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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK BUT, I DON'T THINK ***



BUT, I DON'T THINK

BY RANDALL GARRETT

Illustrated by Freas

As every thinking man knows, every slave always yearns for the freedom his master denies him...

But, gentlemen," said the Physician, "I really don't think we can consider any religion which has human sacrifice as an integral part as a humane religion."

"At least," added the Painter with a chuckle, "not as far as the victim is concerned."

The Philosopher looked irritated. "Bosh! What if the victim likes it that way?"

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I

The great merchantship *Naipor* settled her tens of thousands of tons of mass into her landing cradle on Viornis as gently as an egg being settled into an egg crate, and almost as silently. Then, as the antigravs were cut off, there was a vast, metallic sighing as the gigantic structure of the cradle itself took over the load of holding the ship in her hydraulic bath.

At that point, the ship was officially groundside, and the *Naipor* was in the hands of the ground officers. Space Captain Humbolt Reed sighed, leaned back in his desk chair, reached out a hand, and casually touched a trio of sensitized spots on the surface of his desk.

"Have High Lieutenant Blyke bring The Guesser to my office immediately," he said, in a voice that was obviously accustomed to giving orders that would be obeyed.

Then he took his fingers off the spots without waiting for an answer.

In another part of the ship, in his quarters near the Fire Control Section, sat the man known as The Guesser. He had a name, of course, a regular name, like everyone else; it was down on the ship's books and in the Main Registry. But he almost never used it; he hardly ever even thought of it. For twenty of his thirty-five years of life, he had been a trained Guesser, and for fifteen of them he'd been The Guesser of *Naipor*.

He was fairly imposing-looking for a Guesser; he had the tall, wide-shouldered build and the blocky face of an Executive, and his father had been worried that he wouldn't show the capabilities of a Guesser, while his mother had secretly hoped that he might actually become an Executive. Fortunately for The Guesser, they had both been wrong.

He was not only a Guesser, but a first-class predictor, and he showed impatience with those of his underlings who failed to use their ability in any particular. At the moment of the ship's landing, he was engaged in verbally burning the ears off Kraybo, the young man who would presumably take over The Guesser's job one day—if he ever learned how to handle it.

"You're either a liar or an idiot," said The Guesser harshly, "and I wish to eternity I knew which!"

Kraybo, standing at attention, merely swallowed and said nothing. He had felt the back of The Guesser's hand too often before to expose himself intentionally to its swing again.

The Guesser narrowed his eyes and tried to see what was going on in Kraybo's mind.

"Look here, Kraybo," he said after a moment, "that one single Misfit ship got close enough to do us some damage. It has endangered the life of the *Naipor* and the lives of her crewmen. You were on the board in that quadrant of the ship, and you let it get in too close. The records show that you mis-aimed one of your blasts. Now, what I want to know is this: were you really guessing or were you following the computer too closely?"

"I was following the computer," said Kraybo, in a slightly wavering voice. "I'm sorry for the error, sir; it won't happen again."

The Guesser's voice almost became a snarl. "It hadn't better! You know that a computer is only to feed you data and estimate probabilities on the courses of attacking ships; you're not supposed to think they can predict!"

"I know, sir; I just—"

"You just near came getting us all killed!" snapped The Guesser. "You claim that you actually guessed where that ship was going to be, but you followed the computer's extrapolation instead?"

"Yes, sir," said the tense-faced Kraybo. "I admit my error, and I'm willing to take my punishment."

The Guesser grinned wolfishly. "Well, isn't that big-hearted of you? I'm very glad you're willing,

because I just don't know what I'd do if you refused."

Kraybo's face burned crimson, but he said nothing.

The Guesser's voice was sarcastically soft. "But I guess about the only thing I could do in that case would be to"—The Guesser's voice suddenly became a bellow—"kick your thick head in!"

Kraybo's face drained of color suddenly.

The Guesser became suddenly brusque. "Never mind. We'll let it go for now. Report to the Discipline Master in Intensity Five for ten minutes total application time. Dismissed."

Kraybo, whose face had become even whiter, paused for a moment, as though he were going to plead with The Guesser. But he saw the look in his superior's eyes and thought better of it.

"Yes, sir," he said in a weak voice. He saluted and left.

And The Guesser just sat there, waiting for what he knew would come.

It did. High Lieutenant Blyke showed up within two minutes after Kraybo had left. He stood at the door of The Guesser's cubicle, accompanied by a sergeant-at-arms.

"Master Guesser, you will come with us." His manner was bored and somewhat flat.

The Guesser bowed his head as he saluted. "As you command, great sir." And he followed the lieutenant into the corridor, the sergeant tagging along behind.

The Guesser wasn't thinking of his own forthcoming session with the captain; he was thinking of Kraybo.

Kraybo was twenty-one, and had been in training as a Guesser ever since he was old enough to speak and understand. He showed occasional flashes of tremendous ability, but most of the time he seemed—well, *lazy*. And then, there was always the question of his actual ability.

A battle in the weirdly distorted space of ultralight velocities requires more than machines and more than merely ordinary human abilities. No computer, however built, can possibly estimate the flight of a dodging spaceship with a canny human being at the controls. Even the superfast beams from a megadyne force gun require a finite time to reach their target, and it is necessary to fire at the place where the attacking ship will be, not at the position it is occupying at the time of firing. That was a bit of knowledge as old as human warfare: you must lead a moving target.

For a target moving at a constant velocity, or a constant acceleration, or in any other kind of orbit which is mathematically predictable, a computer was not only necessary, but sufficient. In such a case, the accuracy was perfect, the hits one hundred per cent.

But the evasive action taken by a human pilot, aided by a randomness selector, is not logical and therefore cannot be handled by a computer. Like the path of a microscopic particle in Brownian motion, its position can only be predicted statistically; estimating its probable location is the best that can be done. And, in space warfare, probability of that order is simply not good enough.

To compute such an orbit required a special type of human mind, and therefore a special type of human. It required a Guesser.

The way a Guesser's mind operated could only be explained *to* a Guesser *by* another Guesser. But, as far as anyone else was concerned, only the objective results were important. A Guesser could "guess" the route of a moving ship, and that was all anyone cared about. And a Master Guesser prided himself on his ability to guess accurately 99.999% of the time. The ancient sport of baseball was merely a test of muscular co-ordination for a Guesser; as soon as a Guesser child learned to control a bat, his batting average shot up to 1.000 and stayed there until he got too old to swing the bat. A Master Guesser could make the same score blindfolded.

Hitting a ship in space at ultralight velocities was something else again. Young Kraybo could play baseball blindfolded, but he wasn't yet capable of making the master guesses that would protect a merchantship like the *Naipor*.

But what was the matter with him? He had, of course, a fire-control computer to help him swing and aim his guns, but he didn't seem to be able to depend on his guesswork. He had more than once fired at a spot where the computer said the ship would be instead of firing at the spot where it actually arrived a fraction of a second later.

There were only two things that could be troubling him. Either he was doing exactly as he said—ignoring his guesses and following the computer—or else he was inherently incapable of controlling his guesswork and was hoping that the computer would do the work for him.

