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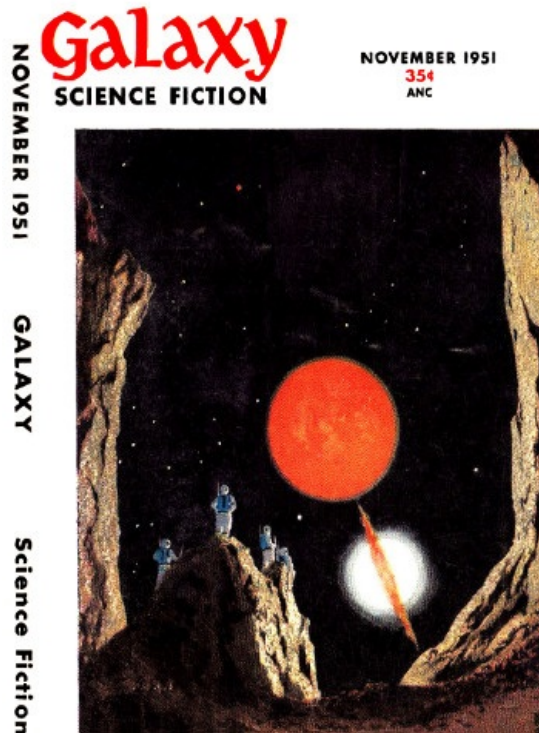
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\*\*\* START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK SEA LEGS \*\*\*



# SEA LEGS

By FRANK QUATTROCCHI

Illustrated by EMSH

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***Rootless and footloose, a man in space can't help  
but dream of coming home. But something nobody should  
do is bet on the validity of a homesick dream!***

---

Flight Officer Robert Craig surrendered the tube containing his service record tapes and stood waiting while the bored process clerk examined the seal.

"Your clearance," said the clerk.

Craig handed him a battered punch card and watched the man insert it in the reproducer. He felt anxiety as the much-handled card refused for a time to match the instrument's metal contact points. The line of men behind Craig fidgeted.

"You got to get this punched by Territorial," said the clerk. "Take it back to your unit's clearance office."

"Look again, Sergeant," Craig said, repressing his irritation.

"It ain't notched."

"The hell it isn't."

The man examined the card with squinting care and nodded finally. "It's so damn notched," he complained. "You ought to take care of that card; can't get on without one."

Craig hesitated before moving.

"Next," said the clerk, "What you waiting for?"

"Don't I take my 201 file?"

"We send it on ahead. Go to Grav 1 desk."

A murmur greeted the order. Craig experienced the thrill of knowing the envy of the others. Grav 1—that meant Terra. He crossed the long, dreary room, knowing the eyes of the other men were upon him.

"Your service tapes," the next noncom said. "Where you going?"

"Grav 1—Terra," fumbled Craig. "Los Angeles."

"Los Angeles, eh? Where in Los Angeles?"

"I—I—" Craig muttered, fumbling in his pockets.

"No specific destination," supplied the man as he punched a key on a small instrument, "Air-lock ahead and to your right. Strip and follow the robot's orders. Any metal?"

"Metal?" asked Craig.

"You know, *metal*."

"Well, my identification key."

"Here," commanded the clerk, extending a plastic envelope.

Craig moved in the direction indicated. He fought the irrational fear that he had missed an important step in the complicated clerical process. He cursed the grudging attitude of the headquarters satellite personnel and felt the impotence of a spaceman who had long forgotten the bureaucracy of a rear area base. The knowledge that much of it was motivated by envy soothed him as he clumsily let himself into the lock.

"Place your clothing in the receptacle provided and assume a stationary position on the raised podium in the center of the lock."

Craig obeyed the robot voice and began reluctantly to remove his flight jacket. Its incredibly fine-grained leather would carry none of the strange, foreign associations for the base station clerk who would appropriate it. He would never know the beautiful, gentle beast that supplied this skin.

"You are retarding the progress of others. Please respond more quickly to your orders."

Craig quickly removed the last of his clothing. It was impossible to hate a robot, but one could certainly hate those who set it into operation.

"You will find a red button at your feet. Lower your head and depress that button."

Stepping on the button with his bare foot produced an instant of brilliant blue illumination. A small scratch on his arm stung briefly and he was somewhat blinded by the flash even through his eyelids, but that was all there was to the sterilizing process.

"Your clothing and effects will be in the dressing room immediately beyond the locked door."

He found his clothing cleanly and neatly hung on plastic hangers just inside the door to the dressing room. The few personal items he carried in his pockets were still there. The Schtann

flight jacket was actually there, looking like new, its space-blue unfaded and as wonderfully pliant as before.

"Insert your right arm into the instrument on the central table," commanded the same voice he had heard before. "Turn your arm until the scratch is in contact with the metal plate. There will be a slight pain, but it is necessary to treat the small injury you have been disregarding."

Craig obeyed and clenched his teeth against a sharp stinging. His respect for the robot-controlled equipment of bases had risen. When he withdrew his arm, the scratch was neatly coated with a layer of flesh-colored plastic material.

He dressed quickly and was on the verge of asking the robot for instructions, when a man appeared in the open doorway.

"I am Captain Wyandotte," said the man in a pleasant voice.

"Well, what's next?" asked Craig somewhat more belligerently than he had intended.

The man smiled. "Your reaction is quite natural. You are somewhat aggressive after Clerical, eh?"

"I'm a little anxious to get home, I suppose," said Craig defensively.

"By 'home' you mean Terra. But you've never been there, have you?"

"No, but my father—"

"Your parents left Terra during the Second Colonization of Cassiopeia II, didn't they?"

"Yes," Craig said. He was uncomfortable; Wyandotte seemed to know all about him.

"We might say you've been away quite a while, eh?"

"I was entered as a spaceman when I was 16," Craig said. "I've never been down for any period as yet."

"You mean you haven't been in a gravity system?"

"Oh, I've landed a few times, even walked around for a while...."

"With the help of paraoxylnebutal," supplied the captain.

"Well, sure."

"Mr. Craig, I suppose you've guessed that the next step in our little torture system here is psych."

"So I gathered."

The captain laughed reassuringly. "No, don't put up your guard again. The worst is over. Short of Gravitational conditioning, there is nothing to stop you from going to Terra."

"Sorry, I guess I'm a little touchy. This is my first time...."

"Quite natural. But it being your first time—in quite a number of ways, I might add—it will be necessary for you to undergo some conditioning."

"Conditioning?" asked Craig.

"Yes. You have spent eleven years in space. Your body is conditioned to a normal state of free fall, or at best to a state of acceleration."

"Yeah, I know. Once on Gerymeade...."

"You were ill, couldn't keep your balance, felt dizzy. That is why all spacemen carry PON, paraoxylnebutal, with them. It helps suppress certain physiological reactions to an entirely new set of conditions. Channels of the ear, for example. They play an important part in our awareness of balance. They operate on a simple gravity principle. Without gravity they act up for a time, then gradually lose function. Returning to gravity is rather frightening at first."

"I know all about this, Captain."

"You've undoubtedly read popularizations in tapezines. But you have experienced it briefly."

"I expect to have some trouble at first." Craig was disturbed by the wordy psychologist. What was the man actually saying?

"Do you know what sailors of ancient times meant by 'sea legs?'" asked Wyandotte. "Men on a rolling ocean acclimated themselves to a rolling horizontal. They had trouble when they went ashore and the horizontal didn't roll any more."

"It meant more than that. There were excellent psychological reasons for the old stereotype, the 'drunken sailor.' A port city was a frightening thing to an old sailor—but let's begin our little job at the beginning. I'll turn you over to psychometry for the usual tests and pick you up tomorrow morning at, say, 0900."

---

During the days that followed, the psychologist seemed to Craig to become progressively more didactic. He would deliver long speeches about the "freedom of open space." He spoke repetitiously of the "growing complexity of Terran society." And yet the man could not be pinned down to any specific condition the spaceman would find intolerable.

Craig began to hate the delay that kept him from Terra. Through the ports of the headquarters

base satellite, he scanned the constellations for the scores of worlds he had visited during his eleven years in space. They were incredibly varied, even those that supported life. He had weathered difficult landings on worlds with rip-tide gravities, had felt the pull of the incredible star-tides imparted by twin and even triple star systems. He had been on Einstein IV, the planet of eight moons, and had felt the pulse of all eight of the satellites at once that no PON could completely nullify.

But even if he could accept the psychologist's authority for the cumulative effect of a gravity system, he could not understand the unspoken warning he felt underlying all that the man said.

