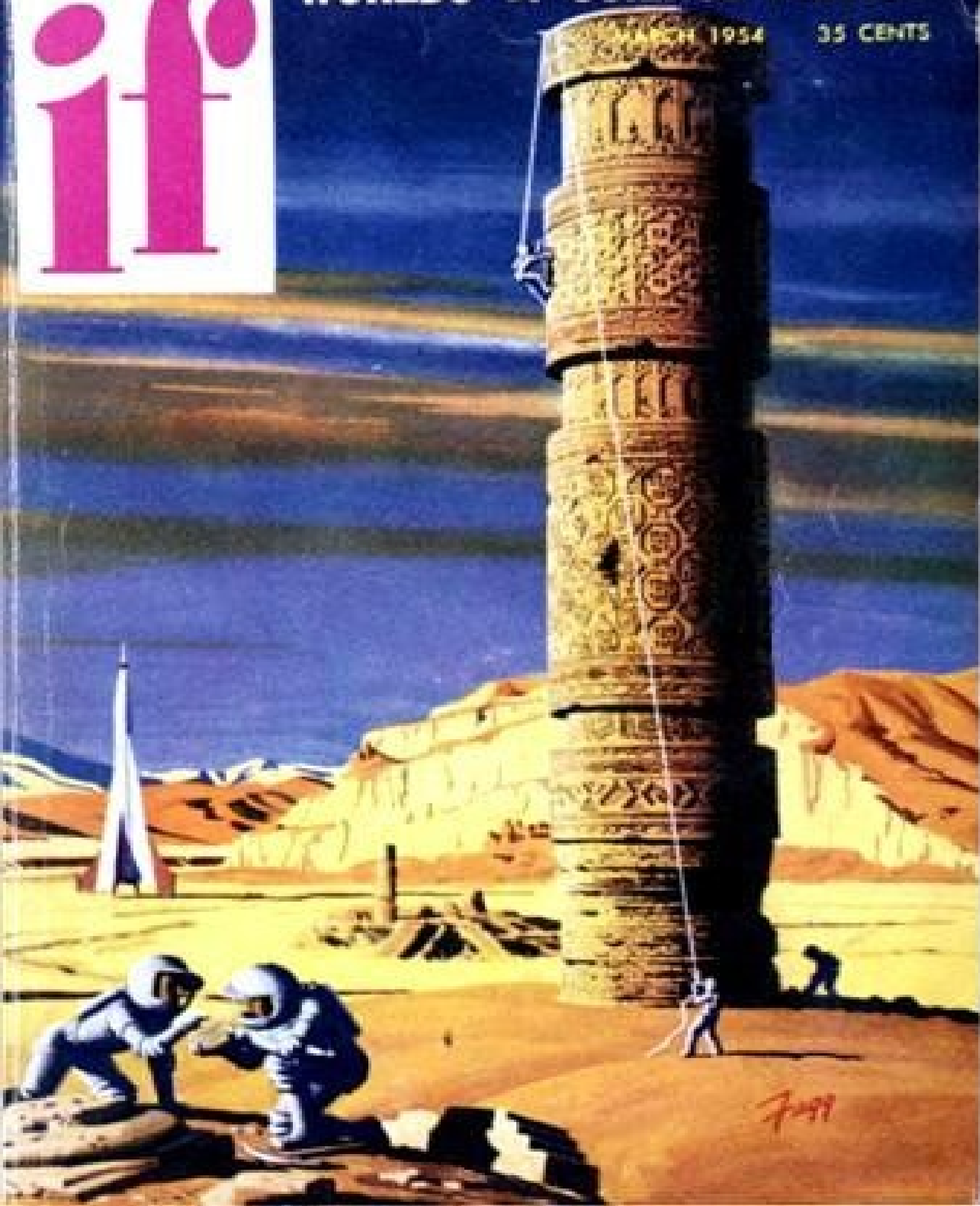


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THE AMBASSADOR

By Sam Merwin, Jr.

Illustrated by Kelly Freas

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All Earth needed was a good stiff dose of common sense, but its rulers preferred to depend on the highly fallible computers instead. As a consequence, interplanetary diplomatic relations were somewhat strained—until a nimble-witted young man from Mars came up with the answer to the "sixty-four dollar" question.

Zalen Lindsay stood on the rostrum in the huge new United Worlds auditorium on the shore of Lake Pontchartrain and looked out at an ocean of eye-glasses. Individually they ranged in hue from the rose-tinted spectacles of the Americans to the dark brown of the Soviet bloc. Their shapes and adornments were legion: round, harlequin, diamond, rhomboid, octagonal, square, oval; rimless, gem-studded, horn-rimmed, floral-rimmed, rimmed in the cases of some of the lady representatives with immense artificial eyelashes.

The total effect, to Lindsay, was of looking at an immense page of printed matter composed entirely of punctuation marks. Unspectacled, he felt like a man from Mars. He *was* a man from Mars—first Martian Ambassador Plenipotentiary to the Second United Worlds Congress.

He wished he could see some of the eyes behind the protective goggles, for he knew he was making them blink.

He glanced down at the teleprompter in front of him—purely to add effect to a pause, for he had memorized his speech and was delivering it without notes. On it was printed: HEY, BOSS—DON'T FORGET YOU GOT A DINNER DATE WITH THE SEC-GEN TONIGHT.

Lindsay suppressed a smile and said, "In conclusion, I am qualified by the

governors of Mars to promise that if we receive another shipment of British hunting boots we shall destroy them immediately upon unloading—and refuse categorically to ship further beryllium to Earth.

"On Mars we raise animals for food, not for sport—we consider human beings as the only fit athletic competition for other humans—and we see small purpose in expending our resources mining beryllium or other metals for payment that is worse than worthless. In short, we will not be a dumping ground for Earth's surplus goods. I thank you."

The faint echo of his words came back to him as he stepped down from the rostrum and walked slowly to his solitary seat in the otherwise empty section allotted to representatives of alien planets. Otherwise there was no sound in the huge assemblage.

He felt a tremendous lift of tension, the joyousness of a man who has satisfied a lifelong yearning to toss a brick through a plate-glass window and knows he will be arrested for it and doesn't care.

There was going to be hell to pay—and Lindsay was honestly looking forward to it. While Secretary General Carlo Bergozza, his dark-green spectacles resembling parenthesis marks on either side of his thin eagle beak, went through the motions of adjourning the Congress for forty-eight hours, Lindsay considered his mission and its purpose.

Earth—a planet whose age-old feuds had been largely vitiated by the increasing rule of computer-judgment—and Mars, the one settled alien planet on which no computer had ever been built, were drifting dangerously apart.

It was, Lindsay thought with a trace of grimness, the same ancient story of the mother country and her overseas colonies, the same basic and seemingly inevitable trend, social and economic, that had led to the revolt of North America against England, three hundred years earlier.

On a far vaster and costlier scale, of course.

Lindsay had been sent to Earth, as his planet's first representative at the new United Worlds Congress, to see that this trend was halted before it led to irrevocable division. And not by allowing Mars to become a mere feeder and dumping ground for the parent planet.

Well, he had tossed a monkey wrench into the machinery of interplanetary

sweetness and light, he thought. Making his way slowly out with the rest of the Congress, he felt like the proverbial bull in the china shop. The others, eyeing him inscrutably through their eye-glasses and over their harness humps, drew aside to let him walk through.

But all around him, in countless national tongues, he heard the whispers, the mutterings—"sending a gladiator" ... "looks like a vidar star" ... "too young for such grave responsibility" ... "no understanding of the basic sensitivities"

Obviously, he had *not* won a crushing vote of confidence.



To hell with them, all of them, he thought as someone tapped him on a shoulder. He turned to find du Fresne, the North American Minister of Computation, peering up at him through spectacles that resembled twin scoops of strawberry ice-cream mounted in heavy white-metal rims.

"I'd like a word with you," he said, speaking English rather than Esperanto. Lindsay nodded politely, thinking that du Fresne looked rather like a Daumier judge with his fashionable humped back and long official robe of office.

Over a table in the twilight bar du Fresne leaned toward him, nearly upsetting his colafizz with a sleeve of his robe.

"M-mind you," he said, "this is strictly unofficial, Lindsay, but I have your interests at heart. You're following trend X."

"Got me all nicely plotted out on your machine?" said Lindsay.

Du Fresne's sallow face went white at this pleasantry. As Minister of Computation his entire being was wrapped up in the immensely intricate calculators that forecast all decisions for the huge North American republic. Obviously battling anger, he said, "Don't laugh at Elsac, Lindsay. It has never been wrong—it can't be wrong."

"I'm not laughing," said Lindsay quietly. "But no one has ever fed me to a computer. So how can you know...?"

"We have fed it every possible combination of circumstances based upon all the facts of Terro-Martian interhistory," the Minister of Computation stated firmly.

His nose wrinkled and seemed to turn visibly pink at the nostril-edges. He said, "Damn! I'm allergic to computer-ridicule." He reached for an evapochief, blew his nose.

"Sorry," said Lindsay, feeling the mild amazement that seemed to accompany all his dealings with Earthfolk. "I wasn't—"

"I doe you weren'd," du Fresne said thickly. "Bud de vurry zuggedgeshun of ridicule dudz id." He removed his strawberry spectacles, produced an eye-cup, removed and dried the contact lenses beneath. After he had replaced them his condition seemed improved.

Lindsay offered him a cigarette, which was refused, and selected one for himself. He said, "What happens if I pursue trend X?"

"You'll be assassinated," du Fresne told him nervously. "And the results of such assassination will be disastrous for both planets. Earth will have to go to war."

"Then why not ship us goods we can use?" Lindsay asked quietly.

Du Fresne looked at him as despairingly as his glasses would permit. He said, "You just don't understand. Why didn't your people send someone better attuned to our problems?"

"Perhaps because they felt Mars would be better represented by someone attuned to its own problems," Lindsay told him. "Don't tell me your precious computers recommend murder and war."

"They don't recommend anything," said du Fresne. "They merely advise what will happen under given sets of conditions."

"Perhaps if you used sensible judgment instead of machines to make your decisions you could prevent my assassination," said Lindsay, finishing his scotch on the rocks. "Who knows?" he added. "You might even be able to prevent an interplanetary war!"

When he left, du Fresne's nose was again growing red and the Minister of Computation was fumbling for another evapochief.



Riding the escarpment to his office on the one-twentieth floor of the UW building, Lindsay pondered the strange people of the mother planet among whom his assignment was causing him to live. One inch over six feet, he was not outstandingly tall—but he felt tall among them, with their slump harnesses and disfiguring spectacles and the women so hidden beneath their shapeless coveralls and harmopan makeup.

He was not unprepared for the appearance of Earthfolk, of course, but he had not yet adjusted to seeing them constantly around him in such large numbers. To him their deliberate distortion was as shocking as, he supposed wryly, his own unaltered naturalness was to them.

There was still something illogical about the cult of everyday ugliness that had overtaken the mother planet in the last two generations, under the guise of social harmony. It dated back, of course, to the great Dr. Ludmilla Hartwig, psychiatric synthesizer of the final decades of the twentieth century.

It was she who had correctly interpreted the growing distrust of the handsome and the beautiful among the great bulk of the less favored, the intense feelings of inferiority such comely persons aroused. It was from her computer-psychiatry that the answer employed had come: since everyone cannot be beautiful, let all be ugly.

This slogan had sparked the mass use of unneeded spectacles, the distortion harnesses, the harmopan makeup. Now, outside of emergencies, it was as socially unacceptable for a man or woman to reveal a face uncovered in public as it had been, centuries earlier, for a Moslem odalisque to appear unveiled in the bazaar.

There were exceptions, of course—aside from those who were naturally ugly to begin with. Vidar-screen actors and actresses were permitted to reveal beauty when their parts demanded it—which was usually only in villains' roles. And among men, professional athletes were expected to show their faces and bodies *au naturel* as a mark of their profession. Among women the professional courtesans—the "models", not the two-credit whores—displayed their charms on all occasions. Beauty was bad business for lower-caste prostitutes—it made such clients they could promote feel too inferior.

These specialists, the models and gladiators, were something of a race apart, computer-picked in infancy and raised for their professions like Japanese *sumo* wrestlers. They were scarcely expected to enter the more sensitive realms of the

arts, business affairs or government.

