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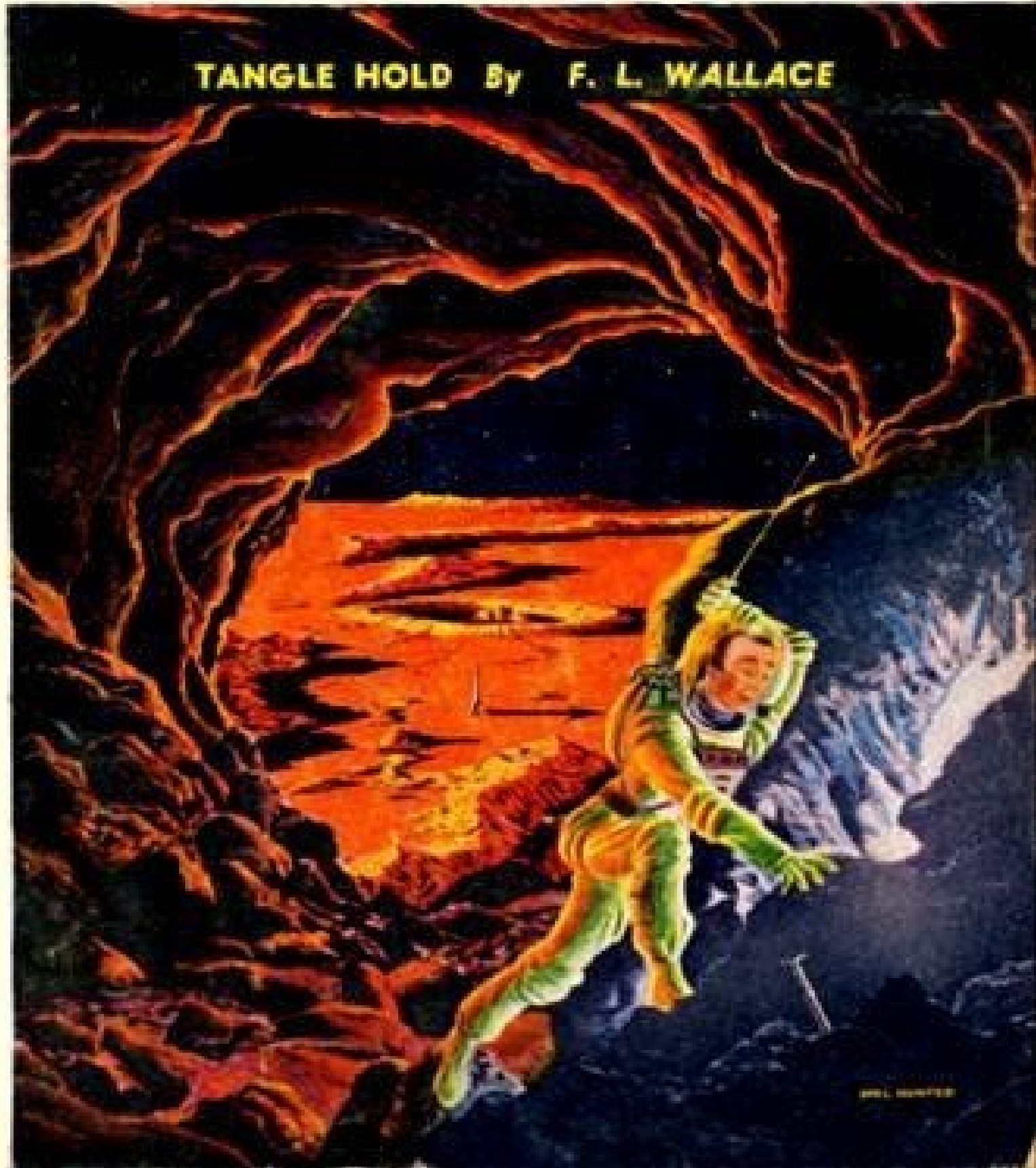
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TANGLE HOLD By F. L. WALLACE



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TANGLE HOLD

By F. L. WALLACE

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Jadiver objected to being the greatest influence for good on Venus ... because what was good for Venus was bad for Jadiver!

Somebody was wrapping him in a sheet of ice and spice. Somebody was pulling it tight so that his toes ached and his fingers tingled. He still had fingers, and eyes too. He opened his eyes and they turned in opposite directions and couldn't focus on what they saw. He made an effort, but couldn't keep it up and had to let his eyes flutter shut again.

"Rest. You're all right." That's where he got the idea of ice and spice—from that voice.

"Mmmm," said Jadiver. He tried to raise his hand, but it wouldn't move. It was good advice—to rest; he couldn't do otherwise. "What happened?" he whispered.

"You had an accident. Remember?"

He didn't. It was his mind playing tricks, of course. It couldn't have been pleasant if his memory didn't have access to it.

"Mmmm," he evaded.

"Go to sleep. We'll talk later."

He thought he felt something shoved deep in his flesh, but he may have been wrong. In any event, the light that filtered through his closed eyelids faded away and the external world, of which there wasn't much in the first place, vanished completely.

Later, he awakened. How much later, he didn't know, but it may have been days. The oppressive languor had left him and he felt capable of movement. To prove it to himself, he turned his head. He was alone, and he thought he recognized where he was. He didn't like it.

There was an odor in the room, but this time it was the kind that lingers in all hospitals. He tried to sit up, but that was more than he could manage. He lay there a long time, looking through the heavily reinforced window; then someone came in.

"You'll live," said the voice behind him—the same voice.

"Think so?" He hadn't intended to turn around, but the spice was back and he wanted to see. It was only the fragrance she wore—there was none in her voice or demeanor. That was still ice.

When she sat down, he could see that her hair was a shade of copper and the uniform she wore a dark green. She was not a robot and therefore not a nurse or a guard. It was logical to assume she was a doctor, police variety—definitely the police.

Thadeus Jadiver sighed. "What am I in for?"

"You're not in for anything. Maybe you should be, but that's not my business," she said in a flat voice. That was the only thing about her that was flat; the rest curved nicely even under the uniform. "This is an emergency as well as a police hospital. We were close, so we took you in."

That was reassuring. Jadiver tried to smile as he lifted a curiously bandaged arm. "Thanks for this."

"I'll take only half the credit. That was a combo job."

He was going to have difficulty if she insisted on using technical slang. "What's a combo job?"

"Just what it sounds like. A combination robot-human surgeon. All hospitals use them. The robot is more precise and delicate, but it lacks the final margin of judgment that's supplied by the human. Two of us work together in critical cases."

He still couldn't remember what had happened, but it would come back in time. "I was critical?"

Her mouth was firm and her cheekbones a trifle too broad. Just the same, the total effect was pleasing, would have been more so with a little warmth stirred in. "To give you an idea, you'll notice that every square inch of your skin is now synthetic." She leaned over and took his hand, which was encased in a light spongy cocoon. Expertly, she peeled back the end and exposed the tips of his fingers.

Jadiver looked, then turned away. "Cellophane," he said. "A man can be born, live, die, and be shoveled away; begot and beget, completely untouched by human hands."

She looked blank at the mention of cellophane. Probably didn't know what it was, thought Jadiver. So few people did any more.

"Don't worry about it," she said. "Your skin's transparent now, but in a few days it will be normal."

"That's nice," said Jadiver. "I suppose it would be educational, but I'd just as soon not be an anatomy model of the first layer of the human body."

She stood up and managed to work up a creditable imitation of interest. "We had to peel off the burned part, and when you were completely raw, we fitted the synthetic skin to your body. Over that we sprayed the bandage. New body cells form with this synthetic substance as the matrix. You'll gradually return to normal or better. Your new skin may be more resistant to corrosive chemicals and microbe invasions."

"Glad to hear it," said Jadiver. "Superman."

For the first time, she smiled. "Don't count on it. This stuff is too new for us to know how it reacts in all cases." She turned around at the door. "In a few days I'll take off the bandages and you can go home. Meanwhile, you know what to do if you need anything."



Jadiver lay there after she left, thinking. He hadn't asked what the accident was and she had assumed he remembered. He ought to, but he didn't. He frowned and

tried to recall the last thing he had been doing.

They had removed his skin and replaced it with a synthetic substance. Why? Take it from there and work back.

He stirred uneasily. The last he remembered, he'd been in his apartment. That didn't help much; he was often there. He shook his head. He was in the apartment, preparing to leave. That meant he must have used the autobath. That was it. The picture came into focus:

He touched the door of the autobath and it swung open. He went inside. "Shave, massage, bath," he ordered.

The mechanism reached out of the wall to enfold him. He leaned back. It gripped him, not comfortably, as usual—but tightly. He squirmed, but when the grip didn't adjust, he relaxed.

The autobath rumbled familiarly and a jet of water spouted up from the floor. It was icy cold and Jadiver shivered.

"You didn't listen," he said firmly. "I asked for the bath last."

The autobath paid no attention. The top and side jets turned on. The force was greater than he had ever experienced. It was difficult to breathe. The water got hotter rapidly, and then, seconds later, steam blew out of the nozzles.

Jadiver shouted and tried to struggle free. The autobath did not let go. Instead, it ground at his muscles with hard inflexible hands. Here and there his skin began parting from his flesh. The autobath kept on kneading him. It was when it reached for his face—Jadiver remembered very clearly—he lost consciousness.

He lay on the bed in the hospital, sweat soaking into the bandages. He could understand why he'd had a memory block—being boiled alive was frightful enough for his mind to repress.

It was not only the accident that was disturbing, but the manner in which it occurred. He knew robot machinery and the principles used in the construction of it. The autobath was one of the best—foolproof, if there was such a mechanism.

Someone had tampered with it—object: *to try to kill him*.

That was one possibility and he could face it with equanimity.

There was also another, but he didn't like to think about that.

He looked out over Venicity. From his apartment, the topography resembled that of a lunar crater. In the middle was a giant concrete plain, the rocketport. From the edges of the rocketport, the size of the buildings increased gradually; at a third of the distance from the center, they were at maximum height; thereafter, they decreased gradually until one and two story structures nibbled at the surrounding forest.

Five million people and in ten years there would undoubtedly be seven, a sizable metropolis even for Earth. That didn't mean that the population of Venus could compare with the home planet. Venus was settled differently. Newcomers started with the cities; only later did they venture out into the vast wild lands. Venus was civilized, after a fashion, but it wasn't a copy of Earth.

The screen glimmered at his back. "Thadeus Jadiver, consulting engineer?"

He turned. "That's right. Can I help you?"

The man on the screen closed one eye slowly and opened it again the same way. "This is Vicon Burlingame. I've been doing some experimenting and am now at the point where I can use some technical assistance."

"I'm not sure. I've been in the hospital until this morning. I think I need a checkup."

"I called while you were gone," said Burlingame. "I know about the hospital; however, I don't think my work will be strenuous. Perhaps you'd come over and we'll discuss it."

"I'll take the chance I can help you."

"Good." Vicon Burlingame gave him the address before fading out of the screen.

Jadiver dressed slowly. Weak, but better than he expected. Physically, his recovery was far advanced. It wasn't he who was taking a chance, of course; it was Burlingame. Jadiver had warned him and if Burlingame was willing to risk it, that was up to him.

Before he left, Jadiver checked his office. A few calls in the last week, but nothing important. It was a routine check and he gave the robot routine instructions.

A tiny thing, that office, located on the ground floor of a building fronting a principal thoroughfare. A space large enough for a client to sit down, if one should come, which wasn't often. Behind the desk was the upper half of a robot. Tiny though the office was, it was not inexpensive, and the business that passed through it was barely enough to pay the rent.