If the first were true, then Kraybo was a fool; if the second, then he was a liar, and was no more capable of handling the fire control of the *Naipor* than the captain was.

The Guesser hated to have Kraybo punished, really, but that was the only way to make a youngster keep his mind on his business.

After all, thought The Guesser, that's the way I learned; Kraybo can learn the same way. A little nerve-burning never hurt anyone.

But that last thought was more to bolster himself than it was to justify his own actions toward Kraybo. The lieutenant was at the door of the captain's office, with The Guesser right behind him.

The door dilated to receive the three—the lieutenant, The Guesser, and the sergeant-at-arms—and they marched across the room to the captain's desk.

The captain didn't even bother to look up until High Lieutenant Blyke saluted and said: "The Guesser, sir."

And the captain gave the lieutenant a quick nod and then looked coldly at The Guesser. "The ship has been badly damaged. Since there are no repair docks here on Viornis, we will have to unload our cargo and then go—*empty*—all the way to D'Graski's Planet for repairs. All during that time, we will be more vulnerable than ever to Misfit raids."

His ice-chill voice stopped, and he simply looked at The Guesser with glacier-blue, unblinking eyes for ten long seconds.

The Guesser said nothing. There was nothing he *could* say. Nothing that would do him any good.

The Guesser disliked Grand Captain Reed—and more, feared him. Reed had been captain of the *Naipor* for only three years, having replaced the old captain on his retirement. He was a strict disciplinarian, and had a tendency to punish heavily for very minor infractions of the rules. Not, of course, that he didn't have every right to do so; he was, after all, the captain.

But the old captain hadn't given The Guesser a nerve-burning in all the years since he had accepted The Guesser as The Guesser. And Captain Reed—

The captain's cold voice interrupted his thoughts.

"Well? What was it? If it was a mechano-electronic malfunction of the computer, say so; we'll speak to the engineer."

The Guesser knew that the captain was giving him what looked like an out—but The Guesser also knew it was a test, a trap.

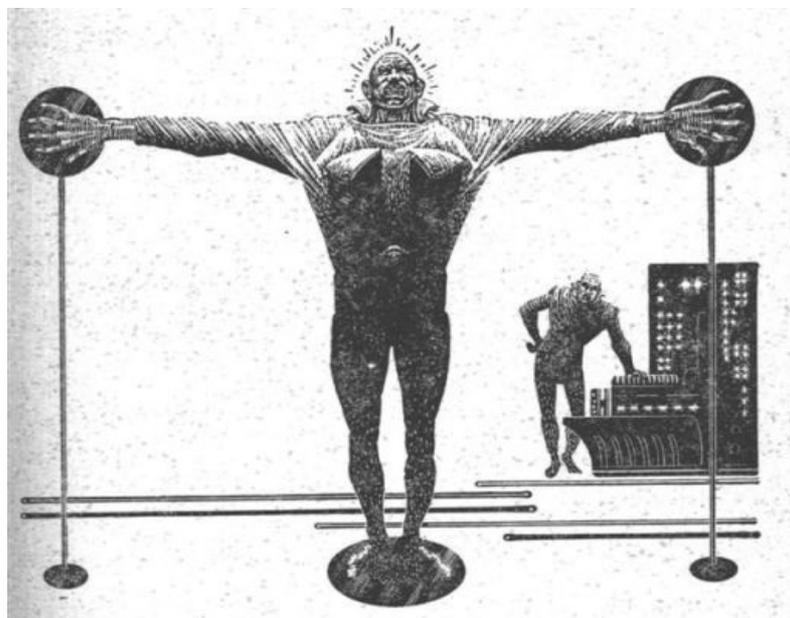
The Guesser bowed his head very low and saluted. "No, great sir; the fault was mine."

Grand Captain Reed nodded his head in satisfaction. "Very well. Intensity Five, two minutes. Dismissed."

The Guesser bowed his head and saluted, then he turned and walked out the door. The sergeant-at-arms didn't need to follow him; he had been let off very lightly.

He marched off toward the Disciplinary Room with his head at the proper angle—ready to lift it if he met a lesser crewman, ready to lower it if he met an executive officer.

He could already feel the terrible pain of the nerve-burner coursing through his body—a jolt every ten seconds for two minutes, like a whip lashing all over his body at once. His only satisfaction was the knowledge that he had sentenced Kraybo to ten minutes of the same thing.



The Guesser lay on his bed, face down, his grasping fingers clutching spasmodically at the covering as his nerves twitched with remembered pain. Thirteen jolts. Thirteen searing jolts of excruciating torture. It was over now, but his synapses were still crackling with the memories of those burning lashes of energy.

He was thirty-five. He had to keep that in mind. He was thirty-five now, and his nerves should be under better control than they had been at twenty. He wondered if there were tears streaming from his eyes, and then decided it didn't matter. At least he wasn't crying aloud.

Of course, he had screamed in the nerve-burner; he had screamed thirteen times. Any man who didn't scream when those blinding stabs of pain came was either unconscious or dead—it was no disgrace to scream in the burner. But he wasn't screaming now.

He lay there for ten minutes, his jaw clamped, while the twitching subsided and his nervous system regained its usual co-ordination.

The burner did no actual physical damage; it wasn't good economics for an Executive to allow his men to be hurt in any physical manner. It took a very little actual amount of energy applied to the nerve endings to make them undergo the complex electrochemical reaction that made them send those screaming messages to the brain and spine. There was less total damage done to the nerves than a good all-night binge would do to a normal human being. But the effect on the mind was something else again.

It was a very effective method of making a man learn almost any lesson you wanted to teach him.

After a while, The Guesser shuddered once more, took a deep breath, held it for fifteen seconds, and then released it. A little later, he lifted himself up and swung his legs over the edge of his bed. He sat on the edge of the bed for a few minutes, then got up and got dressed in his best uniform.

After all, the captain hadn't said anything about restricting him to the ship, and he had never been to Viornis before. Besides, a couple of drinks might make him feel better.

There were better planets in the galaxy, he decided two hours later. Thousands of them.

For one thing, it was a small, but dense world, with a surface gravity of one point two standard gees—not enough to be disabling, but enough to make a man feel sluggish. For another, its main export was farm products: there were very few large towns on Viornis, and no center of population that could really be called a city. Even here, at the spaceport, the busiest and largest town on the planet, the population was less than a million. It was a "new" world, with a history that didn't stretch back more than two centuries. With the careful population control exercised by the ruling Execs, it would probably remain small and provincial for another half millennium.

The Guesser moseyed down one of the streets of Bellinberg probably named after the first Prime Executive of the planet—looking for a decent place for a spaceman to have a drink. It was evening, and the sinking of the yellow primary below the western horizon had left behind it a clear, star-filled sky that filled the air with a soft, white radiance. The streets of the town itself were well-lit by bright glow-plates imbedded in the walls of the buildings, but above the street level, the buildings themselves loomed darkly. Occasionally, an Exec's aircar would drift rapidly overhead with a soft rush of air, and, in the distance, he could see the shimmering towers of the Executive section rising high above the eight- or ten-storyed buildings that made up the majority of Bellinberg.

