





Think Yourself to Death

Stephen Marlowe

Published: 1957

Categorie(s): Fiction, Science Fiction, Short Stories

Source: <http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/32827>

About Marlowe:

Stephen Marlowe (born Milton Lesser, 7 August 1928 in Brooklyn, NY, died 22 February 2008, in Williamsburg, Virginia) was an American author of science fiction, mystery novels, and fictional autobiographies of Christopher Columbus, Spanish author Miguel de Cervantes, and Edgar Allan Poe. He is best known for his detective character Chester Drum, whom he created in the 1955 novel *The Second Longest Night*. Lesser also wrote under the pseudonyms Adam Chase, Andrew Frazer, C.H. Thames, Jason Ridgway and Ellery Queen. He was awarded the French Prix Gutenberg du Livre in 1988, and in 1997 he was awarded the "Life Achievement Award" by the Private Eye Writers of America. He lived with his wife Ann in Williamsburg, Virginia.

Also available on Feedbooks Marlowe:

- *Quest of the Golden Ape* (1957)
- *Home is Where You Left It* (1957)
- *World Beyond Pluto* (1958)
- *A Place in the Sun* (1956)
- *Voyage To Eternity* (1953)
- *Earthsmith* (1953)
- *The Graveyard of Space* (1956)
- *Summer Snow Storm* (1956)
- *The Dictator* (1955)
- *Black Eyes and the Daily Grind* (1952)

Copyright: Please read the legal notice included in this e-book and/or check the copyright status in your country.

Note: This book is brought to you by Feedbooks
<http://www.feedbooks.com>

Strictly for personal use, do not use this file for commercial purposes.

Transcriber Note: This etext was produced from Amazing Stories March 1957. Extensive research did not uncover any evidence that the U.S. copyright on this publication was renewed.

When he reached Ophiuchus, Johnny Mayhem was wearing the body of an elderly Sirian gentleman.

Nothing could have been more incongruous. The Sirian wore a pinc-nez, a dignified two-piece jumper in a charcoal color, sedate two-tone boots and a black string-tie.

The loiterers in the street near the Galactic Observer's building looked, and pointed, and laughed. Using the dignity of the dead Sirian, whose body he wore like other people wear clothing, Johnny Mayhem ignored them. They had a point, of course. It was hot and humid on Ophiuchus IX. The loiterers in the dusty, evil-smelling streets wore nothing but loin cloths.

Mayhem went inside the building, which was air-conditioned. Probably it was the only air-conditioned structure on the entire planet. Mayhem dabbed at his Sirian forehead gratefully, mopping at sweat. As near as he could figure, his life expectancy in this body was down to three days, Earth style. He wondered fleetingly why the Galactic League had sent him here to Ophiuchus. He shrugged, knowing he would find out soon enough.

The Galactic Observer on Ophiuchus IX, a middle-aged Indian from Bombay named Kovandaswamy, wore an immaculate white linen loin cloth on his plump body and a relieved smile on his worried face when Mayhem entered his office. The two men shook hands.

"So you're Mayhem?" Kovandaswamy said in English. "They told me to expect you, sir. Pardon my staring, but I've never been face to face with a legend before. I'm impressed."

Mayhem laughed. "You'll get over it."

"Well, at least as a Sirian gentleman, you're not very prepossessing. That helps."

"It wasn't my idea. It never is."

"I know. I know that, sir." Kovandaswamy got up nervously from his desk and paced across the room. "Do you know anything about Ophiuchus IX, Mayhem?"

"Not much. It's one of the Forgotten Worlds, isn't it?"

"Precisely, sir. Ophiuchus IX is one of scores of interstellar worlds colonized in the first great outflux from Earth."

"You mean during the population pressure of the 24th century?"

"Exactly. Then Ophiuchus IX, like the other Forgotten Worlds, was all but forgotten. As you know, Mayhem, the first flux of colonization receded like a wave, inertia set in, and the so-called Forgotten Worlds became isolated from the rest of the galaxy for generations. Only in the past fifty years are we finding them again, one by one. Ophiuchus IX is typical, isolated from the galaxy at large by a dust cloud that—"

"I know. I came through it."