There were other advantages in maintaining it, though. As long as he had a business address, he was spared certain legal embarrassments.



Five minutes later, he was greeted by Vicon Burlingame. "Come in." Jadiver did so.

Burlingame silently studied Jadiver closely. "Maybe you're tired," he said at last. "A little sun would relax you."

"It might," agreed Jadiver. "This cloudy Venus."

"It's not so bad when you're home," said Burlingame. "But public places are bad for ultraviolet." He indicated the next room. "The lamp is in there."

Jadiver went in and began to remove his clothing. Before he finished, a little man came in, nodding silently at Jadiver. Without comment, Jadiver stood in front of the machine. While the little man methodically examined him, his clothing disappeared.

The little man looked up at the end of the intensive investigation. "You'll do," he said.

"Clear?" asked Jadiver.

"Clear as the atmosphere of the Moon. We were afraid they'd planted you while you were in the hospital, but we decided to take the chance."

For the first time since the accident, Jadiver felt relaxed. "Thanks, Cobber. I was hoping to contact someone to check it for me."

Cobber shrugged. "Who can you trust? If you go to a doctor good enough to find a gadget that small, what is he? A high-powered professional and he's got his problems. He sees something inside and smiles and says you're fine and charges you a fat fee. Even if he tells you that you've been planted, there's nothing you can do. No one's going to cut it out—not while the police can hear everything through it."

"Thanks for taking the chance."

Burlingame came in smiling confidently. "Now we can talk," he said. Behind him were three other men Jadiver had never seen.

"Where are my clothes?" Jadiver wanted to know.

"They'll be ready," promised Burlingame. "The police have got all kinds of cute tricks, only we don't fall for them. We're systematic."

They were that, decided Jadiver, and something more. They had to be to survive so long. Burlingame was good.

A gamin's face peered through the doorway and one hand thrust his clothing into the room and waved it. "Here. They didn't try to conceal anything." She sounded disappointed.

Jadiver dressed as Burlingame relayed the clothing to him. The gamin wrinkled her nose and disappeared. By the time Jadiver was completely dressed, she came back with refreshments.

They sat down at the table. "I want faces," said Burlingame, across from him—"five faces."

Jadiver looked around. There were six. "None of my business, except in a professional way, but who do I leave out?"

"Cobber. We have other plans for him."

It wasn't a good idea to pry. He had to know the human material on which he was expected to work, but it was safer not to know what they were planning.

He tapped his glass. "What kind of faces? Soft faces, hard faces, space faces? And do you want anything else?"

"Society faces," said Burlingame. "Emily wants to wear a low-cut gown. The

rest of us just need faces."

"Real low," the gamin insisted, wriggling.

"Society," mused Jadiver. "I always did think it was better to rob the rich ... like Robin Hood."

"Sure," Burlingame said.

Jadiver tilted the glass. "Especially since the poor don't have much money."

"That has something to do with it," Burlingame cheerfully agreed.

Cobber broke in. He was a little gnarled man, older than the others. "A point, Jadiver. The poor don't have much money, but there's so many more of them. You can actually be more successful robbing them. But you have to keep at it every day in the year, and then you don't call it robbery; you say you're governing them."

"Don't have that kind of stamina," said Burlingame.

"A good point, Cobber." Jadiver leaned on the table. "I don't want specific information, but how can you make robbery pay off these days?"



Burlingame looked at him astutely. "Considering it yourself?"

Jadiver shook his head. "Intellectual curiosity. I'm doing all right in my own line."

"It's a theory," said Burlingame. "You can't touch banks or financial institutions. Too many electronic safeguards, robots, and what have you. In order to get past that kind of equipment, you have to be a top-notch scientist—and one that can do better at a top-notch job."

"Now, who's got money? The rich, and they *want* to show it off wherever they go. Naturally they take precautions, too, but people are always involved and that's the weakness. You can build a machine that does one thing perfectly, but people make mistakes—they get rattled. Teamwork can take advantage of it. A feint here, and a block there, and before anyone knows what's happening, we're through their defenses. With, of course, their money."

Jadiver looked at him, at his handsome, ruddy, respectable face. "You played football?"

Burlingame grinned. "Twenty-five years ago."

"It's changed. You wouldn't recognize it now."

"Perhaps not. But the principle is still the same, and it's the principle that pays off."

Jadiver stood up. "I'd better get started. Where do I work?"

"Here," said Burlingame. "We have the tools ready for you."

"Mind if I look at the setup?"

"Go ahead."

The gamin bounced up and took charge of Jadiver, leading him to a small workshop screened off in a corner of one of the larger rooms. The layout was authentic enough to justify the equipment—a few robot forms in the rough state, handbooks on design, several robot heads in various stages of completion, and an assortment of the specialized tools of the trade. It was standard for the tinkerer, for the would-be designer of robot bodies. Burlingame always covered himself in every detail.

Jadiver inspected it thoroughly, the gamin standing impatiently at his side.

"I'm first when you're ready," she said.

He eyed her amusedly. "What's the hurry?"

"There's more to do on me and you'll do your best work when you're not tired."

"I'll start soon. Let me see the plastic."

She opened a cabinet and there it was. Jadiver squatted and read the instructions on the containers. He shook his head in despair. Every amateur always did this.

He stood up. "You've got the worst kind," he said.

She shrugged. "They told me it was the best."

"That depends. There are two kinds, and this one does look more real than the other. In fact, for a time this actually becomes a part of your body, a pseudo-

flesh. But it's quite dangerous."

"The other kind is just a cosmetic, isn't it?"

"That's right, but—"

"Then I'm not worried," she said, tossing her head. "The way I see it, it's dangerous not to use the best disguise we can get."

She might be right. At least he'd warned her, and as long as she had the facts straight, the decision was hers to make.

Jadiver peeled off his jacket and slid into a protective smock. "Ask Burlingame to come in. This is going to be delicate, you know."

The gamin grinned. "I've never been overly concerned about Vicon, and he knows I can take care of myself." She stepped behind a screen and presently came out again, nude. "Where do you want me to stand?"

"On the pedestal, under the light." He looked at her closely. He had thought she was a little girl, a tired little girl who hadn't slept much recently. It was the pert face that had fooled him, with the upturned nose, because she wasn't young. Forty he would say, maybe more, nearly as old as Burlingame.

Her body was slight, but not much was wrong with it. Here and there were a few wrinkles, though in general her figure appeared youthful. It would require all his skill to make her as spectacular in a low-cut gown as she wanted to be. And her legs, though well shaped, were slightly bowed, a sure sign of Venusian rickets. Early settlers hadn't realized that the soil was deficient in some essential trace elements.

He would have to straighten her legs if she expected to mingle with society. It was beyond his power to change the bones, but he could add pseudo-flesh to give the same effect.

He slipped on the mask, attached the various containers, thrust his hand into the glovelike control valve, and began to work.

She winced involuntarily as the spray tingled against her body and adhered with constrictive force. He blocked out the areas he had to alter and then began to fill in and build up.

"I don't see it," said Emily. "I know you must be good. That's why Burlingame

wanted you. But it seems to me this is out of your line."

He brought the spray up in a straight line along the edge of her shin. "How good I am is a matter of opinion. Mine and the places I've worked."

"What places, for instance?"

"Mostly Earth."

"I've never been there," she said wistfully.

"You haven't missed much." He knew that, while he believed that with part of his mind, essentially he was wrong. As the spray was drying on her legs, he started filling out her breasts. "However, this isn't as much out of my line as you think. Engineers specialize, you know. Mine's industrial design. We don't usually monkey with the internal mechanism of a machine, though we're able to. Mostly, we design housings for the machines, robots as a rule."

He proceeded to her face and changed the upturned nose to a straight one. "The ideal external appearance of a machine ought to establish the function of that machine, and do so with the most efficient distribution of space and material."

He stood back and eyed the total effect. She was coming along. "The human body is a good design—for a human. It doesn't belong on a robot. That, for most purposes, should be a squat container with three wheels or treads, with eye-stalks and tentacles on top. I designed one like that, but it was never built. Robots always look like beautiful girls or handsome men, and the mechanism is twice as clumsy as it should be, in order to fit in with that conception."

He squinted at the spray. "In other words, I design robot bodies and faces. Why should it be strange I can do the same with humans?"

The spray was neither a liquid nor a dustlike jet. She shivered under it. "Why don't you like robots? I don't see anything wrong with them. They're so beautiful."

He laughed. "I'll give you an idea. I got tired of the meaningless perfection of the bodies I was turning out. Why shouldn't the bodies be beautiful, considering how they're made? Anyway, I put a pimple on one model. Not on her face. Her shoulder."

She extended her hands and he took off the fine wrinkles with a sweeping

motion of the spray. "What happened?"

"I had to start looking for another job. But somebody higher up began to think about what I'd done. Now, on Earth, all robots that model clothing have some perceptible skin defects. More lifelike, they say."

"Is that why you came to Venus?"

"I'd been considering it for some time. It seemed to me that there ought to be a place for a good designer, even if I did have to work on robots." He smiled wryly. "A lot of other engineers had the same idea."

"Too much competition?"

"Sort of." He grimaced. "My first job here was designing female bodies for so-called social clubs."

"Oh, those," she said scornfully.

"It's legitimate on Venus. Anyway, I tried out that idea again. Customers didn't like it. Said they could get women with blemishes any time. When they got a robot, they wanted perfection."

"Don't blame them," Emily said practically. She looked at him with sudden suspicion. "Don't give *me* pimples."

"Not a one," he assured her. "You're flawless."

And she was—with only one item missing. He flexed his fingers in the control glove and sprayed on nipples. She was finished.

He shucked off the mask and laid aside the spray gun. "Look at yourself."

She went to the mirror and turned in front of it. She smoothed her hands across her face and smiled with pleasure. "It feels like flesh."

"It is, almost. Tomorrow you'll bleed there if you cut yourself."

She nodded. "Is that all?"

"Except for instructions, yes."

She looked at him with curious shyness and hurriedly slipped into her clothing. She hadn't minded nudity before, when she wasn't as lovely as she wanted to be.

What she didn't know was that Jadiver liked her better as she had been.

Dressed, she came back to him. "What are those instructions?"

He tore off two envelopes attached to the container. He checked the spray gun to determine how much had been used.

"Pseudo-flesh is highly poisonous," he said, handing her the envelopes. "The tablets in the white package neutralize the toxic effects. Take one every eight hours. And don't forget to take it, unless you want to end up in convulsions on the floor."

"I'll remember. When do I begin?"

"In three hours. And now for some advice I know you don't want. You can keep yourself as you are for two months. But you'll be healthier if you get rid of the pseudo-flesh as soon as you can."

She looked longingly at the face in the mirror. "How do I do that?"

"When you're ready, take the tablets in the green package, one every hour until the pseudo-flesh is absorbed. After it's gone, take three more at the same interval. The total time should be about thirteen hours." She was not paying attention. He eased between her and the mirror. "Get a complete checkup before you try this again. It takes years off your life."

"I know that. How many?"

"I can't say exactly. It's a body, pseudo-flesh weight ratio, plus some other factors that no one knows anything about. I'd estimate that you'll lose about three years for every two weeks you keep it."

"It's worth it," she said, gazing again into the mirror. She turned away in indecision. "I've always known Burlingame was mine, even if I wasn't pretty. Now I'm not so sure, after this."

It wasn't exactly Burlingame she was concerned with, thought Jadiver. For a while she was going to be beautiful beyond her expectations. The irony was that almost any robot outshone her temporary beauty. She was jealous of machines

that had no awareness of how they looked.

Jadiver straightened up. He hadn't fully recovered from his accident and he was tired. And the artificial skin, no matter what they said, hadn't been completely integrated to his body. It itched.

