

A Novelet by **KENDELL FOSTER CROSSEN**

The REGAL



RIGELIAN

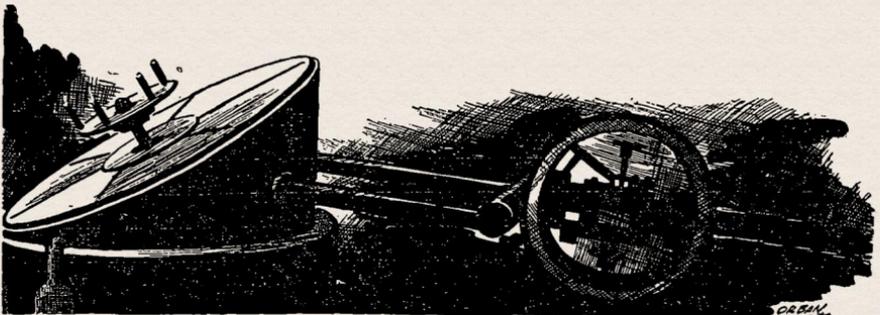
I

ALTHOUGH it was lunch time, the Cosmic Roof of the Mercurian-Astoria Hotel in Nyork belied the clock. Lights were dimmed to a romantic glow. The ceiling was a three-dimensional panorama of the stellar system. In the background, a Venusian stringed orchestra provided muted love music. Seated at a corner table, Manning Draco managed the diffi-

cult feat of eating Vegan pastry while reciting Martian poetry and gazing passionately at Lhana Xano.

It was now four months since Lhana Xano had gone to work as the receptionist at the Greater Solarian Insurance Company, Monopolated, and a steady campaign on the part of Manning Draco had finally produced a luncheon date. He made the proper dramatic pause be-

Manning Draco had to outsmart his rival but his rival outranked him, being king for a week—and Manning could have crowned him!



fore the last line of the poem, taking advantage of it to finish off the last of the pastry, then ended with lyrical passion. He leaned back in his chair and gazed at his companion.

There was no doubt that Lhana Xano was a Martian beauty. Her head fur, glistening like burnished copper, was arranged in the latest Terran style. The soft lights of the Cosmic room did wonders with her copper skin and slant eyes. She wore a green dress, caught up over one shoulder and tight-fitting, which revealed her voluptuous human-oid figure.

"You did that well," she said as he finished the poem. "I didn't know that you were so familiar with the Martian classics." A slight lisp was her only trace of Martian accent.

"There's so much you don't know about me," Manning said lightly. "You really owe it to yourself to learn all. I don't spend all of my time, you know, being chief investigator for Greater Solarian. For example, I have a very fine collection of Martian *Tsigra* art—from the *Zylka* Period—in my apartment. If you'd care to see it—" He broke off as Lhana burst into laughter.

"What's so funny?" he demanded.

Lhana stifled her laughter, but there was still a glint of amusement in her three eyes.

"Since I've been working for Greater Solarian," she said, "I've been going to night school and studying Terran history."

"I don't see anything about that to make you laugh when I start talking about Martian art."

"You wouldn't," she said. "I've been studying the social history of Terra and I was thinking how funny it is that you Terrans have progressed so much in all the sciences without having improved the art of seduction."

"What do you mean?" Manning asked gruffly.

"Almost two thousand years ago, male Terrans were inviting girls up to their apartments to see their etchings. And

here you are using the same technique. The only thing that's changed is that etchings have now become Martian *Tsigra* art."

MANNING DRACO grinned. He was not one to be long bothered by such counter attacks. "Well," he said, "from all I've been able to discover, we're also staggering along with only two sexes and nobody has complained yet. So we'll forget the *Tsigra* art. How about—"

This time he was interrupted by a waiter who appeared carrying a portable visiplate.

"Mr. Draco?" he asked.

"Yes," Manning said, scowling. "What is it?"

"A call for you, sir," the waiter said. He plugged the visiplate into the table socket and departed.

The angry face of J. Barnaby Cruikshank stared out from the visiplate screen. The eyes were fixed upon Manning Draco.

"Ha!" said J. Barnaby Cruikshank. It was rumored around the galaxy that the president of the Greater Solarian Insurance Company could pack more sheer malevolence into a simple "Ha!" than most people could get with the aid of two magnetiguns.

"Go away," Manning Draco said wearily. He had been too long exposed to J. Barnaby's anger to be impressed. "I'm busy and besides it's my lunch hour and you do not own me body, soul and lunch hour."

"Your lunch hour," J. Barnaby said biting, "was up fifteen minutes ago. It's bad enough that I have to put up with your making passes at every female in the office, but I will not tolerate your juvenile seductions being carried out on office time. If you're not back here within ten minutes, the name of Manning Draco will merely be an unfortunate blot on our otherwise perfect industrial relations record."

The screen faded as J. Barnaby broke contact.

"Now how did he know where to find me?" Manning mused. A sudden thought made him look at Lhana. She nodded brightly.

"I left word that we were lunching here," she said. "After all, I'm not as important a cog in the Greater Solarian scheme as you are and I could be fired for not being available."

"That's my complaint about you too," Manning said. "Between you and

"And an Xano never gives in," she said, laughing, as they left the restaurant.

Back at the office, Manning Draco stood in front of the private office of J. Barnaby Cruikshank until the scanner recognized him. As the door swung open, he stepped inside and faced the president of the company.

As the head of an insurance company that spanned two galaxies, and a man who was important in Federation politics, J. Barnaby Cruikshank was usually a model of sartorial elegance. But now his hair was badly mussed and his non-wrinkable coat was near to making liars of its manufacturers. From long experience, Manning Draco knew this indicated a crisis in the coffers of the Greater Solarian Insurance Company.

"Don't tell me," Manning said lightly, "I can guess. A planet full of our insured just killed themselves off and you want me to rush out and bring them back to life. Right?"

"You can afford to joke about it," J. Barnaby said in a pained voice. "You draw a nice salary in return for working about once a month. You can have a quiet, leisurely luncheon, keeping a valuable employee away from her work—while I sit here staving off disaster so that you may continue to draw that nice, fat salary—"

"Spare me your tears," Manning said with a grin. He draped himself over a chair. "I've seen your income tax returns. Now, what's the problem?"

"You know the planet Alphard VI?"

Manning Draco nodded. "The only habitable planet of ten in an orbit around Alphard. Rated as a Class C planet, despite a civilization which fulfills the requirements for Class B. Re-classification has been refused because the inhabitants are considered incurably eccentric. The Alphardians are considered non-humanoid, although there is now a suit in the Supreme Galactic Court contesting this ruling."

"Right," J. Barnaby Cruikshank said. "Alphard VI was admitted to the Fed-

The Cosmic Touch

REACTION to the MERAKIAN MIRA-CLE was so joyfully enthusiastic, that it is with untinged pride we give you this sequel. We suspect there isn't much that is safe from Mr. Crossen's scalpel. If you like a little gentle spoofing, a little stirring of the crust of musty gentility, you will enjoy the manner in which he goes to work on the Mrs. Grundies of the universe.

What makes it so delightful, as far as we are concerned, is the range of imagination displayed. Kidding humans is too easy for Crossen. He's got to jump a galaxy or two and kid creatures not yet invented.

The result is a kind of cosmic humor which is peculiarly and satisfyingly the kind of science fiction we always thought should be written. Read it and see!

—The Editor

J. Barnaby, I might as well be a Plutonian metal termite*. My life is settling down to slavery and chastity."

As they got up from the table, Lhana put one hand on Manning's arm in a friendly gesture.

"Don't misunderstand, Manning," she said. "I'm really very fond of you. Even more, I appreciate the fact that there's more to you than the wolf you show. But let's leave it like that."

"For the nonce, only," Manning said lightly. Now that they were standing he had to look up at her for she towered a good seven inches over his six feet three. "But a Draco never gives up."

*The metal termite, a native of Pluto, is a blindless, underground insect, about ten feet long and weighing close to three thousand pounds, Earth scale. It is valuable to Federation industry because it devours ore and eliminates pure metal. As a source of cheap labor, its match has not been found in the galaxy.

eration ten years ago. We sold our first insurance policy to the Emperor that same week. We continued to sell a few policies there, but made very little headway until three years ago. Then, within the space of one year, we sold policies to almost three-fourths of the population."

"Dzanku and Warren?" Manning asked with a grin.

HERE J. Barnaby winced, his face taking on a persecuted expression. "Yes," he said. "Rigelian Dzanku, Dzanku and Terran Sam Warren—the two best salesmen in the galaxy, as well as the crookedest, the dirtiest, double-crossing—"

"I gather that they did something which is going to cost you money?" Manning said.

"They're doing it now!" J. Barnaby struck the top of his desk with a clenched fist. "But this time we're going to throw them in jail!"

"We?" Manning asked gently.

"We," J. Barnaby declared, glaring at his chief investigator. "You'll get the goods on them and I'll see to it that the Federation judge gives them the limit."

"That's what I call a division of labor," Manning murmured. "Okay, what are they doing?"

"As you probably know," J. Barnaby said, "the Federation Charter permits us to establish a monopoly only when the government of a planet agrees to it. Although we have been the only insurance company operating on Alphard VI, the Emperor has always refused to grant us a monopoly. Now, a new insurance company has been established on Alphard VI."

"Dzanku and Warren?"

J. Barnaby nodded. "If it were legitimate competition, I wouldn't mind," he said piously. "Here, look at this." He tossed a large handbill to Manning.

It was printed in Alphardian and in English. Although he knew some Alphardian, Manning turned to the English version and read:

YOU CAN MAKE MONEY BY DYING

We are pleased to announce that the Galaxy Insurance and Benefit Association is now establishing its main offices on the glorious planet of Alphard VI and will issue special life insurance policies to all legal citizens of this planet at one-half the cost of any life insurance policy issued by any other company now operating in Galaxy I. In addition to this great saving, all of our policies carry an automatic double indemnity clause which becomes a part of the policy when a policy-holder has been insured by us for a period of fifty years or longer. Think of the fun you can have with the money saved from premiums—think of the joy which will come to your family when you drop dead!