It was, Lindsay decided, a hell of a state of affairs.

Nina Beckwith, Lindsay's Earth-assigned personal secretary, was leaning far back in her tilt-chair with her feet on the desk. Her eyes were squinted behind chartreuse-tinted flat-oval lenses to avoid fumes from a cigarette stuck in a corner of her wide mouth. She had shut off the air-conditioner, opened the picture window and pulled the pants of her coverall far up above her knees to let the warm New Orleans September air wash over her skin.

Lindsay looked at her legs with surprise—it had not occurred to him that Nina owned such a long and shapely pair. He whistled softly through his teeth.

Nina removed her smoke, sighed and made a move to stand up and let her coverall fall back over the exposed limbs. Lindsay said, "Not on my account—*please!* Those are the first good looking legs I've seen since leaving Mars."

"Watch yourself, boss," said Nina and indulged in a slow half-smile. Then, putting her feet back on the floor, "You certainly lost a lot of friends and disinfluenced a lot of people down there today. If you'd prepared your speech on the machine I'd have fixed it up for you."

"Which is exactly why I prepared it in my hot little head," Lindsay told her. "I wanted to knock some sense into them."

Nina got out of her chair and snuffed out her cigarette in the disposal tray, then sat on the edge of the desk and poked at the untidy dark-blonde hair she wore in a knot on top of her head. She said, "Night soil! You'll never knock any sense into that mob."

Lindsay, who had been thinking wistfully that if Nina would only do something about that hair, the thickness of her middle, and her bilious complexion, she might be fairly good looking, blinked. He said, "Why in hell do you work for them then?"

She shrugged disinterested shoulders, told him, "It's a job." She yawned, unabashed, added irrelevantly, "You know, boss, the trouble with you is you look like a gladiator. They won't take you seriously unless you wear specs and a

harness."

"Over my dead body," he told her. "What's wrong with athletes anyway? I play damned good tennis when I get time to practice."

"Athletes are lousy lovers," she said. "Your correspondence is on your desk." She nodded toward it. "Get it signed, will you? I've got a dinner date."

Lindsay restrained an impulse to ask her with what and signed the letters dutifully.

Nina was a spy, of course, or she wouldn't have the job. In view of his own assignment and the delicacy of Terro-Martian relations at the moment, she must be a good one.

He handed her the letters, noted the slight sway of her thick body as she walked toward the dispatch-chute. A pity, he thought, that the rest of her failed to match the long perfect legs she had so unexpectedly put on display.

"Oh, Miss Beckwith!" he called after her. "You don't have to list my appointments on the teleprompter when I'm making a speech after this."

She stopped, cast him an oblique glance over one shoulder and said without much interest, "I didn't know whether you'd get back here or not—and it wouldn't do to forget the Secretary General."

"All right," he said in resignation. When she had gone he wondered if he should have told her what du Fresne had said about his possible assassination, decided it was just as well he had kept mum. He went up on the roof for a copter.



The dinner was informal. Lindsay and Fernando Anderson, the flamboyant junior senator from New Mexico, were the only guests. They were four at the charming *ante bellum* mahogany table of the Secretary General's Natchez mansion. Carlo Bergozza, the Secretary General himself—courteous, with natural as well as harness-stooped shoulders, a trifle vague—and his daughter and official hostess, Maria—vividly brunette and dynamic despite the twist given her body by her harness and the mask of huge triangular spectacles—made up the rest of the party.

The meal was simple, automatically served, well prepared. It consisted of plankton soup with chives in chilled bowls, noisettes of lamb with yeast-truffles and bamboo-grass and, in deference to Lindsay, a dessert of Martian lichenberries. Conversation consisted of routine gambits and responses until the dessert.

Then Senator Anderson removed his diamond-shaped raspberry glasses and said, "You'll pardon me, but I want to see what our distinguished visitor really looks like. After all, he can see us as we are."

Secretary General Bergozza looked briefly shocked. Then his overpowering courtesy came to his rescue and he laid aside his own dark green spectacles. He said, "You know, Lindsay, you remind me a little of an American ambassador to the Court of Saint James a hundred and fifty years ago—I believe his name was Harvey. He refused to wear knee-britches to his own reception. Other times, other customs."

"I'm sorry if my appearance is bothering people," said Lindsay, noting that Maria, without her glasses, came close to being a truly pretty young woman. "I'm not trying to disturb them—I merely want them to see me as a true representative of my own world."

Maria said impulsively, "It isn't that you bother us—not really. It's just that you're a little too good looking. Almost like a gladiator. People aren't used to it in a statesman."

"Too good looking—with this busted beak of mine?" Lindsay pressed a finger against his nose, which had been broken in youth by a wild pitch.

Senator Anderson said, "The slight irregularity of your nose is just enough to keep you from being too pretty, Lindsay." He smiled and added, "You certainly stirred up a cyclotron with your speech this afternoon. The British are planning a white paper."

"I merely stated facts as I know them," said Lindsay.

"They aren't used to facts—not unless they have been computer-processed," said the senator. He seemed pleased for some reason, added, "You may have broken some real ice, Lindsay. I've been trying for years to work out a way to tell people computers are robbing them of all powers of decision."

"All they have to do is confine them to mathematical problems and let people

decide human ones," said Lindsay.

The Secretary General cleared his throat. He said, "Without the computers there would be no United Worlds. There would be no world at all, probably."

It was a rebuke. Carlo Bergozza redonned his spectacles and rose from the table. He said, "If you'll excuse me I have some business to attend to. I'm sure my daughter will see that you are properly entertained." He left the room with slow, old-man steps.

Maria said fondly, "Poor darling, he gets so upset. He'll take a pill and go to sleep. Let's go to the bathroom, shall we?"



Though outwardly the Secretary General's mansion was hyper-gingerbread steamboat Gothic, inwardly it was entirely modern in plan. There was a living room, of course, for formal receptions, but as in all normal Earth-dwellings of the period the bathroom was the lived-in chamber.

There and there only did people of the 2070's permit themselves to relax. This was a logical development of latter-day plumbing and air conditioning and the crowding of apartment and small-house life. Actual lavatory plumbing was concealed, in this instance, by an etched glass screen. Otherwise the room featured comfortable plastic lounge chairs and sofas around a fifteen-foot sunken tub and a small semicircular bar, fully equipped.

On entering Maria unfastened her harness and coverall and stood before them, a sweet-bodied dark-eyed girl in her early twenties, clad in shorts and halter. "Lord!" she exclaimed, pushing dark hair back from her broad low forehead, "It feels good to relax. Zalen, I want to talk to you."

"Delighted," said Lindsay, mildly surprised at the use of his Martian first name.

"I've got something to tell him first," said Anderson, unhitching his own harness and emerging as a lean medium-sized man in good condition for his forty years. "I got word just before I flew up here tonight that your life may be in danger, Zalen."



Lindsay accepted the arrack-fizz Maria handed him, said "That makes warning number two, Senator. Du Fresne talked to me about it this afternoon."

Maria paled visibly. She said, "It sounds impossible!"

"It backs up the judgment of my own group," said Senator Anderson. "Du Fresne is just about the smartest computerman we have." He eyed Lindsay speculatively, added, "You don't seem much impressed by your danger, Zalen."

"How can I be?" Lindsay countered. "After all, Earth is supposed to be much further advanced than Mars in civilization. And we have had no political murder on Mars in more than fifty years."

Maria made a despairing gesture. "Oh, dear!" she exclaimed. "You *don't* understand, Zalen. On Mars you have both room and time to settle your political conflicts. And you don't have computers."

"We have some pretty sharp rows," Lindsay told her. "But we don't have anyone assassinated." He paused, looked at them both, added, "Do you have many of them here?"

"Not many," said Anderson. "But there is a growing tendency to go along with computer verdicts, no matter how extreme."

"And you believe the British computers are giving accurate answers when they recommend the dumping of millions of pairs of utterly useless hunting boots on Mars? Or those rubber shower curtains they unloaded on us two years ago?"

The Senator said, "There is, unfortunately, no question as to the accuracy of computer answers. The trouble seems to lie in some special condition, local to Britain, that effects computers."

"But if the British computers are wrong, why doesn't somebody do something about it?" Lindsay asked.

Anderson said, "If it were that simple, Zalen..." His smile was rueful. "Unfortunately our English friends—or their rulers at any rate—are determined that socialism is the only government suitable to their country. Actually it is nothing of the sort—they can thrive only with a mercantile capitalism under a nominal constitutional monarchy."

"In that case I still don't see—" Lindsay began.

"Contrary to what you're thinking, their leaders are not villains," Anderson told him. "They are men and women obsessed with an ideal that has hampered them for almost two centuries. And they are incapable of accepting any conclusion counter to their ideals."

"Even to impoverishing an entire planet?" Lindsay asked.

Anderson shrugged. "A penalty of their insularity," he replied. "The reason for this little meeting, Zalen, is to explain that not all of us are in favor of supporting Britain and its absurd production bungling at the expense of Mars. A few of us are becoming singularly fed up with the computer neurosis that seems to have this planet in its grip."

Maria leaned forward, her dark eyes brilliant in their intensity. She said, "Can't you see, Zalen, *that* is why we are so concerned with your possible assassination? We fear the whole of Earth is on the lip of a nervous breakdown. Unless the grip of the computers is broken anything might happen. And we're counting on you, with your fresh viewpoint and prestige, to help us."

"I was hoping you might be concerned about *me*," said Lindsay softly. "After all, I'm the one who is supposed to be killed." He watched a sudden flush of embarrassment add charming brilliance to the vividness of the Secretary General's daughter.

"Of course we're concerned," she said defensively. "We're not really monsters, Zalen."

"What Maria means," said Anderson swiftly, "is that if the worst *should* happen it will go a long way toward making Earth entirely computer-dependent, if du Fresne's prophecy is fulfilled a lot of people who might go on fighting will simply give up."

"Just what is your stake in this, Senator?" Lindsay asked.



Anderson said, "I could give you a score of 'good' reasons, Zalen. But my real reason is this—I'm damned if I want to see professional politicians become rubber-stamps to a computer. When Sylac was first used officially three decades ago, it looked as if it might be a help. All we had to do was palm off all

unpopular decisions on the machine.

"Elsac, however, has proved to be something else," he went on. "It is making too damned many of our decisions for us—and thanks to our having set Sylac up as a master-brain god we can't controvert its judgment. When President Giovannini gets his new Giac computer working we might as well shut up shop. And the announcement that Giac is in operation may come at any time now."

Lindsay studied him, then said, "Your real complaint then, Fernando, is that the computers deprive you of patronage and power."

"That's about it," said the senator from New Mexico. "We'll be reduced to the level of the political commissars of the Soviet nations. The scientists and symbolic logicians who feed and tend the computers will actually be running the country. *And* the world."

"And just where do I come into this?" Lindsay asked.

"You, Zalen, are the last representative of the last sizeable and important human organism that is not dependent upon computer judgment," said Anderson. "That's our side of it. From your own side—if you already distrust computer decisions, as in the case of the British hunting boots—you surely don't want to see them in full control."

"Hardly," said Lindsay. "But at the same time I have no desire to be assassinated or to be the cause of an Earth-Mars war."

"Think it over, Zalen," said Anderson. "I need hardly tell you that I am not speaking for myself alone." He got up, put down his glass, bade Maria farewell and left the Martian alone with her.

When he had gone Lindsay looked at the girl, who returned his gaze quite openly for a long moment before her eyes fell away. He said, "Somehow the senator and you seem an odd combination."

She made no pretense of misunderstanding but said candidly, "Perhaps I am neurotic in my distrust of computers but I cannot help that. Those of us who have any true sensitivity unblunted by the psycho-mechanistics of the era all share this distrust. It is natural, since we are few and weak, that we should seek what allies we can find among the strong."

"I've always heard that politics makes strange bedfellows," said Lindsay

casually.

It was obvious that he had committed a *faux pas*. Maria's blush returned and her expression froze. Lindsay cursed himself for a fool. With the development of all sorts of pneumatic resting devices the word *bed* had become not only obsolete but definitely distasteful in well-bred Tellurian circles. Its use was as decried as was that of the word *bloody* in Victorian England.

She said angrily, "I assure you, Mr. Lindsay, that Senator Anderson and I have never...." Voice and anger faded alike as she apparently realized that Lindsay had not intended insult.