"It was colonized originally with Indians from southern and eastern India, on Earth. That's why the Galactic League appointed me Observer. I'm an Indian. These people—well, they're what my people might have developed into if they'd lived for hundreds of years in perfect isolation."

"What's the trouble?"

Kovandaswamy answered with a question of his own. "You are aware of the Galactic League's chief aim?"

"Sure. To see that no outworld, however small or distant, is left in isolation. Is that what you mean?"

"Yes," agreed Kovandaswamy. "Their reason is obvious. For almost a thousand years now the human race has outpaced its social and moral development with development in the physical sciences. For almost a thousand years mankind has had the power to destroy itself. In isolation this is possible. With mutual interchange of ideas, it is extremely unlikely. Thus, in the interests of human survival, the Galactic League tries to thwart isolated development. So far, the Forgotten Worlds have cooperated. But Ophiuchus IX is an exception."

"And the League wants me to find out why?"

"Precisely."

"How are they thwarting—"

Kovandaswamy was sweating despite the air-conditioning, despite his almost-naked state. "You have the right to turn this mission down, of course. The League told me that."

"I'm here," Mayhem said simply.

"Very well, sir. Sooner or later, every outworlder who ventures out among the Ophiuchans kills himself."

"I guess I didn't hear you. Did you say kills himself?"

"Suicide, Mayhem. Exactly."

"But how can you blame—"

"Like their ancestors from the Earthian sub-continent of India, Mayhem, the Ophiuchans are mystics. The trance, the holy man who sits in contemplation of his navel, the World Spirit—these are the things of their culture most important to them. Mayhem, did you ever see a hundred holy men of India working together?"

"Usually they don't work together."

"Precisely, sir. Precisely. Here on Ophiuchus, they do. And not merely a hundred. All of them. Virtually all of them. Working together, their minds in trance, unified, seeking their World Spirit, they can do amazing things."

"Like mentally forcing the outworlders to kill themselves?"

"Yes, sir. Legally, they are innocent. Morally, they do not recognize the outworlders as equals of themselves. The League wants to know what they are trying to hide. It could be a threat to peace and—existence."

"You have a body for me?" Johnny would be ready with that provided.

If anyone but Johnny Mayhem had asked that question, Kovandaswamy would not have known what he was talking about, or would have thought him insane, or both. But Johnny Mayhem was, of course, the legendary Man Without a Body. How many corporeal shells had he inhabited in the past half dozen years? He shrugged, not remembering. He couldn't remain in one body more than a month: it would mean the final death of his *elan*, his bodiless sentience. So far he had avoided that death.

The Galactic League would help him if it could. Every world which had a human population and a Galactic League post, however small, must have a body in cold storage, waiting for Johnny Mayhem if his services were required. But no one knew exactly under what

circumstances the Galactic League Council, operating from the hub of the Galaxy, might summon Mayhem. And only a very few people, including those at the Hub and the Galactic League Firstmen on civilized worlds and Observers on primitive worlds, knew the precise mechanism of Mayhem's coming. To others it was a weird mystery.

Johnny Mayhem, bodiless sentience. Mayhem—Johnny Marlow then—who had been chased from Earth, a pariah and a criminal, almost seven years ago, who had been mortally wounded on a wild planet deep within the Saggitarian Swarm, whose life had been saved—after a fashion—by the white magic of the planet. Mayhem, doomed now to possible immortality as a bodiless sentience, an *elan*, which could occupy and activate a fresh corpse or one which had been frozen properly ... an *elan* doomed to wander eternally because it could not remain in one body for more than a month without body and *elan* perishing. Mayhem, who had dedicated his strange, lonely life to the service of the Galactic League because a normal life and normal social relations were not possible for him... .

"Then you'll do it?" Kovandaswamy asked on Ophiuchus IX. "Even though you realize we can give you no official help not only because the Galactic League approves of your work unofficially but can't sanction it officially, but because an outworlder can't set his foot outside this building for long or off the spacefield without risking death... ."

"By suicide?"

"Yes. I'm practically a prisoner in Galactic League Headquarters, as is my staff. You see—"

"What about the body?"

Kovandaswamy looked at him nervously. "A native, Mayhem. A native won't be molested, you see."