But that is not all! In addition to this super-colossal offer, the Galactic Insurance and Benefit Association will give you a generous trade-in allowance on your old insurance policy if you are now insured by another company. All you have to do is bring in your present policy, sign it over to us, and receive a certificate entitling you to an extra one thousand credits of insurance with us. Be insured by the Galactic Insurance and Benefit Association and be the envy of your neighbors! If you carry one of our policies, you can't afford to live!

Dzanku Dzanku, Pres.
Sam Warren, Sec. & Treas.

Manning Draco tossed the leaflet back on the desk and grinned. "The Galaxy Insurance and Benefit Association," he said: "So far as Dzanku and Warren are concerned, there'll be more benefit than insurance in that association."

"Exactly," J. Barnaby said angrily. "It's easy to see what they're going to do. Not only will they sell a lot of policies which they never intend to honor, but did you catch that business about trading in old policies? They're going to get a lot of dumb natives to sign over policies they bought from us, then they'll arrange a convenient accident for the natives and collect from us. And this time we're going to stop them before they do their dirty work."

"How?" Manning asked innocently.

"That's your job—and you'll do it or else." Abruptly, J. Barnaby softened. "You can do it, Manning, my boy. There isn't a smarter operator in the galaxy than you. Aren't you the only person on Terra who has developed a secondary mind shield? Didn't you once get the best of Dzanku and Warren—even to

reading the mind of that slippery Rigelian, something that no one is supposed to be able to do. You won't fail me in the hour of my direst need."

"The visiscreen lost a great scenery chews when you became a monologist, J. Barnaby," Manning said. He grinned. "I don't know when I've seen you give a greater performance."

"I've already notified the field," J. Barnaby said gruffly. "Your ship will be ready when you get there."

"Okay. But just remember one thing, J. Barnaby—once I was lucky enough to pull a fast one on Dzanku. As a result, I was able to read his mind and that was what saved your neck on Mèrak II. But that was strictly a fluke. After this, Dzanku will be on his guard. My secondary mind shield keeps him from reading my mind, but I'll never be able to read his again either—and I'm not sure I'd want to even if I could."

"Okay," J. Barnaby said confidently, "so you'll find some other way of tying a rocket to his tail. I don't care what you have to do in order to get him—but get him."

"My master's voice," Manning murmured. "What if I have to break a few Federation laws to get him?"

"Then do it," J. Barnaby snapped. "But don't tell me anything about it," he added hastily. "The less I know about such things, the better."

"That's what I like about you—your high ethical standards," Manning said. He left quickly, but not before he saw the flush of anger spreading across J. Barnaby's face.

WHEN he reached the spaceport, Manning Draco's ship, the *Alpha Actuary*, was already on the launching level. He climbed in, fed the position of Alphard VI into the automatic pilot, and pressed the button which hooked the ship into magnetic power. The small ship raced up the launching rack and thrust itself skyward.

He was about an hour out from Terra when he decided to feed an encyclopedic

on Alphard VI through the audio-reader. He picked the tape from the library on the ship, but suddenly there was the shrill clangor of a bell. The automatic pilot threw the ship out of magni-drive so quickly that Manning almost fell to the floor. He left the tape there and hurried to the forward screen. The warning bell and the sudden braking meant that the ray-analyzers of the ship had spotted something ahead which was neither meteor nor another ship.

Manning leaned and glanced into the viewing screen. He rubbed his eyes and looked again. But he still saw the same thing despite the fact that his senses refused to accept it.

There, almost dead ahead of the ship, out in open space stood a figure. That is Manning thought in terms of its standing there although there was nothing but space to stand on. The body was pentahedral in shape, with a head in the form of an inverted pyramid. The legs were long and skinny and planted very firmly on nothing. The entire body was a very light purple in color and the only bit of clothing it wore was a rather silly looking green and white cap perched on the top of the head. As though to make the entire sight even less believable, one of the creature's two arms was lifted. The hand consisted of five fingers and two thumbs, with both thumbs hooked back past his shoulder in the signal which had meant a request for a ride for more than two thousand years.

"Great Fomalhaut!" Manning muttered to himself. "Now I've seen everything!" It was true that he had often picked up people thumbing rides on Terra, but this was the first time he had ever seen anyone thumbing a ride out in space.

He took over the ship from the automatic pilot and eased it up beside the figure. He thumbed the button that opened the outer door, waited what seemed a reasonable time, then closed it and watched the gauge which indicated air pressure in the air-lock. When

it equaled the interior of the ship, he thumbed open the inner door. Half expecting the whole thing to be an illusion, he watched in amazement as the purple figure strode through the door and bowed politely.

"Thank you, sir," the creature said in a rather stilted but precise English. "I was beginning to be afraid that there was little travel in this direction today."

Manning Draco took a deep breath and let it out carefully before answering. "Then you were really standing out there in space," he said accusingly.

"Of course," his visitor said.

II

AS THE FIRST impression eased, Manning noticed that there were two slanted eyes and a V-shaped mouth on the side of the head facing him. He saw no traces of what might pass for a nose or for ears.

"I thought," Manning said, "that I had seen about everything in the galaxy—but you're a new one on me. Where are you from?"

"Not from this galaxy which is perhaps why I seem strange to you," the visitor said. "I am Nar Oysnarn from the planet Kholem in the Coma-Virgo Galaxy. May I inquire if you are going in that direction?"

"I'm going to Alphard VI, in this galaxy."

"That will be a help," said Nar Oysnarn, nodding his triangular head. "You don't mind my riding with you?"

"I guess not," Manning muttered. He started the ship and turned it over to the automatic pilot, then turned back to the space-hiker. "It'll be worth it just to find out how you do it."

"Do what, sir?"

"Standing out there in space—where there's nothing to stand on—where there's nothing to breathe—and where I seriously doubt if that cap provides enough warmth."

"Oh, that," Nar Oysnarn said. "It's obvious you know nothing of my race.

We are indifferent to oxygen, or the lack of it, and we are not sensitive to the pressure and temperature changes which seem to mean so much to everyone in this galaxy. And we find it quite restful to stand in spots, where there is no gravity pull. Too bad you can't try it."

"Thanks, but I'm sure it's just as well," Manning said. "What are you doing out here in space, if you don't mind the question?"

"Not at all," Nar said courteously. "I've been attending a university on Terra and this is a mid-term holiday so I'm on my way home for a couple of weeks. I'm at Ohio University, American Territory, Terra. A freshman." As he added the last, he indicated the cap on his head with some pride.

"I see. By the way, what do I call you—Miss or Mister—?"

"Just call me Nar." You see, we Kholemites actually have no sex such as most of the races of your galaxy have.

"No sex," Manning said in surprise. "Then how do you—or am I getting too personal?"

"Not at all. My race is the dominant one on Kholem, but we do not reproduce. We are actually the children—although we have no such word in our language—of an entirely different race. The nearest I can translate the name of our parent-race is something like—The Dreaming Old Ones."

"That's another new one on me," said Manning. "Do all of your race look like you?"

"No—not exactly. You see our parent race does nothing but project images of geometric figures which then materialize as my race. But we are many shapes—all geometric and beautiful, if I may say so—and of all colors. It makes a pleasing variety. But I'm afraid we've talked about me so much I have failed to inquire your name."

"Sorry," Manning said. "I'm Manning Draco."

Nar Oysnarn's color changed to a deeper purple. "Not the Manning Draco who is the chief investigator for Greater

Solarian?" he asked in delight. "Oh, this is a pleasure."

"Thank you," Manning said, flattered in spite of himself. "But I must confess that I don't understand why it's a pleasure."

"You're too modest," Nar exclaimed. "Why we studied about you in Freshman Neo-Mentals. You are the only Terran who has ever developed a secondary mind shield." He hesitated and then continued rather eagerly: "You know, there is a legend on my planet—I wonder if you'd mind terribly much permitting me to try to penetrate your mind?"

Manning hesitated. He had the thought that this might be some sort of trap which had been prepared for him, but then he decided that he was being foolish. If his secondary mind shield could withstand the attack of a Rigelian it should be able to take anything this creature could dish out.

"Sure," he said. "Go ahead."

The color of Nar Oysnarn began to fluctuate rapidly, ranging from a royal amethyst to a pale lavender. Almost immediately, Manning felt the alien mind pressing against his primary shield. The pressure increased steadily, then with a sharp thrust was through and striking at his secondary shield. He felt the surge of his own power and knew that the secondary shield would hold without any trouble. But as that knowledge came to him, he received one of the worst shocks of his life. The mental force which attacked him had no chance of penetrating his mind, but on the other hand he was completely paralyzed.

IT LASTED for only a minute and then he felt the force withdraw. As it went, he could move again. He felt a tingling awareness return to all of his muscles.

"What the hell was that?" he demanded when he could talk. There was a combination of fear and anger in his voice.

"I'm sorry, sir," Nar said contritely. "I should have explained it to you, but I was so eager to try it. You see, there has

always been a legend on Kholem that if one of my race tried to read the mind of a creature far enough advanced to possess a secondary mind shield the attempt would fail but that the creature would be paralyzed. I was so anxious to see if it were true, I'm afraid I forgot ordinary politeness."

"I guess it's true," Manning said ruefully. "Got any idea of how it works?"

"No," Nar said. "It doesn't work, however, with creatures who possess only a primary shield. I should guess, therefore, that it involves using the very strength that supports such a secondary shield and turning it back on itself in some way."

"Sort of automatically locking all the person's energy," Manning said thoughtfully. He was silent for a minute, then looked up at his geometric companion. "Are you in any special hurry to reach your home, Nar?"

"No, but why do you ask?"

"I'll make a deal with you," Manning said. "Stop off at Alphard VI with me for two or three days and then I'll take you all the way home. I have an idea that you can help me with the case I'm working on now. What do you say?"

"Will I!" Nar exclaimed joyfully. "You bet! Will that be an experience! You see, sir, my room-mate is a conceited ass* from Denebola who's always bragging about his adventures. This will really bring him down a parsec or two."