The streets were fairly crowded with strollers—most of them Class Four or Five citizens who stepped deferentially aside as soon as they saw his uniform, and kept their eyes averted from him. Now and then, the power car of a Class Three rolled swiftly by, and The Guesser felt a slight twinge of envy. Technically, his own rank was the equivalent of Class Three, but he had never owned a groundcar. What need had a spaceman of a groundcar? Still, it would be nice to drive one just once, he thought; it would be a new experience, certainly.

Right now, though, he was looking for a Class Three bar; just a place to have a small, quiet drink and a bite to eat. He had a perfect right to go into a lower class bar, of course, but he had never felt quite comfortable associating with his inferiors in such a manner, and certainly they would feel nervous in his presence because of the sidearm at his hip.

No one below Class Three was allowed to carry a beamgun, and only Ones and Twos were allowed to wear the screening fields that protected them from the nerve-searing effects of the weapon. And they, being Execs, were in no danger from each other.

Finally, after much walking, he decided that he was in the wrong part of town. There were no Class Three bars anywhere along these streets. Perhaps, he thought, he should have gone to the Spacemen's Club at the spaceport itself. On the other hand, he hadn't particularly wanted to see any of the other minor officers of his own class after the near-fiasco which had damaged the *Naipor*. Being a Guesser set him apart, even from other Threes.

He thought for a moment of asking a policeman, but he dismissed it. Cops, as always, were a breed apart. Besides, they weren't on the streets to give directions, but to preserve order.

At last, he went into a nearby Class Four bar and snapped his fingers for the bartender, ignoring the sudden silence that had followed his entrance.

The barman set down a glass quickly and hurried over, bobbing his head obsequiously. "Yes, sir; yes, sir. What can I do for you, sir? It's an honor to have you here, sir. How may I serve you?"

The man himself was wearing the distinctive clothing of a Five, so his customers outranked him, but the brassard on his arm showed that his master was a Two, which afforded him enough authority to keep reasonable order in the place.

"Where's the nearest Class Three bar?" The Guesser snapped.

The barman looked faintly disappointed, but he didn't lose his obsequiousness. "Oh, that's quite a way from here, sir—about the closest would be Mallard's, over on Fourteenth Street and Upper Drive. A mile, at least."

The Guesser scowled. He was in the wrong section of town, all right.

"But I'd be honored to serve you, sir," the barman hurried on. "Private booth, best of everything, perfect privacy—"

The Guesser shook his head quickly. "No. Just tell me how to get to Mallard's."

The barman looked at him for a moment, rubbing a fingertip across his chin, then he said: "You're not driving, I suppose, sir? No? Well, then, you can either take the tubeway or walk, sir...." He let the sentence hang, waiting for The Guesser's decision.

The Guesser thought rapidly. Tubeways were for Fours and Fives. Threes had groundcars; Ones and Twos had aircars; Sixes and below walked. And spacemen walked.

Trouble is, spacemen aren't used to walking, especially on a planet where they weigh twenty per cent more than they're used to. The Guesser decided he'd take the tubeway; at the Class Three bar, he might be able to talk someone into driving him to the spaceport later.

But five minutes later, he was walking in the direction the bartender had told him to take for finding Mallard's on foot. To get to the tubeway was a four-block walk, and then there would be another long walk after he got off. Hoofing it straight there would be only a matter of five blocks difference, and it would at least spare him the embarrassment of taking the tube.

It was a foolish thing to do, perhaps, but once The Guesser had set his mind on something, it took a lot more than a long walk to dissuade him from his purpose. He saw he was not the only spaceman out on the town; one of the Class Five taverns he passed was filled with boisterous singing, and he could see a crowd of men standing around three crewmen who were leading them in a distinctly off-color ballad. The Guesser smiled a little to himself. Let them have their fun while they were on-planet; their lives weren't exactly bright aboard ship.

Of course, they got as much as was good for them in the way of entertainment, but a little binge gave them something to look forward to, and a good nerve-burning would sober them up fast enough if they made the mistake of coming back drunk.

Nerve-burning didn't really bother a Five much, after all; they were big, tough, work-hardened clods, whose minds and brains simply didn't have the sensitivity to be hurt by that sort of treatment. Oh, they screamed as loud as anyone when they were in the burner, but it really didn't have much effect on them. They were just too thick-skulled to have it make much difference to them one way or the other.

On the other hand, an Exec would probably go all to pieces in a burner. If it didn't kill him outright, he'd at least be sick for days. They were too soft to take even a touch of it. No Class One, so far as The Guesser knew, had ever been subjected to that sort of treatment, and a Two only got it rarely. They just weren't used to it; they wouldn't have the stamina to take it.

His thoughts were interrupted suddenly by the familiar warning that rang in his mind like a bell. He realized suddenly, as he became blazingly aware of his surroundings, that he had somehow wandered into a definitely low-class neighborhood. Around him were the stark, plain housing groups of Class Six families. The streets were more dimly lit, and there was almost no one on the street, since it was after curfew time for Sixes. The nearest pedestrian was a block off and moving away.

All that took him but a fraction of a second to notice, and he knew that it was not his surroundings which had sparked the warning in his mind. There was something behind him—moving.

What had told him? Almost nothing. The merest touch of a foot on the soft pavement—the faintest rustle of clothing—the whisper of something moving through the air.

Almost nothing—but enough. To a man who had played blindfold baseball, it was plenty. He knew

that someone not ten paces behind him had thrown something heavy, and he knew its exact trajectory to within a thousandth of a millimeter, and he knew exactly how to move his head to avoid the missile.

He moved it, at the same time jerking his body to one side. It had only been a guess—but what more did a Guesser need?

From the first hint of warning to the beginning of the dodging motion, less than half a second had passed.

He started to spin around as the heavy object went by him, but another warning yelped in his mind. He twisted a little, but it was too late.

Something burned horribly through his body, like a thousand million acid-tipped, white-hot needles jabbing through skin and flesh and sinking into the bone. He couldn't even scream.

He blacked out as if he'd been a computer suddenly deprived of power.

II

Of course, came the thought, a very good way to put out a fire is to pour cold water on it. That's a very good idea.

At least, it had put out the fire.

Fire? What fire? The fire in his body, the scalding heat that had been quenched by the cold water.

Slowly, as though it were being turned on through a sluggishly turning rheostat, consciousness came back to The Guesser.

He began to recognize the sensations in his body. There was a general, all-over dull ache, punctuated here and there by sharper aches. There was the dampness and the chill. And there was the queer, gnawing feeling in the pit of his stomach.

At first, he did not think of how he had gotten where he was, nor did he even wonder about his surroundings. There seemed merely to be an absolute urgency to get out of wherever he was and, at the same time, an utter inability to do so. He tried to move, to shift position, but his muscles seemed so terribly tired that flexing them was a high-magnitude effort.