"Of course it has changed," Craig was protesting. "Anyway, I never really knew very much about Terra. So what? I know it won't be as it was in tapezines either."

"Yet you are so completely sure you will want to live out your life there, that you are willing to give up space service for it."

"We've gone through this time and time again," Craig said wearily. "I gave you my reasons for quitting space. We analyzed them. You agreed that you could not decide that for me and that my decision is logical. You tell me spacemen don't settle down on Terra. Yet you won't—or can't—tell me why. I've got a damned good job there—"

"You may find that 'damned good jobs' become boring."

"So I'll transfer. I don't know what you're trying to get at, Captain, but you're not talking me out of going back. If the service needs men so badly, let them get somebody else. I've put in *my* time."

"Do you really think that's my reason?"

"Sure. What else can it be?"

"Mr. Craig," the psychologist said slowly, "you have my authorization for you to return to Terra as a private citizen of that planet. You will be given a very liberal supply of PON—which you will definitely need. Good luck. You'll need that too."

---

On the eighth day, two attendants, who showed the effects of massive doses of PON to protect themselves from the centrifugal force, had to carry a man out of the tank. Many others asked to be removed, begged to be allowed to withdraw their resignations.

"The twelfth day is the worst," a grizzled spaceman told Craig. "That's when the best of 'em want out."

Craig clenched the iron rung of his bed and struggled to bring the old man's face into focus.

"How ... how do they know when you ought ... to come out?" he asked between waves of nausea.

"Blood pressure. They get you just before you go into shock."

"How can they tell?" Craig fought down his growing panic. "I can't."

"That strap around your belly. You mean you ain't noticed it?"

"Haven't noticed much of anything."

"Well, it's keyed to give them some kind of signal."

The old man lapsed into silence. Craig wished him to continue. He desperately wanted something to distract his mind from the ghastly conditioning process.

Slowly at first, the lines formed by seams in the metal ceiling began to bend. Here it came again!

"Old man!" shouted Craig.

"Yeah, son. They've dropped it down a notch."

"Dropped ... it ... down?"

"Maybe that ain't scientific, but it's the way I always think of it."

"Can't they ... drop it down continuously?"

"They tried that a few times—once when I was aboard. You wouldn't like it, kid. You wouldn't like it at all."

"How ... many times ... do they drop it?"

"Four times during the day, three at night. Twenty days."

A nightmare of visual sensations ebbed into Craig's mind. He was vaguely aware of the moans of other men in the vaultlike room. Wave upon wave of nausea swept him as he watched the seam lines bend and warp fantastically. He snapped his eyelids shut, only to begin feeling the nightmarish bodily sensations once more. He felt the cot slowly rise longitudinally, felt himself upside down, then the snap of turning right side up once more—and he knew that neither he nor the cot had moved so much as an inch.

Craig heard the voices around him, muffled, as though talking through wadding.

"... got it bad."

"We better take him out."

"... pretty bad."

"He'll go into shock."

"... never make it the twelfth."

"We better yank him."

"I'm ... all right," Craig mumbled at the voices. He struggled with the bonds of his cot. With terrible effort he forced his eyes open. Two white-clad figures, ridiculously out of proportion, hovered wraithlike over him. Four elongated eyes peered at him.



---

*Attendants coming for to take me home....*

"Touch me and I'll kick your teeth in!" he yelled. "I'm going to Terra. Wish you were going to Terra?"

Then it was better. Oddly, he passed the twelfth day easily. By the fourteenth day, Craig knew he could stand Grav 1. The whine of the centrifuge's motors had diminished to a low hum. Either that or they had begun to produce ultra-sonic waves. Craig was not sure.

Most of the men had passed through the torments of gravitational conditioning. The huge headquarters base centrifuge aboard the man-made satellite had gradually caused their bodies to respond once more to a single source of pull. They were now ready to become inhabitants of planets again, instead of free-falling ships.

On the eighteenth day, automatic machinery freed them from their imprisoning cots. Clumsily and awkwardly at first, the men began to walk, to hold their heads and arms in proper attitudes. They laughed and joked about it and kidded those who were slow at adjusting. Then they again began taking paraoxylnebutal in preparation for the free-fall flight to Terra.

Only one of the score of men in the centrifuge tank remained voluntarily in his cot.

"Space article violator," the old man informed Craig. "Psycho, I think. Went amuck with some extraterritorials. Killed a dozen."

"What will they do, exile him?"

"Not to Chociante, if that's what you mean. They just jerked his space card and gave him a one-way ticket to Terra."

"For twelve murders?" asked Craig incredulously.

"That's enough, son." The old man eyed Craig for an instant before looking away. "Pick something to talk about. What do you figure on doing when you get to Terra, for instance?"

"I'm going into Import. My father was in it for twenty years."

"Sure," said the old spaceman, watching a group of young crewmen engaged in an animated conversation.

"It's a good job. There's a future to it."

"Yeah."

Why did he have to explain anything at all to the old space tramp?

"Once I get set up, I'll probably try to open my own business."

"And spend your weekends on Luna."

Craig half rose from his cot, jarred into anger.

But the old spaceman turned, smiling wryly. "Don't get hot, kid. I guess I spent too long in Zone V." He paused to examine his wrinkled hands. They were indelibly marked with lever callouses. "You get to thinking anyone who stays closer'n eighty light years from Terra is a land-lubber."

Craig relaxed, realizing he had acted childishly. "Used to think the same. Then I took the exam and got this job."

"Whereabouts?"

"Los Angeles."

The old man looked up at Craig. "You don't know much about Terra, do you, son?"

"Not much."

"Yeah. Well, I hope you ain't disappointed."

"My father was born there, but I never saw it. Never hit the Solar System, matter of fact. Never saw much of anything close up. I stood it a long time, old man, this hitting atmospheres all over the Universe."

But the spaceman seemed to have lost interest. He was unpacking some personal belongings from a kit.

"What are you doing in Grav 1?" Craig asked.

The old man's face clouded for an instant. "In the old days, they used to say us old-timers acted like clocks. They used to say we just ran down. Now they got some fancy psychology name for it."

Craig regretted his question. He would have muttered some word of apology, but the old man continued.

"Maybe you've read some of the old sea stories, or more'n likely had 'em read to you. Sailors could go to sea until they just sort of dried up. The sea tanned their skins and stiffened their bones, but it never stiffened their hearts. When they got old, it just pulled them in.

"But space is different. Space is raw and new. It tugs at your guts. It sends the blood rushing through your veins. It's like loving. You don't become a part of space the way you do the old sea, though. It leaves you strictly alone. Except that it sucks you dry, takes all the soup out of you, leaves you brittle and old—old as a dehydrated piece of split leather.

"Then one day it shoots a spurt of blood around in one of your old veins. Something gives. Space is through with you then. And if you can stand this whirligig conditioning, you're through with space."

---

*"You can't figure it. Some of 'em urp all over and turn six shades of green."*

*"You got to watch the ones that don't."*

*"Yeah, you got to watch the ones that don't. Especially the old ones."*

*"He's old. You think it was his heart?"*

*"Who knows?"*

*"They'll dump him, won't they?"*

*"After a tracer is sent through. But it won't do any good."*

*"He probably outlived everybody that ever knew him."*

*"Wouldn't be surprised. Here, grab his leg."*

---

Robert Craig folded the flight jacket tightly and stuffed it into the cylindrical carton. A sleeve unwound just as he did so, making it difficult to fit into the place he had made for it. Exasperated, he refolded it and jammed it in place. Smaller rolls of underclothing were then fitted in. When he was satisfied with the layer, he tossed in a small handful of crystals and began to fill the next layer. After the carton was completely filled, he ignited the sealing strip and watched as the plastic melted into a single, seamless whole. It was ready for irradiation. Probably in another ten years his son-to-be would put it on and play spaceman. But Craig swore he'd make sure that the kid knew what a stinking life it was.

At 1300 hours, the ferry bumped heavily alongside the starboard lock. It was the signal for relief in the passengers' quarters; many were beginning to feel a reaction to the short free-fall flight from the headquarters satellite.

The audio called out: "Flight Officer Robert Craig. Flight Officer Robert Craig. Report to Orderly 12. Report to Orderly 12 through the aft door."

With pangs of anxiety he could not completely suppress, Craig obeyed.

Orderly 12 handed him a message container.

"Who's it from? Somebody on Terra?"

"From a private spaceman named Morgan Brockman."

"*Brockman?*"

"He was with you in the grav tank."

"The old man!"

