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DRAGONS

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THE GREAT
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of

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SORDMAN THE PROTECTOR

BY TOM PURDOM

Illustrated by WOOD

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***He was the most powerful man in the world.
He could make anybody do anything—and yet
he was the slave of a mad criminal's mind!***

In a beer hall on the eighty-first floor of the Hotel Mark Twain fourteen men held an adolescent girl prisoner.

"I'll go up there by myself," Sordman said.

He was a big young man with sloppy black hair and a red beard. His fashionably ornate clothes covered the body of a first class Talent. Disciplined training, plus drugs and his natural gift, had made him one of the four truly *developed* psionic adepts in the world. With drugs and preparation, he could command the entire range of psi powers. Without drugs, he could sense the emotions and sometimes the general thought patterns of the people near him.

"We'd better go with you," Lee Shawn said. "There's an awful lot of fear up there. They'll kill you as soon as they learn you're a Talent."

She was a lean, handsome woman in her early forties. A lawyer-politician, she was the Guggenheim Foundation's lobbyist. For years she had fought against laws to outlaw the development of Talent.

"Thanks, Mama, but I think I'd better go alone."

Sordman, though he didn't tell her, knew that symbolically Lee saw him as the tree and herself as the rain and the earth.

"Go ahead and laugh," George Aaron said. "But you'll need big medicine to fight that fear. Lee's symbolic place in your psyche is important."

"I've thought it over," Sordman said. "I'll depend on God and nothing else."

He felt George's mind squirm. As a psychologist, George accepted Sordman's Zen-Christian faith because Sordman needed it to control the powers of his Talent.

But George himself was a confirmed skeptic.

The men up there were scared. Sordman knew he would die if he lost control. But Lee and George were scared, too. Even now, standing in the park in early morning, their fear battered at his mind.

He thought about swimming in the ocean. He made his skin remember salted wind. The real Atlantic, a mile away, helped the illusion.

It was the right symbol. He felt his friends calm.

"Let him go," George said.

"He's manipulating us," Lee said.

"I know. But let him go."

Sordman laughed. Lee bent and tore a clump of grass from the earth. "Take this, Andy."

"Thank you."

It was wet with dew. He held it to his nose and smelled the dirt and grass. Two things kept him from destruction by his own Talent. He loved the physical world and he believed in God.

"I'll call you if I need you," he said.

"Be careful," George said. "Many people need you."

"You've got status," Lee said. "Use it. You're dealing with the kind of people it impresses."



The hotel stood three hundred stories tall. Surrounded by a five-mile-square park, connected to the major coastal cities by high speed vacuum tubes, the building was a small town. Eighty-five thousand people lived within its walls.

Sordman rode an empty elevator. Through the glass sides he studied the deserted halls and shops.

They were frightened here. Murder had been done. A Talent had destroyed two men. *Lord, protect us from the malice of a witch.*

The eighty-first was a commercial floor. He got off the vator and walked down

the main corridor. A man watched him through the door of a bar. A girl in a blue kimono froze behind the counter of a pastry shop.

He stopped before the doors of the beer hall. He dropped to his knees and prayed.

Once the brave leader walked into a panicky group and it was enough to *look* calm. Now he had to *be* calm. It was not enough to square the shoulders, walk erect, speak in a confident tone. Sordman's true emotions radiated from him every moment. Those within range felt them as their own.

He drove thoughts like knives into the deepest corners of his mind. He begged release from fear. He prayed his God to grant him love for the frightened men within.

He stood erect and squared his shoulders. His bulb-shouldered morning coat was grey as dawn. He thought a well loved formula, a Buddhist prayer from the Book of Universal Worship. *All life is transitory. All people must suffer and die. Let us forgive one another.*

He roared his name and titles at the door.

"I am Talent Andrew Sordman, Fellow for Life of the Guggenheim Foundation, by Senate Act Protector of the People! By the laws of our country, I ask the right to enter."

Silence.

"I am Talent Andrew Sordman, Fellow—"

"*Go away, witch!*"

Without drugs and preparation, Sordman needed visual contact to sense emotions. But he didn't need Talent to sense the hatred in that voice.

He pictured a rough block of stone.

Using a basic skill, he kept the picture in his mind as he opened the door and planned his words.

"I have taken no drugs and made no preparation. You have nothing to fear. I'm your Protector and I've come to talk."



The beer hall was large and gloomy. The butts and ashes of the night's smoking filled its trays. Fourteen men watched him come. Half a dozen had hunting rifles.

Hunched over, weeping, a thin, dark-haired girl sat beneath an unshaded light. A shiver of anger crossed his brain.

"Kill the witch!" a young man shouted.

Lord, grant me love...

His eyes focused on the rifle bearers. One of them half-raised his gun. Then the butt clumped on the floor.

"You're bewitched!" the young man said. "I told you not to let him in."

"I've come to talk," Sordman said. "Who's the leader of your group?"

