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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK BRINK OF MADNESS ***



BRINK OF MADNESS

By **Walt Sheldon**

Illustrated by **KELLY FREAS**

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Chapter I

The night the visitors came Richard Pell worked late among the great banks of criminological computers. He whistled to himself, knowing that he was way off key but not caring. Ciel, his wife, was still in his mind's eye; he'd seen her on the viewer and talked with her not ten minutes ago.

"Be home shortly, baby," he'd said, "soon as I fill in a form or two."

"All right, dear. I'll wait," she'd answered, with just the slightest tone of doubt.

It was an important night. It was at once their second anniversary and the beginning of their second honeymoon. Just how Pell—knobby, more or less homely, and easygoing—had won himself a lovely, long-limbed blonde like Ciel was something of a mystery to many of their friends. She could hardly have married him for his money. Central Investigation Bureau agents were lucky if all their extras and bonuses brought them up to a thousand credits a year.

C.I.B. Agent Pell used his head, even if he did rely on hunches more than on the computer. In fact, when the game got rough, he found that to use his head, he first had to keep it...

Pell had unquestionably caught her in a romantic moment. Maybe that was part of the trouble—part of the reason they needed this second honeymoon, this period of re-acquaintance so badly. Being the wife of a C.I.B. agent meant sitting at home nine-tenths of the time while he was working on a case, and then not hearing about the case for security reasons during the one-tenth of the time he was with her.

Four times now Pell had been ready to take his vacation; four times last minute business had come up. No more, though, by golly. Tonight he'd get out of here just as quickly as....

The Identifier, beyond the door, began to hum. That meant somebody was putting his hand to the opaque screen, and if the scanner recognized the fingerprints the door would open. Pell scowled at the bulky shadows outside.

"Go away, whoever you are," he muttered to himself.

Some of the other agents were out there, no doubt; they were always getting sudden inspirations late at night and returning to use the computers again. In fact, it had been tactfully suggested to Agent Richard Pell that he might use the computers a little more himself instead of relying on hunches as he so often did. "Investigation's a cold science, not a fancy art," Chief Larkin was fond of saying to the group—with his eyes on Pell.

Well, whoever it was, Pell was definitely through. No time-wasting conversation for him! He was ready for six glorious weeks of saved-up vacation time. He and Ciel, early tomorrow, would grab a rocket for one of the Moon resorts, and there they'd just loaf and relax and pay attention to each other. Try to regain whatever it was they'd had....

The door opened and Chief Larkin walked in.

Chief Eustace J. Larkin was tall, in his forties, but still boyishly handsome. He dressed expensively and well. He was dynamic and confident and he always had about him just the faintest aroma of very expensive shaving cologne. He had a Master's degree in criminology and his rise to the post of Director, C.I.B., had been sudden, dramatic and impressive. Not the least of his talents was a keen sense of public relations.

"I—uh—was on my way out," said Pell. He reached for his hat. Funny about hats: few people traveled topside anymore, and in the climate-conditioned tunnels you didn't need a hat. But C.I.B. agents had to be neat and dignified; regulations required hats and ties and cuffs and lapels. Thus, you could always spot a C.I.B. agent a mile away.

Larkin had a dimple when he smiled and Pell would bet he knew it. "We'd have called your home if we hadn't found you here. Sit down, Dick."

Pell sat glumly. For the first time, he noticed the men who had come in with the Chief. He recognized both. One was fiftyish, tall, solidly-built and well-dressed on the conservative side. His face was strong, square and oddly pale, as if someone had taken finest white marble and roughly hacked a face into it. Pell had seen that face in faxpapers often. The man was Theodor Rysland, once a wealthy corporation lawyer, now a World Government adviser in an unofficial way. Some admired him as a selfless public servant; others swore he was a power-mad tyrant. Few were indifferent.

"I'm sure you recognize Mr. Rysland," said Chief Larkin, smiling. "And this is Dr. Walter Nebel, of the World Department of Education."

Dr. Walter Nebel was slight and had a head remarkably tiny in proportion to the rest of him. He wore cropped hair. His eyes were turtle-lidded and at first impression sleepy, and then, with a second look—wary. Pell remembered that he had won fame some time ago by discovering the electrolytic enzyme in the thought process. Pell wasn't sure exactly what this was, but the fapapers had certainly made a fuss about it at the time.

He shook hands with the two men and then said to Larkin, "What's up?"

"Patience," said Larkin and shuffled chairs into place.

Rysland sat down solidly and gravely; Nebel perched. Rysland looked at Pell with a strong, level stare and said, "It's my sincere hope that this meeting tonight will prevent resumption of the war with Venus."

Larkin said, "Amen."

Pell stared back in some surprise. High-level stuff!

Rysland saw his stare and chuckled. "Chief Larkin tells me your sympathies are more or less Universalist. Not that it would be necessary, but it helps."

"Oh," said Pell, with mild bewilderment. The difference between the Universal and Defense parties was pretty clear-cut. The Universalists hoped to resume full relations with Venus and bring about a really secure peace through friendship and trade. It would admittedly be a tough struggle, and the Defenders didn't think it was possible. Forget Venus, said they; fortify Earth, keep the line of demarcation on Mars, and sit tight.

"But there is, as you may know," said Rysland, "a third course in our relations with Venus."

"There is?" asked Pell. From the corner of his eye he saw Chief Larkin looking at him with an expression of—what, amusement? Yes, amusement, largely, but with a touch of contempt, too, perhaps. Hard to say.

"The third course," said Rysland, not smiling, "would be to attack Venus again, resume the war, and hope to win quickly. We know Venus is exhausted from the recent struggle. A sudden, forceful attack might possibly subjugate her. At least, that is the argument of a certain group called the Supremists."

Dr. Nebel spoke for the first time. Pell realized that the man had been watching him closely. His voice was sibilant; it seemed to drag itself through wet grass. "Also Venus is psychologically unprepared for war; the Supremists believe that, too."

Pell reached back into his memory. The Supremists. They were a minor political party—sort of a cult, too. The outfit had sprung up in the last year or so. Supremists believed that Earthmen, above all other creatures, had a destiny—were chosen—were supreme. They had several followers as delegates in World Congress. General impression: slightly crackpot.

"The Supremists," said Theodor Rysland, tapping his hard, white palm, and leaning forward, "have been calling for attack. Aggression. Starting the war with Venus all over again. And they're not only a vociferous nuisance. They have an appeal in this business of Earthman's supremacy. They're gaining converts every day. In short, *they've now become dangerous.*"

Pell thought it over as Rysland talked. Certainly the idea of renewed war was nightmarish. He'd been in the last one: who hadn't? It had started in 2117, the year he was born, and it had dragged on for twenty-five years until T-day and the truce. The causes? Well, both Earth and Venus worked the mineral deposits on Mars unimpeded by the non-intelligent insectile life on that planet, and the original arguments had been about those mineral deposits, though there were enough for a dozen planets there. The causes were more complicated and obscure than that. Semantics, partly. There was freedom as Earthmen saw it and freedom as the Venusians saw it. Same with honor and good and evil. They were always two different things. And then Venusians had a greenish tinge to their skins and called the Earthmen, in their clicking language, "Pink-faces." And both Earthmen and Venusians hated like the devil to see the other get away with anything.

Anyway, there had been war, terrible war. Space battle, air battle, landing, repulse. Stalemate. Finally, through utter weariness perhaps, truce. Now, a taut, uneasy, suspicious peace. Communications opened, a few art objects mutually exchanged. Immigration for a few Venusian dancers or students or diplomats. It wasn't much, but it was all in the right direction. At least Pell felt so.

Rysland was saying: "We're not sure, of course, but we suspect—we *feel*—that more than mere accident may be behind these Supremists."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Someone seeking power, perhaps. As I said, we don't know. We want to find out. Dr. Nebel has

been interested for some time in the curious psychology of these Supremists—their blind, unthinking loyalty to their cause, for instance. He is, as you know, a special assistant in the Department of Education. He asked my help in arranging for an investigation, and I agreed with him wholeheartedly that one should be made."

"And I told these gentlemen," said Chief Larkin, "that I'd put a detail on it right away."

Now Pell believed he saw through it. Larkin didn't believe it was important at all; he was just obliging these Vips. A man couldn't have too many friends in World Government circles, after all. But of course Larkin couldn't afford to put one of his bright, machine-minded boys on it, and so Pell was the patsy.

"Could I remind you," said Pell, "that my vacation is supposed to start tomorrow?"

"Now, now, Dick," said Larkin, turning on the personality, "this won't take you long. Just a routine report. The computers ought to give you all the information you need in less than a day."