After several tries, he got his arms under his chest, and only then did he realize that he had been lying prone, his right cheek pressed against cold, slimy stone. He lifted himself a little, but the effort was too much, and he collapsed again, his body making a faint splash as he did so.

He lay there for a while, trying to puzzle out his odd and uncomfortable environment. He seemed to be lying on a sloping surface with his head higher than his feet. The lower part of his body was immersed in chill, gently-moving water. And there was something else—

The smell.

It was an incredible stench, an almost overpowering miasma of decay.

He moved his head then, and forced his eyes open. There was a dim, feeble glow from somewhere overhead and to his right, but it was enough to show him a vaulted ceiling a few feet above him. He was lying in some sort of tube which—

And then the sudden realization came.

He was in a sewer.

The shock of it cleared his mind a little, and gave added strength to his muscles. He pushed himself to his hands and knees and began crawling toward the dim light. It wasn't more than eight or ten feet, but it seemed to take an eternity for him to get there. Above him was a grating, partially covered with a soggy-looking sheet of paper. The light evidently came from a glow-plate several yards away.

He lay there, exhausted and aching, trying to force his brain into action, trying to decide what to do next.

He'd have to lift the grating, of course; that much was obvious. And he'd have to stand up to do that. Did he have the strength?

Only one way to find out. Again he pushed himself to his hands and knees, and it seemed easier this time. Then, bracing himself against the curving wall of the sewer, he got to his feet. His knees were weak and wobbly, but they'd hold. They *had* to hold.

The top of the sewer duct was not as far off as it had seemed; he had to stoop to keep from banging his head against the grating. He paused in that position to catch his breath, and then reached up, first with one hand and then with the other, to grasp the grating.

Then, with all the strength he could gather, he pushed upwards. The hinged grate moved

upwards and banged loudly on the pavement.

There remained the problem of climbing out of the hole. The Guesser never knew how he solved it. Somehow, he managed to find himself out of the sewer and lying exhausted on the pavement.

He knew that there was some reason why he couldn't just lie there forever, some reason why he had to hide where he couldn't be seen.

It was not until that moment that he realized that he was completely naked. He had been stripped of everything, including the chronometer on his wrist.

With an effort, he heaved himself to his feet again and began running, stumbling drunkenly, yet managing somehow to keep on his feet. He had to find shelter, find help.

Somewhere in there, his mind blanked out again.

He awoke feeling very tired and weak, yet oddly refreshed, as though he had slept for a long time. When his eyes opened, he simply stared at the unfamiliar room for a long time without thinking—without really caring to think. He only knew that he was warm and comfortable and somehow safe, and it was such a pleasant feeling after the nightmare of cold and terror that he only wanted to enjoy it without analyzing it.

But the memory of the nightmare came again, and he couldn't repress it. And he knew it hadn't been a nightmare, but reality.

Full recollection flooded over him.

Someone had shot him with a beamgun, that nasty little handweapon that delivered in one powerful, short jolt the same energy that was doled out in measured doses over a period of minutes in a standard nerve-burner. He remembered jerking aside at the last second, just before the weapon was fired, and it was evidently that which had saved his life. If the beam had hit him in the head or spine, he'd be dead now.

Then what? Guessing about something that had happened in the past was futile, and, anyway, guessing didn't apply to situations like that. But he thought he could pretty well figure out what had happened.

After he'd been shot down, his assailant had probably dragged him off somewhere and stripped him, and then dumped him bodily into the sewer. The criminal had undoubtedly thought that The Guesser was dead; if the body had been found, days or weeks later, it would be unidentifiable, and probably dismissed as simply another unsolved murder. They were rather common in low-class districts such as this.



Which brought him back again to the room.

He sat up in bed and looked around. Class Six Standard Housing. Hard, gray, cast polymer walls—very plain. Ditto floor and ceiling. Single glow-plate overhead. Rough, gray bedclothing.

Someone had found him after that careening flight from the terror of the sewer and had brought him here. Who?

Who?

The sense of well-being he had felt upon awakening had long since deserted him. What he felt now was a queer mixture of disgust and fear. He had never known a Class Six. Even the lowest crewman on the *Naipor* was a Five.

Uneasily, The Guesser climbed out of the bed. He was wearing a sack-like gray dress that fell almost to his knees, and nothing else. He walked on silent bare feet to the door. He could hear nothing beyond it, so he twisted the handle carefully and eased it open a crack.

And immediately he heard low voices. The first was a man's.

"... Like you pick up dogs, hey." He sounded angry. "He bring trouble on high, that'n. Look, you, at the face he got. He no Sixer, no, nor even Fiver. Exec, that's what. Trouble."

Then a woman's voice. "Exec, he?" A sharp laugh. "Naked, dirty-wet, sick, he fall on my door. Since when Execs ask help from Sixer chippie like I? And since when Execs talk like Sixer when they out of they head? No fancy Exec talk, he, no."

The Guesser didn't understand that. If the woman was talking about him—and she must be—then surely he had not spoken the illiterate patois of the Class Six people when he was delirious.

The woman went on. "No, Lebby; you mind you business; me, I mind mine. Here, you take you this and get some food. Now, go, now. Come back at dark."

The man grumbled something The Guesser didn't understand, but there seemed to be a certain amount of resignation in his voice. Then a door opened and closed, and there was a moment of silence.

Then he heard the woman's footsteps approaching the partially opened door. And her voice said: "You lucky Lebby have he back to you when you open the door. If he even see it move, he know you wake."

The Guesser backed away from the door as she came in.

She was a drab woman, with a colorlessness of face that seemed to match the colorlessness of her clothing. Her hair was cropped short, and she seemed to sag all over, as though her body were trying to conform to the shapelessness of the dress instead of the reverse. When she forced a smile to her face, it didn't seem to fit, as though her mouth were unused to such treatment from the muscles.

"How you feel?" she asked, stopping just inside the room.

"I ... uh—" The Guesser hardly knew what to say. He was in a totally alien environment, a completely unknown situation. "I'm fine," he said at last.

She nodded. "You get plenty sleep, all right. Like dead, except when you talk to yourself."

Then he *had* spoken in delirium. "How ... how long was I out?"

"Three days," she said flatly. "Almost four." She paused. "You ship leave."



"Leave?" The Guesser said blankly. "The *Naipor*? Gone?" It seemed as if the world had dropped away from his feet, leaving him to fall endlessly through nothingness. It was true, of course. It

didn't take more than twenty-four hours to unload the ship's holds, and, since there had been no intention of reloading, there was no need to stay. He had long overstayed the scheduled take-off time.

It created a vacuum in his mind, a hole in his very being that could never be filled by anything else. The ship was his whole life—his home, his work, his security.

"How did you know about the ship?" he asked in a dazed voice.

"A notice," she said. She fished around in one of the big pockets of the gray dress and her hand came out with a crumpled sheet of glossy paper. She handed it to him silently. It was a Breach of Contract notice.