The message container produced a battered punch card. Craig straightened it and was about to reach into his pocket for a hand transcriber. But then he noticed the card bore only a few irregular punches and was covered with rough hand printing.

Son, when the flunkies get around to giving you this, they'll have shot me out the tube. How do I know? Same way you know when your turbos are going to throw a blade. It's good this way.

There's something you can do for me if you want to. Way back, some fifty years ago, there was a woman. She was my wife. It's a long story I won't bother you with. Anyway, I left her. Wanted to take her along with me, but she wouldn't go.

Earth was a lot different then than it is now. They don't have to tell me; I know. I saw it coming and so did Ethel. We talked about it and I knew I had to go. She wouldn't or couldn't go. Wanted me to stay, but I couldn't.

I tried to send her some units once in a while. Don't know if she ever got them. Sometimes I forgot to send them at all. You know, you're way out across the Galaxy, while she's home.

Go see her if you can, son. Will you? Make sure she gets the unit transfer I made out. It isn't much out of seventy years of living, but she may need it. And maybe you can tell her a little bit about what it means to be out there. Tell her it's open and free and when you got hold of those levers and you're trying for an orbit on something big and new and green.... Hell, you remember. You know how to tell her.

Her name is Ethel Brockman. I know she'll still use my name. Her address is or was East 71, North 101, Number 4. You can trace her easy if she moved. Women don't generally shove off and not leave a forwarding address. Not Ethel, at least.

Craig put the battered card in his pocket and walked back through the door to the passenger room. How did you explain to an old woman why her husband deserted her fifty years before? Some kind of story about one's duty to the Universe? No, the old man had not been in Intergalactic. He had been a tramp spaceman. Well, why *had* he left?

Fifty years in space. *Fifty* years! Zone V had been beyond anybody's imagination that long ago. He must have been in on the first Cetusian flights and shot the early landings in Cetus II. God only knew how many times he had battled Zone 111b pirates....

Damn the old man! How did one explain?

---

Craig descended the ramp from the huge jet and concentrated on his impressions. One day he would recall this moment, his first on the planet Terra. He tried to recall his first thrill at seeing Los Angeles, 1500 square miles of it, from the ship as it entered the atmosphere.

He was about to step off the last step when a man appeared hurriedly. A rather plump man, he displayed a toothy smile on his puffy red face.

"A moment, sir. Just a little greeting from the Terra. You understand, of course. Purely routine."

Craig remained on the final step of the ramp, puzzled. The man turned to a companion at his right.

"We can see that this gentleman has come from a long, long way off, can't we?"

The other man did not look up. He was peering into what seemed to Craig to be a kind of camera.

"We can allow the gentlemen to continue now, can't we? It wasn't that we believed for a minute, you understand ... purely routine."

Both men were gone in an instant, leaving Craig completely bewildered.

"You goin' to move on, buddy, or you want to go back?"

Craig turned to face a line of his fellow passengers up the ramp behind him.

"Who was that?" Craig asked.

"Customs. Bet you never got such a smooth screening before, eh?"

"You mean he *screened* me? What for?"



"Hard to say," the other passenger said. "You'll get used to this. They get it over with quick."

Craig made his way toward the spaceport administration building. His first physical contact with Terra had passed unnoticed.

"Sir! Sir!" cried a voice behind him.

He wheeled to see a man walking briskly toward him.

"You dropped this, sir. Quite by accident, of course."

Craig examined the small object the man had given him before rushing off toward an exit.

It was an empty PON tube he had just discarded. He couldn't understand why the man had bothered until he realized that the plastaloid floor of the lobby displayed not the faintest scrap of paper nor trace of dirt.

---

The Import personnel man was toying with a small chip of gleaming metal. He did not look directly at Craig for more than an instant at a time, and commented on Craig's description of his trip through the city only very briefly between questions.

"It's a good deal bigger than I imagined," Craig was saying. "Haven't seen much of it, of course. Thought I'd check in here with you first."

"Yes, naturally."

"Thought you could give me some idea of conditions...."

"Conditions?"

"For instance, what part of the city I should live in. That is, what part is closest to where I'll work."

"I see," said the man noncommittally. It seemed to Craig that he was about to add something. He did not, however, but instead rose from his chair and walked to the large window overlooking an enormous section of the city far below. He stared out the window for a time, leaving Craig seated uncomfortably in the silent room. There was a distracted quality about him, Craig thought.

"You are the first man we have had from the Intergalactic Service," the personnel man said finally.

"That so?"

"Yes." He turned to face Craig briefly before continuing. "You must find it very strange here."

"Well, I've never seen a city so big."

"Yes, so big. And also...." He seemed to consider many words before completing the sentence. "And also different."

"I haven't been here very long," said Craig. "Matter of fact, I haven't been anywhere very long. This is my first real experience with life on a planet. As an adult, anyway."

The personnel man seated himself once more and pressed a button on a small instrument. A secretary entered the office from a door to Craig's left.

"Miss Wendel, this is Mr. Craig. Mr. Craig, my secretary. Mr. Craig will enter Minerals and Metals, Zone V."

They exchanged formal greetings. She was a moderately pretty girl of medium height and, to Craig, a pleasantly rounded figure. He would have attempted to catch her eye had she not immediately occupied herself with unfolding the legs of a small instrument she was carrying.

"This is Mr. Craig's first landing on Terra, Miss Wendel," the personnel man continued. "Actually, we shall have to consider him in much the same way we would an extraterrestrial."

The girl glanced at Craig, casting him a cool, impersonal smile.

"He was formerly a flight officer in the Intergalactic Space Service." The statement was delivered in an almost exaggeratedly casual tone.

The girl glanced at him once more, this time with a definite quizzical look in her brown eyes.

"Three complete tours of duty, I believe."

"Four," corrected Craig. "Four tours of three years each, minus a year's terminal leave."

"I take it you have no identification card?" the man asked.

"The one I held in the service. It's pretty comprehensive."

The other turned to the secretary. "You'll see that he is assisted in filing his application, won't you? A provisional Code II. That will enable you to enter all Import offices freely, Mr. Craig."

"Will he need a food and—clothing ration also?" asked the girl, without looking at Craig.

"Yes." The man laughed. "You'll excuse us, Mr. Craig. We realize that you couldn't be expected to be familiar with Terra's fashions. In your present outfit you would certainly be typed as a ... well, you'd be made uncomfortable."

Craig reddened in spite of himself. He had bought the suit on Ghandii.

"A hick," he supplied.

"I wouldn't go that far, but some people might."

---

Craig noted the pleasant way the girl filled her trim, rather severe business suit. He amused himself by calculating stress patterns in its plain woven material as she assembled the forms for him.

"Here, Mr. Craig. I believe these are complete."

"They look pretty complicated."

"Not at all. The questions are quite explicit."

Craig looked them over quickly.

"I guess so. Say, Miss Wendel, I was wondering—I don't know the city at all. Maybe you could go with me to have dinner. It must be almost dinnertime now. You could sort of check me out on some...."

"I'm afraid that would be quite impossible. You couldn't gain admittance to any office you need to visit tonight. Therefore, it is impossible for me to be of any assistance to you."

"Oh, come now, Miss Wendel. There are women aboard spaceships. I'm not a starved wolf."

"Certainly you are not, Mr. Craig. But it is not possible for me...."

"You said that already, but you can have dinner with me. Just company."

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

---

The Galactic hotel strove to preserve an archaic tone of hospitality. It advertised "a night's lodgings" and it possessed a bellboy. The bellboy actually carried Craig's plasticarton and large file of punch cards and forms to his room. Tired from the long, confusing day, Craig was not impressed. He vaguely wondered if the little drama of the hotel carried so far as a small fee to be paid the bellboy, and he hoped he would have the right size of Terran units in his wallet.

Outside the door to the room, the bellboy stopped and turned to Craig.

"For five I'll tell you where it is," he said in a subdued tone.

"Tell me where what is?"

"You know, the mike."

"Mike?"

"All right, mister, three units, then. I wasn't trying to hold you up."

"You mean a microphone?" asked Craig, mechanically fishing for his wallet.

"Sure, they don't put in screens here. Wanted to, but the boss convinced 'em there aren't any Freedomites ever stay here."

"Where is the microphone?" Craig asked as he found a ten unit note. He was too puzzled to wonder what he was expected to do with the information.

"It's in the bed illuminator. You can short it out with a razor blade. Or I'll do it for another two."

"Never mind," Craig said wearily. He waited while the bellboy inserted a key into the door and opened it for him.