He let her mix a second drink for both of them. Then, standing close to her and noting the smooth perfection of her creamy white skin, "I wonder if your father knows that he is nourishing a subversive in his family."

She said with a trace of impatience, "Oh, poor papa never sees the trees for the forest."

"You're a damned unhappy girl, aren't you?" he asked her. He didn't need an answer, but realized she wanted to talk about it.

She said, her eyes shining suspiciously, "You're right, of course, I'm very unhappy—constricted in behavior by my father's position, unable to say aloud what I really think, how I really feel. Sometimes I think I must be living in some Gothic poet's dream of loneliness."

"Contrary to the beliefs of most psychiatrists," said Lindsay, half-touched, half-appalled by Maria's intensity, "we are all of us alone."

"Somehow I *knew* you'd understand!" she exclaimed, without taking her dark eyes from his. "I'm not allowed to date gladiators, of course. You're the only man I've ever been with who was not afraid to look as he is."

"You'd better come to Mars," he suggested, shying away a little from the high voltage the Secretary General's daughter seemed to be generating. "I can assure you you'd have a chance to reveal the charms nature gave you without shame."

She laughed with a sudden change of spirits. "It's at least a half hour since dinner. Let's take a dip." She tossed back her lustrous dark hair with a shake of her head and her hands went to the clasp of her halter, a moment later to that of her shorts. "Come on," she called, extending her arms to expose her exciting

young body before him. "The water will cool us off."

It didn't work out that way, of course. Lindsay was barely in the tub-pool before Maria's arms were about his neck, her body close against his, her lips thrusting upward toward his own. For a moment he felt panic, said, "Hey! What if somebody comes? Your father—"

"Silly! Nobody will," she replied, laughing softly.

His last rational thought for quite awhile was, *Oh well—I'm hardly in a position to get the Secretary General's daughter angry.*



False dawn was spreading its dim fanlight over the eastern horizon as he coptered back to his official quarters in the city. Trying to restore some order to thoughts and emotions thoroughly disrupted by the unexpected events of the evening, he wondered a little just what he had got himself into.

Mars, of course, was scarcely a Puritan planet, populated as it was by the hardiest and most adventurous members of the human race, of all races. But there had been something almost psychopathic about Maria's passion. It had been far too intense to have been generated solely through regard for him.

The girl had made love to him simply to relieve her own inner tensions, he thought wryly. Lacking a man she could love, walled in by the high officialdom of her father's lofty position, she had turned to him in the same way she turned to the anti-computer movement—as a way of feeling less lonely for a while. Still, it had been sweet—if a little frightening in retrospect.

And it had been a little decadent too.

With the copter on autopilot he lit a cigarette and forced his thoughts away from the girl. He wondered if the Governors of Mars were sufficiently in key with the current feelings of Earthfolk to understand fully how deep the repercussions from his speech might go. He wondered if they had considered fully the possibility of interplanetary war.

True, Mars was undoubtedly better equipped to defend itself against such attack than was Earth. Like the mother planet it had its share of robot rockets capable of launching a counterattack. And thanks to the comparative sparseness and

decentralization of its population it was far less vulnerable to attack.

But war between the planets would be destructive of far more than cities and the people that lived in them. It would mean inevitably a breakdown of the entire fabric of civilized humanity—a tenuous fabric, true, but all that existed to maintain man.

And an isolated Mars, even if self-sufficient, would be a sorry substitute for a red planet that was part of the United Worlds. It would mean a setback of generations, perhaps centuries.

He began to feel a new understanding of the importance of his mission. With understanding came something akin to fear lest he should not be able to accomplish it without disaster. It was going to be his job to inaugurate some sort of therapy for Earth's illness. It was, in effect, one man against a planet.

Considering the men and women with whom he had talked that day he was unable to take the assassination threat too seriously. Somehow these neurotics and warped zealots, with their allergies and distortion kits, seemed unlikely to undertake or carry through any such drastic action. Their very inhibitions would forbid it.

Not that Maria had been exactly inhibited. Damn! The girl refused to stay out of his thoughts. He recalled what she had told him of her conspiracy against the computers, of its aims and methods. And again he smiled wryly to himself.

They were like spoiled children, he thought. A little group of over-intense young men and women, neurotic, excitable, unstable, meeting in one another's houses or in expensive cafes, plotting little coups that never quite came off.

From certain unguarded phrases Maria had dropped during the less frenetic periods of their evening together, he gathered that their current aim was actual physical sabotage of Giac, the mightiest of all computers about to be unveiled, before it went into work.

They didn't even realize, he thought, that sabotage would avail them nothing in the long run—or the short either. Destruction of the computers would not cure Earth. It might easily increase the reliance of Earthfolk upon their cybernetic monsters. What was needed to effect a cure was destruction of human confidence in and reliance upon these machines.

And how in hell, he wondered, was he going to manage that?

To a man from level, water-starved Mars the sight of New Orleans still ablaze with lights at five o'clock in the morning was something of a miracle. Mars had its share of atomic power-plants, of course, but such sources had proved almost prohibitively costly as providers of cheap power.

That was true on Earth too, of course, but Earth had its rivers, its waterfalls, its ocean tides to help out. More important, it averaged some fifty million miles closer to the Sun, thus giving it immense storage supplies of solar heat for power. Without these resources the thousand-square-mile expanse of intricately criss-crossed artificial lighting that was the United Worlds capital would have been impossible.

Lindsay wondered how any people possessed of a planet so rich could be afflicted with such poverty of soul. Or was this very opulence the cause? His own planet was comparatively poor—yet nervous breakdowns were few and far between. There the ugly strove for beauty, instead of the reverse.

He parked the copter on the garage-plat, pressed the button, and watched it sink slowly out of sight to its concealed hangar. Like all Martian natives to leave for Earth, he had been warned about the intense heat and humidity that assailed most of the mother planet, especially in the UW capital. Yet the night breeze felt pleasantly cool against his face and its thickness was like the brush of invisible velvet against his skin. Perhaps, he thought, he was more of an Earthling than three generations of Martian heredity made likely.

He did miss the incredible brilliance of the Martian night skies. Here on Earth the stars shone as puny things through the heavy atmosphere.

But, he thought guiltily, he did not have as severe a pang of homesickness as he ought.

In a state of self-bemusement he rode the elevator down to his suite on the ninety-first story. And was utterly unprepared for the assault which all but bore him to the floor as he stepped out into his own foyer.

Since the attack came from behind and his assailant's first move was to toss a bag over his head, Lindsay had no idea of what the would-be assassin looked like. For a moment he could only struggle blindly to retain his balance, expecting every instant to feel the quick searing heat of a blaster burn through

his back.

But no heat came, nor did the chill of a dagger. Instead he felt his attacker's strong hands encircle his neck in a *judo* grip.

This was something Lindsay understood. He thrust both his own hands up and backward, getting inside the assassin's grip and breaking it. His thumbnails dug into nerve centers and he bent an arm sharply. There was a gasp of agony and he felt a large body crumple under the pressure.

Lindsay's first impulse was to summon the constabulary. His second, after examining the face of his would-be slayer, was to drag the man into the shelter of his apartment, revive him and seek to learn what he could about the attempt.

To his astonishment he discovered that he knew the man. His assigned murderer was long, red-headed Pat O'Ryan rated as a top gladiator, a tennis and squash champion whose reputation was almost as widespread among sporting fans on Mars as on Earth. Lindsay had remodeled his own backhand, just the year before, upon that of the man sent to kill him.

He got some whiskey from the serving bar beside the vidar screen, poured a little of it between the unconscious killer's lips. O'Ryan sputtered and sat up slowly, blinking. He said, "Get me some gin, will you?"

Lindsay returned the whiskey to its place, got the requested liquor, offered some neat to the tennis player in a glass. O'Ryan downed it, shuddered, looked at Lindsay curiously. He said, "What went wrong? You're supposed to be dead."

Lindsay shrugged and said, "I know some *judo* too. You weren't quite fast enough, Pat."

O'Ryan moaned again, reached for the bottle. Then he said, "I remember now. Thank God you got my right arm—I'm left-handed."

"I know," Lindsay told him laconically.

The would-be assassin looked frightened. He said, "How do you know?"

"I play a little tennis myself," Lindsay told him. "How come they sent a man like

you on such a mission?"

"Top gladiator—top assignment," said the athlete. "We're supposed to do something besides play games for our keep."

"That's a wrinkle in the social setup I didn't know about," said Lindsay. "Mind telling me who sent you?"

"Not at all. It was my sponsors, the New Hibernian A.C." He frowned. "According to the computers I was in. There's going to be hell to pay over my muffing it."

"How do you feel about that?" the Martian asked him.

O'Ryan shrugged. "It's okay by me," he said. "They can hardly degrade me for fouling up this kind of a job. I'll simply tell them their information was incomplete. No one knew you knew *judo*." He eyed the gin, added, "A good thing you didn't feed me whiskey. I'm allergic to all grain products—even in alcohol. Comes from being fed too much McCann's Irish oatmeal when I was a kid."

"Interesting," said Lindsay, wondering how the conversation had taken this turn. "What does whiskey do to you?"

The gladiator shuddered. "It usually hits me about twenty-four hours afterward. Makes my eyes water so I can't see much. I've got a match at the Colosseum tomorrow night. I hope you'll be there."

"So do I," said Lindsay dryly. "You wouldn't know *who* gave you this little chore on me, would you?"

"Not likely," said the gladiator. "When we report at the club every evening we find our assignments stuck in our boxes. Usually we get orders to meet a dame. This was something different."

"I see what you mean," Lindsay told him.

O'Ryan got up, said, "Well, I might as well be running along. I'll give them hell for fouling up the computer-prophecy. Look me up after the match tomorrow. And thanks for not having me pinched. I might have had to spend the night in a cell. That's bad for conditioning."

"You're quite welcome," said Lindsay, feeling like a character in a semi-

nightmare. "Will I be seeing you again—this way?"

"Unlikely," the gladiator told him. "They'll have to run a lot of checks on you after this before they try again. See you tomorrow."

Lindsay looked after his visitor with amazement. Then it occurred to him that computers were substituting not only for human judgment but for human conscience as well. And this, he felt certain, was important.

Turning in on his contour couch, Lindsay recalled that he had given whiskey to the allergic athlete. He decided then and there that he would be in attendance at the match in the Colosseum that evening.



He got to his office about eleven o'clock. His desk was stacked high with messages, written and taped, and all sorts of folk wished to talk with him on the vidarphone. Nina, looking more slovenly than ever, had arranged them neatly, according to their nature and importance in separate little piles.

"Next time you tear up the pea-patch," she informed him resentfully, "I'm going to get in some help." She eyed him with somber speculation, added, "I hear the Sec-Gen turned in early last night."

"You've got big ears," said Lindsay.

"I get around," she said. "I'm supposed to keep tabs on you, boss."

"Then you must know someone tried to kill me early this morning when I came back from Natchez."

Nina's eyes narrowed alarmingly under the glasses that covered them. She said, "Why didn't you report it?" She sounded like a commander-in-chief questioning a junior aide for faulty judgment.

"I won," Lindsay said simply. "There was no danger."

"Who was it?" she asked. And, when he hesitated, "I'm not going to shout it from the housetops, boss."

"It was Pat O'Ryan."

"You handled *Pat*?" she asked, apparently astonished. Something in her tone told him Nina knew his would-be assassin.

"Why not?" he countered. "It wasn't much of a brawl."

"But *Pat*...." she began, and hesitated. Then, all business again, "We'd better get at some of this. You have a date to be psyched by Dr. Craven at two o'clock."

"What for?" he asked, startled.

"Routine," she told him. "Everyone connected with UW has to go through it. But cheer up, boss, it doesn't hurt—much."

"Okay," he said resignedly. "Let's get to work."

While he dictated Lindsay found himself wondering just who was paying Nina's real salary. If she were a spy for the same group that had sent O'Ryan to kill him, his position was delicate, to put it mildly. But for some reason he doubted it. There were too many groups working at once to make any such simple solution probable.

When she departed briefly to superintend a minor matter out of the office, he found himself staring at the wastebasket by his tilt-chair. A heart-shaped jewel-box of transparent crystoplastic lay within it. Curious, Lindsay plucked it out. It had evidently held some sort of necklace and bore the mark of Zoffany's, the Capital's costliest jeweler. Within it was a note that read: *For Nina, who lost last night—as ever....* The signature was an indecipherable scrawl.