The young man said, "We don't have a leader. Here we're all equals."

Sordman studied the young man's emotions. He was frightened, but only a little more than the others. There was something else there, too. Something very strong. Sex frustration! The young man had an athletic body and a handsome, chiselled face. On his yellow vest he wore the emblem of a Second Class Technician. But even a young man with adequate finances could be frustrated. Keeping the stone in his mind, he undressed a certain actress.

He loved women and engaged in sex with lusty, triumphant joy. To him it was a celebration of the sacred mystery of life. He hoped some of this emotion reached its target.

He started talking without asking for a parley.

"Two men died yesterday. I've come to hunt out the murderer and put him away. What's the evidence against this girl?"

"We found drugs and a divining rod in her room."

"She's had a reputation for a long time."

"The school kids say she's a daydreamer."

Sordman understood their fear. Psi was a new and dangerous force. Its use demanded moral and intellectual discipline. Only a rare and carefully developed personality could encounter the anger, hostility and fear in other minds and still retain compassion and reasonable respect for human beings. An undisciplined person panicked and went into a mental state approaching paranoia. Sordman fought panic every day. He fought it with a total acceptance of human

motivations, cultivated tenderness and compassion, and a healthy ego which could accept and enjoy its own self-love.

Those things, Sordman would have said, and also the necessary grace of God.

But the most undisciplined personality could practice psi destructively. Hostile minds roamed the world. Death could strike you in a clear field beneath an open sky while your murderer lay home in his bed. No wonder they dragged a girl from her parents and bullied her till dawn.



They talked. Sordman picked his way through fourteen minds. As always, he found what he wanted.

A fat, redheaded man sat a little apart from the group. He radiated a special kind of concern. He was concerned for the girl and for his own children. He believed the actions of the night had been necessary, but he felt the girl's pain and he wasn't sure he was doing the right thing.

Above all, he was a man who wanted to do the right thing—the really right thing.

"You all have children," Sordman said. "Would you like to see them dragged out at night and treated the way you've treated this girl?"

"We've got to protect ourselves!" the young man said.

"Let him talk!" the fat man growled. He stared at the thick hands he spread on the table. "The girl has said all night she's innocent. Maybe she is. Maybe the Protector can do what we haven't done and find the real killer."

"I'm a master Talent," Sordman said. "If the killer is in the hotel, I can track him down before midnight. Will you give me that long?"

"How do we know you'll bring in the right man?"

"If he's the right man, he'll make it plain enough."

"You'll make him confess," the young man said. "You'll manipulate him like a puppet."

"What good will that do?" Sordman said. "Do you think I could control a man all the time he's in prison and on trial? If I use my Talent more than a few hours, I collapse."

"Can we hold the girl here?" asked the redheaded fat man.

"Feed her and treat her right," Sordman said. "What's your name?"

"John Dyer. My friends were about to use their belts on her."

A rifleman shuffled uneasily. "It's the only way. Mind killers use their Talent to tie their tongues and confuse us. Only pain can break their control."

"That's a fairy tale," Sordman said. "Without drugs a Talent is helpless."

"We've got the girl," John Dyer said. "She can't hurt us while we're waiting."

"*He can!*" the young man screamed. "Are you a plain fool? He can go outside and kill us all."

Sordman laughed. "Sure I could. And tomorrow I'd have to fight off an army. That I couldn't do if I was fool enough to try. You're frightened, boy. Use your head."

"You are excited, Leonard," said an armed man. He wore a blue morning coat with Manager's stars and the emblem of a transportation company. "We can wait a day. If we've got the killer, then we're safe. If we don't, then we've failed and the Protector should try."

"I'm not frightened. I just don't like Talent."

Most of the men frowned. They didn't share the prejudice. A few nodded and mumbled and shot dark glances at Sordman.

He let them talk. He stood there and thought apple pies and the brotherhood of man and the time he and his second wife spent three days in bed. And the big block of stone.

He was a high-powered transmitter broadcasting joy, good will toward men and tranquility.

In the end they listened to Dyer.

"But don't think you'll get a minute past midnight," said the young man.

"Technician, your Protector will remember."



Clarke Esponito had been a hard, quick little man in his early fifties. On the day

of his death, the hotel newspaper had published his picture and announced his promotion to Director of Vocational Testing for the entire Atlantic Region. He had lived with his wife and his nineteen-year-old son, and his wife had been a lifetime wife. Esponito had been a Catholic, and that faith still called short-term marriages a mortal sin.

For a moment Sordman wondered what it would be like to know only one woman your entire life. He loved the infinite variety of God's creation and wanted to sample as much of it as he could.

"Mylady Widow, our apologies." Lee bowed, hands before her chest, and Sordman and George Aaron bowed with her. "We intrude on you," Lee said, "only because we have to find the real killer. Other people may be in danger."

The Widow Esponito bowed in return.

"I understand, Politician Shawn."