"I can get you a sensatia-tape," whispered the boy when they had entered. He nudged Craig wickedly. "You know what they're like?"

"Yeah," Craig said disgustedly. Traffic in the illicit mental-image tapes was known as far into space as lonely men had penetrated. Intergalactic considered them as great a menace to mental and moral stability as the hectopiates. Craig wearily got the man out of the room, took a PON pill, and eased himself into the bed.

It had been a weird day and he had not liked it. There was no telling how long it would take him to shake his—sea legs, the psychologist had called it. One thing was sure: Terra aggressively went after its strangers.

---

Ushered into the room by a sullen and silent secretary, Craig found himself facing a semi-circular table at which were seated five uniformed men. The center man, obviously their superior, rose to greet him. He wore the familiar smile Craig had come to know so well and hate so much. The man was somewhat over forty years old, short, stout, entirely unpleasant and puffy.

"Mr. Craig, I believe," he greeted Craig. Since it seemed to be more of a statement than a question, Craig did not answer. He took up a position of more or less military attention at the center of the curved table.

"You *are* Robert Craig," insisted the man.

"Yes, I'm Robert Craig," he answered, somewhat surprised.

The stout man seated himself with a sigh and began to sort through some papers on the table before him. The other four men continued to stare at Craig silently, until he began to feel uncomfortable and hostile. He stiffened his position of attention defiantly.

"You may relax, Mr. Craig," said the first man without looking up. "You aren't nervous, are you?"

"No," Craig said, trying to smile. "This is the first time I've been here and...." He let the sentence trail off, hoping for a sympathetic response. But he did not get it.

"Flight Officer, eh?" said the man. Then, looking up, he added, "Somewhat unusual to find a vigorous young man like yourself abandoning the space service for a Terran job, isn't it?"

"I don't know. Is it?"

"Leaving something behind out there, Mr. Craig?"

"No, nothing," Craig snapped.

The other man glared at him a full minute. Craig met the stare and realized the considerable power behind the weak face.

"You don't like this sort of affair, do you, Mr. Craig?"

Craig was forced to look away. "I'm afraid I don't see the necessity," he answered in a controlled voice. "I served the Intergalactic Service well. My records prove that."

"Granted," said his questioner bluntly. "You are a Terran, are you not, Mr. Craig?"

"I should think that would be obvious," Craig said, matching the blunt tone.

The man rapped the table. "That's enough of your impertinence! You may very well have served the Intergalactic Service, but you are on Terra now. Terra, greatest, first of all civilized systems. Intergalactic may very well have to piddle with incompetent savages and wild colonists, but we of Terra assert our supremacy. Remember those words. You may not always find Terra so submissive to Intergalactic as Intergalactic would desire."

"Where are your loyalties, Mr. Craig?" demanded one of the other men suddenly.

"I am a Terran...."

"But your first loyalty is to Intergalactic. Is that right?"

"Is there a distinction?" Craig shot back, thoroughly angry.

"Do you wish to be held in contempt of this committee?" asked the first man, leaning forward half out of his chair.

"Of course not."

"Then you will confine your responses to simple yes and no answers, if you please, *Mr. Craig.*"

Craig glared at the men in impotent rage. His head was beginning to ache. He had been many hours without paraoxylnebutal.

"Now, Mr. Craig," the first man began in an overly mild tone, "we shall begin again. Please try to restrain your show of emotion. You are here in petition of an identity card of provisional Code II type. You maintain that you have never been on Terra before. Indeed, you state that you have never had a political affiliation."

"Yes."

"What are your reactions to the latest acts of the Liberty party?" a third man abruptly asked.

"I have none," Craig answered, after an instant of confusion.

"You do not condemn the Liberty party?"

"I ... I...."

"Then you must favor it."

"I don't know anything about any...."

"Now, then, Mr. Craig," interrupted the head of the group. "The Import service report shows that you passed your tests aboard your ship. You were enabled to accomplish this through night study."

"Yes."

"Yet you maintain in your application that you had considered the space service a career."

"I changed my mind."

"Oh. You changed your mind. I see...."

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"What do you do if they turn you down on your food ration?" Craig asked the man by his side on the bench. He had intended it as a vaguely humorous question.

"You don't eat."

"You mean they would actually let you starve?"

"If you could not eat, you would starve," the man said matter-of-factly.

"What's all this for, anyway? I mean the medical part."

"You are rationed fairly in accordance with your particular metabolism."

"You're kidding."

"One does not jest of such matters," said the man, getting up to take a seat on another bench.

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*"But I'd like to keep it as a souvenir."*

*"It is not permitted."*

*"Look, it isn't issue. I bought the hide, had it made. I can pull off the marks of insignia and it's just another jacket...."*

*"That is not the point, Mr. Craig. Your clothing ration is defined by law. There are no exceptions."*

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*"These are your permanent quarters. You will occupy them immediately. Then, if you believe the location is wasteful of your time, you must petition the appropriate committee. This department cannot accept such a petition."*

---

*"Your petition to be permitted to purchase a private means of conveyance is hereby denied."*

---

The big man leaned far back in the battered desk chair. It creaked at worn joints, but touched the wall without sliding from under its enormous load. The man was silent through Craig's long, confused speech. By turns he examined his fingernails, picked at yellowed teeth, and stared above his head at the discolored ceiling.

"... but you can get all this from ISS, maybe even from Import, if they'll release my file," Craig argued.

"Uh-huh," the big man said between closed lips.

"I just made a mistake, that's all. You don't hear much about Terra out there. It was different in my father's day. It must have been different."

"Yeah."

"I haven't any character references on Terra, but I can post a good-sized bond if they'll release my ISS units."

The space-freight agent glanced up at Craig at the remark.

"Anyway, I can get my units anywhere ISS has a base," Craig continued. "I can handle anything up to 15 Gs acceleration without a new license. I can go heavier if I get a check ride."

The fat man leaned forward in the protesting chair. "You got everything, but you can't go. I can't hire you."

"Why not?"

"Look, kid—Craig, is it?—how long you been in?"

"Four days. I'm still working on my work clearances."

"Four days. You tried Intergalactic to see if they'd take you back?"

"Yes. Their hands are tied by my Terran contract."

"And ours aren't, eh?" The man rose from the desk and walked to a water tap. He popped a pill into his gaping mouth and drank from a tin cup. Then he returned to the inadequate chair. "So you're a spaceman. Flight officer—*ex-flight* officer. You know how to navigate through four star zones and the asteroid belt thrown in. You got a license for 15 Gs, could get five more. You got enough brains to pass Import's senior router's exam.

"Still, you ain't got enough sense to come in out of the rain!"

Craig sat upright in his chair.

"We get guys like you two, three a day. You're hot. You're big. You're rarin' to go. But you ain't goin' nowhere!"

Craig glared at the big man.

"I don't know how you got here, Craig. It ain't none of my business. Maybe you did quit honorable. Quit to follow your daddy's footsteps. Or maybe you went and burned up a colony

somewhere!"

"That would be in my records, wouldn't it?" Craig challenged.

"It still don't make any difference. You're stuck here. Nobody leaves Terra without a permit. Nobody. You couldn't get a permit with a crowbar and a blaster. You got a problem, son. You asked for it. Maybe they told you beforehand, maybe they didn't. You got a problem of adjustment. Terra's moved a long, long way since your daddy left it. We're doing things here. We're going places. Big things and big places.

"You got to fit into that, kid. Fit in quick. Move with it. You don't like the red tape, the committees? I don't like 'em either. But I been here a while. I can cut red tape. Red tape is for guys like you, guys that don't know Terra, don't know where we're going.

"Stick around, kid. You still got sea legs. You're still hopped up on PON. You're going to like it here on Terra. You're going to like it great. You can make a quick dollar on Terra. You can spend a quick dollar here too. Smarten up or you'll finish scrubbing radioactive dust off girders!"

---

The girl approached his table, her hard eyes scanning him. Wordlessly she slid into the booth opposite him and made a sign for the bartender.

"Have a drink?" Craig suggested, smiling.

"Yeah."

"Work here?"

"What you mean by that?"

"I mean if you get a percentage on the drinks, I can...."

"I don't get no percentage."

The bartender brought them a version of N'cadian taz. The girl slouched in the booth and sullenly tapped the glass. The lights in the bar had dimmed to simulate some kind of planetary night. The walls came alive with projected images of Terran constellations. On their table, a globe lamp began to glow. Tiny bright lights swung orbits around a miniature sun inside the lamp.



