

The Superstition Seeders

by Edward Wellen, 1919-2011

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Flaming and hissing, the jets tattooed the ground. In a chained reaction the spaceship came quiveringly alive but failed to rise.

In the control room, Van Gutyf saw that the captain's hand was avoiding the take-off key. He lifted an eyebrow but said nothing.

Captain Sy Barnett caught the lifting, a movement so slight he must have been looking for it. He smiled. Then he wiped the smile off and tuned in the spaceport channel.

Eyes splatted on the screen and stared at them inquiringly.

"Emergency!" Captain Burnett said, looking anxious. "Power failure. Please send take-off assistance."

The eyes blinked acknowledgment. And shortly six squat figures emerged from the maintenance shop and waddled in single file across the tarmac. Van saw as they neared that the combined lettering in lingua galactica on their uniforms spelled out MUANIK.

Captain Burnett frowned and began thumbing through his glossary, muttering, "Now what the blazes is *muanik*?"

Van had gone through the captain's glossary once, at the beginning of the trip. For him, once was enough. A word leaped to his lips. "Milkmaid."

"*Milkmaid!*? Now why the—"

"Take it easy, Captain, Van said, smiling. "I think another letter will be along in a moment."

And in a moment another K emerged from the maintenance shop, came puffing up, and squeezed between U and A.

"Ah!" Captain Burnett said. "That's more like it. *Mechanic.*"

M gave a sign and they halted. Together they opened their toolboxes and brought out what seemed to be baseball bats. M set fire to his and put his torch to the other torches. M gave another sign and they formed a wide circle around the spaceship. Together they jabbed the fiery tips at the ground, let out their breath in one long hissing, and leaped into the air.

Captain Burnett motioned Van down and himself settled back in his seat. Hiding the move from the eyes on the screen he flicked the take-off key. The craft rose on a gaseous column. The eyes vanished.

When his plumbing unknicked and the green feeling passed, Van said quietly, "All right, Captain. I'm getting the idea. That was mimetic magic back there. On Whuud it was contagious magic. On Nyllu it was—"

"Yes, yes," Captain Burnett said impatiently, slicing the edge of his hand down. He sighed gloomily. "So now you see what Man is up against. I ask you," he said plaintively, "what if we really had been in a spot back there? I'll tell you. Those jumping jacks would up and down until the snap went out of their tendons—and we'd still be grounded. That—and worse—has happened, because superstition has started up wherever Man touches." And he glared at Van.

"Hum." Van stared puzzledly back. "But I've seen nothing about it in the news. And there's certainly nothing about it in the guidebooks."

"Of course not," the captain said angrily. "No use panicking the home planets."

"Hum." Van Gutyf squinted thoughtfully. "What started it?"

"You mean *who*," The captain looked grim. "Some beings are deliberately seeding superstitions."

Van leaned toward him.

“Some? Can’t you say right out?”

“No,” the captain said sharply. Then in a gentler tone, “Not that I wouldn’t like to, but we simply don’t know.” He grimaced. “It’s maddening. They always leave just before we come or come just after we leave. That’s not chance. That’s timing. They don’t want us to know who they are.”

Van waited quietly while the captain saw to the taping of their course, then he said wonderingly, “What’s in it for the seeders?”

“Why are they doing it?” The captain laughed bitterly. “Again, we simply don’t know.” A pause and then, “But we can guess. They’ve seen Man’s ambitious drive. Apparently they’re putting themselves out to stymie us. They may live in dread of our monopolizing the prospecting and trading and colonizing in their sector. They may dream of invading ours. Whatever motivates them, they’re undermining whole social structures with floodwaters of superstition—all over space transportation and communication are collapsing.”

“Hum.” Van’s body tensed. He braced his mind.

“Now you know how things stand,” the captain said briskly, “will you track down the seeders?”

Van waited until he felt he had his vocal cords in hand, like reins, then said, “But why me?”

Captain Burnett scowled. “If you can’t answer that yourself,” he said harshly, “then maybe you’re not the man we want, after all.” He turned away pointedly and ran his eye needlessly over the controls.

Van smiled sadly. “I was hoping to escape this moment. I’ve seen it coming. Ever since winning the four-dimensional jigsaw puzzle contest I’ve known there was more at stake than this free trip around the galaxy.”

The captain smiled sadistically. “Just when did you first realize it?”

Van said quietly, “You know well enough—when I found myself alone in this tub with you.”

The captain laughed. “And you anticipating a luxury liner with lovely stewardesses?” He laughed again. “Your face sure kerplunked!”

Van flushed slightly, though smiling ruefully at himself.

The captain sobered. He said incisively, “Young man, there *aren’t* any more luxury liners with lovely stewardesses. There are only a few thousand tubs like this. That’s what the seeders have done to our merchant fleet already.” He fell silent a moment, brooding, then snapped out of it; “All right, you tell me. Why *you?*”

Van made a deprecating gesture. “I’m not falsely modest. I succeeded in mentally piecing together that devilish puzzle, with all those eyes watching and with the time ticking away. Nominally, Doozy-Wheat sponsored the quiz program, but the Galactic Council must’ve been behind it—hunting someone having that twist of mind and the ability to use it under pressure. That’s why me.”

“Right.” The captain’s voice was toneless. “And I have the authority to ask you to set up and head a bureau to find the seeders.”

Van pursed his lips. “Executive work? That kind of thing isn’t my cup of tea.”

The captain examined his nails. “Oh, I wouldn’t blame you for not wanting to take it on. There’d be powerful forces opposing you. For one, there’d be a pressure

group of all those who can't see slow death for the fast buck—those who'd welcome superstition because they'd capitalize on it."

"Hum. You mean like that salesman we saw on Kviir—where they believe a ghost has to count all the leaves on a tree growing in front of a home before it can pass and enter—the one selling a sap serum to make trees non-deciduous and ghost-proof homes through the winter?"

"Yes. And you'd be up against the most powerful force of all—Time. According to our trend analysts, Man will have to pull back to the home planets for good—to keep from drowning in superstition—if we don't stop the seeding by 2828.

"That wouldn't be giving the bureau much leeway."

"No, it wouldn't," the captain said levelly. "Well?"

"I'll do my best," Van said quietly.

"Put it there, son," the captain said with feeling. "You're now Chief of the D.S.X."

Through an aura of exaltation Van heard himself saying, "D.S.X.? What do the letters stand for?"

The captain smiled. "The whole thing is so hush-hush you'll probably never learn that."

They put in at Xivve to refuel. Then, with obliging natives hollering threateningly at the sky to frighten it into giving way, they took off for Terra.

That was at the beginning of the year 2811.

Chapter I

In the latter half of 2811, Tyl Waqa, nominally a trader from Alphecca IV, whizzed into Syrma II's atmosphere. He found not enough trading to make his stay worthwhile. The Syrmans were too busy vying with each other for possession of *tovhs*. Still, Tyl didn't whiz right out. It seemed he didn't care as much about trading as about the Syrmans and their ways.

Tyl himself had a way of putting the Syrmans at their ease. He became something of a fixture, establishing rapport through the medium of easy-going good nature, and one of his new friends filled him in on the *tovh* craze, since he seemed to want to dowse the why of it.

Tovhs were a strange sort of gem. There were only so many of them. There was no mining of them on Syrma II or on any planet within the Galactic Council's knowing. A spaceship had landed and the gems had appeared.

Syrma II's memory of the visitors was vague. It included no knowledge of where they came from and next to nothing about their traits. The one thing that stood out was the visitors' parting gesture.

On corkscrewing away from Syrma II, they scattered over the planet thousands upon thousands of the gems, each set in a leaden circlet.

And almost at once a thick stand of superstition sprouted around the theme that anyone wearing a circlet would become lightheaded and in a tingling of ecstasy would set out on deeds of daring he feared to dream of before.

But the craze really took hold as a result of what happened to Afzevi, the most famous mummer of Syrma II.

By sheer force of personality, Afzevi had reached the summit of his profession. He made the dramaturgic Syrman stage a setting for his dazzling. This wasn't easy. Syrman players interrupt their acting at every moment to utter a disclaimer of identity with the part—"This be not I." For should death take an actor while he played a part he would lose his own identity and be that part in the land of spirits. But in spite of this stepping in and out of character, this disconcerting oscillating between the real and the make-believe, Afzevi made a lasting impression on audience and critics alike.

He attained the height of his ambition. He was to leave his imprint in the pavement fronting the Actors' Academy.

While waiting for the plastic to reach the proper consistency, Afzevi in high spirits cavorted about, diverting the idolizing gathering. He felt full of bounce and, without much urging from the photographers and to the warming accompaniment of feminine shrieking, he scrambled up, up, up, until he was posturing atop a towering plastic likeness of himself.

He balanced there, carelessly.

Encircling his neck was a collar holding a *tovh* gem. Afzevi had received it from an unknown admirer who had evidently fallen for his trait profile. With it came a note saying it was something new—a charm, proof against falling from high places.

Tovhs had only lately come to light on Syrma II, but already were lodestones for lore. What he had heard tell of their potency must have impressed Afzevi. He grew more and more unheeding.

Now he twisted his face into what the roaring throng at once recognized as a mimicking of his arch-rival, Dichyl. And his spellbound audience leaped from laugh to gasp as it followed his capering.

He wasn't himself—or he was very much himself. Ordinarily he shrouded the sparkling talisman so the likes of Dichyl would not share the virtue of it. Now he allowed himself to unveil it.

The throng cheered madly.

And right then the *tovh's* reflecting of sun glare blinded him. He missed his footing and hurtled down, down, down. And before you could say "This be not I," his twisted face impressed itself in the firming plastic.

But, sure enough, the *tovh* at his neck remained unbroken. Truly, it was proof against falling.

Tyl nodded gravely.

After a respectful silence, Tyl's friend said, "There were those who suspected Dichyl of being the unknown admirer." But he went on to say that if such was the case Dichyl had won a hollow triumph; as long as he lived he was never able to top Afzevi and he went chapfallen to meet his other self in the land of spirits.