"Then it's a deal," Manning said. "You got any more surprises for me?"

"I don't believe so," Nar said apologetically. "We Kholemites are really a very ordinary race."

"I can see that," Manning said dryly. "I was about to run an encyclopede on the Alphardians when I stopped to pick you up, so if you'll just sit back and listen, I'll put it through now."

"You won't need to do that, sir," Nar said eagerly. "I can tell you everything that is known about the Alphardians."

*Nar Oysnarn was speaking literally, of course, for as everyone knows the dominant race on Denebola is descended from a variety of the subgenus *Amus*.

"Everything?"

"Yes, sir. I have an eidetic memory—
all of my race do."

"Okay," Manning said, laughing. "Go ahead."

"Yes, sir. Alphard VI is one of ten planets in the system of Alphard. It is the only habitable planet in the system. In size and shape, atmospheric pressure, and gravity it is almost a twin to Terrá—if you'd like the exact figures I can provide them—" Manning shook his head and Nar continued, "Alphard VI has seven satellites which follow its orbit so closely that they are always visible. A strange feature of these satellites is that six of the seven revolve around the seventh moon in a very tight, fast moving orbit, and it is said that one will get dizzy watching them for any length of time."

"The race of Alphardians are evolved from the order of Scolopendromorpha, subclass of Epimorpha, being a subdivision of the distinct class Chilopoda in the phylum Arthropoda. Primitive examples of this class of life are found even upon Terra. On Alphard VI, however, while retaining many of the primitive characteristics, the race has evolved in a general humanoid direction. There is in fact a case now pending in court, Alphardians, vs. Humanoid Creatures of Galaxy I, which may well result in a ruling that Alphardians are humanoid."

"Alphardians are a proud race, claiming that they are one of the oldest races in Galaxy I. This may well be true as evidence of the existence of their race is found in early periods of many planets, such evidence being found, for example, in the Carboniferous period of the history of Terra. It is interesting to note that the Alphardians claim that it is their race which is responsible for the legend of Centaurs on Terra. One of their historians has written a rather entertaining book on the subject, in which he claims that the centaurs of Alpha Centauri are imposters and upstarts."

"The Alphardian Empire is now in the two thousandth year of the IX Dynasty, the present ruler being Emperor Romix-

on. His rule is absolute, with but one exception. Anyone may challenge the emperor to a game of four-dimensional chess* and if the challenger wins he becomes King of Alphard VI for a period of one week. This week is known as the Festival of the Greater Little and. . ."

Nar Oysnarn's voice droned on, giving facts and citing figures about Alphard VI, until it must be confessed that even Manning Draco fell asleep-somewhere between a description of the Alphardian mating habits and the amount of shoe imports in Galactic credits.

BY MID-MORNING of the following day, the ship was nearing Alphard VI. She had just snapped out of magnidrive and Manning was taking over the controls for the approach when the Communicator buzzed. Manning flipped the switch.

"Yes?" he said into the transmitter.

"This is the Imperial War Cruiser, *Remulden*," boomed a voice from the loudspeaker. "Identify yourself and give your destination."

"The *Alpha Actuary*," said Manning, "owned and operated by Terran Manning Draco, headed for Alphard VI on official business for the Greater Solarian

*By this time, four-dimensional chess is played in every civilized part of the Galaxy. For the benefit, however, of any readers who may be from such backward systems as Enif or Beta Crucis, four-dimensional chess was invented by Horace Homer Humptfield, of Terra, in 2983. It was made possible by the now famous Humptfield Penetration Theory [178yb x (bdy - 2z)] which he had discovered five years earlier. The Penetration Theory, of course, provided the formula for reaching the Fourth Dimension, but was thought to be impractical when it was discovered that it applied only to living protoplasm and certain rare wood fibers. In other words, it was impossible to thrust any scientific instruments into the Fourth Dimension. Small animals were thrust through, but none of them lived so it was thought unsafe for Man to stick his hand through and look around. The only exploring possible, therefore, was that which could be done by thrusting an arm and hand into the other dimension. The consensus was that it would be rather silly for a bunch of scientists to stand around wagging their fingers somewhere in the Fourth Dimension, so the whole theory was tossed out by The Science Conference of 2979. Thereafter, it was ignored until Humptfield thought of using it for chess. A duplicate of the regular three-dimensional chess board was set up in the Fourth Dimension, thus enabling a player to project his moves into infinite space. While somewhat complicated, the game proved highly successful until 3201, when Vladimir Smith lost an arm while moving R-KK43 over 400 for a checkmate. While making the move, Smith's arm was apparently bitten off by some animal native to the Fourth Dimension. Thereafter, the game fell into ill repute until 3316 when the great Horvosa thought of setting up the duplicate board in another room and merely calling out what would be the four-dimensional move. Since then this has been known as the Horvosa Application of the Humptfield Penetration Theory.

Insurance Company, Monoplated. Accompanied by Nar Oysnarn, of the planet Kholem in the Coma-Virgo Galaxy."

"Proceed," said the voice. There was a click as the connection was broken.

"Now what the hell was that about?" muttered Manning. "I haven't heard of any trouble in this section of the galaxy. Why should they have a war cruiser out?"

"Perhaps a holiday or something of the sort," suggested Nar. "The Alphardians are great believers in tradition."

"I remember you said that yesterday," Manning said dryly.

He bent to the task of bringing the ship in. Once, in the viewing screen, he caught a glimpse of the whirling silvery moons over Alphard. When he was a few thousand feet above the planet, he contacted the landing tower and identified himself. The tower provided a landing beam and he relinquished the ship to the force. He watched the blue and scarlet pips chase across the landing scanner. When they merged the ship was in the landing cradle.

Pressures adjusted automatically and the inner and outer doors opened. There was a steady drone of noise from outside as though there were a large crowd on the landing field.

"Well, here we are," Manning said to his companion. "Let's go out and look them over."

"After you," Nar Oysnarn said politely. "It would not be seemly for a mere passenger to show himself before the master of a ship."

Manning Draco grinned, but he had long before learned not to argue with the traditional ideas of creatures from other systems. He walked through the air-lock and stepped out on the field.

For a minute he was blinded by the powerful searchlights set up on the landing field. Then he could see that from the spaceport buildings right up to the edge of his ship was packed with Alphardians. As he appeared, the droning noise was raised to a shout. As he waited for it to die down, Manning gazed in

amazement at the crowd which was obviously greeting him.

As is known to all but the most provincial of inhabitants of Galaxy I, the Alphardians are an interesting race. Their bodies proper are very similar to the bodies of primitive centipedes, being all of six feet long, usually a mottled russet brown in color, and supported by a dozen feet on each side*. But where the head would normally appear on a centipede, the Alphardians have the upper trunk and head of humans, rearing up at right angles to the rest of the body. If one ignores the lower part of the body, Alphardian men are handsome and the women beautiful by the strictest Terran standards.

As the shouting of the crowd subsided to a murmur, one Alphardian stepped forward.

"May one inquire your name and origin?" he asked, speaking in flawless English.

"Manning Draco of Terra," Manning said. He turned to indicate Nar Oysnarn. "And this is—"

"Later," said the Alphardian, holding up a hand, "we will be pleased to learn the name of your fortunate companion. But you, Manning Draco, were the first to set foot upon Alphardian soil. Know that this is the Festival of the Greater Little, now in its third day and you are the first alien to arrive among us."

III

SOME FAINT memory tugged at Manning's mind. He had an idea that Nar Oysnarn had told him something about the Festival of the Greater Little which he should remember, but it had been during one of the periods when he was falling asleep and he couldn't trigger it into existence.

"That's very nice," he said vaguely. "Now, if you'll excuse me—"

"You don't understand?" said the young Alphardian. "It is an Alphardian tradition, dating from the first year of

* Industrial statistics show that Terran shoe exports were more than doubled after Alphard VI was admitted to the Federation.

the IX Dynasty, that the first alien to land on Alphardian soil during this Festival becomes a sacred hero of our race and is known throughout the Festival as the Greater Little. It is my honor, therefore, to proclaim you, Manning Draco, a Greater Little."

"I am honored," Manning said, suppressing his annoyance. It would be just his luck to run into something like this which might interfere with his business. "This is, however, a business trip for me and so I'm afraid that I will have to decline. Now—"

"It is not permitted to decline," the young Alphardian said stiffly. "This is our tradition and it is sacred. May I refer you to the Federation Charter, Clause 7,693, which states that all citizens of the Federation must comply with the traditions and customs of any member planet as long as such traditions and customs are not contrary to the Federation laws."

"He's right, you know," Nar Oysnarn whispered over Manning's shoulder. "I was telling you about this last night. I doubt, however, if it will seriously interfere with your business."

"Okay," Manning said. "So I'm a Greater Little. What next?"

The young Alphardian beckoned and an Alphardian maiden stepped forward. In one hand, she carried a lei of Alphardian shell flowers. From the top of her golden blonde hair down to her waist, she was as beautiful a woman as Manning couldn't ever remember seeing—and in the case of the lei-bearer there was nothing to prevent him from noting her beauty for, like all Alphardians, she wore no clothes on her upper body. By being careful not to look down, Manning began to enjoy himself as she slipped the lei over his head and then kissed him full on the lips.

Her kiss, in fact, almost made him forget her progenitors altogether—but then as he responded to her lips, he had a momentary vision of twenty-four sets of toes curling in ecstasy and he suppressed the more obvious of his thoughts.

"Well, that wasn't so bad," Manning said when the girl stepped back. He grinned at the young Alphardian. "Is that all?"

"Oh, no," that young worthy replied. "First, you must be greeted by His Temporary Majesty, the Festival King of Alphard, after which the ritual of the Greater Little must be observed. . . But here comes the king now."

As he spoke, Manning could see the assembled Alphardians squirming around, packing even closer together, as they made a lane leading to where he stood. There were more shouts and the Alphardians began inclining their heads in the traditional gesture of subservience to royalty. Then Manning's worst possible fears were realized.