"That's what you always say, every time I'm ready to take a vacation. I've been saving up for two years now...."

"Dick, that's hardly the right attitude for an agent who is so close to making second grade."

Larkin had him over a barrel, there. Pell desperately wanted to make his promotion. Second-graders didn't spend their time at the control banks gathering data; they did mostly desk work and evaluation. They had a little more time to spend with their wives. He said, "Okay, okay," and got up.

"Where are you going?"

"To get my wife on the viewer and tell her I won't be home for a while after all."

He left the three of them chuckling and thought: *He jests at scars who never felt a wound*. He didn't say it aloud. You could quote formulae or scientific precepts in front of Larkin, but not Shakespeare.

He punched out his home number and waited until Ciel's image swirled into the viewplate. His heart went boppety-bop as it always did. Hair of polished gold. Dark eyes, ripe olives, a little large for her face and sometimes deep and fathomless. She wore a loose, filmy nightgown and the suggestion of her body under it was enough to bring on a touch of madness in him.

"Let me say it," Ciel said. She wasn't smiling. "You won't be home for a while. You've got another case."

"Well—yes. That's it, more or less." Pell swallowed.

"Oh, Dick."

"I'm sorry, honey. It's just that something important came up. I've got a conference on my hands. It shouldn't take more than an hour."

"And we were supposed to leave for the moon in the morning."

"Listen, baby, this is absolutely the last time. I mean it. As soon as this thing is washed up we'll *really* take that vacation. Look, I'll tell you what, I'll meet you somewhere in an hour. We'll have some fun—take in a floor show—drink a little meth. We haven't done that in a long time. How about the Stardust Cafe? I hear they've got a terrific new mentalist there."

Ciel said, "No."

"Don't be like that. We need an evening out. It'll hold us until I get this new case washed up. That won't be long, but at least we'll have a little relaxation."

Ciel said, "Well...."

"Attababy. One hour. Absolutely. You just go to Station B-90, take the lift to topside and it's right on Shapley Boulevard there. You can't miss it."

"I know where it is," said Ciel. She shook her finger. "Richard Pell, so help me, if you stand me up this time...."

"Baby!" he said in a tone of deep injury.

"Goodbye, Dick." She clicked off.

Pell had the feeling that even the free-flowing meth and the gaiety of the Stardust Cafe wouldn't really help matters much. He sighed deeply as he turned and went back into the other room.

Chapter II

A little over an hour later he stepped from the elevator kiosk at Station B-90 and breathed the night air of topside. It was less pure actually than the carefully controlled tunnel air, but it was somehow infinitely more wonderful. At least to a sentimental primitive boob like Richard Pell, it was. Oh, he knew that it was infinitely more sensible to live and work entirely underground as people did these days—but just the same he loved the look of the black sky with the crushed diamonds of stars thrown across it and he loved the uneven breeze and the faint smell of trees and grass.

This particular topside section was given over to entertainment; all about him were theaters and cafes and picnic groves and airports for flying sports. A few hundred feet ahead he could see the three-dimensional atmospheric projection that marked the Stardust Cafe, and he could hear faintly the mournful sound of a Venusian lament being played by the askarins. He was glad they hadn't banned Venusian music, anyway, although he wouldn't be surprised if they did, some day.

That was one of the things these Supremists were trying to do. Rysland and Chief Larkin had given him a long and careful briefing on the outfit so that he could start work tomorrow with his partner, Steve Kronski. Steve, of course, would shrug phlegmatically, swing his big shoulders toward the computer rooms and say, "Let's go to work." It would be just another assignment to him.

As a matter of fact, the job would be not without a certain amount of interest. There were a couple of puzzling things about these Supremists that Rysland had pointed out. First of all, they didn't seem to be at all organized or incorporated. No headquarters, no officers that anybody knew about. They just *were*. It was a complete mystery how a man became a Supremist, how they kept getting new members all the time. Yet you couldn't miss a Supremist whenever you met one. Before the conversation was half over he'd start spouting about the destiny of Earthmen and the general inferiority of all other creatures and so on. It sounded like hogwash to Pell. He wondered how such an attitude could survive in a scientific age.

Nor would a Supremist be essentially a moron or a neurotic; they were found in all walks of life, at all educational and emotional levels. Rysland told how he had questioned a few, trying to discover when, where and how they joined the movement: Apparently there was nothing to join, at least to hear them tell it. They just knew one day that they were Supremists, and that was the word. Rysland had shaken his head sadly and said, "Their belief is completely without logic—and maybe that's what makes it so strong. Maybe that's what frightens me about it."

Okay, tomorrow then Pell would tackle it. Tomorrow he'd think about it. Right now he had a date with his best girl.

He entered the cafe and the music of the askarins swirled more loudly about his head and he looked through the smoke and colored light until he spotted Ciel sitting in a rear booth. The place was crowded. On the small dance floor before the orchestra nearly nude Venusian girls were going through the writhing motions of a serpentine dance. Their greenish skins shimmered iridescently. The sad-faced Venusian musicians on the band-stand waved their graceful, spatulated fingers over their curious, boxlike askarins, producing changing tones and overtones by the altered capacitance. A rocketman in the black and silver uniform of the Space Force was trying to stumble drunkenly out on to the floor with the dancers and his friends were holding him back. There was much laughter about the whole thing. The Venusian girls kept dancing and didn't change their flat, almost lifeless expressions.

Ciel looked up without smiling when he got to the booth. She had a half-finished glass of meth before her.

He tried a smile anyway. "Hello, baby." He sat down.

She said, "I didn't really think you'd get here. I could have had dates with exactly eleven spacemen. I kept count."

"You have been faithful to me, Cynara, in your fashion. I need a drink and don't want to wait for the waitress. Mind?" He took her half glass of meth and tossed it down. He felt the wonderful illusion of an explosion in his skull, and it seemed to him that his body was suddenly the strongest in the world and that he could whip everybody in the joint with one arm tied behind his back. He said, "Wow."

Ciel tried a smile now. "It does that to you when you're not used to it."

The first effect passed and he felt only the warmth of the drink. He signaled a waitress and ordered a couple more. "Don't forget to remind me to take a hangover pill before I go to work in the morning," he told Ciel.

"You—you are going to work in the morning, then?"

"Afraid I can't get out of it."

"And the moon trip's off?"

"Not off, just postponed. We'll get to it, don't worry."

"Dick."

"Yes?"

"I can take it just so long, putting our vacation off and off and off." Her eyes were earnest, liquid and opaque. "I've been thinking about it. Trying to arrive at something. I'm beginning to wonder, Dick, if maybe we hadn't just better, well—call it quits, or something."

He stared at her. "Baby, what are you saying?"

A sudden, fanfare-like blast from the orchestra interrupted. They looked at the dance floor. There was a flash of light, a swirling of mist, and within the space of a second the Venusian girls suddenly disappeared and their place was taken by a tall, hawk-nosed, dark-eyed man with a cloak slung dramatically over one shoulder. The audience applauded.

"That's Marco, the new mentalist," said Pell.

Ciel shrugged to show that she wasn't particularly impressed. Neither was Pell, to tell the truth. Mentalists were all the rage, partly because everybody could practice a little amateur telepathy and hypnotism in his own home. Mentalists, of course, made a career of it and were much better at it than anybody else.

Their drinks came and they watched Marco go through his act in a rather gloomy silence. Marco was skillful, but not especially unusual. He did the usual stuff: calling out things that people wrote on slips of paper, calling out dates on coins, and even engaging in mental duels wherein the challenger wrote a phrase, concealed it from Marco, and then deliberately tried to keep him from reading it telepathically. He had the usual hypnotism session with volunteers who were certain they could resist. He made them hop around the stage like monkeys, burn their fingers on pieces of ice, and so on. The audience roared with laughter. Pell and Ciel just kept staring.

When Marco had finished his act and the thundering applause had faded the Venusian dancing girls came back on the stage again.

Ciel yawned.

Pell said, "Me, too. Let's get out of here."

It wasn't until they were home in their underground apartment and getting ready for bed that Ciel turned to him and said, "You see?"

He was buttoning his pajamas. "See what?"

"It's *us*, Dick. It's not the floor show, or the meth, or anything—it's *us*. We can't enjoy *anything* together any more."

He said, "Now wait a minute...."

But she had already stepped into the bedroom and slammed the door. He heard the lock click.

"Hey," he said, "what am I supposed to do, sleep out here?"

He took the ensuing silence to mean that he was.

And he did.