Tyl had listened with such flattering attention that when he spoke of wanting to own a *tovh* his friend volunteered to help him, though it was no light undertaking. There was a continuing demand for the stones—all Syrma II sought to find in the *tovh* the means of emulating Afzevi, of attaining his lightness of spirit and the selfless glory of his ending—and they were hard to get even though they changed owners rather rapidly.

Tyl's friend tipped him off to a private sale. It took some spirited bidding, but Tyl at last had his *tovh*.

It was a perfect gem, not a scratch on it. But finding the weight and the matte hue of the lead setting not to his liking, he had a jeweler pry the stone loose and attach it to his gleaming phosphor-silicon charm bracelet. As soon as he began wearing the *tovh* a strange thing happened. His very character seemed to change. He felt curiously buoyant, but with an underlying iceberg bulk of unease.

He tried to tell himself he was imagining things, and it worked at first. Then he grew aware of an eerie compulsive action he couldn't pass off as something he was imagining.

He found himself saluting when there was no one and nothing to salute. His hand would slowly rise to his temple. At the touch he would become angrily conscious of the hand and would snap it down smartly. It gave him a creepy feeling.

It was proving embarrassing too. His Syrman friends kept badgering him about the chilling formality they caught him practicing. They hinted that his mask of easygoing good nature was slipping, baring some ulterior motive.

It was the *tovh*'s doing, though Tyl shrank from admitting it. He used to smile at superstition. Now he had to believe there might be something in it or believe he was unbalancing.

He wondered if his *tovh* was the one that had led to Afzevi's plummeting and if it would ecstatize him, too, to a fall. At least, he told himself wryly, if he fell he would make his mark, though he was far from having the heavy Syrman build. He caught himself saluting as if honoring Afzevi's memory.

All at once he shivered. His spine was an icicle.

* * * * *

He saluted. "Tyl Waqa, DSX Agent 504, reporting, sir."

Chief Van Gutyf returned the salute. The specter of the seeders had left shadows under the penetrating eyes that now regarded Tyl. He said quietly, "Welcome back, Tyl."

Tyl saluted. "Thank you, sir."

The Chief returned the salute. He waited gravely.

Tyl said, somewhat haltingly, "Sorry I'm late, sir. I made amazingly good time from Syrma II to Terra, but that cross-town traffic..."

"That's all right, Tyl, the Chief said quietly. "I understand."

Tyl saluted. "Thank you, sir."

The Chief returned the salute. He waited gravely.

Tyl said, "Sir, I understand you wish me to amplify my report." He saluted.

The Chief automatically started to salute back. The Chief's face suddenly purpled. With a loud fist the Chief struck his desk, and an object resting on the desk—a leaden circlet with a gouge in its outer rim—rumbled. "Take the damn thing off!" he shouted.

"Sorry, sir." Flustered, Tyl fumbled with the catch of his charm bracelet. The bracelet slipped out of his over-anxious hands.

It began to fall, then thought better of it. For a moment it wavered like the bubble of a spirit level in a palsy-shaking hand, then lifted slowly.

It came to rest against the ceiling with a brassy ring. Tyl leaped up and grabbed it.

He tried to look casual. "That's what I spoke of in my report, sir."

"Hum." The Chief brooded for a moment. "Well, we'll let the labsters worry about how it does what it does. What did you find out about the visitors who scattered the *tovhs*?"

Tyl shook his head regretfully. "Not much, sir. Upright, mammal with a trace of reptile. That's all the Syrmans know about them. And the Syrmans never got a close look at the spaceship. It hovered fairly high—a wolf in wool pack, you might say." He smiled tentatively.

"Hum."

Tyl withdrew the smile. He said, "Each visitor wore a belt." He pointed to the leaden circlet on the Chief's desk. "With the *tovh* in it, of course. To reach the ground the visitor dove out of the air-lock. To return to the ship the visitor swam up."

"Hum. That all?"

"Yes, sir."

"Hum." The Chief prodded the circlet with a forefinger.

Tyl cleared his throat and the Chief glanced up. "Might I venture a bit of guessing, sir?"

"Hum."

"Thank you, sir. Well, the run of the visitors must be about as much lighter than I am, as I am than a Syrman. The *tovh* must counterbalance the weight of the belt and the one wearing it. And so—"

"Hum. Then why didn't the belts they scattered take off, when there was nothing to counterbalance, instead of falling to the ground?"

"That bothered me, too, sir."

"Hum."

"Then I reasoned it out—more lead or smaller *tovh*."

"Hum. Reason out why they scattered the things?"

"That's what I was coming to sir."

"Hum."

"Sir, I believe these beings are the ones seeding superstition. They knew the Syrmans would try to emulate their use of the belts. They knew the Syrmans' memory of the stone's properties would decay to superstition. And they knew that as the lead wore away with use and the belt got lighter and lighter the eerie sensation would grow more intense and reinforce the superstition."

"Hum. How'd they know the Syrmans wouldn't respond by experimenting, analyzing?"

"The Syrman mind doesn't work that way, sir. It jumps to conclusions. It can't take shorter hops and skips."

"Hum." The Chief glanced up quizzically. "You don't call it experimenting when Syrmans wear the belts around their necks?"

Tyl smiled. "Sir, have you ever seen a Syrman? That's as far as they can squeeze into it."

"Hum."

“Experimenting, sir? Why, no Syrman ever dreamed of removing the *tovh* from its setting. The jeweler thought I was crazy.”

“Hum. Hold on. Why didn’t the *tovh* float away when he pried it out?”

“Sir, I think *tovh* is anti-grav only when it touches solid elements.”

“Hum. Then why didn’t your bracelet take off as soon as he set the *tovh* in it, the way it took off just now?”

“I was wearing it, sir, while he attached the *tovh*. I wear it always. It’s a kind of a—*a habit*.”

“Hum.”

“It wasn’t until I had the amusing thought that the *tovh* might really be bringing some sort of influence to bear...”

He broke off with a slight shudder. It relieved him to see the Chief glance up with a sympathetic look. He went on. “It was then I first removed the bracelet and learned what was making me salute.”

“Hum.”

“Well,” Tyl said, after an awkward hiatus, “we have one thing to go on, sir.”

“Hum?”

“The lightness of the visitors.”

“Hum.”

“Well, don’t you see, sir? That should give us a lead to the kind of planet they come from.”

The Chief said, very calmly, “All we have to do is find the right star.”

“Yes, sir.”

The Chief struck his desk; the leaden circlet rumbled. “Damn it, man, we don’t even know their name! Finding that out is the minimum goal I’ve set the DSX for the coming year... All right, Tyl, you can leave.”

“Yes, sir.” Tyl turned and made for the door.

The Chief waited for Tyl to reach it, then barked, “Tyl!” Tyl spun around in alarm. The Chief made thunderclouds of his brows. “Aren’t you forgetting something?”

Tyl gazed around the room. “Why, I don’t think so, sir,” he said worriedly.

“We can’t let discipline go lax,” the Chief said, smiling. “You forgot to salute before leaving.”

Chapter II

In 2812, Izuivo’ Idvuv, otherwise DSX Agent 1499, sped to Tarazed VI. He burned with zeal to get at his job—investigating why a being from Kitalpha I was languishing in jail there. He knew only that the charge arose out of conflicting superstitions.

It agitated him to learn he might just as well have taken his time getting there. The Tarazedd were celebrating one of their two Overlap Weeks. Affairs of state had to wait—a shocking state of affairs.

Overlap Weeks are the great holidays of the Tarazedd. The males hibernate, the females estivate. But, luckily for the running on of the race, there’s one common

waking period at the ending of estivating and the beginning of hibernating, and there's another at the ending of hibernating and the beginning of estivating. Happy, happy Overlap Weeks.

But even when this particular Overlap Week came to an end, Izuivo' seemed to make no headway. The halls of the governing body re-opened, but the male clerks he showed his credentials to smilingly but stubbornly refused to understand *lingua galactka*.

He set out to learn their language. By the time he mastered it the next Overlap Week had come and gone. The halls of the governing body re-opened, but the female clerks he showed his credentials to refused to understand him. They were, however, he had to admit, very smiling and regretful.

Grimly, he set out to learn the *females'* language. It wasn't in him to simply doze away the days until the male administration returned. And though the waiting was taking its toll of his nerves it paid off. His twitching with impatience turned to trembling with excitement.

Studying the two tongues, he found they had only one word in common. And delving into earlier editions of Tarazedd dictionaries he further found this one word had sprung into use at the same time as the upwelling of superstition.

The word was *crevbnod*. To the females it meant "dallying with a handsome male." To the males it meant "dallying with a beautiful female."

Izuivo considered the shortness of the Overlap periods. *Crevbnod*, connoting the frittering away of productive time in mere teasing play, seemed a curious concept for Tarazed VI. What's more, the dictionaries were strangely bashful about the etymology of *crevbnod*.

He felt he was on the spoor of something.

Another Overlap Week had passed, and again the halls of the governing body re-opened. At Izuivo's first uttering in their tongue the male clerks were quick to understand him. And they were quite willing to lend their aid when he told them he was looking into the detaining of the Kitalphan.

They expedited him from office to office.

The going seemed almost too frictionless. But Izuivo' was too glad to be moving to let that give him pause.

And in nearly no time he was facing Customs Commissioner Ozdvovopsh. Ozdvovopsh deplored the misunderstanding. Tarazed VI and Kitalpha I were a natural trading set-up. Each had what the other wanted.

But Kitalphans were shunning this planet, now that the Tarazedd had begun enforcing the collecting of tolls. Not that Kitalphans were pikers. The one now languishing had proved most ungrudging—in all save the paying of tolls. Toll suddenly seemed to cause Kitalphans to shiver with superstitious dread. Ozdvovopsh smiled superciliously.

Izuivo' asked why the Tarazedd wouldn't waive the tolls.

Ozdvovopsh shuddered. That wasn't a thing to even dream of. Not that Tarazedd were grasping. As Izuivo' must have seen for himself, they were most understanding and least demanding—in all save the collecting of tolls.