Striding through the throng of admiring Alphardians, wearing the royal ermine and looking as if he had always worn it, came Dzanku Dzanku, the Rigelian. Trotting along behind him, carrying the train of the robe, was Sam Warren.

"Oh, no!" exclaimed Manning.

"Ah, what a coincidence," boomed Dzanku, and there was an expression of malicious glee in the three eye-stalks bent toward Manning. "What a pleasant surprise to find that our old friend Manning Draco is to be the Greater Little under our short, but glorious, reign. Isn't this nice, Sam?"

"Yeah, who would've thought it," Sam Warren said with a grin.

Being a typical Rigelian, Dzanku Dzanku weighed all of a ton, Terra scale. He was, however, no taller than Manning Draco. His thick square torso was supported by two tree-like legs. His face was small and expressionless, the three eye-stalks raised a few inches above it. He possessed six tentacles, which just now were fluttering with uncontrollable pleasure.

Sam Warren, on the other hand, was a Terran. He was smaller than Manning, with a crafty face which revealed nothing but the slyness which was his stock in trade.

DESPITE his surprise, as the two inter-galactic confidence men approached, Manning tried a swift mental probe at Sam Warren. He suspected it would be useless and it was. Sam Warren's mind was filled with glee over the arrival of Manning Draco, but there was nothing in his mind which would indicate what he and Dzanku were planning. That synapse had, as usual, been erased.

"Okay," Manning said, turning back to Dzanku. "What's the gag?"

"Gag?" asked Dzanku, his voice filled with mock surprise. "My dear Manning, you are, entirely too suspicious. It is true that I was once somewhat annoyed with you when you tricked me so that you could read my mind, but that was a mere childish outburst of the moment. Today I am merely full of the holiday spirit."

"Sure," Manning said, believing none of it. "Then what's the idea of sticking me with this Greater Little business?"

"Sheer accident, my boy—although a fortunate one. I am the king of Alphard for one week, thanks to having bested Emperor Romixon in the small matter of a game of chess. This automatically brings on the Festival of the Greater Little and custom decrees that the first alien to arrive during the Festival becomes the Greater Little. You were fortunate enough to be that first alien. Since I know you are familiar with Terran history, I might point out that the honor is roughly equivalent to being given the key to a city."

"I'm more interested in the key you've given yourself by being king," Manning said. "How much looting are you going to be able to get away with?"

"A crude way of putting it," Dzanku said delicately. "My powers are limited—but adequate. For example, it is one of my duties to determine the sort of ritual required of the alien who becomes the Greater Little."

"So that's it," grunted Manning. "Well you can decide all you like, but I'll have nothing to do with any ritual you set up."

"In that case," said Dzanku, "it will be my sad duty to devise a suitable punishment for you—since a refusal to participate in local traditions is contrary to Federation law. As the temporary sovereign ruler of Alphard, I may punish you as I see fit. I might add that even if the emperor should feel more kindly disposed toward you, under the law he can do nothing about correcting my acts until six months from now."

A Rigelian has never been known to grin, but for a minute Manning thought Dzanku was going to perform that impossible feat. The two of them stared at each other and slowly Manning brought his anger under control.

"Okay," he finally said. "This one is your round, Dzanku. What's the ritual?"

"That will come this evening," Dzanku said. "I believe there are a number of parades and such things involving you during the remainder of the day. But I shall see you at the palace this evening. Your guard—of honor, of course—will bring you there."

He waved his tentacles amiably and turned away. As he walked through the crowd, he spoke to Sam Warren, in tones which easily reached Manning. "Sam," he said, "don't let me forget to contact the war cruiser overhead and tell them that it's all right now to permit the other alien visitors to land. We've kept them waiting long enough."

As Dzanku had promised, there were a number of things which kept Manning busy throughout the day. With Nar Osynarn tagging along, he was paraded through practically every street of the capital city of IX. He was pelted with flowers, had innumerable leis strung around his neck, and was soundly bussed by dozens of young Alphardian females. He made speeches, laid cornerstones, dedicated schools, and was even a judge, complete with tape measure, of a beauty contest.

In general, there was such an air of good fellowship and the holiday spirit that Manning might have even enjoyed himself if it hadn't been for worrying,

about what Dzanku Dzanku and Sam Warren were up to. But every time he found himself getting into the spirit of things, he'd remember the bland countenance of the Rigelian and his pleasure would evaporate.

It was growing dark when, escorted by a large band of Alphardians, Manning Draco went to the palace. He was taken directly to the roof where he found Dzanku and a retinue, which included Sam Warren, waiting.

"Good evening, Manning," Dzanku said gravely. "I trust you have been enjoying the hospitality of my loyal subjects?"

"I could do without the sound of your unctuous voice dribbling into my ears," snapped Manning. "Just get on with the dirty work."

"Tcht, tcht," Dzanku said. "You must get into the spirit of things. Besides I've been told that my voice is most pleasant—well, I suppose that is a matter of personal taste. In the meantime, shall we get on with this pleasant little custom?"

Manning nodded grimly.

"Then, if you will relax over there." Dzanku indicated a couch arrangement on the roof. To a Terran like Manning Draco, it seemed more arrangement than couch, since it had obviously been built to accommodate the bodies of Alphardian natives. Still it was fairly comfortable, he discovered, since the upper part was built for a humanoid body and his legs could fit into the hollow built to support centipede-bodies.

As he lay down, Manning found himself staring up at the Alphardian satellites, the six bright moons chasing each other madly about the seventh one. It was, he thought, one of the high spots among the confusing aspects of the galaxy.

"Now," Dzanku was saying, "all you have to do is relax on that more than comfortable couch throughout the night—and count the number of revolutions made by the moons above you."

Manning glared up at him and the

Rigelian's tentacles waved with pleasure.

"Where the hell did you dig up an idea like that?" Manning asked.

"Inspired, isn't it?" Dzanku observed. "But I assure you that it is quite in keeping with the festival. Throughout the history of all planets, rituals of initiation have been to some extent tests of strength or endurance. It is true that I have also been influenced in fixing your ritual by a knowledge of the early history of your own Terra. Perhaps you are familiar with the sort of thing which was popular with Terran university organizations some two thousand years ago. Hazing, I believe it was called."

Manning could only glare his anger.

"By the way," Dzanku continued amiably, "There will be various court attendants around all night to see that you don't go to sleep on the job. And, of course, the usual festival crowd to cheer you on in your efforts. I might also add that a photo-tabulator will be turned on so that we can compare your final count with it to detect any inclination toward non-participation. The penalty for such is apt to be severe—and is determined by myself, naturally. I may occasionally drop back here myself to see how you are getting along. Now, if you'd care to begin."

MANNING permitted himself the luxury of one more glare, then turned to gaze upward at the whirling moons. He exerted the rigid discipline of his mind, banished his anger, and began counting the revolutions to himself.

"It's really not bad at all," Nar Osyarn whispered from somewhere near his head. "I could tell by the emanations from the Rigelian that he was not well disposed toward you and I feared that he might give you a tough assignment. But this is relatively easy."

Manning grunted to indicate he heard the Kholemite, wryly making a mental note to discover some time what Nar Osyarn considered relatively difficult.

The long slow hours of the night dragged by as Manning Draco counted

the circling moons, his eyes stinging with weariness. Later, it seemed as if the moons were melting into each other and there were times when he felt that he was revolving while the moons remained still. He was vaguely aware of the distant murmur of the crowd and two or three times he thought he heard the voice or caught the thought of Dzanku Dzanku. But the moons moved so rapidly there was no time to check up on fleeting impressions.

He was completely unaware when daylight came to Alphard VI and the moons faded to silvery disks. Finally the mental retreat in which he counted, hidden from the creaking demands of his body, was penetrated by the voice of Dzanku Dzanku and he was aware that it had been repeating the same thing for some time.

"The time is up, Manning," the Rigelian was saying again. "Your trial as a sacred hero of the Festival of the Greater Little is ended."

Slowly, Manning's eyes dragged their gaze away from the moons and focused vaguely on the three eyestalks inclined toward him.

"Ah, you have done nobly," Dzanku said, when he saw that Manning was looking at him. "What was your count for the night?"

Manning sorted through the numbers in his mind until he came to the last one which had registered before he switched his gaze. "Six thousand, eight hundred and forty," he said.

One of Dzanku's eyestalks bent to peer at a tape held in one tentacle. "Excellent," he boomed. "You astound me, my friend. You were within three of the actual count. Permit me to congratulate you."

Manning Draco stumbled to his feet and tried to get a sharper focus on the Rigelian. But he kept seeing the image of whirling moons between them.

"Drop dead," Manning muttered hoarsely. He swayed from exhaustion. It occurred to him that Dzanku may have intended to exhaust him in order to

strike mentally and he braced his mind shield. But there was no attack. Dzanku continued to gaze at him with the blandness of a well-meaning Rigelian social worker.

"Okay," Manning said finally. "What do I have to do next?"

Dzanku's tentacles waved reassuringly. "Nothing" at all. You are now officially the Greater Little of Alphard VI—a position of only slightly less importance than my own. For the remainder of the Festival there is nothing to do but enjoy yourself. Forget the cares of everyday existence. Be gay. You are now a full-fledged hero and anything on Alphard is yours for the asking—well, almost anything."

> "Okay," grunted Manning, "give me a bed and then leave me alone."

Dzanku Dzanku turned to the crowd of Alphardians and waved his tentacles for attention. "My loyal and loving subjects," he said, "escort the honorable Greater Little to your finest hostelry and see that he is provided with a comfortable room. Being a Terran, and therefore of inferior physical endowments, he must repair his manly vigor by sleeping."

Manning Draco was too tired to resent the insult. He followed a number of Alphardians off the palace roof, dimly aware that Nar Oysnarn was still with him. A few minutes later, he scrawled his name in a hotel register and was taken up to a room. He was aware that Nar Oysnarn said something about having the room next to his and then he tumbled into bed. He slept and dreamed that he wore a halo made of spinning moons.

