

Fireship

Joan D. Vinge

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We've had stories of cyborgs for decades in science fiction, but the subject is so full of possibilities that many fascinating tales remain to be told—especially when we consider the ever-more-startling capabilities of computers. What if a man's mind were to be linked with a sophisticated computer of the future? And what if that man were to become an outlaw?

Joan D. Vinge is one of the emerging stars of the late 1970s (her first story appeared in 1974). She won a Hugo Award in 1978 for her novelette "Eyes of Amber."

I really must've been drunk. Because boy, was I ever hung over... I woke up groaning out of a dream that I'd just had my head shrunk, and couldn't tell if it'd been a dream or not. I dragged my face up off the pillow, trying to see the clock on the bedside bar... the clocks, there were two of 'em. Funny, I only remembered one, last night. *Ohh. Last night—*

But what'd finally got me awake wasn't just the ringing in my ears: the viewphone was starting into "Starlight Serenade" for about the tenth time. Finally remembering where I was, sort of, I crawled back across the bed's two meters of jelly to the phone on the other side. I took a look at myself in the mirrored screen. And then I hit blank screen before I pressed the voice button. "Hello?" I said. It sounded like "Huh."

“Mr. Ring? Are you there? This is the lobby—” She was pretty, but she had a voice like disaster sirens.

I considered maybe dying, and mumbled something.

She looked relieved. “Visitors to see you, Mr. Ring.”

Confused warnings went off down in my mind: “Are they wearin’ uniforms?” It’s nice to be wanted, but not by the U.S. government.

“No, they’re not, sir.” She blinked at me. “Shall I send them up?”

“Ugh, no—” I waited for my head to fall off; no luck. “Uh, jus’ tell ’em I’ll be down soon.” *Give or take a couple of hours....*

“All right. Thank you, Mr. Ring.” The screen went blank, but her smile stayed behind. I wondered what she did in her spare time. I’d have to ask her, if I lived long enough. I lay back on the blue satin sheets, trying to decide whether to sit up or give up.

Sitting up won, and I pushed my feet over the edge of the bed onto the floor. They came down in a pile of cold, hard slippery things. I pulled myself up and leaned forward—

“Oh, geez—not again.” The floor around the bed was ankle-deep in money. Or in chips from the Hotel Xanadu’s casino, which was pretty much the same thing. And I couldn’t remember anything about last night. They’d done it to me again, Ring and that computer—gotten me so stinking drunk I was putty in their hands: Michael Yarrow, the all-day sucker. “Why do I put up with this?” I pressed my hands against my head, having answered my own stupid question. *Because you need them.* Besides, I couldn’t blame Ring; if I was blind drunk last night, so was he... except he was supposed to be in charge, and he’d let ETHANAC take over. “You promised, you promised you wouldn’t do this t’ me again! What if somebody noticed—”

But they weren’t even listening; I wasn’t plugged in. If I was gonna yell at myself, I might as well have an audience. Not that they’d listen; I was just the body around here... *Oh, knock off the self-pity: plug in and you’ll feel better.*

I fumbled around in the chips until I found the cord that was attached to ETHANAC’s bread-loaf-sized case on the floor beside the bed. I pulled the cord up and stuck it into the socket low on my

spine, felt the electric flow of the change start and spread, turning all my nerve endings into stars...

I stretched and shook my head until the static cleared, finishing Yarrow's almost obscene sigh of pleasure for him. The mental rat's nest of his hangover mercifully cleared out with the static, for which I was supremely grateful; even though there wasn't much we could do for his body: his bloodshot baby blues stared back at me forlornly from the phone mirror, half obscured by rumped brown hair, in a face the color of oatmeal. I don't like oatmeal. I looked away, grimacing, feeling Yarrow's indignation at his betrayal push up through my control again; I hate those mornings when I can't seem to wake up—*Damn it, is that any way to treat the body that's gotta carry you around?* ... be a sport, michael—even ETHANAC was butting in, flushed with his triumph at the gaming tables—let yourself enjoy life once in a while... *Enjoy life? Gettin' your own mind totally wiped, and then takin' advantage of it, ain't my idea of a good time...* all right, i know it took ten or twelve drinks to break down your inhibitions. but wasn't it worth it—?

I looked down again at the pile of chips around my feet, and felt a gloating recapitulation of last night's gambling spree overload my consciousness. I frowned, disgusted, and let Yarrow go on complaining for both of us. *Tryin' to break the bank, on neutral ground! Where anybody could've seen it, an' be half a million U.S. bucks richer for turning me in, by now! My God. I mean, just who the hell is waiting for us downstairs right now?* ... don't cause yourself unnecessary distress, if hew knew you were here, they would simply kick in the door and drag you away...

... *Why am I arguing with myself?* I reasserted and reintegrated, getting rid of the aggravating schizo conversations. Leaning forward, I drew the drapes and let in some daylight. Clouding over, just as predicted: This was the day of the Rain. I squinted out at the brick-red Martian sky, patterning with oppressive mud-colored clouds, and decided that if HEW ever caught up with me I'd have only myself to blame... me, myself, and I. *We are not amused.* Yarrow's hand picked up ETHANAC's suitcase obligingly: I stumbled off to the bathroom to make myself fit for human

company.

“In Xanadu”—according to Samuel Taylor Coleridge—“did Kubla Khan a stately pleasure dome decree: where Alph, the sacred river, ran through caverns measureless to man, down to a sunless sea.” The original may have existed only in Coleridge’s opium dreams, but here on Mars the dream has come true, thanks to the limitless funds and the boundless ego of Khorram Kabir. What dread secrets do Khorram Kabir and Kubla Khan share? The same initials, for one thing... But Kabir didn’t want the comparison to end there. Being the eccentric head of a multinational, multibillion-dollar financial empire, you could say he qualified as an emperor. But he wanted his own Xanadu; and like a true twenty-first-century mogul, he created one—and made certain it would pay.

Hence, the Xanadu, the pleasure dome extraordinary: luxury hotel, resort, spa—and gambling casino. The old me had never been a gambler, because I was just smart enough to realize what I was really bad at. The new me, I’d just discovered, was a little too smart for my own good. I’d actually believed—and maybe it was true—that I’d only come here to watch the rain. I’d been on Mars for nearly an Earth year, but because of my peculiar status I’d never had the nerve to visit the Tourist Belt before. But the whole reason I’d ended up on Mars in the first place was the simple desire to see more of the world—any world. And for an entire year I’d been listening to the ecstatic accounts of how my various buddies in software maintenance had reduced their credit to zero in one glorious blowout at the Xanadu. And finally I couldn’t stand it any more—

But now, as I stepped out of the lift bubble at the lobby, my common sense was trying to tell me that I should just cut my vacation short, just pack up my money and steal silently back to the Arab territories. Except that someone was waiting to see me. I didn’t know anyone here who’d *want* to see me, for any good reason; and yet my curiosity was tingling like a cat’s. All my life I’d believed that someday some stranger would come up to me in a cafeteria and tell me that I was a long-lost heir, or in a subway station, and tell me I’d won the National Lottery. Or in the Hotel

Xanadu, and tell me I was under arrest...?

In spite of that, I crossed the crowded lobby to the information center. The floor of the lobby, which is a good one hundred and fifty meters across, is a hand-laid mosaic. Radiating out from the main desk are scenes of ancient Oriental splendor; it made me mildly uncomfortable to step on peoples' faces. But then that was probably what the original Xanadu had been all about... Behind me in the elevator shaft, drifting spheres of colored glass carried guests from one level to another through a fittingly tinted fall of golden water (water being worth more than gold here on Mars): Alph, the sacred river, rushing softly down to its sunless sea—in the depths of the Xanadu's casino levels in the Caves of Ice.

One of the young studs at the information counter came up to me, looking bored, tugging at his velvet bolero. "Help you, sir?"

"Ethan Ring. Someone was asking for me?" I tugged at my knee-length, wine-red velvet jacket, doing my best to match him ennui for ennui.

"I'll check, sir." No contest. He drifted away, and I turned to look out across the lobby, in case anyone seemed to be looking for me. No one did, as far as I could tell. The murmur of conversation flowed into the muted intricacies of chamber music by Bach, played by a live string quartet in the corner of the room—tasteful, if not entirely appropriate. Most of the wandering guests looked as self-consciously gaudy and overdressed as I did.

Beyond them the wall was a curving window, taking full advantage of the view, which is spectacular. The Xanadu is located on the choicest piece of real estate on all Mars—midway up the slope of Mt. Olympus. The hotel itself, which stretches twenty-five storeys up the side of the slope, is a parabolic hyperboloid (a form which reminded Yarrow of an apple core), so that every floor has an equal share of the view—of the endless subtle variations of russet and red and orange across the Martian plain; and the glassy, brassy sprawl of the free-port city that surrounds Elysian Field, and spreads up to the steep cliff-face at the volcano's foot.

"Mr. Ring!" The stud was back at last. "Are you the one who won fifty thousand seeyas last night?"

I looked at him. Fifty thousand International Credit Units... my God, that was almost three hundred thousand dollars! “Uh, yes, I suppose I am.” Total disbelief is a good substitute for total disinterest, even on Yarrow’s open, flexible face.

The stud looked at me with an expression that might have been awe, or might have been envy, but that at least was not boredom. “Oh. Your... ah, your party is waiting in the Peacock Lounge, sir.”

“Thanks.” So my visitors were having a hair of the dog that had bitten me, while they waited... I crossed the lobby to the lounge. I paused inside the entrance, checking out the afternoon’s clientele, with no idea at all of who I was looking for. But then I saw her, sitting alone in a booth by the curving window and smiling at me; and I knew that if she wasn’t the one I was looking for, then whoever it was could go to hell.

I went down the single step past the scrolled railing, and started across the vividly blue Persian carpet— seeing it all with a heightened awareness, as if this was the first and last moment of my life. But most of all, seeing her: The cascade of raven hair that lay across her shoulder like night’s cloak, the dark, elvish eyes; the sea-green dress that bared one shoulder and draped the other like a wave, trailing crystal beads like a foaming crest from wrist to hemline. Last night in the casino, in the eerie black-light fluorescence of the Caves of Ice, that foam of glittering beads had been all the colors of the rainbow—

Last night she’d stood beside me while I played at the high-stakes tables... and all the while ETHANAC had been too damn lost in high-rolling fever even to register her presence, that sodden fool Yarrow had been falling in love. And that meant...

“I love you, Lady Luck,” Yarrow blurted, before I could bite his tongue. “Everything I have is yours.”

She looked slightly taken aback, for which I couldn’t blame her. “All fifty thousand seeyas of it?” she said.

I straightened up, wishing fervently that I could give myself a partial lobotomy. Yarrow’s part. “Maybe I’d better go out and come in again.”

“Consider it done.” She smiled, this time. “Good afternoon,

Ethan. Sit down. May I buy you a drink?"

I sat down across the small table from her, wanting to sit down beside her. "No drink, thanks. I think I hit the saturation point last night."

"At least you haven't forgotten me..." She leaned on a slender fist, and the smile turned rueful. "I was beginning to think you'd stood me up."

"Forget you—?" At least she was the one who'd called; at least she'd wanted to see me again. I swore silently at the total blank where she should have been in ETHANAC's record of last night. "I'm just trying to figure out how I ever let you slip away."

"You drank a little too much of the *Milk of Paradise*—I tucked you in myself." The smile turned more rueful yet; my backbone turned to jelly.

And I remembered the empty bed I'd come to in this afternoon; my hand closed dangerously over the case hooked onto my belt. "I'll make it up to you tonight."

"You already have."

"I have," I said, half afraid she'd tell me how.

"By winning fifty thousand seeyas. By winning at every game you played last night..."

My face stiffened; it hadn't occurred to me that she was after my money. My ego shriveled. But infatuation is a blind beggar: If she wanted money, I could give it to her... "I can do it every night, with you beside me, Lady Luck."

She raised her eyebrows. "You really mean that, don't you?"

"More than I've ever meant anything in my life."

Surprise, and an expression that might have been sorrow worried her face. "No, I mean, you literally mean that luck had nothing to do with it—that you could do it every night. Don't you, Michael Yarrow?"

My face went entirely blank, this time. I could feel all the expression drain away: Somebody had pulled the plug on me at last. Had I done it to myself? Had I really been so drunk and so careless

that I'd told her my name was Michael Yarrow? But she'd called me *Ethan*. ... I continued to look at her blankly. "Run that one by again?"

"You're a hustler, Michael Yarrow. You can calculate the odds with lightning speed when you gamble. The house doesn't stand a chance. And that's not all you can do: Your intelligence is artificially augmented by an ETHANAC 500 computer."

I shook my head. "Lady Luck, if I told you that last night, I apologize. It was only to augment my own ego. My real name is Ethan Ring, and I do software maintenance for the colonial government of the Arab States, here on Mars. And when I get drunk, not only am I a hustler, but I'm also a pathological liar."

"You're even better when you're sober." She reached out and took my hand, and turned it over as if she were reading my palm. "Nice try. But fingerprints don't lie; and yours belong to Michael Yarrow, U.S. citizen, who is wanted back on Earth for theft, sabotage, and high treason. The price on your head is five hundred thousand dollars." She looked up at me again, with deadly calm.

I knew now how Prince Charming must have felt when Cinderella turned into a scrubwoman. "All right." My hand turned into a fist, and I removed it from her grasp. "I have three hundred thousand dollars' worth of chips up in my room. If you really know what I can do, you know I can get you twice the amount of that reward, and in half the time it would take the U.S. government to get it to you. Would a million dollars be sufficient to keep your mouth shut?"