The next morning, as he came into the office, Pell scowled deeply and went to his desk without saying good morning to anybody. Ciel had kept herself locked in the bedroom and he had made his own breakfast. How it was all going to end he didn't know. He had the feeling that she was working herself up to the decision to leave him. And the real hell of it was that he couldn't exactly blame her.

"Morning, partner," said a voice above him. He looked up. Way up. Steve Kronski was built along the general lines of a water buffalo. The usual battered grin was smeared across his face. "I see we got a new assignment."

"Oh—did Larkin brief you on it already?"

"Yeah. Before I could get my hat off. Funny set-up, all right. I punched for basic data before you got in. Hardly any."

"Maybe that means something in itself. Maybe somebody saw to it that the information never got into the central banks."

The C.I.B. computers could be hooked into the central banks which stored information on nearly everything and everybody. If you incorporated, filed for a patent, paid taxes, voted, or just were born, the central banks had an electronic record of it.

Kronski jerked his thumb toward the computer room. "I punched for names of Supremist

members coupla minutes ago. Thought maybe we could start in that way."

Pell followed, his mind not really on the job yet. He wasn't at his best working with the computers, and yet operating them was ninety per cent of investigation. He supposed he'd get used to it sometime.

Three walls of the big computer room were lined with control racks, consisting mostly of keyboard setups. Code symbols and index cards were placed in handy positions. The C.I.B. circuits, of course, were adapted to the specialized work of investigation. In the memory banks of tubes and relays there was a master file of all names—aliases and nicknames included—with which the organization had ever been concerned. Criminals, witnesses, complaints, everyone. Code numbers linked to the names showed where data on their owner could be found. A name picked at random might show that person to have data in the suspect file, the arrest file, the psychological file, the modus operandi file, and so forth. Any of the data in these files could be checked, conversely, against the names.

Kronski walked over to where letter sized cards were flipping from a slot into a small bin. He said, "Didn't even have to dial in Central Data for these. Seems we got a lot of Supremist members right in our own little collection."

Pell picked up one of the cards and examined it idly. Vertical columns were inscribed along the card, each with a heading, and with further sub-headed columns. Under the column marked *Modus Operandi*, for instance, there were subcolumns titled *Person Attacked*, *Property Attacked*, *How Attacked*, *Means of Attack*, *Object of Attack*, and *Trademark*. Columns of digits, one to nine, were under each item. If the digits 3 and 2 were punched under *Trademark* the number 32 could be fed into the Operational Data machine and this machine would then give back the information on a printed slip that number 32 stood for the trademark of leaving cigar butts at the scene of the crime.

"Got five hundred now," said Kronski. "I'll let a few more run in case we need alternates."

"Okay," said Pell. "I'll start this batch through the analyzer."

He took the cards across the room to a machine about twenty feet long and dropped them into the feeder at one end. Channels and rollers ran along the top of this machine and under them were a series of vertical slots into which the selected cards could drop. He cleared the previous setting and ran the pointer to *Constants*. He set the qualitative dial to 85%. This meant that on the first run the punch hole combinations in the cards would be scanned and any item common to 85% of the total would be registered in a relay. Upon the second run the machine would select the cards with this constant and drop them into a slot corresponding with that heading. Further scanning, within the slot itself, would pick out the constant number.

Pell started the rollers whirring.

Kronski came over. He rubbed his battered nose. "Hope we get outside on this case. I'm gettin' sick o' the office. Haven't been out in weeks."

Pell nodded. Oh, for the life of a C.I.B. man. In teleplays they cornered desperate criminals in the dark ruins of the ancient cities topside, and fought it out with freezers. The fact was, although regulations called for them to carry freezers in their shoulder holsters, one in a thousand ever got a chance to use them.

Pell said, "Maybe you need a vacation."

"Maybe. Only I keep putting my vacation off. Got a whole month saved up now."

"Me, too." Pell sighed. Ciel would probably be pacing the floor back home now, trying to make up her mind. To break it up, or not to break it up? There would be no difficulty, really: she had been a pretty good commercial artist before they were married and she wouldn't have any trouble finding a job again somewhere in World City.

The rollers kept whirring and the cards flipping along with a whispering sound.

"Wonder what we're looking into these Supremists for?" asked Kronski. "I always thought they were some kind of harmless crackpots."

"The Chief doesn't think so. Neither does Theodor Rysland." He told Kronski more about the interview last night.

Presently the machine stopped, clicked several times and began rolling the other way.

"Well, it found something," said Kronski.

They kept watching. Oh, for the life of a C.I.B. man. Cards began to drop into one of the slots. The main heading was *Physical* and the sub-heading *Medical History*. Pell frowned and said, "Certainly didn't expect to find a constant in this department." He picked up a few of the first cards and looked at them, hoping to catch the constant by eye. He caught it. "What's 445 under this heading?"

Kronski said, "I'll find out," and stepped over to the Operational Data board. He worked it, took the printed slip that came out and called back: "Record of inoculation."

"That's a funny one."

"Yup. Sure is." Kronski stared at the slip and scratched his neck. "It must be just any old kind inoculation. If it was special—like typhoid or tetanus or something—it'd have another digit."

"There must be some other boil-downs, if we could think of them." Pell was frowning heavily. Some of the other men, used to the machines, could grab a boil-down out of thin air, run the cards again and get another significant constant. The machine, however, inhibited Pell. It made him feel uneasy and stupid whenever he was around it.

"How about location?" suggested Kronski.

Pell shook his head. "I checked a few by eye. All different numbers under location. Some of 'em come from World City, some from Mars Landing, some from way out in the sticks. Nothing significant there."

"Maybe what we need is a cup of coffee."

Pell grinned. "Best idea all morning. Come on."

Some minutes later they sat across from each other at a table in the big cafeteria on the seventy-third level. It was beginning to be crowded now with personnel from other departments and bureaus. The coffee urge came for nearly everybody in the government offices at about the same time. Pell was studying by eye a handful of spare data cards he'd brought along and Kronski was reading faxpaper clippings from a large manila envelope marked *Supremist Party*. Just on a vague hunch Pell had viewplated Central Public Relations and had them send the envelope down by tube.

"*Prominent Educator Addresses Supremist Rally*," Kronski muttered. "*Three Spaceport Cargomen Arrested at Supremist Riot. Young Supremists Form Rocket Club*. Looks like anybody and everybody can be a Supremist. And his grandmother. Wonder how they do it?"

"Don't know." Pell wasn't really listening.

"And here's a whole town went over to the Supremists. On the moon."

"Uh-huh," said Pell.

Kronski sipped his coffee loudly. A few slender, graceful young men from World Commerce looked at him distastefully. "Happened just this year. New Year they all went over. Augea, in the Hercules Mountains. Big celebration."

Pell looked up and said, "Wait a minute...."

"Wait for what? I'm not goin' anywhere. Not on this swivel-chair of a job, damn it."

"New Year they all become Supremists. And the last week of December everybody on the moon gets his inoculations, right?"

"Search me."

"But I know that. I found that out when I was tailing those two gamblers who had a place on the moon, remember?"

"So it may be a connection." Kronski shrugged.

"It may be the place where we can study a bunch of these cases in a batch instead of picking 'em one by one."

"You mean we oughta take a trip to the moon?"

"Might not hurt for a few days."

Kronski was grinning at him.

"What are you grinning at?"

"First you got to stay over on your vacation, so you can't go to the moon with your wife. Now all of a sudden you decide duty has got to take you to the moon, huh?"

Pell grinned back then. "What are you squawking about? You said you wanted to get out on this case."

Kronski, still grinning, got up. "I'm not complaining. I'm just demonstrating my powers of deduction, as they say in teleplays. Come on, let's go make rocket reservations."

Chapter III

The big tourist rocket let them down at the Endymion Crater Landing, and they went through the usual immigration and customs formalities in the underground city there. They stayed in a hotel overnight, Pell and Ciel looking very much like tourists, Kronski tagging along and looking faintly out of place. In the morning—morning according to the 24 hour earth clock, that is—they took the jitney rocket to the resort town of Augea, in the Hercules Mountains. The town was really a cliff dwelling, built into the side of a great precipice with quartz windows overlooking a tremendous, stark valley.



It was hard to say just what attraction the moon had as a vacation land, and it was a matter of unfathomable taste. You either liked it, or you didn't. If you didn't, you couldn't understand what people who liked it saw in it. They couldn't quite explain. "It's so quiet. It's so vast. It's so beautiful," they'd say, but never anything clearer than that.

Augea itself was like twenty other resorts scattered throughout both the northern and southern latitudes of the moon. Except for the military posts and scientific research stations the moon had little value other than as a vacation land. People came there to rest, to look at the bizarre landscape through quartz, or occasionally to don spacesuits and go out on guided exploration trips.

