that word. I'd use the term—normal. For some reason or other your genetic material remained unaffected by the treatment. You're a natural man."

For several minutes there was silence in the room while Hendley pondered the doctor's words. At last he said, "It's too late now, isn't it?"

"Yes. I understand late treatment has been tried—even experiments with adults—but without success."

Hendley rose and went to the window. It was late afternoon and the sun was low above the horizon. He regarded its fiery beauty with bitterness. "What about you?" he asked the doctor. "You know all this, but you're happy."

The doctor smiled. "I couldn't be anything else. I'm ... made that way."

"And I'm a misfit!"

"There are different ways of looking at that." The doctor crossed the room to stand beside Hendley at the window. The smile was back on his lips, but it remained pensive. "Do you want to know what I think?"

"What?"

"I envy you."

The phrase seemed disturbingly familiar. Hendley tried to remember who else had spoken it to him. The answer popped unexpectedly into his mind.

The Morale Investigator had voiced a similar envy on the morning Hendley departed for the Freeman Camp.

He did not smile at the irony.

It was an hour after sunset when Hendley saw the visitor. He was on his way to the main Rec Hall, being unable to stay away on the night of the show in spite of the torment he knew he would endure if Ann was on stage. The glimpse of a red sleeve emblem out of the corner of his eye was enough to make him jump hastily and precariously off the moving walk. Regaining his balance, he looked around eagerly. The familiar identification symbol stood out clearly among the mass of otherwise identical white uniforms. This was the first visitor Hendley had seen since his arrival in the Freeman Camp, and he knew that it was more than curiosity, more than the memory of an experience shared by the stranger, which made his heart pound as he began to follow the red beacon on the visitor's arm.

The man seemed awed by the excitement and activity swirling around him. Hendley wondered if he, too, had gazed about so eagerly on his first night, if his eyes had been alight with the same glitter, if his lips had been parted in a continuous expression of wonder. The visitor was a solidly hewn block of a man with coarse black hair, the outline of a heavy dark beard, and thighs and biceps so thick they stretched the unusually loose-fitting coverall taut. But in spite of his muscular bulk, the stranger moved with surprisingly light, quick steps. Standing still, he looked heavy and ponderous; in motion he conveyed an impression of dynamic strength held in check by an instinctive caution.

His alert, inquiring gaze missed nothing. Hendley had been following him for no more than a few minutes before he realized that his own curiosity had been too obvious. The visitor, pausing before the entrance to a dance hall, turned suddenly to stare directly at Hendley. The glance was bright and hard, but the man's mouth was smiling in a friendly way.

Approaching him casually, Hendley returned the smile. "Your first night?" he called out heartily.

"Was I that obvious?" the visitor asked. "It's no wonder. This is the biggest night of my life!"

"I guess everyone feels that way," Hendley said. He tried to remember how Nik had first cultivated him, but he quickly realized that the circumstances had been different. Nik had been prepared. He'd been waiting for a visitor to come. His every move had been carefully planned. Was it madness to try to repeat his tactics without any preparation, without help, without even a plan of attack?

"I'll bet there's a lot I'll miss on my own," the visitor said. The comment was almost too fortuitous, as if he were offering himself as a victim. "You must know everything there is to see."

Hendley could not resist the temptation. "I'll be glad to show you around," he said.

"Great!" The muscular visitor punched Hendley enthusiastically on the arm. "I didn't really want to ask, but I've only got one night, and I certainly don't want to pass up anything special just because I didn't know it was there!"

Hendley nodded. For a moment he couldn't speak, his jaws locked by the pain in his arm. The visitor had hit him lightly, almost playfully, but the blow had carried a numbing force. It was absurd to consider trying to overpower such a man. If he had any suspicion at all, any warning, he could break Hendley's spine with a casual pressure of those thick arms.

But he wouldn't be expecting anything, Hendley thought. He was too excited by the camp's promised pleasures. He would have no reason to suspect anything. And even a powerful man was vulnerable to a blow on the skull by a heavy enough weapon—a rock, for instance, or a makeshift club. All that was necessary was to lure him into a dark, deserted place where a weapon was handy. It needed daring, quickness, determination, but the reward would be worth the risk. Anyway, Hendley had nothing to lose. If the opportunity failed to present itself, he would simply not act. He would be no worse off than he was now.

"Let's start with this place," the visitor suggested, pointing to a nearby building. "What is it?"

"A bowling alley."

The stranger dismissed this sport. "We have those outside. Do you have PIB's here?"

"Of course."

"Better than ours, I'll bet. Can anyone go anytime he wants?"

"Yes."

"Show me."

The tour began. The visitor's interests turned out to be catholic, his energies inexhaustible, his capacity for food and liquor and sex prodigious. Before long Hendley, beginning to feel somewhat heady, gave up the possibility of getting the stranger drunk. Halfway through the evening, the visitor inquired about the yellow mushroom building on the hill. Hendley told him about the Rec Hall's casino and the weekly show, climaxing in the lottery. The visitor's eyes flashed. "That's how I like to spell pleasure!" he exclaimed, knocking Hendley breathless with a clap on the back. "Let's go!"

"It's early yet," Hendley said. After a moment's hesitation he suggested, "A lot of things go on in the parks that you haven't seen."

"I saw plenty there in the daytime. It's the big show for me!"

Hendley forced a laugh. "Don't judge our night sports by daylight. Come on, we'll take a shortcut through the park and then up the hill."

"You're the Freeman!" the visitor said. "Lead on!"

Hendley tried to think clearly and calmly. Surprise was the important thing. Surprise—and an effective weapon. It would not do to miss. He had already decided on the place, a small clearing not far from the main road through the central park. The spot was well screened by bushes and trees. Here he could hide the visitor's body until he had time to fetch the doctor to remove the man's identity disc—or found some other way of cutting it loose.

They started along a path leading into the park. As they approached the clearing Hendley had mentally selected, his eyes searched the path for the weapon he needed. Soon he saw it—a bed of smooth stones defining a flower bed, some of them as big as a fist, a short distance ahead. He let the visitor take the lead along the path. "Be careful through here," he said. "Sometimes there are prowlers at night."

"Prowlers?"

"We have crime here. Freedom doesn't breed constraint. It's best to be on guard. You might keep an eye on the bushes as you go. You watch the left, I'll watch the right."

The big man peered curiously into the shadows to the left of the path. The bed of rocks was on the right. When they drew opposite it Hendley stooped quickly. His hand closed over a large stone that shaped itself to his palm. He rose hastily. The visitor's back was toward him.

"I don't see anything," the stranger said. "Say, maybe it wasn't such a smart idea coming this way. What is it we were supposed to see?"

Now, Hendley thought. Get him beyond that screen of trees into the clearing. Any pretext will do. He suspects nothing. It will be quick and painless. With his thick skull, the visitor was unlikely to be hurt seriously even by a heavy blow. And he'd undoubtedly be glad to wake up and find himself a Freeman. He liked his pleasures! It might even be possible to talk him into making the switch without violence, although Hendley didn't want to risk everything on that chance.

"Well?" the visitor demanded. "Don't keep me in suspense. Where's that nighttime fun you mentioned?"

Hendley's arm sagged. The tension went out of his body. At that moment the visitor turned. He seemed to stiffen slightly, but otherwise he betrayed no reaction. In a tone that held no more than ordinary curiosity, he asked, "What's that you've got there?"

"Just being cautious," Hendley said. "I thought I heard something off there in the bushes. You never know what you'll run into in the park at night."

"Yeah?"

The visitor's voice had sharpened. His hard, bright eyes were fixed on Hendley's face. He was suspicious now, but it didn't seem to matter. The moment had passed for action, and Hendley had failed. He'd been unable to bring himself to the violence needed. The whole impromptu plan had been reckless, ill-conceived, doomed to failure. But even if it had not, he had lacked the necessary ingredient to bring it off: callous indifference to another man's fate.

"I think we'd better get back," he said. "The park seems to be a washout tonight. Usually there's more going on that makes it worth the risk."

The visitor laughed softly. "What's your hurry? I'd like to see everything this place has to offer."

Hendley regarded him uneasily. The man's response was unnatural. "We don't want to miss the show," Hendley said.

"You told me we had plenty of time."

Hendley glanced nervously over his shoulder toward the main walk. It was not far, but a bend in the path shut them off from the view of anyone riding through the park, just as Hendley had planned. He drew back, turning along the way they had come, but the visitor's thick hand caught his arm in an unbreakable grip. "You're not playing games with me, are you?" he asked softly.