Even with her face scarred by tears she looked lovely. From the earliest years of their marriage, her husband had been high in the Civil Service and able to buy her beauty treatments.

"Mylady," Sordman said, "I need your help for two things. We want to know who you think wanted to kill your husband. And we need your want."

"Our want?" her son asked. He stood rigidly beside his mother's chair. His clothes were rich and formal tweed.

"Do you want to find the killer?"

The boy nodded soberly. "The moment I heard of his murder, I promised to avenge him."

"John!" His mother trembled. "You were raised to be a Christian!"

Sordman said, "I want to locate the image I think was used to kill him. For that I want to hook your strong desires into my thoughts. You won't know I'm doing it. But if you're near me, I'll use your emotions."

"Your husband was a very important man," Lee said. "Would anyone gain by his death?"

"Everyone liked my husband. He was always laughing, he—" The old-young woman started crying. Her son put his arm around her shoulders.



Sordman felt her pain and winced. Death and pain were part of Creation, but he hated them and often cursed them. At times like these, he understood George's skepticism.

The boy said, "Manager Kurt didn't like him."

Mylady stifled her sobs and sat up. "Manager Kurt has been our guest every month. Protector, John's upset. He's talking wildly."

"Father told me. He said Manager Kurt didn't like him."

"Your father and the Manager were good friends."

He felt a sudden resentment in the woman. Why? The boy didn't feel as if he was lying. Maybe Esponito had been the kind of man who didn't talk about his job with his wife. But his son—who would some day be a member of his father's class—would have received a certain amount of practical advice. Perhaps Mylady resented being left out of her husband's professional life. That was a common family pattern, after all.

George felt impatient. Sordman shot him a questioning glance. "Where does Manager Kurt live?"

"In Baltimore," the boy said.

"Mylady, may we use your phone?"

"You don't take John seriously?" Mylady said.

"We'll have to ask the Baltimore police to check on the Manager. It may not mean anything, but we have to follow every lead."

"Use the phone, Protector."

Sordman and George stepped into the dining room.

"We're wasting time," George said. "They're both upset and there seems to be a family quarrel."

"I know. But Esponito's murder gives us more leads than Bedler's. Bedler didn't even have a one-month wife when he died. Lots of people knew the Administrator and might have had a grudge against him."

George clasped his hands behind his back. "We've unraveled twenty-three murders in the last four years. Judging by that experience, I'd say there are three possibilities: both victims were picked at random; both victims are in some way related; or one victim was killed to confuse the police."

"Unless we have something entirely new."

"That's been the pattern so far."

"I think we're both coming to the same conclusion."

"Find out if the murderer used the picture from the paper?"

"Mmm. If he did, Administrator Esponito was probably attacked on the spur of the moment. And we should be seeing who wanted to kill Bedler."

"What about Manager Kurt?"

"Have Lee call the Baltimore police while I try to locate the murder weapon. At least they can search his home for drugs."



George went back to the parlor and Sordman stripped to his yellow vest. From the pockets of his morning coat he removed a leather case and a tiny plastic package. Unfolded, the plastic became a thin red robe with a yellow bomb-burst on the back.

He called it his battle robe. Habit played a big part in the development of Talent. The same clothing, the same ritualized movements, helped put his mind in the proper state.

He filled a hypodermic with a pink liquid and jabbed the needle into his wrist. As the drug took effect, he knelt to pray.

"Grant me, God, the strength to bind the demons in my mind."

He stood up. At this point many Talents danced. Sordman loved to use his body, but ritual dancing made him feel ridiculous. It had been proven, however, that the Power flowed at its freest when the body was occupied, so he took three colored balls from the case and started juggling.

The balls soared higher and faster. He mumbled a hymn. His voice grew stronger. He roared his love of life at the world.



The wall between his conscious and unconscious mind collapsed. Lightning flashed in his eyes. Colors sang in his brain. Walls, floor, table, chairs became extensions of his mind. They danced with the balls between his hands. The Universe and he flowed together like a sea of molten iron.

His hands, miles from his mind, fumbled in the case. The balls danced and bobbed in the air. He laughed and unfolded his divining rod. The furniture bounced. Mylady Esponito screamed.

All Creation is a flow. Dance, you parts of me, you living things, you atoms of my dust!

He had torn Esponito's photo from a newspaper. Now he let the colored balls drop and stuck the picture on the end of the rod.

"This and that are one in kind. Servant rod, find me that!"

He stretched out the rod and turned on his heels. He sang and blanked his mind and listened to the tremors in his hands.

Stop. Back right. Now the left. Too far. Down. Correct left....

Here!

He pressed a button on the rod. A tripod sprang out. A pair of sights flipped up. Carefully he sighted down the rod, out through the window-wall beside the table, to a grove of trees in the park.