"That figures. What kind of native?"

"In top shape, sir. Healthy, young, in the prime of life you might say."

"Then what's bothering you?"

"Nothing. Nothing, sir."

"Your technicians are ready?"

"Yes, sir. And vowed to secrecy."

Mayhem found a tiny capsule in the pocket of his Sirian jumper, and popped it in his mouth.

"What—what's that?" Kovandaswamy asked.

Mayhem swallowed. "Curare," he said.

"Curare! A poison!"

"Paralysis," said Mayhem quickly. "Muscular paralysis. You die because you stop breathing. Painless ... and... ."

"But—"

"Call your technicians ... new body ... ready... ." Gasping, the Sirian gentleman, hardly Johnny Mayhem now, fell to the floor.

Trembling, Kovandaswamy pressed a button on his desk. A few moments later, two white-coated technicians entered the office.

"Project M," Kovandaswamy said.

Grimly the technicians went to work.

Mayhem awoke.

Ordinarily it was his *elan* alone which journeyed between the worlds, his *elan* which was fed the information it would need in hypno-sleep while the frozen body was thawed out. Sometimes, however, he came the normal way in a body which still had some of its thirty days left, as he had come to Ophiuchus IX in the Sirian gentleman.

Darkness. The body felt young and healthy. Mayhem wondered vaguely how it had died, then decided it did not really matter. For the next thirty days the body would live again, as Johnny Mayhem.

Recessed lighting glowed at the juncture of walls and ceiling. Mayhem was reclining on a cot. A loin cloth and a large shawl had been laid out for him. On the far wall of the room was a tinted mirror. Mayhem got up and went over there.

What his new body looked like hardly mattered, he told himself. Youth, health, strength—these were important. He could sense them internally. He could... .

He stared at the image in the mirror. His face turned beet red. He went for the shawl and the loin cloth and put them on. Cursing, he went to find Kovandaswamy.

"Is this supposed to be a joke?" Mayhem demanded.

"You never asked what the—" Kovandaswamy began.

"How am I supposed to find out anything—like this?"

"It's a young body, a healthy body. It is also the one we were given when the Galactic League first came here. It is the only one we were given."

"Take it or leave it, eh?"

"I'm afraid so, Mayhem."

"All right. All right, I guess I shouldn't complain. It could probably outrun and outfight and outthink the dyspeptic old Sirian gentleman, and things turned out well enough on Sirius III. But it'll probably take most of my time just getting used to it, Kovandaswamy. I'm supposed to be conducting an investigation."

"At least as an Ophiuchan you won't arouse suspicion."

Mayhem nodded slowly, with reluctance. There was nothing else to say. He shook hands with Kovandaswamy and, wearing the loin cloth and the shawl, left the Galactic League building.

With, of course, a completely new identity.

Mayhem walked a mile and a half through hot, arid country. The League building was isolated, as if its inmates might contaminate the native Ophiuchans. Along the dusty road Mayhem passed a *guru*, the name for a wise man or a holy man first in India and now here on Ophiuchus IX. The guru sat in contemplation of the tip of his nose, legs crossed, soles of feet up, eyes half-closed. The guru remained that way, without moving, until Mayhem was out of sight. Then the guru behaved in a very un-guru-like manner.

The guru got up quite nimbly, joints creaking, skin dry and cracked. Three strides brought him to a tree with a partly hollow trunk. He lifted a radio transmitter and began to talk.

In twenty generations, the initially small population of Ophiuchus IX, all colonists from India on Earth, had increased geometrically. The colonized planet, now, was as over-populated as the teeming sub-continent which long ago had sent the colonists seeking a new home. As a result, unemployment was chronic, discontent widespread, and whatever inner serenity mysticism might bring was widely sought after. This did not stop the non-mystics, however, of

whom there were many, from seeking jobs that could pay money that could fill empty bellies... .

A long line gathered outside the employment office of Denebian Exports the morning after Mayhem had left the League building in his new body. Denebian Exports was the largest outworld company currently on Ophiuchus, a company which had solved the outworlder-suicide problem quite simply by hiring no one but natives. Still, hoots and catcalls surrounded those on the employment line. Other jobless Ophiuchans, apparently preferring near-starvation to working for the outworlders, threatened to make the situation dangerous.