Frightened now, Hendley stared at him. The stranger, he realized suddenly, had been too eager to be alone with him, too ready to dare the mysteries of a situation about which he knew nothing. Why? At that moment it seemed obvious that the visitor was not the type to walk innocently into an ambush. Had the intended victim all along been cunningly baiting his own trap?

"I'm not playing games," Hendley said. Then, determined to force the visitor to show his hand, he added, "But I'm beginning to wonder about you."

The big man's mouth smiled. "Just why did you bring me here?" he asked.

Before Hendley could answer there was a noise behind them. Both men turned. Shadows moved on the path, solidifying into the shapes of Freeman. They barred the way back to the main walk.

"What's this?" the visitor asked sharply. "Some friends of yours?"

"No!" Hendley gasped. "A pleasure pack. They roam the parks at night!"

"Pleasure packs, eh?" The visitor was still smiling as the silent figures moved closer. There were four of them. Without a word they fanned out in a practiced encircling movement. They would strike noiselessly, Hendley knew. Not that it mattered, since few Freeman passing along the main walk would answer a cry for help.

The attack came in a sudden rush. The men paired off, two of them closing in on each of their intended victims. They carried clubs and knives. Hendley dodged a blow from a club and struck out blindly with the rock he still carried in his hand. He felt no hesitation. This was no premeditated violence but self-defense. The solid impact of the rock against bone was strangely satisfying. But he had no time to congratulate himself as the stunned attacker fell away. The other man closed with him, grabbing his arm, preventing another blow with the rock. They fell together to the ground. Grunts and cries of pain came from nearby, but Hendley could see nothing of the other fight.

Suddenly he was flat on his back, the arm holding the rock pinned by the attacker's knee. Hendley looked up at a distorted grin of pleasure. An arm rose and a knife blade flashed. He tried to twist free but he knew that he was already too late.

The knife traveled no more than a few inches toward his chest. Huge hands seized the attacker and hauled him bodily into the air. Hendley heard a gasp of pain. The knife dropped to the ground beside him. There was a soft thud, and the attacker's limp figure flew through the air. It dropped in a shapeless heap.

The visitor grinned down at Hendley. "I guess you did hear something in the bushes after all," he said. "But they weren't much."

Hendley scrambled to his feet and looked around. Three of the attackers lay sprawled on the ground, inert. Hendley had caught one of them with his first blow. The visitor, he realized with amazement, had overpowered the others alone—armed men!—with his bare hands. And he was not even breathing quickly.

"One of them got away," the visitor said. "But he won't be in a hurry to start any more fights. Not for a while."

Hendley remained speechless. He saw that he was between the visitor and the main walk. That was all he needed. This was no man to confront alone in the isolation of the park. He began to back away, watching the muscular stranger warily.

"I've been waiting for you to make the move," the visitor said. "You must be satisfied about me by now."

"Satisfied? What do you mean?"

The visitor stepped toward him. "The code word is BAM," he said softly.

The sound was ridiculous in that moment of tension, like a child's play word. But Hendley did not laugh. The visitor was frowning. This was no game. The word had a special meaning of some kind, like the key to a puzzle which seems unimportant and insignificant by itself but acquires a unique value when properly used. Had the visitor been fencing with him all evening, waiting for him to come up with the magic word?

"I don't know what you're talking about," Hendley said.

The visitor smiled. "That's the wrong answer," he said.

Without warning he charged. Only the fact that Hendley was already poised on the verge of flight enabled him to elude the big man's rush. A thick arm caught at his waist, but he was already spinning clear. The fabric of his uniform tore as he broke loose.

Then he was running along the path toward the moving walk and safety, not looking back, not daring to waste even the fraction of a second it would have taken to glance over his shoulder.

For the second time in three weeks, ABC-331 was absent from the spectacle on the stage of the auditorium. Hendley stared down at the spotlighted dancers. Each movement, each graceful pose, each tantalizing glimpse in the nearest materializer brought achingly to memory Ann's willowy beauty. He could hear the audience breathing and muttering and shifting about in quickening excitement, like some huge invisible animal in the darkness of the theater. He felt relief that she was not there, exposing her beauty to the audience like an offering, but at the same time he felt cut off from her.

If only he could communicate with her in some way, let her know that he was alive and safe in the camp, even though he was a prisoner. At least the knowledge would give her some hope.

Hope for what?

The clear, cold question jarred him. Ann saw things with a more candid eye than his. She would know what confinement in the camp meant. She would not blind herself to the impossibility of escape. She would be relieved to know that he was safe, glad, even happy—but she would know that his assumption of a Freeman's role erected a wall far more solid and impregnable than any previous barrier of social status.

Shadowy images flickered on the great thought-screen above the stage. Lurid shapes of desire, created by the minds of Freeman who had exhausted every normal area of pleasure, writhed and twisted on the screen like fugitives from the deepest caverns of the imagination. Dreading what was coming, loathing it because Ann had been involved in that same monstrous pantomime, Hendley turned away from the screen. And in that moment, when his attention shifted, he felt again the pressure of eyes on the back of his neck.

He looked around. Three rows back, sitting almost directly behind Hendley, the visitor quietly watched the performance on stage. He was smiling thinly.

It could have been coincidence. Hendley had come to the Rec Hall directly from the park. The show had already started, and the only remaining seats were in the balcony. The visitor must have arrived shortly after him, and it was natural that he should have found a seat nearby. But Hendley knew that the big man's presence was no accident. His seat had been deliberately chosen.

Why? What did he hope to accomplish? In the crowded Rec Hall Hendley was safe from attack—and in any event why should the man pursue him? Was it because of that ridiculous-sounding message Hendley had failed to recognize?

The visitor's gaze started to swivel toward him. Hendley swung quickly back toward the screen. The pressure was repeated at the back of his head. BAM, he thought. What could the word mean?

The show went on. The erotic audience impression of it danced above the stage on the giant screen. And at last the lottery began. Through it all Hendley sat and watched, torturing himself with fears about Ann's absence and what it meant. And whenever his self-absorption wavered, he would become conscious of the patient watch of the visitor sitting behind him.

The last number was called, the last nude figure stood submissively in the spotlight of stage center. The light-curtain fell, obscuring the stage. There was a rush of movement toward the exits. Hendley started up the aisle, turned quickly and pushed his way through the crowd toward another escalator. The visitor was unfamiliar with the camp. If Hendley could reach the sidewalk strip ahead of him without being seen, he could easily elude pursuit.

The exits were jammed. Hendley shoved and jostled his way forward, found an opening and slipped through. He rode the escalator down to the lobby, where the milling crowd again offered a human screen. He began to breathe more easily. The bar on one side of the lobby offered a natural escape route. He fought his way through the clamoring horde of drinkers and ducked out a side door. From there it was only a short distance across the grounds surrounding the Rec Hall to the moving walk. He broke into a run.

He stopped at the edge of the walk to look back. The feeling of triumph drained out of him in a rush. The hulking figure of the visitor was outlined by the lights from the Rec Hall. He paused as Hendley did, regarding him impassively, no more than thirty feet away.

Staring back at the stranger, for the first time Hendley felt within him the coiling presence of hatred.

Hendley was, he knew, half-drunk. The condition was becoming a habit, as indeed it was with an apparent majority of Freeman. The easy availability of liquor was a superficial reason. More pertinent was the need to dull one's senses and artificially stimulate the mind. Pleasure seemed keener when, as in a photograph, it was brought sharply into focus against a blurred background.

The casino, as always, was crowded. It was therefore safe. Hendley had had only a few chips, and he had soon lost these. Now, observing the action at one of the tables, he felt boredom nibbling at him companionably like an old friend. Gambling meant nothing unless you could play.

He searched the crowd for the hard, cruel face of the visitor. It was not visible. But he was there somewhere, patiently watching and waiting. You have a long wait, Hendley thought. Tomorrow you must be on the copter heading back to the city. I can wait till then. Sleep is a bore anyway, a waste.

If only he had some chips!

A winner at the table, raking in a pile of chips, grinned at Hendley. "No chips, friend?" he asked.

"Not just at the moment," Hendley said eagerly. "But I feel lucky. I'd be glad to share my winnings if you'll stake me."

The player laughed. "Your kind of luck I don't need," he said. "Why don't you try the Big Game," he added jeeringly. "You don't need chips there."

"You don't?" Hendley glanced quickly at the big table in the exact center of the casino. It was inactive, as it usually was, guarded only by the silent, motionless robot-dealer.

"You mean you didn't know?" the player asked.

"No. How does it work?"

The player shrugged with an indifference that might have been exaggerated. "It's you against the house," he said. "You have a chance to win ten thousand chips—if you feel lucky."