Creation roaring in his open head, divining rod in hand, he stormed out the door and down the hall. Lee and George hurried after him. The presence of their well known minds pleased him. There was George's unexpressed belief that he had "mastered" and guided the Power he feared. There was Lee's worry for him and her keen awareness of human realities. And there, too, were self-discipline, intelligence, affection, and a richness of experience and thought he expected to draw on for another forty years.

And filling the world, pounding on the walls of existence, the Power. *His* power. He, the master of the world! He who could uproot the trees, spin the earth, make the ground shake and change the colors of the sky.

He felt George's clear-eyed, good-humored tolerance. A hypnotic command triggered in his mind. He saw a Roman Caesar ride in triumph and the slave

behind him said, "Caesar, remember you are mortal."

My power? It is a gift from the Fountain of Creation. Mine to use with the wisdom and restraint implanted by my teachers. Or else I'll be destroyed by *my* power.

He laughed and rolled into a cannon ball and hurled his body through the wood.

"Andy! Andy, you're losing us!"

He picked them up and towed them with him. The girl in the beer hall cried in his heart. The fox is many hills away and the hound grows impatient.

They landed in a heap.

George said, "Andy, what the hell are you doing?"

"I brought you down in a soft spot."

"You felt like an elephant running amok! Boy, you've got to be careful. Since you were a little boy I've taught you to watch every move. For a moment I don't think you knew how you felt."

"You're right," Sordman mumbled. "That was close."

"Let's find the picture," Lee said. "Has the drug worn off?"

"Just about. The picture's over by that tree. It feels like it's rumped up."

After a minute's hunt, they found it. It had been rolled into a ball and tossed away.

"We're dealing with an amateur," Lee said. "A Talent who was even half-developed would have burned this."

Unrolled, the picture fell in half. It had been sliced with a blade.

"Let's walk back," Sordman said. "Let's talk."

They crossed a log bridge. He ran his hands along the rough bark and smelled the cool water of the stream. Most of the big park was wilderness, but here and there were pavilions, an outdoor theatre, open playing fields and beautifully planned gardens. A man could have a home surrounded by the shops and pleasures of civilized living and yet only be a ten-minute elevator ride from God's bounty.

"The fact the killer used the newspaper picture doesn't *prove* Bedler was the real victim," George said. "But it indicates it."

"Let's assume it's true," Sordman said, "and see where it leads us."

"Bedler was married," Lee said. "I remember that from our briefing."

Sordman rabbit-punched a tree as he passed it. "It was a one-year contract, and it ended two weeks ago."

"I smell jealousy," Lee said.

"The world is filled with it," George said. "I favor short-term marriages. They're the only way a person can practice a difficult art and make mistakes without committing himself for life. But about half the mental breakdowns I used to get were due to the insecurities caused by a temporary contract. One party almost always hopes the marriage will somehow become permanent."

"Let's talk to Bedler's ex-wife," Sordman said.



Her name was Jackie Baker. She was just over five feet tall and blonde. She wore glasses with green frames.

Sordman liked big women but he had to admit this little creature made him feel like swatting and rubbing.

She wore a sea-green kimono and bowed gracefully at the door.

"Citizen Baker, I'm Protector Andrew Sordman. May we talk to you?"

"Certainly, Protector. Welcome."

They entered and he introduced Lee and George. After they exchanged bows, the girl offered them some wine. She took a bottle of clear Rhine wine from the cooler and asked George to open it. There were several journals on a throw table.

"Are you a doctor, Citizen?" Lee asked.

"No, Politician. A medical technician."

They drank the first glass of wine.

"Technician," George said, "we have to ask you some questions. We'll try not to upset you."

The girl closed her eyes. "I'll try not to be upset. I hope you find whoever killed him. I'd like to find her."

The girl felt lonely. She ached with unsatisfied needs. I'd like to lie with you and comfort you, Sordman thought. I'd like to hold you in my arms and drain all the tears you're holding back. But he couldn't. His contract with his wife had six months to run and no one committed adultery any more. "When the rules are carefully tailored to human needs," Lee often said, "there's no excuse for breaking them."

"Why 'her'?" Lee asked. "Why 'her' instead of 'him'?"

The girl looked at Sordman. "Can't you just probe my mind? Do I have to answer questions?"

"I'm afraid so," Sordman said. "My Talent has its limits. I can't deep-probe everybody's mind, any more than a baseball pitcher can pitch all day."

Lee said, "Even if he could, our warrant says we can't probe more than four suspects."

"Now can you tell us why you think the killer is a woman?" George asked.



The girl held out her glass and George filled it. "Because he was the kind of man who made you want to kill him. He was understanding and loving. He made me feel like a princess all the time I lived with him. But he can't keep to one girl." She gulped down the whole glass. "He told me so himself. He was so wonderful to live with I went insane every time he looked at another girl. I knew he was shopping for his next wife." She wiggled in her chair. "Is that what you want to know?"

"I'm sorry," Sordman said. "Do you know who he was interested in before he died?"