"Send the rest of them in, one at a time," he said as she went out.

It wasn't going to take long, for which he was grateful. Now that he knew a spying device hadn't been surgieried into him, there were certain aspects of the accident that demanded investigation.



Jadiver limped into the apartment. The chair unfolded and came to meet him as he entered. He relaxed in the depths of it and called out for food. Soon he had eaten, and shortly after that he dozed.

When he awakened, refreshed, he began the thinking he'd put off until now. The fee from Burlingame was welcome. It was dangerous business, so Jadiver had charged accordingly. Now his economic problem was solved for about a month.

In the hospital he had been sure of a motive for the accident. It had seemed simple enough: the police had planted a spying device in him. However, since he had been examined thoroughly at Burlingame's and nothing had been found, that theory broke down.

There was still another possibility—someone had tried to kill him and had failed. If so, that put the police in the clear and he would have to look elsewhere. He might as well start there.

He walked over to the autobath and began inspecting it. It wasn't the one he'd been injured in. That had been removed and replaced by the management. It would have helped if he had been able to go over the original one.

The new autobath was much like the old, a small unit that fitted decoratively into the scheme of the room, not much taller than an upright man, or longer than a man lying down. The mechanism itself, and there was plenty, was effectively sealed. Short of an atomic torch, there wasn't any way to get into it.

Jadiver pryed and poked, but learned nothing. In response to the human voice, it

automatically provided all the services necessary to human cleanliness, but there was no direct way to check on the involved mechanism.

He finally called the firm that made it. The usual beautiful robot answered: "Living Rooms, Incorporated. Can I help you?"

"Information," he said. "Autobath unit."

"Sales? New or replacement?"

"Service. I want to see about repairs."

"We have no repair department. Nothing ever wears out."

"Perhaps not, but it becomes defective and has to be replaced."

"Defective parts are a result of wear. Since nothing wears out, no repair is necessary. Occasionally an autobath is damaged, but then it doesn't work at all, even if the damage is slight. It has to be replaced."

That was what he thought, but it was better to be sure. "This is hypothetical," he said. "Suppose there was an accident in an autobath. Is there an alarm system which would indicate that something was wrong?"

The robot was smooth and positive. "Your question is basically misleading, according to our statistics. In eight hundred and forty one million plus installations, on all the inhabited planets of the Solar System, there has never been one accident.

"The autobath is run by a small atomic motor and is not connected in any way to an outside power source. There are plumbing connections, but these are not suitable for the transmission of a signal. To answer your question specifically: There is no alarm system of any kind, local or general, nor is there any provision for someone else to attach one."

"Thanks," said Jadiver, and cut the screen.

He was nearly certain now. One check remained.

He flipped on a switch and walked out of the room to the hall and stood there listening. He could hear nothing. He came closer to the door and there was still no sound. He pressed his ear against the juncture of the door and jamb. Not the slightest noise.

He winced when he opened the door. The music he had switched on was deafening. He hurried inside and turned it off. He had known his apartment was sound-proofed. Just how good that soundproofing was, he hadn't tested until now.

The so-called accident had happened in the autobath. The unit couldn't signal that anything was wrong. No one passing in the hall could hear his yells.

The evidence indicated that no accident could happen in the autobath—yet it had.

Logically, he should have died in that accident that couldn't happen—yet he hadn't.

What did they want? And was it the police? In the hospital he had been sure—certain, too, of what they were attempting. Now the facts wouldn't fit.

Tiredness came back, reinforced by doubt. His skin itched—probably from nervous tension. He finally fell into an uneasy sleep with the help of a sedative.



In the morning, the itch was still there. He looked curiously at his skin; it appeared normal. It was definitely not transparent, hadn't been even in the hospital when the bandages were removed. He'd had a glimpse of it in the original transparent stage only once, when the doctor had exposed the tips of his fingers.

Briefly he wondered about it. Did it really itch that bad, or was it an unconscious excuse to see the doctor? She was a sullen, indifferent creature, but without doubt worth seeing again. He didn't know her name, but he could find out easily enough.

As if in answer to the silent question, his whole body twitched violently. He raked his fingers across his forearm and the nails broke off. She was at least partly right in her predictions; his skin was considerably tougher than it had

been, though nothing appeared different.

He didn't like communicating with the police, but he had little choice. He flipped on the screen and made a few inquiries.

The name he wanted was Doctor Doumya Filone. She was off duty at present. However, if it was an emergency—? His skin crawled and he decided it was just that and identified himself. There were a number of persons with whom he had contacts who wouldn't approve his doing this, but they didn't have to live in his skin.

He dialed her quickly. He couldn't place the number, but figured it was probably across town, in one of the newer districts. He didn't fully remember what she was like until she appeared on the screen. With that face to put on a robot, he might make a fortune. That is, if he could capture the expression as well as the features.

"How's the patient?" she asked. Behind her briskness he thought he could detect a flicker of concern.

"You can take back that skin you gave me," he said. "It itches."

She frowned. "I told you it was very new. We aren't able to anticipate all the reactions." She paused. "However, it shouldn't itch. By now it ought to be well integrated with your body and new cell growth should be occurring with the synthetic substance as the matrix."

"Thanks," he said dryly. "That doesn't explain how I feel."

Unperturbed, she looked down at a desk he could imagine, but could not see. She got up and walked out of the field of vision. She was gone for quite some time.

A disturbing thought formed in his mind. Was she calling elsewhere for instructions? There was no reason why she should, yet the thought persisted.

She came back. "Get a detergent. What kind doesn't matter. Put it in the autobath and take a hot bath, plenty of lather. Soak in it for at least fifteen minutes."



Her prescription was primitive in the extreme. Did she really expect it to be effective, or did she have something else in mind?

"Do you think I'm going to trust myself to that machine?" he said. "I've got myself a little enamel basin. Had to steal it out of a museum."

Nothing was outwardly changed, but she seemed slightly sympathetic. "I can understand how you feel, but you'll have to get over it or go pioneering in the wild lands. As long as you're in a city, you can't rent, buy or build accommodations that have no autobath. Besides, I've been assured that the odds are against that happening again."

That was an understatement, if his information was correct. Actually, he had wanted her reaction, but it didn't tell him a thing.

"Feel better already," he said.

She nodded. "Suggestion at work. Take your bath now and call me tomorrow if it doesn't work. Sooner, if you need to." She cut their connection before he could answer.

In addition to physical relief, he had hoped that she would let slip some information. She hadn't done so. Of course, she might not know anything more than the purely medical aspects of the police plan. If it was the police.

He left the screen and checked the autobath for supplies. Satisfactory for the present. He removed his clothing, stepped inside, and followed her instructions. A tub rose out of the floor, filled with water, and the mechanism immersed him in it. Thick soapy suds billowed up and warm water laved his skin. The rubbery hands of the autobath were soft and massaged him gently and expertly.

He tried to relax. So far, he had suffered no irreparable harm. He tried to avoid the memory of his accident, but that was impossible. The one comfort was that his death was not the objective. He corrected himself—not the *immediate* objective.

Anyway, he'd been rescued and placed under good medical care. How the rescue had been effected was unknown, unless it had been included in the plan from the beginning. If so, he could assume that the autobath had been tampered with and fixed with a signal that would indicate when he was unconscious.

"Fifteen minutes and ten seconds," said the autobath. "Do you wish to remain

longer?"

"That'll do," he said. "The rinse, please."

He lay back and curled up his legs, stretching his arms while clear water flowed soothingly over him. In spite of his skepticism, this primitive prescription of Doumya Filone seemed to work. The itch had stopped completely; although his skin was now mottled. No scars; the hospital and Doumya Filone had done a good job.

He scrutinized his skin carefully. The marks were not actually on his skin; they were beneath it. So faint as to be almost invisible, it was nevertheless a disturbing manifestation. The marks gradually became more distinct. It looked like a shadowy web thrown over and pressed deep into his body.



The autobath lifted him and he stood in front of the mirror. There was no mistake—a network spread over his body, arms, legs, face too; perhaps on his head as well, though he couldn't see that. His skin was not transparent—it was translucent for a certain depth.

Disfigurement didn't concern him. Even if the condition persisted, it wasn't noticeable enough to constitute a handicap. It was not the superficial nervous system showing through, nor the capillary blood vessels. The web effect was strikingly regular, almost mathematical in appearance.

As he looked, the translucence faded and his skin switched to normal, the marks disappearing. That was the word, switched. He ought to be thankful for that, he supposed. Somehow he wasn't.

He was out of the autobath and half dressed before the realization came to him. He knew what the network was, the patterned marks beneath his skin.

A circuit.

A printed circuit, or, since it was imposed on flesh, possibly tattooed.



A circuit. What did anyone use a circuit for? To compute, to gather data, to broadcast, to control. How much of that applied to him, to the body it was concealed in? The first he could eliminate. Not to compute. As for the rest, he was not certain. It seemed possible that everything could be included in the function of the network beneath his skin. He hadn't been controlled up to now, but that didn't mean control wasn't there, quiescent, waiting for the proper time. However, it didn't seem likely. Human mentality was strong, and a reasonably intact mind was difficult to take over.

What else? To gather data and broadcast it. Of that he could be almost positive. The data came from his nervous system. He suspected where it was broadcast to—back to the police.

How the circuit on his body gathered data was unknown. The markings appeared to parallel his central nervous system. It seemed reasonable that it operated by induction.

That meant it involved chiefly tactile sensations, unless, of course, there were other factors he didn't know about. He felt his forehead carefully, his temples, and his skull around his ears. Nothing, but that didn't mean that infinitesimal holes hadn't been drilled through his skull and taps run to the optic and auditory nerves.

It could be done and he wouldn't know about it, couldn't feel it. The broadcasting circuits could then be spread over his head, or, for that matter, over any part of his body.

If his suppositions were correct, then he was a living, walking broadcasting station. Everything he felt, saw or heard was relayed to some central mechanism which could interpret the signals.

The police.

Cobber had been looking for a spy mechanism, a mechanical device in Jadiver's body. He hadn't found it, but it was there, almost impossible to locate. A surgeon might find it by performing an autopsy, but even then he would have to know what to look for.

How Jadiver had been able to find it was a pure puzzle. Obviously, the police hadn't been as thorough as they had meant to be. Their mechanism had somehow gone awry at precisely the time Jadiver was most conscious of his skin. Without

the itch, he would never have noticed it.

At least one thing was clear now—the purpose. He'd been boiled into unconsciousness, his skin removed, the circuit put in place, and then had the synthetic substance carefully fitted over his body.

His tension increased, for he knew now that he had betrayed Burlingame without meaning to—but it was betrayal nonetheless. It wasn't only a question of professional ethics; it was how long he would remain alive. Burlingame's survivors, if there were any, would have an excellent idea of who was responsible.

This thing went with him wherever he went. Did it also sleep when he did? That wasn't important, really.

He had to try to warn Burlingame.

Even these thoughts might be a mistake. The police might know what he was thinking. This was one way to determine whether there was such a thing as mechanically induced telepathy, but he couldn't work up much enthusiasm for the experiment.

His own problem was essentially the same as if a mechanical spying device had been planted in him—with one difference. A mechanical part was a foreign object and could be cut out by any competent surgeon willing to risk police retaliation. But only those who had installed this complicated circuit would know how to take it out.



Burlingame didn't answer. It was probably useless trying to trace him—he very likely had arranged to drop out of sight. He was good at that. The police hadn't caught up with him in twenty years.

There was Cobber. He'd be elsewhere, setting up a rendezvous to which Burlingame and the rest could return and hide while their faces and figures were absorbed into their normal bodies. Cobber would be even tougher to locate.