Lindsay stuck the card in his wallet, returned the box to the wastebasket. Who in hell, he wondered, would be sending this sort of gift to his slatternly thick-bodied secretary. The answer seemed obvious. The sender was her real boss, paying her off in a personal way that would obviate suspicion. Lindsay wondered exactly what Nina had lost.

He was not surprised when she said she would come along to the psychiatrist's with him after an office lunch of veal pralines, soya buns and coffee. He suggested she might be tired, might want the day off.

She said, "Night soil, boss! Between the Sec-Gen's daughter and things like *Pat* O'Ryan I'm going to keep an eye on you."

As if on signal the vidar-screen lit up and Maria's face appeared on it. She had

not donned harmopan or glasses and looked quite as lovely as she had the night before. She said, "Zalen, I've got to see you tonight. Something has come up."

Lindsay nodded. He figured out his schedule, suggested, "I'm going to the match in the Colosseum. Why not take it in with me?"

She shook her head, told him, "I'm tangled up at a banquet for the Egypto-Ethiopian delegation. I can meet you afterward though. How about the Pelican?"

"That's not very private," he protested.

"All the more reason," she announced. "This is *important!*"

"And seeing me in private isn't?" Despite himself a trace of wounded male entered his tone.

Maria laughed softly, her dark eyes dancing. "Perhaps later," she said softly. "You'll understand when I talk to you." She clicked off and the screen was empty.

"Damned cat!" said Nina through a haze of cigarette-smoke. "Watch out for her, boss—she's a cannibal."

"And I'm a bit tough and stringy," he told her.

Nina said, "Night soil!" again under her breath and led the way out of the office. Lindsay wondered if she were jealous.



Dr. Craven received them in a comfortable chamber, the north wall of which was all glass brick, the south wall a solid bank of screens and dials. He was a soft-faced man who wore lozenge-shaped light blue spectacles and seemed afflicted with a slight chin rash. He caught Lindsay's regard, rubbed his chin in mild embarrassment, said, "I've a mild allergy to paranoids."

Lindsay looked at Nina distrustfully but she nodded and said, "Go ahead—he won't break your arm. I'll wait outside."

The psychiatrist closed his office door. After settling him in a comfortable contour couch, Dr. Craven opened up with, "I don't want you to have any worries about this test, Ambassador. If anybody's crazy here it's me. According to very

sound current theory all psychiatrists are insane. If we weren't we wouldn't be so concerned with sanity in others."

Lindsay asked, "Why in hell am I being tested anyway?"

Craven replied, "President Giovannini himself came in for a voluntary checkup just last week." As if that were an answer.

Lindsay suppressed a desire to ask if the North American president had all his marbles. He had an idea any levity he displayed would register against him. Dr. Craven asked him a number of apparently routine questions which Lindsay answered via a recorder. How old he was, whether he liked flowers, how often he had fought with his schoolmates as a boy, what sort of food he preferred.

"Good," the doctor said, pushing aside the microphone on his desk and motioning Lindsay to do likewise. He rose, wheeled a device like an old-fashioned beautician's hair-drier close to the couch, adjusted the helmet to Lindsay's head. "Now," he added, "I want you to think as clearly as you can of your mother. Keep your eyes on the screen and give me as clear a picture as you can."

He pressed a button and the whir of a camera, also focussed on the screen, sounded from the wall behind Lindsay. When Dr. Craven nodded, he concentrated and, to his amazement, watched a fuzzy likeness of his maternal parent take form on the screen.

This was something new, he decided, and said so. Dr. Craven replied, "Yes—the psychopic is brand new. But concentrate on the picture, please. You're losing it."

It had faded to almost nothing. Lindsay concentrated again, this time brought his maternal parent into clear focus. He felt a little like a man who has never wielded a brush in his life and has suddenly discovered he could paint a perfect portrait.

Dr. Craven said nothing for a moment. Then, "Will you try to visualize your mother without the blemish at her temple?"

Lindsay tried, and all but lost the picture entirely. He brought it back again, blemish and all, felt a sudden tug of nostalgia for the firm kindly features of the woman who had brought him into the world. A minute or so later Dr. Craven pressed another button and the screen went blank. "That will do very nicely," he said. "You may wait for the psycho-computer verdict outside if you wish."

He found Nina sprawled in an anteroom chair with her long legs stuck out before her, contemplating a flashing diamond-and-emerald necklace. He said, before she looked up and saw him, "Business good, Miss Beckwith?"

To his amazement Nina began to snivel. And when he asked her what he had done to cause it she snapped angrily, "You big pig, you haven't the sensitivity to understand. Don't ever speak of it as business again. Now I'll have to bathe my eyes when I get home or they will be all swollen and horrible."

She removed her glasses and they *were* swollen. Lindsay had seen too much of allergic reactions since reaching Earth not to know he was looking at another. He was relieved when she put her glasses back on.

"Sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to disturb you."

"I know it," she replied, "but you did."

"Perhaps, if you told me—" he began. Dr. Craven chose that moment to emerge from his office.

"If you'll come back inside," he said. "There are just a few more questions I'd like to ask, Ambassador."

"Ask them here," said Lindsay. He had no desire to go back under the drier.

Dr. Craven hesitated and rubbed his chin, which was bright red again. He said finally, "Mr. Lindsay, you didn't kill your mother before you were seventeen, did you?"

"My mother died last year," said Lindsay, unbelieving.

"Incredible!" muttered the psychiatrist, shaking his head. "According to the computer you must have..." He paused again, then said, "I hope this won't embarrass you but you evidently are a man who prefers men to women. The stigmata is definite and shows—"

"Night soil!" Nina exploded her favorite expression before Lindsay could collect his wits for an answer. "I'm sorry to disappoint you, Dr. Craven, but this man's a veritable satyr. I caught him looking at my legs yesterday. Ask Maria Bergozza if you want any further proof."

"But this is impossible!" the psychiatrist exploded. "According to the computer —"

"Your computer's out of whack," Nina said calmly, and led a stunned Lindsay out of the place. She added, "You didn't deserve that, boss. Not after puffing my eyes up."

"Why not just keep your glasses on then?" he countered. They returned to their office in unfriendly silence. Lindsay sent Nina home early and took a copter across the Lake to his own place, there to nap until time for the match at the Colosseum.



He felt more at home in the UW box at the vast arena than at any time since reaching Earth. Since it was a sporting event, the eye-glasses were serried, at least in the lower, higher-priced tiers, by good looking faces, male and female, unadorned.

Someone slid into the comfortable contour chair beside him and said, "Evening, Zalen. Enjoying yourself?"

Lindsay looked into Senator Fernando Anderson's diamond-shaped raspberry glasses. He said, "So far—how about you?"

Anderson made a face. "I had a date with a gorgeous item but she put me off until later. So I thought I'd look in. Maria arranged a seat in the UW box. Otherwise I'd be watching it on vidar."

Lindsay looked up and around and discovered that the vast stadium was packed to the rafters, judging by the glowing cigarette tips that resembled an uncountable horde of frozen fireflies.

The court itself was pitch-dark, save for the lines and the net. He had trouble recognizing O'Ryan as his would-be assassin and opponent walked out. Neither player was clearly visible of feature, though shoes, shorts and racquets were luminous, as were the balls they began to hit back and forth across the net.

The only other luminous objects, save for the dim exit lights, were the betting boards. Lindsay, who had never seen one save on a vidar-screen before, asked Anderson how they worked. The senator from New Mexico was glad to explain.

"Naturally," he said, "since the results of all athletic contests are predicted on the computers, there is no betting on who will win."

"No upsets?" Lindsay asked.

Anderson laughed, said, "The last time there was an upset—in the British Australian test cricket matches three years ago—a computer investigation proved bribery and there was a hell of a stink."

"Then how do you manage to bet?" Lindsay asked.

"Simple," said the Senator. "Naturally, in case of accidental injury, all bets are void. But otherwise the betting is on the percentage of variation between the computer prediction and the actual play of the contest. There—you can see the computer line on the big board over there. The line of actual play will be red when it comes on. That way there is plenty of chance for betting on points, games, sets or match."

The man from Mars studied the predictor line for the match. It revealed that Pat O'Ryan, after a fast start, was due to slump in the second set, recover in the third and polish off his opponent, Yamato-Rau from Indonesia, in the fourth set with the loss of but one game.

"Looks like a shoo-in for O'Ryan," he said. "Right?"

"It ought to be," the Senator replied. "He's taken Yamato-Rau in six of their seven previous matches. The second time they played he had a sprained wrist that affected his volleying."

"Care to make a bet?" Lindsay asked his companion.

"Sure—why not?" Anderson countered. "Percentage of variation for game, set or match?"

"I'd like to bet on the Indonesian to win," said Lindsay quietly.



Senator Anderson looked at Lindsay sharply. He said, "You know something."

"Against the computer-prophecy?" Lindsay countered.

Anderson backed down and gave him a hundred to one on a fifty-credit bet. "You can't win, of course," he murmured, "but if you do it will be worth it."

The match began and the hum of the great crowd's conversation slowly quieted. At first it went according to the computer prophecy. Serving brilliantly, hitting crisply from either hand and smashing and volleying with deadly accuracy from all parts of the court, Pat O'Ryan held complete command of the match.

There was something hypnotic about the play—the clean *ping* of racquet strings on luminous ball, the swift flight of the ball, a streak of light in the darkness, the flash of another racquet, the long and intricate tactics of each exchange, broken only occasionally by the flash of a light that betokened an error or an ace and the resulting alteration of the scoreboard.

The red line crept in zigzag fashion along the computer board as the match progressed, veering above or below the white line of the prophecy but always returning to cross or even to cover it briefly. Big O'Ryan took the first set six games to three on a single service break against the Indonesian champion.

"Money in the bank," said Anderson in Lindsay's ear as the players changed courts following the first game of the second set, which Yamato-Rau had taken at fifteen. "Candy from a baby."

"It's barely begun," said Lindsay with a confidence he was far from feeling. He glanced at the clock above the scoreboard, saw that it was scarcely ten o'clock. Sickly he recalled that O'Ryan had told him it took twenty-four hours for his grain allergy to take effect. Lindsay had given him the drink barely seventeen hours before. He began to wish he had not bet so thoughtlessly.

The second set went to deuce twice before Yamato-Rau broke O'Ryan's service to run it out at eight-six. This was two games more than the computer had calculated and caused considerable uproar in the crowd.

"I hear you had some trouble last night," Anderson told him.

"Nothing serious," said Lindsay, wondering how much the senator knew. Dammit, he thought, he wished he didn't like the power-hungry politician.

He wondered if Anderson were behind the attempt of the morning—and if he were behind it, why? There could, he decided, be all sorts of Machiavellian motives hidden beneath that smiling face. Then the match got under way once more, and Lindsay concentrated on the play.

Once again O'Ryan seemed to be in command—just as the computer had foretold. Games went to five-two in his favor. Then, as the players changed

courts once more, the tall Irishman paused to towel off—and paid special attention to rubbing his eyes.

At that his string ran out. Four straight times his swiftest drives hit the top of the net and bounced back into his own court. He blew his service thanks to a pair of double-faults and three minutes later Yamato-Rau had taken the set while the crowd sat in stunned silence.

The fourth set was pitiful. O'Ryan played like a blind man and the Indonesian ran it out with the loss of exactly one point per game. The red line on the computer-board yawed wildly toward the bottom instead of following the white line as it should have.

"Keep your credits," Lindsay told Senator Anderson. "You were right. As it turned out I did know something after all."

"It's impossible!" cried the senator. "But it's cheap at the price—here!" He withdrew his wallet and began pulling out crisp hundred-credit notes.

"Look out!" cried Lindsay. Around them the stands had erupted into violence. While the players were shaking hands at the net, angry—and, Lindsay suspected, frightened—bettors and spectators leaped the low barriers and swarmed out onto the dark court. They hemmed the players in, driving them toward the wall directly under the UW box in which Lindsay and Anderson were sitting.

Someone threw something and Yamato-Rau stumbled and fell to his hands and knees. Swinging his racquet like one of his ancestors' shillalehs, O'Ryan charged to his rescue, pulled him to his feet, covered his retreat to the wall. There Lindsay was able to pull first the Indonesian, then the Irishman, up into the box.