They knew allowing visitors to come and go without paying a toll would affront Fortune. Finding Its darlings spurning Its offerings, Fortune, nursing wounded feelings, would from then on hold back further blessings. Ozdvovopsh laughed

nervously. Why, not so many cycles ago his forebears had been too forbearing. They had a chance once to get their fill of—something. It so overwhelmed them they imagined it would last forever and they lightly *crev*—What he meant was—Well, it wasn't the kind of thing one spoke of to outsiders.

He was glad to shunt the subject and readily agreed to let Izuivo' go through the customs records.

Izuivo' waded back to the time *crevbnod* became a word. He found what he was looking for. Only one spaceship had landed around that time and stayed a full cycle. "Landed" bothered him until he found its opposite number in the writing on the female half of the page meant "hovered."

Trading had gone on between ship and planet for the full of the cycle. But anyone narrowing his eyes could see it for a long thin trickle that would have made one good spurt. The ship's complement had lots of time for giving new meaning to the name they went by—*Crevbnod*.

But anything that might have hinted at where the ship came from and where it was going was missing.

That was as far as he could go in that direction.

He got leave to see the Kitalphan.

* * * * *

She called herself Benx. He couldn't take his eyes off her. She turned on him a disarming look that armed him at once. Though he'd made up his mind not to take sides, he saw at once he was soft on her.

And that made him hard on her. He was almost rude in his questioning. The quiet dignity of her listening and answering shamed him, but he didn't let up. If anything, his attitude hardened.

Benx told him of having heard that once the then Leading Light of her folk welcomed a strange spaceship. The visitors—no, she didn't know their name, it had become taboo—invited the Leading Light to come aboard.

There they would give him a custom-built model of the wonderful belts they wore, absolutely free. They asked him his weight and with some pride he called it up to them.

On time, two visitors touched down to swim him up to the hovering ship. For a minute it seemed the escorting pair would be unable to separate him from the ground. He was plump to begin with and at the moment he was lumpy with coin he meant to press on the visitors anyway, free offer notwithstanding.

But with much straining they tugged him aloft. The captain ceremoniously belted him. The Leading Light beamed. And right away he wanted to make some trial dives. The captain ushered him back to the airlock. The Leading Light put out.

"And so it is the way with us that we never carry sums to pay for any mode of transport. For any other purpose, yes."

Weeks after Izuivo' had drawn all he could from Benx he found reasons to go on seeing her. The sky began flaking again. Overlap Week passed. It took longer to break away from one female clerk and move on to the next in line, but he kept running the clinging gauntlet to get passes to prison. Yet when he reached Benx

he would find himself hiding his feelings by rawhiding hers and he would feel at one and the same time sinister and gauche.

But at last he yielded himself to the promptings of his heart.

By now the Chief must know Izuivo' was adding nothing new to the reports he'd already sent in. Soon he'd be rushing away on another job. He'd never see Benx again. She'd languish here the rest of her life. She'd never give in to the Tarazedd and they too were uncompromising.

During the coming Overlap Week it'd be a cinch to help her escape. Not only that, but they could steal into the Customs offices and strip everything dealing with Benx from the files, leaving behind not only no prisoner but no case.

He slicked up and got a pass. He had to slick up again by the time he reached Benx. Couldn't those females be more businesslike? Still, it was flattering they thought of him crevbnod -wise. It emboldened him to broach his plan to Benx.

She listened in silence and then thanked him. But she gently noed. It was too thrilling here. She wanted to stay and see how it would all turn out.

Mumbling to himself, he left.

Returning to his hotel through drifts of zebra-striped snow, he cooled down; it was up to him to make it come out right.

Adroitly he played up to Customs Commissioner Casuovopsh. When he sensed she was ready he drew up an understanding. She signed, agreeing to let Fortune decide the case. Izuivo' relaxed, but not for long.

Casuovopsh told him this came under the heading of policy-making. He'd have to get her male counterpart, Ozdvovopsh, to countersign.

During Overlap Week Izuivo worked on Benx. The guards were off, celebrating, and he had a free hand.

"But it won't mean you're paying a toll. You're betting. That's always exciting, waiting to see how your bet turns out."

"Yes! Yes!" Her grape-bloomed eyes were shining.

Ozdvovopsh was hardest to sell of all.

"I'll countersign," he said after long hesitating, after weeks of putting off and putting off making up his mind. Izuivo' checked his joy as Ozdvovopsh added, "*If you guarantee Fortune favors us.*"

He was edgy, awaiting Overlap, and Izuivo' didn't utter what sprang to his lips. Izuivo' considered, then nodded.

But when the time came—after Overlap—he was wondering if he was doing right. Then Benx appeared and he left off wondering.

He asked her to hand him a 42.3-*petaap* note, the amount of the levy, and she did so expectantly. He fumbled dexterously behind his back, then thrust out both fists.

At first he thought Casuovopsh was balking at the last minute, even though she knew of the guarantee. But she was only taking her time. After deliberating with her staff, and even consulting the guards who'd led Benx to her office, she chose the left.

Right!

He was proud of Benx. Her face never flickered. She'd lost, but she'd won the right to go free at once. And he asked her to go with him.

She turned him down kindly, the bloom gone from her eyes.

He was too numb to notice or care that Casuovopsh had slipped him a 6.25-*petaap* note. But after a bit he saw he had a good thing, one that in time might make him forget Benx. He'd become an entrepreneur in his own right.

So there'd be no conflict of interests, he broke all links with the DSX and cast his lot among the Tarazedd.

Though Benx hadn't yet left, she was making arrangements to go. But when Fortune continued against all the rules of chance to favor the Tarazedd, no matter which hand they chose, and Izuivo', who acted as Betting Commissioner for the rapidly reviving Tarazed VI-Kitalpha I trade, continued to get his cut, Benx came to regard him as the Tarazedd did, with superstitious awe. And she stayed on and married him.

He knew she married him mainly to pluck the secret of his telekinetic power. And fearing to lose her once she had it he resolved firmly never to let her winkle it out.

By the time she did—learning he palmed a note of his own so either hand was right—she was too fond of him to leave.

* * * * *

The chief taped his thinking-aloud and played it back, over and over, superimposing the new thinking-aloud it evoked. The result was a conversation with himself.

"Hum, now we're a shade nearer a make. *Crevbnod*."

"We know they're beings of—"

"Or able to take the form of—"

"At least two sexes."

"And their M.O. is shaping up. Boils down to doing something to excite wonder."

"Hum. Seems all beings are superstition-prone. It only takes a little seeding to trigger the predisposing dark forces in the shifting cloud-shapes of living matter."

"Hum. 'The dark forces in the shifting cloud-shapes of living matter.'"

"Hum. Something we have to watch out for. Take this chap Izuivo'. Doing a good job, of a sort, getting trading going again, I mean, but he's made us tread on a few toes. The Purists are sore at us for generating new superstitions while investigating old. And the Galactic Culture people—"

"Hum. Galactic Culture. Always makes me think of yogurt or acidophilus."

"—want us to leave it to them to set things right, which means to let them set things wrong their own way."

"Hum. Another thing. Why doesn't the scatter diagram show a perfect functional relationship?"

"Hum. Yes, what about those planets where no *Crevbnod* has ever been, yet where superstition has sprung up?"

"Hum. Better spot-check those ornery dots."

"Hum," he chorused.

Chapter III

In 2814, DSX Agent 817 touched Cernpure III. One whiff of the cloying atmosphere and he determined to get this over with fast. One squint at the dark woods encircling the rundown spaceport hostel and he determined to get this over with faster. One earful of a weird moaning tendriling the dusk and he was ready to turn back right now.

He checked in and demanded of the manager where he might find the Terran José Jmenuje. The manager took five paces, which brought him around the desk and to the doorway. He paused there a long, long time as if in deep, deep thought or deep, deep sleep.

Through the sounds of the spacebus refueling and reprovisioning, 817 heard faintly the weird moaning and felt cold. The night showed streaks of white dust, as though a moth had brushed its wings against the sky.

The manager stood dreaming.

Even though 817 had expected this, only one thing leashed his impatience—an odd feeling that the manager had died and that snapping at him would collapse him to a handful of dust. But the manager came to life. A giant step took him outside and he pointed west. 817 saw dimly an opening in the horror of darkness.

“That path will lead you to José.”

The way looked no more inviting in the dim light of dawn, when the manager pointed it out again. 817 had slept little. He eyed his bags doubtfully.

“Is it far?”

“It’s a good walk. I’ll send your bags after you.”

817 halted at the opening for a longing look back at the looming mass of the spacebus, then plunged into the woods.

He grew aware of the moaning. It waxed and waned as the windings of the way led him on a sort of paper chase, with pieces of sunlight for scents. Twice the moaning fell away altogether, but each time when he believed it had ended for good it began again. He went on and on. The scents were evanescent and, weary as he was, he spurred shanks’ mare on. Night fell. And all at once the moaning grew somewhat louder, nearer.

It came from a large house sitting calmly where the path exploded. A man rested on the porch, his feet on the railing, his mouth to a gleaming object that seemed to be pumping air into his cheeks.

José Jmenuje, he presumed.

Then the man saw 817 and the moaning took a lilted turn, as if to hasten or at least lighten 817’s coming.

817 reined in with a sigh. Soberly he looked the man over. The man took the gleaming instrument from his mouth and the moaning ended. They introduced themselves.

José followed 817’s eyes. “A saxophone.”

“Oh, yes.”

“Don’t you think it has a much richer tone here than on Terra?”

“Oh, yes.”

“Always wanted to play one when I was young, but somehow never found the time. I’m making up for it now. I’m carrying a thematic composition to its logical

conclusion. Not only do I never repeat a melodic phrase within the piece, I play the piece once—and never again.”

“Oh, yes?”

“But rest. You’ve come a long way.”

817 sank gratefully. His belly growled.

“Dolo!” José called.

817 heard five quick steps and a smiling female was leaning out of the doorway. She stood frozen in a seeming trance for a good while, then at last thawed out of it.

“Another setting, my dear,” José said. “Mr. Naimu is staying.”

She nodded, looked at 817 warmly, and withdrew. And from time to time after the meal, while he and José were talking, he glimpsed the smiling female and about a dozen youngsters, all lively—but all statuing every five paces, figures on an urn.