WANTED

for

BREACH OF CONTRACT

JAIM JAKOM DIEGO

AGE: 35

HEIGHT: 185 cm

WEIGHT: 96 kg

HAIR: black

EYES: blue

COMPLXN: fair

Jaim Jakom Diego, Spacetech 3rd Guesser, broke contract with Interstellar Trade Corporation on 3/37/119 by failing to report for duty aboard home merchantship *Naipor* on that date. All citizens are notified hereby that said Jaim Jakom Diego is unemployable except by the ITC, and that he has no housing, clothing, nor subsistence rights on any planet, nor any right to transportation of any kind.

STANDARD REWARD PLUS BONUS FOR INFORMATION LEADING TO THE ARREST OF THIS MAN

The Guesser looked at the picture that accompanied the notice. It was an old one, taken nearly fifteen years before. It didn't look much like him any more. But that didn't matter; even if he was never caught, he still had no place to go. A runaway had almost no chance of remaining a runaway for long. How would he eat? Where would he live?

He looked up from the sheet, into the woman's face. She looked back with a flat, unwavering gaze. He knew now why she had been addressing him as an equal, even though she knew he was Class Three.

"Why haven't you tried to collect the reward?" he asked. He felt suddenly weak, and sat down again on the edge of the bed.

"Me, I need you." Then her eyes widened a trifle. "Pale you look, you do. I get you something solid inside you. Nothing but soup I get down you so far, all three days. Soup. You sit, I be back."

He nodded. He *was* feeling sickish.

She went into the other room, leaving the door open, and he could hear noises from the small kitchen. The woman began to talk, raising her voice a little so he could hear her.

"You like eggs?" she asked.

"Some kinds," said The Guesser. "But it doesn't matter. I'm hungry." He hadn't realized how hungry he was.

"*Some* kinds?" The woman's voice was puzzled. "They more than one kind of egg?" The kitchen was suddenly silent as she waited intently for the answer.

"Yes," said The Guesser. "On other planets. What kind of eggs are these?"

"Just ... just *eggs*."

"I mean, what kind of animal do they come from?"

"Chicken. What else lay eggs?"

"Other birds." He wished vaguely that he knew more about the fauna of Viornis. Chickens were well-nigh universal; they could live off almost anything. But other fowl fared pretty well, too. He shrugged it off; none of his business; leave that to the ecologists.

"Birds?" the woman asked. It was an unfamiliar word to her.

"Different kinds of chickens," he said tiredly. "Some bigger, some smaller, some different colors." He hoped the answer would satisfy her.

Evidently it did. She said, "Oh," and went on with what she was doing.

The silence, after only a minute or two, became unbearable. The Guesser had wanted to yell at the woman to shut up, to leave him alone and not bother him with her ignorant questions that he could not answer because she was inherently too stupid to understand. He had wondered why he hadn't yelled; surely it was not incumbent on a Three to answer the questions of a Six.

But he *had* answered, and after she stopped talking, he began to know why. He wanted to talk and to be talked to. Anything to fill up the void in his mind; anything to take the place of a world that had suddenly vanished.

What would he be doing now, if this had not happened? Involuntarily, he glanced at his wrist, but the chronometer was gone.

He would have awakened, as always, at precisely 0600 ship time. He would have dressed, and at 0630 he would have been at table, eating his meal in silence with the others of his class. At 0640, the meal would be over, and conversation would be allowed until 0645. Then, the inspection of the fire control system from 0650 until 0750. Then—

He forced his mind away from it, tried not to think of the pleasant, regular orderly routine by which he had lived his life for a quarter of a century and more.

When the woman's voice came again, it was a relief.

"What's a Guesser?"

He told her as best he could, trying to couch his explanation in terms that would be understood by a woman of her limited vocabulary and intelligence. He was not too sure he succeeded, but it was a relief to talk about it. He could almost feel himself dropping into the routine that he used in the orientation courses for young Guessers who had been assigned to him for protection and instruction.

"Accurate predicting of this type is not capable of being taught to all men; unless a man has within him the innate ability to be a Guesser, he is as incapable of learning Guessing as a blind man is incapable of being taught to read." (It occurred to him at that moment to wonder how the Class Six woman had managed to read the Breach of Contract notice. He would have to ask her later.) "On the other hand, just as the mere possession of functioning eyes does not automatically give one the ability to read, neither does the genetic inheritance of Guesser potentialities enable one to make accurate, useful Guesses. To make this potentiality into an ability requires years of hard work and practice.

"You must learn to concentrate, to focus your every attention on the job at hand, to—"

He broke off suddenly. The woman was standing in the doorway, holding a plate and a steaming mug. Her eyes were wide with puzzlement and astonishment. "You mean *me*?"

"No ... no." He shook his head. "I ... was thinking of something else."

She came on in, carrying the food. "You got tears in your eyes. You hurt?"

He wanted to say *yes*. He wanted to tell her how he was hurt and why. But the words wouldn't—or couldn't—come. "No," he said. "My eyes are just a little blurry, that's all. From sleep."

She nodded, accepting his statements. "Here. You eat you this. Put some stuffing in you belly."

He ate, not caring what the food tasted like. He didn't speak, and neither did she, for which he was thankful. Conversation during a meal would have been both meaningless and painful to him.

It was odd to think that, in a way, a Class Six had more freedom than he did. Presumably, she *could* talk, if she wanted, even during a meal.

And he was glad that she had not tried to eat at the same time. To have his food cooked and served by a Six didn't bother him, nor was he bothered by her hovering nearby. But if she had sat down with him to eat—

But she hadn't, so he dropped the thought from his mind.

Afterwards, he felt much better. He actually hadn't realized how hungry he had been.

She took the dishes out and returned almost immediately.

"You thought what you going to do?" she asked.

He shook his head. He hadn't thought. He hadn't even wanted to think. It was as though, somewhere in the back of his mind, something kept whispering that this was all nothing but a very bad dream and that he'd wake up in his cubicle aboard the *Naipor* at any moment. Intellectually, he knew it wasn't true, but his emotional needs, coupled with wishful thinking, had hamstrung his intellect.

However, he knew he couldn't stay here. The thought of living in a Class Six environment all the rest of his life was utterly repellent to him. And there was nowhere else he could go, either. Even though he had not been tried as yet, he had effectively been Declassified.

"I suppose I'll just give myself over to the Corporation," he said. "I'll tell them I was waylaid—maybe they'll believe it."

"Maybe? Just only maybe?"

He shrugged a little. "I don't know. I've never been in trouble like this before. I just don't know."

"What they going to do to you, you give up to them?"

"I don't know that, either."

Her eyes suddenly looked far off. "Me, I got an idea. Maybe get both of us some place."

He looked at her quickly. "What do you mean?"

Her gaze came back from the distance, and her eyes focused squarely on his. "The Misfits," she said in her flat voice. "We could go to the Misfits."

III

The Guesser had been fighting the Misfits for twenty years, and hating them for as long as he could remember. The idea that he could ever become one of them had simply never occurred to him. Even the idea of going to one of the Misfit Worlds was so alien that the very suggestion of it was shocking to his mind.