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As a miniature Pluto swung on its slow arc, an image of it was projected on the girl's dusky face. She seemed to be staring at nothing.

"Why d'you call me over here? You a purist, or don't you like the brand of sensatia-tapes they're peddlin' these days?"

"I don't understand," Craig said.

She smiled crookedly at him. Not a bad face, Craig decided, but hard, hard as the ceramiplate of a ship. She could not be very old. It was the kind of wild look in her eyes that gave her a false

appearance of age.

"Maybe you're writing a book—you got me over here for something."

"I just got in," Craig answered.

"What am I supposed to do for this drink?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all. I suppose. I thought ... just skip it. I'm lonesome, that's all."

"Lonely, huh?" said the girl. "Lonely and just in, huh? Just in from space." She turned away from him to signal the bartender. "What you need is drinks."

There were more drinks. Many more drinks. The girl kept them coming, kept talking to him about—what was it? Craig looked at the girl and then at the globe lamp. He watched as the tiny bright orbs of light projected their images on the girl opposite him. He was aware of the gradual dimming of the lights, the suppression of sound in the bar. He watched the tiny lights of other globes appear around shadows, watched as the lights traced fiery trails across the dusky skin of the girl opposite him, watched as they crossed the warm, rounded flesh....

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*"I tell ya we didn't give him nothing but a coupla tazes."*

*"The pump will determine that. You might as well tell the truth."*

*"I am tellin' the truth. He drank, let's see ... two, three."*

*"Four, five, six. You let her pump him full."*

*"Hey, look, this guy's a spaceman, or was."*

*"I didn't know that. Honest I didn't. He never told us."*

*"All right, you didn't know. What you put in those tazes—ether?"*

*"We denature the polyester just like the law says."*

*"And you get it straight from M'cadii, eh?"*

*"We put in some syn. So what? That ain't against the law."*

*"He's probably got grav trouble, Chief."*

*"Who was the girl?"*

*"Girl? What girl?"*

*"You know what girl!"*

*"Just a girl, like a million of 'em these days."*

*"Professional?"*

*"There ain't any any more. You know, sensatia-tapes."*

*"Know her name?"*

*"I don't ask no names. How you going to know names? She's a girl. Just like ten million of 'em these days."*

*"What you think a guy like this is doing here, Chief?"*

*"Why not?"*

*"Well, look at his clothes. He's got units, too. Can't figure that out. She must've been after something else."*

*"How about his clothing and food tickets?"*

*"Uh ... that's it. She got his tickets."*

*"Come on, give me a hand. Lug him into the hold."*

---

The hard face of the Civil Control chief peered down at him. It was a thick, red face that displayed no trace of feeling except perhaps toughness. It was long yet full, and it contained the proper features; but it added nothing of expression to the harsh, rasping voice.

"First time in, eh? Or else Central's too damned lazy to check the file. Okay, I ain't going to cite you. Waste of time. But listen to me. You got problems, we got problems. You solve yours and don't come back here."

Craig was aware of officers glowering at his back as he fumbled with the door button. The door opened onto a city street. It was entirely foreign to Craig. It was not a clean, straight thoroughfare at the bottom of a canyon of towering white buildings and contrived but bright parks. It was an old street, a dirty street; an incredible welter of color and line, of big and little shops, of dirty human shapes in drab gray. A flood of tone and noise hit Craig as he emerged from the station and descended the long, broad steps.

Craig's head was in a whirl despite the strong dose of paraoxylnebutal he had taken in the station

clinic. He felt closed in and befogged. He could remember almost nothing of the night in Civil Control. Even the clinic was fading from his memory. He was aware that he stank, that he was dirty, that his clothing clung to his body. He was miserable.

He must call Import. He was due to begin work this morning, his period of personal adjustment complete. Instead, Craig turned and began to walk. He could not carry on a coherent conversation in his present state. He could never find his way unassisted back to his apartment; he was not even sure he remembered the address. But the thought of returning to his quarters, to Import sickened him.

What *was* his address? East 71, North.... No, that would be old lady Brockman. The association irritated him. He had completely forgotten the unwanted assignment, had forgotten to inquire where the address could be found.

Craig became aware of the heavy flow of vehicular traffic that roared a scant eight feet away. Large surface carriers whistled in the nearest lane of the complex four-lane pattern. Then there were the private surface craft; they were of many sizes and shapes. He guessed that they were turbine-powered, but he could not identify the odor of their exhausts.

There was an odd, unreal quality about the busy thoroughfare. Even myriad sounds from it were sounds he had never heard before and could not break down into their component parts.

Craig became aware of other humans, many of them, on the sidewalk. Again they were of a class that he could not identify. They had none of the brisk, purposeful stride of those he had seen near Import. They lacked also the graceful, colorful dress. Their faces, so far as he could separate them from the blurring film over his eyes, were different.

They seemed somehow *looser* faces, though Craig did not know exactly what he meant by the term. They were not tight, pinched, set, as were the faces he had seen before on Terra. There were bulbous noses, large ears, squint eyes, disheveled hair, the men's and women's faces strangely similar. Some were young, some old, but few were hard or fixed. They seemed more plastic, more full of expression than those he had come to know elsewhere in the city. He felt an inexplicable craving to know someone of this strange street.

"You looking for something, mister?" asked a voice near him.

Craig turned to find a middle-aged man eyeing him from the doorway of an empty building.

"I got it," the man added.

"Got what?" Craig asked.

"Anything a guy just outa the can would want."

"What would a 'guy just outa the can' want that you have?" Craig examined the weathered, sharp face. It was an unpleasant one, but it belonged to this street; it would do to tell him what he wanted to know of the place.

"Follow me." The man quickly inserted a magnikey into the door of the vacant store building.

"There's a station just up the street," Craig warned.

"Sure. So what?"

The empty room was dusty and dark and received little light through the grimy display windows that faced on the street. What kind of store it had been, Craig could not guess. The man led him through a kind of storage room which was piled high with moldy paper cartons and back to a rear door. With quick, dextrous movements, the man swung an ancient bar assembly and pushed open the rear door. It led to a litter-strewn yard enclosed by rough, eroded shacks and a wooden garage.

They entered the garage through a creaking hinged door. It was a dank, almost completely dark room. Craig stumbled over something on the floor and fell against a packing box of some kind.

"Just stand still," said the man. He was shuffling invisibly about in the darkness. Craig could hear him opening a kind of cabinet or drawer while saying in a steady monotone, "You got the right man, mister. My stuff is pure. You can test it. But you'd rather *drink* it, right?"

For the tenth time, Craig asked himself why he had accepted the furtive invitation. The thought of this man's kind of intoxicant—however 'pure'—nauseated him. Nevertheless, he felt himself compelled by a kind of insatiable curiosity to follow out the part he had accepted. Perhaps through this man, through this somehow fascinating street, he could....

"You got ten; I know that. Maybe you got more, huh?" the man interrupted his confused train of thought.

"What makes you think I got ten?" Craig asked. He did not know himself how many units his wallet contained—certainly not after the previous night.

"Don't get sore. I'm honest. But I know you got ten. Otherwise you wouldn't have got out of the station."

The lack of clearly defined objects by which to orient himself in the darkness of the garage made his head begin to swim once more. He wanted to leave.

"Don't get scared, buddy. They don't ever come in here."

Craig fumbled for support in the darkness. He was afraid he would be sick. Fulfillment for the half-formed plan that was beginning to take shape in his mind would not come with the

bootlegger. It would come into being somehow in the tawdry street he had just left, only he did not know how.

"They don't really go after polyester. They don't want to stop the stuff. It makes their job easier. You don't have to worry, buddy. Come on, how much you want? You might have trouble finding more for a while."

Craig said nothing. He fumbled for a grip on a packing box.

"You're from Out, aren't you, buddy? You ain't used to us here yet. Most of my customers are from Out. What jam'd you get into?"

"I got ten units, I think," Craig evaded.

"It ain't none of my business what you done. Nobody around here is going to ask you any questions. Long as you got units, you get poly like the big shots that come over here all the way from Uptown."

"Yeah," said Craig. "Gimme what I get for ten units and let's beat it out of here."

"Myself, I never been Out. Not even Luna. Never wanted to. I stay here and have my little business—you can call it a business. You'll see, buddy, there are millions of guys like me. The controllers don't stop us. We're respectable. A damned sight more respectable than those...."

"All right," snapped Craig. "Let's get out of here."

"You got it bad, huh? This poly will fix that up. It's pure. You just come back to old Nave and get poly."

"How ... how you get out of here?" asked Craig, nauseated.