817 caught himself half-surrendering to he didn’t know what—the body-and soul-satisfying meal, the pollinated night with a fantastic minaret-like structure thrusting at the sky showing above the trees, or the strong repose of José. He got down to cases.

“My chief doesn’t like us to generalize,” he found himself confessing, “but I can’t help thinking of the Konnehuras of Mirac XII. They hold that the accumulating past depletes the future. You can’t convince them time is a never-emptying grail. They’re afraid to use it up. And at certain hours all, as one, stop moving—to hold time still. But that has a philosophical root, of course, while—”

“Of course.”

“—while what the natives do here has, I understand, a superstitious root.”

José smiled, but for a moment 817 thought he saw in José’s eyes deep waters as of a never-emptying cup of sorrow. “You understand right.” And José began talking.

One by one, years ago, the Terrans had abandoned their trading posts here, giving Cernpure III up as a bad job. The natives (not yet superstitious) simply didn’t care about Progress. José was the only Terran remaining. He was the only one who had had a hope of making things hum.

His hope was this: If he could sell the natives on *kantui*-lichen he would close a circuit. He would be bartering the *geis*-berry of Cernpure III for the *wiwequi*-seed of Cernpure II, the *wiwequi*-seed of Cernpure II for the *kantui*-lichen of Cernpure I, and the *kantui*-lichen of Cernpure I for the *geis*-berry of Cernpure III.

On the other hand, there were never enough *geis*-berries to meet the demand; the natives were quite satisfied to raise only enough to meet their own needs.

He had put his digits in one to-one reciprocal correspondence and considered his twin problems. And after a little the digits had slid and meshed in a self-congratulating handshake.

He told the natives each of them had a soul. And he told them the soul was a frail and faltering thing. Live were his words as he told them of the soul passing through shadowy forests of evil. And they felt the foxfirescent eyes following it, a lone truth braving wolf-packs of lies. And their eyes brimmed, pitying the poor soul toddling along, seeing it so real they almost cried out to warn it of pitfalls besetting it and false paths betraying it.

And seeing them weep he so far forgot himself as to weep too.

But he didn't forget to tell them they needed *kantui*-lichen. It would fortify the soul in its journeying—and give them the incentive to harvest *geis*-berry crops bumper to bumper.

He timed the first harvest close, waiting for the last *geis*-berry to ripen and fall tinkling. A spell of searing weather was upon the land. Unless his yield reached without delay the refrigerating hold of his craft, which was a day's march away, it would spoil. Days were yestering fast. But the *geis*-berries tintinnabulated their coda in good time.

He quickly rounded up bearers and loaded them down. It was a gladdening sight—the line of melodiously laden bearers tapering xylophonically into the distance.

And his tread expressed the rhythm in his blood as he led off. He marched through the wood counting cadence and his profit. It took a while for him to notice he was marching through the wood all alone.

There was no jangling but that of his nerves, and that was a tocsin. He backtracked, speeding up as he heard the murmuring of natives.

He nearly tripped over the first of the reclining figures. The murmuring ended and they rose. Without a word, he stepped off again through the wood.

As he lifted his foot for the sixth step the burdens stopped chiming. He turned. The bearers were again reclining.

And so it went. Every five paces the bearers sank for a long count. His pleading and threatening moved them, but not physically. They were sorry, they said feelingly. And at last they would emit a sigh and rise and carry on. But every five paces they stopped and reclined.

On the fifth day he could no longer buoy himself up with his dream of profit. He sank down and sponged his brow dejectedly. The air was almost a membrane, a drumhead for the heat to beat upon. They would never make it in time now, even if the bearers were suddenly to change their strange behavior and lope without halting. Already the *geis*-berries had lost their fresh tinkle.

Not that it mattered now, but to still a dully throbbing curiosity, he asked the natives why. Why were they forever taking five?

Why, they told him, they were giving their souls—their poor souls toddling along—time to catch up.

He cursed, though what—their, himself, the breaks, the universe—he didn't know. Not wanting to lose all control in front of them he lit out blindly.

Little by little he quieted and there came to him deep in the woods a kind of peace. And he found his bearings and returned. And he sat with them, giving his soul time to catch up. And he had done so ever since.

817 looked around with a start. José had drawled them into dawn. The minaret-like spire starked against the rising sun. It seemed troublingly familiar.

José said, yawning, "Time we turned in. I'll show you where to bed down."

But 817 was staring at the spire. And in a blinding flash of insight he saw it as the nose of the spacebus. For a moment he couldn't speak, then—"The spaceport's only a few hundred yards away?"

"Why, yes. But—"

“Blast that manager!” He glanced at his watch. “If I cut across I’ll make the bus before it takes off—and have time to spare.”

And speeding the parting he beelined for the spire.

A moaning followed in his wake. Athematic, indeed! And he smiled as he found himself counterpointing the moaning with the tinkling of *geis*-berries as he brushed past the bushes thronging the wood. The smile deepened. He wouldn’t have to suffer through a wait for the next bus, after all.

But soon the smile faded. The sounding of *geis*-berries shimmered the air and dizzied the mind and he found it hard to keep the spire steady.

In nearing the spire he saw it less and less for the trees. And then he saw it not at all. And with it no longer beckoning he grew more wobbly.

All at once he realized he was repeating one run of notes over and over and saw he was bumping his way around and around a *geis*-berry bush. Gravely he shook his head at the bush. Good old José wouldn’t like that one. Not at all athematic.

Laughing foolishly, he wondered if he would ever find his way out. He waved a finger at an imaginary native of Cernpure II and said wisely, “I know what you want *geis*-berriesh for, you rashcal.

The airlock was just hissing shut when he burst from the wood and into the gnomon-shadow of the spacebus.

The hissing stopped and a dark face thrust out. “Wanna get cindered? Oh, it’s you, Mr. Naimu. Better hurry. We can hold up take-off only five minutes. Got a tight schedule to keep, you know.”

He knew. His head cleared fast. He ran across the field.

He ignored the manager’s pleasant greeting. “Hand over my bags.” Then he unbent and smiled forgivingly. He might even tip the manager a boxtop. Boxtops had become a prized medium of exchange on Earth. Someday the manager might stir himself enough to send for a premium and 817 would be doing his bit to spur trading. “It’s working out all right that you forgot to send them after me.”

“Forgot?” The manager glanced at his calendar. “Didn’t you pass them? Why, they must be a fifth of the way to José’s already.”

* * * * *

“Hum. Good. Now the Purists and the Galactic Culture people”—the Chief made a sour face—“will be busy wrangling over means of dealing with *Terran* superstition-seeding.”

“Hum. And that leaves the DSX to focus on the *Crevbnod* menace.”

“Hum. Remind myself to ask 817 if he’s bringing back any *geis*-berries.”

He suddenly smiled at himself. He really needed nothing of the sort. He was already high. Optimism intoxicated him. The DSX was doing its job, even though it had to work with an ever-pursing budget. And after all, this was only 2814 and the deadline of 2828 was a safe way off.

But it wasn’t until 2822 that the DSX got any forwarder.

Chapter IV

In 2822, DSX Agent 249 landed on Capella I. He extruded himself and stretched gratefully. He was glad the trip had ended when it did. Any longer and he might have cracked up. The cramped quarters of his spacejeep cramped soul as well as body. In the last stage of the journey he had experienced a growing morbid fear of the hull closing in even more and wrapping him, like a straitjacket or metallic kimono. He had never hated in his life, but now he found himself hating the Crevbnod for cramping Man's economy. In particular he hated the Crevbnod for forcing the DSX to whittle to nothing the equipment allowance of its agents and reduce them to claustrophobia-inducing vehicles.

He heard a stirring in the brush and turned to face a group of beings staring at him placidly.

He took them to be members of the ruling class of Capella I and was just introducing himself to them when another being came up and rather fretfully pulled him away and, mumbling about creatures wandering loose and getting mixed in with *shulwijies*, led him out through a gate. He saw by the lettering on it that this was the zoo and he gathered that this curious creature was the keeper.

249 asked the keeper, "Where are you taking me?"

Absently the keeper said, "Don't annoy me. Can't you see I'm busy hunting the cage you got out of?"

Both stopped short. Somewhat shaken, the keeper peered at somewhat shaken 249. 249 managed to get out that he was one Uzmet Shih and belonged not to the zoo, admirable place though it seemed to be, but to the leading genus of Sol III.

The keeper hung on to his words and to him. But finally, frowning as though he hated to part with a seemingly sound specimen of anything, he turned him toward the heart of town and loose.

This ominous beginning left Uzmet feeling a bit out of sorts. But he regained his composure as he followed the open road. Town-ness increasingly smote his senses.

He had to regain his composure all over again once he lit town. Quick to spot a mark, beggars closed in around him, chanting for alms. There was no breaking out of the tightening noose of the mob. And massing behind the beggars, imitating their shambling gait and their supination in expectation of dispensation, came snickering youngsters, whose parents looked on and smiled fondly.

The beggars were a sorry lot, showing signs of suffering from palsy, granular kidney, optic atrophy, and encephalopathy. Their plight moved Uzmet and he doled out what he could. More came swarming, while those who had already received came back for more. He had to put a stop to this before he ran out of coins and had to dig into his precious boxtops. He had to come out openly.

He had to shout above their dinning. "Sorely afflicted," he said, looking around, "I'm here to help you." It troubled him to see them all at once gaze at him in terror—a superstitious terror that wanned their faces and drew their eyes as round as magic circles. He smiled reassuringly and spoke more softly, and they tilted their heads and leaned forward, italicizing their lending of auricles. "I'll bring you all the healing powers of Man—"

He suspended in surprise. A sibilance was passing through the gathering, which opened out from him like a widening iris. Parents took hold of children and

hurried them away. A beggar broke and ran. Others followed. When the dust settled Uzmet was standing alone in the heart of town.

He pondered his mission. Surely all Capella I wasn't benighted and benightmared, surely the officials trusted Man's science?

A mountain of officialdom came to Uzmet where he stood, even before he had a chance to go looking for it. It gratified him to see how reverently the officials examined his credentials, how tremblingly.

But just what, they wondered, by his leave, was his job?