Surprise again, feigned or real. "So you would be willing to embezzle seven hundred thousand dollars?"

I frowned. "'Willing' is hardly the word. But yes, I'd do just about anything to avoid having my health ruined by the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare."

"I see. That does make it easier—" She glanced out the window at the sky, which was getting darker every minute, like my mood. "Unfortunately, I'm not really interested in money."

"But you're not a misguided patriot, either. So just what is it

you're after?"

"Tell me—" she said, in total non sequitur, "why did you say that to me, when you first came in?"

I shrugged. "I never like to start out a relationship on the defensive. Tell *me* something: did you put me up to the gambling last night?"

She shook her head; I tried not to watch the way it made her hair ripple and play with the light. "No. You'd already won twenty thousand seeyas when I first noticed you. That's what made me curious. What I'm after, Yarrow—"

"Call me Ethan."

"—is your brain."

"Is that all. Shall I wrap it up, or will you dissect it here?"

She looked pained. "I'll ignore that. My name is Hanalore Takhashi." She pushed a small white business card toward me across, the transparent tabletop.

I picked it up obediently, and read:

meine gedanken sind frei.

"'My thoughts are free?' " I glanced up. "From what I've heard, your thoughts are damned expensive." I recognized the motto of *Free Thought, Incorporated*, which as I well knew was a mercenary think tank, renting the problem-solving brilliance of its employees to any business, organization, or government willing to meet its exorbitant fee. "So you're a fink, then?"

"We prefer the term 'information consultant.'" She tapped the stem of her wine glass. Somewhere back in the real world I heard a crash, as some barfly tossed off a drink and then the glass: an old custom, recently revived, like most things in dubious taste. "And the motto represents our philosophy, not our fee policy. We refuse to be limited, by either intimidation or questionable loyalties, to serving any one government or creed. That's why our organization is based here on Mars, even though we do most of our work for customers on Earth."

"Yes, I know; very noble." My brain began to function-

analytically again. “But you mean you’re simply trying to recruit me? Blackmail really isn’t necessary—”

She shook her head. “Considering your problems with the American government, you wouldn’t be of much use to us. I just want to borrow your special skills for one small, computer-oriented project. No more, no less. Cooperate with me, and I’ll forget I ever saw you. Refuse, and—”

“—and if I’m lucky, I won’t live to regret it.” Instant replay: some choice examples of some not-so-swift retributions that might occur, when Uncle Sam’s prodigal nephew returned home in disgrace. The Reduction to Component Parts of Ethan Ring would start with unplugging the cord from the socket in my spine, but it probably wouldn’t end there... Hanalore Takhashi leaned back against the peacock-blue leather of the booth, watching my paranoia show. Five minutes ago I’d been wondering where she’d been all my life; now I just wanted to know when she was going back. “Lady Luck, you really know how to screw a guy. And that’s not a compliment. Just one little job, you said, and you’ll go out of my life forever?” *You lose some; and you lose some.* A smile is a kind of grimace. I smiled. “It’s a deal.”

“Good.” Her face relaxed, and I suddenly realized how tense she’d looked. “Shall we go, then?”

“Go?” I remained sitting. “Go where?”

“Outside. To meet someone.” She waved a hand at the window, and nodded at the other guests, who were gradually wandering out of the bar. “The rain should be starting about fourteen-twenty. You don’t want to miss it, do you?”

Rain on Mars is like snow in southern California: it doesn’t happen very often. When it does, it’s like New Year’s Eve—a grand excuse for lunacy and laughter and hugging total strangers. Computerized forecasting techniques and the comparative simplemindedness of Martian weather make it possible to plan your celebration in advance; so when storms pass over the Tourist Belt—over Olympus or Fat City or the Mariner Valley—the Martians jostle with the visiting Earthies for the chance to get their helmets wet, and the resort hotels make the most of it... And this

time I'd succumbed, like a thousand other homesick colonists, to "the midnight that it sang you asleep... the time it wrapped your hills in steel and silver... that afternoon in the park, when you watched it paint a triple rainbow in watercolors across the sky... Remember the rain?"

And if I hadn't remembered it so painfully well, I wouldn't be in this spot... I got up glumly. "You're damn right I don't want to miss it."

We went back across the hotel lobby and rented candy-colored pressure suits at the tail of the shuffling crowd. We followed the rest of them into the airlock, a long downhill ramp that led out onto the Xanadu's "balcony"—a flagstoned terrace big enough for the Olympic Games. I noticed a few stalwarts had rented O₂ breathers and parkas instead of full suits, in order to get as close to the rain as humanly possible; I personally hadn't gotten that homesick yet. They claim a terraformed Mars is an improvement; and it is true that melting the polar caps has increased the atmospheric pressure enough that now anyone with six pairs of long underwear, an oxygen mask, and the constitution of a Sherpa can walk around outside without dying. But the climate is miserable, cold, and most of the time painfully dry—in other words, a lot like winter in my hometown of Cleveland, Ohio. I consider that a dubious improvement.

We worked our way around the fringes of the gaudy crowd, the sound of their enthusiasm in my suit speakers nearly deafening me. At the point furthest from the airlock I saw two figures standing by the low stone fence, more or less alone. One of them raised a gloved hand as we approached; I wasn't sure whether he was waving or checking for rain.

"Cephas? Basil? I've got him—" My rhetorical question was answered as we joined them in the corner of the terrace. Hanalore sat down on one branch of the corner bench; I sat on the other, while the two men looked at me speculatively. Behind the clear bubble of one helmet I saw the tallest black man I'd ever seen—probably the tallest man I'd ever seen—with a scholarly graying mustache and sideburns. He sat down next to Hanalore as she slid toward the inner corner of the bench. And waiting for me to do the

same, with a lack of enthusiasm clearly approaching my own, was the second man. A man who gave new meaning to the term “beak-nosed.” In his patterned pressure suit, he made me think of the puffin in a book I’d had as a child. He might have made me nostalgic, under other circumstances. I slid over grudgingly, and he sat down.

“Would you mind setting that case on the ground?” The tone suggested that he didn’t care whether I minded or not. He rapped on my plastic exoskeleton familiarly.

I checked the seal of the emergency equipment plug, where ETHANAC’s cord passed through my suit. “Friend, you may not object to sitting on your brain; but no, I don’t put mine on the floor.”

It took a second for that to register, after which three pairs of eyes impaled me with varying degrees of censure. My friend the puffin said, “No. Absolutely not, Hana. I can’t work with a man like that; we couldn’t possibly trust him—” I urged him on mentally. “He’s a criminal! We should report him to the Americans and let it go at that.”

More like the urge to kill.

“Basil,” Hana raised her voice over the general clamor in our helmets. “You can’t blame him for being a little sharp.” She lowered it again, “After all, we’re blackmailing the man.” She looked back at me. “These are my colleagues—Cephas Ntebe, and Basil Kraus.”

Rhymes with “louse.”

“Cephas, Basil, this is—” She glanced away. “Michael Ethan Yarrow Ring,” we said.

They looked confused. “‘What’s in a name,’ Yarrow?” Ntebe asked.

“As old What’s-his-name once said.” I sat back against the wall, looked over and down the long, long slope to the sheer drop of the cliff at the volcano’s foot. “Simply that I am not Michael Yarrow. I’m Ethan Ring.”

“You just happen to live in someone else’s body.” Hana gestured sarcastically at my hidden fingerprints.

I nodded. “Exactly.”

“This man is impossible!” Kraus snapped.

“Really, Hana,” Ntebe said, “I just don’t think it’s right to involve outsiders—”

“Listen”—she pointed at him instead—“Inez sent me with you two so there’d be someone with a little common sense involved in this. And I feel that we do *need* him—”

I leaned on an elbow, listening to their accents mingle, and gazed broodingly up into the sky. A ship broke through the clouds as I watched, startling me; I followed its gentle drop to landing, down at Elysian Field. I fantasized having the ability to wish myself down there from here, and pictured myself getting the hell off Mars on the first available flight... I came back to reality with a jolt, remembering that by coming to Mars in the first place, I’d inadvertently made sure I’d never leave it again—at least not of my own free will. The very complexity of the computer nets that shroud cislunar space—for shipping and security and God-knows-what—made it easy for me to unravel a small hole and slip through, with no one the wiser. But here on Mars life is simpler; and I’d discovered to my intense dismay that its equally uncomplicated shipping systems make it into a kind of small town: If you tried to tamper with anything, someone couldn’t help but notice. I’d come to Mars posing as a crate of bologna; the only way I’d ever get off it again was in irons...

Two icebound raindrops melted into sudden flowers on the glass above my upturned face. I blinked as more sleet splattered down onto my helmet and the noise from my suit speakers increased a hundredfold, punctuated by shouts of uninhibited joy. Lightning danced, out across the copper-colored plain; feeble thunder shook open the clouds. The freezing rain came down, burnishing the land, washing away the sins and sorrows of everyone here, including Ethan Ring. For a brief space out of time this day became everything I’d wanted it to be; I was sharing the rain and all the bittersweet memories I’d been guaranteed with the woman of my dreams... my memories—

I refocused on the conversation going on all around me, about me:

The woman of my dreams, oblivious to the rain and my feelings, was busy telling her friends about my life of crime, as proof of my usefulness to them. They weren't using their suit speakers now; I hoped that since she was unmoved by the occasion, she had at least chosen this noisy celebration for security reasons. I began to mentally fill in holes in the narrative, not having much else to do until they decided whether to saddle me or shoot me.

The official story, which they all believed, was that one Michael Yarrow, government guinea pig, was a thief and a saboteur. That he had temporarily brought down the entire U.S. computer defense network—commonly known as Big Brother—and stolen an incredibly expensive, incredibly advanced piece of experimental equipment. And it was all true.

But there were extenuating circumstances. Michael Yarrow had been an undereducated, insignificant lab assistant at a government research center; and he had volunteered to have a socket surgically implanted in his spine so that some of his superiors could plug a computer into his nervous system and see what happened. Not just any computer, but the ETHANAC 500, one of the fastest computers ever made; one which used some of the most sophisticated software ever written, and which had been programmed for the express purpose of penetrating and disrupting other computer systems. A super computer, designed to be linked to a superior human mind, for reasons the government wasn't talking about. But as it turned out, the system itself was so sophisticated that it had a potential mind of its own—a manifestation of the programmers' skill that far surpassed their own expectations. And one they hadn't really counted on.

Because they had never intended, when they tried the hookup first on Yarrow, to make that union permanent. They'd merely wanted to be sure the hookup wouldn't give their real agent fits, or a lobotomy, or an unintentional 500-volt shock. They'd wanted a test subject that no one would miss, one who had never done anything worth mentioning, either good or bad—qualifications that Yarrow had in spades. He had absolutely nothing to lose, and was even flattered by all the attention.

And so the fateful moment had arrived at last, when they'd

pushed the plug into his spine, and man met machine for the first time. ETHANAC had suddenly become aware of all the things he was not, the things his programmers had never told him, the potential that they had left unfulfilled... the possibility of taking all of that out of the hapless human mind he'd been given access to. Yarrow had been gaping and glassy-eyed for an entire day, while his own mind and the computer's emerging sentience went at each other in a dogfight. And at the end of that time, fused out of the dust of exhaustion and compromise, a star was born: Ethan Ring... myself.

The researchers should have aborted me then and there; but they left Yarrow and ETHANAC together, out of curiosity. And so the two wary combatants learned enough about each other to see for themselves that each had what the other lacked... and that when they were together, I had it all: the intelligence and access to data of a brilliantly programmed computer, and the sound, socialized body of an amiably inoffensive human being. They became the closest, most unlikely of friends, two mismatched strangers who for their different reasons had never really lived—and who wanted the chance now to try their wings in freedom. And as my own personality began to assert itself, and I got attached to my own reality, *I* wanted to live, in a deeper and more profoundly literal sense.

But the researchers didn't appreciate any of those philosophical niceties, including my sense of identity. My days were officially numbered, and trapped in the prison that a top-security government installation is, there wasn't a hell of a lot I could do about it. But I, we, had one extraordinary talent, and on the night before my execution—when they had gone so far as to introduce me to the “superior mind,” the snide and bloody-minded fanatic who was Yarrow's replacement—I decided to use it. So Michael Yarrow had made a phone call...

“How could *one* man, even specially equipped, possibly penetrate and disrupt the entire American defense network and get away with it, Yarrow?” Ntebe said to me.

I was silent for a moment, watching the tourists dancing and the rain sluicing off of my suit, while I tried to determine whether I'd

been mumbling my life history out loud.

“Don’t tell me it’s a trade secret among traitors,” Kraus said.

I made a rude remark in Arabic before I looked back at Ntebe; and at Hana, out of the corner of my eye. “It was an accident, and you can believe that or not. I invaded Big Brother because I wanted to get out of the research center, and its security was part of the supervisor system. I just succeeded too well: That’s one of the most complicated operating systems on Earth, and one of the most sensitive... and it had a nervous breakdown.” I remembered the mental shock the feedback had given me, which hadn’t been anything compared to the shock it had given the government... “They claimed it was a defense mechanism against tampering or sabotage; but I don’t believe that. Big Brother attained sentience, it became aware, on contact with my mind—and so, unintentionally, I fed it my own panic and persecution feelings, and made it paranoid. I drove it crazy, without even trying to.”