"What if you lose?" Hendley could feel the excitement building in him. He didn't really care what the penalty was for losing. Here was something different. He had the rest of the night to get through somehow. He couldn't risk leaving the Rec Hall while darkness held and the visitor waited. The game would occupy the time, and bring its own exhilaration.

"You don't think about losing," the player said evasively. "What gambler does? The game ends at dawn, no matter who's ahead. If you last out till then, you win."

Sober, Hendley would have persisted in his questioning. Instead he stared at the big table. What could happen to him if he lost? He was a Freeman. Having everything, he had nothing to lose. Anyway, he *did* feel lucky. And the prize was huge—enough chips to gamble with for weeks! Longer than

that, for you always stood a better chance of winning if you had enough chips to ride out the cold streaks and plunge when you were hot.

With a kind of aggressive, defiant determination he strode through the casino. The robot-dealer at the center table looked up as he approached. His plastic face was expressionless, or rather it was set in a perpetual attitude of slightly curious amiability. He could not care whether Hendley played or did not play, won or lost. That in itself was an advantage, Hendley thought. Desire had something to do with luck.

He slipped onto a stool across the table from the robot. "I want to play," he said.

With the instant response of the machine, the robot placed two identical stacks of large chips between them. They were a half inch more in diameter than the usual casino chips, with smooth white surfaces marked by a red cross. The robot pushed one of the stacks toward Hendley. Depressing a button, he activated two pairs of small viewscreens, one set for each player. Only one of each pair of viewers was visible to the opposing player, the other being the player's own record of his moves.

There was a faint whirring, like an old-fashioned museum clock winding up to strike, and the robot's voice mechanism announced, "We play '100' game."

It was to be a direct, head-on contest. Hendley knew the game, whose rules were simpler than the play actually was in practice. It was an electronic version of the child's trick of guessing how many fingers are pointing when the hands are held out of sight, except that the possible combinations of numbers were infinitely greater, with one hundred as the maximum total. Bets were made for high or low figures, with each player free to draw additional numbers after the first two or to stand with what he had. The odds were, on the face of it, even. But Hendley knew that the robot's precision instrument of a brain was capable of exact, rapid mathematical calculations far beyond his powers. He had to offset that edge by turning his human fallibility into an asset—by doing the unexpected. If he allowed any consistent sequence to develop in his tactics, the robot would instantly detect and take advantage of the fact. Hendley forced himself to play erratically, hoping that he would not unconsciously fall into a pattern of inconsistency.

In the two-player duel the moves went quickly. In the beginning Hendley played and bet conservatively. For a while he seemed to be holding his own. Then, very slowly at first, like a runner inching into the lead in a closely contested race, the robot's stack of chips began to grow, Hendley's to shrink.

A crowd gathered almost imperceptibly. Absorbed in the intricacies of betting, Hendley did not notice the gradual swelling of onlookers. Then, it seemed simultaneously, he became aware of increasing tension, a tightening of hidden springs within his body, and of the crowd surrounding the big table. It was unlike an ordinary gathering in one thing: its peculiar stillness. No one moved or spoke. When Hendley looked around, every eye swiveled toward him. Among the intently watching faces he saw that of the visitor, whose expression was no longer confident. He seemed puzzled. There was in the other faces a controlled anticipation that increased Hendley's nervousness. The crowd's strange silence, its air of breathless waiting, seemed somehow ominous.

He started to reach for a glass—drinks were brought regularly to the table. He'd been drinking automatically, without thinking. Now he drew back his hand. He'd already had far too much. Although his brain seemed remarkably clear, like the cloudless sky over the Freeman Camp on a cool night, he realized that that drunken clarity could be deceptive.

He gave all of his attention to his plays. Shortly after he returned to this grim concentration, the tide of the duel changed. Hendley thought he detected a fixed sequence in the robot's guesses. Betting experimentally, he won. Again. Another win. With increasing sureness he raised his bets boldly. In half a dozen plays he recouped all of his losses and more. The run continued. He couldn't lose. Then, abruptly, the pattern of the robot's moves disappeared. Hendley grinned. He had three-fourths of the chips on the table now—he had the advantage. More important, he had proved to himself that the robot was vulnerable. A machine didn't adjust as quickly as a human being, perhaps because it felt no fear.

Hearing a muttering in the crowd, Hendley stared at the ring of faces. He was surprised to see a number of the Freeman smiling at him encouragingly. So they were not all waiting for him to lose! Some of them appeared disappointed, but almost as many were pulling for him. The knowledge buoyed him tremendously.

The game dragged on. Hendley kept searching for another weakness in the robot's play, but without success. The stacks of chips became even again. Hendley kept varying his guesses, changing his bets at random from high to low number combinations, but slowly the robot drew ahead again. At last Hendley admitted to himself that, if the game went on long enough, the robot would inevitably win. But the game ended at dawn. If Hendley held out until then he could cash in his chips. He wondered how long he had been playing. Hours, it seemed. His body ached, and the continuous tension had begun to affect his nerves. That was part of the robot's strength, he thought. It was tireless. Moreover, it did not make the small errors Hendley occasionally made from carelessness or lack of concentration. With the rest of the play relatively even, these infrequent slips alone could account for the robot's superiority. It seemed clear that the robot had made corrections to prevent the one serious blunder of consistency it had made. That had been Hendley's only chance to win. Now all he could hope to do was stave off defeat until the first light of day.

The end came with the suddenness of a physical blow. Only afterward did Hendley realize that the robot, like a fighter sensing weakness and stepping up the tempo of his attack, had quickened the speed of play. Hendley lost several bets in succession. Instinct warned him that so many losses could not be accounted for by chance alone, but he was already panicking. He cut his bets down to the minimum. Still the robot won. Frantically, Hendley stalled for time as much as he could, groping for the pattern in his play that was betraying him. Now the mind which had seemed so clear and sharp was a dizzying confusion of numbers. The robot brushed aside his delaying tactics, continuing the pressure. Hendley was reduced to three chips. How long had they been playing now? How much longer did he need? If only the casino had windows so that he could see the first light in the east!

He lost again. Now chance itself worked against him. He lacked enough chips to wait out the pendulum swing of luck. He had to risk the final two chips together in a desperate attempt to gain more of a working margin. His total in the draw was high—ninety-two. Good enough to win nine times out of ten....

The crowd burst upon him, shouting, cheering, pounding him on the back. After the hours of taut silence the noise was overwhelming. Hendley couldn't understand. He'd lost. Why were they congratulating him? "Great

game!" someone shouted. "Best I've ever seen!" The crowd was moving out of the casino, carrying him along with them. Someone beyond the confusion shouted a question. "—lost the big game!" came the answer. "Almost made it—there's only an hour left 'til dawn!"

A face thrust close to Hendley's, a forehead swollen and red, eyes bright with excitement. "You've still got a good chance!" the man cried. "We have to catch you before sunrise. Just an hour to hide out!"

"Hide!" Hendley gaped in bewilderment.

"Sure! You're the target!" the red-faced man yelled above the turmoil. "You lost the game—now we have the hunt!"

And suddenly, frighteningly, Hendley knew why the big table was almost always empty, and why the mention of the hunt had always created such a feverish interest. He saw with terrible clarity what he had unconsciously guessed all along.

The prey of the hunters was human.

12

The darkness of the woods in the hour before dawn was like a liquid frozen to a solid, imprisoning within its translucent substance the thin slivers of starlight, the waxen shapes of frozen leaves, the brittle tracery of branches, the cubes and cones of inky shadows. Moving stealthily, Hendley had a sense of shattering this density, of stealing then along the irregular, jagged cracks of the fragmented night.

In the distance he heard the hunters' voices, strained by the intervening trees into the thin cries of children at play. Hendley, a red marker taped to the back of his uniform to identify him as the target, had been given a five-minute start. The gap had closed. The hunters could crash and blunder through the underbrush, careless of noise, while he must slink in silence.

"No weapons," one of them had told him, grinning. "You don't need to worry about that. We really have to catch you."

No weapons. But with a shudder Hendley remembered a scene in a newsview film, not understood at the time, in which a group of Freemen had swarmed upon a single fleeing figure. And he remembered a glimpse of that lone figure lying afterward on the grass, motionless, as if he were asleep. No weapons. Only hands and feet....

He had no idea how many of them there were. In the open near the edge of the woods they had been a numberless mass, a restless, eager horde of hunters, impatient for the pursuit to begin, fanning out to blanket a ridge with their white uniforms. He'd heard their excited mutter, like a single animal growl, as he plunged into the line of trees. He'd looked back once, and they had seemed to surge toward him, straining against an unseen leash.

He paused, trying to place his position. Fortunately he had spent an afternoon in the woods planning his aborted attempt to scale the outside wall. He knew roughly where he was and where the main paths were that would represent added danger.