"Get lost pretty easy in the dark, huh?" The man was beginning to mock him.

Craig lashed out suddenly at the unseen face in the darkness. He caught the thin throat in his left hand. His right left the packing box and cocked to deliver a blow. But he began to fall and had to let go.

"Okay, buddy, okay," the other man said soothingly as Craig was forced to catch himself. "I *like* ex-spacemen. I know lots of you. I sell you poly. You don't want to get tough with me."

He shoved a block of ten small cubes into Craig's hand and, while Craig fished for his wallet, he produced a tiny, narrow-beamed flash. The transaction was quickly over. The cube was small enough to be forced without much difficulty into Craig's jacket pocket.

The man led him back across the littered yard, through the empty store building, and out the front door. When Craig emerged onto the street once more, a uniformed figure was standing nearby.

"He'll need two," whispered the man from behind him.

Craig reached into his pocket and mechanically fumbled two of the small cubes of waxlike substance from the loose package. He placed them on the outstretched hand of the Civil Control officer. The officer did not look in his direction at any time, but accepted the offer and walked slowly on toward the station.

Craig continued aimlessly down the long street. His head cleared as he walked and once more began to form a kind of vague plan. There was anonymity to a street such as this. There was also a kind of freedom. Everywhere in the universe, there were such streets. Neutralized streets, where a kind of compromise was reached between law and lawlessness. They were permitted because it was always necessary to provide such a place for those who were not permitted elsewhere. Those who would not fit, could not be "rehabilitated," could neither be jailed nor permitted complete freedom.

Controllers of one kind or another patrolled such streets, keeping them in a kind of check—or, more accurately, in a kind of containment. But no amount of control would ever completely stamp out the likes of Nave, the bootlegger.

Perhaps here, on this street, Craig could be "lost." Here he might find security for a time in anonymity, security and time to find a way ... to what? He did not know.

"Mister! Mister!" cried a thin, high voice from somewhere to his left. "Here, quick!"

It was a young boy of perhaps nine or ten. Craig caught sight of him as he motioned urgently. He wore a shabby, torn version of what appeared to be a space service uniform.

"I'm not buying anything, son," Craig said, pausing briefly.

"Come here, quick!" insisted the boy, his eyes large in a dirty face. "You already bought too much."

The boy was motioning him to follow. He had stepped between two buildings. Craig approached him with suspicion.

"What did you say?"

"Slip in here quick! You bought from Nave the peddler. You bought poly, didn't ya?"

"How did you...." Craig began.

"Tell you later. Slip through here quick or they'll send you to *Hardy*!"

The genuine fear of the youngster conveyed itself to Craig. With effort he forced his body through



the space between the old buildings. At first he did not intend to follow the boy, but only to stop him for an explanation. The boy, however, continued down the tight corridor formed by the buildings.

"There's a window soon," he said from ahead of Craig. "Hurry. You lost time with that peddler."

Lost time? Cursing himself for becoming involved again in something he did not understand, Craig nevertheless followed as best he could. It was a tight squeeze and he found himself becoming breathless.

"Dive down!" shouted the boy, looking back with terror in his eyes.

Instinctively Craig did so. The rough walls tore at his suit.

"Stop!" shouted a voice from behind Craig. "Stop or we fire!"

Craig suddenly felt the sill of a window which opened into the building to his left. He quickly pulled himself into it. There was a sickening whine and a part of the window disintegrated in a cloud of splinters and plaster.

"Through here," said the boy from the semi-darkness. "They'll blast their way inside in a minute!"

Craig found himself in another empty building. He followed the boy through a doorway and felt his way as he half ran along the dark hall.

"Who are *they*?" he panted.

"Controllers."

"Civil Control?"

"Sure. You must be pretty important. I didn't get it all. But they say the controllers checked up on you after.... I'll explain later."

The hall ended in a dim room piled high with plasmolite packing boxes in great disarray. The boy chose a box and lifted a lid.

"Follow me. It's a passage."

"Where to?"

"No time now. Down here."

The passage, which seemed to be constructed of plasmolite boxes, seemed somehow lit by daylight, although Craig could not actually see the source of the light.

The tunnel ended in broad afternoon daylight. As he climbed out he saw a large clearing surrounded by ruins.

"We're just inside the old city," the boy said. "We're safe now—unless those controllers are willing to take more chances than I think."

"Wait a minute, son. You said 'old city.' You mean that this is a part of pre-war Los Angeles?"

"Well, sure."

"But that's supposed to be...."

"Radioactive? Most of it, anyway. Good thing, too. Otherwise we'd have no place to go."

"Look, kid, you better explain," said Craig. "You were right about somebody being after me, but I don't get the 'we' business. Or how you knew all about this."

"All right, mister, but let's get away from here. Those guys won't come through to here, even if they find a way—I don't think. But they're gettin' smarter and you're pretty hot right now."

The boy led the way to what appeared to be a completely demolished building.

"Used to be the old library," he said.

They circled the heap of plaster, brick, and twisted steel. On the other side Craig saw what appeared to be a window. The boy let himself down through it.

Craig was amazed to find a large, relatively clear area inside, probably part of an old room that had been spared by some freak of the blast.

"You *live* here?" Craig asked the youngster incredulously.

"Part of the time." The boy brought up an old crate and offered it to Craig as a chair. "Listen, mister, I don't know who you are. You're an ex-spaceman and that's enough for me." There was a slightly amusing attempt at adult hardness about him. "You shouldn't have wasted time with Nave. You should have got out of there."

"Why?"

"I don't know. What you done, anyway?"

"I don't remember. Passed out at a bar...."

The boy showed disgust. He glanced at the pocket which contained the polyester.

Craig smiled. "I don't use this stuff. At least not enough to deserve what you're thinking." He tossed the remaining cubes on the littered floor of the room.

The boy maintained his look of scorn for a time, but then softened. "I was afraid you got kicked out of the service for that."

"How did you know I was ever in it?"

"Easy. You don't know how to walk on a planet yet. Anybody can tell."

"I didn't get kicked out," Craig said. "I came here to take a civil service job."

"It'd almost be better if you had been."

"I didn't know about Terra. None of us had any idea."

"I know," said the boy sadly. "My father quit, too. *He* quit to marry my mother. That was before it was ... so bad."

"Where—" Craig began, then bit off the question.

"Oh, gee, mister, Terra's in an *awful* bad shape! They took ... my parents. They hunt us down. They...."

Craig approached the boy and put a hand on his shoulder. "What's your name, son?"

"Phil."

"Phil what?"

"I don't know exactly. My father had to use so many names toward the ... end. He once had only one name, but I guess even he forgot what it was."

---

They prepared to spend the night in the old library room, but first Phil left it and made his way into the wilderness of rubble. He returned dragging a packing box of plastic insulating material, out of which they fashioned a crude bed. Despite the thousands of questions that paraded across Craig's mind, he waited each time for the boy to speak.

"I can't take you any further until...."

"Until you know more about me?"

"In a way. *They'll* let me know."

Craig would have risked much to identify the "they" Phil referred to, but he did not ask the question. As he watched the boy preparing the dimly lit room for the night, he felt sure Phil could be trusted. He was almost frighteningly mature for his age.

The room was well hidden, for the once great library lay in a powdered ruin about it on all sides but a part of one. Only by accident or knowledge would a stranger recognize it in what was literally a world of rubble. During the moments of silence between the boy's volunteered statements, Craig tried to visualize the awful catastrophe that had befallen the old city. Piles of powdered masonry restricted his view greatly under the gathering night. He could see a scant city block through the window, but he knew the wreckage around them must extend for miles.

"You don't have to worry, mister...."

"Craig."

"Mr. Craig. They don't come in here at night."

"Radioactivity?"

"Yes. Not right here, but all around, everywhere."

"What?"

"It's all around us. You go through it to get here, but you can't *stay* anywhere but a few places like this."

"How do you know all of these things, Phil?"

"Oh, we know, all right. We had to find out."

"You must have ion counters," he said in what he hoped was a casual tone.

"We have lots of things."

Craig was thoughtful for a minute. The boy was obviously on his guard now.

"Those empty buildings?" Craig asked tentatively.

"They built them too close," said the boy. It seemed to be a safe subject. "They built them up as close as they thought was safe. Space is very valuable here. But they built them too close."

"Yet the 'we' you speak of live even closer?"

The boy bit his lip and eyed him suspiciously in silence.

"Look, kid," Craig said very deliberately, "I'm not a controller and I'm not interested in a bunch of petty thieves."