The only place Burlingame could be found with any degree of certainty, Jadiver reasoned, would be at the scene of the robbery. Jadiver went to the screen and spent an intensive half hour in front of it. At the end of that time, he had

narrowed it down to two society events, one of which would occur in a few hours. He made a decision to cover it and warn them, if he could. After that, it was up to Burlingame.

Jadiver rubbed his chin; the stubble had to come off. He went to the autobath, but it wouldn't open. A figure in bas-relief appeared on the door. The surface had been smooth an instant before.

"Sorry," said the voice of the lifelike, semi-nude girl, "the autobath is out of certain supplies. It won't function properly until these are replaced."

"Let's have the list," growled Jadiver. He was jumpy.

The bas-relief figure extended a hand with a slip in it. "If I may suggest, these can be placed on perpetual order to avoid future inconvenience."

What the future held was unknown. It wasn't likely to include a comfortable existence in a well-furnished apartment. "I'll think about it," he grunted.

"If there's any other way I can help you—"

"There isn't," said Jadiver.

The door shivered and the figure snapped back into the memory plastic from which it was made. The surface was smooth again.



He went to the screen and punched a code. The counter display flashed on and then was replaced by a handsome neuter face. That face studied him, ascertained his maximum susceptibility, and promptly faded.

The next face was that of a robot harem girl. Sex sells, that was always the axiom. "Is there anything I can do for you?" she asked huskily.

"Yes," said Jadiver. "You can get off the screen and let me see some merchandise."

"We're not allowed to do that."

Jadiver grumbled in defeat. "I want something for my whisk—"

"Just the thing," she said enthusiastically, reaching out of his field of vision. The

hand came back with a package. "Tear off a capsule, crush it, and apply to your face. It removes whiskers permanently for two days, and leaves your face as soft and smooth as Martian down."

Jadiver shuddered. "I'd rather be a man than a bird. Do you have anything that leaves a face feeling like skin?"

The robot harem girl stabbed out frantically, but nothing came to hand. She turned around and went off to search. Jadiver sighed with relief and started to scan the shelves. The robot returned before he could make a selection.

"We have nothing like that," she said, crestfallen. "Asteroid alabaster or hydroponic grapes and several other things, but no whiskoff that will leave your face feeling like skin."

"Then order something that will," said Jadiver. "Meanwhile I'll settle for a face of hydroponic grapes. Two weeks supply will be enough."

The robot complied eagerly. "Anything else? Shampoo?"

Jadiver looked at the list and nodded.

"No need to open the bottle," she rushed on. "Just place in the autobath dispenser and let the machine do the rest. The bottle will dissolve, adding to the secret ingredients. Foams in micro-seconds as proven by actual test, and when you're through, only an expert can tell your hair from mink."

"Mink?" he repeated. "Don't think I'd like it. What about raccoon? I've always admired the legendary Daniel Boone, alone in the terrestrial wilderness with a single-shot rifle. Sure, make it raccoon."

"I know we have none of that." The clerk was positive.

"Then order it," he snapped. "You don't have to furnish the rifle, though."

She seemed confused. "There is a ten per cent extra charge for non-standard merchandise."

"All right. Just don't stand there arguing."

When the clerk left the screen to place the order, Jadiver hastily selected what he wanted. He validated the purchases and snapped off the screen. The merchandise arrived in a few minutes.

He loaded it into the autobath. This time the door opened and the bas-relief figure didn't appear on it. Within a half hour he was ready to leave.

The door was not a door. It was a mirror, three-dimensional. The difference to the eye was slight, but since he knew what to expect, it was not difficult to detect. It was a legitimate piece of staging, but it cost plenty to maintain the illusion. A society event, he supposed, called for such precautions. There must be more inside.

He ignored the mirror and pressed a blank section of the wall directly opposite. The wall faded and a robot in an impressive black-and-white livery stared at him with the proper insolence.

"Your invitation, sir."

"What?" he said tipsily.

"Your invitation, sir." The voice was louder and the insolence increased. If he asked again, the robot would very likely shove him out and close the door. Delicately adjusted and unhumanly strong, it was a bit too invariable in the behavior department to be consistently efficient.

His knowledge of robots was more than fair. In a few seconds he sized up the model facing him. A thin slip fluttered from his hand to the floor. The robot bent over to pick it up. At that instant Jadiver thrust a long, thin, double-tined fork deep into the back of the robot's neck, probing for the right place. He found it. Time became static for the robot; it remained bent over and could not move.

Jadiver rifled the pockets, removed all the invitations, glanced at them, found one that would do, and thrust the rest back. Shadows of figures passed across the field behind the robot. Could they see what Jadiver was doing? Probably not; privacy was too highly regarded. Nevertheless, some people were coming down the corridor and *they* could see when and if they got close. Stepping back, he took away the double-tined fork and the robot straightened up.

"You dropped something, sir," said the robot, handing him the slip from the floor.

"It was nothing," said Jadiver, taking it. That was the best description of what he

had dropped. He extended the invitation he had just filched.

The robot grasped the invitation and seemed unable to focus. It tried to examine the markings invisible to human eyes. It passed a trembling hand across a troubled forehead.

"Didn't you come in half an hour ago?" it asked in bewilderment.

Someone had—the person to whom the invitation had been issued. The robot, of course, had remembered.

"Nonsense," said Jadiver sharply. "Do you feel right? Are you sure of your equilibrium?"

If it was sure, he had miscalculated badly. Robots were so much more or less than humans. It should be possible to design a perfect robot, one that would realize all the potentialities of a mechanical personality. It had never been done; anthropomorphic conceptions had always interfered.

"Must be mistaken," mumbled the robot, and swayed. It would collapse in twenty minutes. The robot pressed a button and the field behind him flickered off. Jadiver passed through it and the field fell back in place.



Inside, he looked around. The usual swank, or maybe more so. Impressive, if he cared to be impressed by it. At the moment he didn't. He had to find Burlingame or Emily. He had created the faces of the other three as well, but he had made them into handsome nonentities. Among so many others who resembled them, he doubted that he could recognize them.

For an instant he thought he saw Emily and made his way through the crowd. When he got there, he saw his mistake. This girl's flesh hadn't been put on with a spray gun.

Burlingame was after jewels, of course, to be carefully selected from two or three of the wealthier guests. He must also have currency in mind, something negotiable for immediate use. He'd need cash to drop out of sight for a while.

Time was growing short for a word with Burlingame, just one word, whispered or spelled out silently: "Police." That was all Burlingame would need.

Jadiver was weaponless, and aside from warning Burlingame, he couldn't help. Until now he'd steered clear of violence and illegality. He'd known the use to which his disguises had been put, but that was the business of those who paid him.

Now it was different. The police had a line to him, direct. How much they knew was impossible to estimate. He could visualize a technician sitting in front of a screen, seeing everything that Jadiver saw. That, however, was a guess, for he didn't actually know how the circuit beneath his skin functioned. Until he learned, he would have to continue guessing, and blunder accordingly.

He made his way to the balcony that encircled half the huge high room. He didn't know the entire layout or the habits of those who lived here, but it was reasonably certain that they kept a large amount of cash on hand and that it would be safeguarded in a room not accessible to all the guests. It might even be up here.

The few people on the balcony were at the far end. He looked down on the milling guests. Still no sign of Burlingame or any of his crew. Jadiver had done his work too well. They were indistinguishable from the others.

At that moment, the lights brightened glaringly. The guests looked less glamorous. Women bulged excessively, top-heavy, and the tanned faces of the men turned an unpleasant gray.

Magically, uniforms appeared at every exit.

"Attention," a harsh voice rang out. "Please line up. There are criminals among you and we can identify them."



Jadiver didn't listen to the rest. His eyes were on the uniformed men. Mercifully, they carried tangle guns. That much he was thankful for. Burlingame and his crew would be taken alive. They might not like what would happen later, but at least they would live.

The tangle gun was the most effective and least lethal weapon ever conceived. It would bring down a butterfly at two hundred yards and hold it there, without crumpling a wing or disturbing the dustlike scales. It would do the same with a

Venusian saurian or a Martian windbeast, either of which outbulked an elephant and outsavaged a tiger.

It didn't have to hit the target. With proximity fuses—and it was usually furnished that way—it was sufficient for the bullet to pass near. Jadiver drew a deep breath. No one was going to get killed because of him. Nevertheless, his skin crawled.

He gazed down at the guests lining up. They, too, knew what tangle guns were.

Suddenly a man darted out of line and headed toward one of the exits. He collided with an officer and the policeman went down. A tangle gun snapped. The running man fell headlong. Three more times the tangle gun fired at the man writhing on the floor—at his hands, at his face, and again at his legs.



The tangle gun propelled a plastic bullet, and that plastic was a paradox. It was the stickiest substance known and would adhere to a sphere of polished platinum, tearing away the solid metal if it were forcibly removed without first being neutralized. It also extruded itself into fine, wire-like strands on a moving object. The more anything moved, the tighter it wrapped around. The victim was better off to relax. He couldn't escape; no one ever had.

Jadiver watched the man thrashing on the floor. One shot would have been enough. Someone on the Venicity force liked to see men squirm.

As nearly as Jadiver could determine, the man on the floor was not Burlingame. The leader hadn't been taken, but he didn't have long to enjoy his freedom. The theory he had about teamwork was tarnished now—a feint here and a block there—and they were all headed into the arms of the Venicity police. It couldn't work against superior force, and an ambush set unwittingly by Jadiver.

Then Jadiver saw them. They moved as a unit—Burlingame, Emily and two others. They smashed through the guests with a formation that had the flying wedge as a remote ancestor. Burlingame was leading it, tangle gun in hand. The guests were thrown back and a policeman went down.

It was hard to fire into the mob through which Burlingame and his crew were bulling. In that respect, the tangle gun was not selective. It seized on any motion.

They couldn't make it, but Jadiver hoped for them. They were at the edge of the crowd. Between them and freedom was a thin cordon of police. Beyond the police was a planted area where jungle vines and shrubs, considerably taller than a man, grew dense. Just past that area were two exits leading to the street.

From the balcony, Jadiver could see it clearly. If they could reach the exits, they had a chance for flight.

They broke through the cordon. They shouldn't have, for superior trained men

were opposing them. But it was another kind of training that Burlingame was using and with it he split the police. The group plunged into the jungle shrubs and emerged on the other side. The police on the floor couldn't see them, the planted area screened off the view. They were almost safe.

The exits opened before they could reach them—more police. Burlingame went down, a cloud around his face, weaving wire shapes that tightened on his throat. The other two stumbled as police fired at their feet.



Emily alone was not hit. She was close and moving too fast. She escaped the tangle guns, but ran directly into the arms of a burly officer. He laughed and grabbed her as if she were a robot. She bit him.

He swore at her and swiftly looked around. The guests couldn't see. He hit her solidly in the middle. She gasped for breath. He took out his tangle gun and fired into her mouth.

Jadiver sickly knew he had been wrong about the tangle gun; it could kill if the person who used it had sufficient experience and brutality.

Emily would never have to lose that beautiful face and figure. She could keep it until she died, which wouldn't be long. Nobody could stop the peristaltic motion of the digestive system, voluntarily or otherwise, or of the lungs in trying to breathe.

Burlingame wouldn't know. Policemen were cooperative, and it would be listed as an accident.

Jadiver closed his eyes. Emily was dying and no one could help her. Or himself, either, when they came to pick him up. They had to know exactly where he was. He waited, expecting a tap on the shoulder or the snap of the tangle gun.

The lights dimmed and the same harsh voice spoke. "The danger is over, thanks to the efficient work of the Venicity police force. You are now safe."