Feeling suddenly benign and whimsical, he told them they might regard him as a sort of public eye.

This enlightened them and they looked meaningfully at one another. And two of them came forward and before he divined their aim blindfolded him—as they said, to keep him from dissipating his glance on the world at large or on those not standing in need of its healing power. It was a holy gift and he must not misuse it.

The way they took his figure of speech dumbfounded him. And because of this and because they put it so guilelessly and because he prided himself on being humble, he let them do it and made himself seem to take it with good grace.

The two officials, Axos and Znassos, guided him with their voices, a cappella, taking him, they told him, to the finest suite of the finest hotel.

But all the same, after stumbling along for a time and seeing he could hardly carry out his mission at this hobbling rate and in this stifling state, Uzmet sniffed at the idea. And to the dismay of Axos and Znassos he tore off the blindfold and found himself at the entrance to the zoo.

Axos and Znassos with some embarrassment apologized for taking a wrong turn. And quarreling with each other over which was to blame and with much show of consulting signs, they and a musing Uzmet wound back into town and up at a hotel. Uzmet was glad they gave him a fair-sized room. He opened the window wide.

Alone in his room, he flopped down on the pallet.

* * * * *

He wakened and listened for what had wakened him. He heard it—a barbaric yawping.

Through the window he could see across the dark town and he barely made out figures moving about in the zoo. Through his Doozy-Wheat spy-ring—he hated to think how many boxtops it had cost but he was glad he had it now—*shulwijies* leaped at him, the telescopic infra-red device picking up their body heat.

They kept lifting their faces to the sky and yawping. Then the moon came up and with a triumphant yawp they quieted.

Uzmet wakened again. It was hours later. The moon had gone. The sky was dark, an altar black with the fires of many burnt offerings.

Shulwijy yawping tore the air. No moon obeyed. And at last *shulwijy* voices gave out, trailing off into silent mourning.

Uzmet wakened a third time. Dawn lay on his eyelids. He listened and heard a breathing other than his own. Slowly he lifted his lids and saw gauzily a hand above his brow and in the hand a point of steel glinting. He opened his eyes wide.

Here was one of yesterday's beggars, attacking his sometime benefactor and would-be healer. He must be—in the classical idiom—plumb loco!

Uzmet's gaze transfixed him. The knife dropped, stabbed the floor, vibrated like a living factorial sign.

The beggar hid his face in his hands. "Don't look at me!"

Uzmet said pityingly, "Tell me why?"

And brokenly from the beggar came, "If you heal me, how shall I beg? If I can't beg, how shall I live?"

Uzmet sought to soothe the beggar, whose name was Xij. Uzmet admitted he had let his feelings over-ride his Chief's admonishing—to locate the roots of superstition and leave to others the rooting out. As for his healing glance, that was wholly a misunderstanding. Xij had nothing to dread.

Xij's blue-gummed smile beggared description. To keep from bursting with gratitude he chose to tell—better yet, show—what he knew of the beginnings of Capellan superstitions. Uzmet dressed swiftly and went with him.

Axos and Znassos lay in wait outside. They greeted him warmly—if anything, a bit too warmly, what with all the surreptitious prodding and probing accompanying their questions about his well-being.

They would have passed Xij by with only dirty looks but he murmured to them. And Uzmet caught their cries of delight, "Ah, nothing to dread! Nothing to dread!" though Axos and Znassos tried to cover these with clinkings that were if anything too generous. And they waved Uzmet and the beggar fond farewell.

Two corpuscles, Uzmet and Xij oozed away from the heart of town.

Word seemed to have gone out. Snickering youngsters took off after them.

It moved Uzmet that Xij didn't turn on those tormenting him. "It's noble of you not to mind.

"Mind? That's how *I* learned this trade."

They moved on in silence as the dwellings sparsed and the youngsters fell away. As zoo-ness increasingly smote his senses Uzmet tried to ease himself out of Xij's friendly hold. But the hold tightened in token of even firmer friendliness.

Well, he was nearing his spacejeep at the same time. Sanctuary.

They passed through the gate at feeding time. The keeper glanced up from throwing an *alivi* down the maw of a *tebk* and dovetailed gazes with Uzmet. And he raised his voice above the cavernous echoing of the *alivi*'s relishing of the *tebk*'s parasitic growths and said, "Now don't you go getting yourself mixed in with them there *shulwijies*."

Uzmet, his own gaze searching for his craft, felt following him the keeper's gaze, brimming with longing to take possession of this strange animal.

"What made him say that?" Xij was staring magic circles.

"Why, my craft happened to set down in ah, *that* clump! ... And I came out among the *shulwijies*."

"How is it you landed there of all the places on this planet?" Xij let go of molten lead. "You *have* powers!"

"Who wants to harm you?" Uzmet smiled benevolently. His conscience made him add, "Even if it were true, which it isn't, that I have supernatural powers."

Xij disbelievingly averted his face.

Uzmet stole a glance through his spy-ring at his craft. Through interstices of the foliage the spacejeep showed symptoms of disease. Splotches of ceramic skin lay bare where glaze was missing. Someone had chipped at the thick coating, as if hoping to enter and/or damage the craft. But at the moment the tampering itself and not the why was what mattered.

In his first seething, Uzmet felt tempted to scruple no more. If these Capellans insisted on being serving-men, handing supernatural powers to him on a platter, why scorn the chance to invoke their superstitious fear of these powers to put them in their place?

But the image of his Chief blazed in his mind, reminding that superstition was the enemy. And remorse at once he turned to Xij.

“Oh, come now, what makes this such a terrifying coincidence?”

“As if you don’t know!”

“I don’t.”

“Really?”

“I swear by—What does one swear by here?”

“One’s wen.”

“I swear by my wen.” His conscience didn’t make him add he owned no wen.

“We—ell.” And Xij, his wanting to believe overmastering his wanting to be leaving, slowly lowered his guard.

Uzmet smiled to himself and turned his attention to the *shulwijies*, who seemed too lethargic to turn theirs to him. They’d make fitting mascots for zombies, he thought.

The keeper came up, staring still at Uzmet.

To swerve the gaze Uzmet said, “They’ve plumped out amazingly since yesterday. What do you feed them?”

“Nothing.”

“*Nothing?*”

“Used to try feeding them all kinds of food. They won’t touch a thing. Each of them crazier than the others.”

Uzmet thought how to translate “You can lead a horse to water—” but it came out a ruin, “Joy horse water water horse need,” so he skipped it. Instead he asked, “How do they live? Do they metabolize sunlight? Air?”

“I’m afraid we’re not much on physiology,” the keeper said. His tone said they were much on a much loftier level.

“Well, where’d they spring from?”

Xij opened his mouth but the keeper forestalled him.

“They came, before my time, with some visiting ship.” And from what the keeper went on to say Uzmet gathered that the visitors had hovered here and asked for leave to dump a load of what the Capellans heard them call *shulwijies*. The beasts were overrunning the visitors’ home planet but the visitors were too softhearted to exterminate them and were taking this way of getting shut of them. The Capellans protested: they didn’t want the beasts to multiply and overrun *this* planet. The visitors assured them these were all of the same sex. “And I’ll have to admit we’ve never seen them mating. But something’s wrong,” the keeper said glowering, “because no matter how many of them we sacrifice their number stays the same.”

Uzmet frowned. "You sacrifice them?"

Xij had been sulking, as if he felt they were leaving him out of it. Now his eyes brightened and his mouth opened.

"Of course," the keeper said. "I'll get to that after a spell. But first—"

Xij mumbled, "Pish—"

"But first," the keeper said firmly, "let me tell it the way it happened." And he told Uzmet that the visitors left behind to repay the Capellans for taking on the beasts a number of amulets—each a leaden circlet with a gem set in it. And the Capellans soon had cause to shout blessings after the visitants. For many of them came down with disease and the visitants had sworn by their wens that the amulets had the power of carrying disease away. The Rx was to pass an amulet on, letting it make the rounds of the ailing and the possibly ailing until it became saturated with the disease—at which point the amulet would automatically soar out into space.

Uzmet nodded grimly. This was *Crevbnod* doing, all right. Handling meant wear, in time lessening the lead enough for the *tovh* to bear it away. And handling kept the vicious circling bullroaring on, for lead rubbing off on the hands contaminated food and led to poisoning—ay, and to the need for more rubbing of amulets.

The whole thing would've ended when the amulets ran out, for though the Capellans were able to mine lead and fashion new circlets they couldn't replace the gems. But someone said that there might be another way: what might not go up might well go down. And that was where the *shulwijies* came in.

And here the keeper broke off and glared at Xij.

Pretending not to notice that he was drawing the notice of others with the clinking, Xij counted out a number of coins. He crossed to a slot machine that Uzmet only now saw and fed it. It regurgitated a small pig of lead.

He hefted it and scowled.

"Making them smaller and smaller."

"You know our lead is petering out," the keeper said reprovingly. "Well, I suppose you want a *shulwijy*?"

Xij opened his mouth. Without waiting for an answer the keeper entered the high-fenced enclosure and took hold of a *shulwijy*. He was too dim-sighted to make head or tail of the beast at first and had a time leading it out.

Xij took it over. He held out the pig. "Here," he said ungraciously.

The keeper took the pig and rubbed it, though he asided to Uzmet that he couldn't say how much good it really did. Disease still saddled them—he himself had a touch of it, and just glance at that beggar. But you had to agree the miraculous maintaining of the *shulwijy* count was a sure sign of *something*.

Xij hopped impatiently, jingling, until the keeper finally handed back the little ingot. Then he motioned to Uzmet and started off, the *shulwijy* plodding until he gadded it into eagerness with the pig.

When they were out of ear-shot of the keeper, though Uzmet's back still felt within eye-shot, Xij said sullenly, "I was going to tell you all that."

"Goes without saying," Uzmet said soothingly. "But you didn't let him tell me what part the *shulwijy* plays in your super—your beliefs."

Xij smiled reminiscently. He grew blithe. “Better mind your footing. You can trip and—”

Endorsing which, the going toughened as the town taffied out that road they trod. The sun poised its glint overhead when they came to a hole in the ground, seemingly augered to infinity. A phalanx of Capellans waited at the rim. Their dull eyes gleamed when they saw the lead, and they togetherd around Xij. Tremblingly each of them fondled the lead.