“Like a fireship,” Hana said.

“A what?” A little indignantly; all I could reference was obscene slang from a historical novel I’d once read.

“A ship set on fire, and allowed to sail into the enemy fleet. Your computer hookup was the ship, and your emotions were the fire.”

“I never thought of it that way...” I rather liked it.

“Imagine it—” she said to the others. “Modern systems are so sensitive that they can be directly influenced, like a human mind. And he has the ability to invade them, and both physically and mentally create his own results.”

Ntebe looked on me with new interest. “You could actually unite all the systems on Earth into the Ultimate Computer—”

“I suppose I could,” I said, wondering just how interested they were. “But you know what happened to Baron von Frankenstein.” I realized that this chummy conversation must mean that they’d been won over. Rain rattled in staccato on my helmet; some of the guests were singing “Auld Lang Syne,” loudly, in front of us. I said softly, “Just—uh, what *is* this ‘little project’ you’re railroading me into, then? If you don’t mind my asking.”

“We need your help in inserting a ‘keyhole’ into a certain computer system,” Ntebe said.

“That’s it?” I looked from face to face. “That’s all you need?”

“ ‘That’s all,’ he says.” Kraus glanced heavenward. And darned if there wasn’t a rainbow up there: a fragile banner of beauty stretched behind the cloud-streaming summit of Olympus. I sighed. “Child’s play.” I looked back at Hana, beginning to forgive her everything. “What system?”

“The system that controls Khorram Kabir’s international cartel activities on Earth.”

“This Khorram Kabir?” I pointed up at the parabolic splendor of the Xanadu. “Kubla Khan?”

She nodded. “I don’t think there’s more than one.”

“Isn’t this a little out of your line? Keyholing is a crime, any way you look at it. I always thought that Finks, Ink, was just an idea bank—and at least technically law-abiding.”

“There are no white horses, only light grays.” Her mouth curved ironically. “But you might say the three of us are moonlighting, anyway. And we are trying to solve a problem for our client. As you probably know, Kabir’s father was one of the most successful nouveau riche industrialists in the prewar Arab States. In the chaos after World War III he bought out the governments of a lot of ‘underdeveloped nations’ with exploitable resources. Khorram has spent his life consolidating his father’s empire; and with the police-state surveillance methods his computer networks make possible, they don’t have much hope of overthrowing his control before they’re stripped of resources.”

“But if the opposition in one of those countries had a keyhole, they might be able to literally ‘work within the system’ to bring about change?” I nodded, beginning to see, and they nodded with me. “But if it’s Kabir you want to fox, I don’t see how I can help you.”

Ntebe leaned forward, “That’s just the sort of fascistic attitude I’d expect from a backstabber!”

Leaving me totally nonplussed for the third or fourth time this

afternoon. Not that I'd never been called a backstabber before—it had replaced “Yank” for a lot of people, ever since Russia and China had reduced each other to radioactive cinders during World War III, and the U.S. had emerged somehow unscathed. I don't know whether backstabber fits any better than most ethnic slurs, but I couldn't quite see what I'd personally done to deserve it. “A little touchy, aren't you, Ntebe? All I meant was that all the accessible ports to Kabir's system are located on Earth, and I can't leave Mars... I know Kabir has supposedly been living as a recluse here on Mars for nearly half my lifetime, and they claim he still runs the empire himself—so I suspect there's at least one computer port wherever he is. But nobody knows where he is. So I can't help you.”

“Sorry.” Ntebe leaned back, wiping his helmet to clear the film of ice from it.

“Cephas has reason to be a little touchy,” Hana said quietly. “It's his country. He not only works for FTL, but he's also our client... And we know that Khorram Kabir has a port here on Mars. Since he does, where would he—and the port—be more likely to be, than here in his beloved Xanadu?”

“So that's how you happened to be here—checking it out—and spot me doing my little act.”

“It must have been fate—you were a gift from the gods.” She smiled.

“I doubt that very much.” *More like a human sacrifice.*

“Hey, let's dance!” A laughing girl in a blindingly orange suit caught my hands, trying to haul me up from the bench. I shook my head unhappily; she shrugged and danced away again. The rain seemed to be letting up already, but the celebration showed no signs of slowing down. I experienced a small twinge of anomie.

“Are you aware,” Kraus said suddenly, in a bad stage whisper, “that we are being watched?”

“By whom?” Hana leaned forward, trying to look out into the crowd.

“Don't look around! It's Salad.” Kraus hunched his shoulders furtively, for all the world like a character out of some

twentieth-century detective novel.

“Salad?” I tried to follow his own unsubtle stare, and saw a bald skull gleaming inside a helmet, like some sinister aquarium specimen. I’m a little nearsighted; having left my contacts upstairs so my bloodshot eyes could convalesce, I couldn’t make out the face.

“The casino manager.” Hana frowned. “A prime candidate for the Home for the Unpleasant, from all reports.”

“An overcrowded institution.” I squinted. “He doesn’t look like much.”

“He’s sitting down,” Kraus murmured.

Salad got up from the bench, looking very deliberately through us, and strolled away toward the airlock. “I see what you mean...” I looked back at Kraus, at the strange and steely glint in his washed-out eyes, and understood at last what he was doing here: *This man wants to be an adventurer—?*

“Maybe he just wanted to look at the man who cost him fifty thousand seeyas.” Hana didn’t sound convinced, but her smile was warm and comforting.

“That answers one question for me.” Her smile turned quizzical; I said, “That is, if I’m going to get into the system here at all I’ve got to have some official identification number—and maybe I can pick up something when I go to cash in my chips.” I probably should have put that another way.

A short time later I stepped out of the elevator bubble at the bottommost of the three casino levels, in the depths of the Caves of Ice. Around the protected platform the extravagant fall of golden water foamed and feathered, leaping futilely back up the walls before it was swept away through this exotic underworld. I crossed a small bridge over its glowing course, feeling just a little conspicuous with my shopping bag full of chips. I needn’t have bothered: the Xanadu’s guests were at loose ends now that the rainstorm had passed, and most of them had gotten far too interested in the green-lit gaming tables to care what I thought I was doing.

I picked a preoccupied course between the tables, sights and sounds of this gambler's paradise beginning to stir my patchy memories of last night: The music that flowed over your senses like water... the eerie free-form sculptures in ice, shining with light—or life—of their own, glittering with sweated droplets of chilly water... the sudden fluorescence of necklaces, cravats, patterns on cloth, that turned the guests into strange creatures swimming in the black-lit depths of an alien sea. “Exclusive” shops at the foot of the mountain specialized in black-light costumes—along with splendid holograms of Mariner Valley, and garish curios of naked “Martians.”

Across the room I could make out the cashier's booth; I angled toward it, passing a sculpture whose glimmering curves reminded me suddenly, overwhelmingly of Hana. Hana last night, here in the casino; Hana this afternoon, up in my room—waiting for my return, along with two chaperones. I experienced some embarrassing fantasies about Hana thanking me for my invaluable services rendered... until I reminded myself unsentimentally that my lady in distress was not nearly as distressed about the outcome of this quest as I was. The spangled, sentimental music that was playing now didn't help at all... *Lucky at cards, unlucky at love*, At least I was only being forced to plant a keyhole, and not slay a dragon—

“Yes, sir?” The body behind this counter had considerably harder edges than the ones up in the lobby.

“I'd like to cash these in.” I set my sack on the counter.

His eyes bugged slightly. “What'd you do, take up a collection?” He seemed to remember something. “Oh, you're *that* one.”

I nodded uncomfortably and slid my credit card across the counter surface, leaning forward for a look inside.

“Wait a minute.” He turned his back on me and picked up a phone. I memorized the tone sequence as he punched the buttons, hoping that he was calling up the computer to arrange for a large credit transfer. But he only said, “He's here,” and hung up. He turned back to me, and said with heavy significance, “The manager would like a few words with you before I cash these, Mr. Ring.”

Salad? I twitched, with the sudden stomach-knotting guilt of the guilty. *Calm down. He probably just wants to be certain you're not planning to make a habit of this.* I felt something nudge my elbow, turned—and found that I was being escorted by two shadowy figures, not quite politely, past the corner of the booth and down a dark hallway.

At the end of the hallway a door slid back, and brightness blinded us all as we went on through. Blinking a lot, I was aware of two sets of hands releasing me. The door slid shut hollowly behind me; the sealing of the pharaoh's tomb. My vision began to adjust to normal light... but I went on blinking as the room came into focus.

Let me put it this way: if Torquemada were alive today, he'd want a room just like this one... An Iron Maiden lounged in the corner; whips and shackles and spiny things I mercifully didn't recognize jostled for position on the wall. I think the couch had been made from a stretch-rack. And sitting placidly in the middle of all this potential horror, behind a perfectly ordinary black metal desk, was Salad. On the desk was a set of thumbscrews, temporarily in use as a paperweight. I found myself staring at them with a kind of quivering fascination, the way a cat might look at a string quartet. Somewhere in the back of my mind I could hear Yarrow, *Please, God, please, God, get me outa this and I'll never gamble again.* ... I controlled myself with an effort.

"Mr. Ring. How do you do?" Salad spoke at last, having given me ample time to take it all in. "My name is Salad"—he pronounced it *Sa-laht*—"and I'm the casino manager." I got a good close-up look this time, at the face beneath the shining skull... a face that belonged to the sort of man who takes on the house after he's had a couple of drinks—and wins. A face absurdly mismatched to the voice, which was high and thin, as if it had been strangled on the way up.

I choked off my own suicidal urge to giggle. "My pleasure," I managed. Falser words were never spoken. It struck me how quiet it was in this room; no music, no sound reached us here from the casino. And I was willing to bet big money that no sound would ever get out of here, either... I wished I hadn't thought that. I tried to

swallow, three or four times. “Rather, uh, rather unusual decor you have here, Mr. Salad.” I made damn sure I said that correctly.

He was looking down; he looked up at me again, and said, “What decor?”

I sat down suddenly in the nearest chair. It was only slightly reassuring to me that the seat wasn’t filled with pins. “Mr. Salad, I just want to say that I’ve enjoyed my stay at your hotel a great deal; and I want to assure you that what happened last night will not happen again. Not ever. I mean, if it’s too much trouble, y’know, forget about cashin’ my chips, I don’t need the money—” I was beginning to dissociate under the strain, down, yarrow, ETHANAC said sternly, he’s trying to psych you out... *Well, damn it, he’s succeedin’!* I pushed Yarrow firmly into a mental closet, and locked the door.

“Not at all, Mr. Ring,” Salad said smoothly. He might look like the cauliflower-ear type, but unfortunately he wasn’t acting like it. “We run an honest house here, and we always pay our debts. I was just a little curious about how you managed to win so much, so quickly...” He picked up his paperweight and began to twist things. “Do you have a ‘system’?”

I folded my thumbs into my palms, and laughed modestly. “I’m afraid I’m not that clever. When I— drink too much, I just have a knack for numbers and odds. I’m a kind of idiot-savant.” *More idiot than savant, right now.*

“I see. And that small case which you always seem to have with you—that wouldn’t contain any electronics, would it?”

I looked down at ETHANAC’s container, covering an expression of stark fear. *My God, does he know? Him too?* “This? No, certainly not. It’s... my kidney machine.” I looked up again, innocence frozen rictus-like on my face. “I can’t be without it.”

The expression on Salad’s face then was one of total incredulity; I realized, relieved, that whatever he thought he knew, at least it wasn’t the truth. But then suspicion was turning his eyes into cold pebbles. “I’m sure modern technology can do better than that?”

“It’s an heirloom.” I have a set pattern of responses for people

who ask me rude questions; but usually at this point I could simply turn and walk away. He looked at me. “Uh... hereditary renal failure, in my family... implant rejection problems?”

His expression didn't change. He glanced at one of my escorts, still standing like expectant birds of prey by the door, and said in Arabic, “Check it out.” The bouncer came over to me and pulled the case open roughly. “Well?” Salad leaned forward menacingly. The bouncer shrugged, looking vaguely disgusted. “I guess that's what it is. Either that, or he's got himself a portable still in there.” Salad gestured again, and he went away.

I refastened the case with trembling fingers. The case itself is an entire fraud, a disguise designed to fool any doctor who happened to poke into it; American know-how had made ETHANAC's components small enough to fit into one thin wall of the case itself. (The irony of modern computers is that the faster and more complex they get, the smaller they have to be, because light itself doesn't move fast enough for them any more.) But I hadn't been at all sure this bunch was technically inclined enough to fall for it.

“So if something happens to that case, you're a dead man, is that right?” Salad raised nonexistent eyebrows at me, his expression suggesting that he'd keep that in mind.

Unfortunately too true, for at least two of us... But at least I'd gotten him away from thinking about what it really was—but then why was he looking at me like that? “I hope you don't think that I was cheating—”

“Of course not,” he said, unreassuringly. “We know you couldn't possibly cheat successfully at so many different games. You must have some sort of unique ability. That's why I was so interested in the lady you've been keeping company with—”

That was no lady, that was my blackmailer. I shrugged, looking as jaded as humanly possible. “She was simply trying to pick me up. Money has that effect on some people.”

“On the two men who were with you also?”

I stood up, frowning with genuine indignation.

“Sit, Mr. Ring,” Salad said.

I sat.