Nothing like advertising yourself, thought Jadiver.

No one came near him. Apparently the police didn't want him yet—they expected him to do more for them.

He went down the stairs and mingled with the excited guests. It had been a good show, unexpected entertainment, especially since it hadn't involved any real danger for them. He circulated through the chattering men and women until he came near the planted area. At an opportune moment, he slipped in.

It was a miniature jungle; he was safe from ordinary detection as long as he stayed there. He went quietly through the vines and shrubs toward the other side. The broad back of a policeman loomed up in front of him.

Jadiver was an industrial engineer, a specialist in the design of robot bodies and faces, robots that had to look like humans. He knew anatomy, not in the way a doctor did, but it was nonetheless the knowledge of an expert. He reached out and the policeman toppled.

He dragged the unconscious man deeper into the little jungle and listened. No one had noticed. Physically a large man, the policeman might be the one who had shot Emily—and then again he might not be. He did have a tangle gun, which was the important thing. Jadiver took it and rifled the man's pockets for ammunition.

He knelt for a final check on the body. The chest rose and fell with slow regularity. For insurance, Jadiver again pressed the nerve. This man wouldn't trouble anyone for a few hours.

Jadiver looked out. When he was sure he wasn't observed, he walked out and joined the guests. He moved politely from one group to another and in several minutes stood beside the door. He left the way he came.

It was that simple. He had to assume that until events proved he was mistaken.



Outside, he walked briskly. It was not late and the city overflowed with men and women walking, flying, skimming. Roughly dressed men down from the north polar farms, explorers from the temperate jungles, government girls—the jumbled swarm that comes to a planet in the intermediate stages of exploitation. It was a background through which he could pass unnoticed.

The circuit, though—always the circuit. He couldn't escape that by walking away from it. But at least he'd proved that telepathy wasn't possible by means of

it, or he wouldn't still be free.

Other than that, he didn't know how it operated. If it was purely electronic in nature, then it had a range. He might be able to get beyond that range, if he knew how far it extended.

A lot depended on the power source. He hadn't been able to check closely, hadn't really known what he was looking at when he'd seen it in the autobath. He remembered that the circuit seemed to be laid over his own nervous system. Considering the power available, the range was apt to be quite limited.

That was pure supposition and might be wrong. There was nothing to preclude an external power source, say a closed field blanketing the city or even the entire planet. If so, it represented a technical achievement beyond anything he was familiar with. That didn't disprove it, of course. The circuit itself indicated a startling advance and he knew *it* existed.

There was still another possibility. The circuit might not be entirely electronic. It might operate with the same forces that existed inside a single nerve cell. If so, all bets were off; there was no way he could determine the range. It might be anything at all, micro-inches or light-years.

With unlimited equipment and all the time in the worlds, he could answer some of those questions floating around in his mind. He had neither, but there were solutions he could make use of. Limited solutions, but it was better than waiting to be caught.

Jadiver headed toward one such solution.

The robot clerk looked up, smiling and patient, as he entered. It could afford to be patient. There was no place it wanted to be other than where it was at the moment. "Can I help you?"

"Passage to Earth," said Jadiver.

The clerk consulted the schedule. That was pretense. The schedule and not much else had been built into its brain. "There's an orbit flight in two weeks."

In two weeks, Jadiver could be taken, tried, and converted ten times over. "Isn't there anything sooner?"

"There's an all-powered flight leaving tomorrow, but that's for Earth citizens

only."

"Suits me. Book me for it."

"Be glad to," said the robot. "Passport, please."

It was going to cost more than just the fare, Jadiver knew. He would arrive on Earth with very little money and could expect to start all over. He was no longer fresh out of training, willing to start at the bottom. He was a mature man, experienced beyond the ordinary, and most organizations he could work for would be suspicious of that.

But it was worth it, aside from the escape. No future for him there, jammed in on a crowded world, but it was his planet, always would be, and he wouldn't mind going back.

"Sorry," said the clerk, flipping over the passport and studying it. "I can't book you. The flight's only for Earth citizens."

"I was born there," Jadiver impatiently said. "Can't you see?"

"You were?" asked the robot eagerly. "I was built there." It handed him back the passport. "However, it doesn't matter where you were born. You've been here three years without going back. Automatically, you became a citizen of Venus two and a half years ago."

Jadiver hadn't known that. He doubted that many did. It was logical enough. Earth was overflowing and the hidden citizenship clause was a good way of getting rid of the more restless part of the population and making sure they didn't come back.

"There's still the orbit flight," said the clerk, smiling and serene. "For that you need a visitor's visa, which takes time. Shall I make the arrangements?"

Aside from the time element, which was vital, he couldn't tip the police off that he intended to leave.

"Thanks," he said, taking the passport. "I'll call back when I make up my mind."

Down the street was another interplanetary flight office and he wandered into it.

It might have been the same office he had just left, robot and all.

"Information on Mars," he said, his manner casual.

The clerk didn't bother to consult the schedule. There was a difference, after all. "There'll be an orbit flight in four months," it said pleasantly. "Rate, four-fifths of the standard fare to Earth."

Nothing was working out as expected. "What about the moons of Jupiter?" This was the last chance.

"Due to the position of the planets, for the next few months there are no direct flights anywhere beyond Mars. You have to go there and transfer."

That escape was closed. "I can't make plans so far in advance."

The robot beamed at him. "I can see that you're a gentleman who likes to travel." It grew confidential and leaned over the counter. "I have a bargain here, truly the most sensational we've ever offered."

Jadiver drew away from that eagerness. "What is this bargain?"

"Did you notice the fare to Mars? Four-fifths of that to Earth, and yet it's farther away. Did you stop to think why?"



He had noticed and he thought he knew why. It was another side of the citizenship program. Get them away from Earth, the farther the better, and don't let them come back. If necessary, shuttle them between colonies, but don't let them come back.

"I hadn't," he said. "Why?"

The voice throbbed throatily and robot eyes grew round. "To induce people to travel. Travel is wonderful. I love to travel."

Pathetic thing. Someone had erred in building it, had implanted too much enthusiasm for the job. It loved to travel and would never get farther than a few feet from the counter. Jadiver dismissed that thought.

"What's this wonderful offer?" he asked.

"Just think of it," whispered the robot. "We have another destination, much farther than Jupiter, but only one-tenth the fare to Earth. If you don't have the full fare in cash, just give us verbal assurance that you'll pay when you get the money. No papers to sign. We have confidence in your personal integrity."

"Sounds intriguing," Jadiver said, backing away. It sounded more like a death sentence. Alpha Centauri or some such place—hard grubbing labor under a blazing or meager sun, it didn't matter which. Exile forever on planets that lagged and would always lag behind Earth. It took years to get there, even at speeds only a little below that of light, time in which the individual was out of touch.

"I hope you won't forget," said the robot. "It's hard to get people to understand. But I can see that you do."

He understood too well. He ducked out of the flight office. He'd stay and take it here if he had to, escape some way if he could. Nothing was worth that kind of sacrifice.

He went slowly back to the apartment. It was not so strange that the police hadn't arrested him. They knew that he'd stay on the planet, that he had to. They'd had it figured out long before he did.

He fell into the bed without removing his clothing. The bed made no effort to induce him to sleep. It wasn't necessary.



In the morning, Jadiver awakened to the smell of food. The room he slept in was dark, but in the adjacent room he could hear the Kitch-Hen clucking away contentedly as it prepared breakfast.

He rolled over and sat up. He was not alone.

"Cobber?" he called.

"Yeah," said Cobber. He was very close, but Jadiver couldn't see him.

"The police got them," Jadiver said, reaching for the tangle gun. It was gone. He'd expected that.

"I heard. I was waiting for them and they didn't come." He was silent for a moment. "It had to be you, didn't it?"

"It was," Jadiver said. "When I found out, I tried to tell them. But it was too late."

"Glad you tried," said Cobber. At that instant, so was Jadiver. "I checked you myself. I couldn't find anything," Cobber added thoughtfully. "They must have something new."

"It is new," Jadiver wearily confirmed. "I can't get rid of it."

"Mind telling me? I figure I ought to know."

Hunched up in the darkness, Jadiver told him what he could. At present, he was defenseless. Cobber was a little man, but he was no stranger to violence and he had the weapons. Perhaps that was what the police counted on—that Cobber would save them an arrest.

"Bad," said Cobber after an interval. It sounded like a reprieve.

Jadiver waited.

"I liked Burlingame," continued Cobber. "Emily, too."

Burlingame was a decent fellow. Emily he had seen only once, twice if he counted last night. She deserved better than she got.

"I don't know who it was," Jadiver said. "Some big policeman."

"I know a lot of people—I'll find out," Cobber promised. "I liked Emily."

It wouldn't do any good, though Jadiver approved. For a while there'd be one less sadist on the force, and after that they'd hire another.

"You'd better leave while you can," said Jadiver.

Cobber laughed. "I'll get away. I know Venus and I don't have a spy inside." He got up, turned on the lights and tossed the tangle gun on the bed. "Here. You need this worse than I do."

Jadiver blinked gratefully and took it. Cobber believed him. If the police wanted to eliminate him, they'd have to come for him, after all.

He stood up. "Breakfast?"

"No breakfast," said Cobber. "I'm going to take your advice and get out of here." He went to the door, opened it a fraction and listened. Satisfied, he closed it and turned back to Jadiver. "Tell that cop I know a few tricks with a tangle gun he never heard of. I'll show him what they are."

"I won't see him, I hope."

"You don't have to. They're taking everything down. They'll tell him. That is, I hope they do."

He slipped out the door and was gone.



The Kitch-Hen tired of waiting for Jadiver to come out. It cackled disgustedly and sent a table into his room. Mechanically he sat down and began to eat.

Not only how far but also what kind of data did the circuit transmit? That was one unanswered problem. If he couldn't outrun it, he might outthink it.

First, the data was transmitted to the police with some degree of accuracy. They had been able to anticipate the robbery. Not completely, but they did know it was Burlingame and how many men he was using. They also knew the approximate date. From that, it was a matter of logic to determine what specific society event he was aiming at. Jadiver had been able to do the same.

Thoughts, visual and auditory impressions, tactile and other sensory data—that was the sum of what the circuit could transmit, theoretically.

He could almost positively rule out thoughts. It had never been proved that thoughts could be transferred from one person to another, mechanically or otherwise. But that was not his reason for rejecting it. If they could read his thoughts, it was useless for him to plan anything. And he was going to plan ahead, whether it was useless or not.

Tactile sensations, temperature, roughness, and the like were unimportant except to a scientist. He doubted that police were that scientifically interested in him. He could forget about the sense of touch.

Sight and hearing. Neither of these could be eliminated at present. They could see what he saw, hear what he heard. As long as they could, escape was out of the question. It wouldn't take much to betray him—a street sign glimpsed through his eyes, for instance, and they knew where he was.

As long as they could see what he saw.

But there was such a thing as a shield. Any known kind of radiation could be shielded against.

He was working with intangibles. He didn't know the nature of the phenomenon he had to fight. He had to extrapolate in part, guess the rest. One thing was certain, though: If he was successful in setting up a shield against the circuit, the police would arrive soon after. Arrive here.

His value to them was obvious. Through him they could make an undetected contact with the shadowy world of illegality. If that contact was cut off or if he seemed about to escape, his usefulness came to an end and they would want one more arrest while they could get it.

Once he started to work on the shield, he would have to work fast.

Jadiver went to the screen. There could be no hesitation; the decision was ready-made.

The bank robot appeared on the screen and Jadiver spoke to him briefly, requesting that his account be cleared. He scribbled his signature and had it recorded.