Pandit Gandhi Menon, a lean, handsome Ophiuchan of perhaps thirty years, wished there was some way he could shut his ears to the abuse. He needed work. His father and mother were ill, his child was starving, his wife already dead. The gurus offered their own unique solution, of course. The body is nothing, they said. The mind is everything. But thus had the gurus spoken for four thousand years, on Earth and on Ophiuchus. The great majority of Ophiuchans, Pandit Gandhi Menon included, preferred food for the body to food for mystic thought. Still, the crowds were ugly, threatening to break up the line of job-seekers if Denebian Exports didn't open its doors soon... .

An unkempt little man, not old but with a matted growth of beard, an unwashed body which gave the impression of wiry strength, and wild eyes, abruptly flung himself at the young woman in line in front of Pandit.

Shouting, "Not our women, too!" the little man attacked the girl, trying to drag her from the line. "It is bad enough our men, but not our women!"

Pandit caught the fanatic's wiry arm and brought it behind his scrawny back in a hammerlock. "Leave her alone," he said. "If you try that again, I'll break your arm."

The fanatic looked at Pandit with hate in his eyes, but stepped back and stood to one side mouthing invective.

The girl, who was about twenty-five years old, had a livid mark on her arm. She wore loin cloth and shawl, the usual garb. She was, Pandit observed for the first time, quite pretty.

"Thank you," she said. "I—I'm not sure I like working for the outworlders. But I need the money."

"Don't we all," Pandit told her. "But we're not hired yet. I am Pandit Gandhi Menon."

"Sria Krishna," the girl said, smiling at him. "What sort of work is it?"

"Don't you know, Sria Krishna?"

The girl shook her head and Pandit said: "Actually, I guess I don't know, either. But there are rumors the outworlders want jet-pilots. Not for rocketry. For jets. To fly to the Empty Places."

"The Empty Places? Why?"

Pandit shrugged. "Because they are empty, perhaps. Because they are too dry and too arid to support life. Because Denebian Export can claim whatever it found there, for free export. So go the rumors. But surely you can't pilot a jet."

"Can you?"

"Yes," Pandit said promptly with a faint show of pride.

"My father taught me. I want to thank you for what—"

"Nothing. Anyone in my position would have done it. This rabble —"

The rabble was still noisy. Occasionally they hurled offal at the stragglers joining the rear of the long line. But Pandit and Sria Krishna stood in the forefront, and presently the door opened. In a few minutes Pandit watched the girl disappear inside. He waited nervously, licking dry lips with a parched tongue. It was early morning, but already very hot. He needed the work. Any work. He needed the money which outworlders could pay so abundantly for honest work. He wondered if the fanatic gurus ever thought of that. Then the door in front of him opened again and a fat, unctuous-looking Ophiuchan came out. He seemed to be an official of sorts.

"One more!" he said. "Only one! The rest of you begone."

Behind Pandit there was a general press of bodies, but he was first in line and did not surrender his position. The unctuous-looking man admitted him, half-expecting a bribe. Pandit passed him by; he didn't have a single copper.

He approached a desk. The crowd noise outside was loud, those who had not joined the line crowding because most of those on it had been turned away. Behind the desk sat a small Denebian man of middle years. He looked nervous.

"Can you fly?" he asked in a voice almost desperately thin.

"Yes," Pandit said. Then the rumors were right.

"How much experience?"

"Five years on and off."

"You have a license?"

"There are no licenses on Ophiuchus IX," Pandit pointed out.

"Yes, of course. I'm sorry. Habit. You people don't lie."

"We try not to."

"Your name?"

Pandit told him. The Denebian wrote it down on a form and said: "You'll do. Pay is twenty credits a mission." It wasn't much, but it was more than Pandit had expected.

"What do we fly?" he asked. Questions didn't seem welcome, but no harm trying.

The Denebian looked at him and laughed. "You want the job?"

"Yes, I want the job."

"Then don't ask questions."

Pandit nodded.

"Out through that door, then. The other new pilots are assembling."

And Pandit left the small office.