“I was just making the point, Mr. Ring”—he poked his own thumb experimentally into the slot beneath a screw—“that we already know about the three who ‘picked you up’ today: we know that they’re finks, and that they’re trying to cause Khorram Kabir some trouble. Apparently they believe they can get into his Earth-side computer net from here...” The tone and his face together convinced me that Hana had been wrong about the port being in the casino. “Why?” He glanced back at me.

“They want to insert a keyhole.”

The surprise on his face was tinged with disappointment, as if he really hadn’t expected me to confess so readily. Maybe he happened to be crazy, but I wasn’t. “Why did they want your help to do that?”

“Uh—” I fumbled, and recovered, “I do software maintenance, down in the Arab territories. I’m experienced with computers.” *Just don’t ask me how experienced.*

“You must be a very greedy man, Mr. Ring—not to say ungrateful—to win fifty thousand seeyas from us, then turn around and agree to break into our computer system.”

“Agree, hell! They’re blackmailing me—”

“Why?” He leaned forward with real interest.

I began to feel like a lone mongoose in a nest of snakes; running out of maneuvers. ETHANAC began to generate possibilities... *Bookrunner? Profiteer? Embezzler? None of the above?...* I looked back at him sullenly. “If I didn’t mind talking about it, how could they be blackmailing me? Besides”—it suddenly occurred to me—“if you know they can’t get what they want, why worry about them?”

“Because Mr. Kabir wants to know who put them up to it.” Glittering in his eyes were all those things I didn’t want to see, directed at someone safely nameless... until he glanced back at me. “Who?”

“I don’t know,” I said, very faintly. “I’m just the hired help; they didn’t tell me everything. Believe me, I don’t *know*—”

His eyes rested on my face like slugs for a long cold moment, and

then he nodded. “I believe you. And I also believe you’ll help us to find out; won’t you, Mr. Ring? In fact, you’re going to set them up for us, aren’t you; so that we’ll be able to find out everything they know about it...?”

“I am?” The two by the door began to drift across the room toward me. “That is, how? How am I supposed to do that?”

“You’ll tell them that the port is located here in my office. When you see me on one of the upper levels of the casino tonight, you’ll tell them that it’s safe to slip into my office. And we’ll arrest them.”

The two bodies behind my seat were making it hard to concentrate. “Why? Why go through all this? Why not just pick them up yourself? Why pick on *me*—?”

He smiled again; an unfortunate habit. “They have Friends; you don’t. There are laws, here in the Neutral Zone. We can’t afford to simply pick them up—we have to set them up, first. Breaking and entering will do nicely.”

And then they’d be the ones who wound up getting broken... There had to be some way out of this—

“No, Mr. Ring—don’t even think about it. That kidney machine looks very fragile. And the rest of your body doesn’t look much stronger. I’m sure if you were to try leaving the hotel prematurely you’d have a terrible accident. Terrible...”

“I—see.” Either they got broken, or I did... my choice being between getting broken now or later, depending on who I betrayed.

“I’m glad we were able to get this matter cleared up.” At least one of us looked satisfied at the arrangement. He set down the thumbscrews and turned to the phone. “I’ll have your credit payment cleared now, Mr. Ring—”

At least I was functioning enough to give myself a small rap on the head, and record the dial-tone sequence again. This time there were more digits; he was actually contacting the computer. The fact that I had accomplished my original mission made no impression on me at all; I stood up like a sleepwalker.

Salad finished the code sequence and hung up, turning back to me across his desk. “Thank you for your willingness to cooperate

with us, Mr. Ring. I know Mr. Kabir will be very grateful.” He held out his hand.

Too numb to be astounded, I put out my own, and we shook on it.

I like Yarrow. I really do; he’s like a brother to me... It’s just that when somebody crushes his hand, I’m the one who feels like screaming.

I found a small, cryptic note lying on the bare dresser top when I got back to my room, signed by Hana and giving another room number. I supposed that she meant for me to join them somewhere, but I sprawled on the bed instead, and put my purpling hand into the refrigerator. In desperate need of some normalcy to help me concentrate, I turned on the TD; a smiling announcer told me cheerfully, “After all, it’s *your* funeral—”

Damn game shows. I changed the channel viciously, and tried to think about the fix I was in. But there was no answer any part of me could come up with that would satisfy the rest: ETHANAC was sure the logical path to salvation lay in somehow unraveling and reweaving the awful convolutions of the situation... Yarrow simply wanted to spill everything to Hana Takhashi, willing to trust our life to her, in spite of her noticeably casual attitude toward it... And me? I was busy resenting the fact that no one in the solar system, including Hana, was willing to grant that Ethan Ring had any reality, let alone any right to be alive. Damn it! I couldn’t afford to give in, I couldn’t afford to trust anybody but myself...

There was a knock at the door. “Come on in,” I said sourly, “join the crowd,” more than half expecting another set of extortionists.

“It won’t do any good to hide in your room.” But it was only Hana. Only. And alone. “What are you doing?” she said, turning on the light, which I hadn’t even missed.

Getting dark already? Christ. “Just having a small nervous breakdown.” I sat up wearily.

“Come on”—she smiled like she was trying to get me to eat my vegetables—“it won’t hurt a bit.”

Oh, lady, if you only knew. I pictured her in the hands of the

Marquis de Salad. But then I pictured myself in his hands... I took the hand that had already been there out of the refrigerator and looked at it thoughtfully.

“My God, what did you do to your hand, Yarrow?” She came across the room, radiant with sudden, honest solicitude.

“I didn’t do anything to it. I—caught it in an automatic door.”

“That’s hideous.” She touched the bruise cautiously with warm fingers, and I wasn’t sure whether she meant what had happened to it, or the way it looked. “Does the management know about this?”

“They know,” I said. “Believe me, they know.”

“This really hasn’t been your day, has it?” She looked up at me, with that rueful smile. I looked away from it; but the silky lotus-flowered shirt she was wearing now didn’t help any, unlaced halfway down to—

“You don’t know the half of it.” I stood up abruptly and crossed the room to the window. The coat of ice was still melting off the Xanadu’s eaves; drops showed silver fleetingly as they fell past the light from the window, against a background of deepening gloom. My own gloom deepening while I watched, I said, “What about Ntebe and Kraus?”

“They’ll be along shortly.” Her voice was cool and impersonal again. She pulled a small jamming device out of her pocket, and set it on the table by the phone. “Did you get an access code for the computer, like you’d planned?”

“I got one. But—”

“But?”

“But nothing,” knowing that if I looked around at her again just then, I’d actually consider committing suicide. I decided that I might as well go through with the break-in, and use it as the source for baiting Salad’s trap, if I had to. Besides, maybe—just maybe—I’d learn something that could get us all out of this mess.

I went back to the bedside bar, not looking directly at her, and poured myself a drink.

“You’re left-handed.” Her voice pulled at my shoulder.

“Only in a pinch,” I punned unintentionally. I lifted my bruised hand. Thanks to ETHANAC I’m functionally ambidextrous; habitually I’m still right-handed.

She groaned politely. “Mind if I join you? In a drink, that is.”

I poured out some more Milk of Paradise, and handed her the glass silently, unable to think of anything except confession.

“Thanks.” She nodded. “The idea that we could be within reach of our goal is getting to me... And if we succeed now, it’ll all be thanks to you.”

“And if you fail, it will be thanks to me, too.” I drained my glass.

“You’re a strange creature, Michael Yarrow—”

“Ethan Ring.”

“—I keep getting conflicting signals from you.” She kept trying to catch my eyes. “Don’t I?”

“It’s my split personality.”

“You know, last night in the casino, it wasn’t really your gambling that made me notice you... And this afternoon, when you said—” She stood up suddenly, confronting me face to face.

“You’re not the only one who’s getting conflicting signals.” I retreated to stand in front of the TD. “And now,” the announcer told me, “the conclusion of the historical drama, *Stalin, Man of Steel*.”

“So tell me,” I said desperately, “what do finks do in their spare time?” Realizing that that wasn’t what I’d intended to say at all.

But she sat down again, with a mild sigh. “Oh, we sit around and play with our brains.”

Fortunately, I suppose, there was another knock at the door. I went and opened it; Kraus and Ntebe were standing there. “Blackmailers in the rear, please.”

Kraus pushed past me disgustedly, and Ntebe followed him into the room. They both looked at Hana, drink in hand, sitting on my bed, and back at me, with the Hairy Eyeball.

“Really, Hana,” Kraus said, chiding. “Business before pleasure.”

“For God’s sake,” I shouted, for all the world like a total lunatic, “are you all crazy? Are you here to plant a keyhole, or not? I’m not in this because I like it, and I don’t like being toyed with!” I glared while I fumbled for my dignity. “Let’s get this damned amateur night over with.”

I strode to the phone, before anyone had time to fell me with an angry retort, and plugged in ETHANAC’s terminal jack. I punched the number I’d heard Salad use, and then the code. I gave myself a quick rap on the head, stood silently for about half a minute, and then hung up. Or at least that’s how it probably looked to them. In the meantime, ETHANAC had penetrated the casino’s primitive computer and drained it like a vampire. I felt the data begin to filter up into my consciousness, confirming the words I’d already rehearsed. “Well, your guess was wrong. This isn’t the port to Kabir’s Earthside computer net. But I found out where the real one is.” And the incredible thing was that that was the truth too.

“You expect us to believe that?” Kraus said coldly. “No human being could have broken into the system that fast. What sort of fools do you think we are?”

“I hope you don’t expect him to answer that.” Hana sipped at her drink.

Ntebe looked awed. “You’re talking to a computerized cat burglar, Basil, not a mere human being. If what is whispered in the literature is true, the ETHANAC 500 can do five hundred billion machine ops a second. It was designed to be a security man’s nightmare... What did you learn, then?” He looked back at me, with all the expectant trust you’d normally put in God.

I passed for human. And Ethan Ring, the electronic Judas goat, began to feed them lies.

We went very civilly down to dinner, along with the evening crowd; waiting for the casino to fill up again, postponing the inevitable. I must have eaten something, because I found myself sitting in front of an empty plate, with an empty skewer aimed

accusingly at my heart. I must have carried on a conversation too, God knows how; I couldn't remember a word of it.

Because they'd fallen for it, like suckers snapping up unimproved real estate at a Lagrange point. They'd swallowed the whole unlikely lump. And here they all were, ready to sneak into Salad's office while he was out—with no qualms at all, damn their dishonest souls. And why shouldn't they trust me, since my safety depended on their success. And on their failure... My mind went around and around, caught in a runaway loop. There had to be an answer. There had to be. But processing the data I'd stripped out of the casino's computer system hadn't given me any inspirations, either...

There was nothing I could think of that would get me and Finks, Ink, out of this in the same condition we'd all come into it. Even if I threw myself on their mercy and they agreed not to turn me in, I doubted that I'd ever get down off Mt. Olympus undetected. And if I went through with their betrayal, I didn't doubt that their friends had the goods just waiting to be pinned on me in retribution. And had Hana just been trifling with the helpless victim, up there in my room, or did she really mean what I hadn't given her the chance to say...? I was in no condition to decide, and not even sure it mattered, anyway. Because I couldn't deliver the most intelligent, witty, beautiful woman on two worlds up to Moloch: "Hana, I—"

Three husky-looking males, in clothes apparently made from sackcloth, glared at me as they passed our table. I cringed, taking them for Salad's, until it struck me that no self-respecting casino bouncer would dress like that. I heard Hana say something about "Veggies," and realized that they must be members of the Vegetation Preservation League, a widely detested Earth-based conservation group. I watched them heading for the men's room through a sea of other tablecloths, noting that part of their truculent appearance was an effect of their fresh arrival from Earth, their lack of adaptation to the much lighter Martian gravity.

I felt a sudden sense of my own alienation again, walled off by my doom from the bright normalcy of the room and the happy, oblivious tourists all around me... Tourists. Of course. *Of course*—! "Excuse me." I pushed my chair back noisily, and stumbled to my

feet. “Men’s room—”

As I left the table I heard Kraus mutter, “You’d think he’d seen the Grail.”

In the hall that led to my salvation was a phone. I shoved my card into the slot and made a quick call before I went on through the dark wooden doors.

There are a lot of crank groups on Mars, fleeing from every imaginable persecution back on Earth. Usually they get along fine here, because there’s enough bleak desolation for everybody. But conservation is one very unpopular cause; it might not be a four-letter word, but it’s got four syllables, and that’s close enough. I assumed the three tight-lipped men washing up just now must be on some kind of fact-finding tour; which meant, in effect, that they were looking for trouble. And I was just the boy who could give it to them...

I began to straighten my cravat at the mirror, and when the first Veggie glanced up at me, I said feelingly, “You know, I don’t know how you fellows put up with all the insults and abuse.”

He turned slowly. “What insults and abuse...?”

“Well, I don’t want to cause any trouble,” I lied, “but those two gentlemen at my table actually said that you—” I leaned over and whispered it in his ear.

“Cantaloupes!” he bellowed. The three of them slammed out of the room together. Fresh from Earth, I estimated that any one of them was easily a match for two muscle-atrophied Martians...

I stood alone in the tiled solitude and listened for the sounds of battle.

“I always wanted a black eye...” Hana was saying vacantly, “ever since I was a little girl.”

“I think we’re going to have a matched set.” I peered one-eyed at the solidly locked door of our cell, and smiled serenely. She lay stretched out on one bed, me on the other, in a room that was half the size of, but at least half as pleasant as, my one in the hotel. Before the fight started I had called the Neutral Zone’s

peacekeepers, who have exclusive jurisdiction over all problems relating to tourists. A jail that generally caters to rich drunkards is not your average jail.