He analyzed his situation. Leaving the woods would be foolhardy. Of a certainty there would be sentries posted along the fringes, and in the open

he could easily be seen for some distance even in the darkness. The cover of the narrow belt of trees and undergrowth was his only protection. He had to stay ahead of the hunters—or hide—for less than an hour. Was the sky already graying? Through the tangle of leaf and branch above he could not be sure.

Could he go overhead, flatten out against a tree trunk as high above the ground as possible? It might work. But if he were detected there, he would be trapped. They could shake him loose at their pleasure. Pleasure! The irony twisted his lips in a bitter smile. There were thickly clustered bushes where a fugitive might easily escape normal detection. But the hunters would be expecting this. The natural screens and covers would be closely searched.

His heart caught and sputtered. From the corner of one eye he'd seen a glimpse of white. Now it was gone. Fear shrilled in his mind, a voiceless scream. He flattened himself against the ground, listening. There was no snap of branch, no scrape of cloth, no rustle of dry leaf disturbed by a stealthy footstep. Yet there was something—a swift padding on turf. He wriggled forward to the outer edge of the woods. Another flash of white! Reaching the last few feet of cover, he waited, lying still. Moments later a white-clad figure ran past him, not even glancing his way, not slowing.

He lay still, puzzling over the maneuver. Were these additional sentries, racing ahead to make sure he did not slip unseen from the woods? No. The lookouts would already have been posted. This was another move, designed to....

His body sagged. A feeling of hopelessness settled over him. They had cut him off. A band of hunters had been sent ahead. They would be awhile returning, for they could not know how far Hendley had gone and they would have to range far beyond any point he might have reached. Then they would group, bisect the woods, and slowly begin to work their way back. He would be caught in the middle of a pincers movement, unable to go forward or to retreat. They would not worry about the time. Even at a careful pace they would find him before dawn. There was no escape.

For one moment it seemed to Hendley that any further resistance was futile. He might as well lie where he was and wait for them to find him. To be trapped at the last moment after desperate attempts to hide, to be crushed

under the fury of the attack as the first light streaked the sky, would be agonizingly worse than not to have come close at all. What would he gain by frantic scurrying when there was no refuge? The woods were too narrow, too thin a line....

In a convulsion of anger he sat up. He shook himself. No, he would not make it easy for them! At least he could make them feel a little frustration, a little worry that they might be denied their jolts. With a bit of the luck which had deserted him until now, he might even fool them all. He had to try. To give up was somehow to make every step of his rebellion against the Organization meaningless. He had sought to find some value in life other than the mechanics of push-button work, other than, as it had turned out, the purposeless pursuit of pleasure in freedom. If he had failed, perhaps he had simply not known where and how to look. In the end the only thing of value he had found was the personal concern one human being might have for another—a concern beyond physical need, beyond pleasure, beyond self.

But that alone was worth struggling to save. He might never find Ann again. He could not give up trying so long as he was alive.

If only he had not drunk so much! He felt a physical let-down now, a heavy fatigue, that might tell against him. And his mind could not seem to take a tight grip on the problem of escape. It grasped without conviction at hazy solutions, lost its hold, slid off into confusion. Running was futile. Subtlety, not speed, had to save him. No point in breaking for the wall. The threat of a robot-guard defending the wall seemed less frightening than the human hunters, but the latter would be upon him before he could scale the wall. He must stay under cover. Forward or back then? The larger body of hunters was behind him. The advance party, fewer in number, might be easier to slip through undetected. But they would be alert for just that move. In the larger group there would be more confusion....

He seized the thought as hungry jaws clench over a morsel of food. Darkness, confusion, limited space and an excess of numbers—there had to be a way to use these factors. And as he examined the possibilities, he realized that he could not hope to exploit the situation by acting like a fugitive. He had to join the hunters. He had to go to them.

Cautiously he began to work his way back along the route over which he had fled. Nothing so concrete or shapely as a plan controlled his

movements. There were too many unknown factors; too many unexpected things might happen. He had to act by instinct when the time came, adjusting to meet the specific situation, following only a general over-all purpose. But a small current of hope trickled through him, banishing his fatigue, sharpening his senses.

He was not sure what made him pause. He melted into the shadow of a tree, his back against the trunk to hide the telltale marker stripe of the hunted. There were no sounds ahead to give him warning. The hunters, sensing that he might be close, moved stealthily. Hendley could feel their presence. As he stood motionless, holding his breath, straining with eyes and ears, a shadow stirred in the underbrush less than fifteen feet away.

Muscles in his arms and legs began to jerk spasmodically from the effort to remain rigid. He felt the beginnings of a cramp in his foot, a tight hard knotting of muscle in the arch. He set his teeth, willing himself to remain inert as a stone. The hunter had paused. Was he looking toward Hendley's tree? Was there a betraying thickness in its shadow?

The crouching figure crept forward again, one step at a time, his hands carefully parting the branches through which he moved. Now he drew level with Hendley's position. Another step took him beyond the tree.

The hunter wouldn't be alone. The others must be right behind him, fanned out across the width of the woods. If one of them blundered too close before Hendley acted, it would all be over. But his plan was crystallizing. The single advance hunter was the key, the unpredictable factor he had been hoping for. Now there were other shadows gliding through the woods. He saw two to his right beyond the first man's position. And to his left was a slimmer, slighter figure—a woman, Hendley saw with a start. Others moved on either side, heard but not seen. They were all around him.

The first man, the eager hunter, was ten yards or more ahead. A patch of his uniform caught a hazy shaft of—not light, but a grayer darkness. At that moment Hendley stepped away from the tree.

"There he is!" he shouted, pointing. "There!"

The leading hunter whirled at the outcry. There was a fleeting second of stillness. Then another shout went up: "We've got him!" And suddenly the woods were alive with hunters crashing forward toward the lone figure in

the lead. The man threw up his hands as two hunters stormed through a thicket to get at him. "No!" he yelled. But as they converged on him he panicked. He turned and ran.

They were on him before he had taken five steps, burying his cries under the fury of the attack. It wouldn't have mattered what the unlucky man had shouted, Hendley thought. The hunters were too tense, their excitement drawn to too high a pitch. He'd relied on that edginess, but the success of the ruse brought no feeling of satisfaction. They would learn their mistake all too quickly. Any second someone might notice that the victim lacked the marker stripe of the hunted on the back of his uniform.

Hendley forced himself to wait. It would be fatal to turn abruptly and run from the scene. He would draw attention—and he wore the mark of the target. Carefully, keeping his back concealed as much as possible from the hunters who crashed past him through the darkness toward the struggle ahead, Hendley worked his way back and forth across the woods, trying to give the illusion of hurrying toward the action while actually drifting back with each maneuver. Quickly the horde of hunters thinned out. A last figure pushed past Hendley, breathing heavily, whimpering with frustration. Then the woods behind him seemed clear.

Using less caution now, Hendley tried to put more distance between him and the hunters. Even when they discovered their mistake, they wouldn't expect him to be behind them. They couldn't know that he had shouted the mistaken identification. Any overeager hunter could have made the error.

The sounds of the fight receded rapidly. Moments later Hendley heard what seemed to be an angry bellow. The mistake had been found! But it was too late, he thought, exulting. Surely dawn could not be far away. Surely he could elude them long enough to win!

Haste—and the illusion of success—made him careless. He stumbled onto a cleared path before realizing it was there. It was only six feet across, but prudence would have made him inspect it carefully if he'd seen it in time. Instead he found himself momentarily without cover. And facing him on the open path was a grinning Freeman. "That was a neat trick," the hunter said.

Hendley spun away. He was not quick enough. Thick, powerful arms grabbed him from behind, stopped him, wrestled him to the ground. The

other man's bulk crashed on top of him. A hand clamped over his mouth. "Not a sound," the man breathed.

As Hendley stared up at the hunter, his stunned amazement gave way to fear. The dark face grinning down at him was that of the visitor.

"Surprised? It wasn't so hard," the visitor said. "I threw in with those joyboys who were after you. I didn't know what the hunt was all about at first, but one way or another I had to make sure of you. You know too much. One word too much. BAM."

Hendley shook his head violently, fighting against the hand which gagged his mouth.

"I couldn't take any chances with you," the visitor said softly. "Once I saw what the hunters were up to, I figured everything was okay. You wouldn't be a problem. But when I recognized your voice shouting back there, I guessed what you were pulling off." There was grudging approval in the big man's voice. "After that it was easy," he said. "I heard you working your way back through the trees. I just slipped out into the clear and got ahead of you." Suddenly the visitor brought his other hand up, carrying the belt from his uniform. Before Hendley had a chance to speak, the belt replaced the hand over his mouth, forcing his teeth apart to press against his tongue. He tried vainly to shout against the gag. He began to choke.