The girl had big, myopic eyes. "Our contract ended sixteen days ago." She took a cigarette from inside her kimono. "Protector Sordman, could I just talk to you?"

"Certainly," Sordman said.

Lee and George went to a coffee house on the next floor down.

"I want to talk to just you," the girl said. "I feel safe with you. You make me feel right."

"It goes with being a Talent," Sordman said. "Either we like people and let them

know it or we crack."

"I know it's all right to tell you things. I love Joe. I broke the rules for him. I didn't avoid him for three months the way you're supposed to. I went everywhere I knew he'd be. I had to see him."

Sordman stroked his beard. Mentally, he cuddled her in his arms and murmured comfort to her.

She hunched her shoulders and wrapped her arms around her body.

"Just before our marriage ended, I found out he was seeing Raven English as much as he could. He didn't break the rules. But when we went to dances he always danced with her once or twice. And she and her husband used to meet us in bars. After the contract expired, he couldn't see her much because she and her husband have another six months to go. But there was a dance last week and I saw the two of them disappear into the park. Raven's husband hunted all over for her. He looked horrible. I pitied him."

"Who's Raven English?"

"She's a sadist. I know she is. She's just the type to do this. She likes to play with men and hurt them. Her poor husband is a nervous wreck. I know she killed Joe, Protector. She hates us!"

He stood up. The girl watched him with big eyes. He put his hand on her head.

"Sleep is a joy," he said.

Unprepared, he couldn't have done that to many people. But she was a woman, which added to his influence, and totally exhausted.



He got off the vator and looked around for the coffee house. Dozens of people wandered the halls and the shops. As he walked down the hall, some of them looked away or got as far from him as they could. Others ignored him or found his presence reassuring or studied him curiously.

A fat woman in a black kimono walked toward him. She had one hand on her hip and her eyes were narrowed and hard. Sordman smiled. He felt her fear and distrust, and her determination not to let such emotions conquer her.

"Good afternoon, Protector."

"Good afternoon, Citizen Mother."

He felt her triumph and her pleasure with herself.

His fellow humans often made him gawk in wonder. Some people say we're psychic cripples, he thought. And maybe we are. But we do our work and we enjoy ourselves. And we do dangerous things like putting bases on Venus and falling in love. Surrounded by death and danger, crippled though we are, we go on.

He swelled with feeling. People smiled and glanced at each other or hid shyly from the organ chords of his emotion.

An old man stepped in front of him.

"Monster! Freak!"

He was thin and perfectly dressed. Sordman stopped. God of Infinite Compassion, this is my brother....

"They ought to lock you up," the man said. "They ought to keep you away from decent people. Get out of my head! Leave me alone!"

People stared at them. A small crowd gathered. Lee appeared in the door of the coffee house.

"It's all right," Sordman told the people. "It's all right." He started to go on.

The man stepped in front of him. "Leave me alone, freak. Let me think my own thoughts!"

"Citizen, I haven't touched your mind."

"I felt it just then!"

"It was no more than I could help. I'm sorry if I've hurt you."

"Go away!"

"I'm trying to."

"Murderer! Mind witch!"

He was faced with a strong mind that valued its independence. Anything he did would be detected and resented.

"Citizens," he said, "this man deserves your respect. No matter what a man does, he's bound to offend someone. This Citizen values his privacy—which is good—and therefore I make him angry. I hope the good my Talent lets me do outweighs

the bad. Forgive me, brother."

He stepped to one side. "Leave him alone," someone said. "Let the Protector work."

"Leave him alone, old man."

"I'm not an old man."

"No, you're not," Sordman said. "I admire your courage." He walked on. Behind him the old man shouted curses.

"Are you all right?" Lee said.

"Sure. Let's go in and sit down."

There were just a few people in the coffee house. Sordman ordered and told them what he had learned.

"I wish you could probe everyone in the building," George said. "All we get is gossip."

"The husband of this Raven English has a motive," Lee said. "Why don't we visit her?"

"I think we should." Sordman drank his coffee. "Citizen English herself might have killed them."

"I doubt it," George said.

"It all sounds like a lot of talk," Sordman said. "But we have to follow it up. This business is nothing but wearing out your legs running after every lead. If your legs are strong, you can run anybody down."

They finished their coffee and cigarettes and trudged out.



Raven English, one-year wife of Leonard Smith, did not meet them at the door with gracious bows. Instead, a wall panel by the door shot back. They stared at a square of one way glass.

"Who are you?" a girl's voice said.

"I'm Andrew Sordman, your Protector. I come on lawful business. May we enter?"

"No."

"Why not?" Lee asked.

"Because I don't like witches. Keep out."

"We're hunting the killer," Sordman said. "We're on your side. I've taken no drugs and made no preparations. You don't have to be afraid."

"I'm not afraid. I just don't want you in my home."

"You have to let us in," Lee said. "Our warrant gives us entry into every room in this hotel. If we have to break the door down, we can."