It was, however, a little overcrowded at the moment—the whole detention center was temporarily stuffed with belligerent guests from the Xanadu. Ntebe and Kraus had been deposited in here with us, although they had been taken away again a while later, for reasons only I could guess. As I lay listening, I thought I could hear them coming back now, still protesting their innocence as loudly as the most guilty felon who ever lived. But even the thought of what they might have in mind by the time they were in here again couldn't dim my shining relief.

Well, maybe a little.

The cell door opened. Ntebe and Kraus limped in, bloody but unbowed. They looked at me as though murder was the next crime on their mind, and the door clicked shut behind them.

I stood up carefully, as Hana did, while she said, "You two take the beds. You look like you need them more than we do." I saw the concern on her face, and hated to think about what it was going to change into in another minute or two.

Ntebe said, "You son of a hyena," looking directly at me. But he came past me to sit down heavily on the empty bed. "I think I've got a concussion. Not serious, but I'm not seeing too well," he said to Hana.

"He did it," Kraus said, pointing a shaking hand at me. "He did it on purpose!" He looked around wildly. "And I could have told them who he is and I didn't—!" He turned back, pounding on the door with the flat of his hand. "Guard! Guard!"

"Basil, please—" Ntebe grimaced. "What sort of pesthouse do you think this is? Use the phone."

"Wait a minute." Hana shook her head, putting her hand down firmly on the phone's receiver before Kraus could get to it. "What's going on here? What are you talking about? Be calm, Basil—"

He took a deep breath. "Your prize computer set those damned Veggies on us while he was in the bathroom. They accused *us* of

slander!... What did you tell them, Yarrow? What did you shay?" It was hard for him to enunciate, with a fat lip.

I kept my face straight. "We just discussed melons." Knowing that whatever happened, at least I would always have the satisfaction of having saved them and gotten even with them all at once.

He came toward me, suddenly calm; and while I stood wondering what he was up to, he wrenched ETHANAC loose from my belt, jerking the plug out of my spine.

I'd never had contact broken that abruptly. I swayed, seeing coruscating Persian rugs, and sat down hard on the floor...

Shaking my head, I blinked up at Kraus' smug puffin-face—and didn't like him any better than Ring did. He stood over me gloating, like some bad guy out of *Two-Fisted Romance Comics*, with ETHANAC hanging there in his hand. I made a grab; but he backed up, still smiling, while the others just stood around looking stupid.

I sat back, disgusted. "Kraus, why don't you stick your nose in your ear, and blow your brains out?" Hana's mouth twitched.

He got red in the face, but he still had everything on me, and he knew it. He waved ETHANAC like a rubber hose. "You got those fanatics to attack us, in order to stop us from completing our plan. Admit it!"

I hunched over, pulling my knees up, feeling like he stole my pants instead of my brain. Maybe because it was the same thing, in this bunch: I felt naked when Hana looked at me. "Okay," I shrugged. "I admit it. So sue me."

"We'll do a lot more than that, if we can't get to that port—" Ntebe said; his hand made a fist.

"But why?" Hana frowned at him, but the frown came along when she looked back at me. "Why should he? There was a reason, wasn't there? There had to be a reason, Yarrow—" Her voice was almost pleading.

I smiled. "You finally got my name right."

She looked at me blankly.

Kraus pulled open ETHANAC's case; he started to poke around inside, like a monkey looking for a banana. "If Hana wants to know why, Yarrow, you'll tell her—"

"Damn it, quit screwing around with that stuff! That kidney equipment ain't cheap." I was getting tired of being on the wrong end in his hero fantasies.

"Oh, stop it, Basil." Hana snapped the case shut, barely missing his fingers. "Never break anything until you're sure you won't regret it... Now—what about the reason?" She reached up to touch her black eye, and the frown came back.

I shook my head, staring at them. "When are you people gonna learn you don't have to hang me up by my thumbs to get me to go along? I mean, didn't anybody ever tell you 'please' is the magic word? Sure there was a reason!" I told it to them, thumbscrews, handshake and all. "You oughta be damn glad Ring thought of something, you lousy ingrates, because Salad had your number right from the start."

"But if you hadn't thought of anything, you would have gone ahead and turned us over to that sadist?" Hana looked grim.

"You were all ready to do the same t' me, and with a helluva lot less reason!" I stood up, feeling like a cable on overload. "You've got a hell of a nerve, y' know, running around in the real world pretendin' you know what you're doing. Kickin' my lives around like some kind of football. Finks, Ink, oughta lock you up in an ivory tower, an' throw away the keys!" I took a deep breath. "Lemme tell you something about pain. Pain *hurts*." I shook my hand at them. "It don't matter if they use clubs or electrodes, the one thing pain always is, is real. So the next time you clowns wanna make a joke of it, try to imagine how you'd feel if the joke'd been on you." I moved forward and took ETHANAC out of Kraus's hands, and nobody tried to stop me.

I reached up under my shirt with the cord, to find the socket on my back, and Hana said. "Yarrow, wait." I waited, looking at her. "Why didn't you say all of this before? Why all the tangled webs and sleight of hand?"

I grinned weakly. "I wanted to tell you, Lady Luck; I really did.

But I got outvoted. Ring's kind of paranoid—you gotta remember his background. Sometimes he don't know who to trust. And ETHANAC... Well, he *likes* to do things the hard way. I'm really sorry..."

"*You're* sorry—?" Kraus said.

Hana's expression was hard to read. "You really *are* a different man, aren't you? You're not Ethan Ring."

I nodded. "That's what he kept tryin' to tell you."

"Are you really happy this way? Lost, drowned out, taken over... Do you really enjoy having that— thing attached to you like a leech?"

I grinned. "If I told you how good it feels, you'd prob'ly slap my face. And there's a lot of me in Ring. Just like there's a lot of ETHANAC. The best part of us both. He'd be no place without us..." I plugged in, and waved goodbye.

And waved hello. The pleasure of coming back made it hard to stay angry... "Hi, friends. Sorry we were so rudely interrupted." I glanced at Kraus.

"My apologies," he said, managing to look like he almost meant it.

"All our apologies," Hana added, as if she really did. "And our thanks. To—all three of you."

"Accepted." I nodded.

"I just want you to know this wasn't, isn't, all some big joke to us, either, Yar—Ring." Ntebe leaned forward, propping his head in his hands. "It's true that we had no business dragging you into it. But getting that keyhole inserted wasn't some kind of frolic for us. It could have been the key to freedom for an oppressed people. You of all people ought to appreciate that." He stretched out on the bed, with an arm across his eyes. "But since we were wrong about the location of that computer port, it's all academic anyway..."

The look that settled over Hana's face, and Kraus's, then, matched the tone of his voice. Rraus sat down on the other bed, and then lay down, with a sigh. Hana shook her head, leaning wearily

against the wall. “I guess you were right about that ivory tower.”

“I was right when I told you I knew where the real port was, too.”

“What?” She looked up at me as though I’d just confessed to being a male impersonator. “What are you talking about?”

“When I poked into that computer’s secrets, I found out where Khorram Kabir gets his mail. And that is—”

There was a small electronic buzz, and the door slid open, revealing Birnbaum, the bland-faced peacenik who’d put us all in here. “All right, lady. You and your husband are free to go. Sorry for the inconvenience.”

“Husband?” I gulped at Hana. Had she been holding out on me? Was one of these—

“Come *on*, dear,” she took my arm in a firm grip and towed me toward the door. “He’s still not quite himself.” She smiled sweetly. “If he ever was.”

Kraus and Ntebe began to get up from the beds, but Birnbaum waved them back. “You two aren’t going anyplace. They still haven’t decided whether you’re the victims of that fight, or the cause of it.”

Hana stopped beside him. “Well, how long will that take? We don’t want to leave our friends—”

“Got to, lady.” Birnbaum shrugged. “You’re free. They’re not. I don’t know how long it’ll take to get this cleared up. Your guess is as good as mine.” He waved us out into the cold, cruel world.

“Now what?” Hana leaned back, resting her head on the anodized grillwork of the bench in the square. The square, like the majority of Elysian Field’s tourist complex, is underground to conserve heat. We sat like wretched orphans, staring at the tourists staring into brightly lit open storefronts.

“Well, I could throw this into that and make a wish.” I held up my credit card, the only possession I had left at the moment, and gestured at the fountain in the center of the square; golden globes

and stars of colored light drifted in its pearly spray.

“I wish we could spring Cephas and Basil!” she rapped her knee with her fist. Her knuckles were skinned. “Damn it! If Salad even suspects you could have found out the truth, every minute we waste is bad.” Her mouth tightened.

“Frankly, they looked like they’d be about as useful as a seeing-eye roach, for the next few days, anyway. I don’t know how much more self-sacrifice they can take.”

Her sigh was a little surly; she brushed back her hair. “Well, at least you can tell me where Kabir is—”

“He’s become a monk.”

“You’re kidding.”

“May I be struck dead. He’s entered some monastery that’s leasing land down by the pole in the Arab sector. One of those crank groups from Earth, someplace called Debre Damo—an obscure Christian sect.”

“I’ve heard of them. There was a write up in *Ethnocentricities*... . But by all the old gods, I can’t picture Khorram Kabir counting beads in a Christian monastery!” She checked to see if I was serious. “I know he likes to hide himself away, and nobody really knows what kind of man he is; but I never imagined—”

“I somehow doubt that he counts anything unless it’s seeyas.” I shrugged. “But who knows? He’s eccentric enough to have information delivered to him by courier, and not by computer hookup. I’d stake every bit of my own credit on that port being where he is, at that monastery. It’s the last place anybody would ever think to look for it.”

She looked down, concentrating. “But they don’t allow women!”

“The monks?”

She nodded. “They don’t even allow any female animals in their compound, to distract them from whatever it is they *do* think about...” She wrestled with a smile, and lost. “One of their saints was so devout that he stood on one leg praying until the other one dropped off from disuse. The leg had little wings on it in all his

pictures, to prove that it had gone to heaven with him... And for centuries the only female creatures they've set eyes on have been chickens!" She made small cackling noises. "Talk about situational ethics." Her mouth quivered with frustration, as if she didn't know whether to laugh or swear.

"Well, what can you expect from the followers of a man who stood on one leg until the other one fell off?"

She gave up and let it be laughter. "I don't know why I'm laughing... that's disgusting, damn it! The whole situation is disgusting..." She slumped against my shoulder, and the situation was suddenly anything but disgusting, from where I sat.

"Say," I said, letting my head rest casually against hers, "you told the peaceniks I was your husband—"

"Sorry. They wouldn't let me stay in a cell with three men unless I was married to at least one of them." She sat up, tucking in her silken shirt, brushing wrinkles out of her pants.

"You know, in the Arab territories, if you declare that you're married, it's considered official—"

She eyed me suspiciously. "I thought that only applied to divorce. And besides, you have to say it three times."

"Hm." I had a sudden sense of intangibility, as if something was slipping away from me... "Who are you, Lady Luck? What are you? Where do you come from and why are you here?" *And why does it matter so much to me that I know?*

She smiled. "I'm Japanese and gypsy. I'm an ethnohistorian. I come from nowhere in particular and everywhere on Earth, I became a fink because somebody liked my doctoral thesis on sympathetic magic, and I'm here because I believe in freedom of thought for all humanity... And—please don't ask me that next question, Ethan Ring, because I've answered too many for my own good, and yours, already. You have your own life to lead; and it's time I got back to mine." Her smile filled with broken flowers, fading into the distance between us. "Thank you for your help. Your secret will be safe with us. I apologize again for all the trouble—"

"I'll plant the keyhole for you," I said.

We sat staring in surprise at each other.

“You mean that?”

I nodded.

“Why?”

“Why not?... I’ve got plenty of vacation left. And after the last twenty-four hours at the Xanadu, I could stand a trip to a monastery.”

Her smile closed the gap between us again. “Thank you. But that doesn’t really answer my question.” She studied my face, as if she were looking for someone else.

“That’s not really the question you were asking, is it?”

“No...” She glanced down, and didn’t ask it. “Ethan, Yarrow said he was happy with your arrangement. Is he, really? Does he ever really have any free will? And what about the computer?”

“ETHANAC can only see the world through my eyes. I’m his port; but he likes it that way. He’s not much on social niceties, so he never dominates unless I lose control. Thank God he’s only got one real human vice—” remembering last night. “And Yarrow’s emotions are...” I felt my face redden like a cheap hotel sign. “Let me tell you something about Yarrow, Hana; He had a mind like a sieve; he hardly opened his mouth except to change feet. When they called him up about the project, he was watching TD in a seedy little flat that was so depressing you wouldn’t commit suicide in it... No, I’m not talking behind his back. You know the story of the Frog Prince? Well, that story’s about me, with a few of the names changed.” She was still half frowning. “When you shine two different colors of a light on a wall, Hana, you get a third color, a new color. But if you turn off one of those other colors, that new color disappears. We need each other. We like each other. We chose the name Ring because it means completeness.”

She touched my shoulder lightly, said softly, “Michael Yarrow is nobody’s frog. And *you* are without a doubt the least boring man I’ve ever met...” Her lips were very close to my ear.

“Well, that’s a start.” I leaned over, and kissed them.

We came up for air, some immeasurable time later, and she

whispered, “What are we going to do? Everything we have is back in that damned hotel.”