Immediately after checking into their hotel Pell and Kronski got directions to the office of the Resident Surgeon and prepared to go there. Ciel looked on quietly as Pell tightened the straps of his shoulder holster and checked the setting on his freezer.

Ciel said, "I knew it."

"Knew what, honey?" Pell went to the mirror to brush his hair. He wasn't sure it would materially improve the beauty of his long, knobby, faintly melancholy face, but he did it anyway.

"The minute we get here you have to go out on business."

He turned, kissed her, then held and patted her hand. "That's just because I want to get it over with. Then I'll have time for you. Then we'll have lots of time together."

She melted into him suddenly. She put her arms around his neck and held him tightly. "If I didn't love you, you big lug, it wouldn't be so bad. But, Dick, I can't go on like this much longer. I just can't."

"Now, baby," he started to say.

There was a knock on the door then and he knew Kronski was ready. He broke away from her, threw a kiss and said, "Later. Later, baby."

She nodded and held her under lip in with her upper teeth.

He sighed and left.

Pell and Kronski left the hotel and started walking along the winding tunnel with the side wall of quartz. On their right the huge valley, with its stark, unearthly landshapes, stretched away. It was near the end of the daylight period and the shadows from the distant peaks, across the valley, were long and deep. Some of them, with little reflected light, seemed to be patches of nothingness. Pell fancied he could step through them into another dimension.

All about them, even here in the side of the mountain, and behind the thick quartz, there was the odd, utterly dead silence of the moon.

Their footsteps echoed sparsely in the corridor.

Pell said to Kronski, "Got the story all straight?"

"Like as if it was true."

"Remember the signal?"

"Sure. Soon as you say we're out of cigarettes. What's the matter, you think I'm a moron, I can't remember?"

Pell laughed and clapped him on the shoulder blade.

Minutes later they turned in from the corridor, went through another, shorter passageway and

then came to a door marked: Resident Surgeon. They knocked and a deep voice boomed: "Come in!"

It was a medium-sized room, clearly a dispensary. There was an operating table, a sterilizer, tall glass-fronted instrument cabinets and a refrigerator. At the far end of the room a hulking, bear-like man sat behind a magnalloy desk. The nameplate on the desk said: Hal H. Wilcox, M.D.

"Howdy, gents," said Dr. Hal H. Wilcox, shattering the moon-silence with a vengeance. "What can I do for you?" he was all smiles.

That smile, decided Pell, didn't quite match the shrewdness of his eyes. Have to watch this boy, maybe. There was a big quartz window behind the man so that for the moment Pell saw him almost in silhouette. "We're from *Current* magazine," said Pell. "I'm Dick Pell and this is Steve Kronski. You got our radio, I guess."

"Oh, yes. Yes, indeed." Wilcox creaked way back in his chair. "You're the fellas want to do a story on us moon surgeons."

"That's right." Pell fumbled a little self-consciously with the gravity weights clipped to his trousers. Took a while for moon visitors to get used to them, everybody said.

"Well, I don't know exactly as how there's much of a story in what we do. We're just a bunch of sawbones stationed here, that's all."

"We're interested in the diseases peculiar to the moon," said Pell. "For instance, why do the permanent residents up here have to have an inoculation every year?"

"That's for the Venusian rash. Thought everybody knew that."

"Venusian rash?"

"Nearest thing we ever had to it on Earth was Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever. It's a rickettsia disease. Makes a fella pretty sick; sometimes kills him in two, three days. It started when they had those Venusian construction workers and tunnel men here, oh, long before the war. Under certain conditions the rickettsia stays dormant and then pops up again."

"And the inoculation's for that?"

"Standard. Once a year. You got the inoculation yourself, no doubt, before you jumped off for the moon."

"Where does the serum or whatever you call it come from?"

Pell thought he saw Wilcox's eyes flicker. The doctor said, "It's stored at the main landings. We draw it as we need it from there."

"Have any here now?"

Wilcox's eyes did move this time. He looked at the refrigerator—but only for the veriest moment. "Don't really reckon so," he said finally. He was staring blankly at Pell again.

Pell patted his pockets, turned to Kronski and said, "You know, I think we're out of cigarettes." Before Kronski could answer he moved to the big quartz window behind Wilcox's desk. He gazed at the moonscape. "Just can't get over how big and quiet it is," he said.

Wilcox turned and gazed with him.

Kronski drew his freezer. He pointed it, squeezed, and there was a soft, momentary buzzing and a twinkling of violet sparks at the muzzle of the weapon.

Wilcox sat where he was, frozen, knowing nothing.

Pell turned fast. "Come on, Steve. Let's get it." They both stepped to the refrigerator.

They had only seconds; Kronski's weapon had been set at a low reading. The time of paralysis varied with the individual and Doc Wilcox looked husky enough not to stay frozen very long. If Pell and Kronski returned to their original positions after he came out of it he would never know that anything had happened.

Far back on a lower shelf of the refrigerator were a dozen small bottles of the same type. Pell grabbed one, glanced at the label, nodded, and dropped it into his pocket. They took their places again.

A few moments later Wilcox moved slightly and said, "Yup. Moon's a funny place all right. You either like it or you don't."

The rest of the conversation was fairly uninspired. Pell didn't want to walk out too quickly, and had to keep up the pretense of interviewing Wilcox for a magazine story. It wasn't easy. They excused themselves finally, saying they'd be back for more information as soon as they made up some notes and got the overall picture—whatever that meant. Wilcox seemed satisfied with it.

They hurried back along the tunnel, descended to another level and found the Augea Post Office. They showed the postmaster their C.I.B. shields and identification cards and arranged for quick and special handling for the bottle of vaccine. Pell marked it *Attention, Lab*, and it was scheduled to take a quick rocket to the Endymion landing and the next unmanned mail rocket back to World City.

Pell stayed at the Post Office to make out a quick report on the incident so he wouldn't have to bore Ciel by doing it in the room, and Kronski sauntered on back to the hotel.

There was a fax receiver there and Pell, missing the hourly voice bulletins of World City Underground, checked it for news. The pages were coming out in a long tongue. He looked at the first headline:

VENUSIAN OBSERVERS ADMITTED TO WORLD CONGRESS

Well, that was a step in the right direction. Maybe one of these days they'd get around to a Solar Congress, as they ought to. The recent open war with Venus had taught both Earthmen and Venusians a lot about space travel, and it was probably possible to explore the solar system further right now. No one had yet gone beyond the asteroids. Recent observations from the telescope stations here on the moon had found what seemed to be geometrical markings on some of Jupiter's satellites. Life there? Could be. Candidates for a brotherhood of the zodiac—if both Terrans and Venusians could get the concept of brotherhood pounded through their still partially savage skulls.

Another headline:

'WE CAN LICK UNIVERSE'—WAR SEC

Not so good, that. Loose talk. Actually it was an Undersecretary of War who had said it. Pell ran over the rest of the article quickly and came to what seemed to him a significant excerpt. "*Certain patriotic groups in the world today are ready and willing to make the necessary sacrifices to get it over with. There is a fundamental difference between Earthmen and other creatures of the system, and this difference can be resolved only by the dominance of one over the other.*"

Supremist stuff. Strictly. If this Undersecretary were not actually a member he was at least a supporter of the Supremist line. And that line had an appeal for the unthinking, Pell had to admit. It was pleasant to convince yourself that you were a superior specimen, that you were chosen....

VENUSIAN SPY SUSPECTS HELD ON MARS

Pell frowned deeply at that one and read the story. A couple of Venusian miners on Mars had wandered too close to one of the Earth military outposts, and had been nabbed. He doubted that they were spies; he doubted that the authorities holding them thought so. But it seemed to make a better story with a slight scare angle. He thought about how Mars was divided at an arbitrary meridian—half to Venus, half to Earth. The division solved nothing, pleased nobody. Joe Citizen, the man in the tunnels could see these things, why couldn't these so-called trained diplomats?

Pell finished his report, questioned the Postmaster a little on routine facts concerning the town, and went back to the hotel.

Ciel was waiting for him. She was in a smart, frontless frock of silvercloth. Her golden hair shone. Her large, dark eyes looked deep, moist, alive. She looked at him questioningly? and he read the silent question: *Now can you spare a little time?*

"Baby," he said softly, and kissed her.

"Mm," he said when he had finished kissing her.

The voice-phone rang.

He said, "Damn it."

It was Kronski, in his own room next door. "Did Wilcox leave yet?" he asked.

"Wilcox?"

"Yeah. The Doc. Is he still there?"

"I didn't know he was here at all."

Kronski said, "Huh?"