A moment later a buzzer sounded on the Denebian's desk. He spoke into a grid: "Orkap here. Go ahead."

"The guru near the League building reports that a native Ophiuchan left the building heading for the city."

"When was this?"

"Yesterday morning."

"And?"

"Draw your own conclusions. Natives don't go near the League headquarters as a rule, do they?"

"No."

"And the League, of course, will want to know about the suicides?"

"Yes, but—"

"But nothing," said the radio voice, which belonged to the only other Denebian currently on Ophiuchus IX. "We can assume this native is a spy. For the League, Orkap."

"All right. I don't see any need to worry, though."

"Don't you? The gurus, like the other natives, can sham, but they can't lie. Sooner or later a guru will be brought out of trance by the League, questioned, and—"

"Tell them about us?" Orkap asked in a shocked voice.

"It could happen. Maybe it's happened already. There won't be any proof, of course, but the League would send a spy. Suppose I describe this native to you."

Orkap said, "Go ahead," and the radio voice did so.

In a shocked voice Orkap admitted: "I've given that Ophiuchan a pilot's job this morning. There can't be any doubt about it."

"Ah, then you see? You see?"

"I can fix that. I can—"

"Orkap, Orkap. You'll do nothing now. Let the spy alone for now. Then, in the Empty Places, you will merely announce to the pilots that there is a spy among them. Don't reveal who it is." He could not believe his ears.

"But—"

"They want work. They need work. They'll all be afraid the finger of guilt may point at them. They'll work like dogs for you, and I wouldn't be surprised if they uncovered the spy themselves."

"Yes," Orkap said. "Yes, I understand."

"All but one thing, Orkap. There is one thing you don't understand. The spy's identity—"

"You already told me who the spy was."

"Yes. But there is another spy. Working for us, in the League building."

"I never knew," said Orkap.

"The spy among your pilots is more than appearance indicates. Did you ever hear of Johnny Mayhem?"

Orkap's heart jumped into his throat. Who in the galaxy hadn't heard of Mayhem? "But," he gasped, "a—"

"Nevertheless. It is Mayhem."

Orkap was suddenly afraid, more afraid than he had ever been in his life. The ubiquitous Mayhem.

The fierce white sun of Ophiuchus IX broiled down on the Empty Places, a featureless desert two-thousand miles across and as lividly white as bleached bone. In all that burning emptiness, the jet cargo craft looked very small and very insignificant, like black midges on the dead white sand.

Midges among midges, the new pilots walked.

One said: "But I see no cargo."

Another: "These outworlders and their mystery... ."

All were sweating, all uncomfortable, but all grateful for the twenty credits a flight they would earn, whatever the cargo turned out to be.

"What do you think?" Pandit asked Sria.

"I think I've never been so hot in my life. I feel like I'm being broiled alive."

"Here comes the Denebian now."

They had been driven into the Empty Places in a sand sled. The trip had taken two days but because the sled was air-conditioned no one had objected. When they saw the half dozen jets they knew why a sled had taken them into the wilderness. The jets were small cargo-carriers with room for pilot, co-pilot and perhaps a ton of cargo in each. Whatever it was the Denebians wanted exported, it didn't take up much room.

Orkap of Deneb walked toward them past the first of the jets. He began without preamble: "Your cargo is packed and ready to be moved in an underground vault five hundred yards from here. You

will break up into pairs, a pilot and co-pilot for each jet." Sria Krishna and Pandit had already paired themselves together. "You work on your own time, getting the cargo with trundle-sleds, loading it, taking off, delivering it to the Denebian freighter at the spaceport. When you are finished, you collect your pay."

"Where do we sleep?" someone asked.

Orkap smiled. "You didn't come out here to sleep. There is only a limited amount of cargo. The jets are swift. You will be paid according to the amount of work you do. Any other questions?"

"What about food?" a plump young Ophiuchan asked.

"You will be given energy tablets, as many as you wish. Any other questions? No? Good. I have two additional things to say. First, you are not to examine your cargo under any circumstances, either here, or in transit, or on the spacefield. There are televid pick-up units in each jet, so you will be watched at all times. Second—" Orkap paused and let the silence grow and spread across the dazzling white expanse—"there is a spy among you, wearing the body of an Ophiuchan but in reality—well, I don't have to tell you who he is in reality." Orkap smiled grimly. "There is only one body-changer in the galaxy, but one is quite enough."

