

The year is 2114.

Someone has stolen a dangerous, potentially violent humanoid clone, capable of unimaginable telepathic powers. That someone accomplished the impossible—transportation of the clone's physical body across inter-dimensional boundaries. The clone remains hidden in the dark recesses of a previously unexplored dimension.

Alan Fletcher, a class A telepath is the only human capable of tracking that clone.

As Alan digs deeper into the strange dimension, he sees the lives of those he loves threatened. He discovers his friends are his enemies. He discovers how important the clone is—not only to his own life, but to his very universe.

But how can he find this clone? And how can he use it?

**DEATH JAG**

A. C. Ellis  
and  
Jeff Slaten

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For *Janet* and *Kaye*

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## CHAPTER ONE

3 October, 2114

8:04 a.m. Mountain Standard Time

The uptown conveyor gave slightly beneath Alan's feet as he stepped from the Colorado Boulevard platform. A shiver ran up his spine and a wave of nausea crested in his stomach. Elbowing his way through the rush hour crowd, he kept his feet moving in the awkward shuffle necessary to reach the faster moving center strip, then stood sweating beneath his powder blue jumpsuit, balanced on the tottery tripod formed by his good leg, his cane, and his plastic-braced leg. The work-bound straights closed in around him, enveloping his light five-foot-six-inch frame in a solid wall of unrelenting flesh. He could smell them—big, hulking idiots, little more than animals. Being this near straights always made him feel uneasy.

The harsh clatter of the straights' surface thoughts became suddenly unbearable to him; they seemed somehow louder and more intense today than ever before. Petty jealousies and hatreds filled Alan's mind, the jumbled memories of fights with spouse or boss, financial worries and fears of sexual inadequacy, and millions of other thoughts from red passion through gray dullness and shading into black despair. All horribly mundane thoughts, yet they raked his mind like steel talons, slashing across raw nerve endings. It felt like large chunks of his brain were being torn from his head and thrown to the straights as food.

Alan fought only halfheartedly to push the crowd's thoughts from his conscious mind. He knew his attempts would be futile; without the aid of a thought shield, he could never hope to drive the intruding thoughts into his unconscious where they would generate relatively little pain, and the effort left him drained and shaking. Finally, he tried to ignore the thoughts, blocking them with those of his own, pleasant memories of Robin and the Foundation. It worked. Not well, but it did work.

He brushed the back of his hand across his forehead and it came away wet with cold perspiration. The hangover was always bad, but the one he had this morning was a real prize winner. His muscles and joints throbbed with a deep ache and a vicious spot of white fire pulsed behind his eyes. His throat was dry and raw from several days of nausea; his stomach muscles were still tight and sore. Even his crippled leg ached worse than usual from sleeping on it wrong. He could not recall having felt this bad since after his first jag.

The Foundation psychologists called it dimensional-disoriented withdrawal, or D.D.W. But to Alan—and every other scanner—it was simply a hangover. There was only one cure for it: rest, four or five day's worth.

And there was the dream. He had had another last night. At one time, the recurring dream of the merry-go-round had bothered him, but it no longer did. Alan had gone to Dr. Hillthorpe, the Foundation's chief psychiatrist. Hillthorpe had told him not to worry about the dream, that it was something entirely normal. That, in fact, many people

who repeatedly found themselves in high-stress situations created such dreams in their subconscious minds to isolate them from whatever was disturbing them. Another's isolating dream location would not be the same as Alan's—a brilliantly painted merry-go-round in a beautifully lawned park—but it *would* be a place where the dreamer, for one reason or another, could feel completely safe. For some reason, buried deep in Alan's youth and long forgotten, he felt unthreatened on the merry-go-round. Whenever his mind had trouble coping, at least in sleep he could find peace in the dream.

Alan had nearly called in sick this morning, extending his paid hangover leave an extra day. It would have been easy to stay in his apartment, wrapped in the protective cocoon of the thought shield installed there. But at the last moment, holophone activated, he had decided against it. The Foundation frowned on its scanners taking more than the three days leave specified in the union contract, and Alan knew he could easily find himself without a job. He was one of the Foundation's most talented scanners, yet there were simply too many class A telepaths waiting for an opening for him to take that kind of chance.

*That would be just fine*, he thought as he ran a hand through his thinning brown hair. "Mr. Alan Fletcher. I see here you're an ex-scanner. But your data-dot specifies no other unique qualifications. I'm sorry, Mr. Fletcher. The Foundation can no longer use your services." He wouldn't stand a chance in any of the other psi fields, he knew that. His other abilities, teleportation and telekinesis, were far too underdeveloped, and at age thirty-four he was not at all likely to develop them.

And the idea of taking a straight position, one totally unrelated to psionics, was absolutely unthinkable.

*I could go back to law school*, he thought, *and maybe eventually apply for a judgeship*. There was still a large demand for telepathic judges. But he simply would never do it; he would never go back to school. He had been too long away from the classroom, and his interests were no longer there.

But just being a class A telepath—or telekinetic, or any other variety of psi—in no way guaranteed one a position in the Foundation. There was also the P.Q.F., or prime qualifying factor. Alan's P.Q.F., that extra *something* that had opened a position for him nine years earlier while he was studying at Harvard, was an extremely high survival rating. When he had applied he had not known he possessed such a thing. He wasn't even sure he knew what it was now. All he knew for certain was that it had shown up in his initial testing and, apparently, it worked.

Someone slammed hard into Alan from behind, shattering his pattern of thought. His good knee buckled and he nearly went down. Regaining his precarious balance, he turned to the man behind him.

Alan had had a smart remark ready, a few well selected words about the other's rather uncertain parentage. But the man he faced stood well over six feet tall and muscles

bulged beneath his dark gray work jumpsuit. His hands were the size, shape, and nearly the color of sledge-hammers, and a hardness around his eyes told Alan this straight would take no lip from a puny psi.

Alan bit back his prepared insult and found himself making an apology.

When he turned back around he noticed the conveyor had already passed his stop. Grumbling under his breath, he struggled through the crowd to the slower moving edge of the conveyor and stumbled onto the next platform. The impact of his landing sent a lance of pain up his bad leg and brought swirling spots of white light before his eyes. He pushed the pain aside and began the walk several blocks back to where he should have gotten off, then north three more blocks to Colfax Avenue.

The walk did not clear his head, as he had hoped it would. Although it was still fairly early in the morning—about 8:30—the throbbing white eye of the sun had already filled the air with its suffocating heat. It burned in his lungs and the usually enjoyable walk became a chore.

*Probably ninety in the shade*, he thought, wiping perspiration from his face with his sleeve. The Weather Techs had screwed up again. The forecast for today had called for fog in the early morning, changing to rain by seven o'clock. But weather alteration had been possible for only a few years now, and he imagined even the Weather Techs were entitled to a few mistakes.

As he walked, Alan looked west, to the mountains. The front range was a cool, misty blue, and the taller peaks behind it were clothed in a thick blanket of snow. Alan had spent many happy years up there, hunting and fishing in cool valleys where he could have sworn no other human had ever set foot. He had grown up in those mountains, tending his father's sheep, and every time he saw them like this, from a distance, he knew how much he missed them. He missed that simple life he had traded so many years ago for college and eventually the Foundation. But he knew he could never again have that kind of life.

By the time he reached the Foundation building his clothes were soaked with perspiration.

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AMERICAN PSIONIC FOUNDATION, read the phrenic sign. The screaming red letters remained in Alan's mind only a few seconds, then quickly disappeared.

Alan tilted his head back on his shoulders and looked up, squinting against the glare of the early morning sun. From where he stood, he could see the entire three hundred fifty story height of the above-ground portion of the building. Although the view was impressive, he realized there were twice as many floors below ground as there were

above. The subterranean levels housed the Foundation's larger equipment, as well as some of its more classified labs.

Instantly his head began to clear and the aches that laced his body subsided. This building, more than anywhere else in Denver—or in the world, for that matter—was his home, his life, everything he had. The shabby and small one-room apartment on First Avenue, for which he paid incredibly exorbitant rent, was little more than a place to sleep off his hangovers. And, as fond as his memories were, he could no longer call his father's sheep ranch home; he hadn't been back even for a visit in almost twelve years. Besides, the ranch couldn't give him what the Foundation offered. The Foundation was Alan's work, his family, one might even say his god.

On average, Alan spent one hundred twenty hours on a jag. Then he would put in another five hours trying to battle off the horribly painful physical and mental symptoms of the hangover in order to get his final report out while everything was still relatively fresh in his mind. Rogers would almost always have something to be cleared up—a few points Alan might have left out of the report or failed to make absolutely clear. And finally he would be off to the apartment to try to sleep off the hangover in time for his next scheduled jag.

At times it all seemed like a vicious circle, like he would be forever trapped in this horribly hopeless position. The leave never seemed long enough for him to completely sleep off a hangover, and he often wondered if he could go on. But then he would go on another jag, and it would all be worthwhile again. He was addicted.

There were several overpowering reasons why Alan so loved being a scanner for the Foundation. Only while on a scan, during those precious few hours or days spent on a jag, did he feel truly alive. There was excitement. There was danger. Something in his mind opened up while he was scanning and he *knew* he was someone special; he was doing something very few others could do.

And, there was Robin.

The straights' thoughts bombarded his mind in a fresh assault as he stood trembling outside the Foundation building. Limping, he stepped through the building's softly glowing pellicle door. The membrane gave, parted, then resealed behind him.

Immediately, the voices in his head ceased. It felt as if someone had suddenly thrown a switch and every straight in Denver had simultaneously dropped dead. He gave silent thanks to the Foundation engineers and architects for developing the thought shield and including it in the building's plans. And to the psychologists who had trained all two hundred and fifty thousand plus of the Foundation's employees in thought suppression techniques, he bequeathed a world of gratitude.

His steps echoed loudly as he walked through the large, empty entry hall. Putting his left eye to the lens in the wall, he allowed the computer to scan his retinal pattern. The

color of the gravity lift's pellicle door changed from red to green, indicating it had become a selectively permeable membrane under the computer's control.

"Hey, wait!" came a female voice as Alan was about to step through the membrane. He turned and looked across the entry hall.

It was Robin Green.

Robin was the union steward for Alan's shift—blue shift—and in spite of the fact that she was only twenty-three, having started at age six, she was one of the Foundation's most experienced scanners. She had been paired with Alan for assignment on many occasions. In fact, lately all Alan's assignments had been team scans, most of them with Robin. He certainly didn't mind. Robin had added something special to every jag they had ever shared; some totally unexpected occurrence always seemed to materialize, adding still more excitement to what was a fascinating profession to begin with. When he scanned with her he always became involved in something interesting, and he always became aware of possible solutions he might not have thought of had she not been present. She seemed to act as a catalyst to his abilities. As a team, they had never had a dull scan.

Lately, however, there had been something wrong. Within the past year, Robin's abilities had become somewhat dulled. Not horribly so, but enough to cause Alan to worry. Although she was normally a highly competent scanner, she had recently gotten them both into several very tight scrapes. Alan had been able to extricate them on each occasion with only the most dazzling footwork and the utmost difficulty.

But Alan realized it was probably but a temporary—if somewhat prolonged—slump in her abilities, and soon she would again have them back up to the Foundation's high standards. He had said nothing about it to her, and he had made up his mind that he would carry her as long as was necessary.

Alan pushed the thought from his mind and studied the girl before him. He noted her blue-and-white-sun suit clad figure as she approached. He eyed her tanned, sleek body as one might a vintage bottle of wine. Her short blonde hair seemed to radiate an internal glow all its own. And those legs! Long, slender, flawless brown. She was several inches taller than Alan.

Robin kissed him lightly on the cheek. "Good morning!" she said. "Glad you could make it, Al. You looked pretty ragged last time I saw you." She smiled easily.

Alan nodded and returned the smile. "You know what they say. The better the jag, the worse the hangover."

"You don't really look much better now. What say we go down together, okay?" She put an eye to the lens, then turned and rested her hand lightly on Alan's arm.



Together they stepped through the gravity lift's membrane.

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Again Alan's gaze fell on Robin's firm, young body as they floated side by side down the shaft. She was the girl Alan had dreamed of as a kid, the girl he had never met until it was too late. True, part of her attraction was purely physical; she was young, blonde, extremely beautiful. But her physical attributes were not the vital ones. More important were the facts that she was intelligent, witty and a psi.

Alan knew he did not stand a chance with her, mostly because he did not allow himself to. Oh, they had made love, once, on their first team scan together. It had been a difficult assignment, and they had both come near death several times. When they had finally succeeded in completing the assignment, before they left their host bodies, the two suddenly flew into each other's arms and made wild, passionate love. But that had been in host bodies, not in their own bodies, and after they had returned to their own dimension they both shrugged it off as something they had done during the high stress of a particularly difficult dimensional jag—nothing to think twice about. Alan could not know Robin's thoughts on the episode. He would never allow himself to peep her mind; that went totally against everything he had been taught, an unforgivable breach of etiquette, and he respected her too much to do it. All he knew was that he would never make love to her in his *own* body. That he could not do, as much as he might wish he could. He felt a strange guilt at the fact that he was a cripple.

Besides, she was living with someone. And from what Alan could gather, it was a serious relationship.

*What a waste*, he thought as they descended into the subterranean levels of the Foundation building.

He had met Robin's friend, Ralf Tanner, only once. It had been at the Foundation party last New Year. According to Robin, Tanner was sixty-one years old, and Alan considered that far too old for her, although he was nearly twelve years her senior himself. He could tell there was very little sex between them, if any at all. But each did seem to supply *something* the other needed. There was something special between them, something that looked like it would last. Something Alan realized he could never share with Robin.

Tanner had not seemed the normal sort of straight. Oh, he had played the part rather well, admiring and at the same time hating the psis for their ability and the status it gave them. But it had seemed to Alan only that, a role he was expected to assume, a part to be acted out. Somehow, there was something mysterious and even a bit sinister about Tanner. Alan had felt a slight trace of it when he had tried to peep the other's mind, an action he became ashamed of as soon as he had attempted it. But what he had encountered was strange indeed. He had found he could not penetrate Tanner's mind. His

probe had been stopped by a black barrier, a wall of cold nothingness that reflected Alan's own mind back at him.

And there had been something else, something strange about Tanner's gaze. His eyes didn't quite focus on Alan or anyone else in the room.

The gravity lift changed direction and began tracking horizontally as they reached their sub-level. Alan looked up into Robin's eyes. She was looking into his.

"Maybe you'd better save that energy, for the scan," she teased. "After that last jag you may need it.

Alan nodded and the corners of his mouth turned up in a halfhearted grin. *We are friends*, he thought, *close friends*. At least he had that. And that was one of the most important qualities in a scan team. In order for them to work effectively together, each member had to trust the other completely.

Together they stepped from the gravity lift. "Coffee?" Alan asked.

"Sure. You look like you could use it. Besides, I already know what my assignment is going to be. I called before I came in." She gave him a secretive pixie smile. Alan knew that could mean only one thing.

"Team assignment?"

"Yep, the dynamic duo. Bad Man and Robin." She took Alan's arm and drew him closer, nearly supporting him as they walked.

They were silent on their way to the cafeteria. Alan was occupied with wild speculation of what the assignment might be, and equally wild anticipation of any assignment with Robin. He knew she was silent because she was only too aware of what the anticipation was doing to him, and she was enjoying it in a not-very-innocent way. She knew what she had, and how to make the best of it. That was part of what made her such a good scanner—her natural ability to use all her assets to their ultimate.

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The lights in the cafeteria were too harsh, reflecting brightly off the stainless steel walls and compounding Alan's already excruciating headache.

The coffee was an evil brew, strong and bitter. He had never found coffee as bad as that served in the Foundation cafeteria. It was laced with all sorts of vitamins and medication prescribed by the Foundation physicians, and he knew that was what gave it such a foul taste. But that knowledge didn't make it taste any better.

At least it took the edge off a hangover, just as it had in the old days with the alcoholic variety. After gulping down two cups without comment, Alan began to feel almost human again.

He ordered a third cup, then asked, "What's the assignment?"

"How should I know," Robin answered. "You know they can't tell us until the briefing."

Alan nodded and smiled. "But I also know you, and the effect you have on Frank Rogers. He'd tell his darkest secrets, if *you* asked him."

"You flatter me, Al." She took a sip of coffee, then looked at Alan over the rim of her cup. Her eyes flashed with humor. "Do *you* have any dark secrets?"

"Well, now that you mention it..."

"Spare me the sordid details," she said and laughed. "No, really, Frank didn't tell me a thing. Except that it would be a team assignment with you. Of course, he was breaking security there. But if he can't break security every now and then, who can?"

"Team operations mean a possibility of danger—of some sort," Alan speculated aloud. "It could mean a basically violent culture." He knew Rogers wouldn't have made it a team scan if a solo would have done as well.

Robin shrugged. "There's nothing to worry about. We're a fantastic team, with your survival factor and my photographic memory and total recall. Hell, we have the highest U.E.R. for both shifts."

*What!* Alan thought. *Even with her dulled abilities, we're still that good?*

To Robin, he said: "How did you find *that* out? The Unit Efficiency Ratings are classified Top Secret."

Robin smiled the pixie smile again.

"Never mind," Alan said. "Something tells me I don't really want to know."

## CHAPTER TWO

3 October, 2114

9:13 a.m. Mountain Standard Time

Frank Rogers, a fifty-year-old black man wearing a well-tailored silver jumpsuit trimmed in black, completely filled the large chair opposite Alan and Robin at the antique walnut conference table. The carpet on the floor was a rich red in color and a huge trophy rack of six-point elk antlers hung on the wall behind Rogers. The antlers, like the table, the chairs and the carpet, were not really present in the form in which they appeared. They were one of Rogers' favorite fantasies, made substantial by the computer several levels below.

The bald dome of Rogers' head was ringed with a halo of gray hair. That, and a face and body that had a soft, doughy appearance, gave him a look of incredible stupidity. But in his case looks were deceiving. Rogers had started more than thirty years before as one of the Foundation's first scanners. He had worked his way up over the years to director of the scan project. That had been no simple feat, the legends of the Foundation's early years were filled with men both intelligent and shrewd.

If there was one thing Rogers was not, that was an engaging speaker. His briefings were notoriously dull sessions, and the subject of several jokes among the Foundation's scanners. This one, Alan knew, would be no different.

Rogers spent the first forty-five minutes stressing the importance of maintaining the integrity of the Foundation, emphasizing the trust and support the inhabitants of "this blessed land" placed in the Foundation, as evidenced by their massive contributions.

The fact was, the majority of the Foundation's operating income came from highly illegal time speculation on the various stock exchanges or their equivalents in other dimensions. *Hell*, Alan thought, *there's even a special department set up for it, operating under the pseudo-scientific title of Economic Development Research*. Everyone in the Foundation knew how the money was obtained. It was, however, a closely guarded secret from the outside world. And tight security was maintained. A good portion of each employee's ample pay was re-invested in the Foundation for his retirement.

The masses were not interested in research. They never really had been. And at times they even became violently hostile toward science in general.

The Foundation supported unbelievable amounts of research in various fields; space exploration, experimental physics, bio-engineering—these and many other projects would have gone under long ago had the Foundation not taken them under its corporate wing and pumped billions of dollars into each. But, although the scan project was the bread-and-butter enterprise that made this all possible, the Foundation made it a policy never to scan in dimensions too near its own. Alterations made in any dimension, whether produced purposefully or accidentally, generated waves of change throughout the universes on either side. Although the effects diminished with the "distance" from the

dimension of origin, the Foundation was basically happy with its home dimension and wanted no major changes.

Alan kept dozing off during the first part of Rogers' briefing, but his eyes remained open. It was a trick he had learned early in his career as a scanner—a defense against Rogers' programmed and played-back opening. He had heard it all too often; he knew it by heart, every boring word.

Throughout the spiel, Robin continually jabbed Alan in his still-painful ribs, making it impossible for him to get the sleep he needed. She was aware of what he was doing, and she also knew he did not want to hear that crap about "duty to the American people" Rogers was handing out with far too much pomp. She was teasing him, and he was annoyed. But beneath the irritation he loved it.

Finally, Rogers got down to the meat, and instantly Alan was wide awake—another well-trained response. This was what he had come to the briefing for, not that other pseudo-patriotic line. Rogers could save that for the press.

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"This is going to be rather complicated," Rogers said, leaning slightly forward in his chair, "so I want no interruptions until I'm finished. Is that clear?"

Not really expecting a reply, Rogers paused a moment to swallow down a glass of water. He filled the glass again from a pitcher before him on the table, then lifted his massive frame from the chair and began pacing back and forth across the room.

He suddenly halted and said: "Computer, visual display—hologram retrieval code alpha-epsilon-three-three-one."

Instantly a hologram materialized before him. It was a life-size projection of a youth, no more than seven or eight years old, sitting nude and completely still in the lotus position. The boy was strangely beautiful. Although his skin had an odd grayish cast to it, it was unmarred by even the slightest blemish. His face was somehow angelic as his eyes stared through Rogers at a spot somewhere beyond. A light blue fuzziness enveloped the boy's body, the scarcely perceptible telltale of a stasis field.

"Okay," Rogers said, then stopped and scratched along his jaw line with the ball of his thumb. Finally, he seemed to make up his mind about whatever it was he had been considering and let his arms fall to his sides like weighted pendulums. Again he began to pace, striding unthinkingly through the motionless hologram.

Alan heard Robin draw in a rasping gasp of shock and felt her fingers squeeze where they rested lightly on his forearm.

"I guess it all started eighteen years ago," Rogers said, obviously not noticing Robin's reaction, "when one of the Foundation's ships found a small probe of unknown origin entering our solar system out beyond the orbit of Pluto. They traced it back along its trajectory and could find no star system anywhere near its track, even allowing for the time it had been in transit.

"The ship brought it back here to the Foundation and a tissue sample was recovered from a small air-tight chamber. Bio section cloned that sample. It turned out to be human, or at least humanoid; the right number of chromosomes, but a few extra genes we don't possess which generated the production of some very strange proteins. It seems these proteins were used somehow in certain cells in which they were produced, a group of cells found only in the clone's brain, without being transported outside the individual cells of origin."

Again Rogers paced through the hologram, and again Alan felt Robin's fingers tighten on his arm. He gently patted the back of her hand, but she did not seem to notice.

"Bio section wanted a telepath in on every step of the cloning procedure from the beginning. I was assigned; I was probably the best telepath the Foundation had under contract at the time. The whole project was kept under the strictest security until we could determine exactly what it was we had."

Rogers stopped pacing and turned to face Alan and Robin. He placed his beefy fists on the table before him and leaned on it. Alan could almost swear he heard the table creak under Rogers' weight, but he knew that wasn't possible.

"I felt something wrong even before they started the cloning procedure," he said, "when it was still nothing more than a few undifferentiated cells." His forehead creased as he thought back through the years. "Nothing I could pin down—just a vague impression of their strangeness, their absolute other-worldness. By the time the clone had developed beyond fetal stage, I *knew* there was something wrong. I could receive nothing from its mind; my telepathic abilities did not work on it. There was nothing, not even the minimal fetal thoughts we had expected."

He shook his head and sat down.

"I was taken off the project shortly after that. If I couldn't make contact with the thing, there was little point in my being involved. And because of the web of security surrounding the project I hadn't heard another thing about it until only a few days ago. I had almost forgotten about the whole thing.

"Then on Monday, Jim Elliot from Bio section came to my office. He brought me up to date on the project. The work had progressed steadily for seven more years. The clone had been allowed to mature normally up to that time. But suddenly it had started to show signs of unbelievable psionic power, and it had begun demonstrating extremely violent behavior. I don't know why I wasn't called in again at that point, as the first

telepath to work on the project in the first place, but I wasn't. They got someone else, someone from outside of the Foundation, and they kept the whole thing under wraps. After seven years of development the clone was placed in a stasis field," Rogers nodded toward the hologram, "thus completely arresting further physical or mental development. The project was shelved and no further work has been done on it in almost ten years.

"But sometime Sunday night the lab in which the clone had been kept in stasis was broken into. The clone and the stasis field generator keeping it in check were stolen. At Jim's urging, I had a psionic trace put on it. Although the trace didn't tell me who stole the clone, it did tell me where it was taken. The clone, and possibly its thief, is in a previously unexplored dimension."

"Wait a minute," Alan said. "You mean someone transported this clone *physically* across inter-dimensional boundaries?"

Rogers nodded. "It's impossible," he said, "but it has happened."

"Didn't the computer register the unauthorized use of a scan booth?" Alan asked.

"No. Somehow someone has succeeded in doing the impossible. Not only has something physically crossed into another dimension, but it was apparently accomplished without the use of Foundation equipment."

Rogers paused, took a deep breath, then continued: "I sent a scanner in late Monday night. He didn't find the clone or its thief. And details of the political and social structure of the dimension in which the clone now exists are far from complete.

"Are the inhabitants of that dimension humanoid?" Alan asked.

"They are."

Robin asked, "Then the dimensional track lies fairly near our own?"

"It seems so."

"Accounting should be happy to hear that," Alan said and grinned. "A smaller power expenditure means less money spent on a scan project. Are they still on your back about that?"

"They are—they had their auditors in yesterday. But, getting back to the assignment, there's just one more bit of information you should have: the two major pastimes of this society seem to be dueling of some sort and extreme forms of sadomasochism. That's all we really know."

Rogers picked up two ridiculously thin stacks of paper from the table before him. "Here are transcript copies of the scanner's reports," he said. He handed out the bundles

of close computer script. "I'm afraid they won't help much." After a few seconds of silence, he asked, "Any questions?"

"What's so important about this clone?" Robin asked. "If nothing has been done on the project for ten years, why not just let it go?"

"Two reasons." Rogers rapped his knuckles twice on the table and Alan was positive he heard the sharp report. The computer program for this room's image had been aurally augmented. *Quite impressive*, he thought.

Rogers continued: "First, the Foundation's security has been broken. That in itself is reason enough to make us go after whoever stole the clone, but in my opinion not the most important reason. Jim said that before it had been placed in stasis the clone had developed powers far beyond anything we could imagine. We don't know why the probe was sent here; that clone can be anything from an alien race's emissary of peace to its highly lethal weapon. We simply don't know."

Alan frowned. He was beginning to see something very suspicious in all this. He glanced down at the transcribed scan reports in his lap, quickly reading the first page.

"It says here Vic Edwards is the scanner you sent in," Alan said. "Where is he? He should be here at this briefing to answer our questions."

Rogers' glance darted away from Alan's steady gaze. "Vic didn't return," he said.

"A scanner with his experience and ability?" Robin asked. "What happened?"

"We don't know. His reports were confused almost from the start. The psychologists have spent hours over the transcripts, and they think he may have been drugged, but they can't be sure. At any rate, his last communication put him in the same general geographical location as Los Francisco here in Earth Prime. We can initiate your scan from Los Francisco through our tachyon facilities there."

Alan nodded silently. He had been expecting something like this. If everything went smoothly, a single scanner could usually handle an assignment, even one as unusual as this. Only when it all went sour did they call in a team.

"Receivers?" he finally asked.

"Chances are good that a city the size Edwards described has quite a few inhabitants with at least rudimentary psionic ability. Edwards landed one without difficulty. You shouldn't have any trouble."

Robin was glancing through the three sheets of copy on the table before her. "This isn't much to go on," she said.



"I know, Robin," Rogers said, "and I'm sorry. But there isn't much I can do about it; that's all we have."

Rogers made a gesture of helplessness with his large, open hands as Alan looked again at the hologram of the strange youth sitting cross-legged in the middle of the floor.

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Alan pushed through the scan booth's pellicle door, limping badly on his still-throbbing leg, as the phrenic sign flashed brilliant green in his mind: *DELTA-TWO-NINE*. The technicians had already left the booth by the time Alan had arrived. They had set the dimensional co-ordinates, adjusted the life support system, and refilled the nutrient solution and dramil reservoirs. Now it was all up to him. And Robin. She was in her booth down the hall, going through the same pre-scan preparations he was about to start.

After stripping, Alan stowed his cane, his brace and his jumpsuit in the scan booth's locker, then stumbled up the three low steps. Before him stretched the pink glowing membrane of the scan cocoon, a highly selective membrane cloned from synthetic cells containing recombinant DNA from Alan and his opposite number on the other shift. It would allow only their minds through the interface between worlds.

He crawled out across its surface and felt a pleasant warm stickiness on his bare legs and the palms of his hands, then stretched out in the center of the membrane. Instantly, its surface began softly massaging his body, like a thousand gentle hands, to prevent muscular atrophy during the scan. Gradually his bad leg began to feel better as the membrane worked its medical magic.

Alan reached up from where he lay on his back and pulled down the nutrient-feeder and waste draw off tubes. He pulled back a flap of skin on his right wrist and inserted the tubes into the grafted circulatory shunt. Mixed with the nutrients suddenly flooding his body was a massive dose of the drug drama which would amplify his psionic abilities and, in conjunction with a plethora of sophisticated electronics, make the scan possible.

He lifted the hair at the back of his neck and plugged himself into the psionic computer/transmitter. A web of connectors instantly linked with the surgically implanted micro-electrodes attached to various parts of his brain, pulsing small jolts of electricity into his head. He did not feel it; it was too much a part of him by now.

"Computer," he said, "activate inter-booth communications—booth delta-two-nine to booth delta-two-two. Robin? Everything okay?"

"Fine on this end," Robin's voice whispered through the membrane beneath him. "Have you read the reports?"

"No, not yet. You?"

"Just finished glancing through them. Nothing there that wasn't in the briefing. Looks like we're scanning blind again."

"Yeah," Alan said. "But I don't like this one. This could be the worse one we've had yet. What did you think of that clone business, of that whole damn story?"

"It scares me, too."

Alan grunted his agreement. "That clone really got to you, didn't it? What's wrong?"

"You noticed? I didn't think it showed."

"You damn near broke my arm. Now, what was it?"

"I don't know. There's something about that thing.... I just don't know." Her voice broke and Alan thought she was going to cry.

"Okay," Alan said. "We'll leave it alone for now. Standard locator procedure?" They usually used the personals column of the local mass-media, when there was such a thing.

"If possible. If not, just keep your eyes and ears open. See you in the next world."

"Right...." Alan let it trail off in a laugh. Robin always made the same statement just before initiating a scan. It would have become old long ago had someone else said it. But from Robin, it was fresh each time.

*That's Robin, he thought. Always a cool breath of fresh air.*

"Computer," Alan said. "Break inter-booth communications. Display transcribed reports from primary scan of this assignment." The words of the reports formed behind his eyes and his mind glanced through them. They told him almost nothing.

Suddenly, his head began to spin and he felt himself getting sleepy. The drugs entering his body were beginning to take effect.

"Computer," he said, "initiate scan."

The membrane of the scan cocoon folded up and over his body, enveloping him in its soft warmth as a flight of lead butterflies invaded his stomach.

**EPISODE**  
**14 February, 2072**  
**1423 Ship Time**

Ross Dillman stepped from the dory trainer and entered the ready room. It had been a bad session, like so many in the past few weeks. Again he had been unable to keep his mind on the computerized kill; the flames had shattered his concentration, throwing his timing off and slowing his reflexes. The glowing letters on the dory trainer's screen still burned in his mind: EXERCISE COMPLETED—NO KILL—END PROGRAM.

The flames were much stronger now, sharper and more precise than they had ever been before.