The *shulwiyjy* turned its eyes trustingly on Xij as he manipulated the pig into a horseshoe-shaped collar and fitted it around the beast’s jowls.

Xij patted the *shulwiyjy* lovingly, and it was heart-breakingly clear to Uzmet that there was something worth saving in Xij’s people and—he silently defied the image of his Chief—if he could work to that end he would. Xij gave the beast another pat, one that put it into the pit.

After long long listening, a hollow *barathrum!* of bethuddled beast.

The watching Capellans sighed up a breeze, then turned and dotted the landscape back toward town.

* * * * *

Trying to contain himself, Uzmet said, “The lead would have fallen of its own weight. Why did you shove the *shulwiyjy* too?”

Xij explained it away. The *shulwiyjy* had to go—partly as a magical ingredient because of its visitant associations, partly as ballast (though after what Uzmet had just said it seemed a rather weak reason), but mostly as the first flesh to sop up any disease that might seep out of the lead.

“Why did you take of your few coins and buy that pig of lead, and why if you fear healing did you handle it?”

Xij said weightily, “One must do as most do.” He made sure they were alone and smiled scapegraciously. “Besides, they reward such doings many times over. And as for the handling—” and in grandiloquent silence he peeled off transparent gloves—“A trick of the trade.”

A floating kidney of a cloud cast its shadow over them and Xij suddenly shivered. He gazed townward and said, “We’d better get indoors before it rains. Are you coming?”

Uzmet hesitated.

“To tell the truth,” Xij said, “I want to get back before darkness falls and the howling of the *shulwijies* for their missing begins. Our wise ones say the howling makes the spirit of the missing materialize and that is the way the *shulwijies* maintain their numbers. Strange tracks appear and disappear along this road, as if the lost *shulwiyjy* was materializing by halves. No one goes wandering when the *shulwijies* howl.”

“All the same, I think I’ll stay a while.”

Xij opened his mouth, shut it, shook his head, and left.

He was a dot when Uzmet forced himself to focus his spy-ring upon the *shulwiyjy*’s remains. What he saw astonished him.

The beast was whole and sound. The last of the lead was vanishing into its mouth. It stood ruminating and spitting out impurities.

And Uzmet saw as in a lightning flash a vision of *shulwijies* chomping the glaze of his craft—the *lead* glaze, extra nutritious, no doubt, with the cosmic radiation that had altered its properties.

Drops puddled a great grayness around him and wrinkled it as if they were dark thoughts. He zipped up and waited. The rain stopped and clammy darkness closed down. Then from pit and zoo yawping reached him, ending on a note of triumph as the moon rose.

The *shulwijy* moved. It leaped from one thin ledge to a higher until it was out of the pit. And leaving groups of imprints—hind feet before forefeet—far apart, it bounded amazingly away.

Uzmet sloshed after it for a moment, then followed it with the spy-ring. At the zoo, with a lazy liquid motion, it lifted lightly over the high enclosure. Uzmet pitted his feet against the mud.

The moon was long gone and the *shulwijies* were at their yawping again when Uzmet reached the zoo and broke in. His craft opened to his coded tapping. Its innards were intact. He grabbed a crowbar and braved the *shulwijy* din.

He jimmied the vending machine and stowed all but one pig of lead in his craft. That one he used to lure a still yawping *shulwijy* aboard. He gave thanks that its drooling oiled its hoarseness.

It was dawning when he squeezed out to shoo the other *shulwijies* away. He was ready to blast off. But he hesitated to squeeze inside again. It was crowded in there. Altogether too crowded. With a sinking heart he remembered the journey in. The journey out would be twice as bad. Could he take it?

He broke out in a sweat. The keeper, not seeing the gate was open, was trying to unlock it and let in Axos and Znassos and Xij. Xij saw Uzmet and hailed him.

With a *shulwijy*-class leap Uzmet made it to his craft. Before closing down the hatch he rose to wave farewell. But he saw them closing in and he resumed his seat and zoomed into the curdling Milky Way.

* * * * *

“Hum. Now we’re getting somewhere. I feel sorry for Uzmet, of course. But they say he’ll get over yawping like a *shulwijy*.”

“Hum. That yawping twice a night shows the *shulwijy* is cocked to herald two moons.”

“Hum. Don’t be so sure, Could be two crossings of one moon.”

“Hum. Well, anyway, the labsters have worked out from the *shulwijy*’s body structure the gravitational pull of its native planet, and from its juices the chemical make-up—”

“At one stage of its evolution at least.”

“—of its native seas, and from its spectral reactions the type of sun it normally blinked at—Class S.”

“Hum. S for Smack. What’s the whole of that mnemonic again, the one for remembering the sequence of classes of suns?”

“Hum. Ah. O,B,A,F,G,K,M,R,N,S. *Oh, Be A Fine Girl, Kiss Me Right Now. Smack!*”

“Harrumph. Well, now we know the what of what we’re hunting. Enough time and box-tops and we’ll learn the where.”

“Hum. Ambiguous, that Smack. Kiss? Or Slap?—Miss Jaxin.”

“Yes, sir?”

“Please step into my office.”

“Yes, sir.”

Click, click, click, click, click. “Yes, sir?”

“Oh, Be A Fine Girl, Kiss Me Right Now.”

Smack!

Chapter V

In 2825, Ubrem Ogg, DSX Agent 1999, landed on Eta Normae II and primly picked his way across the pocked landing field. At first he affected not to hear the shrilling of the adrobots.

But one adrobot by its dignifiedly modulated tones caught his ear. Though a competing adrobot was trying to jam its message, it was bravely telling in a stiffly decorous style the manifold virtues of Ergggerrr’s Custom Tailoring.

Yes, it would be fitting, Ogg thought, before going about his sizing up of *Crevbnod* sowing on this planet, to buy a suit of native weave and cut. It would make him stand out less.

And disdainfully ignoring the cajoling and threatening of the competing adrobot, which to judge by its coarse manner obviously represented an inferior product, he stepped into Ergggerrr’s adrobot. Armor closed around him and he gazed boredly through a slit at monotonously streaking landscape.

A sudden jolt shivered the landscape. The adrobot of the rival outfit had overtaken them and was trying to hijack Ogg. In the ensuing running battle Ergggerrr’s adrobot sustained several more jarring hits. But it gave as good as it got and in the end sent the foe limping away.

Then it rattled into a friendly service station to replace a missing screw. A mechrobot turned screws on a lathe until it came up with one that would fit snugly. And then the adrobot was again rolling smoothly, the mechrobot looking after it neon with satisfaction.

There was no more trouble; the adrobot delivered Ogg safely. With a series of flourishes the master tailor himself, Narlebb Ergggerrr, produced a ball of twine, laid off the distance from the Adam’s apple of Ogg to the belly button of Ogg, snipped the twine, scribbled upon a tag, and with another bit of string tied the tag to the length he had snipped. Meanwhile his apprentices were following suit and in no time at all a string of strings representing the saliences of Ogg’s anatomy fluttered off to the cutting room. And soon Ogg was trying on the suit.

Through the apprentices’ mistaking several of the pieces of string tying the tags to the pieces of string that were measurements, for the pieces of string that were measurements, he was in at one ear and out at one elbow. Still, as that sort of thing seemed to be the prevailing style, he wasn’t too embarrassingly aware of standing out, and he paid up and left, sure it was worth every hard-earned boxtop it cost.

The blare and glare of traffic told him what the main line of work was. All sorts of charlatans were availing themselves of adrobots. "More quacks than Macdonald's farm," Ogg muttered, or thought he muttered—in the blasting that was going on he couldn't be sure.

His new suit would have made him look inconspicuous enough if he were moving in a throng. But he had the walk almost to himself. He halted. It sounded as if somewhere a bomb had gone off.

He stopped wondering how far away it was. There was peril nearer at hand. He moved as fast as was in keeping with the maintaining of his dignity. It wasn't quite fast enough. He got out of adrobot crossfire and away with a whole skin, but a stray shot burned away part of his suit.

He would have to repair to Ergggerrr's. He strode rapidly back toward the shop, his cheeks flaming though he felt a breeze.

He stopped in shocked dismay.

There was no Ergggerrr's. An explosion had gutted the shop. In the smoking debris stood Ergggerrr, his hands wringing sweat. Apprentices moved around in varying degrees of daze, picking up charred shreds of cloth and carefully putting them down again. An old assistant was running madly about, whipping string from place to place, measuring distances on the air.

Ergggerrr at length managed to concentrate on what Ogg, with a great summoning of patience, was saying. But he indicated the shreds and shrugged. He said unfeelingly, "You'll have to wait until we raid Their warehouse."

Ogg inflated dangerously. It was a conspiracy to rob him of his dignity. He glared around at the scene.

Two apprentices were netting the mad assistant. All at once his eyes went sane.

"I'm all right," he said wearily, and he sank to a pile of rubble. He gazed around and took in Ogg's plight. He hesitated, then reached into an inside pocket. There sounded a fusillade of crackling that made everyone else duck. His ancient hand drew out a coeval parchment. He unfolded it, making another fusillade, and regarded it for a moment. His eyes streamed silver threads. Then he held it out to Ergggerrr. "You might make do with this," he said in a shaking voice.

Ergggerrr frowned at the curlicues covering it.

Ogg said quickly, "I don't care whether the design matches exactly so long as it does the job."

Ergggerrr seemed disappointed in Ogg. But he shrugged and waved the piece to an apprentice, who took it and Ogg's suit and vanished.

Waiting, Ogg poked morosely at the litter. His probing brought to light a painting.

Ergggerrr seized it with a glad cry and sank to his knees. "His Highness," he breathed, and he gently wiped it.

"Your ruler?" Ogg stared at the subject of the painting. "Odd shape his head has." Quite conspicuous.

"A nice shape." Ergggerrr swung his body between the painting and Ogg.

"That's what I meant. I never saw a head with such a nice long peak." Much too conspicuous to be in good taste.