While waiting, he began to pack, sorting what he wanted to take. It wasn't much, some special clothing. His equipment, except for a few small tools, he had to leave. No matter. With luck, he could replace it; without luck, he wouldn't need it.

In a few minutes he was ready, but the money hadn't arrived. He sat down and nervously scrawled on a scrap of paper. Presently the delivery chute clattered and the money was in it, crisp new bills neatly wrapped, the total of his savings over the years. He stuffed the money in his pocket.

The scrap of paper was still in his hand. He started to throw it away, but his fingers were reluctant to let it go. He stared curiously at the crumpled wad and on impulse smoothed it out.

There were words on it, though he hadn't remembered writing any. The handwriting was shaky and stilted, as if he were afflicted with some nervous disease; nevertheless, it was unmistakably his own.

There was a message on it, from himself to himself. No, not from himself. But it was intended that he read it. The note said:

RUN, JADIVER. I'LL HELP.
YOUR FRIEND

He sat down. A picture rose involuntarily in his mind: The face was that of Doumya Filone.

He couldn't prove it, but it seemed certain that she was the one. She knew about the circuit, of course, had known long before he did. He remembered the incident when his skin had itched.

He had called her about it and she hadn't seemed surprised. She had left the screen for some time—for what purpose? To adjust the mechanism, or have someone else adjust it. The last, probably; the mechanism was almost certainly at the police end, and at the time he called she had been at home. In any event, the mechanism had originally been set too strong and she had ordered the setting to be reduced. That suggested one thing: the power to activate the circuit came from the mechanism—a radarlike device.

Then what? His skin had momentarily become translucent, allowing him to see the circuit. How she achieved that, he didn't know, but the reason was obvious. It had been her way of warning him and it had worked.

The message in his hand told him one thing. He had known about the danger, but he hadn't guessed that he didn't have to face it alone. Something else was evident: her control was limited—perhaps she could step in at a critical moment, but the greater part was up to him.

He moved quickly. He opened the delivery chute and put in the small bag that held his clothing, then punched a code that dispatched it to the transportation terminal. In return, he received a small plastic strip with the same code on it. The

bag could be traced, but not without trouble, and he should be able to pick it up before then. At this stage he didn't want to be encumbered.

He took a last look around and stepped into the hall. He leaped back again.

A heavy caliber slug crashed into the door.



That had been meant to kill. He was lucky it hadn't.

Who was it? Not the police. By law they were restricted to tangle guns, though they sometimes forgot. In this case, their memory should be good—they'd have difficulty explaining away the holes in his body. Not that they'd have to, really; if they wanted, they could toss him into an alley and claim they had found his body later.

Still, there was no particular reason why they should want to kill him outright when they could do it by degrees scientifically and with full legal protection. They didn't call it killing. There was another term: converting.

The converting process was not new; the principles had existed for centuries. The newness lay in the proper combination of old discoveries. Electric shock was one ingredient, a prolonged drastic application of it during the recreation of a situation that the victim had a weakness for. In the case of an adulterer, say, the scene was hypnotically arranged with the cooperation of a special robot that wouldn't be short-circuited. At the proper moment, electric shock was applied, repeatedly. Rigorous and somewhat rough on the criminal's wife, but the adulterer would be saddled all his life with an unconditional reflex.

That was only one ingredient. There were others, among them a pseudo-religious brotherhood, membership in which was compulsory. C. C.—Confirmed Converters. *They* kept tab on one another with apocalyptic fervor. Transgressions were rare. Death came sooner.

Jadiver stood there thinking. It wasn't the police, because they had converting with which to threaten him. It wasn't Cobber, either. He could have killed Jadiver earlier and hadn't.

Cobber might have talked, though. There were enough people who now regretted that Jadiver had once given them new faces. As far as they were

concerned Jadiver was in the hands of the police.

The identity of the man outside didn't matter. He was not from the police, but he did want Jadiver dead.

Jadiver stood back and pushed the door open. Another slug crashed into it, tiny, but with incredible velocity.

He knelt, thrust his hand outside the door near the bottom and fired a random fusillade down the corridor. Then he took his finger off the trigger and listened. There wasn't a sound. The man had decided to be sensible.

Jadiver stepped out. The man was crouched in an inconspicuous corner and he was going to stay in that position for a long time. He couldn't help breathing, though, and his chest was a tangle of wires. There were some on his face, too, where his eyelids flickered and his mouth twitched.

The gun was in his hand and it was aimed nearly right. There was nothing to prevent his squeezing the trigger—except the tangle extruded loosely over his hand. And he could move faster than it could. Once, at any rate.

"I wouldn't," said Jadiver. "You're going to have a hard time explaining that illegal firearm. And it'll look worse if I'm here with my head wrapped around a hole that just fits the slug."

The man reaffirmed his original decision to be sensible about it by remaining motionless. Jadiver didn't recognize him. Probably a hired assassin.

The man paled with the effort not to move. He teetered and the tangle stuff coiled fractionally tighter.

"Take care of yourself," Jadiver said, and left him there.



Jadiver headed toward the transportation terminal. The police could trace him that far. Let them; he intended that they should. It would confuse them more when he walked right off their instruments.

Once inside the underground structure, he lost himself in the traffic. That was just in case he had been followed physically as well as by radiation. People

coming from Earth, fewer going back. They arrived in swarms from the surface, overhead from the concrete plain where rockets roared out on takeoff or hissed in for landing. Transportation shunted the mob in one direction for interplanetary travel, in another for local air routes.

Jadiver reclaimed his bag, boarded the moving belts and hopped on and off several times, again just in case. The last time off, he had coins ready. He slipped around a corner and walked down a long quiet corridor. There were doors on either side, a double deck with a narrow balcony on the second story. At intervals, stairs led to the balcony.

He walked a third of the way down the corridor, inserted coins in the slot, and a door opened. He went inside the sleep locker and the door closed behind, locking automatically.

It was miserable accommodation if he intended to sleep, but he didn't. It was also a trap if the police were trailing him. He didn't think they were—they were too certain of him. Nevertheless, the sleep locker had one advantage: it was all metal. Considering the low power that probably went into the circuit, it should be a satisfactory temporary shield.

He changed into clothes that looked ordinary—out of style, in fact, though that was not noteworthy in a solarwide economy—but the material, following a local terrestrial fad of a few years back, contained a high proportion of metallic fiber. That solved only part of the problem, of course. His hands and his head were uncovered.

The pseudo-flesh that he had used on Emily was not for him. In a way, it was the best disguise, but he was playing this one to live, as much as he could, all the way. A standard semi-durable cosmetic would do; that is, it would when he finished altering it to suit his purpose.

The chief addition was a flaky metallic powder, lead. However the signal worked, radar or not, that should be effective in dampening the signal. He squeezed the mixture into a tube and attached the tube to a small gun which he plugged into a wall socket. Standing in front of the tiny mirror, with everything else cramped in the sleep locker, he went over his face and hands. He had trouble getting it on his scalp and under his hair, but it went on.

He looked himself over. He now appeared older, respectable, but not successful, which fitted neatly into the greatest category on Venus—or anywhere, for that

matter. He stuffed the clothing he'd worn back into the bag and walked out. He'd been in the sleep locker half an hour.

He was operating blind, but it was all he could do. He had to assume that the metallic fiber in his clothing and the lead flakes in the cosmetic would scramble the circuit signal. If they didn't, then he was completely without protection.

He'd soon know how correctly he had analyzed the problem.



He walked out of the transportation terminal and hailed an air cab which took him over the city and left him at the edge of a less reputable section.

It was not an old slum—Venicity hadn't endured long enough to have inherited slums; it built them quickly out of shoddy material and then tore them down again as the need for living space expanded outward.

He checked in at a hotel neither more nor less disreputable than the rest. The structure made up in number of rooms what it lacked in size and appearance.

This was the test period and he had to wait it out. If he passed, he was on an equal footing with any other person wanted by the police. He'd take his chances on that, his wits against their organization; he could disappear if he didn't carry a beacon around with him. This was the best place to spend the interim period, crowded together with people coming and going to and from the wild lands of Venus.

But if he didn't pass the test—

He refused to think about it.

He walked aimlessly in the grayness of the Venusian day. Different people from those in the bright new sections of Venicity, quieter, grimmer, more bewildered. Tough, but not the hardness of the criminal element. These people had no interest in either making or breaking the law.

After nightfall, he loitered on the streets for a few hours, watching faces. When policemen began appearing in greater numbers, he checked into his room.

It was a grimy, unpleasant place. Considering the comfort it offered, the rate was

exorbitant. Safety, however, if it did afford, and that was beyond price. He lay down, but couldn't sleep. The room, apparently, was designed on the acoustical principle of an echo chamber or a drum.

The adjacent room on one side was occupied by a man and woman. The woman, though, was not a woman. There was a certain pitch to the laughter that could come only from a robot. The management obviously offered attractions other than sleep.

The room on the other side was quieter. Somebody coughed twice, somebody sniffled once. Two of them, decided Jadiver, a man and a woman, both human. They weren't talking loud or much. He couldn't hear the words, but the sounds weren't gay.

In the hall, other voices intruded. Jadiver lay still. He could recognize the way of walking, the tone of voice. Cops. His test period wasn't lasting as long as he'd hoped.

"What good is it?" grumbled one, down the hall, but Jadiver could hear distinctly. "We had him dead center and now we've lost him. If I had my way, we'd have taken him sooner."



Jadiver's reasoning was not so good if the police were this close. He got up and crept noiselessly toward the door, fully dressed, as he had to be at all times if he expected to scramble the circuit signal.

The companion of the first policeman was more cheerful. "He's not lost. We've just mislaid him. We know the direction he's in. Follow the line and there he is at the end of it."

"Sounds good, but have we got him?"

"We will."

That was the fallacy. He'd scrambled the signal, but he hadn't eliminated it. He still showed up on the police instrument as a direction. He could imagine a technician sitting in front of a crazily wavering screen. The instrument could no longer pick up what he saw through his eyes, but it hadn't lost him altogether.

Jadiver clutched the tangle gun.

"Better check where we are," said the first officer.

"Going to," answered the second. Jadiver couldn't see, but he could visualize the pocket instrument. "This is Lieutenant Parder. How close are we?"

The voice came back, almost inaudible. What he could hear, though, was disturbing. It sounded like someone he knew, but not Doumya Filone. "You're off a hundred yards to your left," said the voice. "Also, he's a mile farther out. Either that or a hundred and fifty miles."

"He's really moving," said the lieutenant. "A hundred and fifty miles is in the middle of the swamp."

"I know that," said the tantalizing familiar voice. "I can't choose between outside and inside the city. If he's inside, I want him to move. That motion, extended a hundred and fifty miles, by simple mathematics will indicate a distance he couldn't possibly travel in the jungle." The voice paused. "We'll send a party to check the swamp. You go to the point a mile farther on. We want him tonight. If we don't get him, we'll probably have to wait until tomorrow night."

"I'll find him," said the lieutenant. "Report when I get there."

Jadiver could hear footsteps receding down the hall.

He breathed in relief. The makeshift shield hadn't been a total failure. They knew the direction, but not the distance from some central location. The scramble had affected the strength of the signal and they couldn't be sure.

The impromptu visit told him this as well: there was only one instrument on him. With two, they could work a triangulation, regardless of the signal strength.

He could hazard a guess as to why they had to get him at night. During the day, there were radiological disturbances originating in the atmosphere that made reception of the signals difficult. That meant that the day was safest for him.



He went back to the bed and lay down, to puzzle over the familiar voice, to sleep if he could. Sleep didn't come easily. The man and the female robot had left, but

the quiet couple on the other side had been awakened by the noise in the hall.