"I hope we don't have to break the door down."

"You're getting fat," George said. "You need the exercise."

"You won't break in," the girl said.

Sordman crossed the hall to get a good start. "I'm about to, Mylady." His shoulder filled the doorway behind him. This looks like fun, he thought. He liked to feel his body working.

The door opened. A dark-haired, slender girl stood in the doorway. Her skin was brown and her lips were pink, unpainted flesh. She wore a red kimono.

"All right. Come in."

"Gladly," Sordman said.

It was a three-room apartment, with the kitchen tucked into one wall of the parlor. A painting stood on an easel by the window. The window was a shoulder-high slit and from it, here on the hundred and forty-first floor, he could see across the park to the beach and the rolling Atlantic.

God grant me self-control, he thought. If this is the killer, grant me self-control. He made his savage thoughts lie down and purred at the world.

"I'm sorry we have to force our way in," he said. "And I'm sorry you don't approve of Talent. But please remember two men have died and a little girl may die, too. There are lots of panicky people in the Mark Twain. We've got to find the killer soon and you can help us."

"Why bother me?" the girl said.

"This is awkward," Lee said. She stood erect but looked past the girl. She felt embarrassed. "Someone told us you and Bedler were seeing each other."

"Oh, quit being prudish," George said. "These things happen all the time." He turned to the girl. "We were told you and Joe Bedler were making plans to get married when your present contract ends."

"That's a lie!"

Sordman laughed in his belly. No matter what the rules were, few women publicly admitted they had broken them. By the standards of the period from 1800 to 1990, the whole marriage system of the Twenty-First Century was immoral; but there were still prudes. And women still preserved the conventions.

"Who told you that?" Raven English said. She frowned. "Was it that Jackie Baker?"

"Why her?" George asked.

"Because she's a logical person for you to talk to and because it's the kind of thing she'd say."

"Yes," Sordman said.

"She ought to see a psycher! And that's why you came?"

"We're not accusing you," Sordman said. "But we've got to follow every lead."



The girl swore. "Why would I kill Joe? Why are you all suspicious? That's why I hate Talents! All you've done is make everyone suspicious. Everybody's afraid of everybody else."

"Are you an artist?" Sordman asked.

"What?"

"Are you an artist?"

"What's that got to do with it? No, I'm not. My husband paints."

He felt her stall and evade. She would grab at any subject to distract them. He decided he would let his mind probe at random.

"Is he a professional painter?" Lee asked.

"No, he's an engineer. They wouldn't let him go to art school. He's trying to teach himself." She shrugged and ogled the ceiling.

Her emotions said, Men are like that.

"What does your husband think of Talent?" Sordman asked. "Does he share your prejudice?"

"Didn't you meet Len?"

"Where?" He stroked his beard. "Is he the Len downstairs in the beer hall?"

"Of course!"

"I'm afraid I didn't make the connection."

He felt two other minds run like hounds down the same trail.

Lee studied the painting. "Why does your husband hate Talent?"

"Is this a survey?"

Lee grinned. "I'm the lobbyist for the Guggenheim Foundation. Asking that kind of question is a reflex."

The girl walked around the room. She looked out the window and stretched. Sordman bellowed lust at her flanks and the long curve of her hips.

"Why do men do anything?" Raven yawned. "When he was in Voc school some kid took him in the back room and showed him some tricks. Maybe that did it. Is there a psycher in the house?"

"There is," George said. "Is Citizen Smith an aeronautical engineer?"

"You could say so. He works on instruments for space labs."

"That's funny." George stared at the sun flashing on the far-off ocean. "I remember I felt bitter once because I couldn't be a space engineer. I wanted to build rockets and ride to the planets. But the Voc people told me I was too weak in math. So I became a healer of the psyche and I learned my love for rockets was a hunger for power. But still I love the brutes and now I'm an old man I still sometimes wish I'd been an engineer."

"That's too bad," the girl said politely.

"Yes. I suppose your husband feels that way about art?"

"He gets drunk about it sometimes."

"Double motive!" Sordman said.

"One conscious," George said, "plain jealousy. The other half-conscious—"

resentment. Nobody kills at random. There's always a reason why he took these lives instead of others."

"Plus a lot of self-pity," Lee said, "and I think his wife despises him."

"What are you talking about?" Raven said. "What did you say about me?"

"We think we've got a suspect," Sordman said.

"I didn't do it!"

"I'm going to probe your husband."

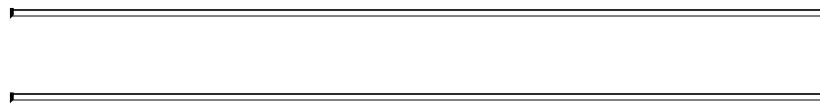
"My husband hates Talent."

"We have to hurry," Sordman said. "If your husband's innocent, I'm sorry. We're not saying he's guilty. But I have to examine him."