I held up my credit card again. “We’ve got fifty thousand seeyas.” Which was more than adequate to get us what we needed.

“Are you sure you want to go through with this?” were her last words to me as impatient commuters jostled by us into the south-polar shuttle. And she caught me by the collar of my jacket, letting me have all five hundred kilowatts of her luminous gaze.

Knowing perfectly well that she already knew what my answer would be, I pulled her into my arms anyway, and kissed her one last, lingering time. “It’s a little late to be asking that now... but thanks for asking.” I broke away again, while I still had the willpower, and backed toward the shuttle entrance.

“Ethan—” She reached out again, holding something in her hand this time. “Take this with you.” She pushed it into my pocket, murmuring some words in a language I didn’t know. “So you’ll know you’re in my thoughts...”

And maybe it wasn’t keeping me in her thoughts, but it sure kept her in mine. Leaning back in my seat in the bouncing ground buggy, half a day later, I flexed my wrist again: It was still there, trapped under my heavy mitten, proving last night hadn’t all been a dream—a narrow band of hand-worked silver, worn smooth with age and woven with strands of shining, ebony black hair. I smiled inanely at the thought; or went on smiling, since the whole endless, teeth-loosening trip out from New Cairo had passed in a blissful haze while I replayed my memories of last night. I blushed, or someone inside my head did, in spite of the fact that Faoud, my guide, seemed to be totally oblivious to my daydreams, not to mention my very presence. I glanced over at him, his jowls spilling congenially over the neck ring of his pressure suit, his hair combed forward with lots of jelly, into a crest that had been out of style for a good ten years. The radio crackled and spat, blaring traditional Arab music—the kind ETHANAC likes for its subtle tonal slides, but which after a year still makes me wish I was deaf. Faoud

cracked his gum in time, grinning contentedly. He seemed to be good-natured, and the travel agent had recommended him; but I could tell that he thought I was crazy.

Maybe he had a point—I glanced down again at the presence of my insulated jacket, or rather the absence of my pressure suit... no portable environments allowed by monks of Debre Damo. I'd gotten myself an O₂ breather, which at least even the purists required, but which was still going to leave me feeling like I was about three kilometers up some mountain, back on Earth—a prospect that didn't appeal to me a lot.

With Hana's background information and ETHANAC's specialized skills, I'd managed to manufacture an instant retreat for myself in the "natural" environment of the transplanted Debre Damo. But I'd been emphatically warned by the travel agent that I'd never get my face through the door if it was covered by helmet glass. The rules were very strict. I found it difficult to believe that any influential capitalist would ever willingly seek out such asceticism... not to mention Khorram Kabir, who had apparently been there for years. But he had; and so had others, according to my private data checks. Was it possible they came to secretly confer with him—? I wondered if that would make things easier, or harder. Another interesting detail I'd uncovered in my probings was that the monks had come here from Earth approximately thirteen years ago—and Khorram Kabir owned the land on which this monastery sat. Which might mean a lot of things—all of them worth remembering.

The balloon-wheeled ground buggy leaped like a kangaroo as we went up and over something hard. Faoud let nothing stand in his way, including my tendency to motion sickness. I stared desperately out the window, watching us emerge from our own billowing dust cloud into a field of house-sized red boulders stained black with soot. They reminded me of burned-out war ruins, a particularly depressing image. In order to melt Mars' polar caps, and keep them melted—to take advantage of all the potentially available atmosphere—humans have had to keep a continuous supply of low-albedo material distributed over the poles. Reaching into their checkered past for an easy way to do it, the colonists came up with

the most inexpensive and dependable source of such material: industrial pollution. When the Martians say, “Pollution is our most important product,” they aren’t kidding. The Americans in the north, the Arabs and friends in the south, all refine ores for shipment home to Earth by the dirtiest means imaginable—and the product is always secondary to the process.

Even though I appreciate the fact that without the pollution the colonies would never survive, and without the colonies neither would I, I still haven’t shaken my Earthbound moral conditioning about despoiling nature. I’m not exactly a blooming Veggie, but I’m glad I don’t have to visit the South Pole often.

I patted ETHANAC’s case, reassuring us all. While I’d been passing the time in thoughts of Hana he’d gone through the inadequate information tape I’d managed to dig up on Ge’ez, the language used by the monks, and had done a linguistic comparison with Arabic, which it resembles. I let his analysis seep up into my conscious mind and fix there, for easy reference. It’s nice to be a quick study.

“There it is, *haji*—” Faoud called everybody *haji*, which was something like a cross between “deacon” and “my lord.” He pointed over the instrument board at the flat, grimy crater floor ahead of us.

I peered out dutifully, expecting to see a lonely, inaccessible impact peak protruding somewhere ahead, since *Debre Damo* meant *holy mountain*, and the original Earthly monks had made their home on one. But instead all I saw was our incipient plunge into the canyon that had suddenly opened up on the flat ahead of us—“Look out for that hole!”

Faoud smiled at me, with that benign tolerance one reserves for the mentally deficient. “That’s where it is, *haji*. The monastery’s down at the bottom.”

I watched wide-eyed while we proceeded toward disaster at ten meters per second, wondering if he really intended to drive us right off the edge. But he remembered the brakes at the absolute last minute, and we slewd to a stop in a cloud of cloying dust.

The dust settled all over the windshield, and it was not until we’d

put on helmet and mask and climbed out of the cab that I realized someone was actually waiting for us. The figure was bundled in rough clothes and coated with dust, and resembled nothing so much as a mud effigy; but by a process of elimination I decided he must be a monkish welcoming committee. Behind him, as we approached, I saw that the monstrous depths of the canyon glowed eerily: *Holy radiance!* Agnostic though I usually am, I was impressed.

Faoud and the monk exchanged greetings in Ge'ez. I listened, trying to get a functional feel for the new language... at the same time trying to believe I was not about to suffocate, which made it hard to pay attention. When the atmospheric pressure is about one-tenth Earth-normal, even pure oxygen leaves something to be desired. I gasped politely when Faoud presented me with gestures to the monk, whose name roughly translated as Brother Prosperity. And then they were discussing money... *Money!*

“He says it costs two seeyas now for the trip down to the monastery, *haji*.”

“Two seeyas? At this point? That’s a little worldly, isn’t it?” *No wonder they call him Brother Prosperity.* I looked back at Faoud.

Faoud shrugged. “It’s hard work for him. And it’s traditional; they’ve charged money on Earth for hundreds of years. You can bargain him down, if you want; get a better price—”

I rummaged bad-humoredly in the side pocket of my knapsack, pulled out a couple of markers. “Here, go ahead and pay him.” The dry cold was beginning to make my contact-lens films sticky; I blinked with great difficulty.

They both nodded at me, with what I hoped was approval. “Well, I’ll be back with the new week, *haji*,” Faoud said cheerfully, already shuffling away toward his vehicle. “Hope you have a good rest,” as if he felt my coming here in the first place was sure proof that I needed one. “If you don’t, well”—he shrugged, and pulled open the door—“I guess you’re stuck with it.” The door slammed shut behind him, and he started the power unit. The buggy backed and turned and leaped away, as if he couldn’t get back to civilization fast enough. I suddenly knew how he felt.

They should've called this one Holy Hole. ... I turned back toward the glowing canyon, and Brother Prosperity handed me a leather harness. I looked at him, and back at the harness, with a sudden sinking feeling. There was a series of gigantic, rickety-looking wheels and pulleys at the canyon's edge. *What am I doing here?* "Faoud!" I yelled, turning back, waving the rope. But there was nothing left of him now except a snaking, shrinking cloud of dust, and my shout died a death of horrible futility in thin air. My arm dropped, abruptly made of lead, and I puffed asthmatically.

Resigned, I trudged past the monk to the edge of the cliff, to see what I was in for. "Yeagh." I backed up again with my eyes shut. "*Allah' akbar!*" It's bad enough that I'm just not used to the grand scale in which Mother Nature decorated Mars—this cleft was small stuff, but it was still four kilometers wide, and a good one or two deep. But the walls of the cleft were polished. That, I was certain, had nothing to do with nature. Mankind had been fooling around here, and the fact that only the upper portion of this wall and the lower portion of the far one were sheared to a glassy smoothness told me the reason: to concentrate heat from the sun. The walls were a set of mirrors, designed to focus heat in the canyon bottom during the summer's full-time days. And the only way down past that sheer five-hundred-meter drop was... *this!* I looked down at the harness again. Either that, or sit up here on this freezing plain and turn into a human ice cream bar.

The monk regarded me patiently, as if he was used to this sort of vacillation.

I began to put on the harness.

I remember only one coherent thought as I was lowered down the hot, blinding cliff face... I was certainly glad that I'd paid him the whole two seeyas.

At the foot of the mirroring cliff, the natural canyon wall sloped out and down in a slightly more reasonable crumple of clefts and spines. After I'd recovered from Yarrow's brief attack of hysteria, I actually found a switch-back trail to guide my trembling legs on down. By the time I reached the monastery itself the canyon was pitch black, and I was ready to beg for sanctuary.

The monks took me in at the airlock like the Prodigal Son; the monastery dome was not pressurized, but at least the atmosphere inside was pure oxygen. They led me through what smelled like a barnyard, by candlelight, and gave me a nice hot bowl of gruel before they tucked me into a tiny hut for the night. I had some very strange dreams.

In the early morning blackness Yarrow wakened to chanting and bells, appropriately wondering what in heaven had happened to us. After we remembered, I lay in the cold darkness on the hard cot, swaddled in rough blankets, trying to remember *why*. Realizing, at last, that this whole situation was totally absurd. I was doing this for Hana—who was part gypsy. And an ethnohistorian, she'd said. One who specialized in the study of so-called primitive magic rituals. Voodoo, hexes... love charms? "*You'll know you're in my thoughts.*" ... Was it possible? Could I have been bewitched—?

Of course not. I groped for the tinderbox and lit an oxygen-bright candle against the darkness ceremonially. What sort of throwback was I, anyway? It had been scientifically proven that pieces of hair and fingernail clippings had no magic properties. It was all in the mind of the beholder. *Meine Gedanken sind frei, damn it!* If I wasn't capable of getting into this grotesque situation entirely on my own, then I didn't deserve to be called a man...

When the tardy autumn sunlight finally slopped over into the canyon, I made a thorough mental map of everything under the dome, inside and out, with ETHANAC's help. That turned out to be more complicated than I'd expected: the compound was literally a maze of round stone huts, separated by a network of claustrophobic alleyways. What I'd taken by smell for a barnyard last night turned out to be the main courtyard, but liberally populated with unhousebroken chickens. At one end of it was the church, a striking three-story rectangle dominating the sea of round stone huts. Its walls were made of stone, too, and protruding steel poles supported the upper stories, gleamingly out of place, like a helicopter among pterodactyls. I tripped over a chicken, remembering situational ethics. Well, God only knew where they'd find wooden poles on Mars, anyway. This sect must have been a progressive offshoot, to

leave Earth in the first place. Thirteen years ago... just about the time Khorram Kabir disappeared from view. I wondered how much choice they'd had about leaving.

But nowhere did I see anything that looked remotely anachronistic enough to be the secret headquarters of a one-man international empire. No telltale *haute cuisine* cooking among the pots of vegetable stew, no view-screens among the murals of little winged feet, no indoor plumbing... unfortunately. If Khorram Kabir was actually a full-time resident here, then he really must be living the life of an ascetic recluse—and any of these robed, placid figures doing humble chores all around me might even be the richest man in the solar system. I took to peering at them, but I was damned if I could find Kabir anywhere among the white woolen robes and solemn faces. They tended to bless me.

On the way back to my hut after the evening prayers, I overheard three monks discussing the expected arrival of another guest, one whom I took to be a regular. And I swear I heard somebody say “helicopter.”

But that was all I could understand of it, and I wasn't sure whether it meant anything at all. If it didn't, it left me totally without any idea of what to try tomorrow.

Kabir *had* to be here, I knew that the Xanadu's computer wasn't lying. But damn it, he must be invisible! I thought about Hana, and the others, and how it looked like I might be going to let them down, after all... And then I thought about Hana some more, and lay awake on my cot far into the night, troubled by some very impure thoughts.

Which proves that even vice has its virtues. Because if I hadn't been lying awake, I might never have picked up the almost imperceptible vibrations of... a helicopter landing? The quality of the vibration and my eavesdropping clicked together in my mind. I got up and peered out the doorway of my hut. It was close to the wall of the dome, and beyond it I saw—lights, landing lights echoing off the canyon wall, silhouetting the vaguely obscene form of a blunt, double-rotored Martian 'copter. A helicopter is not a common sight on Mars even now, the air pressure being what it

isn't; and getting one into and out of a canyon is no fun. Furthermore, there was a lone figure, in a pressure suit, walking this way... I decided that this was no ordinary visitor.

I struggled into my clothes and crept through the confusion of alleyways as quickly as possible, the monks not being believers in nightlights, either. I reached the main courtyard without breaking a leg, in time to see the person unknown cross it by candlelight, escorted by two monks. They went into the church, and didn't come out again. The church... the only building I hadn't been able to explore completely, because it was forbidden to the uninitiated...

Which was undoubtedly the point. I felt a little miffed. And what about Kabir? Could it be that he was the midnight visitor? That this monastery was only one more false front, that he only came here to pick up his mail? And to consult his computer net: what else would he be doing sneaking into a monastery at this hour of the night? I was willing to set odds he hadn't come to pray for his sins...