The effect was just what he had intended. "We're *not* thieves! And we're not traitors, either! We're...."

The boy was almost in tears. Craig waited a moment, then continued in a soft voice. "Phil, I'm just beginning to realize what a rotten place Terra is. From just what I've seen—it isn't very much—I can imagine such a system producing a great many 'we' groups like yours. I don't know who you

are or what you are, but you can't be any worse than what I've already seen of Terran officials. Tell me, kid, what's it all about? And is there any way out of here? I mean—*way out!*"

"You may tell him, Philip," said a quiet voice from the window entrance. "Like us, Philip, Mr. Craig is an enemy of tyranny, though he doesn't realize it yet."

Craig instinctively jumped back to get out of range of the window, meanwhile feeling around for something that could be used as a weapon. But the boy ran to the silhouetted figure in the window.

"Mr. Sam!" he cried eagerly.

Craig relaxed his hold on a strip of heavy metal. When the man had entered, the boy pulled a ragged black cloth across the window once more. He then ignited a small oil burning lamp in a carved-out nook in the wall.

"It's all right, Philip, nobody is following me," the newcomer said.

Craig studied his face. It was an old face covered by a stained gray beard. With a shock Craig recognized the man as a tramp he had seen earlier on the street, napping, sprawled in a doorway. Now for the first time he saw the eyes. Sharp and clear, they caught up the yellow light of the oil lamp and glowed warmly as they turned to Craig.

"I am 'Mr. Sam,' Mr. Craig. You might know me by the full name, Samuel Cocteau, but I doubt it. Even the names of the infamous do not penetrate space."

"I guess not," Craig agreed. "But you said something about my being an enemy of tyranny."

"Whether you like it at once or not, you are temporarily one of us—one of the 'we' Philip has been speaking of. But all of that in due time. Right now it is necessary for us to leave here."

"They're going to try to find us *tonight?*" asked Phil, startled.

"Yes, a tribute to Mr. Craig," said the old man. "A Geiger team is being readied at the station."

Craig started to protest as the boy began hurriedly to pick up his few possessions in the room.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Craig," the man said. "I must ask you to decide now whether to trust us and our judgment. There is grave danger for you if you are caught by the Civil Control. The report I have received is that you are largely unaware of the 'crimes against the state' you have committed. The Civil Control hoped to capture you before you find them out. But that, of course, is my word only. There is no time to give you proof, even if I had it."

Craig's mind whirled under the sudden onslaught of new facts. He had followed a peddler without knowing why he did it. He had bought polyester he had no use for. He had followed a boy who beckoned to him. Now—how much longer was he to move haphazardly through Terra like a cork on a wind-blown sea? Who were these strange fugitives who said he was one of them and who lived in the heart of a radioactive city?

"Well, Mr. Craig?" asked Cocteau quietly.

Craig glanced at the boy. The child's eyes were wide and pleading in the dim light of the oil lamp.

"Let's go," Craig said.

---

Darkness was swiftly falling on the wilderness of heaping ruin. The three made their way toward what Craig at first thought was an unbroken wall of rubble. The near-horizontal rays of the sun tipped the white mass of broken stone with brilliance, and gave the entire scene an unearthly quality. Below the towering rubble mountains, long black shadows were reaching toward what Craig knew to be the living city.

Cocteau took the lead and set a fast pace for a man of his age. He took a highly devious path through the "mountain," or what began to seem to Craig needlessly difficult and that outlined them against the bright western sky. At one point Craig left the invisible path of the older man to avoid an exhaustingly steep rise.

"Follow me exactly," warned Cocteau in a sharp voice. "There is only one relatively safe path through here."

"They'll see us against the sky!"

"It cannot be helped."

But there was no indication that they were followed. They pushed onward, scurrying over heaps of weathered plaster and brick. The old man seemed to avoid with great care places where metal girders were visible.

The exertion together with walking directly into the setting sun made Craig begin to feel the old nausea return. He resisted it for a time, but it would not be repressed, particularly as he strove to maintain his balance on difficult climbs. Once he stumbled on a splintered building stone and fell. It was a long minute before he could regain his feet and mutter a feeble, "Sorry."

"We must push on, Mr. Craig," was Cocteau's only comment.

"It's safe here for a *minute*, isn't it?" Craig panted, dizzy and breathless.

"There is no safe place here, Mr. Craig."

They continued their winding way through the growing darkness. For Craig it became a nightmare of stumbling over the endless piles of sharp stones. His mind spun sickeningly and he retched as he half ran along the path Cocteau set for them.

"Please, mister," breathed the voice of Phil behind him. "It isn't so far now."

Doggedness carried Craig onward long after awareness left him.

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He became conscious suddenly, as though by an injection of stimulant. He found himself surrounded by a number of figures, including Cocteau and a white garbed man, evidently a doctor.

"You are quite safe now, Mr. Craig," said Cocteau warmly. "Welcome to the *City of We*."

"Where are we?"

"Deep in the old city, in a place where the radioactivity is negligible," the man answered as the doctor took his pulse. "This is Dr. Grant and these others are members of the *Liberty party*."

"Liberty!"

"You've heard of it?"

"Yeah, you're pretty unpopular, aren't you?"

"Unpopular? Let us say that all of Terran *officialdom* is dedicated to exterminating us."

"The committee on something-or-other asked me about my attitudes toward the Liberty party," said Craig, rising to a sitting position on the cot.

"And at the time you had a lack of attitude, which most likely was unacceptable to them," supplied Cocteau, smiling. "Well, you may be interested to know that you are considered one of us by most of Terra just now."

"*What?*"

"That is correct," said another of the group. "It seems you were in a bar in—ah—in a somewhat less than fully conscious state...."

"But I didn't know anything about the Liberty party."

"No, nor is it alleged that you actually mentioned the party in so many words," continued the white-haired man, smiling. "But it seems that you did make certain statements in the presence of certain persons that did indicate a definite predilection...."

"That's crazy," said Craig angrily.

"Of course," Cocteau agreed.

"Furthermore," the other man said, "you are charged with wilful abandonment of duty and 'acts indicative of your desire to shun the best utilization of your talents in behalf of the state of Terra.'"

"In other words," explained Cocteau, "you applied for a job on a private space freighter. Without permission to do so."

Craig was silent. He lay back down on the cot and tried to absorb the data he had just received.

"So I'm accused of belonging to something I don't know anything about?"

"Then I'll tell you briefly about us. You have a right to know the magnitude of the crime with which you are charged." Cocteau took a seat by Craig's cot. The others also found chairs.

"But first a brief bit of history—a history that you have never heard before. Not your fault. It is not allowed to penetrate Terra's atmosphere."

"I don't know much about Terra," Craig interjected. "I'm just finding out how much I don't know."

"God, I wish the rest of the Universe could find out with you!" said one of the group.

"Yes, the history of Terra is almost lost now. That is, the part of it that followed the Great Wars of seventy-five years ago. You know of those wars; you have just walked through one of the physical results of them. No nation or alliance of nations can be said to have won them, but the wars had a most profound effect upon Terra. More than anything else, they made men reach to the stars, if only to escape the deadly conflicts of Terra.

"Ideological issues were involved, naturally, but the underlying cause of the Great Wars was the struggle for power. The world was disunited. Peoples were divided from peoples by an almost inconceivable number of unimportant distinctions. These were ethnical, national, racial, cultural—name any brand of prejudice and you'll find it existed then.

"Incredibly enough, the destructiveness of the Great Wars accomplished a kind of unity. Gone were the once proud aggressive nations. Gone into oblivion. Gone, too, were the systems of economics and sociology of which men were once so sure. There was a kind of 'plague-on-both-your-houses' attitude among the peoples of the world. There was a large measure of anarchy following the Great Wars. Not a violent, active anarchy of hate and terror, but of apathy and weariness. Apathy at the outcome of false conflicts, and weariness of the self-defeating strife of man against man.

"At first men produced by the full extent of their labors barely enough on which to survive. Only gradually did they regain their ability to produce surpluses once more. Of course, surpluses mean exchanges—trade. And trade requires order and system.

"The first ten years following the Great Wars was a period of gradualism in all things. Peoples united in small groups. There were no political or racial divisions. The units were built upon functional lines. They were natural and free. Above all, they were cooperative.

"It was not communism. Men knew all too well the mental and physical slavery of that brutally rigid system. It was not rugged individualism either. Rugged individuals during this period either starved or were driven out by the starving.

"This natural, cooperative unity spread and became more complex. There came into being natural associations of units. Not exclusive but inclusive associations that linked all who would join and could produce surpluses. Productivity increased thereby. Men were intelligent enough to avoid many of the old abuses.