At the door he paused and thought, God of Infinite Compassion.... The girl sat down and stared at the wall.



Many drugs activate the psi powers. The commonest, available in any drug store, is a pill of codeine and half a dried peyote bean. Leonard Smith had both in his pocket when he ran out the side door of the beer hall.



Sordman swore wildly. The girl screamed. The men, the hunters of witches and killers, either froze or shouted and ran to the door. Only John Dyer and two others ran shouting down the hall.

Sordman ran to the door and saw Smith leap into the elevator. He grabbed a wall phone and dialed the Manager's office.

"We've got the killer," he shouted. "His name's Leonard Smith. He's a young man, dark, wiry, good looking, and he's on the elevator going down."

"We'll get him!"

"Leave him alone! I saw him swallow something as he left. I think he's drugged."

Clear the lobby but watch him from hiding. I'll get him before he goes far."

John Dyer trudged back to the beer hall. "Give me your rifle," he told an armed man. Before the man could say anything Dyer snatched the rifle from him.

"All right," Dyer said. "Who's going with me?"

"Hold on," Sordman said. "Where are you going?"

"After Smith."

"I'm going after him. Let him go and I'll have him out cold before an hour's up."

"There isn't anything a rifle can't stop."

Sordman understood. These men were afraid of Talent. But some, like Dyer, had to fight that fear. They had to prove that intelligence and the technical power organized society gives individual men were superior to Talent.

"I can't stop you," Sordman said. "But listen to me. Smith has to be captured alive. The man is insane. He's no more a villain than you or me. He just tampered with a force he couldn't control. You might stop him with a bullet but you'll have to kill him to do it."

"He killed two of us," a man said.

"He's drugged. He can hide and kill you from a distance."

"So can we," Dyer said. "That's what we do with rifles."

Sordman ran his fingers through his hair. "Stay under cover then. And if I get him pacified, let him live."



The wall phone buzzed.

"Sordman."

"This is the Manager. He stole a hatchet in the leisure store. He's out in the park."

"Did anybody try to stop him?"

"I cleared the place out."

"Some of your tenants are going after him. Don't let anybody else join them. I

wish myself they wouldn't go."

After he hung up the three of them went up a floor and rang the buzzer of a one-tenant apartment. As politely as they could, Lee and George bundled the occupant out.

"I wish you'd let the state police capture him," George said.

"I've got to get to him before they kill him," Sordman said.

"Andy, there are limits to what you can take! Smith has gone berserk. You connect with an insane man and you may shatter all over the place."

Sordman stroked his beard.

"Let him go," Lee said. "Can't you feel he has to do this?"

"Yes, but I won't admit it. I trained you, Andy. You're my life's work. I don't want you to wreck yourself."

Sordman nodded soberly. "I know, George. I'll take care of myself." He thought tender thoughts and tried to make them feel how much he loved them.

"Let's go," Lee mumbled. "Come on, George."

He closed the door gently. The window of the apartment overlooked the park. He stared at the thick trees and wondered where Smith was running under that green roof. Then he turned to the picture phone and punched out a number.

The screen lit. It was in full color, praise God.

"*Andy!*"

His wife smiled when she saw him. She was a big girl with long breasts and full thighs. She wore a dark kimono.

She bowed. "Good afternoon, Husband."

"Good afternoon, Wife." He pressed his palms together and returned the bow.

"Why are you calling, Andy?"

"Because I love you. And I want to ask you a favor, Tina."

"What, Husband?"

"Will you undress for me now?"

"Andy! My, my, my."

He explained the situation to her. "Be careful," she said. "I love you."

"I'll be careful. But I've got to be aware of myself as a physical being. You understand."

She smiled. "May I take my time?"

"Not too long."

She was an uninhibited girl and took great pleasure in displaying herself. Her skin was pure white and her stomach smooth and softly rounded. He could feel the weight of her breasts on his palm.

"God is good," he said.

"Thank you."

His glands flooded his body. His body ached to stroke, squeeze, kiss, penetrate.

"You'd better go," he said. "Before I break the screen down."

She bowed. "Live with God, Husband."

"Live with God, Wife."



The screen faded. He put on his robe and jabbed the hypodermic into his wrist. Then he knelt to pray.

He did not pray for power. Intelligence and hard work could give him that. He prayed for mercy, compassion, recognition of his own flawed nature. He prayed for courage and the end of fear.

The balls danced between his hands. He sang the Song of Praise, the love song to the world. *Gloria mundi*. Glory in the world, glory in the flesh, glory in the flow of life. Creation is a flow and man a bubble bouncing on the flow. Bubble that will burst but bubble that is. Bubble that feels, strives, blends with other bubbles.

Bubble that can fill Creation!

He roared at the walls of existence. His mind yawned and stretched and came awake. He prowled across the woods and parks. Gigantic, he gazed at the mortals who stumbled through the shaded tunnels of the world. These are such as me. These share my doomed existence.