Ross had first experienced the flames twelve years ago, at age seven. The bright gossamer images had carried him away from the dirt and hunger of the slums. They had supplied him with acceptable—although temporary—escape from the small room packed with eight unwashed brothers and sisters. It was then, after his first brief encounter with the flames, that he had made his decision. One day, he had promised himself, he would escape the city.

But that was long ago, and now the flames were becoming frightening. They came too often and were too strong. If the flames arrived during an actual hunt, when he would need all his attention for the kill...

*They're all so relaxed,* Ross thought as he took a seat at a deserted table and glanced around the ready room. The compartment was decorated in soft pastels and the rich smell of coffee hung in the air. The other dory men sat at low tables, talking in hushed voices. They were all veterans; they knew what to expect. Their radiated confidence washed over Ross' mind, but did not calm him.

Ross was sure the flames were somehow connected with his ability. A class C telepath, he could not actually read thoughts, but his mind was continually bombarded by the harsh, hard-edged emotions of those around him.

*But why,* he asked himself, *are the flames so much stronger now? And why are they coming more frequently?*

He looked across the ready room to Bill Galson. The old man sat alone at a corner table, tense, almost rigid in his chair as he stared blindly ahead at nothing. His lips were parted in a light smile. He looked as if he were listening to something Ross could not hear, listening intently with his entire body.

*The old man has something to do with it too,* Ross thought. Somehow, Galson was connected with the increased strength and frequency of the flames in Ross' mind. This he knew, although he could not say how he knew, or how Galson was affecting the flames. Or even why.

He had not given Galson much attention during the three month journey out to Sirius. The old man had tried to be friendly on several occasions, but Ross had brushed him off. He had been too busy becoming accustomed to shipboard life and too wrapped up in his own problems to give much thought to Galson. But now he studied the old man closely.

Galson was obviously blind; the iris and pupils of his eyes were scarcely visible, a slightly discolored white that almost matched the sclera. He was a small man, like Ross himself. His skin was pulled over frail bones like parched leather. He had shoulder-length hair, a full beard and bushy eyebrows—all completely white.

But behind Galson's ruined eyes there was a sparkling brightness, a newness, a youthful innocence. It was not something that could actually be seen; it was a strange emotion Ross felt within the other's mind, something very similar to the emotions generated by the flames. An intense, overpowering joy washed over Ross from the old man.

Ross shuddered and his thoughts became suddenly filled with the rumors he had heard from the other dory men during the trip out. They were strange stories about Galson, and how he had lost his sight.

"Nervous?"

"No." Ross' response came too fast. He turned in his chair and looked up at Karl Logan, the dory flight commander. Logan was a large rawboned man of about forty with night-black hair and intense blue eyes. He held two cups of steaming coffee.

Logan's eyebrows came together. His mouth turned up in a crooked smile as he came around the table and sat down.

"Yes," Ross finally admitted.

The older man's head bobbed in a slow nod. "That's all right. We all had a first time, and every one of us was scared. If we say different we're lying." He placed a cup before Ross.

Ross suddenly realized he wanted to talk, that he *must* talk. It did not matter what they talked about. He knew only that he had to communicate with another human being; he had to try to fill the pit of fear growing in his stomach.

Seeming to recognize Ross' need, Logan turned and looked toward Galson. "He's been like that ever since his last hunt," he said, shaking his head. "He used to say something about a fire that won't burn but consumes all. Now he lapses into some sort of trance just before the pod is located. The medics can't figure it out. Weird." He shook his head again, then turned back to Ross.

"A flame?" Ross' hands began to tremble and he hid them in his lap beneath the table.

"Look, there's no reason to be scared. The whales are harmless, completely harmless."

Ross nodded. "I've heard the whales let you harpoon them, like they want you to."

"That's a poor choice of words," the big man said. "They don't actually want us to. They're just stupid, that's all. They don't know any better."

"Then they're not intelligent?"

"Where did you get that idea? They didn't teach you that at the Academy."

"Some of the other dory men here told me Galson says they are."

"Don't be ridiculous. You took whale physiology at the Academy; you know they don't have enough brain for their mass—only enough gray matter to just barely function. The whales are just big, dumb mammals."

Ross was silent for a few seconds, then he nodded toward Galson. "How did it happen?"

"Galson's accident? I don't know. No one does for sure. The technicians figure he turned his craft starward. They said there was some sort of temporary chemical change in the screening of his dory's port, a one in a million freak occurrence. But they couldn't find a thing wrong with it when he got back." Logan shrugged, then took a sip of his coffee. "It's as good a guess as any."

"Why doesn't he go back to Earth? Wouldn't the Foundation give him compensation for his blindness?"

"Sure, he'd get compensation as well as a large pension. I've tried to talk him into going back. Anyone else on board would jump at a chance to break contract and ship home; this is dull duty at best. But Galson won't have it."

"Why not?"

"He's crazy. He says he doesn't want to be a whale among men, whatever that's supposed to mean. We keep him on as ready room steward, although he can't even do that properly. I guess we all feel sort of sorry for the poor old guy."

Ross nodded, sipped his coffee. It had begun to get cold.

"You going to be okay now?" Logan asked. "I have to make the pre-flight checks."

"I'll be fine," Ross lied. "Thanks—"

"No problem." Logan got up and drained his cup. "I needed it my first time out, and someone was there for me." He walked away from the table, to the flight status board on the far side of the ready room.

Again Ross looked across the room toward Galson. He took another sip of cold coffee and thought of the fire that does not burn.

## CHAPTER THREE

hr mn sc fr

0000-00-00-0001

*Grayness. But not grayness. Non-color—neither white nor black. A total dun negation of shadow and light.*

*No shape. An infinite, tedious expanse of featureless nothing. Absolutely no sensory stimuli.*

*Suddenly, a burst of high frequency energy. Heard, felt, tasted, seen, smelt—all in the same instant and without sensory organs; loud, hard, bitter, red, acrid.*

*And a fuzzy image. Human? Humanoid. Gray-skinned. Legs spread wide, arms stretched out away from the torso. But indistinct, without detail.*

*A memory:*

*A peaceful ride on his father's ranch in the high country, checking for breaks in the fence. The horse moving beneath him in a slow, familiar rhythm.*

*The horse's hoof nearly coming down on a snake coiled in the middle of the trail. The snake striking out and the horse rearing. Alan going backwards off the horse's back, hitting the ground with bone-jarring impact. The slightly acid taste of his own blood and the throbbing pain as he realizes his left leg is twisted beneath him at a grotesque angle.*

*Then the months spent in the hospital, and the slow realization that his left leg had effectively died.*

*Then nothing.*

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Alan staggered off balance, nearly falling, then caught himself. His head spun with sudden vertigo and a dull ache beat at the back of his mind as he leaned against a nearby wall, closed his eyes and drew in several deep breaths. The wall's rough stone face felt warm against his shoulder, its texture and hardness somehow reassuring. He began to feel better.

The receiver in whose body he found himself had been in the process of entering the building against which he now leaned. That was the only memory in his head. He did not wish to arouse suspicion, certainly not this early in the scan. Fighting back a wave of nausea, he opened his eyes and pushed away from the wall.

A man with a long, puckered scar running down his left cheek sat behind a counter just within the building's door. It was an old fashioned opening, not the pellicle door of Earth Prime. The man was visible only from the waist up—the lower half of his body was hidden by the counter—but he was obviously extremely tall. A brown turtle-neck sweater was the only article of clothing Alan could see. He felt the same kind of clothing constricting his own body.

"Three credits," the other said, his voice heavy with boredom.

Alan reached into his pockets, felt several objects. One was smooth and slightly waxy, like polished leather, and roughly the shape of a flattened rectangle.

He drew it out: It was a wallet. Inside, among other things, he found a plastic credit card which he had known would be there only a nanosecond before he located it.

"Do you take this?" Alan asked, handing the card to the other. He really didn't know! All the receiver's memories should have been there, instantly at his command, ready for use. But something was wrong. The memories *were* there, but they were buried too deep in the receiver's brain, and there was a strange, black barrier between Alan and those memories.

The man's brows lowered in a frown as he breathed an annoyed sigh. He placed the card in a slot in the side of a small blue box on the counter, waited a few seconds, then withdrew it and handed it back to Alan. The box was obviously some sort of electronic credit check.

"You have a silencer for that?" the other asked, pointing.

Alan glanced down past his white turtle-neck and an extremely ornate jeweled codpiece, to the holstered gun on his hip. Gingerly, he drew the gun from the holster and studied it, trying not to look too suspicious in his examination. It was huge and it looked deadly—a weapon very different from the tranquilizing needle-guns of Alan's own dimension. But it felt good resting in his palm; it felt natural.

"No?" The man raised a brow questioningly. When Alan didn't answer, he said, "I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to check it here."

Alan looked into the man's eyes, trying to put some amount of threat into his gaze. Anyone carrying a gun on the streets, he reasoned, would part with it only reluctantly. Without the receiver's memories to guide him, he would have to operate on intuition alone and hope he could bluff his way through. It meant he would make mistakes, but hopefully he could learn from his errors and keep them to a minimum. At any rate, he knew that if he left this body and went back to his own at the Foundation in Earth Prime, he would probably not retain enough psionic energy to obtain another receiver. Already he felt his abilities inexplicably drained.



"A theatre regulation, sir," the other was saying. "If you should get into a duel while inside, without a silencer you would disturb the other patrons who aren't involved. I'm sure you understand. We must protect the rights of every patron. Here, I'll give you a claim check. You can pick it up on your way out."

The man behind the counter handed Alan a red plastic disk. Feigning reluctance, Alan gave him the gun, then placed the disk in his pocket and turned to enter the theatre.

In the spacious lobby Alan noticed his reflection in the glass case enclosing a marquee poster. He stopped to examine his new form. The image was that of a tall man, well muscled, with black wavy hair, bushy eyebrows, a Roman nose above a dark mustache, and a solid square chin. But it was not the ruggedly handsome face on which Alan's gaze was riveted. Standing in front of the glass, he twisted back and forth, watching intently the bulging muscles of his legs as they rippled beneath the tight cloth of his breeches. Both legs were intact.

The poster beyond the glass suddenly caught his eyes. It depicted a blonde-haired girl no older than ten or twelve—just beginning to show the first signs of female puberty. She was totally nude, and performing a sex act with two enormous Doberman pinschers.

At first Alan was shocked that he would even consider going into such a place. It was not that he had anything against the various forms of pornography; he considered it a legitimate and, in some ways, quite sensible outlet for sexual energies—a very logical alternative to rape and other forms of sexual violence man resorted to when his natural drives became frustrated. But he was on assignment. Did he have time for this sort of thing?

*What the hell*, he finally thought. *Why not?* He hadn't seen a skin flick in years. Granted, in the past few years he had not been inclined to see one, but he hadn't really had the time either. The Foundation seemed to consume almost every waking moment. He thought it might be fun to see how different the state of the art was here, what sort of divergent branch it had taken. He had, at any rate, a few days before it would be possible to contact Robin. Two or three hours would not make that much difference.

*Besides*, he thought, *I'll probably learn something about the culture from this*. And, with his receiver's memories inaccessible, he needed all the help he could get.

The movie had not yet started and the houselights were still on as Alan entered. This theatre was quite different from those in Alan's dimension. *Actually*, he thought, *it's rather primitive*.

The architecture was a bit strange—a little too ornate for his taste. It tended toward high arches, false columns and fancy scrollwork. *Ionic*, he thought, *if my memory of historical architecture hasn't failed me*. Instead of the round dais in the center of a grav chair-furnished room—as was the case in the holographic theatres of Earth Prime—there was a large, flat, white surface against one wall with small, uncomfortable-looking

chairs facing it. The old style, flat-projection movie was evidently as far as this dimension had come.

Midway up the middle section, directly in the center of a row, Alan saw an unoccupied seat. He strode confidently down the aisle, then side-stepped his way down the row toward the vacant seat. Half way there, he accidentally stepped on the foot of an old man, a virtual mountain of wrinkles and fat. The man shrugged and smiled, showing empty gums and obviously thinking nothing of a few crushed toes.

"I'm terribly sorry," Alan said. "Did I hurt you?"

The old man instantly stood. His beefy hands flashed out, hit Alan in the chest with surprising strength.

Alan stumbled back down the row and fell, coming up hard against a pair of well-formed legs. He smiled up at a fantastic brunette, catching a revealing glance up her short skirt. The fact that she was not wearing underwear registered like a small explosion in his mind. She smiled back.

"Pardon me," Alan said.

The smile vanished from the girl's face and was replaced by a scowl. Her eyes narrowed and she snapped her legs closed. Alan ducked away from a vicious kick directed at his right kidney.

"The old duck has first crack at you, buster," she said in a hard, cold voice as she nodded toward the old man. "If he doesn't get you, you can bet your sweet ass I will." Alan noticed a small gun holstered at the girl's left shoulder, a silencer on its barrel.

"Get up!" the old man bellowed. He had a huge, long-barreled pistol strapped to his hip, also with a silencer. He stood with his massive legs as far apart as the tightness of the seats would allow—a typical western-movie gunfighter stance. The stance and the jeweled codpiece would have been highly comical if Alan had not been positive the old man meant business.

Shakily, Alan got to his feet. "But look," he said, "I said I'm sorry. I didn't mean..."

"Enough!" the other cut him short. "I'll listen to no more. Draw your weapon."

Alan motioned helplessly to the empty holster on his hip.

"Damn!" the old man said. "You would be unarmed." He sat down and Alan made his way to his seat, still shaking both inside and out.

As he passed the brunette she drilled him with a hate-filled stare.

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What Alan had thought was the main feature—the girl and her dogs—was actually a short subject on a new form of night-life entertainment catching on throughout the city. They were called improvisation clubs, and anything went—sadism, masochism, sodomy, audience participation. The sweet-looking blonde girl Alan had seen on the poster was, in fact, a veteran performer.

The main feature—a tongue-in-cheek orgy of oral gratification—was, by comparison, actually quite tame.

During the feature Alan did some thinking, giving the screen only the slightest attention. He tried to figure out exactly what had happened with the old man and the girl. The old man had seemed completely willing to forget his crushed toes until Alan had apologized. The girl had been *extremely* friendly up to the instant Alan had said he was sorry. Then, suddenly, there were people lined up, just waiting for a chance to get at him. The only thing that had saved him was the fact that he had checked his gun before entering the theatre. He had not actually wanted the gun to begin with, but now he was more than a little thankful for the existence of the house rules.

But it was all so very strange. As unlikely as it seemed, an apology was apparently an insult here. He would have to experiment with that—unarmed, of course.

*And, he thought, there's the fact that I don't have access to my receiver's memories.*

He was sure it tied in with that thing, that strange something he had experienced during his transfer—the high frequency energy and the gray-skinned humanoid image. He had never before entered a receiver without having complete access to its memories, no matter how alien the host body might have been. And he had never before encountered the phenomenon which had appeared at the initiation of this scan. Nor had he heard of either happening to any other scanner.

But somehow, he knew, the two occurrences were linked.

**CHAPTER FOUR**  
**hr mn sc fr**  
**0003-21-58-0269**

It was beginning to get dark when Alan left the theatre in the press of the crowd. He left his holster on the seat he vacated, and he did not reclaim the gun. He knew he would probably be safer without it until he was more familiar with the local customs.

The city was filthy, at least the part of it through which he now walked. Trash of all descriptions littered the streets and sidewalks, and a thick black-yellow haze was visible above. It smarted his eyes and made them water. It burned the back of his throat and left an acrid taste on his tongue. The ecological controls that had cleaned up Earth Prime several score years ago either never existed here or were totally ignored.

The streets were packed with internal combustion powered vehicles—cars, he thought they were called—and each one sported at least one dent like a proud warrior with his battle scars. The sidewalks were filled with pedestrians, thousands of them. The roar was deafening. This was all exactly like Alan had seen on the history tapes of Earth Prime, only sharper, with far more impact. He preferred the mental babble of the billions of his own dimension.

Alan silently thanked whatever god happened to be watching over this dimension for the existence of the wonder drug dramil. Without the drug he would not have had the psionic energy to enter this dimension in the first place. And without it, the thoughts of all the inhabitants of this dimension would bombard his mind. That he simply would not be able to take. He had too many other problems this scan.

He only wished dramil could do the same for him in Earth Prime. But it did not. Somehow, this was a function of the combination of inter-dimensional transfer and the drug.

Alan searched almost desperately for somewhere to go through the contents of his pockets, to see who he was and what he had to work with. He didn't dare do this out in the open; that would attract entirely too much attention. But even the alleys were jammed with people and cars. Finally, after walking several kilometers without luck, he found what he was looking for—an alley so filled with trash and empty shipping crates that it made pedestrian passage almost impossible. The place reeked and it was dark, but he could do most of what he had to by feel.

He worked his way through the heaps of debris to a point midway down the block. The smell of decaying organic matter was so strong it made him gag, but the trash was high enough to effectively screen his actions from the crowd passing on either side. The doors and windows of the buildings facing the alley were boarded up. A small shaft of yellow light filtered in from the street.

Going through his pockets, he brought out the wallet, a large ring of keys, and a pistol silencer.

*Thank God I didn't find this thing before,* he thought as he tossed the silencer into a pile of garbage. He threw the ring of keys away as well. Even if one of them fit the ignition of a car, it would do him no good. He didn't know where the car was parked, and even if he could find the thing he probably wouldn't know how to operate it.

Alan concentrated on the wallet. Inside, he found the credit card he had used before at the theatre. He could just make out the name in the dim light: Fredrik Simms. So he was Fredrik Simms. It meant nothing to him now, but later it might be helpful to at least know who he was.

The wallet was stuffed with pictures. Most of them were faded snapshots of a sadomasochistic nature. There were a few family-group shots. He decided to keep all of them for appearance sake.

There was no folding money, no coin. He was beginning to suspect that computerized credit was the only medium of exchange—something this dimension seemed to have in common with Earth Prime. But he could not be sure. Again, he would have to experiment.

He put the wallet back in his pocket and made his way out of the alley, back down the street the way he had come. He remembered seeing an old, rundown hotel somewhere along the way. It had looked like it would afford cheap and relatively comfortable lodging. And he had to find a place to stay soon; it was beginning to get cold as it got darker.

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Forty minutes later Alan stood before the building. A weathered sign above the door said: *Belmont Hotel*. The place had certainly seen better days, but at least the rates would be reasonable. He did not know how much Simms' account was good for, but the one thing he did not want was to over-draw on the credit card. That would only direct unwanted attention to him.

As he entered, a small bell positioned at the top of the door rang. He stepped into warmth and dingy yellow light.

A man in a red turtle-neck sat behind the counter. He was perhaps forty and totally bald. A large scar ran from just below his left eye, up across his head and disappeared at the back of his skull. He was a small man, with an extremely thin, frail body. He was reading a tattered paperback book and appeared not to have heard Alan enter. On the wall behind him hung an old clock, the large, round-faced kind Alan had only seen in the history tapes. It said 8:45.

"Do you have a room?" Alan asked as he crossed the lobby. There was an extremely worn light blue carpet on the floor and the place smelled like most old buildings do—damp, moldy.

The man looked up, apparently annoyed at having his reading interrupted. He glanced down at Alan's left hip, then to his right hip, and returned his attention to the book as if Alan did not even exist.

"I asked if you have a room." Alan did not have to force anger into his voice; it was there on its own.

"Get on your way," the man said without lifting his gaze. "We don't serve second-class citizens here."

*Second-class citizen!* Alan thought. The other had looked at his hips. Of course, the gun. Those not willing to take the chances would naturally be denied the privileges. Alan was suddenly sorry he had not reclaimed the gun at the theatre.

"I...I lost my gun," he said.

The other did not respond.

"Can you at least tell me where I might purchase a weapon?"

The man looked up, his face showing puzzlement and annoyance. Without a word, he nodded to a thick volume at the end of the counter. Then he shook his head in disgust and returned his attention to the book.

Alan walked to the end of the counter, picked up the huge book, thumbed through it. The volume was a directory, a phone directory. And beside it sat an ancient dial telephone—obviously not even holographic.

The directory was categorized alphabetically, according to service or product. There were phone numbers, but no addresses. Under *W* he found *Weapons*, and half a dozen phone numbers. He placed his credit card in the appropriate slot in the side of the telephone, put the receiver to his ear, and dialed out the first number on the list.

The phone rang four times, then a voice cut in. The connection was bad; there was too much static on the line and Alan could not tell for sure if the person on the other end was male or female.

"Armory Weapons. May I help you?"

"Yes," Alan said. "I've lost my weapon... I need a replacement. If you'll give me your address..."

"What is your location?"

"The Belmont Hotel."

"Do you have anything special in mind?"

"Well, I really don't know. I..."

"I'll send someone right over with a case of samples. If you don't see something you like, don't hesitate to call back. Now, what is your name?"

"Simms," Alan said with just the slightest hesitation. "Fredrik Simms."

"Very well. Our representative will be there within... ten minutes." The line went dead.

Alan understood now why there had been no addresses in the directory. Every product was delivered, and every service was confirmed before enactment.

Suddenly, as Alan was placing his credit card back in his wallet, the burst of high-frequency energy and the mental image of the gray humanoid figure again entered his head, slashing like knives of pure fire into his confused thoughts. The figure was slightly clearer this time. It was human, a male. But the face was still too indistinct. Alan could not make out the features; he could not tell *who* it was.

Yet, the man did seem somehow familiar.

Then, suddenly, Alan remembered that the clone he had seen a hologram of in Rogers' office had had skin with a distinctly gray cast. Could he be projecting the clone into this somehow? He did not know; the clone had been a youth, no more than seven or eight years old, and this image possessed both the muscular development and the genitalia of an *adult* male.

The attack lasted only a fraction of a second, but for all its brevity it left Alan unbelievably weak and frightened. He felt his legs begin to give and he supported himself on the counter. Closing his eyes, he rested for a few seconds. When he opened his eyes again, he looked at the man behind the counter. The other was still reading, as if nothing had happened.

"Did you feel that—just now?" Alan asked.

The clerk did not answer.

"Did you feel something in your head?"

Still there was no response. Alan was evidently still considered a second-class citizen, not worthy of a reply. But he had forced a response before, albeit a non-verbal one, and this was important. He had to find out if it—whatever it was—was affecting him alone, or if it was something common to this dimension.

"Damn it, I asked if you felt anything. Answer me!" Alan slammed his fist down on the counter top.

The clerk's gaze came up slowly from the book and leveled on Alan. His voice, when he finally spoke, was cold and hard.

"No, I didn't feel a thing. I don't know what your game is, but if you don't sit down and shut up until your weapon comes I'll throw you out of here. Understand?" His gaze returned to the book, and, although he was a small man, Alan did not doubt he could make his threat good. Especially with Alan in his present weakened condition.

Alan bent with difficulty and retrieved his wallet from the floor where it had fallen during the attack. He put it back in his pocket and straightened up.

*There could be something wrong with my receiver,* he thought as he staggered toward the far end of the counter, away from the clerk. But no, that wasn't right. He had felt the attack for the first time during the transfer, *before* he was actually in the receiver's body. Although the loss of memory was in some way involved, he reasoned that it was probably an effect rather than a cause.

*Could I be to some extent incompatible with this dimension?* he wondered. *Is my mind somehow slightly out of synchronization with this side-branch of reality? Or is it an anxiety attack of some sort?*

Immediately he discounted the possibility of it being an anxiety attack. He was an experienced scanner; he had been trained in self-actuating mind control techniques against just such an occurrence. An anxiety attack he could handle, completely burying it in his subconscious in case one suddenly came on him. Besides, he had *never* had an anxiety attack before, and—in spite of the strangeness of this scan—he wasn't really under that much pressure now.

Whatever it was, he did not have time to work it out just yet. He had a job to do—he was on assignment. And the first stages of that assignment had to be initiated now.

Alan looked around the lobby. There was a large, well-stuffed chair in one corner, old and battered, but comfortable looking. Beside it stood a yellow newspaper box. He walked over and placed his card in the slot, then withdrew a paper and sat down.

This was not the electro-phrenic newsfax Alan was used to. It was an old-style paper news medium. But it was interesting none the less—filled with all sorts of gossip and scandal—and it was just what he was looking for. It was mostly personals. His



message to Robin would be effectively lost among so many others. Unless someone was looking for it, it would arouse no suspicion.

And Robin would certainly be looking for it.

Calling the paper's office, Alan placed his message: *Robin, Belmont Hotel, between three and five p.m. Al.* He told them to run it for four days, and gave Fredrik Simms' credit card number.

He only hoped Simms had plenty of whatever it took to back what he was spending.

**CHAPTER FIVE**  
**hr mn sc fr**  
**0005-48-02-0015**

The representative from Armory Weapons arrived just as Alan hung up the telephone.

She was tall, blonde and beautifully built. The stitch of red cloth she wore as a skirt effectively kept Alan's mind from the transaction, something he was sure it was intended to do. He kept thinking about the girl in the theatre, wondering if this girl had anything on under that skirt. But she never gave him a chance to find out, they conducted their business standing at the lobby's counter.

Alan finally selected a gun from the girl's sample case. She assured him the weapon was both accurate and deadly, in spite of its small size. A generous supply of cartridges, a holster and a silencer came with the gun. Alan reasoned he did not have to use it—he certainly did not plan to use it—but at least the weapon would give him the status of a first-class citizen and allow him, among other things, a hotel room.

After the girl left Alan again approached the clerk. This time the man was all smiles and nothing but helpful.

"I'd like a room with a window facing the street," Alan said gruffly. Still mad about his previous treatment, he was determined to let the clerk know his mind. But the man apparently did not notice Alan's ire.

"Very well, Mr. Simms," he said. "Did you want it with a shower?" He took Alan's credit card for computer processing.

"Yes, of course." Thought of a warm shower sent a shiver of pleasure up Alan's spine.

"You'll be staying with us how long?"

"Four or five days. Maybe longer."

The clerk handed back Alan's credit card, then showed him to a room on the second floor. It was Spartan, but clean. There was a large iron-posted bed with bedding folded neatly in the center of its mattress, a small writing desk and a stiff-backed chair. Both the desk and the chair were painted white and sat beside a drapeless, shadeless window which offered an excellent view of the street. Alan knew he would spend many hours at that window, watching the people below: their actions, their customs, what incited a duel, what did not. Especially what did not. He planned to live through his assignment, in spite of the handicaps he was working under.

On the wall above the desk hung a dim sadomasochistic photograph mounted in a cheap gold painted wood frame. The paint was beginning to peel from the frame, collecting in small, curled golden chips on the desk top. That was the first thing to go. As soon as the clerk left, Alan took the photograph from the wall and put it in the desk's drawer, atop a small leatherette-bound book.

The bathroom was also clean and sufficient.

First Alan showered, and then he examined his new body more closely. It seemed to be in quite good health. His muscles were firm and well developed. Dropping to the floor, he swiftly executed a series of strenuous exercises, testing every sinew and fiber.

This was a body accustomed to action, he decided, a strong, sturdy body he could put to good use.

As near as he could tell, there was only one flaw in the entire body: a particularly bad case of athlete's foot. It itched like hell, but he decided he could live with it for the little time he would inhabit the body.

Alan dressed quickly, then drew the chair from the desk and placed it before the window. He sat and watched.

At twelve-thirty the mental attack struck him again.

~ ~ ~

Two days passed in this strange branch of reality. Alan sat at his room's window most of both days, and in the lobby from three to five both afternoons. He read the personals, but neither Robin nor her message appeared.

Both nights the mental attack hit him at about twelve-thirty. He still could not figure out what it was or how to fight it. But the gray figure had become clearer, its details sharper, and the feeling that he somehow knew this other grew. The face, however, still could not be made out; it was simply a gray blank.

~ ~ ~

On the third day, as Alan prepared to descend to the lobby after a long and uneventful morning before his window, he heard a series of shouts from the street below. He had missed the first few seconds of the exchange, so he did not know what had actually touched off the duel, but he had already seen enough such encounters to know it could have been almost anything.

Again he sat in his chair and watched.

Below, two men were going through what he knew by now to be the standard preliminaries. Others on the street went by as if nothing was happening. For them, nothing was. They saw this every day of their lives. Still, seemingly unconsciously, they did give the two combatants a wide berth.

The duelists casually asked each other where they lived and where their cars were parked. Both gave the information freely, easily. They asked about marital status: one was married, the other not. Dependents? An equal number, in one form or another—three apiece.

Finally, they squared off on the sidewalk, typical gunfighter stance. Alan was suddenly reminded of an old movie he had seen years ago in a museum display. He could not remember the movie's name, but much had been done with music to develop mood. Somehow, after all these years, the theme song had stuck in his mind. It had gone something like: "*Do not forsake me, oh my darling...*"

*This scene should have similar music*, he thought. The whole thing was just too melodramatic.

The two were fast—damn fast—and it convinced Alan that he should avoid a duel at all cost. The unmarried man was just a little faster than the married duelist. The bullet entered the man's stomach near the naval and pushed out through a monstrous hole in his back, carrying a bloody tangle of intestines with it. Screaming in agony, the wounded man thrashed about on the ground for several seconds before he finally died.

None of the passers-by seemed to care. They went about their business as if nothing had happened.

The victor bent and started going through the dead man's pockets—what was left of them. While he was busy at the ghastly job, another man walked up behind him and eyed the bloody scene. "This your work, Dave?" he asked.

"Of course it's mine," the duelist said without looking up. "You don't think I'd be doing this if it wasn't. Now I have three more dependents, three more mouths to fill." He finished his work and wearily straightened up.

"It can't be all that bad. You can sell one house and a car and live pretty good until your next duel. Hell, there might even be a fair duelist among your new dependents."

"*That* would help," the one called Dave said as he stuffed the dead man's keys and wallet into his pockets. He put the other's gun in its holster and threw the holster over his shoulder. Then he bent and wiped his hands on the dead man's relatively unbloodied trouser leg.

"Let's go get a beer," he said as he straightened. "I'll find the car later." He kicked the limp body into the gutter, where it would be picked up the next morning by the city's sanitation crew. Then they walked briskly up the street.

*All in a day's work*, Alan thought cynically as he turned away from the window in disgust.

~\*~

Today, while sitting in his usual seat in the lobby—the worn and comfortable chair near the news box—Alan found what he had been waiting for. There was finally something from Robin, buried deep in the newspaper's personals. The message was short and, at first, confusing: *Al, see club ad. Rob.*

*Club ad?* he thought. *Oh, the night clubs. An advertisement for a night club.*

He flipped quickly through the paper and found it sandwiched between two large gun ads. It was a front-view picture of a nude girl in her mid-twenties—beautifully healthy, darkly tanned, with night-black hair. Worked pseudo-artfully over the photograph were the words:

*JULIE EMPIRE, SINGING NIGHTLY.  
FEATURED SONG/ACT: "IN THE  
ROBIN'S NEST." IMPROVISATIONAL  
—EVERY PERFORMANCE GUARANTEED  
DIFFERENT AND STIMULATING.*

At the bottom of the ad Alan noted the location of the song/act—*The Smoke and Powder Room*—and the address. It also said the club would not open until eleven p.m. He had some time to kill.

Alan used the time to buy a new suit of clothes: trousers, blue turtle-neck, and jeweled codpiece. Then he got a bite to eat—the same flat tasting synthetic stuff he had been eating for three days now—and showered. When ten-thirty rolled around he hailed a cab, as he had seen done from his window on numerous occasions, and was on his way to meet Julie Empire/Robin Green.