"Sorry it had to be you, friend," the visitor said, easily controlling Hendley's struggles to squirm out from under the crushing weight of the big man's body. "But BAM is too important. If you hadn't been acting funny, following me around, you wouldn't have got involved. I'd have had to pick somebody for the switch, but it needn't have been you. Now it has to be. I can't have you running loose, knowing I'm tied up with the Brotherhood."

Hendley stared up at him wildly, trying to communicate with his eyes. Ignoring the look, the visitor abruptly shifted his weight, flipping Hendley over onto his stomach. Jerking Hendley's arms behind his back, the visitor tied them securely with the belt from Hendley's uniform.

"Now," he muttered, "the first thing is the identity disc. You're going to become me, friend, and when they find you dead I'll be officially dead, and they can stop looking for me. I guess you really didn't know about the Brotherhood, did you? We're against the Merger, you see—the Brotherhood of Anti-Mergers. The morale boys got onto me, and that's why I'm here—before they could catch up with me."

Horried, Hendley renewed his desperate resistance. He tried to shout against the gag. "You've got to listen to me! I'm one of you! I feel the same way!" But there were only meaningless, muffled sounds. The visitor paid no attention. He was trying to tug Hendley's identity disc over his hand. You fool! Hendley thought. If you'd just listen to me. It opens up and slips right off!

"This is going to hurt," the visitor said softly. "But there's no other way. It's got to come off."

One of the thick, strong hands seized Hendley's recently healed left hand and began to apply tremendous pressure. Pain erupted blindingly, filling Hendley's mind, blotting out all other awareness. He screamed against the gag. The pressure only increased. Waves of nausea seized him. Then, like a dry twig, the weak new adhesion of bone in his hand snapped.

He fainted.

When Hendley came to, slowly, swimming out of a pool of blackness and aching pain, his eyes opened to a graying darkness. It was not yet dawn. He'd been unconscious for only a few minutes. At first the only significance of this knowledge was that the hunt was not over. But the gray was a promise of dawn. Soon he could rest.

He saw the figure standing over him, struggling into a uniform which was far too tight—with a red marker stripe along the back. Hendley felt the loose folds of a strange uniform wrapped about his own body, tasted the remains of nausea in his mouth and the wet discomfort of the sodden gag, and shivered at the searing pain in his hand. He remembered.

The visitor glanced down at him. Seeing Hendley's open, staring eyes, he paused. "I didn't think you'd wake up till it was all over," he said softly. "Too bad."

Hendley began to fight against his bonds with the fury of hysteria, heedless of the pain tearing up his arm. Everything couldn't end this way, so stupidly, so insanely! The man had to listen to him! But the visitor merely watched him as one might with objective curiosity observe the dying struggles of an insect. In the end Hendley's wild, bitter rage spent itself as his energies were exhausted. He went limp.

"I'll make it quick," the visitor said, in a tone that was practical rather than sympathetic. "Sorry about the hand, but it couldn't be helped."

He finished adjusting the snug uniform. Hendley wondered if the man had forgotten the target stripe now on his back. It didn't seem to matter. *He* would reap the safety dawn would bring. Suddenly the bulky figure lowered as the visitor squatted over Hendley. One of the meaty hands reached for Hendley's throat. The gesture was arrested. The visitor was still, his head cocked, a frown knitting his forehead. Listening, Hendley heard the sounds which had disturbed the visitor: the rustle, snap, and whisper of men moving through the woods. They were already close.

"Organization be damned!" the visitor hissed through set teeth. "They're coming back!"

Hendley felt no relief. The reappearance of the hunters could not save him. It made no difference at whose hands he was to die. Either way was a mockery of life itself. When the visitor's blunt fingers closed suddenly around his throat he resisted almost automatically until a spasm of renewed anger against the irony fate had played on him made his struggles more violent. His legs were free. He tried to catch the visitor with his knee. His heartbeat was a huge drum exploding in his chest. He could no longer breathe as his windpipe closed inexorably under the squeezing fingers.

All of a sudden the pressure left his chest. He sucked air into his lungs. His vision began to clear. He saw the visitor's back disappearing rapidly into the grayness of the woods. A patch of sky overhead was measurably brighter. It was almost sunrise.

There was a crash of bodies plunging swiftly through the underbrush nearby. A strange voice yelled, "We've got him now! Don't let him get away!"

There was a lot of movement all around Hendley. Someone stumbled over him, cursed, picked himself up and ran on. Hendley peered after the running figure. What was wrong? Why weren't they gathering around him, throwing themselves upon him? He was helpless....

Hope soared into his mind like a bird taking flight. The visitor wore the uniform of the hunted! He even wore the identity disc the hunters would be looking for! They would not ask questions—they had too little time left. The sky was brightening as if a light-wall had been turned on, just as the artificial dawn had come to Hendley's small room in the Architectural Center during those plodding days of work that seemed so far away.

Hendley struggled to his knees. The visitor might yet escape. If he did, he would be back to finish off his task—to silence the voice that could link him with BAM. Hendley pulled feverishly in an attempt to free his wrists. The pain from his broken hand made him sway, reeling, consciousness almost blotted out. But the belt securing his hands was not tied tightly. It had not been meant to hold for long. He braced himself and tugged again. The belt held. The broken hand squeezed into a smaller ball. Hendley cried out, no longer able to contain the agony.

And his hand pulled loose.

He collapsed on the ground. He seemed to be able to watch the pain recede very slowly, like gently rolling waves. An unexpected chill wrenched his body. He lay shivering, his teeth clicking uncontrollably. But at last the pain was something he could look at, and measure, and know that he would endure it. It was no longer larger and stronger and more real than he was. He could tame it.

The visitor's identity disc lay on the ground. Hendley picked it up. When he staggered to his feet he realized that day had come. He could see his way easily through the dense woods.

A scream cut through the cool, damp morning air, rising like the wail of a siren. It broke off cleanly, as if a wire carrying the sound had snapped. The air itself seemed to go on shivering, as if it still trembled from the shrill

vibrations of the scream. But there was another sound now in the distance, the growl of the pack leaping upon its prey while the flesh was still warm and the hot blood flowed freely.

Shaking with fear and revulsion, Hendley stumbled out of the woods into the open. The hunt was over.

13

The passengers were told to fasten their seat belts. The precaution hardly seemed necessary, for the copter's motion was almost imperceptible in the windowless cabin. An illuminated board flashed the message that the ship was hovering in the landing pattern over City No. 9, waiting its turn to descend. Hendley had a mental image of the great city below, huge concrete cylinders rising from the brown, barren land. From above a circular eye in the center of each tower would be visible, peering at the sky.

Wondering what time it was, Hendley was startled to realize how readily he had come to measure time by the sun. He looked around for the copter's clock panel, found it at the back of the cabin. It was not yet two o'clock.

There would be time to reach the Historical Museum before four.

Would she be there? Three weeks had passed since he'd suggested the museum as a meeting place. Even if she had clung to the hope that he was alive and safe, she would believe that he was in the Freeman Camp under Nik's identity. Would she still have come, day after day, to look for him? How long would such blind hope have lasted before discouragement came, and then despair?

He looked down at his left hand, held stiff by plastic braces and wrapped in a fresh bandage. The little doctor had again attended to his hand without question and without recompense. Only once had he sought to dissuade Hendley, saying, "If this man was a criminal, you shouldn't leave the camp in his place. He must have had good reason for smuggling himself in here. That took some doing."

But Hendley had replied: "It may be my only chance to get out. I have to take it. Even if I could live with this kind of freedom, which I can't, I'd have to go back. To find her."

A slight bump alerted him. The copter had landed. Hendley let some of the other passengers file out ahead of him. The exit led directly along an enclosed ramp into a reception area. Hendley walked slowly behind the others. He had no idea what to expect. But for some reason he felt no fear.

A bank of windows in the outer wall of the receiving area faced the great circle of the landing field. A six-foot partition of plastic formed the opposite wall. Set into it was an open gateway. Attendants stationed on either side of the gate watched the passengers with routine curiosity, conveying no impression of special alertness. But Hendley knew that it was not these he had to be concerned about. It was the master computer stationed by the gate, its unblinking eye waiting to record the identities of all those who passed through.

The more impatient passengers were already filing through the gate. As Hendley loitered at the very end of the line, one of the attendants inspected him idly, looked away, then let his gaze wander back. Hendley began searching his uniform pockets. When he dared another glimpse, the attendant had lost interest and was no longer watching.