And that one? That one lying in the brush with an axe? That one, preparing to kill, clawing since he was a baby at a world that torments him?

That also is me.

Smith rose to his knees and swung the axe. John Dyer crumpled with a severed spine. The axe swung twice and two men fell. The hunters dropped to their bellies. Rifles cracked. Bullets sang in the grass.

Now they knew they had to kill Smith or die. Now they felt no mercy.

Sordman hovered over them. What he feels, I will feel. His hate will be my hate. His anger mine. His hate must be absorbed in great compassion, in tenderness and rationality. *Or I will be destroyed with him.*

In the room the balls spun and whirled. He lay prostrate on the floor, the yellow bomb-burst on his back. He was afraid. His weakness was naked. He had always known he would someday meet a personality he could not forgive. When that day came he would shatter and flee, like Smith, to any refuge he could make.

"Show your heads! Show your heads and I'll kill you!"

A bullet smashed into Smith's leg. He screamed and flailed the axe. Shouting curses and threats, he crawled through the brush. The hunters crawled after him.

Sordman located Smith. He shuddered as malice bit the edges of his mind. He sang a long note of praise to life.



Then he opened his mind.

Listen, Smith. I'm your friend. I am Sordman, the Protector of all, of the hunters and the hunted. I come in love. I am Sordman, small brother of the Lord, bubble in the Fountain of Creation....

Once men had thought a Talent would fell his opponents with a blast of mental energy. It wasn't that easy. Sordman had to find the cause of Smith's hate. He was no rifleman, hurling a blast of energy, but a surgeon probing for the source of a disease.

Two minds tangled. Sordman bore the light of himself into darkness.

—I'll kill you, too. Get out of me. Get out!

Snarl, growl, slash. Two minds linked as one. Sordman fighting Sordman, Smith fighting Smith.

Aaaaaaaah!

He doubled up on the floor and hugged his knees. The Protector wept and sobbed. Hate! How he hated hate. How he wanted to kill the haters. They clawed his brain, they tortured every moment, and yet he had to love them. *Love them!*

God, grant your servant strength. Be merciful....

He had lost his contact but he had to go back. Weak man or not, he had to return or Smith would die.

—I'll kill them all.

He saw the hunters creeping after him. He felt his body's dirty sweat and the blood draining on his leg. Run, said his belly. A hunter fired. He saw a blue morning coat in the bush and felt the gun pointed at his head. Kill!

The axe swung back in his hand. He remembered the swift stroke, the hard resistance of the spine, the joy of having struck and won. I never got to win. They always held me back. My hands wouldn't paint what I told them, my mind wouldn't reach where I wanted to go. When I loved Raven she didn't let me out, she denied me, she made me hold my feelings back. But now I strike! Now I swing an unfettered arm.

Sordman knew what he was joined with now. Smith was what the psycher Talents called an unopened personality. A mind totally absorbed in what things meant to itself. A mind which had not learned to feel the pain and joy of other minds.

Smith's arm had stretched all the way back. He had to act now or someone else would die. He was Sordman the Protector, one of the four best Talents in the world and his powers were running like a river at flood. All he had to do was make the right move.

He linked Smith's mind with the mind of the rifleman.



The man in the blue morning coat was forty-three years old. He worked in New York City, the assistant manager of a transportation line's local office. His second wife had grown pregnant by accident, which under law meant they were

automatically married for life. They had been married for fifteen years and still didn't know each other. His two sons thought he was a spineless old fool who slept all the time and couldn't give them what they needed. He didn't like his job but he knew it was all he would ever do, an exact definition of his limits. Alone in his house, imprisoned by his work, he smoked and slept and ate without appetite.

But now he aimed his rifle and thought, I'll kill the witch. That will be something. I'll know I did that.

The two minds were one. Each knew the other's pain, the other's fear. If one died, the other felt his death.

Each recognized the other man's hunger, his frustration, his imprisonment within his body and the limits of his life.

Sordman felt the weight of their lives. He gathered in the strength he called a gift. His voice and mind, his total self, sang the Liturgy of Joy. He gave his feelings and thoughts.

The axe dropped.

The finger squeezed the trigger and the bullet cut the bark from a tree.

His thoughts became a lullaby, a drowsy murmuring of peace and healing sleep.

George and Lee ran from the woods.

"Andy! Don't shoot them. Andy!"

"Where?"

—Here.

He wiggled the leaves and branches of the brush.

—Here!

They stood over the unconscious men. The hunters crept from their hiding spots and joined them.

"We'll bring him in," George said. "A psycher team is on the way."

—Good.

Lee said, "You feel tired, Andy."

—I think they get harder. They take more out of me. Lee?

"What, Andy?"

—It'll never end, will it?

He was a young man speaking to an older person. He had seen much of humanity, but there were things only years could tell.

"Probably not. Is it too much?"

—No.

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