And yet, the suggestion that the Sixer woman had made did require a little thinking over before he accepted or rejected it.

The Misfits. What did he really know about them, anyway?

They didn't call themselves Misfits, of course; that was a derogatory name used by the Aristarchy. But the Guesser couldn't remember off hand just what they *did* call themselves. Their form of government was a near-anarchic form of ochlocracy, he knew—mob rule of some sort, as might be expected among such people. They were the outgrowth of an ancient policy that had been used centuries ago for populating the planets of the galaxy.

There are some people who simply do not, will not, and can not fit in with any kind of social organization—except the very flimsiest, perhaps. Depending on the society in which they exist and the extent of their own antisocial activities, they have been called, over the centuries, everything from "criminals" to "pioneers." It was a matter of whether they fought the unwelcome control of the society in power or fled from it.

The Guesser's knowledge of history was close to nonexistent, but he had heard that the expansion to the stars from Earth—a planet he had never been within a thousand parsecs of—had been accomplished by the expedient of combining volunteers with condemned criminals and shipping them off to newly-found Earth-type planets. After a generation had passed, others came in—the civilizing types—and settled the planets, making them part of the Aristarchy proper.

(Or was the Aristarchy that old? The Guesser had a feeling that the government at that time had been of a different sort, but he couldn't for the life of him remember what it was. Perhaps it had been the prototype of the Aristarchy, for certainly the present system of society had existed for four or five centuries—perhaps more. The Guesser realized that his knowledge of ancient history was as confused as anyone's; after all, it wasn't his specialty. He remembered that when he was a boy, he'd heard a Teacher Exec talk about the Geological Ages of Earth and the Teacher had said that "cave men were *not* contemporary with the dinosaur." He hadn't known what it meant at the time, since he wasn't supposed to be listening, anyway, to an Exec class, but he had realized that the histories of times past often became mixed up with each other.)

At any rate, the process had gone along smoothly, even as the present process of using Class Sevens and Declassified citizens did. But in the early days there had not been the organization that existed in the present Aristarchy; planets had become lost for generations at a time. (The Guesser vaguely remembered that there had been wars of some kind during that time, and that the wars had contributed to those losses.) Some planets had civilized themselves without the intervention of the Earth government, and, when the Earth government had come along, they had fought integration with everything they could summon to help them.

Most of the recalcitrant planets had eventually been subdued, but there were still many "hidden planets" which were organized as separate governments under a loose confederation. These were the Misfits.

Because of the numerical superiority of the Aristarchy, and because it operated in the open instead of skulking in the darkness of space, the Misfits knew where Aristarchy planets were located, while the Aristarchy was unable to search out every planet in the multimyriads of star systems that formed the galaxy.

Thus the Misfits had become pirates, preying on the merchantships of the Aristarchy. Why? No one knew. (Or, at least, The Guesser corrected himself, *he* didn't know.) Such a non-sane culture would have non-sane reasons.

The Aristarchy occupied nearly all the planets of the galaxy that could be inhabited by Man; that much The Guesser had been told. Just why Earth-type planets should occur only within five

thousand light-years of the Galactic Center was a mystery to him, but, then, he was no astrophysicist.

But the Sixer woman said she had heard that the Aristarchy was holding back facts; that there were planets clear out to the Periphery, all occupied by Misfits; that the legendary Earth was one of those planets; that—

A thousand things. All wrong, as The Guesser knew. But she was firmly convinced that if anyone could get to a Misfit planet, they would be welcomed. There were no Classes among the Misfits, she said. (The Guesser dismissed that completely; a Classless society was ridiculous on the face of it.)

The Guesser had asked the woman why—if her statements were true—the Misfits had not conquered the Aristarchy long ago. After all, if they held the galaxy clear out to the Periphery, they had the Aristarchy surrounded, didn't they?

She had had no answer.

And it had only been later that The Guesser realized that *he* had an answer. Indeed, that he himself, was a small, but significant part of that answer.

The Misfits had no Guessers. That was a fact that The Guesser knew from personal experience. He had been in space battles with Misfit fleets, and he had brought the *Naipor* through those battles unscathed while wreaking havoc and destruction among the massed ships of the Misfits. They had no Guessers. (Or no *trained* Guessers, he amended. The potential might be there, but certainly the actuality was not.)

And it occurred to him that the Misfits might have another kind of trained talent. They seemed to be able to search out and find a single Aristarchy ship, while it was impossible to even detect a Misfit fleet until it came within attacking distance. Well, that, again, was not his business.

But none of these considerations were important in the long run; none of them were more than minor. The thing that made up The Guesser's mind, that spurred him into action, was the woman's admission that she had a plan for actually reaching Misfit planets.

It was quite simple, really; they were to be taken prisoners.

"They spaceships got no people inside, see you," she said, just as though she knew what she were talking about. "They just want to catch our ships, not kill 'em. So they send out a bunch of little ships on they own, just to ... uh ... cripple our ships. It don't matter, they little ships get hit, because they no one in them, see you. They trying to get our ships in good shape, and people in them and stuff, that's all."

"Yes, yes," The Guesser had said impatiently, "but what's that to do with us?"

She waved a hand, as though she were a little flustered by his peremptory tone. She wasn't, after all, used to talking with Class Threes as equals, even though she knew that in this case the Three was helpless.

"I *tell* you! I *tell* you!" She paused to reorganize her thoughts. "But I ask you: if we get on a ship, you can keep it from shooting the Misfit ships?"

The Guesser saw what she was driving at. It didn't make much sense yet, but there was a glimmer of something there.

"You mean," he said, "that you want to know whether it would be possible for me to partially disable the fire-control system of a spaceship enough to allow it to be captured by Misfit ships?"

She nodded rapidly. "Yes ... I think, yes. Can you?"

"Ye-e-es," The Guesser said, slowly and cautiously. "I could. But not by just walking in and doing it. I mean, it would be almost impossible to get aboard a ship in the first place, and without an official position I couldn't do anything anyway."

But she didn't look disappointed. Instead, she'd smiled a little. "I get us on the ship," she said. "And you have official position. We do it."

When she had gone on to explain, The Guesser's mind had boggled at her audacity—at first. And then he'd begun to see how it might be possible.

For it was not until then that the woman had given The Guesser information which he hadn't thought to ask about before. The first was her name: Deyla. The second was her job.

She was a cleaning woman in Executive territory.

And, as she outlined her plan for reaching the Misfits, The Guesser began to feel despair slipping from his mind, to be replaced by hope.

The Guesser plodded solemnly along the street toward the tall, glittering building which was near the center of Executive territory, his feet moving carefully, his eyes focused firmly on the soft, textured surface of the pavement. He was clad in the rough gray of a Class Six laborer, and his manner was carefully tailored to match. As he was approached by Fours and Fives, he stepped carefully to one side, keeping his face blank, hiding the anger that seethed just beneath the surface.

Around his arm was a golden brassard indicating that he was contracted to a Class One, and in his pocket was a carefully forged card indicating the same thing. No one noticed him; he was just another Sixer going to his menial job.