"Damned fool!" said Anderson. "Getting us into a riot." But a moment later Lindsay saw the senator swinging hard at an angry customer with a fist in which his wallet was still clenched. The man made a grab for it as someone else hit Anderson over the head with a plastic bottle. He dropped across a contour-chair, letting his wallet fall from unconscious fingers.

UW police formed a protective wall around them and Pat O'Ryan, recognizing Lindsay, said, "Thanks, Ambassador. I guess I owe you a couple. If my eyes hadn't gone bad on me...."

Lindsay was tempted to admit his guilt in that matter but decided against it. He had no desire to be caught in another riot. He picked up Anderson's wallet, put it

back in the still unconscious senator's breast pocket. A white-clad interne was brought through the police cordon, knelt beside Anderson and began to make repairs.

"You'd better leave now, Ambassador," said one of the boss policeman respectfully to Lindsay when the senator had been carted away on a stretcher. Lindsay nodded. Then he noticed a slip of paper lying beneath the chair across which Anderson had fallen. It read: *rec. 10,000 cdt. 1 em. & di. neck.* It was from Zoffany, the jeweler.

"What the hell!" Lindsay discovered he was speaking aloud. He stuffed the paper in his pocket and followed the officer through a maze of underground passages out of the Colosseum. He still thought, *What the hell!* What could Nina have reported about him that was worth that sort of money to the senator?



Spy, slattern or not, Nina was efficient, as he realised when a bowing motley-clad waiter captain smilingly ushered him to a secluded table for two in a banquet niche of the Pelican. It was Lindsay's first visit to an Earthly after-dark cafe and he instinctively compared it with certain of its imitations in the comparatively small cities of his native planet.

It was sleeker, better run, far more beautiful. Its general color scheme was darkly opalescent, subtly glowing, flattering to its clients. And, of course, most of them needed flattering, at least to Lindsay's alien eyes. He noted here a pair of scimitar-shaped spectacles whose turquoise-studded rims caught the light like a pair of small lemon pies, there a harmopan-covered female face that glowed pale green in the darkness.

But even more numerous and decorative than at the stadium, the gladiators and courtesans were present, reinforced by a larding of vidar stars visiting or entertaining in the capital. And these, Lindsay admitted to himself with awed reluctance, outshone in sheer beauty and handsomeness any group of Martian humans.

They ought to, he thought. Direct descendants, figuratively if not actually, of the advertising-Hollywood beauty fetish of the previous century, they were selected almost from birth for their callings and trained rigorously from childhood on, the males to become athletes or actors, the females courtesans or actresses.

There was no race among them, for their only standards were beauty and physical fitness, no creed but achievement in their lines of individual entertainment. He caught sight of a lissome Euro-African, the classic exoticism of her flower-petal face illumined by joyous laughter beneath a glossy neo-Watusi hairdo, as she glided gracefully over the dance-floor in the arms of a hunch-harnessed and bespectacled partner.

The gladiators and courtesans alone seemed to find joy in living. Lindsay, who had seldom been unhappy in his active existence, felt his sympathies and heart go out to them. He followed the progress of a tiny Oriental model whose face was alive with good-humor as she swept past his table, her exquisite figure stressed by a glittering jeweled sheathe.

"You really should wear glasses—or else learn not to stare," said Maria, appearing from nowhere and sitting down at the table. She made amends by extending a warm soft hand to grip one of his. Though she wore her glasses and her hair was severely pulled back, he had no difficulty in recalling the fact that, unclothed, she was lovely.

"Why don't you get in on the act?" he suggested, nodding toward a pair of models emerging from the harmopan room. "All you'd have to do would be to remove your specs and harness and let your hair down."

"You're sweet, Zale," she said, pleased. Then, with a sigh, "But there's a lot more to it than that."

"You do all right that way too," he told her boldly.

She slapped the back of his hand and then, growing quickly serious, said, "Zale, I didn't ask you to meet me for that. I've got so much to ask you—so much to tell. Did you really find an assassin waiting for you when you got home last night? And did you kill him?"

"Yes and no," said Lindsay. "I did find one and I didn't kill him. In fact we parted good friends."

"You Martians..." She sighed, then said, "And I understand you have already broken two computers—this afternoon at the psychiatrist's and this evening at the Colosseum. It's the most marvelous news, darling. I've got to know how you did it."

"I'm damned if I know how I fouled up Dr. Craven's computer," he told her, "I'm

still trying to figure it out."

Her face fell. She said, "I was hoping you had something.... But never mind." Then, brightening, "But you're driving them crazy. They ran Dr. Craven's results through Elzac late this afternoon and got the same answer. The records checked that you didn't kill your mother and *I* know you're not an invert." She laughed softly.

Spurred by the erotic atmosphere, plus the dizzying speed of recent events and Maria's nearness, he said, "Let's get out of here and go to my place."

Her hand covered his again atop the table. "I wish we could," she said wistfully. "I like you *very* much, Zale darling. But this is too important. We haven't time. But what about the tennis tonight? There's going to be an investigation, of course. Won't you tell me how you did it?"

"Not until I've figured out both," he said. "I may be on the track of something or it may be sheer chance. Until I understand what happened at Dr. Craven's I'm simply not sure of my facts."

"But there simply isn't time, darling," Maria told him. "This is really what I must talk to you about. We got word today that President Giovannini is going to unveil Giac any day now."

"Decided against your sabotage plan?" he asked her.

She wrinkled her pert little nose. "What's the use? They'd simply repair it. Besides, it's much too well guarded. Zale, you're our only hope now."

He said "If I'm right, and I'm beginning to hope I am, it won't matter whether Giac is unveiled or not. In fact, it might be more effective if it were."

Maria drummed on the table with nervous knuckles. "But you *don't* understand, Zale. You don't think for a minute that the Ministry of Computation is taking this lying down. I got word less than half an hour ago that they are preparing to force your recall as an unsuitable plenipotentiary."

"They can try." Lindsay spoke grimly. This was a move he had failed to foresee, though he supposed he should have. Inadvertently he was becoming a major threat to the crockery in the china shop that was Earth.

"They can do it," Maria said simply. "Zale, these people have become absolutely dependent upon their computers. They aren't going to let their entire creed be wrecked by one Martian."

"What do you want me to do?" he asked simply.

"Come with me—now," she said, once more gripping his hand. "A group of us want to talk to you, to find out *how* you have done it."

He looked at her, found her adorable in her earnestness. He said, "And if I play guinea pig with your friends, then you and I...?"

"Of course—as soon as there's time," she told him.

"You *are* a little bundle of fanaticism, as well as of sex," he told her. "I should think at least, since you seem to have such an inside track, you could manage to get my recall deferred."

"That's just *it!*" she exclaimed bitterly. "I see everything, I hear everything—yet I can *do* nothing. Papa thinks I'm merely a foolish female creature and his attitude blocks me at every turn." Lindsay realized again how fundamentally frustrated she was, wondered if she would ever find a completely satisfactory release.

Lindsay decided to play along. "All right," he said. "Shall we go?"

"Thanks, darling," she promised. "We'd better go separately. There will be a blue copter-cab waiting outside when you leave." She leaned across the table to brush his lips briefly with hers, squeezed his hand and glided off.



He wondered, while he waited for the check, just how foolhardly he was being,

allowing himself to be summoned to a meeting of palace conspirators. It could very easily be a trap, whether Maria knew it or not. It could be a ruse to add fuel to the fire being lit under him for his recall as a *legate persona non grata* on Earth.

"You *haven't* forgotten our date, have you darling?" The voice was throatily reproachful above him and he looked up in surprise at a glittering female figure, who seemed to be clad entirely in blazing brilliants.

She was tall and blonde, her hair an ocean helmet of gold, sprinkled with gems. Her face was beautifully boned, with broad cheeks and forehead pierced by a decided widow's peak. Light green eyes slanted upward beneath brows like the wings of some tiny graceful bird. Nose, lips and chin gained fascination from the perfection they skirted but just escaped. Face, arms, upper bosom and shoulders wore the even tawny golden tan that only some blondes can achieve.

Her figure, ashimmer with gems, was lithe of waist, firmly full of breast and pelvis, moved with the enticing grace of an Indonesian temple dancer as she slipped into the seat Maria had so recently vacated.

"Sorry, your highness," he said with a look of honest admiration. "I didn't know we *had* a date."

"We have now," she stated. She laid a handbag solidly encrusted with diamonds, emeralds and rubies on the table, said to the dwarf waiter, "Bring me the usual, Joe—and give Ambassador Lindsay another of whatever he's drinking."

At any other time, Lindsay thought. He said, "I regret this more than you'll ever know, my dear, but I've got a copter-cab waiting for me outside."

"It will keep." The girl pouted prettily, then leaned toward him and said huskily, "We'll have just one here. Then we can go to my place. It's just outside of Biloxi, almost on the Gulf. We can watch the dawn come up over the water. We can—"

"Stop twisting my arm," said Lindsay, trying to keep his thoughts in focus. Who had sent *this* girl and why? And what, he wondered, awaited him in Biloxi.

He got up, tossed a twenty-credit note on the table. "This will pay the check," he informed her.

"Not so fast," said the houri, rising with him. Trying to ignore her, he headed toward the door as fast as he could.

She kept after him and his ears burned as he plunged out into the night, saw the blue copter-cab waiting with its door open at the curb. But when he tried to plunge toward it he was halted by an arm whose sharp-faceted jeweled adornments cut his adam's apple. He gasped but the girl got in front of him, waving her bag.

There was a faint popping noise as the door closed and the copter-cab swiftly and silently darted away. Stunned by the swiftness of events, Lindsay was utterly incapable of resistance when his decorative tormentor thrust him into another vehicle. As they took off he said, "I suppose this is the prelude to another assassination try."

"Night soil!" said a familiar voice. "What the hell do you think I just saved you from, boss?"



Lindsay uttered one word—a word which, he thought later, was singularly revealing as to his native flair for diplomacy. He said, briefly and succinctly, "*Huh?*"

"Listen, my fine unfeathered Martian friend." She sounded like a primary school teacher addressing an overgrown and somewhat backward pupil. "Somebody fired a glass bullet at you from that cab."

"How do you...?" he began helplessly.

For answer she turned on the copter-cab light, revealing the back of a uniformed chauffeur, and showed him her handbag. There was a slight tear in one side of its begemmed surface and, when she shook it, bits of glass fell to the floor. "Careful," she warned when he reached for the bag. "It was probably packed with poison." Then, "Can you think of a better shield than diamonds?"

He said, "*Ulp!*" Unquestionably, now that she had revealed herself, this glittering creature was his slovenly office Nina. Seeking desperately to recover what had at best been a shaky boss-secretary relationship, he said, "Where are you taking me?"

"Out of the city, boss," she informed him. "We really are going to my place in Biloxi. You're much too hot a property to be allowed to wander around loose.

Two tries in less than twenty-four hours."

"Then Maria..." he said, wonderingly.

Nina picked his thought up crisply. "We don't know whether your little playmate put the finger on you consciously or not. But she did it. Some of that sweet little crew she pals around with are desperate. They don't believe they can lick the computers and their only hope is to foment incidents that will lead to an interplanetary war. Nice kids!"

"But why pick on me?" he asked. "From what Maria said tonight I'm their one hope of beating the machines."

Nina shook her head at him sadly. "And you're the best brain our Martian cousins could send us. Here it is in words of one syllable. Maria's mob wants war. They believe they can light the powder train by arranging the assassination of a Martian Plenipotentiary.

"Meanwhile your speech yesterday and your fouling up Doc Craven's computer this afternoon, and whatever you did at the tennis tonight, have the Computer crowd screaming for your recall before you upset their little red wagon." She paused, added, "Naturally Maria's crowd wants to have you killed before you become a mere private citizen of Mars. Once you're removed from office you aren't important enough to cause a war."

"Good God!" said Lindsay as the double pattern became apparent. Then, curiously, "And just whom do you represent, Nina?"

She eyed him steadily, mockingly for a moment. Then she said, "Let's just say for now that I represent the Model's Union. We don't want any wartime austerity wrecking our pitch. Will that do?"

"I guess it will have to," he said. Then, plucking a diamond-and-emerald necklace from among the half-dozen about her throat, "You certainly didn't give poor Anderson much for his money."