**EPISODE**  
**14 February, 2072**  
**1506 Ship Time**

The alarm's piercing whistle sent a shudder of terror through Ross' light frame. Bile flooded his mouth, sat heavy on his tongue. A glaze of cold perspiration broke out on his forehead. His palms felt suddenly moist. His body went rigid and fear was an open pit in his bowels. The pastel walls of the ready room bleached to a colorless white before his eyes.

The alarm lasted only a few seconds, but to Ross it seemed like whole minutes. Finally it stopped, and fourteen dory men jumped to their feet, spilling food and coffee, and scrambled for the hatch.

Ross couldn't move. Flashes of crimson excitement entered his mind from the men around him and mingled with cryptic bits of memory. He suddenly remembered scenes from his youth in the Los Fancisco slums, his years-long battle to escape the strip city, his training at the Foundation's Merchant Service Academy, his assignment aboard the Foundation whaler *Stardrift*. The memories flashed like lightning through his mind. They were sharp, vivid. And the most vivid of all were his memories of the flames.

He pushed the unwanted thoughts aside and his mind began racing through the procedures he had rehearsed again and again in the ship's dory trainer. He knew exactly what had to be done—his reflexes had been sharpened to perfection during the past few months and his body should have been reacting automatically. He should have been on his feet, he told himself, following the others out of the ready room. But his body simply would not respond.

"Damn it, Dillman," Logan called from the hatch, "move!"

Something in Ross' mind snapped at the sound of the flight commander's harsh, gravelly voice. Instantly he was on his feet, running. As he launched himself through the hatch he looked back into the ready room. Galson sat alone at his table, seemingly unaware of what was happening around him. The old man's mouth was still set in a soft smile and his sightless eyes remained locked in the unfocused gaze of a trance.

Ross followed Logan out of the ready room, keeping his gaze riveted on the large man's back. They ran swiftly down a short corridor, down a ladder and another corridor, then out into the cavernous dory hold.

Ross sprinted for his assigned dory. Its small hatch lay open and he scrambled through. Then he bent awkwardly around and swung the hatch shut behind him. He heard the staccato clicks of the auto-lock as he stretched out prone in the cramped cockpit and strapped himself in with deft movements. Then he glanced at the instruments before him—all lights on the board were glowing green.

"Flight check," came Logan's calm voice over the intercom. "Alvarez."

"Green," said a voice.

"Bracken."

"Green," came another.

"Dillman."

"Green!" Ross' reply was too loud, almost a scream.

"Take it easy, Dillman," Logan said. "There's nothing to worry about."

Ross did not hear the other names or their responses as the flight commander continued down his flight list.

**CHAPTER SIX**  
**hr mn sc fr**  
**0079-13-56-2576**

A blue neon sign above the entrance flashed out its warning: SILENCERS MUST BE USED.

Alan had thought, just before leaving the hotel room that it might be safer not to bring his gun, that he should hide it somewhere in the room and simply forget about it. But then he had realized that a second-class citizen would probably not be admitted to *The Smoke and Powder Room*. The weapon hanging like a sleeping cobra at his hip was essential.

He searched his pockets, found the silencer and screwed it on the barrel of his gun. Fear rose in him as he pushed against the door, but he beat it down and entered the club.

The room was large and dark. People were jammed into it, laughing and screaming, generating a sound level almost physically painful. Cigarette smoke hung heavy in the air, a choking cloud of irritants. In the fog of smoke Alan smelled what he thought was burnt gunpowder.

*There's danger here*, he thought. The room was filled with potential death; alcohol, sex and guns made a very deadly mixture. There would be duels tonight—and death. Alan could almost feel it crouched in the air about him, waiting to pounce. As if to emphasize his thought, the silencer-muffled *thunk* of a shot fell nearly unnoticed into the din around him.

He located a small table near the door and sat down. On the table's plastic surface a list of drinks glowed in dim red. Beer was among the drinks offered. He ordered a beer and sipped it while he waited nervously for the show to begin.

After a few minutes a bright spotlight shone on the stage at the far end of the room. A low, electronically-generated, hypnotic music began. It seemed to start deep within Alan's body and mind and work its way to the surface. It wove its sinuous way in and out of Alan's consciousness, and he found himself somehow sexually aroused by its base rumble. *Most of it*, he thought, *is in the sub-sonic range*.

A girl stepped out from behind the heavy crimson curtains. It was Julie/Robin. She was clad in nothing but a gold sequined g-string and her long, black hair. The ad picture had not done her justice; she was certainly the most beautiful woman Alan had ever seen. She seemed to radiate an almost overpowering sexuality—something the photographer had not been able to capture.

She began to move with the music, slowly at first, her body as fluid as mercury, but warm and alive. The passions the music ignited in Alan intensified with each soft



undulation of her body. But her face—*Robin's face*, Alan forced himself to remember—was totally without expression, as if she was in a deep trance. She performed like a zombie: beautifully, precisely, but without feeling or will.

The music climbed and soared in Alan's mind, finally reaching a sustained climax of unbelievable strength. Robin's dance matched the music's intensity; her movements flowed like water, yet they were filled with the power of a storm at sea. Listening to the music, feeling it, watching Robin dance to it—all this made Alan want to join her. He felt his muscles involuntarily jumping to the music, and he fought their twitching movements, trying to control his body.

As he watched, several members of the audience climbed up onto the stage. They quickly disrobed and started dancing.

Alan pulled his mind free of the music for an instant, just long enough to think, *This might be my chance to make contact with Robin*, through the haze of passion and sound. But as soon as the thought was completed, he no longer had a choice. A gain the music snared his thoughts, and his muscles began working of their own accord. Without further thought, he undressed and joined the others on the stage.

Fighting the fog the music blew into his mind, he danced across the stage, working his way slowly toward Robin. He slid through the crowd like smoke. Dimly, he realized it was not so much that Simms' body and brain remembered how to dance to this strange music without conscious effort from his own absent mind—although that *was* part of it too; the music did dictate the form of the dance. But this music, and the subconscious movements it somehow generated, came from somewhere in the dim past. Not the past of man exactly, but of proto-man, some primeval savage that was an ancestor to both the humanoid inhabitants of this dimension and those of Earth Prime alike. Somehow, the music touched a chord in the long submerged racial memories of both races, bridging a gap not so much of time or distance, but of realities.

Suddenly, that thought was gone, and Alan found himself standing beside Robin, dancing, matching her intricate movements detail for detail. He leaned toward her, placed his lips to her ear, was about to speak....

"Later," she said mechanically, not even bothering to turn and look at him. "I have a show to perform now."

"Robin," Alan said in a soft whisper, "it's me." His words came out rough and low, more a groan of passion than a whisper.

A look of shocked surprise washed over Robin's face. Her dark brown eyes widened and the corners of her mouth turned down slightly in the beginning of a frown. It quickly switched to a smile, then her expression returned to its trance-like stare.

"Back stage," she whispered, "after two."

Suddenly, the music and the girl dancing beside him became too much for Alan to cope with. He fought their strong seductive influence, but it was too deep, too basic. He stopped dancing and reached around Robin, held her by her long black hair and around the waist, and drew her to him. Her body pressed against his own, warm, soft, but firm-muscled. Her flesh seemed to melt into his.

He gave her a long kiss on the mouth, then released her and took a step backward. Again her expression changed: horror flooded her eyes for an instant, hardening the lines around her mouth. Then her expression softened and she smiled. She reached out, took Alan's hand in her own, squeezed it gently. After only an instant she released his hand and resumed her dance. Her expression returned to a blank stare.

Alan walked off the stage and slowly back to his seat. He got dressed and ordered another beer. The dancing had left him exhausted, but it was a pleasant feeling too.

The music lasted only a few minutes longer. When it stopped, Robin left the stage through a parting in the curtain, clutching her g-string in her hand. Some of the others had gone further with her than Alan had, but her expression had not altered throughout. As Alan watched, the crowd gathered up their clothes, returned to their tables and got dressed.

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During the two hours he had to wait, Alan tried to remember as clearly as possible Robin's reaction to him being there. Alan himself had been affected in some strange way by the hypnotic music, and he wasn't sure he could depend on his own observations of what had happened. But, although he couldn't quite pin it down, something was very odd about the way in which she had responded to his presence, something somehow out of sequence about her initial response. Of course, he reasoned, she had been under considerable stress at the time, both physically and mentally. Either that explained it, or the music had affected him far more than he had been aware.

Robin did two more shows, one with a Shetland pony and the other with a horribly disgusting chimpanzee. The climax of both shows was the slow butcher of the animals with a long, curved knife. The high, piercing screams of the chimpanzee were almost more than Alan could take.

Toward the end of the pony episode Alan experienced yet another of the strange mental attacks. After the vertigo had subsided, he checked the luminous face of a small clock set in the top of his table below the list of drinks. It was exactly twelve-thirty.

Robin's expression did not show whether or not she felt the attack. *How could it?* Alan thought. At the time she was delivering the final death-thrust to the pony.

He certainly did not envy her the receiver she was stuck with.

The lights came on at two o'clock sharp. Alan waited at his table while the crowd collected its belongings and left. Then he went backstage, stepping gingerly over the bodies of the night's less fortunate duelists.

Robin waited for him in a small, dimly lighted hallway behind the stage. She wore a pink terry-cloth robe, and she looked tired, haggard. Alan noticed heavy bags of flesh around her eyes which he had not seen earlier in the evening.

Wordlessly, she led him to her dressing room. The room was only sparsely furnished: a small unmade bed, a cosmetic-cluttered dressing table with a built in credit check terminal, and a chair. The once-white wallpaper was yellow with age and peeling in places. A dim bulb hung from its worn cord near the ceiling.

When the door was closed behind them, Robin threw her arms around Alan's neck and began to cry. Her robe fell slightly open and Alan worked his hands inside, against her bare back. She shook uncontrollably against him, and he felt cold perspiration on his palms.

"Al," she sobbed into his chest, "you don't know how glad I am to see you. I wasn't able to place my message until today. And I haven't seen a paper at all since transfer." Her words came fast, almost frantic, and Alan squeezed her tighter to him.

"I'm sorry, Robin. Is it like this every night?"

She nodded, then sniffed back her tears. "It's been three nights now. I'm a prisoner here. To Grange, the owner of this club, I'm no more than a money-making piece of meat."

"It's okay now, kitten," Alan said, again squeezing her reassuringly. "It's all over."

Robin lifted her head, then stepped back and wiped her eyes on the sleeves of her robe. She smiled weakly. "You didn't do so bad for yourself this time," she said.

"No, not bad at all. It sure beats that dwarf I drew last assignment."

"That *was* funny." Robin laughed weakly, still sniffing back tears.

"To you, maybe. You always did have a strange sense of humor, but I love it."

"Of course you love it. You're supposed to."

Alan smiled. She was playing with him. That was a good sign. She would come through this. It would leave its scars—deep ones—but Robin could handle them. She was tough; she was a good scanner.

"We'd better get cracking," she said, as if to prove his point.

"That's my girl. Now, we have to report in. Frank's anxiety profile must be doing flip-flops off the chart by now."

"It'll do him good. But you're right. You make the report while I shower. If Grange comes in, tell him you're a paying customer. He'll leave you alone; he loves the money too much."

## EPISODE June, 2071

The whales were found in Sirius system of Earth Prime—they had never been discovered anywhere else. But they were not native to any of Sirius' seven planets. They were far too massive to hold up for long under any gravitational pull, no matter how light. It was a wonder they came near any system, let alone one with the dynamic stresses of a double star. Yet, they were always coming into the system from somewhere. From where? That had so far not been determined. Sirius might be the system that had spawned them and they returned there to breed; that was the currently popular theory, and it had much evidence to support it. But where did they come *from*?

From the whales man obtained dramil. A coenocytic fungus, similar to class Phycomycetes, grew throughout their bodies. The drug was distilled from this fungus and, because of restrictive rotation about its double bonds, so far it had defied all attempts at laboratory synthesis. A geometric isomer, dramil constituted the trans structure. The cis isomer could be fabricated in the laboratory with little difficulty, but it displayed different physical properties as well as a different chemical behavior.

Ross had used the drug only once, in his room at the Foundation's Merchant Service Academy. On him it had had but one effect—it had intensified the flames. They had danced with a power and beauty far beyond anything he had ever experienced. Their communication with him that night had been stronger and more demanding than it had ever been before or since.

The flames had been intelligent and friendly. They had shown him, for the brief time the drug had been effective, the road to perfect happiness. Through dramil he had become one of them for a few hours. He had experienced joy and life with an almost painful clearness and intensity.

But he could not bring himself to try the drug again after that first time. The route the sparkling creatures of fire had shown him led through death. He had awakened on the window ledge outside his room, his roommate struggling to drag him back inside. He knew he would have jumped had the other not arrived in time. The flames had commanded it.

The Academy administration had been told about Ross' dramil experience. The Student Health Officer had recommended psychiatric treatment. "Dramil," he had said, "should not induce suicidal action. It has two primary functions. First, it is a harmless euphoric. There have never been adverse effects from using it as such. But it is also used as a boost for parapsychics. You are a class C telepath, I realize that. But it still should not have had this effect."

Ross had agreed to undergo treatment; it was that or be expelled from the Academy. But he told the doctors nothing of the flames and decided to avoid the use of dramil.



## CHAPTER SEVEN

hr mn sc fr

0082-21-07-0036

Alan pulled the chair away from the dressing table and sat down. Resting an arm on the red credit check terminal, he cradled his chin in the crook of his elbow, then closed his eyes.

The light hiss of the shower in the bathroom beyond pressed in on his mind. With little effort he pushed the sound from his consciousness; his mind had to be totally clear of all thought other than the report if its transmission back to the Foundation in Earth Prime was to be a success. He would need all his mental faculties if he hoped to break through the interface separating him from his own world.

An almost imperceptible tingling sensation began at the base of his spine. It increased in gradual stages, adding to itself, finally washing in wave upon wave up his back toward his head. There it gathered, at the back of his skull, waiting almost impatiently for him to tap it. A deep, glowing lava-pool of psionic energy, this was the carrier over which he would lay his message, transmitting his report across inter-dimensional boundaries.

Alan coded his report on the carrier—*Alan and Robin together/Will begin search soon*—and cast it out.

The report would reach his own dimension instantly; Alan had to believe that or it never would. There was no way to know for certain that his sleeping body, holding the receiver's mind, had verbalized the words to be recorded by the computer. Confirmation would have to wait until after the assignment had been completed and he and Robin had returned. But only on a few of the Foundation's assignments into other dimensions had a report failed to get through, and never on one of Alan's scans.

When Alan again opened his eyes, Robin was standing before him. Her hair was still wet from the shower, giving it a blue-black sheen Alan found most attractive. It hung limply past her shoulders. She wore a short green skirt which showed her long lithe legs to full advantage. A see-through halter and white, old-style high heels finished off her clothing.

The effect was stunning.

"Feeling better?" Alan asked.

"Much. I'll be fine now. Just stop staring." Somehow, she managed that pixie smile of hers with a face not at all structured to deliver it.

"With that outfit on, you'll be lucky if you're not raped as soon as we set foot outside this room."

Robin shook her head. "After all I've been through the last few days, a good human rape would be almost welcome."

"I'll remember you said that."

"I said *almost*." She made an unsuccessful attempt at replacing her smile with a frown.

"You don't sound too sure about that."

"I'm not." There was an edge of fear in her voice. The teasing was hitting too close to home.

Alan knew the mental scars of the preceding few days would heal only very slowly, and with much care. Robin would bury herself in the scan assignment, giving her raw psyche the time it needed to repair itself. Meanwhile, the teasing would be kept to a minimum. Alan, too, would help the scars heal, by not pressing her.

"You're seeing me through the mind of a man from *our* dimension," she said. "I'm in no danger of rape in these streets. Here, all sexual encounters are by mutual consent—no matter how strange some of them might seem to us—and this is perfectly normal female attire. I would think you would have noticed that by now. Or are you slipping in your old age?"

"What about this Grange character?" Alan said, ignoring her question. "You said you're almost a prisoner here. Is he going to give us any trouble?"

"I don't know. This whole set-up is by mutual agreement. This receiver is a strange girl. She seems to like being hurt, enjoys being another's slave. A real masochist. And Grange, now he's a sadist from the word go. Both seem to be quite happy with the arrangement in a strange sort of way; they have this weird love/hate thing going between them. I really don't know how Grange would react if I... I mean, if Julie Empire was to leave him. He might just sulk for a few days, then find himself someone else, or he might go into a rage, track her down and kill her. That is, me."

Alan nodded thoughtfully. "Have you retained your receiver's memories, then?" he asked.

"No. I picked up all that about Grange's and Julie Empire's relationship through his reactions to me. But I meant to ask you about that before I went in to take my shower. How come this receiver's memories aren't there when I need them, like they're supposed to be?"

"I don't know. I was hoping maybe you had the answer to that one." He looked at her questioningly. "No idea at all?"



Robin shrugged.

"Do you experience the image of that faceless man?" Alan asked.

"Faceless man?" she said hesitantly. There was a question in her eyes, but it quickly disappeared. "Yes," she said with more conviction, "I've experienced his image."

"The burst of high frequency energy—do you receive that too?"

Robin nodded. "At twelve-thirty every night. But it isn't exactly high frequency energy. It's a binary code of some sort, but speeded up, so it comes in one quick burst. It scared the hell out of me at first, until I had time to slow it down and analyze it."

"Binary," Alan said thoughtfully. "A computer code?"

"It could be. At least a code for transferal or transmission of information at high speed."

"And you have the bits stored? I mean, you remember them?"

Robin tapped her temple with a long-nailed index finger and smiled. "Photographic memory and total recall. Remember?"

Alan nodded. "Just checking," he said, and thought silently for an instant. Finally he continued: "Okay, I don't want it now; it'll just get in the way. We'll work with it later. Right now, we have to find Edwards—if he's still alive."

Without a word, Robin turned and walked to the bed. She pulled the blankets straight and sat down. Her shoulders slumped forward, her hands resting limply in her lap, and Alan read extreme exhaustion in every line of her body.

Standing, he dragged the chair noisily across the floor and positioned it beside the bed. He sat down again, his knees nearly touching Robin's. Her knees were trembling and the small muscles around her eyes twitched uncontrollably.

"Are you sure you're up to this?" Alan asked.

Robin closed her eyes, drew in a deep breath between clenched teeth and let it out slowly and noisily. Finally, she opened her eyes. Her eyes looked haunted, her gaze somehow hooded with fear.

"I have a headache, that's all. I'll be okay." She shrugged. "Besides, this has to be done." She again closed her eyes and reached out to Alan, palms toward him, fingers spread.

Alan nodded, then extended his hands out to meet hers.

*This will make her headache worse, he thought as their fingers locked tight, squeezing his palms flat against hers. But she's right. It does have to be done. And the sooner we make contact with Edwards, the better it will be for everyone.*

As Robin's long fingernails bit lightly into the backs of his hands, he caught himself hoping this would be a nice, simple search. But there was really no such thing as a simple assignment for a scan team. And that was why Alan and Robin had been sent in; they always got the job done, no matter what the odds or the danger.

Scan teams simply didn't last long enough to talk about failures.

Alan closed his eyes. Again he felt the tingle stirring in his lower spine, working its way up his back. He was aware, without actually thinking it, that the same thing was happening to Robin; when the energy reached his brain, it was joined by another—different from his own, yet complementary and equal in strength.

Together, they cast the energy out in ever-increasing concentric circles. Farther and faster it ranged, like the invisible pulses of sonar. But this scan, unlike that which had projected their minds into this new world, was specifically tuned to detect a mind with a psi potential above a certain critical level. That mind stood a very good chance of belonging to Edwards.

At first there was nothing.

Then...contact!

A swirl of confused thoughts: pain, frustration, fear, the rich smell of blood and a sharp-edged wail of agony. A cold wind blew like the finger of death across their minds, bringing with it the stench of decay and corruption.

Before them lay a spot of black, an evil, bottomless pit of malefic power. Alan felt it deep within his own mind as it grew with incredible speed, swelling like a caterpillar in its fragile chrysalis, sucking hungrily at the corporate mind that was Alan and Robin. They fought it as one, trying to break its web of power and pull free. But their effort did no good; they were helpless against that blackness, and it drew them into itself. They were engulfed by despair as the blackness before them coalesced into a mass of swirling dark clouds.

Ahead, emerging from the clouds thundering down upon them, came the form of a man—gray-skinned, legs and arms spread, face a featureless blank. It was the image Alan had experienced during those strange mental attacks.

Suddenly, Robin's mind went blank beside Alan's. Alan reached out for her with his own mind, probing, searching for her consciousness. But she was no longer there. She was gone.

Alone, Alan renewed his fight, drawing on mental reserves he had not known he possessed. Reaching deep within his consciousness, he pulled up bright, flashing bolts of power, throwing them like spears toward that faceless other.

Finally, after what seemed like hours, he broke the other's dark grip. But as he pulled away there was a flash of something else. It was a quick glance of a thin man in a conservative brown jumpsuit sitting behind a large desk. His hair was totally white, his eyes hooded and glazed above a large, hawkish nose. Behind a mouth that was little more than a slash in a too-narrow face, the teeth were gnarled and blackened with decay. His posture—the way he sat hunched over the desk—suggested he hadn't slept in quite some time.

And Alan knew the man.

Then there was the image of a huge building, bigger than anything Alan had yet seen in this dimension. The architecture was heavy and functional, similar in design to ancient Assyrian of Earth Prime. It looked like a fortress of some kind; large guns studded its face and black-uniformed, submachine gun carrying soldiers stood guard at every entrance.

Then, there was nothing.

Alan quickly withdrew his mind. This was not what he had expected. He had thought of a hurried acquisition of Edwards' location within this dimension would be accomplished through the Gestalt mind. But this...

He opened his eyes. Robin still sat on the bed, watching him, her eyes wide with fear. She looked pale and tired, and she kept squinting in the dim light.

"What happened to you?" Alan demanded, his voice hard with sudden anger. "Why did you leave me like that?"

"I... I couldn't face that, whatever it was. I just had to get out." Her voice cracked; she was on the verge of tears.

"All right," Alan said, softening his voice and reaching out to take her hands. "You couldn't face that. I understand." She had been through a lot in the last few days, he reminded himself.

Alan looked down at his own hands where they rested in his lap. Twin rivulets of blood trickled off his finger tips and puddled on the floor. Robin had dug her long nails in deep during the search.

"That must have been Edwards," Alan said. "He must have caused all that somehow."

Robin sniffed back her tears. "That wasn't the mind of a trained scanner," she said. "It wasn't even human. It was horrible."

Alan glanced at the clock on the wall above Robin's bed. It was 3:36 a.m. "It has to be Edwards. A mind with a psi output that one displayed could only belong to a scanner. Power like that doesn't just happen; it has to be developed."

"But Ralf was mixed up in that nightmare somehow."

"Tanner?" Alan said, remembering the man behind the desk. "I thought I recognized him. Were you thinking of him any time before he appeared?"

"No, not consciously."

"Then subconsciously?"

"It's possible, I guess."

Alan nodded. "I think you may have projected him into all that," he said, "subconsciously."

"But how do you explain the crazy quality of Edwards' thoughts—if that was Edwards?"

"I can't. He might be under the influence of a drug of some kind. One thing for sure: he needs our help."

Alan rubbed the back of his neck, then, too late, remembered the blood on his hands. He felt as tired as Robin looked.

"I'm sorry about leaving you in all that," Robin said. "I..."

"It's okay, kitten. I just don't see how you did it. I mean, whatever that was, it *had* us. You just broke away, without any apparent trouble. How?"

"I don't know. I just did it."

Alan nodded. He still wasn't satisfied, but Robin obviously didn't know how she had accomplished so easily what he had had such a hard time doing.

"How's your headache?" he asked.

She pinched the bridge of her nose with thumb and forefinger. "I'll live."

"Maybe you'd better take something for it. I have a feeling this is going to be a long night."

"Maybe I'd better," she said, and turned and went into the bathroom.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

hr mn sc fr

0083-46-01-5527

"At least they have rather effective analgesics here," Robin said as she again sat on the bed. "I'm already starting to feel better."

Alan frowned. "The way they live here, they *need* strong pain killers. But what about those mental attacks? I don't want to push you, but we have to get busy."

"What about them?"

"When did you pick up the first one?"

"Just after initiating scan," Robin said, "before I landed my receiver."

"Same here. Do you have a piece of paper and a pencil?"

"Somewhere around here," Robin said. "But you don't actually think you can break that code, do you?"

"If it's a linear code, no, we don't stand a chance. But if it's two dimensional it was meant for display on a flat surface, say a cathode-ray tube, and it should decode into recognizable symbols. All we have to do is assume that is the case and assign some sort of logical raster to it."

Robin got up and began fumbling through the chest-of-drawers while Alan pulled his chair to the dressing table and started clearing bottles of cosmetics from its surface, placing them on the floor. "Oh, and I'll need a straight edge of some kind," he said as he sat down.

After a few minutes, Robin joined him at the dressing table and placed a small pad and the stub of a pencil before him. "I couldn't find a straight edge," she said.

"That's okay." Alan stood and took his wallet from his pocket. From it he withdrew the plastic credit card, which he laid on the dressing table. "This will work fine," he said, replacing his wallet and sitting back down.

"Work fine for what? I still don't see what you're doing."

"Just give me the first transmission you picked up. Slowly, so I can copy it."

"You mean the bits?"

"Yes, in sequence."

"All right, if that's what you want." Robin closed her eyes and was silent for several seconds. Finally, she began to read off the binary code:

```
"00100101001011100000101101001001000101011001000000101001001001110
00000000000000111010011110000101010001000000111010001010110101011
1010."
```

Alan read it back to her to make sure he had copied it correctly. Then he counted up the ones and zeroes.

"I make one hundred thirty-five bits in all. Not a very elaborate display, but certainly enough in information to form one. Were all the transmissions one hundred thirty-five bits?"

Robin again closed her eyes. She was silent for a few seconds. Finally she said, "Yes, they're all the same length."

"Good. That means they more than likely form a two dimensional display. If we find a raster pattern that works for the first transmission, it will probably work for all. What are the possible factors that can be divided into one hundred thirty-five?"

"Let's see," Robin said, "discounting the obvious—one times one hundred thirty-five—there's three times forty-five, five times twenty-seven, and nine times fifteen. I don't think there are any more. Yes, that's it."

"Okay," Alan said, "we can figure that a visual display will be pretty close to a square in shape. Three by forty-five can be completely ignored. And I don't think five by twenty-seven would work too well either." He drew as he spoke, using the credit card as a straight edge. "We can assume the information will be read mainly from left to right. That puts the long axis, fifteen bits, along the horizontal and nine along the vertical. Now, we simply transfer the coded information onto our visual grid in a raster pattern."

Alan was silent for a few minutes while he worked over the grid he had drawn. When he was through he sat back in the chair to let Robin see the finished product.

A large upper case *I* and *A* stood out on the paper. There were a number of symbols to the left.

"Is it possible those letters stand for intruder alert?" Alan asked.

"Could be, I guess."

"If so, someone knows we're here."

"And just maybe that someone has the means to stop us," Robin said.

Alan nodded. "What I can't understand are the symbols to the left. I can recognize the binary numbers one, two and four running down the grid. But three and five are all wrong."

Robin looked at him questioningly. "That fourth column over is for parity," she said. "In this case, odd parity. It's used as an accuracy test for the entire signal. You had orientation; you should have known that."

"Yes, I had orientation. But that was more years ago than it's comfortable to remember. *You're* the one with the eidetic memory, not me. When did you receive the second transmission?"

"A few hours after I entered my receiver's body. I found myself here, in this room. I was trying to get my thoughts together, trying to find out who I was, where I was."

"Okay, let's have it."

Robin again closed her eyes. In a few seconds she spoke and Alan wrote. Then he drew another grid and transferred the information.

"What the hell does that mean?" he asked when he had completed the graphic.

Robin laughed. "You don't remember much about orientation, do you? It looks like the monitor display for a training session at the Foundation. The middle piece of information, the plus nine, would be the projected mission success index. It's directly dependent on the information above and below it—the biomagnetic field ratings of the individual team units. A negative number is a normal reading. An injured operative would climb from minus five until he reached a positive reading, which would indicate traumatic shock."

"You mean someone is monitoring our operations from the Foundation?" Alan asked. "But that's impossible. Electromagnetic radiation can't cross inter-dimensional boundaries."

"I know," Robin said. "That means we're being monitored by someone *here*, someone with extensive knowledge of Foundation procedure and equipment."

Alan nodded and was silent for a few seconds. Finally he said, "Which biomagnetic rating is whose on this display?" He tapped the pad with the pencil stub.

"I don't think we can know for sure," Robin said, "but I'd guess the bottom one is mine—the minus four. What this girl went through day after day *had* to alter her physical well-being."

"That makes sense. What was that third transmission you intercepted?"



Robin gave him the binary bits and again he went through the decoding process. This time Robin's reading was plus two while Alan's remained minus five.

"You were into traumatic shock here."

"It looks like it. I intercepted that the first night, during my act. Is there any wonder I got a traumatic reading?"

"None at all."

The fourth read-out showed Robin's rating slipped to plus four, and the fifth to plus five. The projected mission success index steadily dropped to a minus five.

"Of course," Robin said, "each of those readings were taken during a performance, and my rating probably goes into the minus readings between them. Still, I imagine it loses a little each time. I just can't control the biochemistry of this body like Julie Empire obviously could."

"In other words, your receiver's body is gradually wearing out. How dangerous is that?"

"It could be very dangerous, if I've spent too much time in the positive. And the process isn't all that gradual. But the important thing now is the assignment. Because of the occupational hazards of this receiver, we're working in the red now. A projected mission success index of minus five will take immediate action and a lot of luck to beat. And the longer we wait, the worse it will get."

"Which means we'd better get to it," Alan said as he again checked the clock above the bed. The time was 4:40. "We know Edwards is here, in the city. And we have a hint as to where in the city he is."

He pushed back his chair and stood, scratching at the stubble beginning to form along his jaw.

"Come on," he said, striding toward the door. "We have to locate that fortress."

Alan opened the door. Beyond, silhouetted in the dim light from the naked bulb in the hallway, was a man almost seven feet tall. He was built like hamburger on the hoof and stood with his feet spread wide apart, blocking Alan and Robin's exit.

"Where d'you think you're goin'?" His voice was low and rough and his large fists were planted on his wide hips. Alan noticed he did not carry a weapon. But then, he didn't look like he needed one.

"To take the lady out for something to eat." It was more a question than a statement, and Alan cringed inside at the sound of it. That was definitely not the way he had intended it to sound.

"No you don't, buster," the large man said. "She eats here. And you, if you have business with her you'll conduct it here, too. Understand?" A beefy, calloused finger with almost no nail poked hard in the center of Alan's chest, forcing him to stagger back a step.

"Come on, Grange," Robin said. "This here's a customer. He's just trying to be a nice guy. Believe me, you'll get your cut."

"Damn right I will," Grange said, taking a menacing step toward Alan. "That's why I'm not lettin' you leave here. You've tried to skip out on me five times in the last three days. I ain't no fool; I ain't gonna let it happen. I'm through bein' a nice guy, hear? I got too much tied up in your crab-infested hide."