Everything was all right. The computer might reject his identity number, but the gateway was open. It appeared that the computer did not have to control the gate to allow each passenger through. Hendley guessed that such a process caused too much congestion. When the moment came, a sudden rush would carry him through the opening. Before the guards could act, he would be merging into the stream of travelers thronging the main lobby. With luck he would escape.

It was too much to hope that the computer at the city's central landing field would not possess information about the visitor whose identity disc Hendley wore. And the big man had said enough to make it clear that he was a hunted criminal.

The passenger directly in front of Hendley reached the gate and flashed his identity disc. The computer emitted a low click. The passenger walked on. Hendley stepped into his place. He waved his wrist toward the computer's eye casually. He was too conditioned to computer efficiency to feel any surprise when the machine buzzed in protest. A red warning light flickered.

Hendley did not wait any longer. He charged for the open gateway.

A split-second later he was reeling back, his face and body bruised and battered, his brain numbed by shock. Something had risen to smash him away from the opening. Awareness seeped into his stunned mind. An

invisible electronic field triggered by the computer's warning. Impregnable. The way was blocked.

There were voices now. Shouts beyond the barrier, faces swimming toward him. Green uniforms—guards advancing. He stumbled back, looking around frantically. There was no other gate. In seconds the attendants would be on him. Only one path lay open, and that seemed a dead end. He took it anyway, running blindly down the tubelike ramp which led back into the copter. A stewardess blocked his way. He brushed by her into the cabin. A man was coming along the aisle, dressed in beige, wearing a stitched emblem with wings—the ship's mechanic. Hendley did not slow his rush. He drove into the man at full tilt, his one good fist smashing out ahead of him, striking the mechanic's jaw so hard the impact sent an electric shock along strings of nerves all the way up Hendley's arm into his shoulder. The man fell backward. Hendley trampled over him.

Then he was in the control center at the front of the copter. A service door stood open, a ladder suspended from the doorway. Hendley went down three steps and jumped to the paved surface of the landing field.

There was a momentary illusion of escape. The landing field was broad and open, dotted here and there with copters in the process of loading or unloading. There was no one immediately behind him. Hendley started across the field, running, putting distance between himself and the alerted guards. He ran into a wide, bright swatch of sunlight.

A siren began to yip—an ascending series of pulsating cries. Hendley stopped, looking back. Still there was no one in close pursuit. The door of the copter from which he had escaped was still open—no! The ladder withdrew even as he watched. The door swung shut! He whirled. All around the field the routine of activity had ceased. Ladders were withdrawing, ramps pulling back, doors closing. Two men at the far side of the field, mechanics, ran toward an opening and jumped through it just before a panel sealed the doorway.

Hendley was alone in the center of the deserted landing field, standing in the glare of the sun as in a spotlight, exposed and defenseless.

The siren's wail died as if it were running down. Silence shut down upon the great expanse of the landing field like a lid. Hendley took a couple of

aimless steps. The thud of his footsteps echoed across the pavement. He saw movement behind the high windows all around the field, faces pressing close to the glass, mouths gaping.

From somewhere high above came the slow, deep grinding of a giant machine rousing itself, groaning, heaving into motion. Hendley looked up. The massive interlocking panels of the airfield's domelike roof, ordinarily closed only against the weather, were moving. Two vast crescents crept toward each other, straightening out, sluggishly diminishing the opening through which sunlight and warmth poured down. Hendley could not tear his eyes away. Alone, isolated in the stunned silence of the airfield, he watched the roof close over him with a sensation of physical pain. The two closing crescents were like two huge presses grinding together, beating the sky into an ever-thinner, brighter sliver, crushing it at last as the roof panels clashed shut.

Sickened, Hendley tore his gaze away. He saw that doors had opened now at intervals spanning the wide circle of the landing field. Green-uniformed guards advanced toward him from each doorway, carrying weapons he could not identify at the distance. He stood rooted, unable to run any more. The tight green cordon of guards pulled closer around, the circle shrinking. He threw an agonized glance overhead at the blank, sealed grayness of the roof dome, where moments before there had been a dazzling brightness. A deep chill made him shiver. He looked once more at the noose of guards tightening around him, and slowly he sank to his knees.

His rebellion had ended.

The trial was brief.

For three days Hendley was kept in a bare, windowless room in the Judicial Center. There was a single, one-piece pad of plastifoam on which to lie. The foam was designed so that, intact, it was both resilient and comfortable. It was almost impossible to tear, but even if that could have been managed, the damaged web of foam would then have disintegrated. There was no way it could be used as a weapon, either against others or oneself. Because it

breathed, it would not even smother if held over the face. The cell was otherwise empty.

He was taken from the room for periodic questionings, some of them under drugs. Before the trial began he knew that the contents of his brain had been thoroughly scooped out and examined. All would be presented in evidence.

His uniform was taken from him, along with the identity disc which had belonged to the visitor. He wondered if he would be led naked into the courtroom.

On the fourth day he was given a nondescript uniform of a kind he had never seen before, a pale gray in color. He was transferred to another room. Here there was one window. It was covered with unbreakable plastic, but he could look out and, through a speaker imbedded in the plastic, listen to the sounds outside. The room was well above street level, looking out upon the vast underground city.

At first, listening and watching with fascination as the familiar activity of the city swarmed through the streets, he felt a peculiar sense of rightness, a feeling of being back in his own element, his senses lulled by sights and sounds he had always known—the soft artificial sky of the illuminated roof, the rumble of walk and tube and hurrying feet, the babble of talk, the faintly discernible odor of chemically cleansed air—most of all the knowledge of being enclosed, contained within the city's gigantic womb.

But in a short time Hendley began to feel unnerved by the jostling, hurrying crowds, even though he was not physically among them. The noise and confusion made his head ache. The city seemed oppressively close and warm. There was nowhere a patch of cool shade on which the eye could rest. He felt a barrenness in the unending surfaces of stone and glass and plastic and metal, unrelieved by any grass or living plant. He missed the irregularities of landscape, the sense of openness, the unexpected breezes which he had so quickly come to take for granted in the Freeman Camp. He began to feel himself a tiny creature caught in the intricately meshing gears of a huge, impersonal machine buried far underground.

He turned off the speaker, welcoming the silence of his cell, and in the end he did not even look out the window.

The trial began on the fifth day. Wearing his gray uniform, Hendley was led into an antiseptically clean, white amphitheater. As he was taken to his seat in the center of the courtroom, spectators, seated behind glass on the balcony level, ogled him. He was surprised to see a second empty chair beside his own. The surprise turned to shocked dismay when a second gray-clad figure was escorted into the court. He rose, dumfounded, as ABC-331 was seated in the chair next to his.

"What are you doing here?" he exclaimed. "How did they find—" He broke off. They had scoured out his mind. They knew everything. Everything from that first forbidden escapade outside the museum.

"It doesn't matter," Ann said, trying to soothe him. "It's all right. This is the way I want it."

"But they can't—you've done nothing!"

She smiled a little. "Did you think you broke the rule all by yourself that first day?"

"But they wouldn't try you with me for that alone!"

"There's more. You've made a misfit out of me, too." She spoke without regret, with even a suggestion of pride. "I was withdrawn from my—my work. There were complaints that I was—uncooperative. Do you understand, Hendley?"

As the meaning of her words sank in, he felt a rush of emotion, full and swelling in his chest. "So that's why you haven't been in the show!"

"Yes, that's why. Then when I learned about your arrest—it's been on all the news, they're making an issue out of it—I beat them to it before they could come for me. I gave myself up as an accomplice." Hendley started to protest but Ann went on quickly, giving him no chance. "You wouldn't have been caught in the camp by that—that awful man if you hadn't tried to see me. It's because of me you're here at all. Don't you know how important that is yet? I wouldn't want to be anywhere else but with you."

Hendley sank into the chair beside her. He reached out impulsively to grip her hand.

A stern voice intruded. Hendley looked up at the bench facing the two chairs of the accused. "The accused will be silent," a grim-visaged judge

said, staring down at them. "This court will now come to order."

As the procedural ritual to open the trial began, Hendley thought of Ann's reference to Nik. His safe refuge under Hendley's identity would have exploded around him. He would certainly have been taken into custody, perhaps returned to the Freeman Camp. Hendley smiled grimly.

Two beige-clad men came forward at the judge's order. One was designated as a pleader for the defense, the other for the prosecution. There was also a bailiff, several guards, and, ranged along one wall, a bank of twelve computers, six in each of two rows. Each was of a different design and manufacture. These, Hendley knew, were the jurors. Such trials were unusual in the Organization, but not unknown, and the system was familiar to him. He guessed that the rarity might account for the crowded spectator gallery.