IV

IT WAS the middle of the afternoon when Manning Draco awoke. He was considerably more rested than he had been that morning, but there was still a layer of numbness over his body and mind. He was overly-conscious of the fact that he had been on Alphard VI al-

most twenty-four hours and hadn't done anything for Greater Solarian.

To his surprise his luggage from the ship was in the room. He quickly changed clothes and slipped out of the hotel. Searching along the streets, he found a small restaurant which served Terran food and had his breakfast. Then he went straight to the palace.

The Alphardian who greeted him in the royal chambers was old, with a long white beard covering most of his chest. Like other Alphardians, his humanoid upper half was bare of clothing. His lower body was covered with a lavender silk garment which might have been loosely described as trousers. He wore twelve pair of shoes of gayly-colored Procyon suede, made from the space-cured skins of the giant capellae-mice found on that planet.

"My name is Manning Draco," Manning said. "I want to see Dzanku."

"Dzanku?" repeated the old Alphardian, thoughtfully stroking his beard. "Dzanku? I don't believe—oh, yes! You must mean His Temporary Majesty King Dzanku. Of course. I will announce your presence at once."

The old man ambled across the room, but just before he reached the door he turned and came back, shaking his head.

"I'll have to have your name," he said. "It's the rule, you know. Have to announce everyone."

"But I told you my name. It's Manning Draco."

"Of course, you did." The old Alphardian looked at him shrewdly. "Draco, eh? You must be the new Greater Little." He surveyed Manning and shook his head. "I'm not sure but what we should abandon the custom of the Festival. We seem to be attracting more and more weird specimens. Well, I'll announce you. His Temporary Majesty seems to see all sorts."

Once more he ambled across the room, but again turned back just before he reached the door.

"I'm sorry," he said, "but who was it you wanted to see?"

"Dzanku," Manning snapped.

"Your welcome—although I'm sure I don't know why."

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Manning exploded. "I've told you in simple Galactic English that I am Manning Draco and I want to see Dzanku Dzanku, the temporary king of Alphard VI. Can't you keep anything in your mind?"

"I'm sorry," the old Alphardian said, "but I'm rather new at this job. And then I keep thinking that perhaps if I had only moved my King's Knight's pawn to King's Knight three over four into two infinity, I might not have lost. It's an interesting problem."

"King's Knight's pawn," exclaimed Manning. "Then you must be the Emperor of Alphard."

"Not now," said the Emperor, "but I will be again in three days. You know, this is the first time I've ever been beaten. I think I'll pass a law against playing chess with strangers." He sighed heavily. "Oh, well, I suppose I might as well announce you. One of my accursed ancestors made it a rule that the Emperor must serve the temporary king. I must confess it makes me happy to remember that he broke all twenty-four legs when he was courting his seventh wife."

The old man turned away and this time he made it through the door without forgetting his errand. He returned shortly and conducted Manning into the throne room. Dzanku, practically smothered in ermine and with the royal crown perching precariously on one side of his head so as not to interfere with his eye-stalks, sat on the throne. Despite the fact that it was designed to accommodate the most royal of Alphardian bodies, Dzanku managed to sit on it with an air of having always belonged there. Sam Warren lounged in a Terran-style chair beside the throne.

"The Greater Little of Alphard, Manning Draco, my friend and yours, is always welcome," Dzanku said pompously. He turned to the old Alphardian and waved a couple of tentacles. "Go away,

Romixon. I'll have no servants snooping around during audiences."

The temporarily unemployed emperor walked across the throne room, but at the door he turned back. There was a worried frown on his face:

"You make me nervous," he complained. He caught the agitation in the Rigelian's eyestalks and added hastily: "Your Temporary Majesty. I have to admit that all the laws you've passed have been all right, but I never know what you're going to do next. After all, I've made a career of being the Emperor of Alphard and I don't like some amateur messing around in it. It would be different if you were a professional. I tell you I don't like it."

"You have a low and suspicious nature," Dzanku said blandly. "Now, begone." He waited until the old Alphardian had shuffled out of the room and then turned back to Manning. "What do you want?" he asked bluntly.

"Yeah," chimed in Sam Warren, "what're you up to, Manning?"

"Boys, you got me all wrong," Manning said. "All I want is some information."

"Any time," said Sam Warren, "that Manning Draco says that he doesn't want anything it's a lead-coated cinch, there's a Polluxian somewhere in the atom pile. Watch him, Dzanku."

"I shall, old friend," Dzanku said pleasantly. There was a wariness in his eyestalks. "What kind of information, Manning?"

"The relationship between the Galaxy Insurance and Benefit Association and this thing of you being king," Manning said. "I don't know how you worked it to pull this festival racket just as you and Sam are starting your new business, but it's obvious that you'll squeeze every advantage out of the position. I want to know what you've done so far."

"I fail to see how this is the concern of Greater Solarian," Dzanku said.

"Easy," Manning answered with a grin. "We've been notified that a number of our policy holders will not keep up

their policies in the future, but in the meantime have made you the beneficiary during the remaining time the policy is in force."

"Ah, yes, our trade-in program. A rather brilliant touch, I thought."

"But what business is it of yours?" Sam Warren added.

"We don't like to have the same person or same company," said Manning, "be the beneficiary on so many policies. You boys ought to know how such things upset J. Barnaby Cruikshank. It makes for too much temptation for fraud."

DZANKU ogled Manning piously. "Perish the thought," he sympathized. "But everything Sam and I have done here on Alphard has been completely legitimate. In fact, you could easily learn all about it from the records so I might as well tell you. Sam and I are the sole owners of a corporation known as the Galaxy Insurance and Benefit Association. We are an Alphardian corporation. Since we are the first local corporation to be formed for the purpose of insurance, under local laws no other local group can go into competition with us for at least two years."

"How did you manage a local corporation since neither you nor Sam are citizens of Alphard?"

"Emperor Romixon," Dzanku said, "owns one share of stock in the corporation and is the chairman of our Board of Directors—at a generous annual stipend, I might add. Up to about a week ago, in open competition with Greater Solarian, we had sold about two thousand insurance policies due to our generous trade-in offer. But I assure you we have no intention of arranging for the—ah—demise of those policy holders. What we'd collect from Greater Solarian would only have to be paid to the heirs on our own policies."

"Uh-huh," said Manning. "That covers anything nicely up to a week ago. But four days ago you became the temporary ruler of Alphard. What has happened since then?"

"I admit the business outlook has improved," Dzañku said mildly while Sam Warren grinned. "I presume you know that the emperors of Alphard have always been great lovers of chess, thereby accounting for the tradition which permits anyone who beats the emperor to be king for one week. I enjoy the game myself in a modest way and it was by a fortunate chance that I defeated Emperor Romixon."

"I'll bet," murmured Manning.

"Since becoming king," Dzanku continued, "I have introduced a certain amount of socially-minded legislation—you know I've always been interested in economics. First, in the interest of national welfare, I have passed a law which permits only Alphardian companies to sell insurance. The matter of the security of the relatives of a bereaved one should not be subject to the whims of inter-planetary speculation." He paused.

"Which means cutting out Greater Solarian and all other companies of the Federation," said Manning, "and leaving your little company with a veritable insurance monopoly on Alphard VI?"

"You might put it that way," Dzanku said, "although the monopoly is good for only two years. In addition to this, I have also passed a law which makes it necessary for every Alphardian citizen to carry not less than five thousand credits worth of life insurance. As a result, the Galaxy Insurance and Benefit Association has, during the past four days, sold two hundred and twenty million insurance policies with more orders coming in. It has, I must admit, been a most satisfactory week, so far."

"And I suppose," Manning said bitterly, "that you and Sam will put the advance premiums in your pockets and blast off a few hours before your reign is over—since the Emperor can certainly do something about those two laws once he's back on the throne."

"On the contrary," Dzanku said, "we are thinking of staying around. There will be three more days in which I can pass laws and there are untold possi-

bilities on this little planet. I assure you that the Emperor will not rescind my laws."

"Why not?"

"He can't. No Emperor, or even temporary Festival king, can pass a law which is harmful to either the people of Alphard or to the Crown. My first law, limiting the selling of insurance to only local companies, is obviously to the benefit of Alphardians and to change it would be harmful to the people. In my second law, I was thoughtful enough to include a clause which puts a special ten percent tax on all insurance benefits. This goes directly into the coffers of the Emperor. Therefore, he cannot repeal that law either."

"Of all the barefaced robbery," began Manning.

"But legal," interrupted Dzanku. "I'm afraid, my dear Manning, that Greater Solarian is through here on Alphard and there is nothing you or J. Barnaby can do about it. You might as well close up the branch office while you're here."

MANNING DRACO had a suspicion that this was true. It looked very much like he and J. Barnaby had both been bested for the first time in their lives. But he wasn't admitting it yet.

"Maybe," he said. "But tell me something, Dzanku. Why did you go to all the trouble of holding other alien ships up above the planet until I arrived? Why did you want me to be elected the Greater Little?"

"I'm a generous person," said Dzanku grandly. "I knew that there was no way that Sam and I could lose and that you were making a long trip for nothing. So, in a sentimental moment, I thought it would be nice to let you share in the Festival honors."

"It also gave you a chance to make me count those damn moons until my eyes were popping out," Manning growled. "And that sounds more like you."

"You wound me deeply," Dzanku said. "Now, if you will excuse us—there is the small matter of some special tax exemp-

tions I'd like to work out. You know, despite one of the oldest proverbs of which you Terrans boast, I've discovered that there is a royal road to happiness." He waved his tentacles in dismissal.

Manning Draco left the palace, but think as he could he was unable to detect even the slightest flaw in Dzanku's work. An hour with a leading Alphardian lawyer proved his worst fears to be justified. After leaving the attorney's office, he entered a public visibooth and put through a call to J. Barnaby Cruikshank on Terra. It was a good thing that the call was scrambled for when the news was broken to J. Barnaby, the head of Greater Solarian ran through a string of profanity which would have made a space pirate, or a Fomalhautian pleasure queen, turn green with envy. When he finished, J. Barnaby's face was a choleric shade and he was out of breath—but he still had enough breath for a final order.