"Stop it!" she snapped. "Do you want my eyes to swell up again? In a way what happened tonight was all your fault. Fernando and I were going to keep close tabs on you but you fouled me up with your beastly remark about my business at Doc Craven's and then put poor Fernando out of commission by getting mixed up in that riot at the Colosseum. I barely made the Pelican in time."

He thought of giving Nina the receipt from Zoffany's in his pocket, decided not to take the chance. So he said, "Is Fernando working for the Model's Union too?"

"Stop trying to be funny," she told him. "Night soil! You make me so damned mad. Letting that little tramp Maria nail you."

"At the time there wasn't much alternative," he said. Then, eyeing her closely, "How come you're mixed up in UW politics? I thought models were strictly for fun and games."

Nina said matter-of-factly, "I won top model rating when I was seventeen. I still hold it and I'm twenty-six now. A girl can get tired of being and doing the same thing—even in my profession. Besides, I've got brains. So I try to use them."

"How come you decided to be my secretary?"

"We drew lots and I lost," she informed him.



The copter dropped by searchlight to a flagged terrace in front of a dark cottage just off the beach. "Thanks, Bob," said Nina. "Tell the boys to stand by with their guard beams up." Then, to Lindsay, "Come on, boss, let's get out of this heap."

She walked swiftly toward the cottage, pressed something. Soft lights came on, revealing a charming simulated wood dwelling in the fine antique Frank Lloyd Wright tradition. She ushered him into a delightfully gay bathroom looking out on the water, said, "Wait here while I get this armor off."

Lindsay felt a slight qualm as he considered what being a top model at seventeen must mean. And then he thought, Why not? Certainly he had no claim on Nina's morals. He doubted if anyone had a claim of any kind on her.

She emerged, looking unexpectedly like a young girl in simple clout and cup-bra, which exposed most of her gorgeously tanned body. Her hair, innocent of jewels like the rest of her, was clubbed back simply with some sort of clip. She lit a cigarette and said, "Now—how the hell are you fouling up the computers?"

"I'm not," he told her promptly. "At least not in the case of the tennis match. I just happened to know something about Pat O'Ryan the people who fed facts to the computer didn't."

"That goon Pat!" she said. "He's so damned dumb."

"You know him well?" he asked with a trace of jealousy.

"I know him." She dismissed it with a flick of her cigarette. "It's a good thing you knew *judo* too, boss. But what did you do to him that fouled up the match?"

"While he was out cold I gave him a shot of whiskey to bring him 'round," Lindsay told her. "He didn't know about it and I didn't tell him when he informed me about his grain-alcohol allergy. So for once the computer didn't get full facts. And I had them."

For the first time Lindsay basked in a smile of approval from Nina. She said, "And then you had to mess me up at Doc Craven's so I couldn't sit in on the match."

"I'm sorry about that," he said sincerely. "You might brief me so I don't do it again."

"Well...." She hesitated. "I don't want to set myself off. It's not uncommon among us—models. You see, we're proud of our careers, not like the two-credit whores who wear glasses and harnesses. And it hurts us when someone refers to our work as business. You see, there's nothing really commercial about it. So when you—"

"But how the devil was I to know you were a model?" he asked her.

"I know," she said illogically. "But it still made me mad." Then, frowning, "But if the computer was wrong because of incomplete knowledge at the Colosseum, what was wrong at Doc Craven's?"

Lindsay said, "I'm damned if I know."

"We've *got* to know, with the president ready to put Giac to work."

"I meant to tell you about that," said Lindsay.

"Don't worry," Nina informed him. "Your table at the Pelican was wired."

"Why are you against computers?" Lindsay asked her.

She dropped her smoke in a disposal-tray, said, "Never mind why—let's just accept the fact that I am. And not for Fernando Anderson's reason either. He just wants power."

"And what do you want?"

"Me?" Her eyebrows rose in surprise. "Why, I just want to have *fun!*" She extended her arms and flapped her hands like birds. Then, again reverting to seriousness, "I wish you'd tell me everything that went on at Doc Craven's yesterday. Dammit, *his* office wasn't wired."

Lindsay went through it, as nearly word for word as he could, then did it again when no answer was quickly forthcoming. Nina listened, her perfect forehead marred by a frown. Finally she said, "Let's take a dip. It's almost dawn."

She removed what clothing she wore and Lindsay did likewise. They felt the refreshing caress of the cool Gulf water on their skins—but that was all the caressing there was. Nina, unlike Maria, was all business despite the near-blatant perfection of her charms. Back in the bathroom she said, "The only thing I can think of is that stigmata business. Why should you imagine a mark on your mother's forehead?"

"Because she had one," he told her bluntly. "It was not unattractive—my father used to call it her beauty mark."

Nina ran long slim fingers through her water-dark hair and said incredulously, "You mean blemishes are not removed automatically at birth on Mars?"

"Why, no," said Lindsay, surprised. "It's entirely up to the individual—or the parents."

"And Doc Craven asked no questions that would lead to the truth?" the girl asked, blinking. When Lindsay shook his head she suddenly grabbed him and kissed him and did a little dance of sheer joy. "It's simply too good to be true! Two computers fouled in one day through missing information!"

"You're right, of course," he admitted. "But I'm damned if I see how it does us any good."

"You idiot!" she shook him. "It clears the whole situation. It means that the computers cannot give accurate answers according to the symbolic logic tables unless they get full information. And you have proved two breakdowns in the inescapable human element—the information feeding—just like *that!*" She snapped her fingers. "It means we've got the whole computer-cult on the hip. I could kiss you again, you big goon." She did so.

"Cut it out," he said. "I'm not made of brass."

She said, "Night soil," amiably. What he might have done he was never to know, for a buzzer sounded and Nina moved quickly to a wall-talkie. She said, "All right, Bob, you say he's clean?" Then, a moment later, "Better let him in and say his piece." And, to Lindsay, "We've got company. Dmitri Alenkov—met him?"

Lindsay frowned. "You mean the Soviet *chargé d'affaires*? I met him at the reception last week. Dreadful little lizard."

"Dmitri might surprise you," she said enigmatically.

Lindsay almost said *night soil* himself in exasperation. Instead and peevishly he asked, "Is there anybody you don't know—intimately?"

She laughed. "Of course," she said, "I don't know many women."



The Soviet diplomat entered the bathroom. He was a languid mincing creature whose decadence glowed around him like phosphorescence around a piece of rotted swampwood. He said, "I hope I am not intruding."

"That depends," Nina told him. "*I'd* like to know how you traced us here so quickly."

"My sweet," said the Russian in intensely Oxford Esperanto, "you and your friend's"—with another bow toward Lindsay—"little affair at the Pelican was witnessed this evening. When the two of you departed together, heading eastward, and Ambassador Lindsay could not be reached in his apartment...." He paused delicately.

So this, thought Lindsay, was a descendant of one of the Red Commissars whose fanatic and chill austerity had terrorized the free world of a century ago. Lindsay knew something of modern Soviet history, of course. There had been no real counter-revolution. Instead the gradual emergence of the scientists over their Marxist political rulers had been a slow process of erosion.

Once computer rule was inaugurated in the North American Republic and swept the Western World, the scientists had simply taken over real power. The once-powerful Politburo and its sub-committees became obsolete.

Alenkov was stressing this very point. He said, "So you see, we, the best blood of Russia, are forced by these machines to live the lives of outcast children. Naturally we resent it. And when, after so many long years of waiting, we learn that one man has succeeded in foiling the computers where no man has succeeded before, we want to know his secret. We must have it."

Nina spoke first. She said, "Dmitri, the secret, as you call it, has been right there all along for any of us to see. It just happens that Ambassador Lindsay fell into it head first."

"Thanks for the 'Ambassador' anyway," Lindsay said drily.

Nina quelled him with a frown. "The computer weakness," she said, "lies in the human element. Now figure that out for yourself."

Alenkov's brows all but met in the middle of his forehead and his mouth became a little round O under the twin commas of his mustache. He said, "I see."

He left shortly afterward on a note of sadness, rousing himself only to say to Lindsay, "Ambassador, you are a very lucky man." His eyes caressed Nina's near-nude figure.

"That," Lindsay told him, "is what you think."

When he had departed Lindsay suddenly realized he was exhausted. He sank back in a contour chair and let fatigue sweep over him. But Nina paced the bathroom floor like a caged cat. Finally she went to the wall-talkie, gave a number in a low voice.

She pushed some sort of signal button several times, then swore and said, "Better not sleep now, boss. We're cut off."

It brought him to with a start. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"Somebody or something is jamming our communicator."

She opened a concealed cabinet, apparently part of the bathroom wall, drew from it a couple of light but deadly looking blasters, and tossed one onto the contour chair in front of him. "You know how to work one of these things?" she asked.

"Better drop the weapons," a quiet voice said from the doorway behind them. "You haven't got a chance."

The speaker wore the light blue tunicall that was the summer uniform of the Army of the Republic of North America. His cap and shoulder-boards were bright with silver lace and he held a singularly ugly little automatic weapon cradled across one forearm.

Nina and Lindsay dropped their weapons. But the girl's back was up. Her slanting eyes crackled green fire as she said, "What right have you bastards got to come busting in here without a warrant?"

"Sorry," said the officer with chilling courtesy. "As it happens we do have a warrant. Remember, Miss Beckwith, this cottage is not United World's soil." He tossed an official looking document which Nina caught, motioned a couple of his men to pick up her weapons.

"All right," she said after scanning the warrant. "What do you want?"

"Ambassador Lindsay," was the reply. "We have been ordered to ensure that no harm comes to him while he is on American soil."

"I can read!" snapped the girl. "There's going to be hell to pay over this." Then, to Lindsay, "We can't stop them now but they can't hold you. *I* can see to that. Just try to keep your big dumb blundering self out of any extra trouble till we can take steps—will you promise me that, boss?"

"I'll try," said Lindsay.



They took him to Washington—or rather to Sherwood Forest, in Annapolis, where the summer White House sprawled over and beneath its landscaped acres. To a man from Mars it was very green, very lush, very beautiful.

Lindsay's first impression of famed President Giovannini was that the famous elected leader of the North American Republic was composed mostly of secretaries. But at last one of them—the seventh or eighth—said gravely, "If you'll just step this way, please," to Lindsay and motioned for the Army officer to remain where he was. He was admitted to the bathroom of the man who had sent for him so summarily.

The president proved to be unexpectedly like some of the governors of Lindsay's home planet—incisive, unaffected, easily articulate. Physically he was stocky, of

middle height, with a round, firmly fleshed sensitive face. He wore huaraches and bright blue shorts, no glasses or distortion harness.

He waved Lindsay to a contour chair beside his own, said, "Sorry I had to have you hauled here this way. I was afraid you'd get killed if I didn't. Do you have any idea of the uproar you've caused in the past two days, young man?"

Lindsay, somewhat taken aback by the president's abruptness, said, "Well, I knew some small groups were upset but..."

"Take a look," the president told him, waving toward a quartet of vidar screens on the wall. Over one of them was the legend, New Orleans, over another, New York, over a third, Los Angeles, over the fourth, Chicago. "Those are live shots," Giovannini added.

Lindsay was appalled. Each of them showed rioting crowds and defensive police action; the commentaries cried their confusion. However, the Martian got the drift quickly enough. Apparently his recent activities had driven the neurotic Earthlings to violence.

There appeared to be two chief factions. One of them, smashing and swarming and screaming its outrage, was demanding the abolishment of computer government. The other, equally violent and even more numerous, was after a villain named Zalen Lindsay.

Seeing that Lindsay was beginning to understand what was happening, the president pressed a button that turned off all the vidar screens and voices. He said, "I could switch to any of our other cities—to cities in South America, India, Western Europe, England. They're especially bitter toward you in England."

"I'm beginning to accept the fact—if not to understand," said Lindsay.

The president said, "Lindsay, from the point of view of your planet you have done nothing improper. But from the point of view of this planet...." He let silence and a shrug of thick shoulders finish the sentence.

"I had no idea," Lindsay began, "that conditions on Earth...." He let his own voice trail off.

Giovannini finished it for him. "You had no idea people on Earth were so damned neurotic," he said, and sighed. Then, "Lindsay—call me Johnny, will you? All my friends do—Lindsay, for generations now people by and large have

been forfeiting confidence in themselves to confidence in computers.