Grange put a large open hand on Alan's chest and pushed. Alan flew back into the room, landing in a heap on the floor against the bed. He gasped for breath as the large man came into the room and stood towering over him.

"In fact," Grange said, a menacing gleam coming into his eyes, "I just might finish this joker off right now. I could make it look like a duel, see. I wonder how much he's got in his account. How much you got, sucker?"

"You'd have to take my dependents, too," Alan said, bluffing and stalling for time. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Robin behind Grange. She was bending to pick up the large rock used as a door jam. "I have twenty-five dependents."

"Hell, I couldn't care less. I wouldn't touch your damn dependents. I take only what I want. Anybody doesn't like it gets hurt bad." The large man bent at the waist, reached down for Alan. Alan saw that Robin was not yet in position. That left only one alternative.

Almost as purely reflex action, Alan reached for the gun at his hip. He surprised himself, he was fast—faster than the two duelists he had seen from his window. But Grange was faster. The large man's huge hand snapped out and wrapped around Alan's hand and the gun in it before Alan could aim the weapon.

Pain shot through Alan's hand as the large man crushed it in a vise-like grip, directing the weapon away from himself. When he finally released Alan's hand, the gun clattered noisily to the floor.

"You shouldn't have done that, dummy," Grange said, glee creeping into his voice and his face. "Now I'm goin' to enjoy this a whole lot more."

Alan glanced to Robin behind Grange. The rock was cradled heavily in her hands, but she was not moving. She was not doing what Alan had thought she was going to do, what he was depending on. She simply stood motionless, as if she was in some sort of trance, the rock which should have been crashing down on Grange's head resting uselessly in her hands.

"Yeah, I'm goin' to enjoy this a lot."

Grange leaned down closer to Alan, his massive body blocking Alan's view of Robin, his monstrosly huge hands reaching slowly for Alan's throat. An ugly grin spread across the large man's face. Alan noticed he had several teeth missing and his breath smelled heavily of garlic.

With almost no conscious thought, Alan's foot suddenly kicked out toward the face looming above him. The heel of his boot caught Grange squarely in the mouth. There was a dull, sickening crack. The smile immediately disappeared from the large man's face as he spit blood and broken teeth and the impact catapulted him away from Alan.

Even if Alan's mind was at a loss, his body knew exactly what to do. Instantly, he was on his feet. He caught Grange hard with his first punch, a left to the stomach, as the other staggered off balance. Grange doubled up, grabbing his mid-section, and Alan reached around to the back of his head, pushing his head down, and viciously kned him in the face.

The huge man straightened, showing a face bathed in scarlet blood. He staggered backward several steps, colliding with Robin and knocking her to the floor. Then he toppled heavily on top of her.

"Get him off me," Robin grunted as she pushed against over three hundred pounds of dead weight. Alan reached down, rolled the large man's body off her.

She got to her feet, looked down at the man on the floor. Grange lay with his face in a growing pool of crimson blood. His breathing was shallow and ragged.

Robin directed a sharp kick to his ribs. There was a faint *crack* and Grange grunted. "Underneath all that sinew and tendon," she said, "beats a heart of pure protein."

Alan grabbed her by the shoulder, spun her toward him.

"What the hell happened?" he demanded. "Why didn't you hit him with the rock?"

"I don't know." Robin's brow furrowed in puzzlement. "Somehow, I just couldn't. For a few seconds, my mind went completely blank."

"The mental attack, the code and the image?"

Robin nodded. "I couldn't move," she said. "I couldn't *think*."

**EPISODE**  
**14 February, 2072**  
**1509 Ship Time**

Ross Dillman watched through the rectangular port above his dory's instruments as a small section of the *Stardrift's* hull opened into black space sprinkled with stars.

"Dories," said Logan's voice over the intercom, "launch on own command."

Ross braced himself in the cockpit, as the trainer had so painfully taught him. He pressed the launch button. The great *woosh* and *thud* of the catapult turned his body to lead as the dory was hurled from its cradle in the *Stardrift's* hold.

The weight decreased quickly, almost instantly, as Ross shot away from the parent ship. But he did not feel the speed of his departure. He hung weightless in the black silence, finding it easy to imagine himself alone and naked in space, without the life-supporting aid of his dory. The stars were brilliant, sharp, clear. They beat down on him like a billion shining eyes. He thought he might stretch out his hand and touch them.

"Maypole three is hot!" said Logan over the intercom, breaking the peaceful silence and shattering Ross' thoughts. "That's yours, Dillman."

"On my way." Ross punched a button on his instrument board, received a relative bearing to the radar buoy along its locator beacon. He faced his dory along that line and tapped a five second burst on the main propulsion thruster. A one gravity force pressed down on him for a few seconds, then was gone.

His pulse pounding in his ears, Ross sped out away from the huge mass of the *Stardrift*, toward his designated radar buoy and his first whale.

**CHAPTER NINE**  
**hr mn sc fr**  
**0085-02-27-0035**

It had started to rain by the time they left *The Smoke and Powder Room*.

The streets were brilliant with water and littered with mud puddle craters, the contents of which speeding cars kicked up to the umbrage of the pedestrians. But the air was relatively free of the choking cloud of pollutants Alan had been breathing for the past few days. It was almost a joy to breathe it.

Almost.

Alan located a phone booth and called a cab. Then he and Robin waited in wet, miserable silence, dodging muddy sprays thrown up by passing cars.

The cab, when it finally arrived, was a beat-up old vehicle. Its driver didn't look to be in much better shape. He was a little man, about sixty, with several days' growth of gray beard covering the lower half of his face. On his head, cocked at a jaunty angle, he wore a moth-eaten red beret. His eyes were blood-shot and watery, and his breath smelled of a foul mixture of beer and stale cigarettes.

Alan helped Robin into the back seat of the cab, then climbed in beside her. The driver didn't turn around, but watched them in the rear-view mirror, the end of his cigarette glowing dull red in the darkness.

When they were finally situated, the driver asked: "Where to?"

"I don't know for sure," Alan said. He gave the other a description of the fortress he had seen during his search for Edwards.

"Hell, every schoolboy knows that's the palace," the driver said, turning in his seat.

"The palace?"

"Sure. The President's palace. What's wrong with you? You from the moon or somethin'?"

"We're from out of town," Alan said, hoping his response was acceptable. "This is our first visit here."

"You still should know about the palace."

"Never mind that—just take us there." Alan was mad, and his anger showed in his voice. He wasn't so much angry with the driver as with himself. He didn't know what to

expect or how to respond. He didn't have his receiver's memories, and it was at times like this that it showed the most.

"Sure, pal," the driver said, "anything you say." The old man put the car in gear and pulled away from the curb. He drove in silence for a few minutes, then turned around in his seat at a convenient stop light. Alan noticed his gaze on their guns.

"You two assassins?" the old man said, smiling, and Alan saw almost toothless gums.

"Assassins?" Alan gave him a questioning look. "No, of course not."

"Didn't really think so; you don't look the part. Too soft. But you never can tell. Everyone seems to be tryin' to get the job. Hell, I even toyed with the idea a couple years back. But no, it'd take an army the way this new President's got it set up. Either that, or someone on the inside. You got someone on the inside maybe?"

"What do you mean, 'on the inside'?" This old man was a good source of information, someone who knew the set-up and was apparently willing to talk, and Alan wasn't about to let that source dry up until he had milked it for all it would give. The knowledge this old guy was giving so freely might not be of any use at all, but then again it might. You just never could tell.

"Yeah, like I said, on the inside. You know, get someone on the Presidential staff or in the Black Guard. Or, better yet, do it yourself. Then wait for the right breaks. You're bound to have a chance that way."

"If it's such a good idea, how come you haven't tried it?" Robin asked.

"Me? You're kiddin', right? I don't have the kind of credit it takes for somethin' like that. You gotta bribe someone in a high place. And I sure as hell don't have the brains it takes to get on the President's staff, even if I could win a duel against one of 'em. I'm too damn old for the Black Guard. Those killers are crack duelists—the best of the best—and they're hand picked by the President himself." The old man turned back around, just as the traffic light changed.

He said no more until they reached their destination. .

Alan was sure the old man took the most circuitous route possible; he saw the same buildings at least three times. When they finally did arrive, he had the driver go by slow so he could make certain it was the building he wanted. Then he told the driver to go back a few blocks and let them off.

"You *are* assassins," the old man said as they climbed out of his cab. "You can't jive me. You workin' for someone else, or for yourselves?"

They didn't answer, but that seemed to be even more satisfying to the old cab driver. He had already made up his mind about these two.

"Well, look, I don't think you'll make it, just walkin' in like this, but good luck just the same. And if by some freak chance you *do* pull it off, remember me when you're up there in high places."

The rain had almost stopped, but the wind blew cold on their still-damp clothing as Alan and Robin crouched in a small copse of bushes across the street from the palace. Ice-cold water dripped from the branches and splashed on Alan's neck, ran down his back. He could imagine what Robin was going through; neither of them was dressed for this foul weather, but her clothing provided even less protection than his. She shivered uncontrollably beside him.

"Huddle against me," Alan whispered. "We'll keep each other warm that way." He moved closer to her and put an arm around her shoulders. She drew closer against him, and it did seem to warm them some.

But they still had work to do—they were both painfully aware of that. And they both knew they didn't have much time in which to complete the near-impossible task that had been set them. The sun would be coming up soon; Alan saw its faint glow in the east. They had to be away from there before it became too light, or the palace guards would spot them.

"Are you ready?" Alan asked in a whisper.

"I gue... guess so," Robin answered. "Let's get this over with and find somewhere warm and d... dry."

Alan took a final look at the guards across the street. They were walking their cold rounds like unfeeling robots. Obviously, they were bored, and as yet had not seen him and Robin.

Closing his eyes, Alan reached out and took Robin's hands in his own. Quickly, he cleared his mind of all thought except that of achieving the Gestalt mind. The tingling sensation fluttered at the base of his spine, worked its way up his back. His mind linked with Robin's, and they cast the resulting corporate consciousness out toward the palace.

They wormed their way slowly through the building, touching the mind of each guard and minor official, memorizing the location of every sentry post and office. Alan realized they would eventually have to know this sort of thing if they were ever to get inside. And they had to locate Edwards again. Their power was too drained for direct contact, the only way they could hope to find him was by trial and error.

Painstakingly, they searched, probing blindly into each consciousness they encountered, gently touching mind after mind, then carefully withdrawing. If their



presence became known now, the result could be disastrous; they were too close to the palace, too vulnerable to avoid capture.

Their probe was stopped. Their delicate tendril of thought-generated energy met a metal wall, a black barrier of cold nothingness that reflected Alan's mind back at him.

They withdrew and tried again.

Suddenly, it was there in their Gestalt mind—the gray-skinned, faceless figure. But this time the mind that generated it was quiet; the cloud of black despair was not quite so dark. The mind behind the faceless image did not seem to be aware of their presence.

*This has to be Edwards*, Alan thought. But what had happened to him? Alan knew Vic Edwards. Under normal circumstances, that man's mind could not have generated what Alan was experiencing. What could be affecting Edwards' mind?

And what was that other, the mind that had blocked them? Alan had encountered something like this before. Something, in fact, identical to it. Almost a year ago, at the Foundation's New Year's party, he had tried to probe Ralf Tanner's mind and had encountered just such a black barrier of non-thought. But this couldn't be Tanner. He was not a scanner. His mind did not possess the ability to cross inter-dimensional boundaries.

Or did it?

One thing was sure: whoever or whatever this other was, it was responsible for the mental attacks Alan had felt at twelve-thirty each night. This was the mind that held extensive knowledge of the Foundation's classified equipment and procedures, the one that had been monitoring both Alan and Robin since their arrival in this dimension.

Forcing their corporate mind back to the task at hand, Alan and Robin memorized the location within the palace, then withdrew and again became two distinct individuals.

Alan opened his eyes.

The horizon was much lighter now. Pink fingers of cloud streaked the sky to the east, and Alan knew it was no longer safe to remain in the vicinity of the palace. Without a word, he started crawling back through the bushes, half dragging Robin along behind him.

A block away they found the same cab which had delivered them almost an hour before. "I thought you might be needin' me again in a hurry, if you made it," the old man said, "so I waited."

"Thanks," Alan said, and he meant it. He felt miserable. He was tired, wet and hungry, and he needed a bath and a shave. The way Robin looked, everything applied there too, except for the shave.

"You decided against it?"

Alan nodded, not really wanting to talk just now. "It was all you said it would be, and more."

"Good. I'd hate to see your names in the obits. 'Specially the pretty lady's here." He winked at Robin, and she forced a smile.

"I don't feel much like a lady right now," she said. "I could sleep for a month."

"Well," the driver said, "where to now?"

Alan thought for a moment. They did need rest and refreshment, but they needed information more. It was absolutely imperative that they find a way to get to Edwards without killing either him or themselves in the process. That meant far more knowledge of this dimension than was now in their possession.

"Is there a library near by?" Alan finally asked.

"Sure, just a few blocks away."

"Would it be open at this hour?"

"Don't know. Never use 'em myself. I'm not much on book learnin'."

"Take us there anyway."

"Oh, Alan!" Robin said as the cab pulled away from the curb. "I'm so tired—I just want to sleep."

"I know." Alan put an arm around her shoulders. "I'm tired too. We'll get some rest after we have the information we need."

~\*~

The exhausted duo spent several hours in a small all-night coffee shop across the street from the library, waiting for it to open. The coffee was strong and black—seemingly the only non-synthetic food item in this dimension—and it helped keep them awake. The time alone together gave them a chance to swap tales of the past three days in hushed voices.

Their research, when they finally got to it, told them exactly what they already suspected and nothing more. The President was replaced through assassination, usually carried out by a member of his staff, the elite Black Guard or the President's personal harem, which alternated between male, female, and both, depending on the sex and/or sexual preference of the reigning President. The man in office now had been President for almost a year, which was apparently something of a record. Either he was extremely lucky, or very efficient.

Alan realized he and Robin could not spend the time necessary in this dimension, nor did they possess the needed knowledge, to get near enough the President through those normal routes. And they certainly could not hope to make their entrance into the palace during the day. What Alan had planned was a task for the dark of night, a job for cunning and stealth. They would have to rely almost entirely on the element of surprise if they expected success.

But now, it was finally time to catch up on that much needed sleep.

They couldn't go back to *The Smoke and Powder Room*; Alan was sure Grange would kill them on sight. That left only one alternative. They took a cab to the Belmont Hotel, skulked quietly through the lobby—although it was quite empty at two in the afternoon—and up the dimly lighted stairs to Alan's room.

Robin showered first while Alan stretched out on the bed.

"Need someone to scrub your back?" he asked, raising his voice above the water's hiss coming from the bathroom.

"I'm doing fine," came Robin's muffled voice. "You stay right there."

Alan didn't mean to fall asleep, but Robin woke him when she was through.

She was standing before him when he opened his eyes. Beads of water stood out like jewels on her tanned skin, and she looked fresh and clean. A trail of small puddles led from where she stood to the open bathroom door.

"Your turn." She snapped the towel at him playfully.

"Hm, yeah. I must have dozed off." His eyes felt like they had been dusted with a fine layer of sand, and he rubbed them with the back of his hands.

"You aren't kidding," Robin said, continuing to towel herself. "Your snoring could have woke the whole city."

Alan sat up slowly. He knew he had better get the sleeping arrangements decided before he took his shower; in spite of her present perkiness, Robin would probably be asleep by the time he was finished.

"If you want," he volunteered, "I'll take the floor."

"No, we'll share the bed. But don't get any ideas."

"Why not?" Alan smiled as he stood and started toward the bathroom. He stopped in the door frame, turned back toward Robin. "When in Rome..."

"This isn't Rome." Robin pulled back the covers and slipped between the sheets. She sat up in bed and began drying her hair. "I'm too tired, Al, and I'm just not ready yet. Every time I think about it, I see a big, hairy chimpanzee. I just can't."

"Okay," Alan said, secretly glad she had said no; he was tired too. "But when you *are* ready..."

"Don't worry," she said and smiled, "you'll be the first to know." She threw the wet towel at him, then disappeared beneath the covers.

## CHAPTER TEN

hr mn sc fr

0103-47-10-0015

*The joyous sound of marching music jangled in the hot summer air, mixing with the rich smell of buttered popcorn and filling eight-year-old Alan Fletcher's head with wild anticipation of the day ahead. He followed the music across the well-manicured grass of the park, his eyes glued to the top of the small hillock ahead, straining for his first glimpse at the merry-go-round. He was close to it now; he could almost feel it there, just beyond the hill.*

*Suddenly, there was someone walking beside him. He turned to look at the other. It was Robin.*

*He reached out, took her hand in his own. And in that instant he realized he was no longer an eight-year-old boy. Now he was a man in his thirties. And both he and Robin were being chased. He did not know who was chasing them—merely that someone was behind them, getting quite near.*

*But he refused to turn and face whoever was chasing him. He continued marching straight ahead, following the music, his hand in Robin's.*

*Suddenly, there it was. The brightly painted ponies went round and round, beckoning him. The sun felt good on his back and shoulders.*

*And they were there.*

*Alan stepped aboard the moving merry-go-round. He reached down and pulled Robin up beside him. Still he did not look at who was chasing them. There was no need. Now they were safe.*

~\*~

Forcing the fog of sleep from his mind, Alan opened his eyes. He could just make out Robin's form—a darker silhouette against the room's darkness. She was leaning on her elbow above him, tickling his cheek with her long hair. She bent down and kissed him gently on the mouth, and the pleasant, musty smell of her filled his head.

"Have a good sleep?" she asked softly, drawing her mouth away from his.

"Why didn't this happen earlier?" Alan said sleepily. He took her in his arms and drew her to him.

"I told you why. Now, get up. It's almost midnight, and we have to go out and play secret agent." She disentangled herself from his embrace.

"I think I'd rather stay home and do a bit of undercover work."

Robin swatted him playfully on the hip. "There'll be plenty of time for that later," she said.

Alan groaned in mock agony, then got out of bed. Half way across the room to the light switch he stubbed his toe hard on a chair. His athlete's foot instantly started burning, and he stood in the middle of the dark room, cursing, while Robin laughed. Finally, he found the switch and snapped it on.

They quickly got dressed, Robin stuffing Alan's soiled clothing into a small satchel. Then they hurried down stairs and got a cab. In a small, all-night diner near the palace they ate a hurried breakfast: synthetic bacon and eggs, real coffee. They were uneasy throughout the meal; it seemed this greasy-spoon was the off-duty hangout for the palace Black Guard. Three black suited figures talked softly over coffee in a rear booth. Alan wasn't sure if it was his imagination or not, but it seemed at least one of them always had an eye on Robin and him.

After a while it began to get on his nerves, and he motioned Robin to the door with a nod. The world outside the diner was blanketed in heavy fog. Alan knew it wouldn't make what he had planned that much easier, but it certainly couldn't hurt, either.

They walked the few blocks to the palace in nervous silence, continually looking over their shoulders for the guards from the diner. But obviously they were not spotted. Again they wormed their way through the copse of bushes they had used for concealment the night before. This time they were better dressed for the cold, Robin having put Alan's original clothing on over her own in a dark alley. The clothes were an ill fit, and they hid the more appealing aspects of her femininity, but they were far more appropriate for their bold venture than her own attire.

There was, however, something more important to worry about now than the weather. Across the street, two guards carrying submachine guns paced their rounds before the palace's main entrance. Alan could just make out their black-clad figures through an occasional thinning in the fog. This wouldn't be easy, but there was no getting around it; it had to be done.

"Wait here," he whispered, drawing the gun from his holster and screwing on the silencer.

"I can take one," said the voice beside him in the dark.

Alan could just barely see Robin's outline in the dim light, but he heard the sharp metal-on-metal scraping sound of a silencer being adjusted on the end of a gun barrel.

Under ordinary circumstances, she would be quite capable of taking out one of the guards. But her abilities had not been quite so sharp of late, and Alan didn't know if she

could handle it. Still, he couldn't take out both guards. He knew he must take the chance; in spite of his fears, he had to rely on her.

"Don't shoot unless you have to," he said. "I want one of those uniforms un-bloodied." And immediately he was sorry he had said it.

"I know something about this," Robin said, her voice showing hurt. "I've been on a few scans too, you know."

"Yes, I know, kitten. And I'm sorry."

After a few seconds of awkward silence, she said, "It's okay. Now, let's get to it."

They ran across the street in a silent, low crouch, using the fog and anything else in their path for cover. Robin scurried off to the left, and Alan soon lost sight of her as he veered to the right.

When he reached the palace wall, he flattened himself against it. The rough stone was cold and wet on his back through his turtle-neck, but its very substantiality was reassuring.

He waited.

As the guard became suddenly visible through the swirling mist, the muscles in Alan's lower back tightened instinctively, readying him for action. He forced himself to relax, then noticed for the first time that the guard was wearing a gas mask. Still he waited.

Soon, the other came parallel to his position, only a few feet away. Alan crouched and sprang. His shoulder caught the guard in the small of the back, and as one they went down hard. Reacting almost instantly, Alan crawled to where the guard was trying to regain his feet, and hit him hard on the head with the handle of his pistol.

The guard again went down, but he was not out. Alan instantly dropped his gun and wrapped large, powerful hands around the guard's neck. He squeezed with all his strength.

After he was sure the guard was dead, he retrieved his pistol and put it back in its holster. He hauled the body back to the wall, rolled it into the shadows, and went back to locate the submachine gun. He returned with it to the shadows beneath the wall, then squatted silently in the darkness, the gun at the ready, listening intently for the struggle that would be Robin taking out her guard.

Soon, he heard a faint scuffle. Then nothing.

A form approached through the fog, bent low and moving fast. He leveled the submachine gun on the figure. It was Robin.

"Any trouble?" he whispered.

"None."

"He isn't going to wake up at an awkward moment and call for help, is he?"

"No, he's out of it. You'd better get into that uniform. I'll keep watch." She knew what Alan had in mind, and she knew that the uniform wouldn't hide her female attributes nearly well enough.

Alan got dressed quickly—the uniform was nearly a perfect fit—and placed the gas mask over his face. Then he picked up the submachine gun and turned back to Robin. He motioned with the barrel of the gun.

"Oh, come on, Al!"

"Look," he said, his voice muffled by the gas mask, "we have to keep their attention off me, so they don't realize I'm not one of them until it's too late. Who do you think they'd notice first: a girl whose assets are hidden beneath a man's clothing, or one who shows it all?"

"Damn it!" she said as she began stripping down to the short skirt and see-through blouse, "that's sexist."

"You're damn right it is. When in Rome..."

"I know, I know. But it's cold."

"We'll be inside soon. Let me have your gun."

"You think that's wise?" She kicked the man's clothing into the shadows along the wall.

"This has to look right. Let me have it."

Robin drew the gun from its shoulder holster and handed it to Alan. Then, without a word, she turned toward the palace's front entrance. Alan marched behind her, keeping the barrel of the submachine gun jammed into the small of her back.

Robin stopped before the massive armored door, stood on her toes and gazed through the small window set in it.



"There's only one guard at the desk," she said. "He doesn't look like he'll be much trouble."

Alan reached past her and pressed the button beside the door. A buzzer sounded inside. After a few seconds, the guard's face appeared in the window, back-lighted in yellow light. He nodded to Alan, then opened the door.

"Move," Alan bellowed, his voice made ever more gruff than he had intended by the gas mask. He shoved the gun barrel hard into Robin's back, and she stumbled forward. The guard followed as he marched her up to the desk.

Corpulent, wearing his hair in a crew cut, the guard watched their every movement with squinty, darting eyes. He kept his hand on the large gun at his hip as he went around the desk and sat down behind it.

"Where'd you find this bit of fluff?" he said in a voice like a bullfrog's, oily and slimy. He pulled open one of the desk's drawers, removed an official looking form, and, choosing a pen from among several in an ornate holder, poised it expectantly above the paper. Finally he looked up at what appeared to be a member of the Black Guard and his prisoner.

"Sneakin' round the grounds," Alan said, putting on his version of a South Philly accent. "She had this." He slapped Robin's gun down on the desk.

"Well, well," the other said, getting to his feet and walking around the desk. "So, she wants to be President, does she?" He eyed Robin up and down, then laughed. "That was a damn clumsy try," he said. "What made you think you could get away with it?"

Robin didn't answer, and after a few seconds awkward silence, the fat man said: "Put your hands on the desk, little lady. Feet back, wide apart."

Robin looked to Alan, her fear and helplessness twisting her host body's delicate features into a grotesque mask. Finally, she did what she was told.

"Might just as well have some fun before we turn her over to detention," the fat man said with a wink toward Alan. "First, a little feel... search." He reached out, cupped Robin's right breast with his hand. She sucked in her breath and closed her eyes tightly.

Alan brought the butt of the submachine gun down hard on the back of the fat man's head, and he fell heavily to the floor.

"What took you so long?" Robin demanded in a hoarse whisper. She straightened and adjusted her clothes. She was shaking with something more than anger.

"I'm sorry," Alan said. He shrugged.

Robin nodded. "Let's go," she said, and again took up her position in front of Alan.

Alan put the gun in the small of her back and they marched down a long hall lined along both sides with closed doors. If the information they had gathered on last night's mental search was correct, the suite of rooms that held Edwards would be just ahead. And there would be another guard posted outside it.

The guard who sat behind the desk beside the door they wanted, however, was neither fat nor out of training. He, like the other guard, wore close-cropped hair, but that was where the resemblance ended. His eyes were hard, cold, the color of flint. His jaw was square and strong, and his thin lips were set in firm determination. This man was a born killer; it showed in every line of his body.

As they approached, the guard came slowly to his feet. His right hand rested lightly on the gun at his hip, and his feet were planted slightly apart in a casual, confident stance.

"What is it?" he asked, observing Alan and Robin with a critical eye. His voice was as hard as his eyes.

"I found her out on the grounds," Alan said. It sounded lame even to him.

"Why the gas mask? You know security regulations prohibit wearing masks indoors."

Alan reached up with his free hand, took off the gas mask. Instantly, surprise registered on the guard's face.

"What is this?" he asked. "Who are you?" His hand went to his weapon.

He was fast, but not quite fast enough. Alan merely shifted the submachine gun's aim a fraction of an inch—off Robin and onto the guard—and pulled the trigger.

The guard's face erupted into an oval of red pulp. The wall behind him was peppered with skull fragments and bloody brain tissue as he jerked violently backwards, then staggered a hesitant step forward. Finally, his body folded in the middle and collapsed to the floor like a rag doll with all the stuffing knocked out.

Alan placed the gas mask on the desk, then bent to where the guard lay. He patted the man's clothing, found a large knife strapped to his right calf beneath his trousers. He withdrew it and cut away the dead man's sweater.

Together, Alan and Robin dragged the body back behind the desk, where it would be out of sight of any passers-by. Then Alan wiped up the gore as best he could with the sweater and threw it behind the desk with the guard's body.

Robin opened her mouth, about to speak, but Alan cautioned her to silence with a quick gesture. He pointed to the door leading to the room where Edwards was being held, and Robin flattened herself beside the door, her back pressed close against the wall. Alan positioned himself a foot from the door, squarely before it.

Shifting the submachine gun nervously in his hands, he looked to Robin.

"Ready?" he whispered. His voice was husky with excitement, and that startled him.

Robin nodded, and Alan threw his shoulder into the door. He heard a loud crack as the frame splintered and the door flew open.

Alan entered the room low and on the roll. He came up quickly, submachine gun at the ready, trained on the white-haired man behind the desk.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

hr mn sc fr

0106-23-01-0025

"I've been expecting you," said the man behind the large oak desk. His white hair was in disarray, and there were heavy bags under his deep-set eyes. But his voice was calm and steady in spite of his haggard appearance.

"Tanner!" Alan said, picking himself up off the floor. "Robin, it's Tanner!" The barrel of his submachine gun wavered only slightly from its bead on the center of Tanner's chest, then again steadied on its target.

"Yes, I know," Robin said as she strode into the room behind Alan. There was a casualness in her voice Alan could not understand, a lack of emotion that bothered him. But it was only a slight irritation, and he pushed it from his mind.

Suddenly, Alan's mind buzzed with a swarm of alarming questions. How could this man, a straight, be here? And, still more remarkable, he was present in his own body; *he was scanning without using a receiver.*

Cautiously, Alan reached out with his mind, probed Tanner's mind, attempting to peep the other's thoughts. Again, as it had happened at the Foundation party, his mental probe met a strange, cold barrier that bounced the image of Alan's own mind back at him. Alan withdrew his probe.

Beyond Tanner, enveloped in the eerie blue glow that marked the focus of a stasis field, a naked boy with strange gray skin sat cross-legged on the floor. He was young—seven or eight—and Alan knew he had seen the boy before. It was the child he and Robin had seen in the hologram in Frank Rogers' office. *It was the stolen clone!*

The child's face wore an innocent, peaceful expression. His eyes were barren and cold, yet his gaze had an almost saintly quality about it.

A great wave of sorrow rose in Alan, cresting in his mind—sorrow and pity for the boy. This was horrible, cruel beyond tolerance. To stop the boy's natural development like this, to effectively turn him off through the use of a stasis field, made absolutely no sense. It was an act so monstrously inhuman, Alan could no longer permit it.

In his peripheral vision, Alan saw the bulky, gray painted cabinet of the stasis field generator in the corner of the room. Without shifting his gaze from the child, he started toward it in a halting, staggering shuffle.

"Stop!" Tanner screamed. "Stop, or I'll shoot!"

Alan saw Tanner out of the corner of his eye as the other stood up from behind the desk. He leveled a large caliber gun on Alan, and Alan suddenly realized he no longer

had Tanner covered with his gun. He still held the submachine gun, but it hung at his side, heavy and useless.

But there was absolutely nothing Alan could do. He could not respond to Tanner's order. Somehow, the clone's steadfast gaze held him, working a strange and powerful enchantment on his mind. *He must free the boy from the stasis field. He must...*

Robin stepped between Alan and the clone, trying to stop him from reaching the stasis field generator. Her hand came up and she slapped Alan across the face. He saw the clone beyond her over her right shoulder, still sitting unmoving on the floor. The child's hypnotic gaze continued to hold him and he took another lurching step toward the generator, trying to push past Robin.

"Don't look at him!" she said, her face a mask of grim determination. She slapped him again, harder.

With an effort, Alan tore his gaze from the child's. He looked at Ralf Tanner across the room, and instantly the oppressive sorrow left him, to be replaced by a strange heaviness in both his body and his mind.

"Don't look directly at the clone," Tanner said, his words slurred with fatigue. He stood and came around the desk, his gun still leveled on Alan. "He may look like a helpless boy, but he possesses abilities beyond any you could ever imagine. Now, drop that gun." He motioned with a wave of his own weapon.

"Who... What is it?" Alan asked as his submachine gun clattered to the floor. He looked toward the youth, but not directly at him. Again he felt the pull of that strong mind, felt his thoughts again narrowing on the youth's plight.

Again Robin stepped before him, blocking his view of the strange child.

"I told you not to look," she said. And suddenly Alan noticed that Robin's weapon was pointed at him.

"What is this?" Alan asked her. "Just what's going on here?"

Then he looked at Ralf Tanner. The older man's face wore a crooked smile, and his gaze was centered somewhere beyond Alan. It was as if he watched Alan with a sense other than sight.

"Don't be alarmed," Tanner said, his voice calm and cool. "Get his gun, Robin." He motioned with the barrel of his own weapon.