"You stay there and fix it," he said, "or don't ever show your face here again. I don't care how you do it, or what it costs, but get these two!" With that he broke the connection.

It was getting dark as Manning Draco walked along the main street of the City of Ix on Alphard VI. There was a festival air to the whole city—one which Manning did not share. The streets were filled with gay Alphardians. Many of them recognized him and two or three groups tried to carry him off to private parties. He shook them off as kindly as possible. For once in his life, Manning even failed to enjoy the fact that every few feet he was on the receiving end of feminine caresses and kisses. He submitted but his heart wasn't in it.

When a man is in the mood Manning was, there are only two things he can do—and this has not changed between the days when man drove a yoke of oxen and when he flashed from sun to sun in slim space cruisers. Since it was impossible to smash J. Barnaby in the face and there could be little satisfac-

tion in using a visiscreen to tell him where to stuff his job, Manning Draco turned into the first bar he came to.

It was a combination bar and night club and there was a young Alphardian female on the stage singing. It was a currently popular Alphardian song and measured by Alphardian morals it was a pretty risqué number*. The Alphardian males were whistling and stamping their feet to show their appreciation as Manning made his way up to the bar.

The bartender caught sight of Manning at the bar and hurried over.

"We are honored," he said. "With what can we give you pleasure?"

"What's your strongest drink?" Manning wanted to know.

"A Sabikian *Prohna*," the bartender said, "distilled from the wild *Proh* which grow only on Sabik II. But it is very strong and—"

"Good," interrupted Manning. "I'll have one."

A few minutes later, the bartender set a tall glass in front of him. It was filled with a green liquor which seemed to be shot through with amber streaks. Pale smoke curled up from the top of the glass. Manning lifted it and tossed half of the contents down his throat. Then he hurriedly set the glass down and gripped the bar with both hands. He could feel the flames in his throat and there was a reeling sensation in his head which made the whole room spin. That passed quickly but it was another two minutes before he could make his throat muscles work.

"You're right about it being strong," he said hoarsely. "How much do I owe you?"

"But nothing," said the bartender. "During the Festival, no Alphardian business man will knowingly accept money from the Greater Little. And, by Ix, I've never seen one before who could toss off half a glass of *Prohna*."

*In English, the title of the song was "Unbutton your shoes and I'll be over." Later, the song became popular all over the Galaxy, but was considered a comedy song on most other planets.

"Fools rush in," Manning muttered, more to himself than to the bartender. He gingerly tried the drink again and discovered that if he sipped it the results were not quite so explosive.

The singer was replaced by a team of Alphardian tap dancers. At first, Manning was amused, but the thudding of twenty-four pair of feet soon began to annoy him. He finished his drink and left.

Farther down the street, he entered another bar and ordered a *Prohna*. He sipped it and turned to watch the floor-show. A sense-teaser was under the spotlight, gyrating slowly to the music. She was half beautiful—that is, her upper half was beautiful—but to anyone not educated to the Alphardian moral code her strip act was only funny. As she danced around, she would lean over and carefully remove one shoe which she then tossed to a shouting admirer at the ringside tables. Then she slowly danced out of range of the spotlight until the applause recalled her to repeat the act with another shoe.

Four barrooms and five *Prohnas* later, Manning Draco walked down the street feeling no pain. He was filled with love for the creatures of the universe, be they man or beast or a bewildering cross between. So all-embracing was this love, in fact, that he beamed with affection when he saw the royal conveyance coming along the street bearing His Temporary Majesty, King Dzanku Dzanku. He waved wildly and six tentacles returned the greeting.

"Having a wonderful time," Manning shouted. "Wish you were here."

"Peace be with you," Dzanku called and Manning thought it was rather stuffy of him. But somehow the phrase also made him feel good and he decided it called for a drink. He headed for his fifth bar.

V

IT WAS just after he'd taken his first sip of the *Prohna* that he saw her. A

Terran—an Earth girl. And so beautiful, so breath-taking, that Manning knew it was real and not the result of the Sabikian drinks. From the top of her golden red hair to the bottom of her small feet she was in every respect his dream girl. He grasped his drink firmly, moved around a number of half-drunken Alphardians, apologizing as he stepped on three feet of one of them, and slid into a place beside her at the bar.

Her name was Jadyl Genten—a name that was like music to him, although perhaps it was the voice with which she told him. She had been feeling lonely, surrounded by Alphardians, and was as happy to see another human face as he was. Over his *Prohna* and her Acruxian *Leeba* highball, they exchanged the sort of information which passes quickly between two enchanted people. She liked all the things he liked, hated the things he couldn't stand, longed for the things which were his heart's desires—and before long the glow which came from standing beside her far surpassed the smoky warmth of his drink.

They had dinner at a little place around the corner. Although its ability to provide Terran food was only passable, the fact that they ate together made the cuisine superb. They drank cool green wine, imported from Al Na'ir, and afterward they danced to the disturbing music of an Alphardian string quartet.

Later, they went up to his hotel room—mostly to get away from the fact that the Alphardians couldn't forget that he was a part of their festival. Manning Draco had dropped all of the wise mannerisms which had so long marked his presence with women and it was important that they be alone.

There, in the hotel, he sat at her feet and softly recited the great love poems of a hundred planets. And like a good Earth man, who explores the galaxy before settling down at home, he came at last to a love poem of the old Earth.

As always, it was the tale of a man and a maid and when he reached the part concerning their first kiss, Jadyl leaned over and kissed him. He recited no more poetry that night.

The two days which followed were dreamlike in their ecstasy. The visicreen crackled calls and he ignored it. There were rappings at the door and once the anxious voice of Nar Oysnarn outside, but he paid no attention. Then, on the morning of the third day, as he sat telling Jadyl of older dreams, while she nodded with understanding and sometimes agreement, the door opened. Into the room stepped Nar Oysnarn, a pass-key dangling from his hand. His purple body was so pale it was almost white, but there was a determined look on his triangular face.

Nar Oysnarn advanced into the room. He ignored the Terran girl and at first Manning Draco was annoyed, but then he decided that it was only the tactful politeness of one from another culture.

"You will forgive me," Nar Oysnarn said politely but firmly, "but you asked me for my help and I am here to render it."

"Your help?" Manning asked and, then only vaguely remembered that he'd had some thought of using Nar's peculiar powers against Dzanku.

"Yes," Nar said firmly. "And while I realize that you have probably decided not to tackle your case until the Rigelian is no longer king, it is my belief that this is a mistake. He is most vulnerable who has the most power. And since this is the last day of the Festival, I respectfully suggest that you must act today."

While it was true that forty-eight hours earlier, Manning Draco would have happily permitted the Greater Solarian Insurance Company to go smash, and it was equally true that he hated to leave Jadyl for even one minute, he was now doubly aware of his responsibility to others.

"You're right," he told Nar. He turned to Jadyl and ran his fingers play-

fully through her hair. "You stay here, honey," he said, "while I go take care of some business. It won't take long and then you and I will head for earth." Nar watched him stonily.

He went jauntily through the door, followed by Nar Oysnarn, and out of the hotel.

"What is your plan?" Nar asked when they were on the street.

It was there, with the sharp Alphardian wind blowing some of the tendrils of perfume from his mind, that Manning Draco forced himself to put all of his mind to the business of Greater Solarian. He looked at the little Kholemite in consternation. "I'll be damned if I know," he confessed. "Originally, I did have an idea whereby with your help I could tie Dzanku up in knots. But Dzanku being even the temporary king of this screwy planet makes the original plan dangerous. If only Dzanku hadn't challenged the Emperor to chess—" He broke off and stared into space.

For the first time since he'd landed on Alphard, Manning Draco's brain had begun to work. The first day had been taken up with anger and frustration and the strain of counting the revolutions of the moons. The next two days had been lost in romance. Now, all at once, he thought he saw the solution. With a sensation of guilt, he felt that it was a solution he should have seen at once.

"I think I've got it," he said to Nar. "Come on."

THEY went first to the Royal Alphardian Library where Manning pored over the Constitution of Alphard VI. After that, he spent a few minutes in the general reading room of the Inter-Planetary Annex. Only a few minutes were needed, for Manning possessed an eidetic mind and when he left, the pages he'd read were firmly impressed in his memory. With Nar Oysnarn puffing to keep up, they headed for the palace.

The same old Alphardian, he who was Emperor Romixon, was in the anteroom as they entered. He seemed to have lost the vacant stare of two days before and there was a glint of recognition in his eyes as he looked at Manning.

"I suppose you want to see Dzanku?" he grumbled.

"If you please," Manning said.

"All right, but I tell you I'm pretty sick of this whole thing. I'll be mighty glad when tomorrow comes. Why, I don't know how everyone stands it being commoners. Who's that with you?"

"Nar Oysnarn, of the planet Kholem, Coma-Virgo Galaxy. He's a friend of mine."

"You Terrans will take up with anyone," the old Alphardian sneered. He went into the throne room, but was soon back. "He'll see you," he said curtly.

They followed him into the throne room and there was Dzanku once more lolling on the throne, with Sam Warren nearby. Both of them were obviously pretty well pleased with themselves.

"You may leave, chamberlain," Dzanku said to the old Alphardian. "It's nice to see you, Manning. Where have you been keeping yourself?"

"Let Romixon stay," Manning said. "He'll be interested in what I have to say."

"Oh, very well," Dzanku said, waving a tentacle agreeably. "What's on your mind, Manning?"

"I am here," Manning announced, "to challenge you to a game of four-dimensional chess."

The Rigelian lost his amiability. "What's the gag?" he snapped.

"No gag at all," Manning said cheerfully. "You and I are going to play a game of chess, with the throne you're now occupying going to the winner. In other words, if I beat you, I become king of Alphard."

"You can't do that," declared Dzanku. "You have to challenge the Emperor—which means you'll have to

wait until tomorrow."

"Wrong, Dzanku. The Constitution of Alphard merely says that anyone can challenge the ruler of the planet, and therefore this applies to the temporary ruler as well as to the regular one."