Pell said, "Maybe we better back up and start all over again."

"Wilcox, the Resident Surgeon Doc Wilcox," said Kronski, not too patiently. "He was in my room a little while ago. Said he'd drop by on his way out and see if you were in."

Pell glanced at Ciel. She was busy lighting a cigarette at the other end of the room. Or

pretending to be busy. Pell said, "I just got here. Just this minute. I didn't see any Wilcox. What'd he want?"

"I don't know exactly. He was kind of vague about it. Wanted to know if he could answer any more questions for us, or anything like that."

"Sounds screwy."

"Yeah. It sure does, now that I think it over."

"Let me call you back," said Pell and hung up. He turned to Ciel. "Was Doc Wilcox here?"

"Why, yes. He stopped in." Nothing but blank innocence on her face.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Hm?" She raised her eyebrows. "He just stopped in to see if you were here, that was all. I told him you weren't and he went out again."

"But you didn't mention it."

"Well, why should I?"

"I don't know. I'd think you'd say something about it."

"Now, listen, Dick—I'm not some suspect you're grilling. What's the matter with you, anyway?"

"It just strikes me as funny that Wilcox should drop in here and you shouldn't say one word about it, that's all."

"Well, I like that." She folded her arms. "You're getting to be so much of a cop you're starting to be suspicious of your own wife."

"Now, you know it's not that at all."

"What else is it? Dick, I'm sick of it. I'm sick of this whole stupid business you're in. The first time we get a few minutes alone together you start giving me the third degree. I won't stand for it, that's all!"

"Now, baby," he said and took a step toward her.

The deeper tone of the viewer sounded.

"Agh, for Pete's sake," he said disgustedly and answered the call. The image of Chief Larkin's boyishly handsome face came into focus on the screen. Pell lifted a surprised eyebrow and said, "Oh, hello, Chief."

Larkin's eye was cold. Especially cold in the setting of that boyish face. "What in hell," he asked, "are you and Kronski doing on the moon?"

"Hm?" Now it was Pell's turn to look innocent. "Why, you know what we're doing, Chief. We're investigating that case. You know the one—I don't want to mention it over the viewer."

"Who the devil authorized you to go traipsing to the *moon* to do it?"

"Why, nobody authorized us. I thought—I mean, when you're working on a case and you have a lead, you're supposed to go after it, aren't you?"

"Yes, but not when it's a crazy wild goose chase." In the viewer Pell saw the Chief slam his desk with the palm of his hand. "I'd like to know what in blazes you think you can do on the moon that you can't do in a good healthy session at the computers?"

"Well, that's kind of hard to explain over the viewer. We have made some progress, though. I just sent you a report on it."

Larkin narrowed one eye. "Pell, who do you think you're fooling?"

"Fooling?"

"You heard me. I know damn well you wanted to take a vacation on the moon. But we have a little job for you that holds you up, and what do you do? The next best thing, eh? You see to it that the job *takes* you to the moon."

"Now, Chief, it wasn't that at all...."

"The devil it wasn't. Now, listen to me, Pell. You pack your bags and get right back to World City. The next rocket you can get. You understand?"

Before he answered the question he looked at Ciel. She was staring at him quietly. Again he could read something of what was in her mind. He knew well enough that she was trying to say to him: "*Make a clean break now. Tell him No, you won't come back. Quit. Now's the time to do it—unless you want that stupid job of yours more than you want me....*"

Pell sighed deeply, slowly looked into the viewer again and said, "Kronski and I'll be back on the next rocket, Chief."

Chapter IV

Back again in the underground offices of C.I.B., Agent Richard Pell plunged into his job. Up to his neck. It was the only way he could keep from brooding about Ciel. She was somewhere in the city at this very moment and if he really wanted to take the trouble he'd be able to find her easily enough—but he didn't want it to happen that way. She'd never really be his again unless *she* came to *him*....

And so once more he found himself in the office late at night. Alone. Poring over the lab reports that had come in that afternoon, turning them over in his mind and hoping, he supposed, for a nice intuitive flash, free of charge.

As a matter of fact the analysis of the vaccine he'd lifted from Wilcox's dispensary was not without significance. There was definitely an extraneous substance. The only question was just what this substance might be. Take a little longer to find that out, the report said.

It made Pell think of the corny sign World Government officials always had on their desks, the one about doing the difficult right away and taking a little longer for the impossible. Some day, when he was a big-shot, he would have a sign on his desk saying: *Why make things difficult when with even less effort you can make them impossible?* Of course, ideas like that were probably the very reason he'd never be a big-shot....

The Identifier humming. Someone coming again.

He looked up, and then had the curious feeling of being jerked back in time to several nights ago. Chief Larkin and Theodor Rysland entered.

"Hello, Dick," said Larkin, with a touch of studied democracy. He glanced at the government adviser as if to say: *See? Knew we'd find him here.*

Pell made a sour face. "Some day I'm going to stop giving all this free overtime. Some day I'm not going to show up at all."

Rysland smiled, dislodging some of the rock strata of his curiously pale face. He seemed a little weary this evening. He moved slowly and with even more than his usual dignity. He said, "I hope, Mr. Pell, that you'll wait at least until you finish this job for us. I understand you've made some progress."

Pell shrugged and gestured at the lab report. "Progress, maybe—but I don't know how far. Just a bunch of new puzzles to be perfectly frank."

Rysland sat down at the other desk and drummed on it with his fingertips. He looked at Pell gravely. "As a matter of fact, since we last talked to you the situation has become even more urgent. A Supremist congressman introduced a bill today before the world delegates which may prove very dangerous. Perhaps you know the one I refer to."

"I was too busy to follow the news today," said Pell, looking meaningfully at Larkin.

Larkin didn't seem to notice.

Rysland said, "I'll brief you then. The bill purports to prohibit material aid of any kind to a non-Terran government. That means both credit and goods. And since the only real non-Terran government we know is Venus, it's obviously directed specifically at the Venusians."

Pell thought it over. High level stuff again. He nodded to show he followed.

"On the surface," continued Rysland, "this would seem to be a sort of anti-espionage bill. Actually, it's a deliberately provocative act. I know the Venusians will take it that way. But right now certain quarters are secretly trying to negotiate a trade treaty with Venus which would be a major step toward peaceful relations. If this bill became law, such a treaty would be impossible."

"But World Congress isn't likely to pass such a bill, is it? Won't they see through it?"

Rysland frowned. "That's what we're not sure of. Messages are pouring in urging passage—all of them from Supremists, of course. The Supremists are relatively few, but they make a lot of noise. Sometimes noise like that is effective. It could swing a lot of delegates who don't see the real danger of this bill and are at the moment undecided. The Defender side, with its desire to isolate and fortify, is especially susceptible."

"That *is* bad," said Pell thoughtfully.

Rysland put his palm on the desk. "Now then, if we can somehow discredit the Supremists—get to the bottom of this thing quickly enough—I'm sure that bill will be killed. I came here tonight, I

suppose, out of pure anxiety. In other words, Mr. Pell, just how far are you?"

Pell smiled and shook his head. "Not very, I'm afraid. This Supremist thing is the damndest I ever came across. No central headquarters, no officers, no propaganda mill—entirely word of mouth as far as I can see. No way of finding out how it started, or even how the new members are proselyted. Ask any member how he became a Supremist. He just looks kind of dreamy and mutters something about the truth suddenly dawning upon him one day."

"But don't you have any theories?"

"I've got a hunch," Pell said, picking up the lab report.

Chief Larkin snorted softly. The snort said clearly enough that an efficient investigator didn't depend on hunches these days: he went after something doggedly on the computer, or by other approved techniques.

Pell pretended not to hear the snort. "First of all we discovered that nearly all Supremists received some kind of an inoculation before they became Supremists. Then we found a whole village, one of those moon resort towns, that had gone over. There was the record of inoculation there, too. I got hold of some of the vaccine and had the lab analyze it. It's mostly vaccine all right, but there *is* a foreign substance in it. Listen." He read from the report: "*Isolated point oh six four seven grams unclassified crystal compound, apparently form of nucleotide enzyme. Further analysis necessary.*"

"You think this enzyme, or whatever it is, has something to do with it?"

"I don't know. All I have is a pretty wild theory. To begin, when our lab can't analyze something right away, it's pretty rare—possibly even unknown to chemistry in general. Now it's just possible that this substance does something to the brain that makes a man into a Supremist, and that somebody's behind the whole thing, deliberately planting the stuff so that people here and there become injected with it."

"Pell." Larkin made a pained face. "Really."

Pell shrugged. "Well, as I say, it's a hunch, that's all."