"Really?" Ergggerrr brought the painting around again. "Yes, our Director was one of the first heads of state to come to a point and I believe he still holds the

record. Ah, yes, it takes me way back. I can remember seeing casts of His Highness squirming in his crib, his tiny fists reaching up to his crown—a gilded circlet with a strange flashing stone. And I can recall marveling at the tides of the throbbing fontanel and wondering at the first beginnings of the peaking at the bregma. Ah, the changes I’ve seen! No more mass producing! Everything custom built! Some have seen better days, so they say.” He nodded at the ancient assistant, who was sitting silently amid the rubble as if reminiscing, “But these times suit me.” He broke off as an apprentice returned bearing Ogg’s outfit. “Ah, we’ve mended it, I see, and it looks as good as new, if I say so myself.”

Ogg hastily donned it and gratefully paid up. As he stepped self-possessedly out through what would have been the door an adrobot streaked past, greeting him with a burst of humiliating laughter. “An Ergggerrr suit! Ergggerrr suits are lousy suits!” Ogg reddened and stepped hurriedly back inside.

At Ogg’s distraught urging, Ergggerrr kindly put off the raid he and his helpers were planning, so the Ergggerrr adrobot might deliver Ogg to the landing field.

* * * * *

“I warn you, Ogg, I’m taping this in case I have to bring you up on charges.”

“Yes, Chief. Quite proper, Chief.”

“Hum. Now why did you end your mission before you even began it? You know how few we are and how big the job is. Ogg, I was counting on you.”

“Sorry to let the DSX down, sir. But it was quite impossible for me to stay there and maintain my dignity. Sir, I hope you understand I wasn’t thinking of myself as an individual. I was thinking of myself as representing Man.”

“Do *you* understand that Time is breathing down Man’s neck? Everywhere we keep running into dead ends. And here, just when you had a promising lead—I’m talking about that crown jewel; it sounds to me like a *tovh*—you had to abandon it. And why? Because you were afraid of bruising your feelings! Ogg, Ogg, Ogg! Hum. But recriminating gets us nowhere. Isn’t there anything—*anything*—you can add?”

“Only that the place is swarming with those who fatten on superstition. More adrobots huckster for the pseudo-sciences than for any other sort of product or service. Phrenologists head the list. This one is ‘by appointment to’ one Director, that one is ‘by appointment to’ another Director. Every court has its Royal Phrenologist to keep tab on the Heir Apparent’s pate and let the Royal Bureau of Standards know when it reaches its peak.”

“Hum... I’m waiting.”

“Sir, I’ve told you all I know.”

“Hum.”

“I’m sorry, sir, to have to say I didn’t stay to find out more. But that place is too much for me. I’d rather face a firing squad.”

“Hum. Stand up and turn around,” Y-yes, sir.

Crackle, crackle.

“Hum. Move it over in front of the decoder.”

“Yes, *sir!*”

Crackle, crackle, crackle.

“Hum. Better bend over a bit.”

Crackle.

“Hum. Now don’t stir. I’m turning on the scanner. Hum. Nothing. Ah, well. You can straight—”

“Please forgive delay. Had to orient to upside-down reading matter, will now begin to translate—”

“Hold it, Ogg!”

“—Message.

“News format, masthead reads quote These Times unquote. Item reads quote gvizfuz city comma five-oh-fourday comma twenty-eight-oh-one period press release from space visitors colon quote we are happy to answer your many kind requests and tell you what we think of your culture period but first we want to thank the welcoming committee dash a truly noble group of great scientists dash for showing us about period peace be upon professors avyafss comma idginaa comma and dybdivv exclamation mark new paragraph

What we have seen has impressed us very much comma but nothing more than your sterling character period your character is such that we know we would affront you should we try to hold back our few unflattering but well-meaning words of advice period new paragraph it seems to us you are losing sight of the real value of measure period new paragraph

Let us explain period at best comma measure is an almost thing period absolute accuracy is impossible when you use one variable to measure another variable comma one thing of moving atoms to measure another thing of moving atoms period so far as you persist in doing this comma so far do you lose sight of the real value of measure period new paragraph

Now the epit comma your basic unit of linear measure comma derives from that heroic ruler of old comma director lhimnyl one comma being the great circle distance from his glabella to his lambda period generations of interlocking directorates had produced by his time a standard model director and this has so inured you to measure as measure that when director lhimnyl seven got caught in an adrobot hassle you did not change the unit to conform to the new contour of his skull period herein lies your error period new paragraph

As a director in essence uniquely symbolizes the unity of his people comma so the unit of measure should while he rules be the sign of his reign comma all the more so as he rules more by example than by authority period new paragraph

We foresee that compensating for such renovating by slowing down or speeding up your handling of existing measuring rods may seem excruciatingly unsatisfying period and we foresee there may come times when comma having just related the epit of one realm to the epits of the others comma you find the installing of a new ruler forces you to begin all over again period but you will no longer fall under the spell of the illusion of precision period new paragraph

Easy lies the head that wears the crown exclamation point and as a means to that end we are meting out lightweight infant-size crowns period unquote, end of message.”

“Hum. Okay, Ogg, relax.”

Crackle.

“Hum. Why would the *Crevbnod* want to foul up the planet’s system of measure?”

“Sir, it’s merely a way of making mischief.”

“Hum. I have a feeling it’s more than that. There’s something they’re trying to cover up. Hum. Take off your pants—”

“Chief!”

“—and turn ’em inside out and hold ’em up to the decoder.”

“Yes, sir!”

Crackle, crack, crackle.

“Item reads quote gvizfuz city comma five-oh-fourday comma twentyeight-oh-one period press release from head astrophysicist dybdivv colon quote our mysterious visitors from space have let slip that their ship is on its maiden voyage and that this is its first stopping place period i comma dybdivv comma have taken a reading of the cosmic radiation the ship has passed through dash or vice versa period and knowing the distribution of cosmic radiation i have been able to compute how far the ship has come dash almost exactly two hundred parsecs period unquote. End of message.”

“Hum. Okay, Ogg, you can set the pants on my desk.”

“Yes, sir.”

Crackle.

“Hum. The *Crevbnod* press release was calculated to take the play from Dybdivv. That was the immediate effect. The long-range effect they were after was that Dybdivvs to come would give up trying to cope with the firmament in general and with *Crevbnod* origin in particular. When you’re dealing with astronomical distances and the smallest unit is off by even a fraction, the whole reckoning becomes meaningless. Hum. Miss Qhepu.”

“Yes, sir?”

“Please step into my office.

“Yes, sir.”

Click, click, click, click, click.

“Yes, sir?”

“Top priority, top secret. Tell Astromaps to spin Eta Normae II back to 405 day, 2801 and at the tip of a 200-parsec sweep out—give or take a parsec—show every Class S star having a Class Y planet. Get on it right away.

“Yes, sir.”

Click, click, dick, dick, dick.

“Hum. Fine job, Ogg. Ogg? Where are you?”

“Behind the decoder, sir.”

“Hum. You can go now. Well, what are you waiting for?”

“My pants, sir.”

“Hum. Here. But first let me take this parchment for the archives.”

Rip.

Chapter VI

In 2826, Ina Ibohutu, DSX Agent 1995, set careful toes on Nusakan IV. Out of sight, but occulting her mind, was Wyyku I.

Shortly after *Crevbnod* visitation, the Wyykui had begun exchanging dwellings posthaste, everyone moving around in a kind of Brownian jitter to keep his personal nemesis from knowing where to drop in on him. This proved so exhausting that all but realtors were getting ready to call a halt and put out a welcome mat for their nemeses, whatever fearful apparitions they might turn out to be. Then someone—all Wyyku I would have beaten a path to his door had it known where he lived—hit upon a simpler scheme. The Wyykui merely removed their house numbers, wrapped them up, and addressed them to other homes. As all these numbers crossed in the mail, the nemeses must have taken up haunting the dead-letter office, for they have never forwarded themselves.

In the chaos that was Wyyku I, Ina had failed to pick up the *Crevbnod* trail. True, the Chief hadn't blamed her, but she couldn't help feeling she'd made a mistake somewhere along the line. And this with the hands of Time a closing beak. And now a sudden silence as she entered the Nusakani spaceport waiting room nearly unnerved her. Finding she was the cynosure she looked to her bearing to see was she erring in any way.

She appeared to be in order. She glanced about shyly.

It seemed to her the silence grew somewhat menacing. They were watching her, waiting for her to do something. But *what?* Then she remembered that Nusakanis emit a continuous humming and talk by larding the humming with short and long silences, and she understood they were extending a friendly greeting.

She sighed in relief and intermitted the sigh to return the greeting, and they went back to their humming. She smiled. Somehow they were making her feel at home. And she segued into humming until she could break out the buzzer she had brought for talking with them.

The lodging she found with a family—a mother and the mother's father; the son and the husband were away—was pleasing to her too.

For that matter, the whole atmosphere of the planet was happy-go-lucky to the point of euphoria. Leading an unconventional life appeared to be a convention.

And yet a vague feeling of unease possessed Ina. Trying to pin it down was like trying to snare the shadow of a *pexalt*. She got no closer fix than that vague feeling. And as the days wore on and nothing out of the way happened, and as dreams of clock faces filled her nights, she concluded that because her job required her to trust least what seemed most correct she was mistaking shadow for substance.

And she gathered her belongings and asked Yugbit, the lady of the house, what was owing.

"011 *wulghdske*," Yugbit said smiling.

Ina stared at her aghast. "011? Haven't you made some mistake?" One *wulghdske* was worth four boxtops.

Yugbit unsmiled. "I've made no mistake."

"But—" The old grandfather, Vebenpobep, happened to be approaching and in his anxiety to be in on what was going on he broke into a walk. He silenced sharply to gain his breath and Ina's attention.

"Give her the 011 *wulghdske*," he said, winking.

"But 011 will hardly pay for the food I ate. 110 would be more like it. She forgot her end-around carry."

"Never mind. Give her 011 and let it go at that."

"I don't understand."

"Do it for Yugbit's sake."

"I still don't understand."

Vebenpobep gestured fatalistically. "It's unlucky to admit making a mistake." His manner livened and he began expandandanding on a favorite theme.