"Ways were found to harness the productivity of each man and woman. Genuine efforts were made to avoid misfits, to make those who produced fit. It was realized, Mr. Craig, that the unhappy man will infect others with his misery, and the trouble he will cause is much more difficult to undo than to prevent in the first place.

"There were, of course, mistakes, false starts. But the new-found system of world-wide unity proved flexible. It was multiple-based. To a very large degree, all men fitted into it logically and naturally. It was the first truly 'grass-roots' economic and social system in the history of man. And it was a great tribute to his ability to work out his destiny, particularly since it came after a tragedy that was so enormous and devastating.

"The list of its successes is incredible. For in a decade the age-old problem of poverty seemed to have disappeared. There were no significant outbreaks of disorder and lawlessness—indeed, there was comparatively little need for a written law. The principle of mutuality and cooperation was too strongly conditioned into the people.

"Scientifically, the first half of the new century, a scant twenty-five years after the last bomb was dropped, was the greatest in man's history. Man reached the stars. He began to know the molecule, the atom, the electron. He pushed the frontier of his knowledge deep into both microcosm and macrocosm.

"But a fatal flaw had long before developed in the structure, wonderful as it was. It was an age-old flaw. It was one that was disguised by the very nature of the new system. When it was recognized, that flaw had so weakened the system that its spread was all but inevitable. It is a flaw that will always plague man to a certain extent, but one that must keep us eternally vigilant.

"It is this: the greatest human good comes not in how well you learn to control man and keep him from harming himself. What determines it is how completely you learn to free him.

"Conversely, the law provides that no control system, however devised, will succeed in bringing happiness and security to man to any greater extent than it permits the fullest expression of his nature.

"Man is *inherently* good. He will *always* choose a moral path when free to do so. He strives for justice and truth both as an individual and in mass.

"Mr. Craig, democracy is man's greatest *a priori*. Yet based upon a law of restraint, it cannot escape the hopeless contradiction that leads to its own destruction. Man can democratically do the irrational and the insane. He can democratically limit and coerce the absolute highest nature of himself. Bad laws are forever passed to achieve good ends. But each new law produces new criminals while the cause of the new crime remains unsolved.

"Ergo, the world you have just seen. Ergo, the Liberty party. Mr. Craig, our world is ruled by a vast and horrible bureaucracy whose terrible weapon is conformity. You would find few laws even today written in books. Our assemblies pass few statutes. They determine dogma instead. They 'resolve' and 'move.' They fix a new 'position,' define a 'stand.' Our equivalent of judge and attorney is no student of law. He is a kind of moralist. He is sensitive to the 'trend' and appreciative of the 'proper.'

"Terra fits uncomfortably in the Intergalactic System. Like many of the undemocratic systems of the dark past, the Terran state must expand. It is based upon a self-limiting philosophy unless it can spread fast enough. You are charged with being 'unTerran,' Mr. Craig. A system that forever seeks 'unTerrans' must inevitably exile or kill itself!"

It had been a long speech. Craig had listened in awe, for it was a completely new story to him.

"And you propose to destroy this bureaucracy?" he said.

"In so far as it is a philosophical entity, yes."

"And you say I am one of you now?"

"You are considered one of us. Your employer and his secretary are also suspected."

"But I'm entitled to a trial, or at least a hearing."

"Not now, Mr. Craig. It would do you little good, anyway. The 'position' of the Assembly on subversion is that it 'rightly behooves every loyal Terran so to conduct his behavior that a suspicion of membership in the Liberty party is unthinkable."

Craig found himself regretting every minute of his stay on Terra. Old Brockman had been right—it was no place for a spaceman. Now it was probably too late. No Terran space freighter would accept him and Intergalactic could not. There was not even a way for him to recover his service records.

"Will you join us, Mr. Craig?" asked one of the men. "We can use your skills, particularly your knowledge of space."

"Look, how do I know you aren't a bunch of traitors? Maybe all this you've told me is true. I've seen plenty of that bureaucracy and there seems to be damned little freedom of action left on Terra. But how do I know you can do any better when you get in power?"

"Liberty will never be 'in power,' Mr. Craig," Cocteau said quietly. "Liberty will attempt to reach the minds of the people with our message of hope, of freedom in true democracy."

Another of the group joined Cocteau. "We are now hunted as criminals. We have only this small stronghold in the old city."

"We shall attempt only to gain entry to the minds of the people," said Cocteau. "Gain entry to tell them how they live, for most of them have had no contact with any other kind of life."

"It would mean killing a few people," Craig pointed out.

"One of the basic principles of Liberty is the inherent goodness of every man," Cocteau repeated. "We have never taken a life, even in self-defense. We shall never take one. Nor will it ever be necessary for a member of the Liberty party to hold public office, to own a weapon, to coerce a man in any physical way."

"But you will coerce them with ideas. Is that what you have in mind?" Craig protested.

"If a point of view, a promise, a goal is coercion, then the answer to your question is yes. But ideas are not dangerous when a man is free to argue and act against them."

"Look here, Cocteau," Craig said earnestly, "all you say may be true. I believe it is. But what can I do? I'm a spaceman, or at best an apprentice import clerk. I don't know anything about this sort of work."

"Come here a moment," invited a member of the group.

Through the window indicated by the man, Craig saw an incredible sight. The entire scene seemed to be on the inside of a vast underground cavern. There were other buildings and some kind of systematic work being done by many men and women. But the thing that caught Craig's eye seemed to be cradled in a kind of hangar.



"A spaceship!" exclaimed Craig.

"A very modest one, yet not so modest when you consider that it was necessary to carry in every single piece and part by hand."

"Good Lord!"

"*You*, Mr. Craig, might captain that ship. Very few Terrans have ever even flown in one. It will be necessary to establish contact with possible assistance outside of Terra. You can make that possible."

Craig was thoughtful. "I suppose, now that I've seen all this, you can't let me leave here unless I join you."

"No," denied Cocteau. "You may leave here any time you like."

"I'd be sure to get caught, of course...."

"Within limits, it might be possible to help you avoid capture." Cocteau reached into his beggar's

coat and withdrew a wallet. "Identity card, food ration, clothing, work card, even a Government party card. It's all here, Mr. Craig. You could have a slightly altered physical appearance. Liberty accepts no unwilling members. You are given as nearly a free choice in this matter as is possible to give you."

"Suppose I talked?" asked Craig, nodding bluntly toward the port.

Cocteau smiled. "It was necessary to prepare for that. You were given a drug. It has not affected your thinking capacity in any way. But once it wears off, you will be unable to remember what took place while under its influence.

"When agents of the Liberty party are sent out of here, they go having had all experience with Liberty take place while under the drug. None of us could remember for more than a few hours the exact location of this headquarters. When it is necessary to leave for very long, we carry a small amount of the drug with us. Many of our agents have been caught and a few have resigned. But none has divulged enough information to harm us seriously."

Craig was postponing his decision to the last. "They must know you're somewhere in here. If the radioactivity keeps them out, why shouldn't they put a cordon around the entire old city?"

"Periodically, they try. But there are many, many other ways of leaving here than by the surface. Underground water conduits, ancient power and sewer lines, a number of tunnels we have dug...."

Craig was solemnly handed the wallet.

"If you will submit to sufficient plastic surgery to make you resemble this man, you may safely leave here no later than tomorrow night."

A long silence ensued. It was interrupted by a noise from outside the door of the room. It was the voice of Phil.

"Has he decided to stay? Did you see him? He looks like my daddy did.... Will he stay?"

"You mustn't interrupt, son. They're in conference now. We'll let you know."

"Tell him yes!" said Craig in a loud voice. "Tell him hell, yes, I'm staying!"

The men gathered around him to congratulate him on the decision.

Phil was allowed in the clinic to join them.

"Oh, Cocteau, one more thing," Craig said.

"Yes?"

Craig was fumbling for his own wallet. He extracted a folded card.

"Where would East 71, North 101, Number 4 be?"

"It *would* have been somewhere here in Old City."

"God! How did the old guy expect me to deliver this message? Old man named Brockman. He sent me a message just before he died in Gravitation. I was to visit his wife."

"Brockman?" asked Cocteau. "You mean Ethel Brockman?"

"Yeah. How'd you know?"

"Ethel Brockman was one of the organizers of the Liberty party. She served as its chairman until her death only a few years ago. Her husband must have felt your 'sea legs' would lead you to us eventually. And, of course, they did."

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