Robin picked up the submachine gun, took it to Tanner. Tanner put his own weapon in his belt, then trained the submachine gun on Alan, still not quite looking at him.

"You..." Alan said to Robin, "you knew about him all the time. You're in this with him, aren't you?"

The girl nodded, but did not speak. Nor did her steady gaze shift from his eyes. Alan's fists balled and relaxed convulsively at his sides.

"That's right," Tanner said, "she is with me."

Alan shifted his weight to the balls of his feet, preparing to spring at Robin. If he could grab her weapon, wrench it from her grasp and use her as a shield...

"Don't try it," Tanner said, his voice hard and cold. "You'll only succeed in getting yourself killed."

"Isn't that what you two have planned for me anyway?" Alan asked. He relaxed his stance slightly, with both Robin's and Tanner's gun trained on him, he wouldn't stand a chance.

"Perhaps," Tanner said, and his smile vanished. Alan knew Tanner had already made up his mind.

"What happened to Edwards?"

"I had to eliminate him," Tanner said. "He had served his purpose."

Alan's mind chewed that bit of information over for a few seconds. These two were killers. They had stolen Foundation property and murdered a Foundation operative. But why? What was so important about this clone that they would risk the wrath of the Foundation?

"How did you get here?" Alan finally asked. "Scanning in your own body, I mean. It's impossible; it can't be done."

"You mean you can't do it," Robin said. There was a strange tone of superiority in her voice. Alan nodded. If they could do that, what else could they do? And how could he possibly hope to stop them?

"The boy—who is he?"

"You know the story," Robin said. "You were there when Frank told us."

"But where did he *come* from?"

Tanner scratched the stubble on his jaw. "We don't know," he said.

"Then why did you take him from the bio-lab at the Foundation?"  
Neither Tanner nor Robin spoke.

"A stasis field's supposed to stop both mental and physical activity," Alan said. "I looked into the boy's eyes, felt his mind. It's still active; it's still working." Alan watched Tanner's face. For the first time he saw fear there. He looked into Robin's eyes and again he saw fear. For some reason, they both feared the clone.

"That doesn't concern you," Tanner finally said, bringing himself visibly under control.

"But what's this all about? Don't you think I have a right to know?"

"No," Tanner said. "You don't."

"Wait," Robin said, turning to Tanner. "What will it hurt? After all, we're going to..." Her voice trailed off.

"That's true," Tanner said. To Alan he said: "I guess it really doesn't matter now if you know." He stopped and thought a moment. Finally, he said: "First, we really didn't want to do it this way."

"That's good to know," Alan said.

"We meant for you to die, all right," Robin said, glee sparkling in her voice. "We just meant for it to be more of an accident."

"Oh."

"What Robin means is that, according to the computer, the maximum desired effect could be achieved only through *accidental* death. What we were trying to do was stage your accidental demise—to put you in a position where, without aid, you would be killed, then withhold that aid."

"If you wanted me dead, why didn't you just *kill* me?" Alan asked.

"If it were only that easy," Robin said. "Don't you see, we were trying for the maximum desired effect. Anything other than an accident would lower the effect we'd achieve."

"But why do you want me dead?"

"Personally," Tanner said, "I don't. I'd be just as happy if we could let you live. This is Robin's project."

Alan turned to Robin. She was silent for a few seconds, as if collecting her thoughts before she tried to speak. When she finally did speak, it was with more than a touch of pride.

"We've been using the computer for this almost ten years now. Actually, what it amounts to is finding alterations we can make in adjacent dimensions that would favorably change our own. For one such change, you must die. The computer says the optimum time is now."

"Tampering with adjacent dimensions... that's illegal."

"Yes," Robin said, "in your dimension it is."

"In *my* dimension!"

Ralf Tanner nodded. "Don't you understand yet?" he said, as if explaining to a child. "We're not from your dimension, not from your Earth. We call it Earth Prime, just as you do yours, but it's not *your* Earth Prime."

Alan suddenly turned on Robin. "Then you're not Robin," he said, surprising himself with the ferocity of his own voice. He stopped before he walked into the barrel of her gun.

"But I am," the girl said, her eyes going wide as she took a step backward. "I'm just not the Robin from your universe. I'm the Robin that might have existed in your world had certain things happened and certain other things not happened."

"How long have you been operating in my dimension, in her place?"

"Almost a year."

"And you," Alan said to Tanner. "Just who are you?"

"The body belongs to one Ross Dillman of your dimension," Tanner said. "But that wouldn't mean a great deal to you."

"But who *are* you?" Alan asked.

Tanner grinned, his mouth becoming a vicious slash across his face. "Some things," he said, "you will die in ignorance of." He slowly shifted the aim of his gun, leveled it dead center on Alan's chest.

This was it. Suddenly Alan knew he would have to make his move now or not at all. He could not jump to his own body laying in an electronics and drug induced stupor back in Earth Prime; that would take several moments preparation, time Tanner and Robin would surely not allow him. Now he would have to act out of desperation,



depending on surprise. But he needed an edge, something that would distract the two who held their guns on him, something that might cause them to hesitate for just a fraction of a second before they fired....

"The clone," he said, forcing defiance into his tone. "Why do you fear it so much? How could it possibly hurt you?"

Again there was fear in both Tanner's and Robin's eyes. Tanner's gaze suddenly became more unfocused, and the barrel of the submachine gun in his hands wavered slightly off target.

Instantly, almost without thought, Alan's body went into action. He took a quick step toward Tanner, his left hand knocking the submachine gun's barrel aside. The gun went off and a spray of bullets ricocheted off the wall behind Alan. His right hand flashed out and buried itself deep in Tanner's stomach, then he withdrew it and brought it up in a vicious *bolo* punch to Tanner's chin. The submachine gun clattered to the floor as Tanner crumbled beneath Alan's heavy blows.

Alan spun to face Robin, and he saw a sudden flash from her gun and heard the loud *crack* of the weapon's discharge. But he felt no pain, as he knew he should. Instead, there was a dull impact on the left side of his neck, and a soft warmth flowed over his shoulder and down his arm. The light-caliber gun went off again as he lunged for Robin, and he felt another bullet slam into the right side of his chest, a few inches below his collar bone. Before he reached the girl, the weapon went off a third time, the bullet striking him in the stomach. Still he felt no pain.

Reaching out, Alan wrapped a large hand around Robin's small weapon and wrenched it from her grasp. He turned it on her, and she staggered back a step, her hand going to her mouth in shock and fear. Then he motioned her to where Tanner laid sprawled unconscious on the floor.

Still keeping Robin covered, Alan bent and picked up the submachine gun. He ignored the blood flowing heavily from the wound in his stomach and placed the girl's light weapon in his belt, then motioned with the submachine gun's barrel.

Gingerly, making sure Alan did not misinterpret her movements, she pulled Tanner's gun from his belt and slid it across the floor. It skidded to a stop against the instep of Alan's left foot.

"Aaarrrgh..." Alan said, his voice dying in a ragged gurgle as he tried to talk. There were so many questions. There was so much he had to know. But he could not ask those questions; Robin's first bullet had slammed into his neck, smashing his vocal cords.

But now was no time for questions anyway. Tanner was quickly regaining consciousness. He sat up—still not focusing his gaze on anything in particular—and took in the entire scene, as if just beginning to realize what had happened. Then he got slowly

to his feet, rubbing the red, nearly bleeding area along his jaw line, and stood beside Robin.

"So," Tanner said, almost matter-of-factly, "it seems you have gained the upper hand. But it won't do you any good. You're bleeding to death right this minute."

Alan didn't even try to respond; he knew he couldn't. Feeling was returning to his body. His wounds were beginning to throb with pain, and he felt blood spurting steadily from a ruptured artery in his neck.

"I can't imagine what you had hoped to gain from this," Tanner said. His tone was still calm, but as he spoke he backed away from Alan, toward the clone and the stasis field generator in the corner of the room. Alan saw it happening, but there was absolutely nothing he could do about it. He was simply too weak, his body would not respond.

"You can't win, you know," Tanner said. "You really can't." He reached out a hand and touched the stasis field generator, and for the first time he gazed directly into Alan's eyes.

With a nearly inaudible pop, Tanner, the generator, and the clone all disappeared.

Alan turned to Robin. He pointed his gun in the middle of her chest.

"You won't shoot me, Alan," she said, smiling. "I know you won't." Then she, too, vanished into thin air.

Alan stumbled to the desk, collapsed into the chair. He tried to clear his mind of all thought, attempting to focus his total attention on the jump back to Earth Prime. But he could not make it work. The pain was just too great for him to concentrate on what he knew he must do. The pain was no longer confined to his wounds; now his entire body throbbed with it, and his mind actually pulsed with agony. He was dying, and he knew it. If he could not make the jump soon...

Again he tried, and again failed.

Planting his elbows on the desk before him, he leaned heavily on them. Blood splashed crimson across the instruments set in the desk top. Dials, switches and meters, a five-inch cathode tube—all arranged in a certain logical order. He had seen instrument arrangements like this before. These were like the instruments used back in Earth Prime to monitor scanners during training assignments. This was Foundation equipment.

Suddenly, Alan realized it was from this console that the high-frequency energy attacks had originated. And it was because of Tanner's monitoring him that he had been denied access to his host body's memories this entire assignment. Just as he had made his jump at the initiation of this scan, he had been monitored. And, somehow, that had fouled everything up, placing a barrier between the host body's memories and his mind.

But how had Tanner come by Foundation equipment? This was very sophisticated, classified gear—difficult to fabricate and certainly almost impossible to obtain.

Instantly, through the haze of pain, Alan answered his own question: Robin, of course. Although she lacked a sufficiently high security clearance, with her charm it would have been no problem at all to gain access to Bio-section. She stole the clone. Why not a surplus monitoring station as well?

The hints of her involvement had been staring Alan in the face all along. He had simply not picked up on them until it was too late.

First, she could worm information from Rogers almost at will—not just advance information on a particular scan assignment, but very sensitive, restricted data as well. Such as the Unit Efficiency Ratings. There was that mysterious barrier in Tanner's mind, and Robin's relationship with him. She had never explained her irrational response to Rogers pacing back and forth through the hologram image of the clone either. And there was that time in her quarters behind the *Smoke and Powder* Room when she had hesitated while Alan took a beating from Grange: her excuse for not using the rock had seemed all too lame even then. But the clincher should have been when Tanner had inexplicably appeared in their mind-linked attempt to locate Edwards.

Alan cursed himself loudly, then choked on blood and gasped for breath. How could he have been so blind? It had all been obvious from the start. All he'd had to do was tie the pieces together.

But his feelings for Robin had blinded him to all that, making it impossible for him to see what was right in front of him. His Robin, not this fake Robin, this substitute out of another dimension. For her, he could feel nothing but contempt.

*The clone*, Alan thought. What *about* the clone? Somehow, Robin and Tanner were tied to it. Yet they feared it, that much was quite clear. It could harm them in some way. That was why they continually watched it. And, for some reason, they couldn't destroy it. As much of a threat as it obviously was to them, if they could have destroyed it they would have, instead of toting it across inter-dimensional boundaries. Perhaps it was the fact that they did not know what the clone was that prevented them from destroying it outright. Perhaps their precious computer could not reconcile its existence, and therefore could not predict what would happen should it suddenly cease to exist. This clone might be the unknown variable in their sinister equation.

*If only I could have gained possession of the clone, Alan thought, I might have been able to use it against them.*

But how *could* it be used as a weapon? And now, with them again jumping across dimensional lines, how could he possibly hope to gain control of it?

Again pain flared throughout Alan's body and mind, and he knew none of this speculation would do him the least bit of good if he could not escape this body before it died.

Gathering the dregs of energy from the battered and bleeding host body as well as his pain-wracked mind, he concentrated on his own body back in Earth Prime. Through a fiery curtain of pain, he saw it curled up in fetal position, enfolded in the warm, pink membrane of the scan cocoon. He felt the gentle, regular breathing of its drug and electronics induced sleep. He felt the slow rhythmic pumping of its heart. But still he could not break through. He could not make the jump.

Suddenly, something else occupied the host body with him. Another mind, another intelligence. More precisely, a focus of many individual intelligences. One second, it had not been with Alan. Then, it was there, in the brain of the dying host body. And Alan felt its strength, an almost physical power, not evil but benevolent.

Leisurely shaking out a thin tendril of energy, the focus of intelligences reached out and touched Alan's mind, attaching itself to him. Then, guiding, it pulled him from the dying body into the gray nothingness between worlds. Without a thought otherwise, Alan's fatigue-strained mind followed.

*But this is impossible!* Alan thought.

By its very nature, nothing but Alan's own mind should have been able to exist in this non-place between worlds. Here was merely a state of mind, augmented by the drug dramil and the Foundation's sophisticated electronics. There wasn't actually a *here* at all.

The other, however, *was* here. It did exist.

Suddenly, the tenuous strand of energy that linked Alan with the other snapped, like a broken rubber band. And Alan was hurled from the gray nothingness....

## EPISODE

They had stopped only once during their spawning journey, bringing their flames together, focusing them through Ari's flame to perform the *necessary task*. But there had been only one *necessary task* this journey, and so only one stop.

Ari's flame had been increasing steadily over the long journey, continually growing hotter within him. It now burned and scorched throughout the entire network of long narrow filaments that was his conscious-generating brain. He felt its intense heat as a flaring pain deep within his consciousness.

Ari now lapsed more frequently into those brief periods when he completely lost control of his waste-energy discharges, when his secondary brain—the small, insignificant lump of matter that governed his automatic body functions—was simply not sufficient. That scared him. Too much discharge could be harmful to the small flames nearby.

*What if one of the small flames is near when I lose control?* he thought. He could involuntarily harm one of them. Their flames were not like his own. They were fragile flames, and could be snuffed out too easily. They possessed shallow flames, ones that did not know joy. Their flames could not burn hot and intense, as his did. The continued existence of their flames depended solely on the preservation of their physical forms.

He knew the small flames had come for his own physical form. Ari would give it to them gladly; it would release his flame, set him free of physical bounds. And his liberation would help the small flames as well. Gradually, as generation after generation of small flames gathered the substance of his body into their own, their flames would be strengthened. They would begin to know joy and life. And eventually they too would be free to experience the total liberation of physical death. Ari knew this to be true. He had seen it all during the spawning journey.

But already there was one among the small flames who would live beyond liberation. His flame was bright with life, it knew joy. That had been an accident. The small flame had been too near another of Ari's kind when he had lost control. The other's discharge had been stifled in time. The small flame had been saved and strengthened.

Ari was glad the time for the mating was almost upon him. With that finished, his flame would again cool to a comfortable warm glow. Then he would again be able to control his body functions and his waste-energy discharges. Joy would again course through his body's filaments.

*The mating!* he thought, and felt a sudden jolt of excitement and joy race through his entire being. It was for the mating he had traveled up the time stream, against the very flow of existence. It was for this he now battled the monstrous gravitational forces and intense radiation now ravaging his body and his mind. Out of all the infinite universes his mind encompassed, out of all the possible realities his mental being inhabited, the precise

combination of gravitational stresses and radiation from this particular double star in this period of history of *this* particular universe stimulated his sexual drives. Only *here* and *now* could his mating take place.

And when that mating was completed, when the raging fire within him had finally cooled, he would accompany the females to the *place of laying*. He and the other males would watch as the females discharged their cargo of fertilized eggs. Then, they would leave the eggs, to mature and eventually hatch.

Ari expelled a jet of gas from a pouch near the surface of his skin and drifted slowly away from his companions and the small flames grouped near the mating stars. He was not quite ready to mate; his seed was not yet ripe. And it was not wise to be among the small flames until after the mating. He might lose control.

He noticed something strange a short distance off and released another puff of gas to propel himself toward it. As he advanced, he absorbed through his skin free-floating hydrogen, nitrogen, carbon and other elements. The area around the mating stars was rich in food, and Ari fed greedily.

The strange object was not one of the small flames, but it was something *of* them. It radiated an unusual energy. Ari felt his flame growing suddenly hotter as the energy touched him and was absorbed. It burned deep inside him like the molten heart of a star, making rational thought nearly impossible. His waste-energy started to build. He knew he must control it; one of the small flames was approaching and he did not wish to harm it.

Ari pushed the rising fire from his thoughts and concentrated on controlling his body functions.

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**14 February, 2072**  
**1512 Ship Time**

Ross Dillman maneuvered his dory closer to the whale. The huge amoebic animal hung motionless, its non-reflective surface a great hole in the field of stars. A shifting lace of gold and silver light played over its body, defining its outlines.

Then, suddenly, the flames were dancing around the animal, flickering in and out of existence, darting then floating, shedding multi-colored sparks.

The flames were comforting, as they had always been, bathing Ross' mind in their familiar warmth. They were old friends. But now Ross needed all his attention for the task at hand, and the flames were a distraction.

He forced the flames from his thoughts and fired three quick bursts on the dory's starboard steering jet and one on the main propulsion thruster. He drifted carefully around

the whale, placing the creature's body directly between himself and a particularly bright patch in the field of stars.

His training told him the entire body of the great beast would fit easily into the small storage of his dory, but Ross was having trouble believing it now that he had finally seen a whale. Yet, he knew it would work. He would kill the animal by launching the dory's explosive harpoon into its small brain, then cut the carcass into sections with the dory's laser. The flesh would come away from the body in large chunks and, losing its moisture and gas almost immediately, shrivel to a fraction of its original size.

Ross tested the servo-mechanism claws as he carefully maneuvered his dory around the whale, toward its anterior end and the brain hump. The claws flexed like large misshapen hands before him, moving slowly but responding precisely to his slightest command. He armed the explosive harpoon, then stopped his forward momentum with the bow jets and fired a single short burst on the port steering jet. His thumb rested lightly on the harpoon's launch button as the nose of his dory swung in a slow arc toward the whale's brain hump.

The silver and gold filigree on the whale's body flared to sudden brightness. Searing pain filled Ross' head as he looked up from his instruments. He screamed out and raised his hands to his eyes. The intense light coming from the whale was visible through his hands and closed eyelids.

The light seemed to last an eternity, and Ross' body erupted in a thousand minute agonies. The radiation lancing out from the whale was killing him—he knew it, felt it. But there was absolutely nothing he could do about it.

He could only wait in fear.

Ross kept his trembling hands pressed to his eyes as the light gradually subsided. He was not yet ready to see. And he was bothered by something. Why had the protective film on his dory's port failed to work? Why hadn't it darkened automatically in response to the light and radiation? Ross thought again of Galson and panic scurried like a frightened rodent through his mind.

With a tremendous effort he finally brought his panic under control, and slowly removed his hands. Then he opened his eyes.

Where the whale had been only a few minutes before, there was now a large tongue of fire, a flame of blue, green, orange, yellow and red. It was the most beautiful thing Ross had ever seen. It was the incarnation of his flames. His fear instantly vanished.

Ross looked down at the dory's instruments. He could not see them; for him, they were no longer there. He could see nothing but the flame. It hung continually before his eyes, no matter which direction he looked. And, suddenly, he realized he was no longer actually *seeing*. It was a sense other than sight which brought the image of the flame into

his mind, a sense somehow beyond sight. He knew now that he was physically blind, and it did not matter.

A voice spoke in Ross' head. It did not speak in the conventional sense, yet Ross understood it clearly. He knew it was the whale. The whale was communicating with him. Its thoughts blew like a soft, warm breeze across his numbed mind, clearing it of fear and confusion.