Yugbit strode out but Ina listened to the tale though she knew it was likely he was fetching it far from the truth. A wolf tone marred his humming and she didn't mind in the least how long his say lasted, the silences were so soothing.

According to Vebenpobep, at one time a chemachine hunting through all possible jugglings of molecules had come up with a drug. The chemachine proudly announced it as a panacea and leaped into production. But a statmachine proved by extrapolating that the chemachine's statistics made out the drug to be so effective the death rate would fall below zero. And the statmachine scornfully asked if that meant some dead would come to life. This humbled the chemachine. It admitted its mistake and not only destroyed what it had brewed but forbade itself to ever remember the formula.

And that would have been the end of the matter. But at that same time a strange spaceship was hovering in Nusakani skies.

Ina, who had been nodding drowsily, started and nodded most affirmatively for Vebenpobep to go on.

He looked hurt. He needed no encouraging.

He went on, after humming a while to teach her a lesson. A Nusakani reporter, Bledmirkt, saw the stranger he was interviewing stare soulfully into the night as if quivering to be arrowing home. Bledmirkt pneumatically braked his humming. He noted the line of gaze and asked the stranger if the latter's star was one of the—from the Nusakani point of view—formers of the constellation Ghozhus.

A considered hiatus, conveying mockery, was the only answer. Even so, the possibility made good copy and it went to press in a twinkling.

But Bledmirkt hadn't much of a beat, only a slight syncopation before eleven colleagues each reported observing a homesick stranger in an off guard moment. And there was an ancillary catch—each of them reported a different constellation as the target of longing.

At their last press conference the strangers begged the Nusakanis to forgive them. For security reasons they couldn't divulge their true point of origin. But they had simply been unable to resist having a bit of fun with the Nusakanis by seeming to give it away. It was a shock, but for the most part the Nusakanis took the revelation in good part. But Bledmirkt somewhat pompously offered to retract

his piece at once, perhaps hoping by doing this to label as mistakes too the flattering things he had said about the strangers.

But the strangers urged him not to. Would he mind a bit of parting advice? Not at all? Good! Well, then, it was unlucky to be too hasty in admitting a mistake.

Bledmirkt pressed them for a for instance.

They hummed and hawed but finally hinted that had the chemachine not recanted, the statmachine's extrapolation, as strange as it seemed, might really have come about.

The strangers left the Nusakanis brooding over the lost panacea. But the mood soon changed.

To eliminate rivalry, the Nusakanis had later consolidated all computing machines into one—the Factor. All went well for a time; then the Factor showed signs of dashing components. To maintain its integrity, the Factor couldn't admit the outward signs were mistakes. And mindful of the lost panacea, the Nusakanis never questioned the workings of the Factor. In fact, they were grateful to the Factor for making life more interesting.

Take this family. Vebenpobep's son-in-law, Feruflurud, had set out one day on his daily humdrum commuting to a nearby suburb. It would be some time before he came back. The Factor had honored his ticket as one to Nu Delphini IX.

As for Vebenpobep himself, he was taking things easy, having just got over a fatal disease.

"Fatal?" said Ina.

"How can I die when I haven't come into being? The Factor has told me there's no record of my birth."

"I see. And how has the Factor affected your grandson?"

For a moment she wondered what error she had made to throw Vebenpobep back into sullen humming. Then she realized it was the house vibrating. It was trembling to a rhythmic thudding in the street.

The sound stopped before that very house, and she saw troops dismount and each stand straight and stiff beside his spring-bottomed stilt. She trembled. What had she done wrong?

The door opened. There was a high thin humming and a tiny figure in dazzling uniform entered. A tiny frown crossed his tiny brow as he saw Ina. He nodded curtly to Vebenpobep, who stood at attention. Yugbit came into the room and gave a silence of surprise.

She rushed to meet the newcomer. She picked him up and hugged him. Then she held him out and looked him over.

"Another star!" she said and shook him fondly. Medals jangled. "And more of those things!"

"Put me down!"

Yugbit almost dropped him in her haste to obey.

Ina turned to Vebenpobep and hushed, "Who's he?"

Vebenpobep hushed back, "Usvernk-Kiluca. My grandson. Last year the Factor ordered him to active duty. Yugbit was only just weaning him. But of course it was no use arguing."

"I must rush," Usvernk-Kiluca was saying more kindly. "I don't want to keep my troops waiting. I just stopped by on the way to maneuvers."

And in a moment the house was vibrating to the army's pogoing away.

Ina wound up her secret mission by laying hands on copies of the contemporary pieces about the strangers and then once more she was asking Yugbit what was owing.

"11111001011 *wulghdske*." Yugbit said smiling.

The buzzer leaped in Ina's digits and she gripped it more firmly to keep from crying out. It was touching that Yugbit had a catch in her voice in time of parting, but after all!

"Here's your 11111001011 *wulghdske*," Ina said. And she handed 110 *wulghdske* to Yugbit and was on her way before Yugbit could count them and find Ina had made a mistake.

* * * * *

Ina leaned across the Chief's desk to hand the Chief a tear-sheet. "And here, sir, is a fostat showing a group of *Crevbnod* swimming up to their craft."

The Chief lowered his eyes to the fostat. "Hum. The flight pattern seems strangely familiar. Allowing for the wrying of a differing viewpoint, it has the gestalt of the constellation Cassiopeia."

"Why, of course!" Ina gazed at him warmly. "And now that you mention it, sir, part of Cassiopeia forms part of the Nusakanis' constellation Ghozhus—That's what Bledmirkt caught the first *Crevbnod* pining for."

"Hum. And as soon as the *Crevbnod* realized he'd given it away he told the others to seem to long for different spots."

"I just know you can straighten me out on this, sir. If they were trying so hard to cover up, why did they foolishly give it away by their flight pattern?"

"Hum. They didn't know they were giving it away. Look again at the fostat. The formation is too undisciplined to be deliberate. It must have been a collective Freudian slip."

Ina clapped delightedly, then sobered quickly. "Oh, forgive me, sir, but it's astonishing how you see to the heart of things."

"Harrumph." The Chief got up and moved to a huge ball with flickerings all over its surface and within. "Come over here, Miss Ibohutu, and have a look at this astromap."

Ina came smiling. "This sphere is the 200-parsec sweep out from Eta Normae II as of 405 day, 2801. Now, see all those glaring points of light?" Ina had to lean close to him. "Harrumph. Well, those are the Class S stars. We've been eliminating them one by one."

"It must be horribly Time-consuming," Ina said softly.

The Chief laughed shortly. "Know when that job would be done?"

"When, sir?"

They were touching.

"What?"

"When, sir?"

"When what? Oh, yes. In 3104."

"Oh, my!" Her shiver of alarm passed to him. "And the time limit is 2828!"

"Right. And thanks to you"—he spun the ball slowly, peering at the identifying code letters, and at last pointed dramatically to a pinpoint of light—"We'll make it."

Ina gasped. "You mean, sir?"

"Yes," the Chief said very quietly, "this is it."

Chapter VII

It was windy and dust swirled across the field. A youthful pilot brushed past, almost throwing the Chief off balance. The young pilot threw a preoccupied but friendly glance back. "Sorry, pop."

"These fresh kids!" Ina said hotly. She pressed more closely to the Chief.

"*These fresh kids* are doing Man's job," the Chief said quietly. He put an arm through Ina's. "Come, we'd better move."

They moved to the edge of the field and looked at the waiting space fleet. Somehow the Galactic Council's anti-*Crevbnod* crash program had scraped it together, fitting out each ship with a deathnium projector.

"How does it work?" Ina asked.

She seemed childlike in her wonder and the Chief smiled.

"Hum. Well, you know our labsters found out *tovh* is a biaxial crystal rich in anti-protons. It breaks the law of gravitation. And it reverses entropy—turns matter back to a state where more and more hangs on less and less. The increase of entropy of a system is a moving from a less probable to a more probable configuration. So miracles were more likely—the farther back, the likelier. That meant if we could harness *tovh* we could perform miracles. And then the astrophysicist Kontonku Owia came up with the equation $\phi = \sqrt{\pi^2 + e^2}$, as one popularizer has put it, the 'hypotenuse' of the 'triangle' of space generating the 'cone' of time."

Ina looked at him admiringly and he forgot that she had majored in math. He went on. "That equation paved the way for the deathnium projector, which transmits *tovh* characteristics to the other elements. It'll be a stereotaxic operation. All those ships will surround Omega Cassiopeia II and zero in the core of the planet." He sighed and fell silent.

"And then?"

"Hum? Well, no one knows for sure. Most of the brains on the project foresee a flooding of the *Crevbnod* by seemingly supernatural phenomena—water freezing over a fire, and the like—a flooding so overwhelming they'll sink into the sort of superstition *they've* seeded."

The take-off siren wailed warning and they moved into the blockhouse. They stood off to one side by themselves.

Ina gazed at the Chief wonderingly, "It's a great day for you—but you don't seem to be enjoying it."

He smiled. "You can get so used to an obstacle that its sudden ending is like the giving way of a prop."

She looked at him searchingly. "No, it's something more than that."

"You're right," he said quietly. "It's a feeling. I haven't worded it yet, but I'll try. It seems to me this is one of those turning points. Man comes upon a strange seed. He doesn't know into what sort of thing it will sprout. Something about it

throws a scare into him. But because he's Man he goes ahead and makes it germinate.

"Now here we have *tovh*. We don't really know what we're dealing with, what forces we'll loose. A few of the brains believe that planet may wrench itself out of our space-time matrix. Nearly all its substance—from the animal and vegetable life fuzzing its surface to the core itself—would vanish. Nearly all. Remains to be seen if wraiths of *Crevbnod* would be going on about their business on a ghost of a globe, haunting the old orbit and making that sector of space taboo. Hum. Let's talk of something else."

She pressed his arm sympathetically. Her eyes marveled at him. "All right, how do you remember and piece together so many things?"

He smiled. "Sometimes mnemonic devices help. For instance, *Oh, Be A Fine Girl, Kiss Me Right Now—*"

Jet tattooing drowned out the sound of the kiss.