"They have had good reason. Computer judgment has been responsible for the first true age of world peace in history. It may not be healthy but it's a damn sight healthier than war. And it has transformed this republic from an unwieldy group of states into a controlled anarchy that can be run by pushbuttons under ordinary conditions."

He paused while the Martian lit a cigarette, then went on with, "Thanks first to Sylac, then to Elzac, we learned that Vermont was happiest under its Town Meeting method, North Carolina needed its oligarchy, while my native state, California, is much better off divided in two. Texas became happy with its triple legislature—they never are happy unless they have a little more of everything down there. It was the same in other countries—Canada, South America, Spain...."

"And England?" Lindsay said softly.

The president sighed again. "England," he admitted, "is a bit of a problem—out of all proportion to its size and current importance. But the British are stubborn about their institutions. They've hung onto a Royal Family a hundred years longer than anyone else. We can hardly expect them to give up their beloved socialism so soon."

"Just as long as Mars is not expected to pay for this indulgence, it's quite all right with my people," Lindsay told him.

"What's *your* first name—Zalen?" the president asked. "Well, Zalen, I know it's a problem but we all have to give a little or crowd somebody out. Zalen, people are getting killed on account of you right now."

"I've nearly been killed a couple of times myself."

"I know. Regrettable," said Giovannini. "The UW crowd never has understood security. That's why I had to kidnap you, Zalen. Couldn't have you killed, you know. Not now anyway."

"Glad you feel that way, Johnny." Lindsay told him drily. "But hasn't it occurred to you that if people here are so easily set off it might be a good idea to knock out this computer business once and for all?"

The president puffed on his cigarette. Then he said, "Zale, twenty years ago,

maybe even ten, it could have been done. Now it's too late. Which is why the ninety-billion-dollar investment in Giac. We've got to give them an absolute computer, one that will remove forever the basic distrust of computer judgment that underlies the neuroses you just mentioned."

"Quite possibly," said Lindsay. "But I haven't actually done a damned thing myself to undermine computer judgment. The mistakes have been made by the so-called experts who have fed their machines inadequate information. Those mistakes were infantile. They suggest some sort of neurosis on the part of the feeders. They could be mistake-prone, you know."

President Giovannini chuckled again. "Of course they're mistake-prone, Zalen," he said. "Some of them, anyway. And it's getting worse. That's the real reason for Giac. Wait'll you see it!"

"You think I'm going to be around that long, Johnny?" Lindsay asked. "I understand I'm to be sent back to Mars—if I live that long."

"No, Lindsay, we need you—I'll explain in a moment. And we aren't going to let you die and become a martyr for generations of anti-computerites. We can't have that now, can we?"

"I'll go along with you on it," said Lindsay, wondering what the president was leading up to.

"Good!" The president beamed at him. "Zalen—I want *you* to be the first person to put Giac through a public test. That's how much I trust that machine. I want you, the man who has fouled up two computers, including Elsac, to try her out."



And Lindsay could only nod. The governors of Mars might not approve but after the uproar he had caused on this mission they could hardly object. President Giovannini's scheme was fully up to that renowned statesman's reputation for political astuteness. The more Lindsay thought it over the more beautiful was its simplicity.

Mere word that he was to conduct the first public test would quell the rioting. And unless Lindsay could show this mightiest of all symbolic logic computers to be fallible, computer rule would be entrenched on Earth as never before.

But what if, in some way, he succeeded in confounding the computer? Lindsay shuddered as he thought of the rioting he had so recently witnessed on the vidar-screens.

His face must have revealed his distress for the president said, "You're worn out, Zalen. Can't have that, you know. Not with the big test coming tomorrow."

Lindsay barely remembered leaving the president and being led to a sleeping chamber somewhere in the vast mansion. When he woke up it was dark and Nina was perched on the edge of his contour couch, looking unexpectedly demure in a grey bolo with white collar and cuffs.

He said, as articulate as usual when she surprised him, "Hi."

"About time you woke up," she said. "Do you know you snore?"

"I can't help it," he told her. Then, coming fully awake, "How the devil did you get *here*?"

"I walked," she informed him succinctly. She stood up, her magnificent figure silhouetted against the light. "Better get dressed—your duds are over there." She nodded toward a walldrobe. "I'll wait in the bathroom." She breezed out.

When he looked at the clothing he was to wear he sensed that Nina had selected it for him. It was a little brighter in color, a little more daring in cut, than what he would have picked for himself.

Nina was placing jewels carefully in her hair, which she had released to form a sleek halo around her magnificent head, when he entered the bathroom. A small palisade of glittering jeweled hairpins protruded from her mouth. She had shed her demure bolo and stood revealed in glittering black bodice-bra and evening skirt-clout.

After placing the last jewel in her hair she swung about and said, "There—how do I look?"

"Gorgeous," he told her.

"You look a bit dull," she said. She dug a box out of a travel-bag placed in a corner of the room. "Here," she said. "Put this on—left side."

"This" proved to be a magnificent sunburst decoration, a glittering diamond-encrusted star. He said, "What is it?"

"Grand Order of the United Worlds—a fine diplomat you are! I picked it up for you this afternoon before flying here. Just stick it on...." She came over, took it from him, pressed it firmly against his bolo till the suction grips caught hold.

He put his arms around her. She let him hold her a moment, then pushed clear in the immemorial gesture of women dressed for a party who do not want to have their grooming mussed. "Not now," she said. "We'll have plenty of time."

"Not for what's worrying *me*," he said. "Nina, I've got to put Giac through its paces in front of the whole world tomorrow. And I don't know what to ask it. I've got a blind spot where symbolic logic is concerned."

"Don't fret yourself," said the girl calmly. "I'm not worried about *you*. Not after what you've managed to do to all the other computers you've faced. Come on—we're having dinner with the president."

"Who the hell *are* you anyway?" he asked her bluntly. "You don't even look the same."

She laughed. "I should *hope* not," she told him. "After all, I could hardly grace the president's table as a mere UW secretary—or as a New Orleans top model. Come on!"

He went—and got his second shock when President Giovannini greeted Nina with a manner as close to obsequiousness as that professionally free-and-easy politician could muster. He said, "My dear Miss Norstadt-Ramirez. I do hope you'll forgive me for ordering such summary action this morning. If I'd had the slightest idea...."

"I was boiling," Nina told him. "I was just about ready to order Aetnapolitan to pull the props out from under you when the riots started. Then I blessed your shiny little head and came up here."

"I am honored," said the president.



Lindsay, walking through the proceedings in a fog, was even more laconic than a clipped British envoy who, along with a recovered Senator Anderson, was a member of the party.

"Don't take it so hard," Anderson whispered. "Nina is just about the best-kept secret in this hemisphere. If I weren't one of the few who's been in on it all along...." He shrugged eloquently.

Lindsay said nothing. He couldn't. So Nina—his fresh slatternly secretary, the courtesan of the world capital—was also Coranina Norstadt-Ramirez, the heiress who owned almost half of Earth!

He felt like a quadruply-plated idiot. He knew about Norstadt-Ramirez—who didn't, whether on Earth or Mars or the space-stations circling Venus while that planet's atmosphere was being artificially altered to make it fit for human habitation?

She was a fantastic glamorous lady of mystery, the ultimate heiress, the young woman to whom inexorably, thanks to North America's matriarchal era during the twentieth century, the control of most of its mightiest corporations and trust funds had descended.

And she was Lindsay's secretary. No wonder, he thought miserably, she had never sounded quite sincere about calling him boss. Why, she virtually owned his home planet as well. He watched her covertly across the table, poised, amused, alert, occasionally witty—and so damnably attractive. He wished he were dead.

She caught his regard, scowled and stuck her tongue out at him. He thought. *Why, you little...!*

Somehow she got them out of the chatter after dinner, got him back to his suite. There, regarding him sternly, she said, "Zale, you aren't going to be stuffy about this, are you?"

"I can't help it," he replied. "If you'd only told me...."

He read sympathy in her green eyes. But she merely shrugged and said, "Result of a lifetime of keeping myself under wraps." She sat on a contour chair, patted a place for him alongside.

She said, "I'm the richest single person there has ever been—you know that. It isn't my fault. It just happened. I didn't deserve or want or need it. But it is a hell of a responsibility. Since I'm responsible for so much it seemed important to me to know how people felt. After all we act because we feel. And thanks to a few good friends like Fernando Anderson I've been able to get away with it."

"Why me?" he asked her. "Why pick on me?"

Her expression softened. One of her hands crept into his. "One of the nicest things about you, Zale, is the fact that you don't realise just how special you are."

"I'm not so special on Mars," he told her.

"No?" Her eyebrows rose delightfully. "A quarter of a billion Martians select you as their first Plenipotentiary to the UW and you're not special? Zale, you're an absolute woolly lamb."

"There's more to it than that. I've never been to Mars. I should have, but I simply haven't had the time. So I decided the best way to find out about Mars at second hand was to work with you in some capacity that would let you be yourself."

"A filthy, underhanded, thoroughly feminine trick," he said gently and kissed her. Then, frowning into her green eyes, "But why are you so dead set against computer judgment?"

"Isn't it obvious?" she asked. "I've got a tremendous stake in this world. Kicking around it as I have I've been able to see what is happening. I'm damned if I'm going to have my property managed and run by a bunch of people who make mistakes because they're too neurotic to make decisions. Look at them!" Her voice became edged with disgust.

Lindsay said, "I see. Listen, honey, I'd like to sleep with you tonight."

She looked surprised but not displeased by his bluntness. "Of course, darling," she told him.

"How much will it cost me?" he asked her.

She froze—then her eyes began to fill and she sniffled. He said, "You know I didn't mean that. Dammit, I just wanted to show you you're a neurotic yourself."

She slapped him hard enough to tilt him off the contour chair. She rose haughtily, still sniffing. Lindsay stretched out a hand and caught one of her ankles and tripped her up. She tottered, gave vent to a startled, "Awk!", fell backward into the pool-tub.

He dived in after her, caught her when she came up, spluttering, gripped her shoulders hard. Her eyes blazed green fire at him. She said, "How *dare* you do that to me, you moron!"

He said, "If I hadn't I'd probably never have seen you again."

She collapsed into his arms.

Later—much later—as Nina was about to leave him for her own suite, he asked, "Honeycomb, what did you lose that caused Fernando to give you that necklace?"

"I nearly lost you," she replied from the doorway. "I bet him Maria wouldn't get you that night. And lost. So Fernando sent the necklace as compensation."

"Quite a large compensation," said Lindsay drily.

Nina shrugged. "Not for Fernando," she told him. "After all, I pay him enough. He's my number one political boy. 'Night, darling."



Lindsay was on the verge of a breakdown himself by noon the next day, after Computation Minister du Fresne, looking uglier than ever, had finished conducting President Giovannini's official party through the rooms and passages of Giac. If Nina hadn't been by his side during and after the swift rocket trip to Death Valley, he might have collapsed.

It was she who had removed the glittering star from his breast before breakfast in the Sherwood Forest mansion that morning. "You needed something to wear for show last night," she had told him.

"Then it's not mine?" he had countered absently.

"Of course it is," she had assured him. "But Secretary General Bergozza is going to make the official investiture after the test."

Lindsay had meekly surrendered the bauble, barely noticing. His brain was straining to recall what he could of symbolic logic—a subject that had never particularly interested him. For some reason it kept working back to Lewis Carroll, who, under his real name of Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, had been the founder of symbolic logic back in the nineteenth century, along with the renowned Dr. Poole.

About all he could remember was the following problem:

- (1) Every one who is sane can do Logic;
- (2) No lunatics are fit to serve on a jury;
- (3) None of *your* sons can do Logic.

The Universal was "persons". The symbols were: a—able to do Logic; b—fit to serve on a jury; c—sane; d—your sons.

And the answer, of course, was: None of *your* sons is fit to serve on a jury.

For some reason this, in turn, made him think of the ancient conundrum that employed confusion to trip its victims: What's the difference between an iron dog in the side yard of a man who wants to give his little daughter music lessons but is afraid he can't afford them next year, and a man who has a whale in a tank and wants to send him for a wedding present and is trying to pin a tag on him, saying how long he is, how much he weighs and where he comes from, but can't because the whale keeps sloshing around in the tank and knocking the tag off?

This time, the answer was: One can't wag his tail, the other can't tag his whale.