"It's a pipe dream," said Larkin. "I never heard of anything so fantastic."

"That's what folks said a couple of centuries ago when the Venusians were first trying to make contact and their ships were sighted all over the place. 'I never heard of anything so fantastic,' they all said."

Theodor Rysland still looked interested. "Granted there is some connection between the Supremist mental state and this, er, enzyme. What then, Mr. Pell?"

"Well," said Pell, stretching his legs out, "I had an idea maybe your friend Dr. Nebel could give us some help on that."

"Nebel?"

"He's interested in this thing, isn't he?"

"Definitely. Nebel's a very public spirited man."

"Well, I understand he's one of the top psychobiologists in the country today. Seems to me this new enzyme, whatever it is, would be right up his alley. Of course the lab should get to it eventually, but he might do it a lot quicker."

Larkin had been examining some statistical crime charts on the wall. He turned from them. "Pell, does Kronski know about all these wild hunches of yours?"

"I haven't talked with him about them yet. He left today before the lab report came in. Why?"

"I was just wondering," said Larkin evenly, "whether I had two maniacs in my organization or only one."

Rysland, frowning, turned to the chief. "I wouldn't be hasty, Larkin," he said. "Crazy as it sounds Pell may have something here."

Larkin snorted again, and this time along with it he shook his head sadly.

"What's your next move then?" Rysland asked Pell.

"Tomorrow morning, first thing," Pell said, "I'll take a sample of this stuff to Dr. Nebel and see what he can do with it. Of course the lab can keep on working on it in the meantime."

"Don't you think you might do better to get busy on those computers?" Larkin asked.

Pell shook his head. "This hunch is too strong, Chief."

Rysland smiled, and got up. "I'm inclined to put a little stock into this man's hunches. He's done pretty well with them so far. I'd even say he's pretty close to a solution of this thing—possibly."

Larkin shrugged and started to look at the crime charts again.

Rysland held out his hand. "Good night, Mr. Pell. You've encouraged me. Larkin and I are going topside for a little night cap before we turn in. Like to join us?"

"No, thanks," said Pell. "I'm sleepy. I want to get home and hit that sack."

"Very well. Good night again." The two men went toward the door.

Pell watched them quietly. He had lied. He wasn't sleepy at all. He just wanted to get home and sit by that viewer and hope, hope against hope, that it would ring and that Ciel's lovely image would swirl into view....

On the way home he was just the least bit tempted to go topside, however. He thought he might like to walk the broad, quiet boulevards under the stars. His brain functioned better there. The tunnels were so clean and bright and sterile, so wonderfully functional and sensible, that they oppressed him somehow. Maybe, he sometimes thought, he wasn't fit for this age. Maybe he should have been born a couple of hundred years ago. But common sense told him that people in *that* age must have often thought exactly the same thing to themselves.

He looked at his chrono and decided he had better go home.

The apartment, when he came to it, was cold and empty without Ciel. He bathed and tried to keep up his spirits by singing in his tuneless way, but it didn't help.

He went back into the living room, selected a film from the library and slipped it into a lap projector. He sat down and tried to concentrate on the film, a historical adventure about the days of the first moon rockets. He couldn't follow it.

The viewer rang.

He bounded from the chair as though he had triggered a high speed ejection seat in a burning jet. He went to the viewer and flicked it on. The plate shimmered, and then Ciel's image came into focus.

"*Baby!*" He was certain his shout overmodulated every amp tube in the entire World City viewer system. But he felt better, wonderfully better, already.

She was smiling. "Hello, Dick."

"Hello."

And then they looked at each other in affectionate embarrassment for a moment.

"One of us," said Pell, "ought to have his script writer along."

"Dick, I don't know exactly how to say what I want to say...."

"Don't. Don't say anything. Just pretend nothing ever happened. Just come on home fast as you can."

"No, Dick. Not yet. I still want to talk about—well, everything. Dick, we've got to reach some sort of compromise. There *must* be a way."

"Come on home. We'll find a way."

"Not home. Too many memories there. Besides," she smiled a little, "I don't trust us alone together. You know what would happen. We wouldn't get *any* talking done. Not any sensible talking anyway. You'd better meet me someplace."

He sighed. "Okay. Where can I meet you?"

"How about the Stardust Cafe?"

"Again? That place didn't help us much the last time."

"I know, but it's the handiest. I'm sure we can find a quiet place. Out on the terrace or something."

"Is there a terrace?"

"Yes, I think so. I'm sure there must be."

He looked at his chrono. "All right, baby. Half an hour?"

"Half an hour."

When she clicked off he felt his heart pounding. He felt dizzy. He felt as though he had just taken a quart of meth at one jolt—intravenously. He sang, more loudly and more off-key than ever. He went into the bedroom and started to get dressed again.

It wasn't until he was finishing the knot in his tie that the hunch hit him.

It was funny about that hunch. He would have said it came out of nowhere, and yet it must have broken from the bottom of his mind through some kind of restraining layer into the conscious levels. He didn't remember thinking anything that might have brought it on—his mind was strictly on Ciel. Maybe that was how it came through, with the attention of his conscious mind directed elsewhere.

With the hunch he heard Ciel's voice again, heard it very clearly, saying: "*I'm sure we can find a quiet place. Out on the terrace or something.*" And with that other things started to fall into place.

As he thought, and as the possibilities of his hunch fanned out to embrace other possibilities he became suddenly cold and sick inside. He fought the feeling. "Got to go through with it," he muttered to himself. "Got to."

As soon as he was dressed he took the tunnel cars to Station D-90, changing twice. People were aboard at this hour, returning from the evening. Lots of men and women in uniform: the green of the landfighters, the white of the seamen, the blue of the flyers, the silver and black of the space force. Young people. Kids mostly: kids who had never seen war, smelled death, heard the wounded scream. He hoped they never would. But if his hunch was correct they might be dangerously near to it right now.

If only he had time to call Kronski. He'd feel a lot safer....

He shook himself. Have to stop thinking about it. Proceed cautiously now, and take each thing as it came. That was the only thing to do.

He went topside and stepped from the elevator kiosk into the night air. Ahead he saw the bright globular sign of the Stardust Cafe. But he didn't go toward it right away. He turned in the other direction, walked swiftly, and kept a sharp eye on the shadows. He turned off on a side street, circled a small park, and then crossed a sloping lawn toward the back of the night club. He headed for the light of the service entrance.

A half-credit bill got him inside through the back entrance. He found the door with the temporary sign saying: Marco the Mentalist. He knocked.

Marco the Mentalist opened the door. He didn't look quite as tall face-to-face as he did out on the floor, nor quite as impressive. His face was still dark and faintly saturnine, but the jowls seemed a little puffier now, there was a faint network of capillaries around his nostrils and his eyes looked just the least bit weary and tired. In a pleasant enough voice he said, "Yes?"

Pell showed his C.I.B. identification.

Marco raised his eyebrows a little and said, "Come inside, please." Inside he found a chair for Pell. He sat across from him at his dressing table, half-turned toward the room. "I must get ready for my show in a little while. You understand that, of course."

Pell nodded. "What's on my mind won't take long. First of all, I want to ask a few questions about hypnotism. They may seem silly to you, or maybe a little elementary, but I'd like you to answer 'em just the same."

Marco's eyebrows went a little bit higher and he said, "Proceed."

"Okay. Question number one: can anybody be hypnotized against his will?"

"Some can, some can't." Marco smiled. "The average person, under average circumstances—no. I appear in my act to hypnotize people against their wills. Actually, subconsciously, they *wish* to be hypnotized, which is why they volunteer to let me try in the first place."

"Okay, number two. Is there any drug that can hypnotize a person?"

Marco frowned. "Pentothal and several things *appear* to do that. You could argue it either way, whether the subject is actually hypnotized or not. I believe post-hypnotic commands have been given to subjects under sodium pentothol and carried out, even back in the dark ages of psychiatry several hundred years ago."

"I've got one more really important question," Pell said then. "I'd understood that somebody under hypnosis won't do anything against his moral or ethical sense. An honest man, for instance, can't be forced to steal. Is that true?"

Marco laughed and gestured with his graceful fingers. "I don't think it is true. It was once believed to be, because hypnotic technique was not strong enough. That is, the subject's hypnosis was not strong enough to overcome a strong moral sense, which is actually a surface veneer on a deeper, more brutal nature. But I think with deep enough hypnosis, and the right kind of command, you can get a person to do most anything in post-hypnotic behavior—and of course not know why he *must* do it, even knowing it's wrong. Do you follow me?"

"I hope I do." Then Pell leaned forward. "And now I have a very great favor to ask of you."

"Yes?"