The woman sniffled. "I don't care, Henry. We're going back to Earth."

It was not an old voice, though he couldn't be sure, not seeing her. Thirty-five, say. Jadiver resented the intrusion at a time like this. He was trying to sleep, or think, he wasn't sure which.

"Now, hon, we can't," Henry whispered back. "We've bought the land and nobody's going to buy it back."

"We bought it when they told us there would be roses," said the woman, loud and bitter. "Great big roses, so big that most of the plant grew below ground, only the flower showing. So big, no stem could support them."

"Well, hon—"

"Don't hon me. There *are* roses, ten feet across, all over our land, just like they said." Her voice rose higher. "Mud roses, that's what they are. Stinking mud roses that collapse into a slimy hole in the ground."

She sniffled again. "Did you notice the pictures they showed us? People standing by the roses with their heads turned away. And you know why the pictures were like that? Because they didn't dare show us the expressions on those people's faces, that's why."

"It's not so bad," said the man soothingly. "Maybe we can do something about it."

"What can we do? The roses poison cattle and dogs run away from the smell. And we're humans. We're stronger, we're supposed to take it."

"I've been thinking," said Henry quietly. "I could take a long pipe and run it at an angle to the roots. I could force concrete through the pipe and seal it off below ground. When it collapsed, the rose wouldn't grow back."

The woman asked doubtfully, "Could you?"

"I think so. Of course I'd have to experiment to get the right kind of concrete."

"But what would we do with the hole it left?" There was a faint tremor of hope.

"We could haul away the slime," he said. "It would stop smelling after a while. We might even be able to use it for fertilizer."

"But there's still the hole."

"It would fill with water after the next rain. We could raise ducks in it."

"White ducks?"

"If you like."

The woman was silent. "If you think we can do it, then we'll try," she said. "We'll go back to our farm and forget about Earth."

Henry was silent, too. "They're kind of pretty, even if they do smell bad," he said after a long interval. "Maybe I could pump a different kind of cement, real thin, directly into the stem. It might travel up into the flower instead of down."

"And make them into stone roses," enthused the woman. "Mud roses into stone. I'd like that—a few of them—to remind us of what our farm was like when we came to it." She wasn't sniffing.

They had their own problems, decided Jadiver, and their own solution, which, in their ignorance, might actually work. He'd been like that when he first came to Venus, expecting great things. With him it had been different. He was an engineer, not a farmer, and he didn't want to be a farmer. There was nothing on Venus for him.

He couldn't stay much longer on Venus in any capacity. Earth was out of the question. Mars? If he could escape capture in the months that followed and then manage to get passage on a ship. It wasn't hopeless, but his chances weren't high.

The puzzling thing was why the police wanted him so badly. He was an accessory to a crime—several of them, in fact. But even if they regarded him as a criminal, they couldn't consider him an important one.

And yet they were staging a manhunt. He hated to think of the number of policemen looking for him. There must be a reason for it.

He had a few days left, possibly less. In that time, he would have to get off the planet or shed the circuit. Without drastic extensive surgery, there was not much hope he could peel off the circuit.

Unless—

He had received a message from someone self-identified as a friend. And that

friend knew about the circuit and claimed to be willing to help.

He kept seeing gray eyes and a strong, sad, indifferent face, even in his sleep.

He awakened later than he intended. Since daylight was safest for him, that was a serious error. He wasted no time in regret, but went immediately to the mirror. Under the makeup, his face was dirty and sweating. He didn't dare to remove the disguise for an instant, since to do so would be to expose himself to the instrument. He sprayed on a new face, altering the facial characteristics as best he could. His clothing, too, had to stay on. He roughed it up a bit, adding a year's wear to it.

For what it was worth, he didn't look quite the same as yesterday. Seedier and older. It was a process he couldn't keep extending indefinitely. He would not have to, of course. One way or the other, it would be decided soon.

He shredded the bag and his extra clothing, tossing them into the disposal chute. No use giving the police something to paw over, to deduce from it what they could. The tiny spray gun he kept, and the tube of makeup. He might need them once more.

It was close to noon when he left the room. There were lots of people on the streets and only a few policemen. Again he had an advantage.

He found a pay screen and began the search. Doctor Doumya Filone wasn't listed with the police and that seemed strange. A moment's reflection showed that it wasn't. If she were officially connected, she might not show the sympathy she had.

Neither was she listed on the staff of the emergency hospital in which he'd been a patient. He had a number through which he could reach her, but he resisted an impulse to use it. It was certain the police wouldn't confine their efforts to the instrument check. They knew he had that number and they'd have someone on it, tracing everyone who called her.

Noon passed and his stomach called attention to it. He hadn't eaten since yesterday. He took a short break, ate hurriedly, and resumed the search.

Doumya Filone was difficult to find. It was getting late and he had ascertained

she wasn't on the staff of any hospital not listed for private practice.

He finally located her almost by accident. She had an office with Medical Research Incorporated. That was the only thing registered under her name.

Evening came early to Venus, as it always did under the massive cloud formations. He got off the air cab a few blocks from his destination and walked the rest of the way.

Inside the building, he paused in the lobby and found her office. Luckily it was in a back wing. He wandered through the corridors, got lost once, and found the route again. The building was almost empty by this time.

Her name was on the door. Dr. Doumya Filone. Research Neurological Systems, whatever that meant. There was a light in the office, a dim one. He eased the door open. It wasn't locked, which meant, he hadn't tripped an alarm.



No one was inside. He looked around. There was another door in back. He walked over to it. It didn't lead to a laboratory, as he expected. Instead, there were living quarters. A peculiar way to conduct research.

The autobath was humming quietly. He sat down facing it and waited. She came out in a few minutes, hair disarranged, damp around her forehead. She didn't see him at first.

"Well," she said coolly, staring at him. There was no question that she recognized him through the disguise. She slipped quickly into a robe that, whatever it did for her modesty, subtracted nothing from the view. He wished he was less tired and could appreciate it.

She found a cigarette and lighted it. "You're pretty good, you know."

"Yeah." But not good enough, he thought.

"Why are you here?" she asked. She was nervous.

"You know," he said. She had promised him help once before. Now let her deliver. But she had to volunteer.

"I know." She looked down at her hands, long skilled hands. "I put in the circuit.

But I didn't choose you."

He began to understand part of it. The 'Medical Research' business was just a cover. The real work was done at the police emergency hospital. That was why she had no laboratory. And the raw material—

"Who did choose me?"

"The police. I have to take what they give me."

There were certain implications in that statement he didn't like. "Have there been others?"

"Two before you."

"What happened to them?"

"They died."

He didn't like where this was taking him. His hand slid toward the tangle gun in his pocket. "Maybe I should die, too."

She nodded. "That would be one solution." She added harshly: "They shouldn't have taken you. Legally speaking, you're not a criminal. But I couldn't investigate you personally before I put the circuit in."

Why not? Was she an automaton that reacted in response to a button? In a way she was, but the button was psychological.

"That doesn't help me," he said tiredly. "The police wanted to catch Burlingame through me. That's right, isn't it?"

She indicated that it was.

"I did, without knowing what I was doing," he went on. "Now I want out. Even if I cooperated with the cops, which I'm not going to do, I'm of no further value to them. Every criminal on Venus knows about me by now."

"That's part of it," she said. "But there's more. You've tied up the machine and neither I nor the police can use it."



Explanations were coming faster. It was no wonder the police wanted him badly. They had a perfect device to use against criminals, which was all they were concerned with, and they couldn't use it as long as the circuit was in him. It made sense, but that kind of logic was deadly—for him.

"I'll face it," he said. "I'll take whatever charge they hang on me. It shouldn't be more than a few years. You can use the time to take this damn thing out of me. Only I want a guarantee first."

She got up and stood with the light behind her. It was deliberately intended to distract him. Under other circumstances, it would have.

"If it were a small circuit, over just a fraction of your body, I could cut it out," she said. "But the way it is, I can't. It would kill you."

At least she was honest about it. And he still didn't know what she meant when she had written, with his hands in the apartment, that she would help him. He would have to find out.

"I can smash the machine," he said. "That's the other solution."

She leaned against the wall. "You can't. And neither can I, though it's technically my machine. It's in the police department with an armed guard around it at all times. Besides, the machine can defend itself."

He looked at her without understanding. It didn't sound right. He was sweating under the makeup and part of it was coming loose.

"Then what did you mean when you said you'd help?" he asked. "You promised, but what can you do?"

"I never promised to help." It was her turn not to understand. Her hand slipped down and so did the robe.

She was lying to him, had been lying all along. She never intended to help, though she said she would. The purpose? To lead him into a trap. She'd been successful enough. He looked up in anger, in time to see an object hurtling from her hand.

It struck him on the side of the head, hard. Some of the makeup chipped and fell off, but that was less important than yanking out the tangle gun. He fired twice, once at her feet and once at her shoulders. He had aimed at her head, but the shot

went low.



Her face was still pretty, though no longer indifferent or so strong. "What do you want?" she screamed. "Why don't you leave me alone? I can't help you. Nobody can."

She was standing there rigid, not daring to move. The robe rippled in a breeze from the vent and the tangle stuff gripped it and the fabric tore. She'd stand there a few more hours and then topple over. They'd find her in the morning and remove the tangle with the special tongs.

As for himself, it was too late. He might have got off Venus at one time if he had concentrated on it. He hadn't tried harder because of Doumya Filone. He had *wanted* to believe her because—well, because.

"I told you I'd help, Jadiver. I will." The voice was distinct.

It wasn't Doumya Filone who'd said it. A tangle strand had worked up her throat and gripped her face. She couldn't speak if she tried. Her gray eyes weren't gray; they were the color of tears.

He looked around. It wasn't Doumya Filone—and there wasn't any other person in the room.

"I've kept the police away," said the familiar voice. "I can protect you for a while longer. There's still time to save yourself. But you have to guess right. You can't make any more mistakes."

Strictly speaking, it wasn't a voice. Doumya Filone didn't hear it; that was obvious. It was the circuit then. Someone was making use of the machine to actuate the auditory nerve directly. That was what he seemed to hear.

Jadiver was tired and his body grimy, muscles twitching under the tension. But if his unknown friend—real, after all—could out-wit a room full of police and tinker with the mechanism which was supposed to spot him, he couldn't do less.

He grinned. "I'll make it this time. I know what to do."

"The police haven't given up," said the voice. "I'm going to be busy with them. Don't expect further communication from me."

He didn't know who the person was, in spite of the haunting familiarity of the voice. And he wasn't going to find out soon. Probably never. It was enough, however, to know that he had a friend.

He left Doumya Filone standing there, which was a mistake, he realized as he reached the front office. He should have fired once more at her hands. The screen was crackling; her hands had been free and she'd managed to turn the screen on before the tangle strands interfered with her movement.

He'd made a grave error, but not necessarily fatal. It would be some time before anyone got there. By then he hoped to be safe.

He slipped through the corridors, went out the rear of the building and looked around for an air cab. The place was deserted at this hour and no cabs were in the nearby sky.

He had to walk and he didn't have that much time. He headed toward the nearest main thoroughfare. It was in the opposite direction to his destination, but he should be able to find an air cab there. He was walking too fast, for a light flashed down on him. He wasn't presentable and his haste was suspicious.

"Stop," said the amplified voice. It was probably just a routine check, but he couldn't risk even that.

He dodged into a space between two buildings and began to run. In the center of town, this would be a blind alley, but in this section it wasn't. There was a chance he could lose them. The buildings were just high enough so that they couldn't use the air car and they'd have to follow on foot.