*Little flame, it said, you approach at the wrong time.*

And the flame that consumes all but does not burn washed over him.

~~~~~

Stretched out prone in his dory, Ross felt tired but happy. His flame was a warm glow deep within him as a new energy coursed throughout his body. He did not know how long he had been in actual communication with the whales, and it really did not matter. Now, he would be forever in communion with them.

Fumbling blindly with the controls before him, he looked about. Directly ahead was a small cluster of flames. Among them, only one burned bright, only one knew joy. The others were pale and weak. They left pools of sorrow in Ross' mind.

Without having to turn his head, Ross looked to his left and realized he was *seeing* through the hull of his dory with his new sense. There, in the distance, danced a large group of intensely burning flames—the whale pod. Wave upon wave of raw emotion radiated from them, a pure joy that washed over his mind, cleansing it and carrying away the stagnant pools of sorrow.

Ross' flame burned suddenly brighter. He reached out, activated the main propulsion thruster. The artificial gravity of acceleration returned briefly, then again vanished. As he sped toward the waiting parent ship, Ross let his thoughts wander.

The whales allowed themselves to be hunted. Ross knew that now. They could not die—not really. They were the carriers of peaceful thought, the caretakers of love and eternal life. They gave their physical beings willingly, bringing not only man, but every other life form they came in contact with into their web of joy and life everlasting. And now Ross was one with them; he was a member of the web of flame. He was a member of the pod.

When Ross finally reached the *Stardrift*, seemingly blind and in a catatonic state, he was taken immediately to sick bay. Galson was there, waiting for him, his flame blazing with excitement.

The old man, like Ross, radiated waves of joy.



## CHAPTER TWELVE

hr mn sc fr  
0106-58-27-9562

...into the world of physical realities.

Again, the gray, faceless figure appeared in Alan's mind—legs spread, arms stretched out away from the torso—and again the inexplicable feeling of familiarity. But still Alan could not identify him.

There was something else strange, too, something made odd by its very absence rather than its presence. The powerful burst of high-frequency energy he had experienced so many times in the last few days was gone. Tanner was no longer monitoring his movements.

For what seemed days, the faceless image hung in Alan's mind. Again and again he tried to force it from his thoughts, attempting to consciously drive it away. But that did not work, and soon Alan stopped trying altogether.

Eventually, as if by its own volition, the image disappeared from his thoughts.

The soft folds of the scan cocoon's membrane pressed close around him, its soothing warmth drawing the chill of the jump from his mind, its vibration bringing consciousness. Slowly, in response to Alan's waking, the cocoon opened, exposing his perspiration-soaked body to the cool air of his scan booth.

Immediately he felt a strangeness. There was something wrong here, something different. This *felt* like his body, yet somehow it did not. Although the body contained the same heavy fatigue that followed every scan, there was something changed about it.

Alan opened his eyes, got to his hands and knees, and, shaking both physically and mentally, crawled across the staging platform at the top of the three short steps, then got to his feet and descended to the floor.

Suddenly, he realized what was so different about his body. His right leg did not hurt. And it supported him without the aid of his brace. For the first time in many years, his body was again whole.

But *was* it his body?

*Yes*, he decided, *this is my body*. There was none of the unfamiliarity of a host body; the very muscles seemed to remember small, habitual actions.

Alan remembered the strange barrier in Tanner's mind, the barrier he had observed both during the Foundation party and again only a few short minutes ago. And suddenly he knew there never had been a barrier in the other's mind. Not really. What he

had thought to be a reflection of his own mind bounced back at him had actually been Tanner's mind. And it was the same as his own.

Instantly, Alan realized the full implication of this knowledge. This body was a counterpart to his own back in *his* Earth Prime. And his own counterpart from here was now inhabiting Ross Dillman's body, whoever that was. Incredible as it seemed, the man who was trying to kill Alan was, in a sense, *Alan himself!*

But it was an Alan he did not like, one capable of murder for some twisted ideal. An Alan who, because of his actions and beliefs, had to die.

Dazed by the contradiction of that thought, Alan stumbled to the scan booth's locker, removed the blue jumpsuit he found there, and put it on. It was a perfect fit, as it should have been. It looked, in fact, exactly like the one he had placed in his locker back in his own world. But where he had left his leg brace and cane, there was nothing.

After dressing, Alan stepped through the scan booth's pellicle door. The phrenic sign flashed in his mind: *DELTA-TWO-EIGHT*. But that wasn't right, his scan booth designation should have been delta-two-nine.

Without a moment's hesitation, he hurried down the corridor, toward Robin's booth, carefully counting the number of pellicle doors between his own booth and hers. He was almost positive he knew what he would find, and he feared that knowledge. If he was right, it could mean but one thing.

*DELTA-TWO-ONE*, said the glowing sign in his thoughts as he approached the pellicle door to Robin's booth. He knew the door membrane would not respond to him. The computer would admit only those with the proper, pre-recorded DNA code, just as it did the pellicle door to his own scan booth. But he knew Robin's booth was empty. The pellicle door glowed a rosy red.

*That's the clincher*, he thought. It was just as he had thought it would be. Robin's booth designation should have been delta-two-two. This was not Earth Prime, not *his* Earth Prime. It was a dimension very similar to the Earth he knew, perhaps even running directly adjacent and parallel to it, but it definitely was not his Earth. And the body he now inhabited, although incredibly like his own, was not his. It was whole and healthy; it had not suffered the crippling accident in youth.

Suddenly, inexplicably, Alan realized that the benevolent mind that had guided him in the non-world between dimensions had left him here on purpose. Whatever that mind was, it knew something Alan did not, something about this alternate universe, something it wanted Alan to know. For some reason, it wanted him *here*, in this dimension so much like his own, but still not his own.

**EPISODE**  
**12 December, 2113**  
**10:17 Mountain Standard Time**

The breeze was cool on Ross Dillman's body as it blew through his light robes. He sat beneath the large pine, his back against its bole, its rough bark pressing into his flesh. His white-bearded face was lifted to the warm sun.

He was lost in memory, recalling a time many years ago—a time even before he had come to live in this wilderness park—when he had been aboard the whaler *Stardrift*. It had been a short time, yet in many respects a very happy time. It was while aboard the *Stardrift* that he had strengthened his flame.

The small flames danced around him. He saw them in his mind and identified each one. There was a chipmunk, its flame brown-tinted and lively. There the slightly red-tinted spark of a raccoon. And there, in the stream's cool green water, the darting flames of several trout. There were many more, each distinct and identifiable, yet each part of the whole.

And he also felt the large flames, out in the vastness of interstellar space. They burned with an intensity that filled him with warmth and joy, even at their great distance. They were far away, yet they were with him. He was one of them, and they were all one.

Suddenly, there was another in Ross' mind, one of the small flames, yet one that burned dim even for a small flame, one that did not share the least bit of joy.

At first, Ross fought this other. He could have easily pushed the other from his mind or, with a thought, destroyed him. And at first he started to do this.

But then a thought came from the large flames. *Do not fight the other*, they said. *Let it happen. Let him have your body. It must be so.*

Ross no longer fought the other. He left his body and joined his brothers among the stars.

~ ~ ~

Slowly, the other got to his feet. He tested his arms and legs and decided they were adequate. He tested his brain and found it sound. The only defect he could find was in the host body's sense of sight. But for that he was more than compensated; he possessed a strange other sight.

As he walked along the dusty forest road, toward the park's exit, he decided to call himself Ralf Tanner.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

hr mn sc fr  
0107-09-19-0296

*FRANK RODGERS, DIRECTOR, SCAN PROJECT*, declared the red phrenic sign. Its flashing message lasted only a few brief seconds, but that was time enough for it to leave the slightly acid feeling of strangeness in Alan's mind. Again there was something different about this world, something not quite as it should have been. Something slightly out of kilter with the way it was in Alan's dimension. And Alan couldn't quite determine what it was.

Then, suddenly, he knew what it was. Rogers *did* exist here, and—as in Alan's universe—he was head of the scan project. That much was clear. But his name was spelled differently here than it was in Alan's Earth Prime. Here, the man's last name was spelled with a d.

Putting his eye to the lens in the wall beside the pellicle door, Alan permitted the computer to scan his retinal pattern and match it to the copy in its memory. The door's membrane cycled from red to green, and Alan pushed through.

A bald black man sat behind the conference table reading the top sheet of a thick stack of computer print-outs, his bulk filling and almost overflowing the large chair. He appeared to be the same man Alan knew, even down to his choice in jumper color—silver with black trim—but not quite. This man's skin shade was a bit lighter than that of Rogers in Alan's dimension. This was, of course, not the same man at all. Although both men undoubtedly shared many attitudes and biases, Alan was sure there were plenty of differences as well. And unless Alan could somehow turn the tide of events his way, it looked as if some of those differences might eventually prove fatal to him.

There were certainly differences in the make-up of this man's computer-generated office. These were, for the most part, subtle deviations, yet they did exist, and they mirrored basic differences in the two men's personalities and the worlds in which they functioned: a blue carpet on the floor rather than red, a four-point elk rack on the wall above his head rather than a six, mahogany used in the conference table and chairs instead of walnut. And the furniture was of a slightly different style too, a bit more ornate than the furniture the Rogers of Alan's dimension preferred, and slightly heavier looking.

Alan's gaze took in the room as he looked for Tanner, Robin and the clone. They were not there.

"How did the scan go?" the black man said, looking up from his reading and marking his place with a large index finger. His gaze met Alan's, his dark eyes seeming to stare through the smaller man's, as if he could look into his brain and read his very thoughts.

"Good," Alan lied. Then the full impact of the black man's gaze hit him and he realized that Robin could join them at any minute, and he added an uncertain, "I think." He couldn't begin to guess what might happen if she should arrive, but he knew he didn't want to be caught in an outright lie. The longer he kept this cover, the more he would learn and the less likely he was to die.

"What do you mean, you think? Isn't he dead?"

Alan lowered himself slowly into the soft cushions of the large chair across from the black man, trying to appear cool and confident while perspiring heavily beneath his powder blue jumpsuit. "He got the drop on us," he said, "and we had to jump. But he has to be dead. I don't see how he could have made the jump; he was in bad shape."

"Has to be!" Rodgers bellowed, getting up from his chair. The table creaked under his weight as he leaned on it, as it had in Alan's own dimension, and again Alan wondered how the techs could have augmented the computer program for this room's furnishings enough for such a subtle effect. The black man brought his face—brown eyes bulging, stubble-covered jowls quivering with anger—to within a foot of Alan's. "You don't know for sure that he's dead, do you?" he said, his voice gruff with accusation.

"N...no," Alan stammered.

Rodgers straightened and stepped away from the table, linked his hands behind his back, then paced rapidly across the room and back. Part way through his second circuit of the office, he stopped and turned to face Alan.

"Can't you see yet how crucial this is?" he said, as if explaining something very basic to a child. "Robin has put a lot of time into this, and she's used the computer to prove her theories right: our very existence here depends on the deaths of our counterparts in that other dimension. Don't you understand that?"

"Yes," Alan said, "I understand." And he did. He could sympathize with these others, he could almost condone what they were trying to accomplish. If he knew that his life depended on the death of his counterpart in another dimension, he would certainly try to eliminate that other.

And now, suddenly, paradoxically, his life did depend on that other's death.

"Then why did you let him slip through your fingers like that? With him dead, you could have easily gotten close to my counterpart there, and this would all be over so quickly."

"We didn't *let* him get away," Alan said, finding it easy to put a necessary note of defensiveness in his voice. "Like I said, he *has* to be dead. Besides, he was holding a submachine gun on us. What were we supposed to do, just stand there and let him shoot

us down? That wouldn't have accomplished a damn thing. After all, the only reason for all this in the first place is to assure our continued existence."

The black man nodded.

*That's a beautiful piece of logic, Alan thought, the kind of level-headed thinking that just might get me out of this alive.* He almost allowed himself a small smile of triumph, but stopped himself in time. There was certainly no point in giving himself away before it became absolutely necessary.

"But still we have to make sure he's dead," Rodgers said, his voice calming still more, becoming more controlled. "And we have to do something about my own counterpart. According to the computer,"—he nodded at the stack of print-outs on the table—"we're within the optimum time-slot for his death right now."

Alan nodded and remained quiet. How should he respond to something like that? He didn't know what to say, and he certainly did not plan to kill either himself or Rogers for these others.

"Okay," Rodgers said, ignoring Alan's silence and sitting back down in his chair. "What's done is done. Now we have to make it all right. Agreed?" He folded his huge hands peacefully atop the stack of printouts.

"Agreed," Alan answered. *Like hell!* he thought.

Rodgers shook his head. "First, if you didn't get him—if he could still jump—he would have undoubtedly returned to his own dimension. If he made it back there, our game is up and you can come out of hiding, start scanning in your own body. If, on the other hand, he didn't return to his own dimension—fine. You can simply dispose of his body, put on his brace, and take his place. Either way, we have to move right now; time is no longer on our side."

*But I don't know how to jump with a body!* Alan thought. *I can't do it!* To Rodgers, he said: "What about the clone?"

"I made another run. The computer still can't account for the clone. We can't afford to let it out of our hands. It might be too dangerous, and we just can't take that kind of chance."

"And Robin?"

"She's with the clone, isn't she? You should know that better than I."

For an instant, panic filled Alan's mind. Had he made the fatal error, the one he had known all along he would probably make? But, if he had, would Rodgers catch it?

With an effort, he gathered his frantically scurrying thoughts, then took a deep breath and nodded.

"Shouldn't she be with me, though?" he asked. "Won't her absence arouse their suspicion?"

"Yes, it probably will. But there isn't much we can do about that now. I'll send her along as soon as she returns. Until then, tell them..." Rodgers stopped and thought for a few seconds. Finally, he resumed. "Tell them she had a few loose ends to tie up in the target dimension, things that would have caused drastic changes in its structure if left unattended. They should buy it, they're usually pretty sensitive about that sort of thing.

"Now, you'd better get to your scan booth," he said, getting slowly to his feet, obviously very tired both physically and mentally.

Again fear filled Alan's mind, gnawing at the fringes of his sanity like a ravenous rodent. How could he possibly explain away his inability to make the jump with the body? And how would Rodgers react once he caught on to his act?

Alan stood, turned and started toward the pellicle door. He was about to step through when Rodgers said: "I'll send the techs in to set your booth for an in-body scan."

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Alan crawled out across the pink glowing membrane of the scan cocoon to its center, then laid on his back, his arms stretched out away from his body and his legs spread. He felt the membrane's familiar stickiness and warmth beneath him, the gentle massaging of its pliant living tissue, and instantly he began to relax. This was something he knew, something he understood. This was something he could cope with.

The technicians had been there and gone. They had executed their tasks in a silent, efficient manner, adjusting the cocoon to allow him to scan *with* his body and setting the dimensional co-ordinates. Alan thought he had recognized a few of them. He had even called out to one tech by name. But the man had not responded—in fact, had ignored him—and a few of the others had looked at him strangely.

Alan's immediate problem, however, was that he really didn't know what was expected of him. He didn't know which procedures held here and which were different from those in his own dimension. If, for example, he would be scanning with this body, he certainly wouldn't need the nutrient-feeder and waste draw off tubes. But, if this world's equipment and procedures were similar enough to his own dimension's, the dramil necessary to make the scan possible was included in the nutrient solution. He *would* need the drug, wouldn't he? Or would he?

In the end, he decided to connect both the nutrient-feeder and the waste draw off tubes and take his chances. He pulled them down and inserted them into his right wrist, then plugged himself into the psionic computer/transmitter and curled into fetal position.

"Computer," he said after taking a deep breath, "initiate scan."

Just before the membrane of the scan cocoon folded over Alan's body, Rodgers burst through the pellicle door, the red box of a membrane scrambler clutched in his hands. Three large men dressed in the black jumpsuits of Security stumbled into the booth close behind him, needle-guns at the ready.

"Stop!" Rodgers bellowed.

Then the membrane enveloped Alan in its soft warmth, shutting out all sight and sound.



## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

hr mn sc fr  
0107-58-42-6215

6 October, 2114

9:46 p.m. Mountain Standard Time

It was a strange sensation, a tingling and stinging throughout his entire body, like a million crawling and biting insects. Simultaneously, he became painfully aware of his body's every part. Each individual axon in his nervous system burned as if with fire, and his veins and arteries ran acid hot. He even felt every blood cell coursing through his circulatory system, small but intense sparks of living flame. Yet, there was a feeling of retaining complete control of his entire being, a feeling that more than compensated for the pain. A feeling Alan found he liked.

And suddenly, that feeling was gone, and he again entered the physical world.

He stood against one wall of the scan booth, beside the storage locker, and instantly he knew this was *his* scan booth in his own Earth Prime. There was a familiar feel to it, an almost friendly texture to the very air that marked it as his world. It wasn't anything concrete, nothing he could put his finger on, but it was present none-the-less.

Directly before him, glowing a bright, healthy pink, was the scan cocoon. Alan could just make out the dim form of a body through its opaque substance. The body was in fetal position, lulled into a deep sleep by the combined effects of dramil and the cocoon's highly sophisticated electronics. It was his body, he knew that. His *real* body.

Alan turned to the locker, opened it, and took out his jumpsuit. As he got dressed, he noticed his cane and leg brace hanging on a hook at the back of the locker. He would not need them now, not until he left this body to return to his own. But it was strange; he actually *missed* strapping the brace on his leg. He had done it after every scan he had ever been on, and not putting it on now made him feel somehow incomplete.

*DELTA-TWO-NINE*, came the phrenic sign into his thoughts, and instantly he knew this was his dimension. Yet, the scan booth's pellicle door did not respond to him as it should have. There was resistance; the membrane did not give easily and Alan had to struggle through. Then he realized what was wrong. The pellicle door was set to only his body and that of his relief on the other shift, and no other. As much as this body looked like his own, it was not; its DNA code was just different enough to prevent easy use of the pellicle door. Yet, this body's genetic information was enough like his own body's to at least permit him to pass through.

He hurried down the hall toward Rogers' office, his mind churning, trying to plot his next move. First, he knew, he would have to convince Rogers of what had happened. He couldn't handle this alone; he needed help on this end while he scanned.

But the story he was about to tell Rogers was too unbelievable. Even he had trouble believing it, and he had experienced it. Would Rogers believe what Alan was about to tell him? Could he believe it?

One factor in Alan's favor, at least, was his leg. Rogers could not deny that it was again whole. And there was also his *real* body still wrapped in the scan cocoon back in his booth. Two of the same body in the same dimension? Rogers knew Alan had never had a clone made of himself. Only under very special circumstances was that permitted.

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*FRANK ROGERS, DIRECTOR, SCAN PROJECT*, read the phrenic sign. Again, Alan noted the difference: no *d* in Rogers' name. This was certainly his own dimension.

Alan pushed through the pellicle door with considerable difficulty. Rogers sat behind the conference table reading computer print outs, just as his counterpart had in that other dimension. But this Rogers' skin tone was several shades darker than had been that other's.

"Alan!" the black man said, jumping to his feet. "What are you doing back? I wasn't informed your assignment had been terminated."

"It wasn't," Alan said and smiled.

"What?"

"I'm still on assignment; I'm still scanning."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Rogers said. "How did you get here?"

"I told you. I'm still scanning. This isn't my body."

Rogers' gaze narrowed and his brow furrowed. He was obviously beginning to find the whole thing very annoying. "What do you mean, it isn't your body?"

"Just what I said." Alan sat down in the chair across the table from Rogers. "But I really can't explain right now. I don't have time. Too much has to be accomplished too quickly. And I need your help."

"Now just you hold on a minute," Rogers said, leaning urgently across the table and placing his jowled face within inches of Alan's, just as his counterpart had in that other dimension. "First, you tell me you're still scanning, when you're standing right here before me. Then you say that this isn't your body, and you actually expect me to believe you. You damn well better explain yourself. And fast."

Alan thought for a minute. Finally he said, "Okay. I owe you that much, and I do need your help. But first, you have to do something for me."

"What?" the black man demanded. There was a note of suspicion in his voice.

"Take Robin's body from its cocoon and place it in a stasis field."

Rogers was silent, shock registering openly on his broad face. He obviously could not believe what he had just heard, and he could not respond.

"This is important," Alan said, finally breaking the awkward silence. "And it has to be done now, without a minute's delay. Either you do it, no questions asked, or you won't get the explanation you want. I'll simply walk out of here and you'll never hear from me again."

"But..."

"No buts. That's the way it has to be."

For a few seconds, Rogers just sat unmoving and stared at Alan, anger growing in his hot gaze. Then he reached out, activated the holophone on his desk, and contacted Security.

Alan waited, not saying a word. At any time Rogers could order Security in to take him into custody. That was a gamble, but one Alan knew he had to take. He had to depend on his judgment of Rogers' character, relying on the other's faith in Alan himself.

And Rogers came through for him. He made the necessary arrangements to have Robin's body placed in stasis, then deactivated the holophone without giving him away.

"Okay, it's done," Rogers said, his hot gaze again meeting Alan's own. "Now, this had better be good

"Not good," Alan replied, "simply unbelievable."

~ ~ ~

Within ten minutes, Alan had told Rogers his entire incredible story: how the scan had proceeded in the dimension where the clone had first been kept, how he had discovered Robin was at the root of it all, and what part Ralf Tanner had played. Then he told him about his scan in that dimension so much like their own. As proof of his story, he showed Rogers his whole leg, a leg capable of supporting him without the aid of a brace, a leg strong and healthy and without pain.

"Then you're telling the truth. This isn't your body?"

Alan shook his head.

"And the rest of your story? It's...it's true as well? These others actually wish us harm?"

Alan nodded. "They're working on some sort of time-table," he said, "on a schedule developed by their computer. And they mean business. If we don't stop them soon, within the next few days or even hours, they'll stop us. They'll stop us *dead!*"

"How can we possibly stop them? Hell, we don't even know where they are."

"But we do," Alan said, "They're with the clone— at least one of them is—and it originated here, in this dimension. We can put a psionic trace on it, use it to locate them."

"That's true," Rogers said, and scratched the dark stubble along his jaw line. "But with all this going on, why all the interest in the clone? Why are they so interested in it, I mean?"

Alan shook his head. "I don't know. But that clone is the key to all this. Somehow, it can be used against them. And they know it."

"Perhaps," Rogers said. "You'd know more about that than I would." Then he was quiet for a moment, thinking. When he finally spoke, there was cold determination in his voice. Right or wrong, he had made up his mind. He had determined a plan of action.

"Okay, look, there isn't a thing you can do until we have the results of the trace on the clone. You get some sleep— you can use the cot in the back there." He motioned with a nod of his head to the pellicle door behind him. "I'll have your body—your *real* body— removed from your cocoon and placed in stasis. When everything's ready, I'll wake you."

Alan nodded and, without a word, got to his feet. He hadn't noticed it until now, but he *was* tired. More tired than he could remember ever being. He would be able to think clearer after a few hours' sleep, he told himself.

He wondered if he would be *able* to sleep.

Stumbling around the conference table, he stepped through the pellicle door. Again, there was resistance as his body passed through the membrane. This, however, was a non-discriminating membrane. There should have been no resistance, unless...

Unless it was because the body he now inhabited was from another dimension.

The small room beyond did not enjoy the elaborate computer augmentation that graced Rogers' office. Gone were the rich browns of wood paneling, to be replaced with spotted bare plasterboard. In one corner were a sink and a toilet, totally open to the rest of

the room. An ancient army cot rested forlornly against the far wall. A gray wool blanket lay atop it, nearly touching the floor on the out-wall side.

"It's not much," Rogers said, sweeping the room with a wide gesture of his arms, "but it has served." He nodded with obvious satisfaction, then said, "Tonight, it is yours."

Alan looked about the room without comment. It certainly wasn't much. Both the room and the cot were obviously intended only for occasional short naps.

"Why don't you have this room fixed up?" Alan finally said. "Augment it and bring in a few creature comforts."

Rogers shook his head. "This is the way I want it to stay. Anything more would be superfluous."

"What?"

"I know you won't understand this," the black man sighed. "I don't completely understand it myself. I guess you could call it an idiosyncrasy, but sometimes I just have to get away from all the modern comforts that this cluttered-up world of ours provides. Sometimes I have to get just as primitive as possible, while still being able to properly perform my duties. At times like that, when absolutely necessary, I escape to this room. For a day or two, maybe longer. It seems to clear my head, allowing thought processes somehow not otherwise possible. I don't know. Somehow this room's very primitiveness seems to allow me to do the kind of thinking I find I sometimes must do." He paused, unsure of himself. "I knew you wouldn't understand," he said.

Alan nodded. Rogers was right; he didn't understand. But he didn't really have to. He found, to his complete surprise, that he could accept it without understanding it. Somehow, it made an instinctual kind of sense to his subconscious mind, without actually breaking through into his consciousness.

"Now, you sleep," Rogers said. "I'll come and wake you when I have news." Without another word, he turned and strode through the pellicle door.

Alan stretched out on the cot, on the itchy roughness of the wool blanket, not even bothering to pull the blanket over his fatigue-numbed body. The cot was not in the least comfortable and, in spite of his exhaustion, he found he could not sleep. For what seemed like several hours he tossed and turned on the cot's sagging surface, reliving over and over in his thoughts the hectic occurrences of the past few days. He thought again of Robin—his Robin. But she was dead. She had been dead for almost a year now, replaced by a duplicate with sinister intentions and absolutely no conscience. He thought of his own counterpart, Tanner, a ruthless and highly capable man with but one mission: to kill Alan himself. He thought of the gray-skinned, faceless man who haunted his life almost continually now. And even as Alan thought of the dun-colored phantom, its image blossomed in his mind.

He thought of the clone, that strange, enigmatic youth. What was he? What was his connection with all this? What was the power he seemed to hold over Tanner and that duplicate Robin? Obviously, the clone's power lay in Tanner's and Robin's fear and their ignorance of its origin. And, because of that ignorance, it was a weapon that Alan could somehow use against them. But how?

Finally, he did sleep. But it was a fitful slumber, containing a very frightening dream.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

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*The music, the sun, the smell of hot buttered popcorn—it was all there, just as it had been each time Alan had had the dream. But this time, unlike the last time he had dreamed of the merry-go-round, Robin was not with him. This time she was one of those following him, one of those trying to catch him.*

*He moved up the hill at a run, Tanner, Robin and Rodgers fast behind him. He knew he must make it to the merry-go-round. If only he could make it, stand among the bright painted ponies, then he would be safe. Those others wouldn't be able to touch him then. They wouldn't..*

*Then, there it was. Round and round and round. He reached it, and stood in complete shock, unable to move.*

*The gray, faceless figure reached down and took hold of Alan's hand*

~\*~

When Rogers shook him awake, Alan bolted up on the cot with a start. His jumpsuit was wet with cold perspiration. He swung his feet heavily over the edge of the cot and instantly found it difficult to catch his breath.

"Take it easy," Rogers said. "You'll be fine. Just sit a minute and relax."

At first Alan was unable to respond. His head throbbed with intense, white pain and his stomach was cramped with the promise of nausea. The sour taste of bile burned at the back of his throat. This was a hangover, but one like he had never had before. It was the worst he had ever experienced. But, then, this had been the worst jag he had ever experienced. And it had been the worst jag he had ever been assigned to.

"I'm okay," Alan said after a few seconds. Then, suddenly, he realized he didn't know what time it was. He didn't even know the day. All his life he had prided himself on his *biological clock*, as he referred to it. He could almost always determine the time, simply by an inexplicable feeling within him. He just *knew* what time it was, automatically and without question.

But now, that sense was gone. And, inexplicably, he felt somehow betrayed by this time-sense, abandoned and cast adrift.

"How long have I been asleep?" Alan asked.

"About five hours."

"What time is it? What day?"

"Time? Why, a little after three in the morning. October seventh." He cocked his head and stared at Alan, but did not ask the obvious question.

To Alan, it certainly did not seem like five days had elapsed since he had started this scan. So much had happened. In just a few short days his entire world had come tumbling down about his ears. Robin—his Robin—was gone, dead. And now those who had killed her were trying to do the same to him.

*But they won't, he thought, climbing wearily to his feet. Now I know that they're trying to get me, and I don't plan to let that happen.*

Following Rogers from the small room, he stumbled to the pellicle door. Again it resisted his passage.

"Is everything set?" he asked, pushing the pain from his thoughts as they walked through Rogers' office.

"It's all ready. We tracked the clone, and we know where it's being held." They passed through the membrane of Rogers' pellicle door—again the resistance—then out into the hallway toward Alan's scan booth.

"Where?"

"Where, indeed!" Rogers said, and laughed humorlessly under his breath. "We've never scanned that far afield; it's at the very limits of our equipment's capabilities. The power expenditure for this one is going to be astronomical."

"Ah," Alan said, forcing a smile in spite of the way he felt, "accounting is not going to like that. You can expect a visit from the auditors first thing next week."

"Very funny," Rogers said, trying to keep from smiling himself. "But that's the least of my worries right now. If all you say is true, we may not be around next week."

"And I'm your immediate worry." A statement rather than a question.

"Yes. This target dimension is so distant from ours in terms of the power necessary to scan there, so deviated from our own, that we have absolutely no way of knowing anything about it. We just don't know what to expect. Physical laws as they exist there may even be considerably changed. But, obviously, a scan can be made into that other dimension; the clone is there, and so is Tanner."

"It may not be Tanner. Robin could be keeping an eye on the clone."



"No," the black man said, stopping beside the pellicle door to Alan's scan booth. "Just after you turned in, she did a very foolish thing. She jumped into her body. You'd think, with her ability to scan *with* body, she would have had no use for her own. But she must have wanted it pretty desperately. Anyway, before she could jump again, we snapped on the field generator. We have her in stasis."

"Good," Alan said. "But maybe we can't scan into this target universe. You forgot: Tanner and the clone did not jump into host bodies. They're scanning in their own bodies. There may not even be acceptable receivers there, particularly if it's as deviated from our own universe as you seem to think."

Rogers nodded. "Right," he said, and scratched along his jaw line. "I hadn't thought of that. But we have to try. What do you think? Are you game? After all, you're the one who's going to make the jump."

"What have I got to lose?" Alan said. "If I don't stop Tanner, I'm dead and so are you."

Rogers nodded. "Good scan," he said, squeezing Alan's shoulder, "and good luck." And without another word, he turned and stalked off down the hall.

With difficulty, Alan pushed through the pellicle door to his scan booth.

He undressed quickly, crawled out across the scan cocoon's membrane, and stretched out on his back in its exact center. Almost without thought, he reached up and pulled down the nutrient-feeder and waste draw off tubes, then inserted them into the circulatory shunt in his right wrist. He lifted the hair at the back of his neck and plugged himself into the psionic computer/transmitter.

Then he relaxed and permitted the dramil and electronics to do their work.

"Computer," he said when he felt himself becoming drowsy from the dramil coursing through his veins, "initiate scan." He turned on his side and rolled into fetal position as the cocoon closed over him, wrapping his body in its soft, warm folds.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

hr mn sc fr

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*Again the dun grayness of the non-world between worlds. Again the tedious, featureless expanse of non-existence and the total lack of sensory stimuli.*

*Suddenly, the faceless image in its familiar spread-eagled position. But this time no burst of high-frequency energy. This jump, the faceless man hangs alone in his thoughts.*

*Then, nothing...*

~

At first, Alan thought he was dead. He knew that he had completed the jump, that he was again in the physical world, but he could see nothing, hear nothing, feel nothing. And his senses of taste and smell supplied him with no information either. It was as if, having completed the jump, he had simply ceased to exist.

*No, he thought, that can't be right. I am able to think. If I can determine that my senses are receiving no stimuli and can comment abstractedly on it—albeit to myself—I am still alive. Thought is life, and the thought that is me persists.*

But if he wasn't dead, then what? How was he to explain this total lack of sensory stimuli? Could he be in a host body now, one so unlike those he was accustomed to that he did not yet know how to make it function, how to use its senses?

*That just might be the case, he decided. He had, after all, been projected into a dimension tremendously distant from his own in terms of the energy requirements for transfer. And Rogers had said that some of the physical laws would probably be quite different here. If they were considerably different, would he be able to perceive the world around him in the same way he perceived his own? And if the physical laws were sufficiently changed, was it possible he might not be able to perceive the world around him at all?*

*No, he thought, that isn't right. No matter what the physical conditions, he would perceive something. His host body would have to be capable of functioning in the universe in which it existed. That meant it had to sense its environment, as well as somehow interact with it.*

*The problem, he decided, has to be somehow in the interface between my mind and the host body's brain. And there was but one way to cross that mental bridge: by first constructing it.*

Carefully, Alan built a thin tendril with a section of the thought that was his mind. The tendril itself was thought, was, in fact, part of him. With it he reached out, probing the area of non-space around him, groping for the structure of his host body's brain. His tentacle of thought touched something—something flowing, slimy, repulsive—and instantly he retracted it, his mind becoming suddenly icy with revulsion.

*What was that thing?* Alan asked himself, trying to melt the ice in his mind. Could it have been his host body's brain? It had been so horrible, so sickening, yet it had been there for his mind to touch. It had to be the other's brain, he decided—at any rate, the metaphor for it. He knew he could never perceive the brain's physical structure, its tissue, its cells. In actuality, the brain was neither flowing nor slimy; these were qualities of the metaphor Alan's mind had constructed to deal with it, mere symbols for its actual structure. This brain was different, alien, and the metaphor served to position it in the non-physical world in which Alan's mind functioned, to define it in terms his mind could understand.

Again he reached out with his tendril of thought, and again he touched the alien brain. But this time he forced himself to stay in contact with it, and gradually he became accustomed to its bizarre texture. He poked it with his thought-tendril, gently prodding it, testing it, jostling it to see what thoughts might fall out.

Suddenly, a flood of memories assaulted his mind—the distilled product of a long and alien life.

*This is as it should be,* Alan thought, fielding the memories as they came, gathering the bits of strange knowledge to himself. *The memories should come easily, with only a little prodding from me, not grudgingly, as they had in my last host body. Each bit of information might prove to be exactly what I need to survive here and complete this assignment.*

As the alien data flowed into his mind from the host body's brain, Alan catalogued it. First, there was the sensory data, a confused hodge-podge of multi-band radio frequency inputs. This creature—whatever it was, whatever it looked like—perceived its world in the radio frequencies.

Alan ignored these bits of sensory data for the present. They would be there when he needed them. What interested him most now were the other's perception of itself and its memories of its past life.

This creature was definitely an it; it did not come at all close to humanoid, neither in the way it thought nor in its physical appearance. It was huge—massing nearly eight tons—and roughly spherical in shape. Its surface was sheathed in a one-cell-deep layer of organic radio frequency receivers. This array was its sole means of sensory perception.

Sifting through the creature's thoughts and memories, Alan searched for some reference to its means of locomotion. He found none. This host body did not *move* as

Alan understood the concept. There was a predator in its memories—a living, mildly intelligent, highly corrosive chemical fog. Yet, apparently, this creature could not run from it. And, as near as Alan could tell, it possessed no natural weapons either.

Yet, there was something, something so strange, so alien, that Alan could not pin it down in his mind. It was a thought, but not a thought—something more basic even than thought. It was primeval, and more a part of this alien's body, its DNA, than its mind or thoughts. It was slippery in Alan's mind and defied study and understanding.

*But, if this other cannot defend itself against the killing fog, Alan thought, how can it possibly survive?*

Using the creature's radio frequency receptors, he *looked* around him. There were hundreds of bodies just like the one he inhabited in his immediate area, their huge forms dimly leaking radio frequency energy. And with their radio image came a thought: these creatures—and Alan himself—were immature. They were fetal. They were the fertilized but as yet undeveloped eggs of still larger creatures.