"I want you to put on a little special private performance for me, right here and now."

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

"You will, in about sixty seconds. Just listen carefully...."

Chapter V

He was late for his date with Ciel, of course. He glanced at his chrono as he entered the Stardust Cafe by the front door and saw that he was twenty minutes late. However, this time he was certain Ciel wouldn't complain too vigorously.

Again the askarins were playing, and once more the green-skinned Venusian girls were doing their writhing, spasmodic, aphrodisiacal dance. It was remarkable how they could achieve such an effect of utter abandon and yet keep their faces blank and frozen. He looked around the rest of the room swiftly. Not so crowded tonight, and people were generally quieter. There were no oversexed spacemen clawing after the dancers on the floor.

Ciel was again in a rear booth, in the same corner of the room she had chosen before. She had spotted him now; she was looking his way. She lifted a white-gloved hand and waved.

He smiled and headed for her. He forced his smile, and made himself forget the prickling of his wrists and the feeling of bristling fur along his spine. And he held his smile all the way across the room. *Why, hello, darling, fancy seeing you here; no, nothing's wrong, nothing at all, why on earth would you think anything was wrong?*

"Hi, baby," was all he actually said.

"I'm—I'm glad you're here, Dick." Her eyes didn't show much. They roved over his face a little too much perhaps, but otherwise they seemed simply as large and dark as ever. He noticed that the meth glass in front of her was empty.

Grinning, he sat down. "This is a big moment. This is almost too much for me to handle. Maybe that's what I need—a good slug of meth."

"No."

"No?"

"Let's not waste time. Let's go out on the terrace. I want you to kiss me."

"Best offer I've had all evening." He rose again. "Where's the terrace?"

"Through that door. There's a dining room there that's closed at night. You go through the dining room and out to the terrace."

"Okay."

He took her arm and led her in and out of tables, across the room. They moved swiftly through the quiet, nearly dark dining room, and after that through a pair of window-doors. They were on the terrace then, a flagstoned space with a low wall. It overlooked the scattered lights of World City's topside area and some distance beyond they could see the river, a blue-silver ribbon in the moonlight.

They stopped at the wall. She turned toward him. He looked down at her, at her pale face and deep, dark eyes. He smelled her perfume and he felt her live warmth near him and coming nearer. He saw her eyes close, her lips part just slightly, and each lip glistening, faintly moist....

He was wondering when it would happen. He was wondering when he would be struck.

As he wondered that he suddenly discovered he wasn't on the terrace any more.

He looked about him in some surprise. It was nearly dark. He was in a room; he could sense the walls about him. He heard a curious, high-pitched metallic voice—and recognized it.

"*Pell? Are you awake now?*"

It had happened then, just as he had expected. Someone had thrown a freezer on him there in the patio, and during his complete unconsciousness he'd been taken here, wherever this was. He sighed. The least they could have done would have been to let him finish kissing Ciel.

As calmly as he could he said to the four blank walls, "I'm awake."

Soft glowlights came on gradually and he saw that the room about him was fairly small—twenty by fifteen, roughly—and very plain. It contained a bed and a few odd pieces of furniture, all apparently of good quality. There was a door in one wall. He tried the door. Locked. He went back to the middle of the room.

"Chief," he said to the blank walls, "what's this all about? Is it some kind of a joke?"

The metallic voice chuckled. It belonged to Eustace J. Larkin, Chief, Central Investigation

Bureau, and even filtered like this it was somewhat prim and precise. "No, Dick, it's not a joke, I'm afraid. I'm surprised you haven't guessed what it's all about. Or at least had one of your brilliant hunches." There was sarcasm in this last.

"Where's Ciel?" Pell asked.

"Right here with me. In the next room. Here—listen."

Ciel's voice said, "Don't worry, darling, we'll explain everything. And when it's all over it will be for the best. You'll see that it will."

"All right, everybody," said Pell, half-belligerently, "what's the big idea?"

"Big idea is right," Larkin's voice came back. "The biggest that ever hit the human race. And as Ciel says we'll explain it all in a moment. But first I'd like your word that you won't be foolish and make any kind of a struggle. If you'll promise that you can come in the other room here and we can all talk face to face."

Pell frowned. "I don't know—I'm not so sure I can honestly promise that."

"Suit yourself, then. A few minutes from now it won't make any difference anyway."

"Will you stop being so damned mysterious and tell me what it's all about?"

Larkin's voice laughed. "Very well. I haven't had much chance to tell about it, frankly. And I think you'll agree we've rather neatly kept our parts under cover—until you got dangerously close to the answer, anyway."

"Until I got close?"

"Certainly. Doc Wilcox's office on the moon was perhaps our one weakness in the whole set-up. How you managed to stumble on to that, I'll never know—your luck must have been with you."

"It wasn't luck, Larkin, it was a hunch."

"Still believe in hunches, eh? Well, we won't argue the point. At any rate you wouldn't have found the enzyme any place else but there."

"Oh, so the enzyme does have something to do with it."

"Everything. Here—suppose I let Doctor Nebel explain it to you. He developed it, after all."

Pell lifted his eyebrows in surprise and Dr. Walter Nebel's sibilant voice came through the hidden speakers. "I think you should know how it works, Mr. Pell. You may know that a certain part of the brain called Rossi's area is, to put it figuratively, the hypnotic center. The cut-off of the adrenal cortex, so to speak. In ordinary hypnosis the function of that area is dulled by overexercising the motor senses. By that method the intensity of hypnosis is widely variable and never really one hundred per cent effective. My compound, however, brings about complete and absolute cut-off. Any post-hypnotic suggestion given under those circumstances takes permanently and deeply. It can only be removed by further post-hypnosis under the same treatment, negating the original command."

Pell stared at the blank walls. "Go on," he said in a soft, tense voice. "What's the rest?"

Larkin spoke again. "Suppose we briefly examine a little history as a kind of introduction to this matter. The human race, since the beginning of recorded time, has failed to achieve real peace and stability, right? Every time there has been a chance for cooperative effort—for total agreement—certain selfish interests have spoiled it. There have been times, however, when certain groups—states or combinations of states—came close to permanent peace and prosperity. The Napoleonic era was one. Hitler two hundred years ago almost brought it about. The only reason they failed was that they didn't achieve their goal—*complete* conquest."

Did Pell hear correctly? Was there a faint simmering of madness in that metallic voice now? In the words there was madness, surely....

It went on: "The fact is, Pell, people simply don't know what's good for them. Look at the blunderers and even downright crooks who are elected to World Government. Never the best brains, never the best talents. When a really able man gets into a position of leadership it's an accident—a fluke."

"I still don't see what all this has got to do with it," said Pell.

There was a shrug in the metallic voice. "For once the ablest men are going to take over. There are a number of us. You know already about myself and Doctor Nebel. Rysland will be with us, too, as soon as we can get him conditioned."

"By conditioned, you mean this enzyme of yours?"

"Exactly. We started out in a small way, using force or trickery where necessary, and managed to condition a number of doctors and nurses. Conditioning simply means injecting Nebel's compound and then giving the post-hypnotic command to be unquestioningly loyal to the

Supremists. We created the Supremists, of course. In order for us to take over it will be necessary to have another war, and to conquer Venus. That can be done if Earth strikes quickly. Within the next few days I think there'll be enough Supremist influence to get this war started."

Pell stared back, open-mouthed. To hear it coldly and calmly like this was shock, cold-water shock. "Let me get this straight now. Your group made Supremists of doctors and nurses and they in turn made new members by installing this hypnosis stuff whenever anybody came for a hypodermic injection of any kind, is that it?"

"That's it."

"But how does this stuff work? Does it knock you out, or what?"

"You'll be finding that out at first hand very shortly."

Pell stiffened, made fists and unconsciously lifted them and looked around him, warily.

Larkin laughed. "It won't do you much good to put up a fight. I'm sending a couple of my assistants in there. They specialize in people who want to make a struggle. And there's no reason to feel unhappy about it, Pell: once you're conditioned you'll simply be unable to do anything against the Supremist cause. You'll be happier, in fact, having such a cause. Ask your wife if that isn't so."

Pell trembled with anger. "How did you get to her? How did you make her do what she did?"

"You mean luring you into our little trap on the terrace, so to speak? You mustn't blame Ciel for that. She couldn't help herself; she had to obey, after all. You see she was conditioned in Augea on the moon by Dr. Wilcox, one of our very loyal men. He simply dropped in when you were at the Post Office, pretended that Ciel needed a routine injection and she, not at all suspicious, allowed him to do it. He gave her the command of loyalty, and also cautioned her not to say anything about it. So you see, Ciel's been one of us for several days. It was just a little precaution of mine, in case you should become troublesome. I had to assign somebody to the investigation, of course, because Rysland and his crowd would have been too suspicious if I hadn't complied with their request."