The front of the building bore a large glowing plaque which said:

VIORNIS EXPORT CORPORATION

But the front entrance was no place for a Sixer. He went on past it, stepping aside regularly for citizens of higher class than his own assumed Six. He made his way around to the narrow alley that ran past the rear of the building.

There was a Class Five guard armed with a heavy truncheon, standing by the door that led into the workers entrance. The Guesser, as he had been instructed by Deyla, had his card out as he neared the doorway. The guard hardly even glanced at it before wagging a finger indicating that The Guesser was to pass. He didn't bother to speak.

The Guesser was trembling as he walked on in—partly in anger, partly in fear. It seemed ridiculous that one glance had not told the guard that he was not a Class Six. The Guesser was quite certain that he didn't *look* like a Sixer. But then, Fives were not very perceptive people, anyway.

The Guesser went on walking into the complex corridors of the lower part of the building, following directions that had been given him by Deyla. There was no hesitation on his part; his memory for things like that was as near perfect as any record of the past can be. He knew her instructions well enough to have navigated the building in the dark.

Again, The Guesser found himself vaguely perturbed by the relative freedom of Sixers. As long as they got their jobs done there was almost no checking as to how they spent their time. Well, actually, the jobs to which they were suited were rather trivial—some of them were actually "made work." After all, in a well-run society, it was axiomatic that everyone have basic job security; that's what kept everyone happy.

Of course, there were plenty of Sixers working in construction and on farms who were kept on their toes by overseers, but cleaning jobs and such didn't need such supervision. A thing can only be so clean; there's no quota to fill and exceed.

After several minutes of walking and climbing stairs—Sixers did not use lift chutes or drop chutes—he found the room where Deyla had told him to meet her. It was a small storeroom containing cleaning tools and supplies. She was waiting for him.

And, now that the time had actually come for them to act on her plan, fear showed on her face. The Guesser knew then that he had been right in his decision. But he said nothing about that yet.

"Now are you certain about the destination?" he asked before she could speak.

She nodded nervously. "Yes, yes. D'Graski's Planet. That's what he say."

"Good." The Guesser had waited for three weeks for this day, but he had known it would come eventually. D'Graski's Planet was the nearest repair base; sooner or later, another ship had to make that as a port of call from Viornis. He had told Deyla that the route to D'Graski's was the one most likely to be attacked by Misfit ships, that she would have to wait until a ship bound for there landed at the spaceport before the two of them could carry out their plan. And now the ship was here.

"What's the name of the ship?" he asked.

"Th-the *Trobwell*."

"What's the matter with you?" he asked, suddenly and harshly.

She shivered. "Scared. Awful scared."

"I thought so. Have you got the clothing?"

"Y-yes." Then she broke down completely. "You got to help me! You got to show me how to act like Exec lady! Show me how to talk! Otherwise, we both get caught!"

He shook her to quiet her. "Shut up!" When she had quieted, he said: "You are right, of course; we'd both be caught if you were to slip up. But I'm afraid it's too late to teach you now. It's always been too late."

"Wha-what ... what you mean?"

"Never mind. Where's the traveling case?"

She pointed silently towards a shelf, one of many that lined the room.

The Guesser went over and pulled out a box of cleaning dust-filters. Behind it was a gold-and-blue traveling case. The girl had spent months stealing the little things inside it, bit by bit, long before The Guesser had come into her life, dreaming of the day when she would become an Exec lady. Not until he had come had she tried to project that dream into reality.

The Guesser thumbed the opener, and the traveling case split into halves. The sight of the golden uniform of a Class One Executive gleamed among the women's clothing. And she had forgotten no detail; the expensive beamgun and holster lay beneath the uniform.

He picked it up carefully, almost reverently. It was the first time he'd held one since he'd been beamed down himself, so long ago. He turned the intensity knob down to the "stun" position.

"We going to put them on *here*?" she asked in a hushed voice. "Just walk out? Me, I scared!"

He stood up, the stun gun in his hand, its muzzle pointed toward the floor. "Let me tell you something," he said, keeping his voice as kindly as he could. "Maybe it will keep you out of further trouble. You could never pass as an Exec. Never. It wouldn't matter how long you tried to practice, you simply couldn't do it. Your mind is incapable of it. Your every word, your every mannerism, would be a dead giveaway."

There was shock slowly coming over her face. "You not going to take me," she said, in her soft, flat voice.

"No."

"How I ever going to get to Misfits? How?" There were tears in her eyes, just beginning to fill the lower lids.

"I'm sorry," he said, "but I'm afraid your idealized Misfits just don't exist. The whole idea is ridiculous. Their insane attacks on us show that they have unstable, warped minds—and don't tell me about machine-operated or robot-controlled ships. You don't build a machine to do a job when a human being is cheaper. Your fanciful Misfit nation would have dissolved long ago if it had tried to operate on the principle that a lower-class human is worth more than a machine.

"You'll be better off here, doing your job; there are no such havens as Classless Misfit societies."

She was shaking her head as he spoke, trying to fight away the words that were shattering her cherished dream. And the words were having their effect because she believed him, because he believed himself.

"No," she was saying softly. "No, no, no."

The Guesser brought up the gun muzzle and shot her where she stood.

Half an hour later, The Guesser was fighting down his own fear. He was hard put to do it, but he managed to stride purposefully across the great spacefield toward the towering bulk of the *Trobwell* without betraying that fear.

If they caught him now—

He closed his mind against the thought and kept on walking.

At the base of the landing cradle, a Class Four guard was standing stolidly. He bowed his head and saluted as The Guesser walked by.

It's so easy! The Guesser thought. *So incredibly easy!*

Even the captain of the ship would only be a Class Two Exec. No one would question him—no one would *dare* to.

A lieutenant looked up, startled as he entered the ship itself, and saluted hurriedly.

"It's an honor to have you aboard, great sir," he said apologetically, "but you realize, of course, that we are taking off in a very few minutes."

Words choked suddenly in the Guesser's throat, and he had to swallow hard before he could speak. "I know that. I'm ... I'm going with you."

The lieutenant's eyes widened a trifle. "No orders have been taped to that effect, great sir."

This is it! thought The Guesser. He would either put it over now or he'd be lost—completely.

He scowled. "Then tape them! I will apologize to the captain about this last-minute change, but I want no delay in take-off. It is absolutely vital that I reach D'Graski's Planet quickly!"

The lieutenant blanched a little. "Sorry, great sir! I'll see that the orders are taped. You wish a cabin?"

"Certainly. I presume you have an adequate one?"

"I'm sure we do, great sir; I'll have the Quarters Officer set one up for you immediately."

"Excellent," said The Guesser. "Excellent."

Fifteen minutes later, the *Trobwell* lifted from the planet exactly on schedule. The Guesser, in his assigned room, breathed a deep sigh of relief. He was on his way to D'Graski's Planet at last!

"Tell me, great sir," said the captain, "what do you think the final decision on this case should be?" He shoved the sheaf of papers across the desk to The Guesser.