*That explains some of it,* he thought. The parent produced far more eggs than could ever survive, as did most creatures in nature, hoping at least a few would survive the predators and the elements. But these eggs were totally helpless. They should have been completely decimated by the fog, a predator with no actual appetite to be satisfied, yet a voracious eater none the less. It should have eaten until, within a very short time, there were no more eggs left. This was the knowledge the host body's brain supplied.

Again, there was that strange, slippery concept that Alan could not quite grasp, hanging in his mind just out of his reach. And, although he could not clearly *see* it, study it or define it, he knew it must be the egg's sole means of defense against the killing fog.

But this was doing him no good. If he couldn't move, he wouldn't be able to locate Tanner and the clone. He would have to jump back to his own dimension and have a long talk with Rogers. Hopefully, between the two of them, they could discover some way to flush Tanner out of this dimension, into one where Alan would at least be mobile and able to deal with him.

*Strange,* he thought, *how I continue to think of him as Tanner.*

But it wasn't really strange at all; it was just easier that way. It kept at least a modicum of sanity in his thoughts, a minor miracle considering all he had been through the past few days.

Clearing his mind of all unnecessary thought, Alan focused on the body so like his own resting in its cocoon back in Earth Prime. He felt the energies building, cresting. Then he threw them out into the grayness between dimensions.

And nothing happened. A wall of cold darkness stood in the non-world between him and that other body, blocking him, preventing the energy that was his mind from making contact with that body.

Confused, he pulled his energies back. This was not right, not as it should be. Every time before, he had been able to jump from a host body in a target dimension back into his own in Earth Prime with no difficulty. The electronics were there, ready and waiting. And the dramil. It should work.

Again he gathered his energies, storing them until they had reached the proper level, then throwing them out into the gray non-world for retrieval by the body in his own universe. Again he was unable to make contact, stopped by the wall of darkness.

Suddenly, he had a thought: the body into which he was trying to jump was not his own. Yet, he had jumped into it before. Or had he?

No, he decided, he had not. He had been *led* into that dimension so like his own. He had been *directed* into his counterpart's body. Throughout all this, he had been maneuvered—first by his counterpart and those others from that not-quite Earth Prime, then by that strong yet somehow benevolent mind he had encountered between worlds.

And now, in a sense, he was again being controlled. That other, the gentle mind that had so easily guided him into his counterpart's body to begin with, was withholding its assistance now. And, as a result, Alan was trapped in this dimension.

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In the distance, Alan observed a small but intense spot-source of radio frequency energy. This, he knew, was the stasis field generator, leaking r-f as part of its waste energy. And where the generator was, there too would be Tanner and the clone.

But Alan had no way of getting to them. Trapped in this body—this body so alien, so unlike his own—he could not move. And even if he could, he had no weapon with which to fight Tanner. He would be completely at the other's mercy.

He felt the intense r-f energy from the stasis field generator striking his host body, felt its effects deep within him. Somehow, it was causing this body he inhabited—as well as those other eggs packed close around him—to mature far more quickly than it would have otherwise. The division of cells in his host body suddenly accelerated, doubling, tripling, proceeding at four times its normal rate and more. Much more. Soon, the mass of cells that comprised his host body was maturing at thousands of times its customary rate, swiftly being drawn from the egg stage to that of an adult by the generator's r-f waste energy.

He felt subtle yet important changes being worked throughout his host body. Most he did not understand. Others, however, he grasped in their entirety, and these he tried to

control. Slowly, by sheer force of mind, Alan set about reshaping the body he was trapped in, while it raced ever faster toward its inevitable maturation.

The necessary elements were present in abundance in this primeval world: hydrogen, oxygen, carbon, nitrogen, and a multitude of trace elements. There were even a few elements Alan had not known existed. What was not stored in the body itself, he gathered from the ground beneath him—a strange, organic-rich substrate, almost alive itself. Within the layer of highly undifferentiated tissue at the base of his body, he formed millions of microscopic filaments. These he projected downward, into the substrate, and with them collected the very molecules he needed to sustain his transformation.

Gradually, grudgingly, the mass of rapidly dividing cells that was his body elongated. He made a minor adjustment and felt cartilage form, shape itself into a crude spine, then harden into bone. Another adjustment and his eyes began to take form—still very primitive, unable as yet to function, yet developing with an insane speed. Still more changes, subtle alterations in basic body chemistry, and Alan had blood based on hemoglobin and a fine network of crude yet rapidly developing nerve cells.

Suddenly, the killing fog hovered above him, obscuring a section of sky, blotting out a large patch of its background radiation. Slowly, it descended toward him.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

hr mn sc fr

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Pure animal terror filled Alan's thoughts as the corrosive fog descended toward him. Alan lay unmoving, helpless. His mind raced frantically, like a frightened rodent, casting about for a way out, for even the smallest and most improbable route of escape. But he could find none. And still the killing fog descended, coming nearer and nearer with the passage of each swift second. If he was unable to find a means of escape within the next few seconds, Alan knew, he would die.

His problem was a physical one. This strange new body was not yet completely transformed; he had not yet developed his legs to the point where they would support him and be at all usable. Had his legs been completed, the solution to his problem would have been stunningly simple. He could have merely walked away from the fog, stepped out from under its path of descent. But that option was not open to him.

That left but one route of escape. As much as he hated to leave this world now, as much as he disliked the thought of relinquishing even this tenuous foothold here when he was already so close to Tanner and the clone. But he knew he must leave this dimension. He would have to return now to that body resting in his scan booth back in Earth Prime.

This entire line of reasoning took but an instant, occupying only the smallest fraction of a second necessary for thought. When it was completed Alan wiped it from his mind, clearing his thoughts and concentrating his full attention on the body awaiting his return back in his own world. His exacting mental preparations finally completed, with absolutely nothing but the image of the cocoon-enshrouded body back in Earth Prime fixed firmly in his thoughts, he cast his mind out toward that non-world between worlds.

As before, nothing happened. And still the deadly fog descended toward him.

Blaring alarms went off in his mind. His thoughts crackled with terror. He had one, perhaps two seconds remaining before the fog fell about him, enveloping his still unformed body in its corrosive substance. One or two seconds—just enough time for one last try.

Again he cleared his thoughts, concentrating totally on the task he knew he must complete. Again he fixed firmly in his mind the image of that body awaiting him back in Earth Prime. Not his body, of course. Another's. But close enough to his own to make the difference almost insignificant. He concentrated on that thought, kept telling himself that the body was near enough his own to make this work. It had not worked before, but this time it *must!*

Nothing.

And still the fog fell.

Instantly, the alien brain took over, guiding Alan's host body through several rapid yet extremely complicated chemical changes. This was not something the brain did consciously. It was automatic, almost instinct, but not quite. It was something remembered by the host body's cells themselves, something coded in DNA and included in their complement of genetic material. Alan had no control over these changes. He could neither study them sufficiently nor prevent them.

Within a fraction of a second Alan was aware of changes in the world around him, alterations in the world *outside* his host's body. These alterations were subtle at first, hardly noticeable and seemingly insignificant. There were small changes in the substrate beneath his host body, minute chemical alterations that did not appear to make much difference in his continuing body alterations. But these changes became more obvious with the passage of time, much more pronounced. Eventually, he even became aware of differences in the very air around him: the oxygen content decreased as the nitrogen level soared.

Soon, there were even alterations in the other eggs around him. Each individual egg was not quite the same as it had been only a moment before. They were changed somehow, in small yet significant ways. Their body heat was elevated and there was an almost unnoticed change in their primeval thought patterns. Even the intricate radiation patterns of their waste radio-frequency energy was subtly different, indicating not only an altered average metabolic rate, but a change in the basic chemical processes as well. Not only were they different individuals, but they were also changing as a race. Even as Alan studied them they altered. Yet, in some ways—some very basic, primitive, and indefinable ways—they were the same eggs, too.

Almost as quickly as it had begun, the effect ceased. The changes in the substrate beneath his body and the air around him came to an abrupt stop. The host of eggs scattered over the barren flatness of the substrate around him also stopped changing. Alan looked above him with his strange new r-f sight, searching for the menacing killer fog. But he could not detect it. The fog was gone.

Almost intuitively, Alan knew what had happened. Somehow, in response to the fog's threat and without aid of the Foundation's sophisticated equipment, his host body had moved across dimensional boundaries. Yet, it had not done *quite* that, either. The world around him was now a different one than the one he had inhabited only an instant before. It was another dimension—similar in many respects, yet altered in others. But the method by which he had accomplished the move—that was something entirely new to him, something totally amazing in both its concept and its implications. Somehow, instead of merely jumping into another dimension, this host body had literally altered the reality around it. It had not so much searched out a world where the killing fog no longer hung above it, it had literally *constructed* such a world through small changes in the already existing world. Alan, through the host body he now inhabited, had changed the universe around him to suit his own needs. And, in doing so, he had in effect flowed fluidly through the dimensions.



But with the fog's absence, Tanner and the clone had disappeared as well. This world was altered sufficiently from that other that they did not exist here. Alan only hoped Tanner had not spotted him before he had made the shift.

As Alan saw it, he now had exactly two alternatives. First, he could remain here, in this dimension of his own making, safe from Tanner's observation, and complete the transfer of his host body; without the worry and distraction of Tanner's presence he could concentrate fully on building a body at least highly functional if not altogether attractive. His other choice was to return to the dimension Tanner and the clone inhabited *before* completing his transformation. If he did that, he reasoned, he would be able to maintain at least a limited watch on their movements, know, at any rate, when they made their jump. But was it actually worth it? After all, once he was spotted, they would be able to watch him as easily as he could watch them.

In the end, he decided on the former plan of action. The risk of being spotted in that other dimension was just too great. And in order to accomplish what he knew he must—the total alteration of both the morphology and the DNA composition of a creature which, until only a few hours ago, he didn't even know existed—he needed to concentrate on the process without distraction.

The substrate beneath his host body was considerably changed in this new world. A few of the elements he absolutely *needed* were no longer available. Carefully, he readjusted the world around him to again include these essential elements, causing them through force of mind to be in the substrate from which his many microscopic siphons drew the basic building materials. At the same time, he assured that neither Tanner's nor the clone's existence intruded in the dimension he created. And, after a short period of altering the world around him to suit his needs, he found that his host body was the only egg inhabiting the strange world in which he existed—at least, within the limited range of his r-f sensors.

Slowly, his body took shape: roughly humanoid in form and size, but with sensory organs that went far beyond those of man. He was no longer limited to the visible portion of the electromagnetic spectrum; he heard X rays, smelled infrared, tasted ultraviolet, felt the visible wave lengths, and saw the radio frequencies. All forms of energy stimulated his sensory organs simultaneously, supplying him with a chaotic yet complete picture of the world around him.

And, suddenly, his new body was completed.

He withdrew his siphons from the substrate beneath him, retracting them into his body. Then he lay on his back on the soft, warm substrate, his arms stretched out away from his torso, his legs spread-eagle, and looked up into the sky. There were no stars, merely a chaotic swirl of energies localized directly above him.

*Why should there be stars in the sky?* he thought. *After all, this is my world, a completely private place constructed for but one reason. What should it need but elements, a substrate in which to anchor the elements, and an abundance of energy? Stars would be superfluous, an extravagance neither logical nor worth the effort.*

Slowly, he got to his feet and carefully tested his legs before he put his full weight on them. His feet sank a few inches into the soft substrate, its spongy substance squishing up between his bare toes.

Alan looked down at his body, noting the lumpy texture of its gray skin. It was a crude body, without polish or beauty. But it was functional—much more so than his human body resting in storage back in Earth Prime. And it was unbelievably strong. He felt a strength he had never before experienced, a power unlike any he had discovered in any of the multitude of host bodies he had inhabited during his tenure as a scanner for the Foundation. *He* had built that strength into this body; he had incorporated it into the design. It was a strength of more than the body, though; it extended to his mind as well. It had, in fact, originated in his mind.

Now, Alan knew what had to be done and how to accomplish it. Now he was ready to face Tanner and the clone.

Without further thought, Alan began altering the world around him, making it ever more like that dimension in which he had left Tanner and the clone.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

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Gradually, the world changed.

One by one, the stars winked into existence above his head. As he became more and still more accustomed to this new process of world building, they slowly, almost cautiously appeared in twos and threes. Finally they came in a great glittering rush, populating the sky and gushing forth tremendous streams of electromagnetic energy.

In the same manner, the eggs reappeared on the flat plain around him. At first, they were very different from those he had left less than an hour ago. Their chemistries were altered and their waste energy patterns subtly changed. Slowly, carefully, he changed them back to what they had been, matching their physical structures and DNA to the template that existed in his memory.

As he altered the world around him, bringing it ever closer to the dimension he wanted, he kept a close watch on his host body. This he did not wish to change; it was exactly as he wanted it, as he knew it had to be if he was to do what he knew he must. Physically, he knew, it was an ugly body—nearly seven feet tall, lumpy and unrefined, gray skinned. But inside, in its altered DNA and changed brain structure, it was a wonder of biological engineering, a finely tuned living instrument designed for but one purpose.

Alan gave the coarse fabric of the universe one final twist. Ahead, no more than fifty feet away, were Tanner and the clone.

Tanner squatted back on his haunches in his conservative brown jumpsuit, hunched over a small, dim fire, warming his hands in its low flames. (Alan himself was not cold; *his* body was being warmed by the chaos of electromagnetic energy continually bombarding him from the universe beyond.) Occasionally, Tanner removed his hands from the fire's heat and rubbed them together vigorously, then again placed them close to the flames. A smudge of oily black smoke rose heavily from the flames, as if with great difficulty, and mingled with the thick darkness gathered just beyond the fire's influence. Alan sniffed the air, smelled the stench of burning flesh, and instantly tasted bile at the back of his throat.

The clone sat just within the fire's circle of light, facing Alan, still nude and in the lotus position. The stasis field generator rested beside him, radiating its flood of radio frequency waste energy.

Alan wasn't quite sure, but for an instant he thought he saw the hint of recognition in the clone's eyes, just a glint of awareness and understanding. Then it was gone and again he felt the boy's strong mind pulling at his own mind, making him want to release the youth from the constraints of the stasis field. With an effort he forced his gaze from the youth's.

Slowly, Alan approached the fire, his bare feet sinking a few inches into the ground and making absolutely no noise.

Tanner didn't become aware of Alan's presence until Alan stepped into the circle of heat and light. Then he looked up from the flames before him, into Alan's eyes, and instantly horror showed on his face. He formed a large oval of surprise with his mouth and fell back, away from Alan, protecting his eyes with his uplifted arms.

"What are you afraid of?" Alan said when the other did not speak. His voice sounded strange in his ears. He had done a quick, crude job on his vocal cords; they were functional, but the sound they produced was eerie—a bass rumble almost too low to be heard.

"I...I..." Tanner stammered. He cowered away from the aberration before him.

"It's me," Alan said, "your counterpart." He looked into the fire and realized with disgust that Tanner had been burning the intelligent eggs to keep warm.

"You? But how...?" Then realization washed across Tanner's face. "Oh, I see. But I don't understand *how* you accomplished it."

"That isn't important now," Alan said. "What is important is that I finally have the means to stop you."

Tanner laughed, a loud, deep chuckle. Shaking his head, he got slowly to his feet.

"You really think you can stop us, don't you?" He laughed again. "There isn't a thing you can do about us. You might as well get used to that. You're good as dead right now."

Alan smiled, his face twisting into an ugly mask. "We have Robin," he said.

Shock registered in Tanner's expression. "No," he said, "I don't believe you."

"We have her in stasis. And soon, we'll have you. Either you'll be dead, or we'll have you safely in stasis." He took a deliberate step toward Tanner.

"Nooo!" Tanner screamed, a long, ragged cry, more a growl than anything else. He launched himself at Alan, his hands opening and closing spasmodically as he reached for Alan's throat.

Alan was taken entirely by surprise; he moved too late. He side-stepped to the left, but not before Tanner's hands closed around his throat. The other's full weight slammed into him, throwing him off balance, and he went down hard.

Tanner landed heavily on top of Alan, knocking the wind from his lungs. Kneeling on Alan's arms, he pinned them to the soft, strange ground, then increased the pressure of his grip on Alan's neck.

Alan struggled frantically beneath Tanner, but he could not break his strangling hold. In spite of Tanner's age, he was incredibly strong, and Alan felt his pulse thundering in his head. Pressure built behind his eyes. He knew he was dying; Tanner was succeeding. But there seemed to be nothing Alan could do about the situation.

Suddenly, as if struck by a bolt of mental lightning, Alan knew a way out. He knew how he could escape Tanner. It had worked before, when the corrosive fog had threatened his host body. But could it work now? Before, it had been automatic, more a conditioned reflex than a conscious effort. Could he possibly control it precisely enough now?

Yes, he decided. He had controlled it well enough to return to this dimension after finishing the transformation of his host body. All he had to do, he told himself, was force the pain from his thoughts, and concentrate totally on this new-found process of world building.

That, however, proved harder than he thought it would. Tanner's grip increased in strength. And Alan's body continued to struggle almost instinctively—in spite of his attempts to still it—distracting his mind, keeping it from focusing on the one thing that could save him.

But he knew it had to be done, no matter how difficult. He would have to go against all that was natural to him. He would have to cease his frantic thrashing and rely on a totally alien defense.

With great difficulty, Alan stopped his struggles. Calming his mind, he concentrated his thoughts on the task at hand.

What he wanted was a world without Tanner's hands clutching at his throat, and the easiest way to produce such a world was to build one in which Tanner simply did not exist.

But he couldn't just *wish* Tanner away. That wouldn't work. What he had to do was concentrate on the individual elements that made up the world around him, changing a few just enough so that the total effect was a completely different world, a world altogether incompatible with the man, Ralf Tanner.

He started with the air, adding methane where before there had been none—not enough to be harmful to either himself or Tanner, but just enough to make a certain fungus growing on the soil beneath him unable to exist. In response, he observed a slight change in Tanner's hair, a slight discoloration to its usually brilliant white. But the alteration was not enough. The grip Tanner had on Alan's throat did not relax in the least.

Next, Alan played with the strange ground itself. He removed a moderately complex protein chain from its composition and watched it change color in response: from dark brown to a more bleached shade. And Tanner's grip relaxed. Almost imperceptibly, and certainly not enough for Alan to break free, but it did relax, and Alan took a few short gasps of breath.

But he did not have much time left. His tortured lungs burned and he knew if he couldn't do something very soon he would die. He decided on a more obvious change, something on a grander scale and much more dramatic. But with this he would have to proceed with a bit more caution, and keep a close watch on his host body. He did not, after all, wish to alter it.

Alan reached out with his mind and tampered with the very stars in the heavens above.

His plan was this: to change the basic chemistries of the stars—and, thus, their radiation—just enough so that they would no longer favorably affect the life cycle of a small grub inhabiting the strange soil of this dimension. This grub was the larval stage of an insect responsible for fixing magnesium in the soil. And the magnesium was important in keeping certain bacteria in check. With the magnesium no longer present, the bacteria multiplied beyond all imagining. It was a bacteria highly harmful to human proteins, but only incidentally so. Until now, a human had never been present in this dimension. Be that as it may, here, in this new dimension, Tanner had died within minutes after arriving. Alan's flesh, however, contained no human proteins, and the bacteria would not harm him.

Without a sound, Tanner vanished. *Here*, he had ceased to exist short minutes after having arrived.

Alan climbed slowly to his feet and rubbed his throat, massaging feeling back into it. He could actually feel the indentations of Tanner's fingers on his neck.

*Now what?* he wondered. He was finally free of Tanner's grasp, but that didn't really help him much. He could go back to that dimension, hoping to somehow turn the tables on Tanner, but Tanner wouldn't be there by the time he arrived. Why should he be, when he could jump and be waiting in ambush for Alan anywhere along his world-altering route back to Earth Prime. Somewhere along the way Alan had to create a world with Tanner in it. He simply did not have the time for the attention to detail necessary to keep Tanner out.

*So*, he reasoned, *I must now take direct action*. The old adage that the best defense was a strong offense may have been horribly trite after so many years of continuous use, but in this case it certainly did apply.

But how could he follow Tanner through the dimensions? How could he possibly know the physical characteristics of the worlds through which the other ran?

Suddenly, instinctively, Alan knew where he could find Tanner. Tanner was, after all, Alan's counterpart from another dimension. He was Alan. And he thought enough like Alan for Alan to be sure he could predict what Tanner would do next.

Tanner was confused, hurt, in mortal fear of losing his life. There was only one place he could hide.

Taking a deep breath, Alan set about to create a world which included Ralf Tanner, but in a role with far less advantage than before. A world where Alan could exist on at least an even footing with his other self.

Carefully, Alan twisted the fabric of reality, making a minor change here, a slightly less minor change there. Slowly, the world he wanted began to take shape around him.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

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The grass was cool beneath his bare feet as he strode up the low hill. The smell of buttered popcorn mingled with the scent of freshly mowed grass, making heavy the hot summer air. In the distance, nearly inaudible, the tinny music of the merry-go-round played. He had heard it so many times in his dreams: mechanical, yet somehow magical.

On impulse, he turned and looked back down the hill. For an instant he thought he saw two figures, one large and one small, walking together down the hill the way he had just come. Phantoms. Fuzzy, indistinct apparitions. But then they vanished, before Alan was even sure he had seen them.

*Some strange by-product of this world building process, he thought, turning and continuing on up the hill. Shadows of myself as I entered this dimension.*

Anticipation grew in his chest as he neared the crest of the hill, burning there like an expectant flame. He knew he would find Tanner at the top of the hill, on the merry-go-round. And, as irrational as he knew it was, he feared finding the other here, in *his* park, riding *his* merry-go-round. Yet, at the same time, he was looking forward to facing him once and for all in an environment where he would be at least Tanner's equal. Here, in this park, on the merry-go-round, he would finally be able to match wits with Tanner with some promise of success.

Suddenly, there it was: the merry-go-round stood before him, huge and bright. His merry-go-round. The brilliantly painted ponies and carts, almost garish in the mid-day sun. The assorted dragons and other riding beasts. All traveling in a circle, going round and round—always seeming to go somewhere, yet always returning to the exact same spot.

A metaphor for his own mind, Alan suddenly realized. And for Tanner's as well.

Tanner was there on the merry-go-round, as Alan had known he would be. The other leaned against a large green and red dragon, his too-white hair shining in the sunlight, gazing fixedly out toward Alan. But he did not look exactly at Alan. His gaze was a bit off, centered somewhere beyond its intended mark, as it had always been since the first time Alan had seen him at the Foundation's New Year's party. Then he flashed past, the merry-go-round sweeping him from Alan's sight.

*How long has it been?* Alan wondered as he approached the merry-go-round. *How long since that party and my first encounter with Tanner?* It had certainly been less than a year, another New Year had not yet arrived. Yet it did seem so very long ago.

And this assignment? How long had *it* lasted so far? Alan was not sure. His usually very accurate time-sense was somehow no longer operative. It seemed like years



since that pre-scan briefing when he had first heard of the theft of the mysterious clone. It seemed as if he had been chasing its thieves through the countless dimensions for years now. But, of course, that wasn't right. It *couldn't* be. Certainly no more than four or five days had elapsed since Alan had first stepped into his scan booth to start this jag.

He thought it all through again, and was finally able to convince himself that he had been on the scan just over four days. But he still could not pin it down more precisely than that. Somehow, it seemed like a much longer period of time had elapsed. And he was sure this inexplicable loss of his time-sense was in some way connected with his new host body.

Suddenly, Alan was aware that the clone was nowhere in sight. The gray cabinet of the stasis field generator stood alone a few feet from the spinning merry-go-round. It was no longer operating; the field's eerie blue glow was gone.

Alan watched the gaily painted amusement park ride closely as it went around and around, scanning the ponies and carts and improbable beasts as they flashed by for a quick glimpse of the youth. But the clone was not there.

Alan put out a hand and swung himself on to the opposite side from Tanner. The other was not visible from where Alan stood. He was hidden from Alan's view by the center structure which housed the merry-go-round's music-generating machinery.

Trying to make as little noise as possible, Alan began working his way around the circle of the merry-go-round, weaving slowly in and out between the garishly painted figures. But his progress was slowed even more than he had planned. In places he was forced to go back and find an alternate route through the rank of figures; his host body was nearly too large to squeeze between some of them.

Finally, he saw Tanner, leaning against the haunch of a dragon a quarter of the way around the merry-go-round from where Alan stood, his back to Alan. Certainly he knew Alan was on the ride now. Certainly he was aware Alan was approaching him from behind. Yet he did not turn to face Alan.

Alan continued to work his way toward Tanner. Within a minute he stood only a few feet behind the other.

"Back so soon?" Tanner said, still not turning around. There was not hate in his voice, as Alan had thought there would be. Tanner's voice was merely heavy with exhaustion.

"You've been expecting me?" Alan asked, brushing aside Tanner's odd phrasing. "How did you know I was coming? How could you be sure I'd find you?"

Tanner laughed, a short, humorless exhalation. But still he would not face Alan.

"This is my place," he said after only a moment's silence, "my personal, secret world. No one else can share it. No one but you. It's your place, too. After all, in a sense you are me and I am you. In everything that counts, we are the same. Basically, we are the same person."

"No!" Alan screamed, his mind flooding with sudden horror and terror. He knew this other was, for all intents and purposes, himself. Yet, he still could not face that truth. That was why he had found it so much easier to think of this other as Tanner, even after he had known it to be true.

Alan's hand came down hard, smashing like a huge, gray sledge-hammer into the brightly painted pony which stood to his left. The wooden body crumbled beneath his fierce blow. Its steel-reinforced legs sagged. And Tanner finally turned to face him.

"Oh, but we are," Tanner said, his voice flat, emotionless. A smile spread slowly across his face. Still he did not look directly at Alan. He stared beyond him, with the gaze of the blind.

"How can you possibly say that?" Alan said. "I know that you are my counterpart, that you are me as I might have been. But you are so very different." Alan knew he must believe in that difference if he was to retain his sanity. He had to.

"Am I? Am I really so different from you? You followed me here to kill me. You can't deny that. How does that make you any better than me?"

For an instant, Alan was silent. He could not answer the other's question. What could he say? Tanner was right, he knew that. He had followed Tanner here to kill him.

"But if I don't kill you," Alan finally said, "you will kill me. You started this whole thing—you and your Rodgers, and your Robin, and your computer. Anything I do will simply be in self defense."

"And that's why I have to kill you," Tanner replied. "Because you will do something now. You have to. In a way, this was all pre-ordained from the beginning. Our computer merely picked up on the pattern."

"Are you trying to say that I started all this?" Alan asked.

"In a strange, twisted sense, yes. I guess you did."

"Now wait a minute, that's not right. If you hadn't come after me first, I would never have been a threat to you."

"But you are, don't you see. Right now you're a threat to not just my continued existence, but to that of my entire world. And the computer in my world saw the inevitability of this here, of this now."

Alan shook his head. "I don't understand," he said.

"I don't think I understand all of it, either. Granted, the only person that tampering in this world could possibly affect is us, because this is our world and ours alone. It exists only in our minds—or did until we gave it substance only a few minutes ago. But you would have followed me back to my own world if you would have had to. In fact, you will eventually have to go there. Rodgers won't let it stop here. He'll hound you with other agents, until you are either dead or are driven to kill him. The computer saw that. And it does not know what time is. It deals only in probabilities."

Alan sighed, a long, hollow sound of despair. "Undoubtedly, then, I will have to hunt Rodgers out," he said. "But, again it will be in self defense."

"Call it what you will. It's the same thing you are condemning us for. The computer predicted you would eventually expand into our dimension, bringing your sphere of influence closer to home, as it were. Your home, that is. Even now you're beginning to see the benefits."

To Alan's surprise, Tanner was absolutely right. Alan could already see many benefits to tampering in worlds adjacent to his own Earth Prime. If the Foundation could control the effects closely enough—if they could somehow predict the results of their tampering, as Tanner's Foundation could—then they could conceivably create a world totally without suffering or strife. With the proper safeguards, they could create a literal paradise.

Alan forced his mind away from that line of reasoning. Its very existence in his thoughts horrified him. It was all too easy to think that way, to rationalize the deliberate tampering in worlds so close to his own. When word finally got back to Alan's Foundation in Earth Prime about Tanner, Rodgers, that other Robin, in fact, that entire other Foundation, would Alan's Foundation opt for the sane, rational course of action—that of no action at all? Would they leave dimensions adjacent to their own alone, except in cases of self defense? Or would they give in to the overwhelming temptation to reprogram their computers to predict the results of selected interference in those adjacent dimensions?

Alan hoped for the former. But he feared the later.

"You see," Tanner was saying, "I can almost read your mind. After all, it's almost my mind." He smiled sadly.

"Yes," Alan said resignedly, "I see what you're trying to say. But what does that change between us? As I see it, we remain at a stalemate."

"You're right," Tanner said. "I'm afraid it really doesn't change a thing. I still have to kill you, and you have to try to do the same to me. One of us simply won't leave this strange little world of our own making alive."

Alan nodded his agreement. Physically, Tanner was strong, Alan knew that; he had felt the other's strength only a little while ago, in that other dimension. But Alan was strong too. With his new body, he reasoned, he probably had the edge. He felt his strength growing even as he stood talking to Tanner. The only reason Tanner had been able to best him before was because Alan had been unused to his new body, unable to control its strength as he felt he now could. A contest between them now would have an entirely different outcome.

And, in a way, Alan felt, it was a shame. As much as he had been trying to avoid it, he found he was beginning to like Tanner. *After all*, he thought, *why shouldn't I like him?* With only a few minor changes, this other was Alan himself. The body wasn't his, but then neither was the one Alan now wore. Where it really mattered, they were basically the same person. Just as Tanner had said, mentally there was more than one Alan.

But, of course, it had to be done. Somehow, Alan had to kill Tanner. He knew that. There was no way around it, absolutely nothing could be done to alter the circumstances. If he didn't succeed, if for some reason he couldn't kill Tanner, Tanner would surely kill him.

"I guess there isn't really a thing we can do about this whole mess," Tanner finally said. "I'm going to try to kill you now. Be ready to defend yourself." He said it very matter-of-factly. But in the advance warning, Alan saw Tanner's like for him as well.

Alan knew Tanner was going to attack a fraction of a second before it actually happened. He could not understand how he knew exactly when it was coming, he simply knew. And it was that knowledge which saved him.

Using the stout metal pole supporting one of the merry-go-round's ponies as a pivot point, Tanner brought both his legs up and out in a quick movement, kicking for Alan's face. Alan ducked his head just a few inches to one side, then struck out at Tanner's legs with a vicious left-handed karate chop. He felt bone give beneath the blow, and Tanner screamed with pain.

Going with Alan's blow, Tanner rolled off the merry-go-round, tumbling in the dust. Immediately he sprang to his feet, and winced with the pain. He hobbled a few steps backward, favoring his twisted leg, then faced Alan in brooding silence.

Alan stepped off the merry-go-round and stood before Tanner. Planting his balled fists on his hips, he looked down on the other man from the advantage of nearly seven feet.

"Make this easy on both of us," Alan said. "Let me get it over with fast. Please."

And he meant it, Alan did not want this to last long. He did not wish to hurt Tanner any more than was absolutely necessary, but he knew he had to kill him. If he didn't, if he just left now and returned to Earth Prime, Tanner would follow him and kill him. Somehow, Alan's death was necessary for the continued existence of both Tanner and the world in which he lived. Tanner had tried to tell him how, but Alan wasn't quite sure he understood.

Tanner smiled. Then he spat into the dirt at Alan's feet.

"No, I won't make this easy for you," Tanner said. "If you want my life, you'll have to work for it. I'm not going to just hand it to you on a silver platter, like so much chopped liver. And who knows, I might get lucky. You're stronger than I am, I'm aware of that. But I know how you think. I know what you will do in response to any action by me.

Alan nodded. "But the same is true for me," he said. "I can predict pretty well what you will do."

"Sure. But like I said, you're stronger, and I'm depending on that to work in my favor. Being physically more able, perhaps you won't rely on your instincts as much as I will be forced to. Remember, I have absolutely nothing to lose here."

With that, Tanner threw himself at Alan.

Suddenly, it was as if Tanner was moving in slow motion. Alan saw him coming, arms outstretched and reaching for his throat, and he should have had plenty of time to react, enough time to jump to one side or the other, removing himself from the other's path of attack. But he didn't. Somehow, he couldn't. He just stood there, his huge bare feet seemingly riveted to the ground, his large hands hanging uselessly at his sides, as Tanner's hands came up and encircled his neck.

Alan's wind was cut off by the other's grip. He struggled for breath, but could get none; Tanner's hands were amazingly powerful. And still Alan could not move to defend himself. It was as if Tanner's gaze held him, as if the knowledge that Tanner was in fact himself somehow sapped him of all his strength and prevented him from moving.

"It's just as well it stops here," Tanner gasped through clenched teeth as he squeezed Alan's windpipe shut. "You'd never be able to beat Rodgers. Mentally, he's too strong; his abilities are just too great for you."

Suddenly, with Tanner's admission of weakness relative to Rodgers' powers, something snapped in Alan's mind and he *could* move. His arms went up, inside Tanner's, breaking the other's grasp on his throat, and Tanner flew back, off balance.

An expression of horror replaced the one of confidence on Tanner's face. He knew now, in one sharp, vivid instant, that he was beaten. Here, in *this* world, this metaphor made physical, the slightest admission of weakness could be fatal. And through such an admission, Tanner had just lost his advantage.

While Tanner tried to recover, Alan quickly brought his hands together, locking his fingers and forming a huge, gray club with his joined fists. He took a short step toward Tanner. Bringing his hands up from below in an awkward upper-cut, he slammed them hard into the other's jaw. Blood flew in all directions, and Alan felt Tanner's jaw bone snap.

Tanner staggered backward, a look of stunned shock transfixing his features. His jaw hung slack and twisted to one side. He spit blood and tooth fragments into the dust at Alan's feet.

Gazing into Tanner's eyes, Alan saw for the first time a look of pleading. He wanted Alan to finish him; he knew he was done. He had tried, but he had failed.

*It's time for this to end*, Alan thought, feeling sudden pity for the other.

Again he stepped up to Tanner. Looking Tanner in the eyes, he said, "I know. But it will be over very soon now. Don't worry." Then, with his features set in an expression of grim determination, he brought his hands around with all his strength, driving them into the side of Tanner's head in the area of his temple.

The other went down like a sack of wet cement. For a few brief seconds, his arms and legs twitched convulsively and his entire body quivered almost imperceptibly. Then he was still.

Tanner was finally dead.

Wordlessly, Alan turned from the body and walked away.

Almost objectively, he noted that the mechanical music was no longer playing. Sometime during the fight it had ceased, unnoticed until now. And Alan did not have to turn to know that the ride itself had stopped as well. The brightly painted ponies and dragons were forever stilled; Alan knew that, he *felt* it. And he also knew he would never come here again. There was no longer anything for him here.

As he walked back down the grassy slope of the hill, Alan reached out with his mind and twisted the fabric of reality, changing the shape of the world around him.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