"Is that right, Romixon?" Dzanku demanded.

"He's right," the old Alphardian said gloomily. "But I wish all of you would stop acting as if my throne were a credit someone tossed on the dice table. It's undignified. I've got a notion to secede from the Federation and ban all Terrans and Rigelians from my planet." Suddenly his face brightened. "I just remembered something," he said, speaking to Manning. "Even if you win you won't be able to keep me from becoming Emperor again tomorrow. The Constitution says that no one Festival can last more than one week and that only one Festival is permitted in any six months period."

"That's true," Manning said, "and I had no intention of trying to keep you from resuming the throne. But if I win, I'll be king for this last day of the Festival."

"Okay, I'll play you," Dzanku said. "There hasn't been a Terran born who could beat a Rigelian in four dimensional chess—why do you think my planet has held the Galactic Championship for the past two hundred years? And don't think you'll catch me with a cheap trick like you did the last time—it wouldn't help you any even if it were possible."

"I wouldn't think of it," Manning said.

Dzanku pushed a button on the throne and a number of footmen rushed in. He sent them after the chess board and pieces. Within a few minutes, a regulation three dimensional chess board had been set up in the throne room. A similar board, representing the fourth dimension, was set up in another room and the two rooms were connected by audio. Dzanku generously offered to let Manning send a representative into

the other room to see that the moves were made as called, but Manning just as generously declined.

Dzanku won the choice and took the white. The game started, with Sam Warren, Nar Oysnarn, and Romixon as the only audience.

FOR the first few moves, both players moved in three dimensions only. Dzanku led off with the well-known Queen's Knight Gambit developed by Tanalov in the 28th Century and Manning countered with standard moves. But within a few minutes, both players were widening the scope of play to include simple moves into infinity. As they reached the middle game, Dzanku set up a pawn sacrifice on the third level of play.

Manning studied the board for a minute, then leaned back in his chair, running one hand through his hair.

"I move," he said, taking advantage of the rule which permitted a player to call the move on an infinity play, with the pieces being adjusted later, "my queen to king's rook's four; to six over queen's knight's three; to queen's bishop three over four into three infinity. I believe that's a mate."

The Emperor Romixon sighed heavily and looked at Manning Draco with considerably more respect. He was the only one to recognize it as the same daring move which in 3316 had cost the great Horvosa the championship of the galaxy*.

Dzanku Dzanku poised one tentacle over the board and then froze in that attitude. A close observer might have noticed that Nar Oysnarn also seemed to be unduly preoccupied.

Manning Draco turned to Romixon. "I should like to remind you," he said, "of the rule, accepted several years ago by the Galactic Chess Rules Committee, which states that on any move in the

fourth dimension which results in a mate must be answered by the opposing player within a time limit of two minutes. Failure to do so forfeits the game."

The old Alphardian nodded. "I'm aware of the rule," he said testily. "Thirty seconds have already elapsed."

"Hey, what goes on here," Sam Warren said. "What's the matter, Dzanku? — Dzanku!"

THE Rigelian gave no evidence of having heard his partner. He still crouched over the board, his three eyes fixed immovably on the pieces, one tentacle still poised in the air. Manning Draco noticed that red veins had suddenly appeared in his eyes and they looked as if they might pop out of their stalks any minute.

It was a curious tableau, lasting for the next ninety seconds. Both Dzanku and Nar Oysnarn sat as though carved from stone. Romixon kept his eyes on the chronometer fastened to one of his fore-legs. Manning Draco leaned back in his chair and relaxed. Little Sam Warren became more and more agitated as he urged Dzanku to do something—anything.

"The two minutes are up," Romixon announced. "Manning Draco is the new temporary king of Alphard VI and may rule—" he glanced at his fore-leg—"for the next twenty-one hours and thirty-six minutes."

"Permit me to be the first to congratulate Your Temporary Majesty," Nar Oysnarn suddenly said.

There was a roar of rage from Dzanku—Dzanku. He leaped to his feet, tentacles waving wildly, scattering chess board and pieces in every direction.

"I've been cheated," he bellowed, his three eyes bulging with anger. "The whole thing is illegal. That creature there—" a sweeping tentacle indicated Nar Oysnarn—"did something that paralyzed me. The rules state that no special powers are permitted."

"I didn't see him do anything," Romixon said maliciously. "According to

*Lest some reader who is not giving his undivided attention to this account jump to the conclusion that Manning Draco has an Ubermensch psychosis, it should be made clear that this was the first game of chess he had ever played. He had merely memorized a number of games, so there was nothing very spectacular about his feat.

the law, Manning Draco is now king of Alphard."

For a minute, Manning thought Dzanku was going to charge all of them. The big Rigelian was so angry he was quivering like a ton of jelly.

"By the way, Romixon," Manning said casually, "what is the penalty for assaulting a ruler of Alphard?"

"Exile to the third moon," Romixon said. "It sometimes takes as long as eighteen months for a creature to die there, although the mind cracks after eight or nine months, I understand."

With a visible effort, Dzanku restrained his anger. "All right, Draco," he said hoarsely, "you win this round. But there's nothing you can do to recall the laws I've passed. And I'll get around to you when the Festival is over. Come on, Sam."

Followed by Sam Warren, Dzanku stomped from the throne room.

The old Alphardian was doubled up with laughter, the tears streaming down his face.

"Oh, dear," he said firmly, "I haven't enjoyed myself so much since the day my father, the Emperor Dumixon, broke his silly neck while playing some alien game introduced by you Terrans." He stopped laughing and glared at Manning. "But don't you start messing up my kingdom now. At least, Dzanku fixed it so that I make a tidy little profit, so don't get any ideas you're going to take it away from me."

"I wouldn't think of it," Manning said. "But there is one thing we'd better do quickly. What is the process for passing a law on this planet?"

"Why?" Romixon asked suspiciously.

"Dzanku was angry when he left here and still filled with a desire for revenge, but once he's cooled off he may decide it's better to make sure of keeping his profit. I want to stop him from leaving here with all the money he's collected so far."

"In here," Romixon said quickly, leading the way into the next room. "Hurry up! Don't let him get away

with all of that beautiful cash. . . There—all you do is write the new law on the visiscribe and sign your name. It then appears on the public screen and in all police courts and is an established law. But hurry!"

VI

MANNING stepped over to the visiscribe, picked up the electronic pencil and wrote: *No alien is permitted to leave the planet Alphard VI during the Festival of the Greater Little nor may any money be sent from the planet without a special permit signed by the ruler. King Manning.*

"There," he said, turning back to Romixon, "that will keep him from leaving or sending the money out to a confederate. Tell me, does an ex-king have any immunity from the laws of the planet?"

"No," Romixon said and it was obvious from his grin that he was contemplating the future of more than one ex-king. "Although," he added reluctantly, "with the exception of murder or a royal assault, prison sentences for actions during Festival week cannot be for more than six months."

"Even six months in prison will do Dzanku good," Manning said cheerfully. "Well—to work."

"Wait a minute," Romixon said hastily. "Let's not go off half-shoed. You really ought to discuss everything with me before going ahead. After all, I have had more experience in this business than you have."

"Okay—but don't try to stall me, Romixon."

The Alphardian started to pout, but then changed his mind. "How did you get the best of Dzanku?" he asked curiously.

"Nar Oysnarn," Manning said, indicating his young friend. "He has a strange ability which works only with those who have secondary mind shields—as Dzanku does. If Nar tries to read such a creature's mind it causes paraly-

sis. When I leaned back and ran my hand through my hair, Nar merely tried to read Dzanku's mind."

"Then you did cheat," Romixon said. "Maybe I could declare the whole thing illegal and take over right now."

"Wrong," Manning said. "The rules state that a *player* may not use special powers in order to win—and I used no special powers. Nar Oysnarn was not a player and I cannot be held responsible for the fact that his curiosity made him try to read my opponent's mind."

Romixon glared at him. "What are you going to do now?" he demanded.

"Well, first, I'm going to pass a law stating that no alien is permitted to directly make a profit on any business which may involve the death of one or more Alphardians. Since insurance does involve the death of the insured, this means that no alien may profit *directly* from insurance on this planet. I think you'll agree this is a law which is good for Alphard."

"Y-yes," Romixon said uncertainly. "But that will also mean that your company, Greater Solarian, can't sell insurance here either."

"That's right," Manning said cheerfully.

Romixon scratched his beard thoughtfully. "There has to be a catch in it," he grumbled. "You Terrans don't give things away. There must be an angle somewhere."

"Maybe," Manning said. "Incidentally, I will also pass a law confiscating for the crown all receipts and assets of any company incorporated in Alphard for the purpose of selling such insurance. Since the Galaxy Insurance and Benefit Association is the only such company, it means we will confiscate everything that Dzanku and Warren own."

"This I like," Romixon said.

"First, however, I will pass a law making it a crime for any alien to possess money which comes from the sale of anything involving the life or death of an Alphardian. Then we arrest Dzanku and Warren, throw them in jail, and

then confiscate their business."

"Good," said Romixon, stamping his twenty-four feet with glee.

"Then," Manning said, "I'm going to nationalize insurance on this planet. In other words, the laws Dzanku passed requiring all Alphardians to carry insurance will still stand, but all insurance policies will be sold by the government."

"That sounds a little like socialism," Romixon said cautiously. "I'm not sure that it's right for an emperor to have anything to do with subversive ideas."

"Not at all. It would be socialism if the government was the people; but since you are—or will be again in a few hours—the government, it'll actually be you who owns the insurance company."

"That sounds logical," the Emperor agreed.

"Of course," Manning continued blandly, "it is a matter of Federation law that all insurance companies must have available assets to cover the values of policies issued. Therefore, I will have to pass a law freezing enough of the royal holdings to equal the value of the insurance policies."

"You'll have to—*what?*?" screamed Romixon. He jumped up and down with rage, the sound of his twenty-four feet like thunder. "That'll tie up every cent I own! You can't do that to me! I'll declare war!"

"And fight the whole Federation?"