The Guesser looked at them unseeingly, his mind in a whirl. For five days now, the captain of the *Trobwell* had been handing him papers and asking him questions of that sort. And, since he was the ranking Exec, he was expected to give some sort of answer.

This one seemed even more complex than the others, and none of them had been simple. He forced his eyes to read the print, forced his mind to absorb the facts.

These were not clear-cut problems of the kind he had been dealing with all his life. Computing an orbit mentally was utterly simple compared with these fantastic problems.

It was a question of a choice of three different types of cargoes, to be carried to three different destinations. Which would be the best choice? The most profitable from an energy standpoint, as far as the ship was concerned, considering the relative values of the cargoes? What about relative spoilage rates as compared with fluctuating markets?

The figures were all there, right before him in plain type. But they meant nothing. Often, he had been unable to see how there was any difference between one alternative and another.

Once, he had been handed the transcripts of a trial on ship, during which two conflicting stories of an incident had been told by witnesses, and a third by the defendant. How could one judge on something like that? And yet he had been asked to.

He bit his lower lip in nervousness, and then stopped immediately as he realized that this was no time to display nerves.

"I should say that Plan B was the best choice," he said at last. It was a wild stab at nothing, he realized, and yet he could do no better. Had he made a mistake?

The captain nodded gravely. "Thank you, great sir. You've been most helpful. The making of decisions is too important to permit of its being considered lightly."

The Guesser could take it no longer. "It was a pleasure to be of assistance," he said as he stood up, "but there are certain of my own papers to be gone over before we reach D'Graski's Planet. I trust I shall be able to finish them."

The captain stood up quickly. "Oh, certainly, great sir. I hope I haven't troubled you with my rather minor problems. I shan't disturb you again during the remainder of the trip."

The Guesser thanked him and headed for his cabin. He lay on his bed for hours with a splitting headache. If it weren't for the fact that he had been forced to go about it this way, he would never have tried to impersonate an Executive. Never!

He wasn't even sure he could carry it off for the rest of the trip.

Somehow, he managed to do it. He kept to himself and pretended that the blue traveling bag held important papers for him to work on, but he dreaded mealtimes, when he was forced to sit with the captain and two lieutenants, chattering like monkeys as they ate. And he'd had to talk, too; being silent might ruin the impression he had made.

He hated it. A mouth was built for talking and eating, granted—but not at the same time. Of course, the Execs had it down to a fine art; they had a great deal more time for their meals than a Class Three, and they managed to eat a few bites while someone else was talking, then talk while the other ate. It was disconcerting and The Guesser never completely got the hang of coordinating the two.

Evidently, however, none of the three officers noticed it.

By the time the *Trobwell* reached D'Graski's Planet, he was actually physically ill from the strain. One of the worst times had come during an attack by Misfit ships. He had remained prone on his bed, his mind tensing at each change of acceleration in the ship. Without the screens and computer to give him data, he couldn't Guess, and yet he kept trying; he couldn't stop himself. What made it worse was the knowledge that his Guesses were coming out wrong almost every time.

When the ship finally settled into the repair cradle, The Guesser could hardly keep his hands from shaking. He left the ship feeling broken and old. But as his feet touched the ground, he thought to himself: *I made it! In spite of everything, I made it!*

And then two men walked toward him—two men wearing blue uniforms of a ship's Disciplinary Corps. He not only recognized their faces, but he saw the neat embroidery on the lapels.

IV

Space Captain Humbolt Reed, commander of the *Naipor*, looked at his Master Guesser and shook his head. "I ought to have you shot. Declassification is too good for you by far. Impersonating an Executive! How did you ever think you'd get away with it?" He paused, then barked: "Come on! Explain!"

"It was the only way I could think of to get back to the *Naipor*, great sir," said The Guesser weakly.

The captain leaned back slowly in his seat. "Well, there's one extenuating circumstance. The officers of the *Trobwell* reported that you were a fine source of amusement during the trip. They enjoyed your clownish performance very much.

"Now, tell me exactly why you didn't show up for take-off on Viornis."

The Guesser explained what had happened, his voice low. He told about having something thrown at him, about the beamgun being fired at him. He told about the girl, Deyla. He told everything in a monotonous undertone.

The captain nodded when he was through. "That tallies. It fits with the confession we got."

"Confession, sir?" The Guesser looked blank.

Captain Reed sighed. "You're supposed to be a Guesser. Tell me, do you think I personally, could beam you from behind?"

"You're the captain, sir."

"I don't mean for disciplinary purposes," the captain growled. "I mean from ambush."

"Well ... no, sir. As soon as I knew you were there, I'd be able to Guess where you'd fire. And I wouldn't be there."

"Then what kind of person would be able to throw something at you so that you'd Guess, so that you'd dodge, and be so preoccupied with that first dodging that you'd miss the Guess on the aiming of the beamgun because of sheer physical inertia? What kind of person would know exactly where you'd be when you dodged? What kind of person would know exactly where to aim that beamgun?"

The Guesser had seen what was coming long before the captain finished his wordy interrogation.

"Another Guesser, sir," he said. His eyes narrowed.

"Exactly," said Captain Reed. "Your apprentice, Kraybo. He broke down during a Misfit attack on the way here; he was never cut out to be a Master Guesser, and even though he tried to kill you to get the job, he couldn't handle it. He cracked completely as soon as he tried to co-ordinate alone. We've actually missed you, Master Guesser."

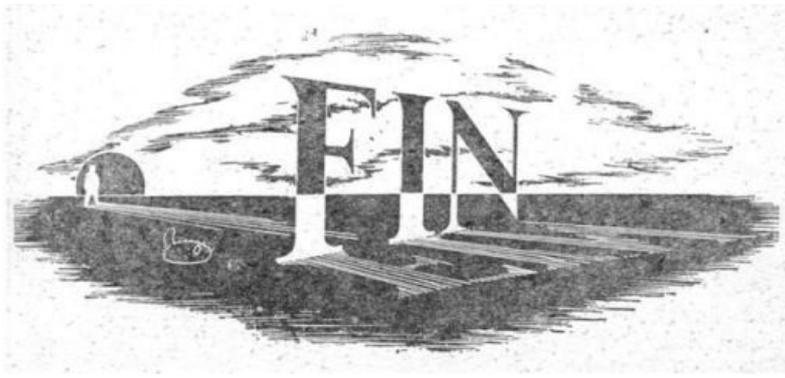
"May I see to the disciplining of Kraybo, sir?" The Guesser asked coldly.

"You're too late. He's been declassified." The captain looked down at the papers on his desk. "You may consider yourself reinstated, Master Guesser, since the fault was not yours."

"However, masquerading as an Exec, no matter how worthy your motives, cannot be allowed to go unpunished. You will report to the Discipline Master for a three-and-three every day for the next five days. And you will not be allowed to leave the ship during the time we remain in repair dock. Dismissed."

"Thank you, great sir." The Guesser turned on his heel and marched out, heading for the Discipline Master.

It was good to be home again.



*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK BUT, I DON'T THINK ***

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