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The alterations necessary were massive, a complete restructuring of the physical reality within Alan's sphere of influence. His task was to change the simple world around him—the almost stereotypical fantasy land of grassy park and merry-go-round—into a world containing a specific office, the template of which existed in his mind. But what he wanted was not the office of Frank *Rogers*, he told himself, not that of his own boss in his own Earth Prime. The reality he was building now was slightly altered from his own world, subtly different from the Earth Prime he knew. It contained the office of a man who spelled his name differently. He was trying to re-create, as he had seen it only once before, an office with the exact physical characteristics of a Frank Rogers who spelled his name with a *d*.

Alan stretched his hands out before him as he made the changes, imagining the black man's form before his gaze. Then he carefully constructed four walls around him, building a room of just the right dimensions, and replaced the grass with light blue carpet. Long before anything became visible between his hands, he *felt* something in their strong grip.

This, he reasoned, was the only way he could best this strangely altered Frank Rodgers, the only way he might beat him. If Rodgers was really as powerful as Tanner had said, Alan would have to have him firmly in his grasp before the other had a chance to react. Alan knew he would have to take every advantage he could possibly gain; in his present position of complete ignorance of the other's abilities, he could not afford to act otherwise.

Soon, the object he found himself squeezing became visually substantial. At first its outlines were fuzzy, but they became steadily clearer with each world change he generated. It was a man's neck he held between his fingers, discolored by the pressure he was applying and corded with straining muscles.

And still Alan continued to make alterations, refining the world around him, tampering with the color of the carpet and the quality of the lighting until they were just right. He placed a four-point elk rack on the wall, then filled the room with mahogany furniture. Within minutes, the black man's body was completely substantial before him.

But this was not the man Alan wanted; this was not Frank Rodgers. Not yet. He had a few of Rodgers' characteristics—his chocolate-brown skin, his bald head and massive frame. But there were other characteristics that were not quite right. His mouth was too thin-lipped. His nose was much too large and his skin color was several shades too light.

Again Alan twisted the structure of the world around him, changing only slightly the shape of the elk rack on the wall. And the face of the man in his grasp changed too.

His lips thickened and his nose became smaller. But his skin color was still not right. And the emotion in his eyes was all wrong; the fear Alan saw on the other's face would never be permitted to show on Rodgers' own.

The other's breathing rasped harsh and loud in Alan's ears. Alan wanted to increase the pressure his hands were applying to the other's neck, but he forced himself to wait. This other was *a* Rodgers, true enough, but not the Rodgers he wanted. If he did it too soon, if he squeezed the life from this other before he became the right Frank Rodgers, it would do no good. Rodgers would only escape, and Alan would have killed a poor and perhaps innocent facsimile.

Another alteration—a slight change in the style of the furniture, making it a bit more ornate—and there he was, Frank Rodgers.

In spite of the totally different appearance of Alan's new body, Rodgers obviously recognized him. He stared up at Alan with a hate and fanaticism far beyond anything Alan had ever experienced. There was absolutely no doubt in Alan's mind: this was the Frank Rodgers he sought.

"So," Rodgers said, "you've come for me now." His voice was little more than a hoarse whisper as Alan continued to squeeze his windpipe. "It won't do you any good. You can't hold me here." With that, Rodgers' features altered, losing their doughy appearance and becoming slightly coarse.

The change took Alan by surprise. Rodgers, the Rodgers he wanted, was no longer present. In his place, his throat pinned between Alan's strong fingers, was one of Rodgers' innumerable counterparts. A man close to the Frank Rodgers who had been in Alan's grasp only a second before, yet not quite him at all.

Alan loosened his grip slightly, but kept his hands on the other's neck. He was confused. How could he possibly track Rodgers through the dimensions? This other was too skilled at the world changing process that Alan had learned only a short while ago. Alan could change the world around him at random, and hope to stumble across Rodgers by chance in one of the realities he created. But it would be simply blind luck if he found the other that way; the odds against it were nearly astronomical.

Then how could he possibly hope to....

"Need some help?" said a low, rumbling voice from behind him.

Alan let go his hold on the black man's neck, and the altered Rodgers cowered away from him, then jumped to his feet and ran from the room.

Alan turned toward the voice. A gray-skinned man strode from the small room at the rear of Rodgers' office. His body was huge and lumpish, dressed in a scarlet jumpsuit several sizes too small. His face was angular and unfinished.



This other wore a body identical to Alan's own host body.

Confused, not knowing quite what to do or how he should react, Alan turned and started for the office door. In his befuddled state of mind, he reasoned he should go after the fleeing black man, bring him back under his control. He was almost to the office door's pellicle membrane when the other spoke again.

"Let him go."

"But..." Again Alan turned to face the other. Aside from the fact that Alan was not clothed, it was just like looking into a mirror.

"We don't need him any more," the other said. "He's not the Rodgers we want."

"I know. But I must..."

"No." The other shook his head sternly. It was as if he could actually read Alan's thoughts. "Look, I'm here to help you. Just take it easy and together we can track Rodgers. There's a way. He can't escape the both of us."

"But who..."

Again, Alan did not get a chance to ask his question; the other answered it before Alan could ask.

"You'll know who I am when the time is right. Meanwhile, we have a job to do."

Before Alan could formulate another question, he felt something slip into his head and touch his mind. Instantly, he knew it was this other's mind, and it felt somehow very pleasant, like soft warm fur being pulled up around his own mind. But, in spite of the fact that Alan knew it was the other's mind, he could not read the other's thoughts.

Suddenly, he saw it before him—not with his eyes, but with a sense belonging to the very tissue that made up his new body, a mental sight which fed directly into his mind. What he saw was Rodgers' path through the dimensions, a glowing crimson ribbon stretching and winding simultaneously through both the complex fabric of the multiverse and the equally complex mental fabric of his own mind. To catch Rodgers, he knew, he would have to follow this glowing band which marked the other's passage through deviant realities. He would have to follow the red ribbon that was the connection between the string of similarities in the dimensions through which Rodgers had passed.

Alan turned from the mysterious, gray-skinned other, stretched out his hands before him, and began to change the world.

The walls of the room vanished. Alan stood outside, beneath the brilliant stars. Slowly, he began playing with the patterns of the constellations, shifting them about in the night sky.

As he made these changes, he kept the glowing ribbon continually before his mind's eye. And it guided him in his changes. Slowly, Rodgers began to materialize in his grasp, his throat gradually becoming substantial between Alan's fingers.

He changed the stars again and again, thinning them out, gradually diminishing their numbers. And each time Rodgers' features refined, becoming slightly more like what they should be.

Another alteration, and the stars disappeared entirely. The sky became suddenly filled with fire. The air was heavy and hot, scorching Alan's bare skin and searing his lungs as he breathed it in. In spots, the very ground on which he stood hissed and vented steam. Off to his right, in the distance, he thought he saw a large pool of molten lava, glowing dim red. But he could not be sure. It could be a pool of some other liquid, reflecting the red color of the sky. Certainly not water; it was far too hot here for water to exist in any state other than vapor.

Suddenly, Alan knew what was wrong. The sun now shining down on him was no longer a life-giving class G star. Here, in this altered world, it was a huge, red super giant, much cooler than the Sol Alan knew. And here the planet was much closer to the star's surface, because of the giant's bloated condition.

Rodgers was leading him a wild chase indeed, jumping through dimensions close to uninhabitable, hoping to lose Alan and that mysterious other, attempting to discourage them from following, or at least break Alan's strangle hold.

Alan looked into the eyes of the man he was strangling. And there Rodgers was, just as Alan had hoped he would be. His thick-lipped mouth. His nose just slightly too small for his wide face. His dark brown skin—nearly black. This was the Rodgers Alan wanted.

Trying to hold the universe around him as it now was, attempting to freeze it, as if it were in stasis, Alan gathered the last dregs of his strength and increased the pressure of his grip on the black man's throat. But it was no good. Rodgers' features shifted slightly, again making him a Rodgers other than the one Alan was after. And Alan was again forced to relax his grip.

Again Alan made a change in his surroundings. Keeping the bright crimson ribbon of Rodgers' flight centered in his mind, he increased the air temperature around him another twenty-eight degrees Fahrenheit. Instantly the planet he inhabited jumped several thousand miles closer to its bloated primary. It now orbited at the very edge of the star's tenuous, gaseous envelope. The ground became suddenly hot enough to blister the tough soles of his feet.

And Rodgers was again in his grasp.

Once again Alan squeezed the other's throat, bearing down with all his remaining strength. And yet again the black man changed, his nose becoming suddenly larger, and Alan had to let up.

"This isn't working," Alan said in frustration to the man behind him, the grey-skinned carbon copy of himself.

And it wasn't. Alan could just barely keep up with Rodgers as he jumped frantically through the alternate universes. But at this rate he could never hope to hold him. If Alan was to win, if he was to kill Rodgers as he knew he must, he would somehow have to stop his flight through the dimensions, somehow pin his mind definitely in one single world.

"Don't worry," the other one said. "Everything will work out."

"But how?" Alan asked.

The other did not respond, he only smiled, and Alan was left with the dilemma. He knew that each time he had Rodgers, each time it was actually Rodgers' neck in his grasp and not another's, Rodgers would simply make a change of his own, shifting to another dimension and leaving Alan strangling a poor facsimile. How, he wondered, could he possibly get around this?

Alan had no time for such thoughts right now. Every instant he postponed action was an instant Rodgers had to flee farther into the dimensions.

Making another finely calculated alteration, Alan placed the planet within the star's tenuous gas envelope. Again, the change produced Rodgers. And that man's response was almost instantaneous; he shifted himself away again, and Alan was allowed absolutely no time in which to react.

Again Alan wondered how he was ever to catch Rodgers if Rodgers was permitted the freedom to alter the world around him. Either Alan would do something to limit Rodgers' dimension-hopping movements soon, or he would have to give up the chase entirely. In his haste to shake Alan, Rodgers was creating worlds where the planet was increasingly near the heart of its super giant primary, forcing Alan to do the same in order to remain within reach. It would be only a matter of time before the air around them burst into flame. If Alan didn't abandon the chase soon, he, Rodgers and the mysterious gray-skinned stranger would all be dead. He had to do something—now. But what?

Sudden movement to his left caught Alan's attention. He turned his head to follow it.

Striding toward him across the hot, steaming ground came the clone. But the boy did not seem to notice the searing heat filling the world around him. In fact, he didn't seem to notice anything. It was as if he were in a trance. His long golden hair streaming out behind him as if being blown by an unfelt breeze, his face looking cool and somewhat confident, he drilled Alan with a gaze neither benign nor malevolent, but strong and steady nonetheless.

"What...?" Alan started.

"Don't get excited," said the gray-skinned man behind him. His voice was calm, somehow reassuring. "There's nothing to be afraid of. He's one of us. He's here to help." And again it was as if this stranger knew precisely what Alan was thinking.

When the boy was near enough, he stretched out a hand, lightly touching the back of Alan's hand where it clutched the throat of a man somewhat like Rodgers, yet still not quite like him. Alan felt a slight tingle, like a low voltage electrical current.

Suddenly, the boy's *mind* reached out and entered Alan's head, joining the two minds already there—Alan's own and that of his gray-skinned duplicate standing close behind him. In a reflexive response, Alan's mind recoiled, as if slapped by a searing brand, and he nearly released his hold on the other man's neck. But with a conscious effort, he maintained his strangle hold.

There was something strange about this youth's mind. Something entirely too familiar.

Again the boy's mind touched Alan's, and again he felt the sense of familiarity.

Suddenly, inexplicably, Alan knew the origins of the faceless form that had continually haunted his thoughts since his arrival in that strange sadomasochistic dimension. That frightening image had been generated within the mind of this clone, and projected into Alan's own mind.

And now he knew what the faceless form was; the figure was faceless no longer. His mind could finally handle the information that had actually been available for quite some time. He could finally grasp the truth without going completely insane. Now his subconscious supplied a face where before there had been none, affixing it to the featureless head of the faceless man.

The face that the enigmatic form now wore was the same lumpish, gray mask Alan had created only a short time ago for his new host body. The face of the faceless form was Alan's own!

And, Alan suddenly realized with shocked horror, the face also belonged to the gray-skinned stranger behind him! But how could that possibly be? Unless....

He could not finish the thought. It was just too incredible.

A sudden confidence flooded Alan's thoughts, filling him with a sense of knowing precisely what he was doing. This was not the same type of confidence he was familiar with, the knowledge that he knew his job as a scanner and could handle anything it became necessary for him to handle during an assignment. No, this was something else entirely, something far more basic to who and what he had become within a few short hours since he had begun this scan. It was a primeval certainty that all was right, not just in this world, but in every dimension comprising the multiverse. And, somehow, Alan knew that it came from the union of the three minds now occupying his host body—his own mind, that of his hulking duplicate, and the mind of the clone.

Alan let go of the other man's throat. He straightened, took a backward step. The ground beneath his feet felt strangely cool now, but he knew it was still extremely hot; steam continued to rise from pockmarks and bulges scattered over its surface. Still, it no longer burned him. Somehow, his mind and those of the other two who shared his host body held the heat at bay, building a barrier of thought that effectively prevented him from being harmed.

Intently, Alan watched the frightened black man lying on the ground in the center of the triangle formed by himself, the other large gray man, and the youth. Alan reached out with his mind, twisted the fabric of the world around him. The temperature jumped yet again.

The black man looked up, stared questioningly into Alan's eyes. He lifted a hand to his neck and massaged a red area where Alan had been squeezing with such controlled strength.

At that instant, the man changed. Suddenly he became Rodgers.

Rodgers' eyes widened with horror as he looked from Alan to the clone, to the other hulking figure, then back to Alan again. But in an instant the fear disappeared from his gaze. Rodgers' face became suddenly set in a grim mask of determination.

And once again the world began to shift frantically around them.

First, the air and the ground cooled. Initially the change was nearly imperceptible, but soon the cooling became much more pronounced. Still Rodgers remained stretched out on the ground. And still he remained Rodgers.

As the temperature fell, Alan suddenly knew what was happening. Rodgers was backtracking now, making changes to bring the planet out of the star's envelope of gas. He had finally reached his limit, and he was now jumping the other way.

But now there was a difference. Now he could not shake Alan. Somehow, the three minds massed against him were enough to keep a mental leash on Rodgers. How

this link was accomplished, Alan did not know. And it really didn't matter. It was enough to know that it was simply so.

Again fear filled Rodgers' eyes as he realized that he could shake neither Alan nor the clone nor Alan's duplicate. They were staying with him now, tethered to him by a strange mental force as he jumped through the dimensions.

Quickly, the sky shifted colors, going from red through blue, to dark green. Just as quickly, the whole world shifted around them. In rapid succession, it became a desert, a jungle, a swamp, an ice field, then again a desert. But still Rodgers remained the same.

"Nooo..." Rodgers cried, his scream lost in the wail of a sudden sand storm. He raised his arms, threw them up across his eyes, shielding them from blowing sand as well as protecting them from the fearful vision of Alan, the clone, and that still more enigmatic other.

A sudden jump in temperature and a shift of the sky to red: the sun was again a too-near super giant.

It was happening again. Rodgers was again moving the planet toward the star. But now there was no more of his previous caution. Now, he was running blind, trying to shake the three who chased him in any way possible, at any cost. He ran wild, scurrying through the dimensions like a frightened animal, his eyes wide with a fear that he wore like an almost physical mantle.

And the three followed, staying with him, matching him change for change and world for world. The air and ground were again hot. But, where Rodgers panted and wheezed, obviously breathing the searing air with great difficulty, the other three had no trouble breathing it at all. They were hardly aware of the heat; they were protected both by the strange strength of their bodies and the equally strange abilities of their minds.

As the four men jumped in unison from world to world, through dimensions where the planet on which they existed became progressively nearer and nearer to the star's surface, and then deeper within it, the increased heat began to show on Rodgers' body. His skin gradually reddened and blistered. Eventually, the blisters burst, releasing their precious life-sustaining fluids. His body fluids quickly evaporated into the air and his skin dried, stretched, becoming like parchment and pulling tight over his bones, then finally cracking. Rivulets of crimson blood were released from the profusion of small rents in his skin, streaking the exposed areas of his dehydrated body and soaking his silver jumpsuit. Almost instantly, all moisture was sucked from the blood by the dry, hot air, and it became a series of rust-colored stains on his body and jumpsuit.

And still Rodgers continued to jump through the dimensions. Still he threw the planet deeper and deeper into its parent star.

Soon, the very atmosphere of the planet burst into flame. Alan, his duplicate and the clone were protected from the fire by a bubble of strange energy produced subconsciously within their minds. But Rodgers was not so protected. His body quickly burst into flame, his blood and other bodily juices visibly boiling away. With a horrible scream of agony—a long, ragged howl, more the wail of a dying beast than that of a man—Rodgers arched his back in one, two, three monstrous convulsions. Then he lay still on the ground, his burning body just visible through the red, flaming air. A smudge of black, oily smoke roiled up into the hot red sky.

And in that instant Alan knew that Rodgers had finally died.

Alan stood unmoving for almost a full minute, watching Rodgers' burning body. He was stunned, shocked nearly into catatonia by the rush of events over the past few days, dazed by the chase and by the gruesome way in which Rodgers had finally died. He forced himself to remember who Rodgers really had been. And he forced himself to remember who Tanner had been as well.

He turned to the clone. The boy's face was just visible through the glowing red of the burning air. His eyes still held no emotion. And, in spite of his physical appearance, Alan knew this youth was a tool and nothing more.

But not so the other, the strange gray-skinned man clothed in the tight-fitting red jumpsuit. His hard, cold eyes shone with confidence as he smiled crookedly at Alan—just as Alan imagined his own smile might look. And finally, that other spoke.

"It's done," he said to Alan. "Now, the boy and I must go. I have one hell of a lot of sleep to catch up on. And you still have much to do."

With that, both he and the clone vanished.

Suddenly, standing alone in the burning air of a planet within its own primary, watching the remains of Frank Rodgers' body being consumed by flames, Alan knew who both the gray-skinned stranger and the clone were. And the stranger had been right; Alan still did have so very much to do.

He knew now, for the first time since the start of this assignment, exactly where he was going and what had to be done.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

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This time, Alan knew, it would be considerably easier. This time he knew *exactly* what he wanted. He knew precisely the right shade of green for the grass, the correct scent of popcorn in the air, the garish colors of each pony and dragon on the merry-go-round. Stored in his memory was the precise spot on the spinning ride where Tanner should be standing, even down to the subtle nuances in the other's very stance.

In concept, what he was attempting seemed impossible. Yet, Alan's new body knew precisely what to do. If he did everything just right, if he made no mistakes, it would work.

In one final world change Alan placed the clone a short distance from the ride, right where he knew it should be, then enveloped it in the eerie blue haze of its confining stasis field.

And, suddenly, he was there, in the world he had inhabited only a few short minutes before. Somehow—Alan was not quite sure how—he had traveled backward in time.

"I thought you might follow," Tanner said, gazing blindly to Alan's left and out beyond him from the merry-go-round. "But I expected something a bit more subtle than this. Is this really the best you could do?" There was icy confidence in Tanner's expression.

Alan ignored the other's jibe and strode determinedly to the large gray box of the stasis field generator. Tanner meant nothing to him now. Where before Tanner had been a threat, frightening Alan, now he constituted little more than an annoyance. Although Tanner did not know it, he was soon to die.

"Wait!" Tanner called from the ride. He stepped off the merry-go-round and bounded the few steps to Alan's side. Reaching out, he took Alan by the shoulder and spun him around.

Alan found himself staring into the other's clouded, unseeing eyes.

"Just what the hell do you think you're doing?" Tanner demanded.

Not even bothering to answer, Alan threw out his arm, catching Tanner in the chest and casting him aside. Tanner tumbled in the dirt and came up hard against the stasis field generator's cabinet. He stared up at Alan, unseeing, yet with shock filling his gaze. Alan thought he heard an almost inaudible whimper issue from Tanner's parted lips.



Turning back to the squat cabinet of the stasis field generator, Alan reached out for the button that would turn the generator off, disconnecting it from its small nuclear power supply. But this time he was not being compelled to turn off the generator by the clone's hypnotic gaze. True, the clone was still attempting to work its mental magic on Alan's mind; Alan could still feel the strong pull of that other's will. But now Alan was immune to the tactic. What he did next was entirely his own action, initiated by his own will.

Alan pressed the button atop the stasis field generator.

Instantly, the field collapsed, shrinking around the boy's nude body and quickly concentrating into a small spot of intense blue light hanging in the air before the clones' eyes. Then even that vanished, and the boy moved—a mere blink of his clear blue eyes, but a movement nonetheless.

Ignoring Tanner lying in the dust at his feet, Alan turned and strode to the clone where it sat in lotus position. He reached out, took the boy's arm. The youth seemed unbelievably light as Alan lifted him to his feet. It was as if the boy's absence of thought somehow caused an equal absence of body weight.

But Alan knew that was not right. The boy weighed as much as anyone with his size and musculature would. Alan now possessed an incredibly strong body, one with power considerably out of proportion with its massive size.

The boy had spent *years* in the stasis field! That was a thought nearly too amazing for Alan to grasp. Yet, in spite of those years spent sitting in one position, he stood straight and unweaving. Alan looked into the boy's eyes, and saw absolutely nothing. No emotion. No thought.

Alan turned and started from the park, the clone following close behind. He heard Tanner calling behind him, but he did not turn.

For Alan, Tanner was already dead.

~\*~

Alan walked away from the merry-go-round, back down the grassy slope the way he had come. The clone walked slightly behind him and to his right, matching his pace step for step.

Suddenly, Alan was aware of being watched. He actually *felt* a gaze on his back, but he did not dare turn around. That other, the unseen one observing him and the clone, was Alan himself. An Alan of his past, yet of this world's future. And, before, Alan had seen neither himself nor the clone turn around.

This paradox was just too much for Alan to grasp. The thought gave him a splitting headache, and he quickly forced it from his mind. He had enough to keep his mind occupied with now; there were adjustments that had to be made in his present, so that his past might unfold as it should.

Slowly, he changed the world around him, at the same time assuring that the clone remain within his sphere of mental influence. As in his last world change, he was not only attempting to achieve a particular world, but a specific time in that world as well. Time and timing were the important elements now. Subjectively, he had plenty of time to accomplish what he knew he must. By jumping back and forth through time, he had in effect placed himself *outside* of time. Yet, his timing had to be precise; he had to leave the clone at exactly the right time, in exactly the right dimension, in order for events to work out as they should.

And the correct time could only be determined by instinct, a feeling peculiar to his new host body, residing within the very cells of its unique tissue.

The grass disappeared, to be replaced by hot, steaming earth as Alan made change after change, continually altering the world around him. The sky went quickly from cloudless blue to candent red as a huge super giant star blossomed overhead. Alan was aware of the great heat in the world around him, but he didn't actually *feel* it. Somehow, inexplicably, he was protected from its searing blast.

The clone, too, apparently did not feel the heat. The boy looked cool and untroubled. His hair streaked out behind him, as if blown by an unseen and unfelt wind.

Cautiously, taking as much time as he thought necessary, Alan brought the planet closer to its huge primary. Then, finally, the planet was actually within the star's envelope of burning gas.

Alan proceeded with extreme care now, carefully gauging the effect of each world change just prior to initiating it. He did not wish to enter this world precisely where he had been before, when he had dealt with Rodgers. He had not seen himself leading in the clone then, so he would not let the other Alan see it happen now. He would have to materialize sufficiently distant from the action to prevent himself from being observed by that other self, yet near enough to insure that the clone arrived where it was needed.

Soon, they appeared—three figures almost five hundred yards from where Alan stood. Two were huge men, like Alan himself. One of these hulking figures was clothed in a brilliant red jumpsuit several sizes too small, while the other was as nude as Alan. Alan had to remind himself that they were, in fact, himself. Both of them.

It was an eerie scene, indeed. One of the large men, the naked one, had his hands around the throat of a smaller figure, a black-skinned man. His gaze was riveted on the face of the black man he strangled. His twin, the large man dressed in the red jumpsuit, stood close behind him, looking directly at Alan.

Alan's thoughts filled with sudden horror. The red clad figure was looking in their direction, actually *seeing* him and the clone as they entered this world. This could change everything.

Instinctively, he changed the world around him, away from the one containing Rodgers, the Alan of the past, and the Alan of the future. But then he stopped and reversed the process, bringing the clone and himself back into that dimension. What did he have to fear? The one who had seen him was a self of the future, an Alan he would eventually be, not the Alan he had been only minutes before. Why shouldn't this other be permitted to observe Alan entering this dimension? What could it possibly hurt?

He made one final world change, completing the transition.

Positioning himself behind the clone, Alan took the boy by his narrow shoulders and pointed him toward the three men in the distance. Then he gave the youth a small shove, and the clone began to walk.

Waiting only until he was sure the clone would reach his destination, Alan again altered the world about him.

The world Alan constructed next was much more conventional. But still the task would be an extremely difficult one. Again, he was aiming for a specific time. And again he used his host body's strange instinct for time.

Around him, Alan built the wood-paneled walls of Rodgers' office. He carefully constructed the four-point elk rack on the wall where it belonged, and fabricated the ornate mahogany furniture. Then, when all was right, he concentrated on the rug, attempting the precise shade of blue.

Within seconds, he finished. And he was in Rodgers' office.

Luckily, the office was not occupied at the moment he appeared, as he had gambled it would not be. He could not be here before Rodgers arrived; that would alter everything, change everything beyond repair. But he knew the office would soon be bustling with activity.

Alan strode without hesitation to the pellicle door at the rear of the office, stepped through its non-discriminating membrane. The membrane parted around his body, and he stood in a small room containing a toilet, a wash basin, and a cot. The only difference between this room and the one in which he had taken a few hour's rest back in his own dimension were this room's relative cleanliness and a scarlet jumpsuit hanging from a hook above the cot.

Walking to the cot, Alan took the jumpsuit from its hook and examined it. In size, it could have belonged to the Rogers of Alan's own dimension. But the color was totally

wrong. The Frank Rogers Alan knew would never have worn such a garish color. This jumpsuit could only belong to that other Rodgers, the one who spelled his name with a *d*.

Alan put on the jumpsuit. It was a tight fit for his hulking body, but it covered his nakedness. Then he sat down heavily on the cot, its aluminum frame creaking loudly under his weight.

Taking a deep breath, Alan leaned back against the wall. It felt soothing to just sit and relax. He closed his eyes and exhaled noisily. He was more tired now than he could remember ever being—literally exhausted. So much had happened since he had begun this scan. His actions of the last few days changed not only his own life, but had irreversibly altered the lives of many others with whom he had come into contact.

But, finally, it was almost over. Now there was but one more task to accomplish. In just a few minutes, he would be finished. Then he would be able to return to his own dimension.

Alan heard sounds in the larger room beyond the pellicle door, but he did not move from the cot. Those sounds—that was Rodgers entering his office. He would sit at his desk and begin to shuffle his papers, Alan speculated, totally unaware of the Alan waiting in the small room adjoining his office or Alan's twin who would appear at any moment and begin to strangle him.

*It would be so easy,* Alan thought, *to just rush into the office and do what had to be done.* But he knew he couldn't do that; that was not how it had gone before. He would have to wait for that other Alan to arrive, and follow precisely the scenario imprinted indelibly in his memory. Any deviation—just the slightest alteration in either action or word—and everything would be forever changed.

Alan forced himself to sit quietly for several minutes, although his body cried out for action. Finally, he heard a scuffle beyond the pellicle door and knew the time was right. He got to his feet, strode to the membrane, stepped through. And again he became an actor in a small play with but two characters, both of whom were Alan himself.

## EPISODE

All about him was nothingness—dull, gray, dead. Imbedded in that nothingness, scattered throughout its dreary non-fabric like raisins in an extremely bland pudding, were the flames. They burned bright, vivid, strong, in every possible color.

The flames communicated silently with each other, using strange, fantastic energies. They *talked* of what they had just accomplished out there in the multiverse. And, although he was new to their ranks, but a dim, fledgling flame compared to those brilliant others, he was included in their exalted communication.

He was Ross Dillman. Yet, he was no longer Ross Dillman. Now he was a flame in the great network of flames. Now he was a god.

Together, the flames perceived the enormously complex structure of the multiverse as a whole, as well as the intricate patterns and workings of its individual parts. Together, they sustained the multiverse, tampering with it and assuring its continued existence. The flames were, in fact, ultimately responsible for the very existence of the multiverse. The flames had created it.

The novice god who had once been a man was amazed by it all. Still unaccustomed to his position in the great web of flame, unused to his role as a god, albeit minor rather than major, he could not quite grasp what had so recently occurred. Yet, at the same time he realized he had somehow played a part in this last great alteration to the structure of the multiverse, and that there was still much more to accomplish before the change was absolutely complete. Although he still did not understand it at all, he was very proud of the part he had played and the part he would continue to play.

This much, however, he did know: Things had shifted within the multiverse. A creature now existed which had joined his mind to that of a fetal whale. Before, he had been a man. Now, however, he was neither man nor whale. Now he was a strange hybrid. His flame burned as bright as any in the great web of flame, yet it was somehow different.

Already the hybrid had acquired minimal abilities. He could alter the multiverse at will, and make short journeys both up and down the time stream. And his abilities would grow: of this much the one who had been Dillman was sure. Each change in the structure of the multiverse not only brought the multiverse closer to the perfect sculpture it was intended to be, but also greatly increased the hybrid's powers.

But there were still elements that were not quite right in the multiverse, small factors that still must be adjusted. And now, in this hybrid, the great network of flames at last had the tool it needed to complete those minor adjustments, to finish its cosmic work of art....

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

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0118-42-57-9592

7 October, 2114  
8:32 Mountain Standard Time

Again the phrenic sign as Alan approached the pellicle door: *FRANK ROGERS, DIRECTOR, SCAN PROJECT.*

Even before he stepped through the pellicle door, Alan knew he would have no difficulty with it. He stretched out his mind, making a slight change in the dimension around him. With this alteration he adjusted the membrane's pre-programmed permeability, permitting his host body to pass through.

The pellicle door parted around him, then resealed behind. The clone followed, also passing through without difficulty.

"It's done," Alan said as he strode into the office.

The man who looked up from the large stack of papers on the conference table was not quite the Frank Rogers of Alan's Earth Prime; Alan had assured that when he altered the pellicle door. His skin was a bit too light. But the difference was not great enough to make him that other Rodgers, the one who had spelled his name with a d. That man could never again exist. Not in any dimension. Alan had already seen to that.

Yet, this man was a different Rogers, and so this dimension would not be Alan's Earth Prime.

Again Alan reached out with his mind and worked a change. In response, Rogers' skin darkened slightly. And the black man's eyes became suddenly wide with fear.

Without a word, Rogers jumped to his feet. His abrupt movement knocked the chair over behind him and his hand hit the stack of papers. In a flurry, the papers fluttered to the floor, and Rogers backed slowly away from Alan toward the pellicle door on the far side of the room.

"What's wrong with you?" Alan demanded. "What the hell are you afraid of?"

Then he knew. Of course, it was his host body, a massive, lumpish carcass with mottled gray skin. Who wouldn't be frightened by such an ugly hulk?

"It's me—Alan," he said, laughing. He opened his huge hands and extended his arms in the universal sign of friendship.

"Alan?" Rogers said. "Is that really you?" The black man took a tentative step forward.

Alan nodded his massive gray head.

"There's nothing to be afraid of. I know what I must look like, but it's just a host body. Beneath this rough exterior, it's really sweet, lovable me."

The look of fear disappeared from Rogers' face. His gaze centered behind Alan and to his left.

"I see you have a clone," he said.

Again Alan nodded.

Leaving the papers scattered about the floor, Rogers righted his chair—*A fantastic computer augmentation!* Alan thought—and sat, resting his elbows on the table before him.

"And the assignment?"

"All-in-all, a good jag. Both your counterpart and mine are dead."

"Fine," the black man said. "Now, let's have it."

"What, no written report?" Alan asked incredulously. "That's alright with me. I'm so tired I could sleep for a whole year."

"Of course, I'll need a written report. But for now, just tell me."

Alan should have known. This *was* the Frank Rogers he knew.

The clone stood silent and unmoving as Alan told his amazing story.

~\*~

Alan's one-room apartment was dark when he entered through the pellicle door. He altered the world slightly to allow his host body passage, then immediately changed it back again. Turning on the light, he went directly to his bed on the far side of the room. He removed the too small scarlet jumpsuit and threw it into a corner. Then he collapsed across the bed.

He was exhausted, nearing the limits of both his physical and mental endurance. And he felt the beginnings of a hangover coming on.

*The better the jag, he suddenly thought, the worse the hangover. I guess some things will never change.*

But already he was looking forward to his next jag. The thought of scanning in this new body excited him. There was so much potential in this ugly gray carcass. Never again would he have to depend on the Foundation's electronics and drugs. He had already decided to keep this host body, to make it his own.

His only regret was that he would never again scan with Robin. She was gone, dead. From now on, the second member of his scan team would be the clone, a mindless boy who nonetheless completely complemented Alan's own new-found abilities. The clone was in stasis now, and it would go back into stasis after each assignment. But for the brief period of each scan it would live again.

The clone. Finally he knew what it really was. It was no longer something sinister, something evil. It was a clone of his own body, a genetically altered facsimile of the grotesque gray body Alan now inhabited.

Soon, when he awoke, Alan would have the Foundation engineers begin work on a deep space probe designed to his specifications. After its completion, he would take a few cells from the body he now inhabited, have them cunningly altered by the boys in bio section, and place them in the probe's air-tight chamber. Then he would rent a one-man scout ship, transport the probe seventeen years back in time and over three and a half billion miles through space, and release it out beyond the orbit of Pluto, vectoring it in toward the center of the solar system. The clone would be there, ready to be found when he needed it.

But he would begin none of this until he'd had at least twelve hours of sleep. And he could never tell Rogers what he planned to do with the cells and the probe, no matter how much he badgered Alan for an answer. Rogers would never believe the truth. This was something he could never tell anyone, because no one would believe him. He had enough trouble believing it himself, and he was the one who had to accomplish it.

"Damn!" he said as he realized he had forgotten to turn out the light. But the switch was on the far side of the room, on the wall beside the door, and he was too tired to get up and turn it off.

Pulling the cover up tight around his neck, he reached out with his mind and twisted the fabric of reality ever so slightly, creating a world where the apartment light no longer burned. Then he smiled in the dark. In spite of its obvious dangers, this world changing business was fun.

Just before he fell asleep, he had a thought: What changes had the deaths of both Edwards and Robin at the hands of those others in Alan's own dimension caused? What alterations, good or evil, were laying hidden somewhere, waiting to surprise the Foundation and the world?



And—perhaps a more important question—what had happened to those duplicates of himself, those huge gray men with amazing physical and mental powers to match Alan's own? How many were there now? Alan had seen two. But how many others were there? An infinite number? Each time that particular series of events happened, it would produce two other individuals just like Alan. And it was a paradox—set up to happen again and again.

What problems might they create?

But he could not think straight just now. This kind of mental gymnastics was best left for a mind clear and bright after a good sleep.

Exhausted, he pushed the thoughts from his mind, and within seconds he was asleep.

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