"None of *your* sons is fit to tag a whale—or wag a tail," he said absently.

"What was that?" Nina asked.

"Nothing, nothing at all," he replied. "Merely a man going out of his mind."

"It will never miss you," she replied brightly. But her brightness became a bit strained as the day wore on. The trip, for Lindsay, was sheer nightmare. *No sane man can wag his tail*, he kept thinking.

Even such fugitive grasping at Logical straws vanished when he saw the immense squat mass of Giac, rising like a steel-and-concrete toad from the wastes of the California desert. It seemed absurd even to think that such an imposing and complex structure should have been reared on the mathematics of the immortal author of *Alice in Wonderland*, *Through the Looking Glass* and *The Hunting of the Snark*.

For Giac *was* imposing, even to a man biased against computers from birth. Nor did du Fresne's smugness help Lindsay's assurance a bit. He explained how each of the block-large preliminary feeders worked—one for mathematical symbols, one for oral recording, a third for written exposition. Each worked simultaneously and in three different ways—via drum-memory banks, via

punched tapes, via the new "ear-tubes" that responded to sound.

Then there were the preliminary synthesizers, each of which unified in vapor-plutonium tubes the findings of its three separate feeders. Next, a towering black-metal giant filling three walls of a cubical room twenty metres in each dimension, came the final synthesizer, which coordinated the findings of the preliminary synthesizers and fed them into Giac itself.

The master machine was the least imposing of all. It stood like an alabaster stele in the center of an immense chamber arranged like a theater-in-the-round. But du Fresne, peering through his strawberry spectacles, said gloatingly, "Don't be deceived by the size, ladies and gentlemen. All but what you see of Giac is underground. It is contained in an all-metal cell one million cubic metres in volume. And it is infallible."

Fortunately Lindsay was given a half hour of final preparation in one of the small offices with which the above-ground building was honeycombed. Nina came with him—by request.

"I can't do it," he told her abruptly.

"Don't worry, darling, you'll think of something," she said. She tried to embrace him but he was too worried to respond. After awhile she said, "Why not put a direct question. Ask it if it's infallible."

"It could hardly tell a lie on itself," he replied.

"What if such a question involved destruction of part of itself in the answer?" she asked.

"It might—though I presume du Fresne and his boys have prepared it for such jokers. And anyway, what sort of question would do that? Got any ideas?"

"That's your department," she said helpfully. "You're the computer smasher of this team."

"But that was pure luck," he said half-angrily. "One can't wag his tail.... The other can't serve on a jury."

She looked alarmed. "Darling," she said, "you aren't—"

"Not yet, Honeycomb," he said, "but give me time."

"It's got to be something about this Mars-Earth problem," he went on after a long silence. "Listen: how can Mars develop if it's in the spot of the Red Queen—has to run like hell just to stay where it is thanks to Earth's dumping policies?"

The door opened and closed and Maria Bergozza was with them. She said, "Apparently this is necessary." She was holding a glass-pellet gun in her hand, pointing it at Lindsay.

He said, "Why, you—!" and moved toward her. Promptly the Secretary General's daughter pointed the gun at Nina's tanned midriff. He stopped.

Maria said evenly, "It's *you* that have done this to me, Nina. You've had all the fun while I've had to pour tea for papa at his damned functions. You've fouled up our plans with your meddling down in New Orleans. And now you've taken Zale, as you take everything else you take a fancy to."

"But you tried to kill him," said Nina. "Why should you care?"

"He would have been a martyr—and *you* wouldn't have had him," said Maria, her gun hand steady. "I know it's going to ruin me to kill you—but my whole life is ruined anyway. And this way at least I can sacrifice it for the cause."

"The cause of interplanetary war?" said Lindsay, in his turn incredulous. Hot rage rose within him, "You third-rate tramp!" He stepped squarely into the line of fire, thrust his left breast in front of the muzzle of her gun. Behind him Nina screamed.

But Maria didn't fire. Instead she sneezed—sneezed and sneezed again. Her gun hand gyrated wildly as she doubled in a paroxysm and Nina moved past Lindsay to pluck the weapon from her.

"Don't call me—*krrrashew!*—third-rate," she managed to gasp before the blonde sent her sprawling with a very efficient right cross to the chin.

Nina turned on Lindsay angrily. "You damned fool!" she almost shouted. "You might have been killed."

He looked down, felt his knees turn to water. He said, "Omigod—I thought I was still wearing the star. I remembered how you saved my life in New Orleans with

your diamond evening bag!"

He sat down—hard. From the floor Maria whimpered, "What are you going to do to me?"

Nina said, "I ought to kill you, you know, but it would cause too much of a stink. So beat it and let us think. You'll be hearing from me later. What you hear will depend on how you handle yourself from now on. Understand?"

When she had slunk out Lindsay said, "What broke her up?"

Nina dropped the gun into her bag casually, said, "Now I know you're lucky, you thin slob. You happened to stumble right onto her allergy. She can't stand being thought of as a third-rate lover. That's why she's always been jealous of me—because I have top-model rating and she could never make it. She's too damned concerned with pleasing herself to please anyone else. She flunked out at fourteen."

"Then why didn't *you* pull it?" Lindsay asked her, astonished.

"Because," Nina said thoughtfully, "I'm not conditioned to think that way. It's horribly rude here on Earth to stir up other people's allergies. As you reminded me last night, you rat, we're all people in glass houses."

"But I didn't even know...." muttered Lindsay.

"You hit it though," she reminded him. "And you're going to hit it again out there in exactly five minutes."



Lindsay was extremely conscious of the eyes of the vidar cameras upon him as President Giovannini, having finished his introductory speech, led him to the alabaster stele in the center of Giac's great central chamber and turned him over to du Fresne, whose official robe hung unevenly from the hump of his harness.

Lindsay handed the Minister of Computation the question he had prepared on paper, was brusquely told, "Read it please, Ambassador."

He cleared his throat and began.

"I am asking a question highly pertinent to the welfare and future amity of the

United Worlds," he said slowly. "More specifically to the future amity of Earth and Mars. It is a simple question without involved mathematical qualifications—but one that no computer and no man has thus far been able to answer correctly.

"It is this continued failure of computers to come up with a logical answer in the full frame of interplanetary conditions that has done much to make the people of my planet feel that no computer is trustworthy to make decisions involving human beings."

He paused, looked covertly at du Fresne, repressed a smile. The Minister of Computation was already showing signs of distress. He was shaking his head, making little pawing motions toward his glasses.

"Here it is," Lindsay said quickly. "Should the governors of Mars, whose responsibilities lie at least as much in the economic improvement of their own world as in inter-world harmony, permit their planet to receive goods which retard that economic development so that it becomes a race to maintain current unsatisfactory standards, merely because certain computers on Earth are fed false facts to permit continuation of some illogical form of government or social system—or should the governors of Mars permit their planet to suffer because of computer illogic in the name of a highly doubtful status quo on the parent planet?"

He walked slowly back to his place and sat down, almost feeling the silence around him. Nina whispered, "What in hell does it mean?"

Lindsay whispered back, "It's a bit of the iron dog and the whale, a bit of the Red Queen, a bit of the suicide idea—and something else. Let's see if it works."

Lindsay watched du Fresne, whose moment of triumph was marred by his obvious discomfort. The twisted little man was very busy running the question into its various forms for submission to the feeder units, whose mouths gaped like hungry nestlings along part of one side wall.

If du Fresne failed him....

It was a long nervous wait. Lights flickered in meaningless succession on subsidiary instrument boards and du Fresne darted about like a bespectacled buzzard, studying first this set of symbols, then that one.

Lindsay glanced at Maria, who sat huddled beside her father beyond the president. To break the suspense he whispered to Nina, "What about *her*?"

Nina whispered back, "I've got it taped. I'm going to give her a nice empty job on the moon—one with a big title attached. It will get her out of the way—she can't do any harm there—and make her feel she's *doing* something. Besides"—a faint malicious pause—"there are still four men to every woman on Luna. And they aren't choosy."

"You're a witch," said Lindsay. He snickered and someone shushed him. Looking up he saw that things were happening.

"In exactly"—du Fresne glanced up at a wall chronometer—"six seconds Giac will give its answer."

They seemed more like six years to Lindsay. Then the alabaster stele in the center of the floor came abruptly to life. A slow spiral of red, composed of a seemingly endless stream of high mathematical symbols, started up from its base, worked rapidly around and around it like an old-fashioned barber-pole's markings, moving ever upward toward its top.

"Effective—very effective," murmured President Giovannini.

Suddenly a voice sounded, a pleasant voice specially geared to resemble the voice of the greatest of twentieth-century troubadors, Bing Crosby. It said, "Interplanetary unity depends upon computer illogic."

There was a gasp—a gasp that seemed to emerge not only from the company present but, in reverse, through the vidarcasters from the entire listening world. President Giovannini, suddenly white, said inelegantly, "Son of a bitch!"

Nina laughed out loud and gripped Lindsay's arm tightly. "You've done it, darling—you've *done* it!" she cried.

"On the contrary," he said quietly, "I haven't done it; du Fresne did it." And as he looked toward the Minister of Computation that little man fainted.



But Giac kept right on. It blanked out briefly, then once more the spiral of red figures began to work its way around and up the stele. And once again the pleasant voice announced, "Interplanetary unity depends upon computer illogic."

It blanked out, began again. And this time, from somewhere in the building,

came the thud of a muffled explosion. A spiral of green symbols began to circle the stele, then a spiral of yellow. The red reached the top first and the Bing Crosby voice began again, "Interplanetary unity de—"

The green and yellow spirals reached the top. A few seconds of sheer Jabberwocky emerged from the loudspeaker, ending in a chorus of, "Illogic, illogic, illogic...." with the words overlapping.

Panic began to show itself. The president gasped and Maria suddenly shrieked. Frightened onlookers crowded toward the door. The president looked from the machine to Lindsay, bewildered.

Lindsay got up and strode toward the microphone by the stele. He shouted into it, "Turn off the computer—turn it *off*."

And, moments later, while the angry hot glow of the stele faded slowly, he said, "People of Earth, this is Lindsay of Mars. Please be calm while I explain. There is nothing wrong with Giac or any of your computers." He paused, added ruefully, "At least nothing that cannot be repaired in short order where Giac is concerned.

"I am going to ask to look once more at the question I submitted to this machine—and to the language tape fed into it by the Honorable Mr. du Fresne." He waited while they were brought to him, scanned them, smiled, said, "No the fault was not with Giac. Nor was it consciously with Mr. du Fresne. The question was loaded.

"You see, I happen to know that your Minister's belief in computers is such that he suffers an involuntary reaction when he hears them defamed. I defamed computers both in my preliminary address and in my question. And when he had to transfer to tape the phrase '—or, should the Governors of Mars permit their planet to suffer because of computer illogic in the name of a highly doubtful status quo on the parent planet?'—when he transferred that sentence to tape he was physically unable to write the phrase 'computer illogic'.

"Involuntarily he changed it to 'computer logic' with the result that the question was utterly meaningless and caused Giac's tubes to short circuit. None of the recent computer failures was the fault of the machines—it was the fault of the men who fed them material to digest.

"So I believe it is safe to say that you may rely upon your computers—as long as

they do not deal with problems affecting yourselves and ourselves. For those you need human speculation, human debate, above all human judgment!"

President Giovannini, able politician that he was, had joined Lindsay at the microphone, put an arm across his shoulders, said, "I feel humble—yes, humble—in the great lesson this great envoy from our sister planet had taught us. What they can do on Mars we can do on Earth."

When at last they were clear of the vidar cameras Lindsay grinned and said, "Nice going, Johnny—you'll have more voters than ever come next election."

Giovannini simply stared at him. His eyes began to water, his nose to run and he turned away, groping for an evapochief.

Lindsay looked after him and shook his head. He said to Nina, who had rejoined him, "How about that? Johnny's in tears."

"Of course he is," snapped Nina. "He's allergic to the word 'voters'. Night soil, but you're simple!"

Lindsay felt his own eyes water. He sneezed, violently, for the first time since coming to Earth. Concerned, Nina said, "What's wrong, darling? Have I done something?"

"If you ever say 'night soil' again..." he began. Then, "Krrachooooo!" He felt as if the top of his head were missing.

Nina hugged him, grinning like a gamine. "I'll save it for *very* special occasions," she promised.

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