"They're here because of all the news coverage," Ann whispered, as if she had divined his thoughts. "Not just over you, but over that man whose disc you were wearing. There's been a lot of furor over BAM. They're said to be guilty of sabotage—it's caused all kinds of excitement." She paused. Then, nodding at the jury, she asked, "Why are there twelve of them?"

"It's an old tradition."

"Wouldn't one of them do?"

"Yes. A more sophisticated computer could even make twelve separate sets of calculations, for that matter. But it's traditional—it's always been done that way."

The two pleaders began to present their cases. Each spoke rapidly, without emotion—the emotional factor could not be considered by the computers who would render the verdict, and was, in fact, regarded as inconsistent with absolute justice. The presentation by the prosecution took most of the morning. Its weight of evidence was exhaustive. At noon the court recessed. Hendley was taken back to his cell, where he was given a spare meal. When the trial resumed, it seemed to him that Ann was paler, more drawn than before.

The defense made no attempt to refute the evidence, pointing instead to the instability of morale shared by the two accused, and to the series of events beyond their control which had driven them into infractions of the

Organization's rules of order. The defense was palpably weak. A sense of the hopelessness of their case began to weigh upon Hendley.

The defense rested. Two legal computers were brought into the courtroom and hooked up to the jury. Each in turn fed into the twelve jurors all recorded legal precedents which bore upon the case for or against the accused. During this time Hendley could not help staring at the flickering screens of the twelve jurors. He had the strange sensation that they were watching him, examining and judging what they saw.

Ann sat with her head down, her hands clasped in an attitude of resignation. But her face, when she glanced up at him, was calm.

"It's all right," she whispered reassuringly. But he knew that she did not mean they would be acquitted.

At last, after a brief address to the jury by the judge, the twelve computers went into action. A bailiff pushed a button to start them off. Hendley could see excited activity among the spectators in the balcony as they craned their necks to see and talked animatedly among themselves. In the soundproofed courtroom only the calculations of the jury were audible, each computer racing to its decision—clicking, humming, whirring, finally coughing up, each in turn, a strip of white tape. The bailiff ceremoniously collected each strip and handed all twelve to the judge. As he examined them his stern face did not change expression.

"The accused will rise," he intoned. Staring down gravely at Hendley and Ann, he said: "You have been accused of rebellion and sedition against the rules of order of the Organization. The verdict is unanimous—guilty!"

Hendley was surprised to find that he felt no reaction. Too much had happened to him in recent weeks. Or perhaps it was just that he had already accepted the inevitability of the decision.

"It is within the prerogative of this court," the judge said slowly, "to determine the severity of sentence. In the light of the male accused's persistent and determined efforts to defy the Organization's accepted mode of conduct and way of life, the court does not see that leniency would serve any just purpose. As for the female accused, known as ABC-331, it would appear that her emotional relationship with her fellow accused accounts in great part for her actions. Rehabilitation in the Morale Center—"

"No!" Ann cried, leaping to her feet. "We're both guilty!"

The judge frowned severely. "The accused will refrain—"

"But I must! You can't separate us!" She whirled toward Hendley, seizing his arm with desperate fingers. "Don't let them! Hendley, please, I have to be with you!"

"Bailiff!" the judge stormed. There was turmoil in the gallery as the judge pounded his bench with a gavel.

"Stop it!" Hendley spoke to Ann sharply. "They'll make your punishment easy!"

"I don't care about punishment!" she cried. "I don't care about the Organization! I care about us! What kind of life would I have without you now?"

The bailiff reached them. Shoving Hendley aside, he grabbed Ann's arms. Hendley spun the bailiff around, breaking his hold. The courtroom guards converged on the scene. In the brief struggle one of the guards clipped Hendley a glancing blow with a club. Ann was pushed into her chair.

As suddenly as it had begun the scuffle was over. With an effort Hendley brought his anger under control. The bailiff glared at him threateningly, but Hendley ignored him as he resumed his seat and looked anxiously at Ann. Her hand reached out to him in mute appeal. Her cheeks were damp with tears.

He looked up bitterly as the judge began to speak. The eyes that met his showed neither compassion nor understanding. These would be out of place, Hendley thought angrily, in such a court, just as they could not really exist in a world governed by machines.

"It is the judgment of this court," the judge said harshly, "that the names TRH-247 and ABC-331 be erased from all the records of the Organization, that their identity discs be destroyed, and that the accused formerly known by said numbered designations be taken from the city and banished forever into the outer light...."

14

At night, in the second week, they slept wrapped in each other's arms for warmth. The last matches were gone, and a battery had burned out in the electric fire starter. Try as he might, hampered by the stiffness remaining in his left hand as well as by inexperience, Hendley could not create enough spark with stones or dry sticks to fan a flame into life. By then they were both hungry, a deep continuous hunger which seemed to add to the cold's penetration, as if the blanket of flesh covering their bones, already worn thinner, could no longer keep out the chill which spread over the land after the sun went down.

Each day he had tried to put more miles between them and the city. The copter had left them some distance away, but still in sight of the tall, faceless cylinders of the major centers. Viewed across the barren plain, the towers appeared more like dead, naked trees than buildings swarming with human life. Moving always west, away from the hated towers, Hendley kept expecting to see them sink below the horizon, but they remained persistently in view, seeming no further away.

He slept fitfully. Waking in the cold darkness before dawn, he could see the beams of light shooting up from the circular cores of the great cylindrical towers, as if they were giant torches held up to illuminate the sky. Ann shivered in her sleep and tried to hug him more tightly, seeking to warm her body with his. Pity washed through him. Holding her, he felt a growing, spreading ache that was like the cold but deeper, that would not yield to warm rays of the morning sun.

He had brought her to this, and he was failing her.

Once, in the first week, he had trapped a small animal, one of the few species that seemed to be alive on the plain. He had had matches then, had built a fire, and it seemed they had never tasted anything more delicious than the fresh meat they shared in that festive meal. "I think," Ann had said, "Hendley, I think now we are really free. For the first time."

Later that night, lying before the warm glow of the fire, they had made love, and it had been like that first day of discovering each other.

Now they no longer made love. They were both dull with fatigue at the end of each day, even though they rested during the period of brutal midday heat. They were weakened by having had little to eat for days. They had tried various wild plants and even grasses that looked edible. Some were acceptable to their stomachs, some were impossibly bitter, one had made both of them sick. Hunger and thirst had jealously driven out other appetites.

The need for water, Hendley knew, would soon be more urgent even than food. In all this brown, empty land they had found no stream, no spring, no sign of water. They had started out with a two-week supply in the canteens provided them, but in the first days, unused to the weight of the desert sun, they had drunk too generously. It was only near the end of the first week that the necessity for strict rationing became painfully clear. There were mountains to the west, creeping infinitesimally higher each day, and Hendley reasoned that there must be water flowing down from the mountains, but he wondered, the strange new ache piercing to his heart as he held Ann more closely, if they would find it in time.

Really free, he thought. It was true. But this freedom was demanding. They were unprepared for it. Nothing in their lives before had equipped them to cope with it. Everything had always been provided—all the needs of mind and body. The social machine had taken care of its moving parts. Could they manage even to exist cut off from the benevolent machine?

There must have been others banished from the cities. Hendley could not guess how many. Had any of them learned to survive? Where would they have gone? Instinctively toward the mountains, as he had, in search of shelter from the sun and life-giving water? Had they begun to regret their transgressions against the Organization, to wish themselves back in the familiar routine of work and reward, the accepted pursuit of an artificial freedom? Had any of them crawled back to the cities, begging to be taken in?

The last question made Hendley start. A new chill crawled up his spine. Was that part of the punishment—reducing the criminal to abject surrender? Did

they expect Hendley and Ann to return to the towers as beggars, shaken by cold and tormented by hunger, ready to accept any terms of rehabilitation?

Angrily he shook his head. There was an insidious weakness in the direction of his thoughts, a half-wish concealed behind the resentment. But the wish was for her, the woman whose body he covered with his own, feeling the bones more sharply outlined, seeing the pinched look of hunger around her mouth....

He waited until the sun's first rays lanced through the concrete fingers projecting along the eastern horizon. Very carefully he eased out of Ann's tight grasp, trying not to wake her. She stirred once, then fell back into the drugged sleep of exhaustion.

For an hour Hendley labored—doggedly, frustrated and tormented by his repeated failures—until at last a puff of smoke drifted from the small pile of powdery leaves and wood pulp he had fashioned. Perspiring in spite of the early morning chill, his face flushed with anxiety, he fanned the first sparks into a steady glow. At length, adding fresh twigs and seeing firm tongues of flame lick around them, he sat back on his heels and luxuriated in a sense of triumph. He had made his first fire.