"You're stark crazy, Larkin! You ought to be in a mental hospital!"

"You'll be over that idea in a minute or so. Meanwhile, we're wasting time. I'm sending the boys in now. You'll make it easier for yourself if you submit without giving them any trouble."

The door opened, then. Pell caught a quick glimpse of the other room and saw that it was a tastefully furnished living room. He recognized it, and knew where he was. This was a country house of Larkin's, topside, not far from the outskirts of World City. Whoever turned the freezer on him must have set the control at high intensity because it would take at least an hour to get to this place from the Stardust Cafe and he had been unconscious at least that long.

He had the momentary impulse to rush that partly opened door—and then the boys, as Larkin had called them, appeared.

They were specialists, little doubt of that. They regarded Pell with flat, almost disinterested looks as the door closed behind them. One held a hypodermic needle. He was the shorter of the two, but he had shoulders like ox-yokes. His face had been kneaded in the prize ring, and his bare arms were muscular and hairy but the top of his head was bald. The other had red hair, close-cropped. He was big and well-proportioned; Pell might have taken him for a professional football player.

Red did the talking. He spoke quietly, almost pleasantly. "Gonna cooperate?" he asked Pell.

Pell said, "You touch me, brother, and I'll make your face look like Baldy's."

Red glanced at Baldy and seemed to sigh. Abruptly he whirled, jumped at Pell and brought a sizzling right hand punch through the air. Pell ducked it. He saw Baldy move in as he did so, and a painful blow struck the back of his neck. His teeth rattled when it struck. Something caught him under the chin, straightened him. When he was straight a pile driver struck him in the midsection.

It was all over within a matter of seconds. Under different circumstances Pell might have found time to admire their technique.

As it was, he was now face down on the floor and Red was straddling him, holding him there. The pain in his stomach made him gasp. His face and the back of his neck ached terribly.

Red had his arm in the small of his back. Pell tried to struggle.

"I can break the arm if you move," said Red cheerfully.

And then Pell felt the bite of the needle just below his shoulder.

A misty feeling came. He felt as though he were in a red whirlpool, spinning, going down—down.... He fought to rise. He could still hear. He could hear footsteps and the slam of the door

when somebody else came into the room. And then he seemed abruptly to be detached from his own body and floating in a huge gray void....

Words hammered at his brain. Larkin's voice, at his ear now and no longer metallic. "*You will be loyal to the Supremist cause. You will do nothing against the Supremist doctrine. You will believe that Earthmen are meant to rule the Universe—*"

He felt an overpowering impulse to nod, to agree, to believe that it was right to do this. He fought this impulse, straining his mind and his very being until it seemed that something might burst with the effort.

"You will work for the cause; you will give your life for it if necessary."

Yes, perhaps it was better to succumb. The words were too strong. He couldn't fight them. Larkin was right, Earthmen were supreme, and they were destined to rule....

Somewhere in the depths a tiny spot of resistance still glowed. He tried desperately to evoke it. It seemed then that it became brighter. He *could* resist—he *would*.... He kept thinking over and over again: "*No, no, no!*"

Larkin's voice said, "Carry him in the other room. He'll come to in a moment."

He came to slowly, and he saw that he was lying on a couch and that several people were gathered around him smiling down at him. Something detached itself from the group, knelt by his side. He blinked. It was Ciel. Her golden hair shone and her dark eyes searched his face and she was smiling. "Hello, darling," she said.

"Hello, Ciel." He kissed her, and then sat up on the couch and looked around.

Larkin and Dr. Nebel were standing together, and Red and Baldy were a few steps behind them, still looking indifferent.

"Now you're one of us, Dick," said Larkin, flashing his professional smile, dimples and everything. Pell rose. Nebel held his hands behind his back and beamed, blinking his heavy reptilian eyelids and Larkin stepped forward and held out his hand.

"Yes," said Pell, shaking the hand, "I guess we're all working for the same thing now. What do you want me to do?"

Larkin laughed. "Nothing right away. We'll give you instructions when the time comes. I think you might as well go home with Ciel now; I have a copter and a chauffeur outside that'll take you to the station near your apartment."

"Okay, Chief, whatever you say." He smiled and took Ciel's arm. He started toward the door. Then he stopped, patted his chest and said, "Oh—my freezer. I guess the boys took it away...."

Larkin turned to Baldy. "Give him his weapon."

Baldy took the freezer from his pocket and casually tossed it to Pell.

A sudden change came over Pell, then. His smile disappeared. He stepped quickly away from Ciel, whirled and faced all of them. He pointed the freezer. "All right, everybody stay perfectly still—you, too, Ciel. This is where we break up your little Supremist nightmare."

Larkin stared in utter amazement. Nebel's turtle lids opened wide. Ciel brought her hand to her throat.

Red's hand blurred suddenly, going for his own weapon. Pell squeezed the trigger, the violet sparks danced for an instant, and then Red stood frozen with his hand almost to his chest.

"I'd advise nobody else to try that," said Pell, and then in an ironical tone to Larkin: "C.I.B. agents are trained to be pretty quick with a freezer, right, Chief?"

Larkin seemed to find his voice now. "But—how—what happened? You were injected. How can you...."

"I just took a little precaution, that's all," said Pell. "There'll be plenty of time to explain it all later. You'll probably hear the whole thing in court, Larkin, when I testify at your trial for treason. Meanwhile, all of you just stay nice and calm while I use the viewer."

He stepped to the viewer and dialed with his free hand. The plate glowed, shimmered and a moment later the pale, grave face of Theodor Rysland came into view. His eyebrows rose as he saw the weapon in Pell's hand and glimpsed the people beyond Pell. "Hello—what's this all about?"

"Haven't time to explain fully now," said Pell, "but I want you to get to Larkin's country house as soon as you can. I'll call agent Kronski in a moment and have him bring some others, and together we'll take Larkin and Nebel into custody. They're behind the Supremist movement—a deliberate attempt to take over the government. They did it with a drug; that's how Supremist's are made."

"What's this? A drug?"

"Think about it later," said Pell. "Just grab the facts right now. The drug makes a person subject to post-hypnotic commands—that's why your Supremists are blindly, unthinkingly loyal. However, the command can be erased by a second treatment. That'll be tough and take a lot of ferreting out, but it won't be impossible." He glanced at Ciel, and saw that she was staring at him with horror—with enmity. It sickened him, but he steadied himself with the realization that Ciel would be one of the first to be re-treated.

Several minutes later he had completed his calls. Rysland, Kronski and the others were on the way. He kept the freezer pointed, and watched his captives carefully. Ciel had gone over to the couch and was sitting there, her face in her hands, weeping softly.

"I don't know how you did it," said Larkin. "I don't understand it. The injection should have worked. It always did before."

"Well, it almost worked," said Pell. "I must admit I had quite a time fighting off your commands. But, you see, I knew you'd gotten to Ciel somehow when she called me up to make the date this evening. She spoke of going out to the terrace at the Stardust Cafe. It was a little odd that she should speak of the terrace like that, out of a clear sky—and I wondered why it should be on her mind. Then it struck me that neither of us had ever noticed a terrace there, and Ciel must have some special reason for knowing about it.

"She did, of course—she'd been instructed to get me out there where your boys could slap a freezer on me. So I started guessing with that hunch to work on. Everything more or less fell into place after that. It was pretty certain that they'd try to make a loyal Supremist out of me, too, and that's when I took that little precaution I mentioned to you."

"What precaution?"

Pell smiled. "I had Marco the mentalist hypnotize me and give me a rather special post-hypnotic command. He ordered me not to believe any *subsequent* post-hypnotic commands. That's why your conditioning didn't work on me."

Larkin could find no words; he just stared.

"Think about it, Larkin," said Pell. "Think hard. Maybe you'd convinced yourself you were doing good, but your purpose was still tyranny. And like any tyranny it contained the means of its own destruction. It always works out that way, Larkin—maybe it's a law, or something."

It had been a long speech for Pell, practically an oration. He was, after all, a cop, not a philosopher. Just a guy trying to get along. Just an ordinary citizen whose name was legion, looking at his wife now and waiting with what patience he could find for the time when she would be cleared of the poisonous doctrine that any one race or group or even species was supreme.

He was thinking, too, that the trial would keep him busy as the very devil and that they *still* wouldn't get to that vacation and second honeymoon for a long time....

That, considering everything, was not too much to put up with.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK BRINK OF MADNESS ***

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