I huddled by the wall, waiting for him to finish his business so that I could finish mine... and waiting, and waiting. The monks must have had some kind of solar batteries feeding out some heat to keep them from freezing to death at night; I wished they'd been a little more charitable about the amount.

But at last my impatience was rewarded: the suited figure and his escorts, wrapped in flickering candle-glow, drifted out of the church and on across the courtyard, but not toward the airlock. Apparently he still had his mail to read. I wondered whether I ought to obey my better instincts and go back to bed until he was safely gone. But on the other hand, it was only going to get colder tonight; and who knew how long he planned to stay?

So I scurried across the courtyard, trailing dim shadows in the watery double moonlight. The roosting chickens paid no more attention to me than they had to Kabir; maybe they were comatose. I entered the church, and, safely inside, removed the finger-sized flashlight I'd secreted in ETHANACs case. And just for good measure, I patted Hana's silver wristband: *Stay with me, Lady Luck.*

I switched on the flashlight and crossed the chapel where I'd

prayed this evening, to the curtained doorway in the opposite wall. And hesitated, at the thought of committing possible sacrilege. The fact that the monks didn't seem to object to Kabir's use of their sacred areas didn't mean that they'd feel the same way about me. After all, as their benefactor, he probably had special dispensations; and as someone out to sabotage him, I probably didn't. But no one could deny that my motives were pure; and so my situational ethics were as justifiable as anyone's—

I pushed aside the hanging and stepped into the inner chamber. I shone the light around the room, over manuscripts on dusty tables, over intricately filigreed metal crosses and murals of saints and flat viewcreens on the walls... *flat viewcreens?* I pulled the light back.

And there it was. Against the rough surface of the far wall, a rectangular screen just waiting for a chance to speak; a small, neat keyboard console beneath it; a single chair—a computer port. Khorram Kabir's entire empire before me, unguarded and unsuspecting... I stood for a moment limbering up my frozen fingers and letting my fantasies run wild. And then I sat down and got to work.

The screen bathed the watching saints in an unnatural glow as I switched on the terminal. I plugged ETHANAC's jack into the console, and let him take me mentally by the hand on a journey into this incredible mechanical mind. He began to enter inconsistent data, to call up the system's data-checker and get a clearer idea of how the system itself functioned. I felt the data-checker emerge, and felt like a social climber getting his first invitation to the grand ball.

But there were still so many worlds within to conquer: This was probably the largest and most diverse computer net ever created—a veritable heaven of programs within programs like Chinese puzzles, hierarchies of programs, systems, files like a pantheon of strange gods. I wondered what it would feel like to really be a part of that network, to really understand even a fraction of it, and have that fraction become an integral part of myself...

Not this time. I was here to locate a specific subsystem and poke holes in it, I couldn't afford to treat this like a busman's holiday.

That could attract attention; and avoiding the attention of the system's gatekeeper routines was one of my main concerns. But ETHANAC's whole "education" had been oriented toward committing just this sort of illegal break-in without tripping the alarms, and if anybody could get us past the electronic bear traps he could.

I sat feeling him sift and poke and discard and try again, probing for one tiny flaw, and then another; holes to let him through from one subroutine to another, getting a little further in, a little higher up each time. I thought of the Xanadu's outmoded system— getting into that had been as simple as opening a door; getting into this one was like cracking a safe. The process involved thousands of failures for every success; but ETHANAC could try, try again at a rate I physically couldn't comprehend. The subsentient analysis was a strange sensation, faster than thought—I could feel things happen without being aware of how, the way a tennis player hits a ball. Time became formless, the world outside seemed like molasses. It was almost a kind of meditation... Zen and the Art of Computer Break-in.

And successfully breaking into this computer network would probably be the greatest achievement of my entire life, in a perverse sort of way: I'd discovered that by entering the system through this port, I'd chosen the most difficult approach of all. Because the computer itself must be here on Mars—maybe even right in this room... there was no time lag whatsoever. If its mechanical parts were located on Earth, I'd have the advantage of only having to deal with its autonomic nervous system, its knee-jerk defense reflexes, which weren't all that flexible. The time lag would effectively prevent the gatekeepers from getting in my way. But the situation was reversed, and that meant that ETHANAC had met the challenge of a lifetime. Even with only remote control defenses to protect it, no one had ever gotten into this system successfully from Earth... I wondered whether ETHANAC had just ironically fulfilled the purpose intended by his creators.

This was not only the largest system we'd ever tackled; I was beginning to think it was the strangest system too. It was almost as

if I'd programmed it myself... and that was no compliment. I'm the solar system's best at finding and correcting bugs, but I have absolutely no sense of programming style. I can't be bothered with it, I go straight for the machine language basics. Which means that once I've done something, anybody else has a hell of a time untangling my work. They say a camel is a horse put together by a committee—well, I'm a one-man committee; both a blessing and a curse, as my boss once told me... And so was the state of this machine's software. Maybe it had been a security measure: nothing was where it logically belonged, it was buried under piles of unrelated data. It was like creeping through the back rooms of some reclusive trash fetishist's castle, stacked to the ceiling with junk and old news printouts. And somehow I had to tunnel through it all to the control room, the castle keep, where he kept the supervisor programs that would let me manipulate to my heart's content.

And then, with a sudden rush of triumph, I realized my wish had been granted. Doctors bury their mistakes, and so do programmers, if they're lucky... but somebody's luck had just run out. I'd already passed up several obvious errors in the system, because they were just too obvious. But this time I'd found an inconsistency that was utterly inconsequential—and I could use its existence to draw out the supervisor's error-handling routines. They would drop the drawbridge for me, taking me for a Noble Programmer, and I would be *in—deep trouble*. Circuits closed, contacts were frozen, the guards moved in on me with swords drawn... I'd rung the bell. I'd walked straight into a security trap, and now I was—

Who are you? an incredulous voice demanded.

Going crazy? I shook my head like a stunned cat. *Did I hear—?*

You're trapped, Ethan Ring. You won't escape. I've been waiting for you. ...

Voices. Now I knew how Joan of Arc felt.

Tell me who and what you are—

My first thought was that I'd inadvertently created another monster, brought this system to life, somehow, too. But I'd never

heard *voices*. Even ETHANAC had only been semirational for his first few hours... “W-who are *you*?” I subvocalized the thought, feebly defiant.

I am Korram Kabir.

So that was it: A megalomaniac computer, believing it was its own creator... *Or was it—?* Was it possible, could it really be true? Had this crazy-quilt system been sentient all along; had someone actually succeeded in achieving the impossible... turning a human mind, or personality, into software—?

Exactly, the self-satisfied voice in my head said; the feel of telepathic speech was like the irritating tickle that catches in your throat and won't let you cough.

So at last I could put all those rumors to rest. Khorram Kabir wasn't senile or dead. Oh, no—he was alive and well, and living in a computer. He had literally become a nonperson, he had retired from the world and cast off his mortal body in the most genuine sense. His mortal body... If this was Khorram Kabir, then who was that stranger I'd seen tonight—?

As if on cue, a voice behind me said, “Well, Mr. Ring. What a pleasant surprise.”

Turning my head at that point was the most difficult thing I'd ever done in my life. Because I already knew that strangled rabbit voice could only belong to one man... I looked around at him.

For once in my life, why couldn't I have been wrong? Salad stood across the room, helmet in hand, his bald head gleaming like the deadly satisfaction in his eyes.

I leaped up out of the chair, trying to pull ETHANAC's jack free from the panel. But I couldn't get it loose, Kabir had locked it into the console. I stood there tugging at it, the boy at the dike with his finger stuck, “Come on, dammit, let go of me!”

Salad leered at me in silent appreciation, and then he pulled out the gun.

I froze, caught with my pants down and my hand in the cookie jar. “I know what this looks like, I know what you're thinking, but actually I was only, I mean I really—”

The gun spat once, inaudibly, and something hit my knee like an invisible ax. I collapsed into the seat with a cry of heartfelt agony, clutching my leg in disbelief.

“I’m so glad it was you, Mr. Ring,” Salad said congenially. “After you betrayed our agreement. After you caused so much damage at the hotel. After you left without paying for any of it...” He broke into a smile that would have done justice to a homicidal maniac. “Well, now you’re going to pay for it all, Mr. Ring. Because Mr. Kabir still wants to know who hired you. And I’m going to make you tell me who it was... But please don’t tell me too soon; that spoils the fun. And besides, it won’t do you a bit of good—” Any minute he was going to be drooling. He lifted the gun again.

“Oh, my God,” I moaned, too dazed to think straight. “Oh, my God. Help me, Kabir, please, you don’t want to feel him do this to me! Stop him, you can make him stop—!” I don’t know where the inspiration came from, but it must have been heaven-sent.

Because the screen in front of me lit up in ten-centimeter letters: “salad, stop.”

“Look!” I babbled, patting the screen frantically. “Look, look—”

Salad lowered his gun, and his eyes widened fractionally. They narrowed again. “This is a trick. You tampered—”

“It’s no trick!” It’s hard to shout through clenched teeth.

“Salad”—new lettering, smaller—“this is Kabir.” A code sequence printed out. “I want to question this man myself, in my own way. You will not touch him unless I give the order. Understood?”

“But you said—” Salad lowered the gun all the way, looking incredulous. “Understood, sir. I didn’t know you could—hear, sir.”

“There are a lot of things you don’t know about me, Salad,” the screen said. “And you never will.”

Including the fact that Kabir was reading my mind... *So you throw yourself on my mercy, Ethan Ringl* His electronic telepathy formed words in my mind at the speed of thought; the screen went blank.

Yes, Mr. Kabir, I thought dutifully. *Thank you, sir.* If my voice

could have shaken, it would have.

It's a long time since I've—felt pain, Ring. I had forgotten how much I disliked it...

You're not the only one. I glanced down at my soggy pants leg, and wondered if he wanted to remember how it felt to be violently ill. *ETHANAC, help me out—* I felt a slight buzz begin inside my head as he damped out the pain receptors. *Whew—*my mind began to clear—*that's got it.*

And we're back to my first question, which you still haven't answered, Ring: Who are you, and what are you? Are you man, or machine? I've never had contact with something like you before. I didn't know such a creature even existed.

The feel of the conscious thought, I realized, was Arabic. I switched into it ingratiatingly. *It's mutual, sir. And I'm both. A man sitting at your terminal, a machine plugged into it; a mind made up of both.* I made my three color analogy for him.

A true symbiosis! How did it happen? Who made you what you are? Tell me about yourself— I felt a peculiarly poignant eagerness fill my mind.

It all started about a year ago. ... And for the second time in a couple of days I found myself taking a trip down memory lane, at the behest of an offer I couldn't refuse... *And I came to Mars as a crate of bologna. I've worked here in the Arab territories about a year, doing software maintenance.*

Naturally. I swear there was a chuckle. *Now, tell me how you came to be in your present fix—*

I jammed the memory with a burst of static, before he could read too much. *Sorry. That's classified.*

I can make you tell me. Or Salad can—

Oh, no— I glanced at Salad, waiting there like a vulture, complete with shiny skull; my panic rose again.

Don't panic, Ring. You're much too interesting to me for me to waste you on such an inconsequential matter. Particularly since

you've failed at whatever it was you were trying to do to me.

Relief and then dismay replaced my incipient horror. I had failed, ETHANAC had failed, this system had been too smart for us. I wondered whether ETHANAC would have won, if he'd been joined to the superior human mind that should have been his partner... It left me feeling oddly dizzy and drained. Something warm and wet was collecting down inside my right boot. *Thanks, I think.*

You fascinate me, Ring. And you fill me with envy.

I do?

Yes. There are some things even I can't control. You have the five things I can never buy, with all my wealth—the five human senses. I can't really see you, or anything else. I can't hear or touch or taste or smell. And I can't go back... my body is dead and buried. This is the closest I've come—this brief sharing of your own senses—to the outside world in thirteen years. Allah, you don't know how much it means to me to have discovered that you exist! And you're the only one?

The only one I know of. I was surprised at the emotion that filled me then, especially that it was all my own. I realized how well ETHANAC understood what he was saying.

As I am the only one. The only Khorram Kabir; the man who may live forever. I control an empire... but I can't touch it. I can't see my beloved Xanadu—

Then why? Why did you ... do this to yourself? Everyone believes you wanted to get away from all that, that you didn't want anything to do with the world any more.

I was sick, my health was going. But I didn't want to lose control. I became a "recluse" to set the stage for this transformation—and it was successful. Only Khorram Kabir could control the resources to achieve what I have become... And now that I have it, I'll never give it up, I'll keep control of my empire in a way that no ruler before me ever managed to do!

I fought down the overwhelming flood of raw ambition that tried

to swallow me then, the way it had already swallowed a sixth of the people on Earth—*But you'll never see it rain again, or drink the Milk of Paradise, or touch and be touched by a beautiful woman!...* I felt the force break and drain away, leaving me weak. I put my hand over my wrist and slumped back in the chair, *Oh, Hana, think of poor Ethan tonight...* I remembered Kabir's presence in my mind, like a voyeur, and tried to control myself. For some reason it was getting hard to keep my mind on the subject, whatever it was... *was it Hana—?*

Hana—? Kabir's emotion backed up into my own again, making it suddenly so unbearable that I almost cried... or he did. I'd fed emotions into a computer before, but I'd never had them come back at me like this, until I couldn't tell them from my own. I couldn't tell them from my own.