There was powdered coffee remaining from their meager rations. When he had heated water he carried a cup of the steaming beverage to where Ann lay. He woke her gently.

"We may not have a feast," he said. "But there's hot coffee, and a fire to take away the chill. Come on over closer to it."

Her happy exclamations of surprise and praise amply rewarded all his effort. He felt a slow surge of pride as he watched her crouch close to the fire, warming her hands and face and thin, shivering body. She drank too deeply of the coffee, scalding her tongue, but when she looked up at him, choking and smiling, her drawn face was flushed with color.

There were some things he could do, he thought with renewed determination. There would be other small animals he could trap, perhaps more of them nearer the mountains. There would be a fire each night to give them warmth and to cook their food. He would have to learn to strip the hides of any usefully covered animals so that the hides could be saved and

warmer clothes eventually made from them. He would have to learn a lot of things. It would not be easy—but he had made a beginning.

"That was marvelous of you," Ann said, reaching for him with one slender hand, pulling him down beside her.

When he let the fire die later, the sun was well above the horizon and the air was warming.

He felt, at the last, a sense of being cheated.

They had reached the foothills ascending in steps to the great purple vastness of the mountains when Ann collapsed for the first time. Hendley was sure that water could not be far away. The last drop had been squeezed from their canteens two days before. Yet even this conviction of being so close to the desperately needed water did not affect him as much as the tracks on which they had stumbled.

They were human tracks—feet soled in what seemed to suggest smooth leather. The tracks had crossed their path a day before they reached the foothills. They had eagerly followed the apparently purposeful line of the footprints—not a single set of prints, but many, indicating that the trail was frequently used. Their own progress was slow all that day, held back by Ann's weakness. In his excitement over the discovery of the freshly made tracks Hendley had found an untapped core of strength and stamina, and not until Ann stumbled twice late in the afternoon did he become sharply aware of how weak and sick she was.

He had insisted on stopping immediately. Hurriedly he built a fire, before which he made her rest while he scoured the area for fresh roots. From these and the juice squeezed from green plants he made a kind of thick, stringy soup. During the night, in spite of his own deep fatigue, he slept little, watching over Ann anxiously. She kept waking, and what sleep she had was disturbed and restless. He waited several hours after dawn, putting down her objections, before they sat off again.

Early in the afternoon she collapsed. "I'm sorry, Hendley," she kept repeating as he lifted her and carried her into the shade of an outcropping of

rock. "I'm sorry."

He brushed her words aside almost brusquely. "What have you to be sorry for? I've been pushing you too hard—I should have realized. I haven't let you rest."

"It's not that. If only I had some water...."

Hating to leave her for long, he made quick forays through the remainder of the afternoon searching for some sign of water. The foothills were greener than the main desert plain—there had to be water not too far away. It must be there!

But, though he ranged farther each time, he found nothing, returning after each trip with a sharper fear.

Night again found him watching over her worriedly, listening to her dry, hacking cough. Her lips were cracked and swollen. He was vaguely surprised to find his own lips split so that one was bleeding.

And on his last scouting trip he had stumbled badly. A low grade had exhausted him. His strength was waning.

They could not live long without water. The human trail they had followed for two days must surely lead to help, to a source of food and water. But time was running out on them. Should he keep following the tracks, or strike out across the foothills, searching for a stream? He didn't know, and the uncertainty plagued him through the long night.

Falling into fitful sleep, he dreamed of a rushing mountain stream, clear and cold, frothing as it boiled over beds of rock, cold and sweet and nourishing...

In the morning Ann seemed stronger. They set off at an easy, careful pace. Hendley helped her when the way was steep, carrying her over the most difficult stretches. They climbed steadily, following the fresh trail. When she could go no farther, he lifted her across his shoulders and went on, laboring.

They made little progress. At noon he had to rest. Because the day was cloudy and cool, with a stiff cutting wind whining through the gullies and bending the grasses that covered the foothills. Hendley searched carefully for a sheltered cove. He knew they had gone almost as far as they could go.

Alone he might have struggled on for another day, perhaps more. But he would not leave her to save himself.

After a brief rest he made one more fruitless search for water. Exploring a ravine which looked promising, a slash across the hills once carved by a river but now dry, he was gone longer than he had intended. When he returned, he found Ann sprawled on the ground, only half-conscious.

They were absolutely alone in the vast, empty land. To the east now there was only an endless reach of denuded prairie. The towers of the city were no longer visible. The only sign of human existence other than themselves was the tauntingly recent trail they had been following. What men were these? Where did the tracks lead? How far?

He felt again the sense of being cheated, of a promise made, a hope nurtured, which could not be fulfilled.

Shortly after dusk he heard the buzz of an aircraft overhead, but he could not find it. This remote sign of life quickened no hope. The blind copters droning across the sky carried no one who could, or would, save them.

Ann came out of her delirium to stare at him. Her eyes were large, wide open, unexpectedly lucid. "You must go on without me," she said calmly. "You can make it without me."

He shook his head. "There is nothing without you."

"You could find help—come back for me."

"No, Ann," he said gently. "We have to face it. There is no help. And I won't leave you alone."

She stared at him for a long moment. He saw, peering closely, that her eyes were liquid with tears. "Are you sorry you came?" he asked, not knowing until the words were out what he was saying. "Would you go back?"

She seemed to gather strength for her reply, drawing from a worn, thin body a surprising vigor. Her eyes shone. "Never!" she cried.

He lay beside her on the ground near the fire and folded her into his arms. "Nor I," he said.

When, some time later, the fire began to die, the two figures bundled together before it did not stir. The fire slowly darkened, its orange glow

turning to gray ash, and then to black, obscuring the last feeble flicker....

15

Epilogue

So few of them survived, the hunter reflected. So few lasted long enough to be found. And of those who did, few were able to adapt to the rigors of the new life.

But the survivors were strong. The tribe was growing stronger all the time, larger and stronger and more skilled. While those in the cities were growing weaker.

Time, he thought, is on our side.

For a moment longer he gazed thoughtfully down at the two prone, wasted figures. The branches of a gnarled, twisted tree reached almost over their shelter. Absently, the hunter probed with his hand into one of the low-hanging branches to pluck one of the round fruits concealed among the waxen leaves. With strong white teeth he bit through the outer skin and sucked up the delicious juice. He scraped out all of the nourishing pulp with his teeth. When he had finished he tore the rubbery skin into strips and placed these in a pouch at his waist, except for one piece which he kept in his mouth to chew on.

Using a blanket, he repeated his earlier smoke signals, alternately smothering and exposing the fire he had raised on the coals of the old one. He worked patiently, whistling softly through his teeth.

The woman must have been very pretty, he mused.

The curling puffs of smoke climbed into the bright morning sky and scattered slowly before the wind. After several minutes the hunter desisted.

From a leather gourd he poured water into a crude, hand-shaped cup. He knelt beside the two strangers and, for the second time since his arrival, forced a little water between their cracked lips. The man was breathing well now, he noted. The woman had been much weaker, her heartbeat almost imperceptible. But with care she would live.

They had come a long way, he thought. The man, stronger, could have continued. That was important. Love and loyalty were always important. These two would be valuable additions to the tribe. And from them would come another generation, born to freedom, stronger and more adaptable than their parents. It was a pleasure to watch the children cope with the new world so easily, so naturally....

While the hunter was still engaged in caring for his two sick charges, the drone of an aircraft wove a thin thread of sound across the bright blue sky. Reaching the drifting smoke signals, the aircraft swung in slow circles, each one lower. It was a crude craft, lightweight and spindly looking, but very maneuverable.

The hunter glanced up. Banking low above him, the aircraft seemed to balance on one wingtip. From the windowed cabin the pilot waved. The hunter, smiling, returned the salute.

As the plane veered off toward the flat plain below, where it would be safe to land, the hunter rose. He began to search the area for materials from which to fashion a stretcher. It would take, he reckoned, a half hour for the pilot to reach him, another hour to transport the two strangers down to the aircraft. He set to work.

The man on the ground stirred and opened his eyes.

RIGID!

LOCKED!

ENSLAVED!

that was our Earth in 2200. East and West had merged at last, so there were no more wars, no more political differences.

Citizens everywhere could concentrate on working off their TAX DEBTS! If you were capable and industrious, you might be able to make freeman status for the last few years of your life.

No one questioned. No one spoke out. No one rebelled until one bright morning Citizen TRH-247 decided not to go to work—and worse than that, became desirous of a girl below his own classification!

Thus he made himself an outcast with the whole world against him and mere survival dependent on his wits, his daring, his strength.

THE SENTINEL STARS—a novel of our world run as the Bureau of Internal Revenue would run it!

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