THE anger went out of Romixon. "Please," he said. "Why did you have to come here? I was so happy before. Now you're going to make a pauper out of me—I won't have a palace to my name. What will become of me in my old age?"

"There is one other way to handle it," Manning said thoughtfully.

Romixon went down on twenty-four knees, clasped his hands together. "Have pity on a poor old despot," he said. "Handle it the other way. Leave my few remaining years untouched by the dreadful pinch of penury."

"Let me get one thing straight," Manning said. "If I pass a law which benefits both you, as the Emperor, and the citizens of Alphard, that law cannot be repealed in any way—can it?"

"Absolutely not," declared the Alphardian. "And in addition, I give you my word of honor.

"Okay, we'll do it this way. We'll nationalize insurance, which makes you the insurance company of Alphard. But because an Emperor cannot become an insurance broker without the loss of a certain amount of dignity, the government will then sub-contract the Greater Solarian Insurance Company to furnish all policies, put up the necessary assets, and pay all benefits. As the original contractor, the government—which is you—will receive a regular sales commission on every policy. How's that?"

"Splendid," Romixon exclaimed, leaping to his feet. "My boy, you have saved the throne of Alphard. I will never forget you for this." But there was a gleam deep within his eyes which reminded Manning Draco that the last sentence could have more than one meaning. Mentally, he resolved to leave Alphard VI slightly in advance of the time his reign would be over.

"Then I'd better get to work," he said.

The remainder of the morning was a busy one. Manning Draco carefully checked the wording of each law with the best lawyer on the planet, then passed them. He had the police round up Dzanku and Warren. To be sure that nothing went wrong, Manning sat behind the national judge while both of them were sentenced to prison. Then he saw to the confiscation of the property, had all of the policies transferred, and made sure that the contract between the government of Alphard and Greater Solarian was without loopholes and that one copy went off to be filed in the Federation archives.

Then he called the home office on Terra. The news that Dzanku and Warren were in jail and that Greater Solarian now carried policies on every single

Alphardian instead of only a few million brought an expression of sublime bliss to the face of J. Barnaby Cruikshank. In fact, he was so carried away that he rashly offered a large bonus to his chief investigator. Manning made him put it into writing and hold the signed sheet up in front of the visiscreen. Then he broke the connection.

It was lunch time. A triumphant Manning Draco, feeling better than he had since landing, went back to the hotel to have lunch with Jadyl Genten.

She wasn't in the room. No one in the hotel recalled having seen her leave. Manning, still king, ordered out the entire Alphardian police force. Inch by inch, they searched the city, and then later the entire planet, but there was no sign of the Terran girl. The officials of the spaceport swore that not a single ship had left.

Manning was frantic, but the fact was not changed. Jadyl Genten was nowhere to be found. At first, he suspected the Emperor but he finally became convinced that the old Alphardian was telling the truth when he said that he'd never heard of the girl. Inasmuch as during the questioning, Manning had been a little rough with the emperor, it became even more important to leave before the time came for Romixon to regain his throne.

The only other thing which seemed plausible was that Dzanku had found some way to spirit her away in revenge. Sending Nar Oysnarn on to the ship at the spaceport, Manning Draco went to Ix Prison.

For reasons not too difficult to understand, Dzanku Dzanku was still not in the best humor and the sigh of Manning Draco did nothing to improve it. He gripped the bars of his cell with all six tentacles and glared until his eyestalks quivered.

"I'm going to ask you something," Manning said grimly, "and you'd better give me the right answers."

"I wouldn't give you the fumes of an old broken-down rocket," Dzanku said

just as grimly. "Why don't you go off on a long vacation with Jadyl Genten?"

"Then you do know something about her," shouted Manning. He leaned close to the bars and Terran and Rigelian stared angrily at each other. "What did you do with her?"

"I didn't do anything with her," Dzanku said. "In fact, I wouldn't have anything to do with her under any circumstances."

"Where is she?"

"Why don't you ask that little purple monstrosity that tags around after you? He helped you to get a throne."

"I'll make you talk," Manning declared.

"How?" Dzanku said. "You can't give me any more than the six months I'm already serving."

"Then tell me where she is and I'll let you go free."

"I'd rather stay in jail and watch you go crazy," Dranku said, and for the first time he regained some of his good humor. "Go away."

STRAIGHTENING up, Manning Draco sent the full force of his mind slashing at the Rigelian. He felt it strike the secondary shield and lock there. For a full minute, the two of them stood there, straining. The sweat poured from Manning's face and Dzanku's eyes bulged. But their strength was equal and neither shield would give way. Finally, Manning staggered and leaned wearily against the bars. Dzanku sank down on the prison stool, his eyestalks drooping.

"Dzanku," Manning said, "be a good guy. You and I have fought each other, but we never hurt other people in the effort to get each other. Tell me where she is?"

"I'll give you some good advice," Dzanku said wearily. "It's less than an hour before Romixon becomes Emperor again. If you're still on this planet then, you'll be right here in jail with me and for a damn sight longer than six months. Beat it and forget about Jadyl. You'll

never see her again. Besides there was something wrong with her or she would have worked better."

"What do you mean?"

But Dzanku Dzanku had gone to sleep, his tentacles wrapped around his head, and Manning knew there was no use trying to awaken a Rigelian when he didn't choose to be aroused. He turned and walked from the prison, his shoulders slumping.

It lacked only twenty minutes before the end of the Festival when Manning Draco arrived at the spaceport. A number of cheering Alphardians tried to keep him from reaching his ship, but he knew this had to be the influence of Romixon at work and he shoved roughly through.

Nar Oysnarn was already within the ship and Manning didn't even bother getting a clearance from the tower. He merely switched the ship into magnetic power and the *Alpha Actuary* leaped skyward. There were still five minutes to spare when the little ship flashed beyond the atmosphere of Alphard VI.

Manning fed the position of Kholem, into the automatic pilot, threw the ship into magni-drive and relapsed into a sulky silence which lasted until they landed on Kholem. Nar Oysnarn tried to start a conversation several times, but earned only a glare for his trouble.

"Okay, kid," Manning said, setting the ship down on the planet. "Here you are. Thanks for everything and goodbye."

Looking unhappy, Nar Oysnarn started for the airlock. But just then Manning Draco remembered something and he grabbed the Kholemite back so fast the cap flew off his head.

"I just remembered," Manning said grimly, "when I was trying to make Dzanku tell me where Jadyl was, he wanted to know why I didn't ask you. What did he mean by that?"

"Was she that beautiful?" Nar asked softly.

"You know she was. You saw her."

Nar Oysnarn shook his head. "No," he said, "that's what I've been trying to tell you. I didn't see her. Neither did anyone else."

"What the hell do you mean?" Manning asked angrily.

"You know," Nar said, "that all over your galaxy the Alphardians have had the reputation of being eccentric—but do you know just why they are eccentric?"

"What's that got to do with it?"

"Everything. The Alphardians are eccentric because they live out their lives beneath six moons which constantly whirl around a seventh one. Those moons are always in sight. The result is that everyone on Alphard is always in a slight hypnotic trance."

"Hypnosis?"

NAR OYSNARN nodded. "That's why Dzanku Dzanku worked out that ritual of making you look at the moons all night. He put you in deep hypnosis. He was there for a long time that night and I was sure he was in telepathic communication with you, but it didn't occur to me that he was hypnotizing you until later. Then it was too late."

"Not Jadyl," Manning said violently. "You saw her when you broke into my room this morning."

"No," Nar said gently. "You were sitting there by yourself. Think back and you'll realize that no one saw her but you. The Alphardians probably paid no attention because they merely figured you were also eccentric."

Against his will, Manning thought back to that evening in the bar, on the street, and in the restaurant.

Try as he did, he couldn't remember anyone else speaking to Jadyl or even looking at her.

"I can't believe it," he said.

"She was a post-hypnotic suggestion," Nar said firmly. "I'm sure that what happened was that Dzanku gave you some key word or sentence which would trigger the image later."

Manning was remembering meeting Dzanku on the street that night and the

Rigelian's strange greeting—"Peace be with you"—which was so out of character for him.

"And," continued Nar, "I think that when Dzanku was paralyzed by the contact with my mind the hypnotic control was broken and she vanished. That's the reason why you couldn't find her afterward."

Manning Draco sat, feeling a dream fade away into nothing, and feeling a little sorry for himself.

"But how did he make her so perfect? She liked everything I liked, seemed even to anticipate my likes and dislikes."

"I think," Nar said slowly, "that the hypnotic control made you see a feminine version of yourself—and therefore her every taste would be identical with your own. I imagine that Dzanku believed this would be such a perfect vision that there would be no danger of your spoiling his plans."

"And that's what he meant in the prison when he said there was something wrong with her or she would have worked better," Manning said, believing against his will.

There was little more to be said and Manning Draco didn't feel like small talk.

He soon said goodbye to Nar Oysnarn and the *Alpha Actuary* blasted off from Kholem.

As he streaked back toward his own galaxy, Manning Draco began to remember more of the conversation he had held in the prison with Dzanku. Dzanku. And the more he remembered, the greater was his anger. So great that he knew he had to do something to get even. But what could he do to one who was in prison on a planet where it was probably unsafe for him to land—then, realizing the lusty nature of the Rigelian and the fact that he would be shut up for at least another six months, Manning had an idea.

He landed briefly at the outlaw planet of the Deneb system—Deneb XIV. There, after some shopping around

among the shifty street vendors, he purchased some Rigelian postcards—enough to supply one for each day of six months. And since, as everyone knows, Rigelian postcards can't be sent through the mails, he found a method to smuggle them into the prison on Alphard VI. He was directed to a salesman who traveled for an import house, and handled a number of illegal items on the side, who would arrange it for a price.

As small as the gesture was, it made him feel better. By the time he was reaching the Solar System, his thoughts were once more centered about Lhana Xano. Manning Draco was again on course.

Back on Alphard VI, Dzankú Dzanku cursed violently in ten languages and three crustacean dialects as the first postcard turned up in his breakfast cereal. Once, in his youth, he had known the model.



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