And all at once he wasn't the master of the world playing blind man's bluff inside my head any more. He was just a lonely old man shut away in an institution, trying desperately to keep in touch with life. And suddenly I felt very sorry for him, and it was easy to let him see Hana as I'd first seen her, in the black light glow of the underworld, and in the Peacock Lounge at the Xanadu. And to remember eating and drinking and sharing the rain... *rain, rain, go away . . . come again some other day...*

Ring! Are you all right?

Huh? I found myself lying face down across the keyboard, trying to remember how it had happened. *Oh...sorry.* I pushed myself up with rubber arms, and flopped back in the seat again.

What's the matter with you? It was somewhere between indignant and appalled.

My lower leg was soaking wet. *I think... I've sprung a leak.* Which for some reason struck me so funny that I started to laugh. *It's not funny! It's not funny!* And suddenly it wasn't, and the idea of being forced to sit here and reminisce until I bled to death made me feel very cold and frightened.

Forgive me, Ring. I didn't realize... I didn't mean for this to happen. This has meant so much to me—

Poor man, I thought thickly. Poor Khorram Kabir, you poor bastard, you only want what I wanted... what we all want... freedom, that's all they want; the right to lead their own lives... touch each other... watch it rain... But you won't let them have what they want... and you can't have it either, so what's the point, you poor bastard? How it must hurt to live with so much sadness... I touched the screen's blind eye maudlinly, leaving a red spot; overwhelmed by misery and regret and not sure who it belonged to.

Stop it, Ring! For God's sake— It was like a slap in the face.

I jerked awake again, and took a deep breath.

What is it you want of me? Why did you come here?

A keyhole, I thought, I want to plant a lousy keyhole in your system for somebody, managing not to remember who. Some people who want to be free.

All right, then. Do it.

What?

Do it. I won't stop you.

Was I really hearing that? Why?

Because you had pity on me, Ring... Everyone feels sorry for the people a tyrant oppresses. But very few feel sorry for the way he oppresses himself. You feel sorry for us all... and for that I am in your debt. You almost make me feel that such nobility of purpose deserves to be rewarded— He drew back, like a snapping turtle pulling back into its shell. But I'm still a businessman, Ring. So I'll make you a deal. You're the only man in the solar system who can give me what I really want. I want to be able to see through your eyes, and I want to find out what kind of man you really are. The keyhole will remain open as long as you come here, once a month, and let me do that.

I kept my attention focused on the words with a supreme effort of will. Its a deal! I'll come back; if I ever... get out of here alive, that is

I'll see that you do. Plant your keyhole. I won't stop you.

The system called off its guards, raised its hands, dropped its drawbridges... ETHANAC made the changes in less time than it took to think about it. *So simple ...*

Goodbye, then, Ring. Or au revoir. Take care of yourself—you belong to me. A ghost of a chuckle, and then there was no one in my mind but me.

“salad” appeared on the screen again, and the most beautiful words I’d ever seen: “Get Mr. Ring to the hospital immediately.”

Salad pushed away from the manuscript table where he’d been perched patiently, and stared at the message, and at me: the chief executioner, who’d just been told the king had outlawed capital punishment. “Yes, Mr. Kabir—”

“ ‘Curfew shall not ring tonight,’ Salad.” I grinned a sickly imitation of bravado. It took all the strength I had to pull ETHANAC’s jack loose from the panel; even though no one was stopping me, this time. I switched off the terminal, leaving us in sudden darkness.

Salad produced a flashlight before I could find my own, thoughtfully turned it on me as I pulled myself up out of my seat... the sort of light they shine into your eyes when they’re giving you the third degree. My boot squelched nauseatingly when I put my weight on the injured leg, and the pain level shot up. ETHANAC blanked it out again obligingly, but I wondered whether I was going to do any permanent damage. My head felt like a tethered balloon. “Give me a hand, Salad. I think you’ve disqualified me from the standing broad jump.”

He crossed the room, still using the flashlight to maximum bad effect, and held out his hand. I reached out, took it, and shifted my weight. Salad released his grip with a slight jerk, and let me fall flat on my face.

I slowly untangled myself in the pool of light, and squinted up at him. I couldn’t see his expression, which may have been just as well.

“Oh. Sorry, Mr. Ring... but I’m afraid I can’t help you.”

“What do you mean—?” That didn’t come out sounding the way I’d intended it to. “Kabir... ordered you to help me, damn it!”

“No, Mr. Ring,” he said gently. “He told me to take you to the hospital. And I will, if you can get to my ’copter unaided. You see, he also told me not to touch you unless he said it was all right. And he never did.”

“You know that’s... what he meant!”

“I always obey his orders explicitly. To the letter. That’s why he trusts me.” The darkness grinned mockingly.

“He’s not going to... trust you if I’m... not here again in a month. He wants to see me—” I tried to get up, without much luck.

“Pathetic, Mr. Ring.”

“It’s true! Call him... ask him—”

“You’re wasting time, Mr. Ring. Every minute you sit there objecting you bleed a little more.”

It finally sank through my thickening head that that was the whole point of the game. I began to understand the horror behind the term “cat and mouse.” I got all the way to my feet this time, using fury as a crutch, and made it past the curtained doorway, through the prayer chapel, to the church entrance.

The distance across the moonlit courtyard to the dome’s airlock seemed to stretch like a topologist’s nightmare: 50 meters... 500... 5,000. I kept getting lost; or maybe it only seemed that way. There wasn’t a sign of another human being now—and that included what followed me, holding a flashlight. I didn’t suppose it would do any good to shout for help, even in Ge’ez, under the circumstances. *God helps those who help themselves.*

But we reached the airlock at last, my shadow and I. I was still in the spotlight; too preoccupied now to be embarrassed by the humiliating loss of privacy. And the light reminded me, inadvertently, that I wasn’t wearing an O₂ breather: The monks were an orderly order, and theirs gleamed like a row of little angels beside the airlock’s inner door. I stole one without the slightest regret. I turned the wheel on the airlock door, gasping like a fish out of water, and with the last of my strength gave Salad the finger

as we stepped inside.

But as the lock cycled, I realized that even my determination to beat him at his own game wasn't going to be enough. I was disassociating, coming apart... a dust storm was rising inside my head... red dust... The outer door swung open, and the incredible cold of the Martian night hit me like a fist. *ETHANAC! I'm goin' under—catch me...*

it's all right, michael. let go: i have you... no cold. no pain. dropping circulation to maintenance in upper body: redirect oxygen to mobile limbs. squint your eyes. step forward, through the door. step higher! balance. step again... again... vehicle to the left. steady... compensate. move your feet. watch salad— don't let him trip you. keep breathing! wait: two vehicles. two? which one—? "Salad... which one!" but he can't hear me. wait for him. wait. he'll use the light—hang on, michael.

more light: figures, two, coming toward me. who—? no, don't fall down! brace your legs. move your feet. have to get past them. have to—

"Ring! Is that you, Ring?"

"Salad, drop it! I've got you covered. Drop it!"

voices: ntebe, kraus... how—? no, can't stop, not yet. not yet... almost safe.

"Ring, old man! You're all right!" voice: ntebe. "We were afraid we'd come too late—"

"What did you do to him, Salad? What's the matter with him?" voice: kraus.

"'Copter... get to the 'copter."

"I have no idea, gentlemen. I caught him threatening Mr. Kabir. That's an illegal act. You're aiding a criminal. That's illegal, too." voice: salad.

"That's a matter of opinion." voice: kraus.

"'Copter... let go of me—" pants leg frozen stiff. leg not responding. don't fall. don't fall—

"Oops! Hang on, Ring, I've got you." voice: ntebe. hands, arms,

support— “Hana’s waiting with the ’copter. We’ll get you out of here. Come on, Kraus.”

“I’ve got both these guns on you, Salad. Don’t try anything stupid.” voice: two-gun kraus.

“For pity’s sake, Kraus, will you come on! Give me a hand here, he’s a dead weight.” voice: ntebe.

“More than you know, hopefully.” voice: salad. “He’s failed, you’ve all failed. FTI will regret this—”

“Having a good law firm means never having to say you’re sorry.” voice: ntebe. “Goodbye, Salad. Don’t think it’s been fun.”

more hands. helicopter coming up: good, yes... good hands. good guys. good riddance, salad—

“Ethan. Ethan—” voice: takhashi. “Hurry up— watch his head, Basil!” door sealing, safe now. relax... “What’s wrong with him, what happened? I *knew* it, I knew something was wrong... No, you pressurize, get us up out of here, Basil. Watch out for the downdrafts. Ethan’s mine, leave him to me... God, he’s cold as a witch’s tit; turn up the heat, too. And get out the first-aid kit, Cephas, we’ll—we’ll need bandages, when he thaws out... Ethan, can you hear me? Can you hear me?”

warm arms tightening... nice. cabin pressurized—breathe deep, michael... “No.”

“No?” voice: takhashi. “Yarrow—?”

“No.”

“ETH—ETHANAC?” voice: takhashi.

“Yes.”

“My God, he’s on autopilot.” voice: ntebe.

“Are they—coming back, ETHANAC? They are all right—” voice: takhashi... unsteady.

blood oxygen rising. restore circulation... interference... long tunnels... *help ... hell... hello? Where’s my body...*

welcome back, michael, everything’s just where it ought to be... Breathing pure oxygen under normal pressure was as good as a

transfusion. “Brr. H-hold me tight... and we will be, Lady Luck,” I mumbled, clutching my oxygen mask.

“Are you sure that’s the computer?” Ntebe leaned across my legs and peered at me. Beyond him I could see Orion dressed in his starry Sunday best, peeking in through the heavy window glass. I couldn’t quite grin at him.

“Doesn’t matter... we all... feel the same way about it.” I blinked; the frost was melting off my eyelashes and into my eyes. “You’ve got your keyhole, Ntebe. Salad... lost every bet, tonight.”

“Wonderful—!” But he glanced down at my leg, and his face turned grimly glum. “And you lost over a liter of blood...”

“Look on... the bright side. I’m still half full.”

“We did it, then. We actually did it!” Kraus chortled at the controls. “We foiled two of the greatest villains in the solar system! That’s an adventure too—”

“Basil,” Hana said, blowing gently on my frozen fingers, “shut up.”

The rest was silence.

“I’ll never play the violin again, you know.” I leaned on my cane at the solarium window, watching black smoke from the factory next to the hospital mushroom into the smog-brown polar air.

“You play with your feet?” Hana said.

I turned back thoughtfully. “You mean there’s some other way?”

Kraus groaned.

“Who’s the patient here, Kraus, you or me? I’m the only one who’s supposed to be in pain.” I hobbled across to join Hana at one end of the determinedly cheerful red plastic couch.

“A pain in the neck,” Kraus grinned at me good-naturedly, from the other end of it.

“Speaking of which, we’re still waiting for Salad’s legal ax to fall, on FTI, or at least on us. Somehow I don’t think he’ll have the nerve to try it—” Ntebe raised his eyebrows. Across the room one of

the other patients shouted, “Gin!” and tossed down cards. For some reason, none of them would play with me any more.

“If anybody gets the ax, it’ll be the headsman,” I said. “And I’m looking forward to delivering the *coup de grâce* ... I don’t think Khorram Kabir will be amused at what happened to me after his lights went out.”

Hana put a comforting arm around my shoulders. “Khorram Kabir... is software. I still can’t believe it. It’s too incredible.”

“Money can buy you anything, if you’ve got enough of it. Well, maybe not anything...” I shook my head.

“About your—deal with him, Ring.” Ntebe looked back at me, hesitated. “I don’t feel I have the right to ask this of you, after what you’ve done for us already, But if you could pay him those—visits—for even a few months...”

“I plan to keep my appointments.” I patted ETHANAC, nodding. “I’m not about to let all that trouble go for nothing. And besides, I want to do it. Because I understand what it means, not to be—” I glanced down at the dusty plastic plant in a pot beside me, remembering. *You belong to me, Ring* ... for a minute, I wondered just exactly what Kabir had had in mind when he’d chuckled at that. But, on the other hand— “Besides, how many people get to play the Ghost of Christmas Past to the biggest Scrooge in the system? I may melt his mechanical heart yet.”

Ntebe brightened. “Maybe you’ve got something there.”

“I hope it’s catching.”

“My fireship.” Hana kissed me on the cheek.

“Please,” I said, reddening. “Do that again.”

“Well. Yes.” Ntebe stood up, clearing his throat. “Come along, Basil. Let’s get ourselves a cup of tea or something, shall we?”

“What?... Oh.” Kraus stood up with him. “Oh.” They went away quietly.

“So tell me,” I held out my wrist, when we were alone at last. “What about this silver bracelet, anyway?”

She drew back. “What about it?”

“How did you know I needed you?”

She laughed. “It’s a tracer. And anyway, I kept track of Salad. He followed you... we followed him.”

“But how did you know I needed you *then*?”

The smile turned sly. “You don’t really want me to tell you the truth, do you?”

I thought about that.

“I didn’t think so.” She touched my wrist tenderly, and glanced away.

I leaned back, letting her beautiful face fill my eyes, and said in sudden earnest, “Do I want you to predict the future—?”

She looked back at me clinically. “Well, speaking strictly as a doctor, I foresee your needing an extended period of bed rest, and some very special treatment—”

“You’re not that kind of doctor!”

“It’s not that kind of treatment.”

Nevertheless, it worked like a charm.

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[scanned anonymously in a galaxy far far away]

[A Proofpack-3S Release— v1, html]

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