The patrol car alighted almost instantly and one of the policemen started after him. The man following him knew his business and was in good physical condition, better than Jadiver was after days of tension and little sleep.

Jadiver turned and snapped a half dozen shots at his pursuer. He was lucky, a couple were close enough. The policeman crashed to the ground and began to swear. His voice was choked off in seconds.

The other one got out of the patrol car and let it stand. It was the principle of the thing: nobody did that to a policeman. Jadiver had a substantial lead and it was

dark, but he didn't know the route. Jadiver was enormously tired and this was the policeman's regular beat. The gap between them closed rapidly.

Out of breath and time and space to move around in, Jadiver took the wrong turn because the man was so close—and found himself boxed in.



Crouching, Jadiver fired at the oncoming man, a dark shape he sensed rather than saw. The tangle gun clicked futilely, out of ammunition. He fumbled hastily for a clip; before he could reload, the policeman squeezed the trigger and held it down.

The bullets didn't hit him, they were set to detonate a fraction of an inch away. He gave up and awaited the constricting violence of the tangle strands.

The bullets detonated and the strands flashed out, glowing slightly in the darkness. They never touched him; instead, they bent into strange shapes and flipped away. The stickiest substance known, and one of the strongest, from which there was no escape, yet it would not adhere to him—was, in fact, forcefully repelled!

It was that skin, of course, the synthetic substance they had put on him over the circuit. They should have tested it under these conditions. They might not have been so anxious to boil men alive.

He felt that he was almost invincible. It was an exhilarating feeling. He stopped trying to reload the tangle gun and stood up. He sprinted at the policeman, who stood his ground, firing frantically at a target he could not miss and yet did not hit. The tangle strands shattered all around the target.

Jadiver swung the gun with his remaining strength; the butt connected with the policeman's forehead.

Jadiver scooped up the discarded tangle gun and fired twice at close range, in case the man should decide to revive too soon, which was doubtful. He went back and entered the idling patrol car. He hadn't lost much time, after all.

He sat the car down on top of a building near the edge of the rocketport, straightened his clothing and wiped the grime off his face. Some of the disguise went, too, but that no longer mattered much.

He stepped out of the elevator and walked casually along the street until he came to the interplanetary flight office. The same robot was there—would be there every hour, day and night, until the rocketport was expanded and the building torn down and rebuilt, or the robot itself wore out and had to be replaced.

The clerk looked up eagerly. "You're back. I knew I could count on you."

"I'm interested in that flight you were telling me about," said Jadiver.

"We've changed rates," the robot clerk replied, beaming. "It was a bargain before, but just listen to the revised offer. We pay you, on a per diem basis—subjective, of course. When you arrive, you actually have a bank account waiting for you."

Per diem, subjective—the time that *seemed* to elapse when the rocket was traveling near the speed of light. It wasn't as good as the robot made it sound.

"Never mind that," said Jadiver. "I'll take it if it's going far."

"Going far!" echoed the clerk.

A policeman sauntered by outside, just looking, but that was enough.

"I said I'd take it," Jadiver repeated in a loud voice.

The clerk deflated. "I wish I could go with you," it explained wistfully. It reached under the counter and pulled out a perforated tape. "This will get you on the ship, and it also constitutes the contract. Just present it at the other end and collect your money. You can send for your baggage after you're on board."

Jadiver opened his mouth and then closed it. His baggage was intangible, mostly experience, not much of it pleasant.

"I'll do that," he said.

The clerk came out from behind the counter and watched Jadiver leave. Lights from the rocketport glittered in its robot eyes.



Jadiver paced about the ship. It was not enough to be on it, for the police could still trace him. And if they did, they could get him off. It was not only himself,

there was his unknown friend. They had ways to learn about that.

He passed a vision port on his way through the ship. It was night, but it didn't seem so on the vast, brightly lighted concrete plain. A strange vehicle streaked across the surface of the rocketport in defiance of all regulations and common sense.

It was coming his way. It dodged in and out of rockets landing and taking off, escaping blazing destruction with last minute, intricate maneuvers. The driver had complete control of the vehicle and was fantastically skillful.

It was a strange machine. Jadiver had never seen anything quite like it. As far as he knew, it resembled nothing the police used.

It didn't halt outside the ship. The loading ramp was down and the machine came up without hesitation. The entrance was too narrow and the vehicle would never get through—that seemed evident. An instant later, he was not so sure. The ship quivered and groaned and vibrations ran throughout the structure.

He leaned over the railing and looked down. The machine was inside, dented and scraped.

"Captain," bellowed a voice from the vehicle. It was an authoritative voice and it puzzled Jadiver.

The captain came running, either in response to the command or to find out how much damage had been done in the crash and why.

"Take off, Captain," said the voice. "Take off at once."

The captain sputtered. "I give orders here. I'll take off when I get ready."

"You're ready when the ship reaches a certain mass. As soon as I came on board, you attained it. Check your mass gauges, Captain."

The captain hurried to the gauges and glanced at them. He stared back at the machine.

"Captain," purred the machine, "you have a little daughter. By the time you get back, she will be grown and will have children of her own. The sooner you leave, the sooner you will see her again. I will regard it as a personal favor if you see that we take off immediately."

The captain looked at the machine. Tentacles and eye stalks rose up out of the tip as he watched. It was a big machine, well put together, and it appeared quite capable of handling a roomful of armed men. As a matter of fact, it just had.

The captain shrugged and gave the order to lift ship.

It was none too soon. Out of the visionport, Jadiver could see uniformed men edging up from the underground shelters. They backed out of sight when the rockets began to flame.

Faster the ship rose and higher. They were in the dense clouds and then through them, out in the clear black of space, away from Venus.

Jadiver looked down at the machine. It wasn't a vehicle. It was a robot, and it was familiar.

"It ought to be familiar," said the robot softly. That voice was for him alone, directly on the auditory nerve. "You designed most of it back on Earth, remember?"

He remembered. It was not a pretty imitation of a human—it was his perfect robot. And it was also, his unknown friend, the one who had watched over him.

He walked slowly down the stairs and stood beside it.

The robot switched to the regular speaking voice. "They built your design, after all. They needed a big and powerful mobile robot, one that could house, in addition to the regular functions, an extensive and delicate mechanism."

That was the voice that had haunted him so long and in so many situations. It was not Jadiver's own voice, but it resembled his. A third person might not recognize the difference.

"That other mechanism," said Jadiver. "Is that the one that monitors the circuit in my body?"

"That *parallels* the circuit in your body." Tentacles were busy straightening out the dents. "When I was built, they gave me a good mind, better than your own in certain respects. What I lacked was sensory perception. Eyes and ears, to be

sure, good ones in a way, but without the delicate shadings a human has, particularly tactile interpretations. I didn't need better, they thought, because my function was to observe and report on the parallel circuit I mentioned.

"In the beginning, that circuit was a formless matrix and only faintly resembled your nervous system. As nerve data was exchanged back and forth, it began to resemble you more and more, especially your mind. Now, for practical purposes, it is you and I can look into it at will."

Jadiver stirred uneasily.

"Don't you understand?" asked the robot. "My mind isn't yours, and vice versa. But we do have one thing in common, a synthetic nervous system which, if you were killed, would begin to disintegrate slowly and painfully. And now that it's developed as much as it is, I would probably die, too, since that synthetic nervous system is an otherwise unused part of my brain."

"There were two other victims before me," said Jadiver.

"There were, but they were derelicts—dead, really, before the experiment got started. They lasted a few hours. I tried to help them, but it was too late. It was not pleasant for me."



Not only was it a friend; it had a vital interest in keeping him alive. He could trust it, had to. After what had happened, doubt wasn't called for.

Jadiver rubbed his weary eyes. "That shield I used," he said. "Did it work?"

The robot laughed—Jadiver's laughter. It had copied him in many ways. "It worked to your disadvantage. The circuit signals got through to me, but I couldn't send any back until Doumya Filone chipped off part of your disguise. Then I spoke to you. Before that, I had to misdirect the police. I built up a complete and false history for you and kept them looking where you weren't."

If he had thought, he would have known it had to be that way. The police were efficient; they could have taken him long ago without the aid of the circuit. But it had seemed so easy and they had trusted the robot—had to where the circuit was concerned. No man could sit in front of a screen and interpret the squiggles that meant his hand was touching an apple.

Jadiver sat down. The strain was over and he was safe, bound for some far-off place.

"The police used you, though not as much as you used them," he said. "Still, they didn't develop the theory."

"They didn't. There was a man on Earth, a top-notch scientist. He worked out the theory and set up the mechanism. He had a surgical assistant, a person who would never be more than that on Earth because she wasn't good on theory, though she was a whiz at surgery. She realized it and got his permission to build another machine and take it to Venus. Originally it was intended to accumulate data on the workings of the human nervous system.

"On Venus, things were different. Laws concerning the rights of individuals are not so strict. She got the idea of examining the whole nervous system at once, not realizing what it meant because it had never been done that way. She discussed it with officials from the police department who saw instantly what she didn't—that once an extensive circuit was in a human, there was no way to get it out, except by death. They had no objections and were quite willing to furnish her with specimens, for their own purposes and only incidentally hers. Once the first man died, they had her and wouldn't let her back out, though she wanted to."

"Specimen," repeated Jadiver. "Yeah, I was a specimen to her." His head was heavy. "Why didn't you tell me this in the beginning?"

"Would you have listened when I first contacted you?" asked the robot. "Later, perhaps. But once you put on the shield, I couldn't get in touch with you until you were with Doumya Filone."



Would Jadiver have listened? Not until it became a matter of raw survival. Even now he hated to leave Earth and what it meant for the unknown dangers and tedium of a planet circling an alien sun. It was more than that, of course. Just as he'd had a design for a perfect robot, he had in mind a perfect woman. He could recognize either when he saw it.

"Doumya Filone was the assistant?"

"She was." The robot was his now, Jadiver knew. Others had built it, but it belonged to him by virtue of a nervous system. It had as good a mind as his, but it wouldn't dispute his claim. "Like yourself," continued the robot, "in the Solar System she would never have been more than second rate, and she wanted to be first. Hardly anyone recognizes it, but the Solar System is not what it once was. It's like a nice neighborhood that decays so slowly that the people in it don't notice what it's become. There are some who can rise even in a slum, but they're the rare exceptions.

"Others need greater opportunity than slums offer. They have to leave if they expect to develop freely. But the hold of a whole culture is strong and it's hard to persuade them that they have to go." The robot paused. "Take a last look at a blighted area."

Outside planets glimmered in the distance.

Jadiver was tired and his eyes were closing. Now he could sleep safely, but not in peace.

"Don't regret it," advised the robot. "Where you're going, you'll have real designs to work on. No more pretty robot faces."

"Where is it—Alpha Centauri?" Jadiver asked disinterestedly.

"That ship left yesterday. They got their quota and left within the hour, before any of the passengers could change their minds. We're going farther, to Sirius."



Sirius. A mighty sun, with planets to match. It was a place to be big. Big and lonely.

"I can't force you to do anything," said the robot. It sounded pleased. "But I have no inhibitions about others."

The robot flipped up its cowl. There was a storage space and a woman in it.

Except for her hands, she was bound tightly by tangle strands.

"I don't think she likes you at the moment," said the robot. "She'll tell you that as soon as she's able to speak. She may relent later, when she realizes what it's

really like on Sirius. You've got the whole voyage to convince her."

The eye-stalks of the robot followed Jadiver interestedly. "Are you looking for the tongs? Remember that the tangle stuff is repelled by your skin."

Jadiver willingly used his hands and the tangle strands fell off.

As the robot had predicted, Doumya Filone was not silent—at first.

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