One of the pilots said, a little breathlessly: "Johnny Mayhem!"

Orkap smiled again. "I am aware of Mayhem's identity," he said, "but I'm not going to do anything about it."

The pilots waited. The sun glared down balefully. "You see," Orkap told them, "we cannot be altogether sure that the rest of you are here simply to earn your twenty credits a flight. Mayhem has unwittingly become our insurance. Find Mayhem! Find the spy among you! A hundred credits bonus to the man who does!"

Pandit looked at Sria, who whistled. The girl said: "If they think we can finish the job without sleep, picking up cargo and flying it to the spaceport and returning for more, then a hundred credits is probably more than any of us will earn. They'll all be looking like hawks for this Mayhem."

"And," Pandit agreed, "if there's a native spy among them, he'd be afraid to show himself for fear they'll think he's Mayhem. Very clever of the Denebians."

"... to work at once," Orkap was saying. He wore a blaster on his hip, the only weapon among them. They all trudged behind him through the burning, faceless sands. Soon they reached a depression from which the sand had been cleared, baring the white bedrock of the Empty Places. In the rock a square opening had been cut, shielded on each side from the shifting sands by an up-curving lip. A ramp led down into darkness.

"You will find your cargo down there. Also enough trundle-sleds to go around," Orkap explained. "The cargo is crated. The crates must remain intact. Is that understood?"

It was understood.

Their sudden mutual suspicion a pall worse than the heat, the Ophiuchans descended the ramp. They needed the money or they wouldn't be here. The money meant more to them than anything: this was no time to be far-sighted. Yet one of them was a spy for the Galactic League—Johnny Mayhem.

One of them, but which?

Pandit made a quick estimate of the number of crates. They were stacked neatly against one wall, each about four feet by four by four. And from the size of them, a single crate would fill the cargo bay of each of the jets. Pandit made a rough estimate. Two dozen crates, perhaps. In the dim light it was hard to tell. Two dozen crates, six jets, twelve Ophiuchans. Four trips for each jet. A half hour to load, ten minutes to unload, an hour and a half by jet to the spacefield. Three hours and forty minutes, round trip. Say, four hours. Four times four, sixteen. Sixteen hours of steady work for eighty credits. No time for mystery or suspicion. Barely time for mistrust... .

"You, there!" a voice called. "What are you doing?"

It was one of the other Ophiuchans, quite the biggest of the lot. Pandit had seen him outside and remembered his name. He was Raj Shiva, a tall, muscular, swarthy Ophiuchan, with small, alert, suspicious eyes and a livid scar alongside his jaw.

"Nothing," Pandit said. "Nothing."

"No? The others are loading already. I'll be watching you."

For a hundred credits, Pandit thought furiously, but said nothing. Sria touched his shoulder. "I have one of the trundle-sleds," she said. "Let's get about it."

"Right," said Pandit.

Raj Shiva watched them a few moments longer, then drifted away with his own partner. It took Pandit and Sria, sweating copiously in the tremendous heat, a few minutes less than half an hour to load one of the crates aboard their jet. Three of the other ships were already airborne, whining away toward the spacefield.

Pandit looked at the crate. There were no markings on it anywhere. The wood looked new, but that meant absolutely nothing. In the dry heat of the Empty Places, wood would last a century, a millennium. They could not tell how old it was.

"Ready?" Sria Krishna called from the controls.

Pandit had secured the crate in the cargo bay. "Ready," he responded.

Moments later acceleration thrust them back in the twin pilot seats.

Sria leveled the jet at twenty thousand and they sped at eight hundred miles an hour toward the city and the spacefield just beyond it.

"Do you wonder about it?" Sria asked after a while.

"About what?"

"The cargo."

"We aren't supposed to."

"I know." Sria laughed. "I'm a woman, you see."

Pandit grinned at her. "Curiosity," he said. "A woman's trait on any world."

Sria got up from the pilot chair but Pandit placed his hand on her shoulder and gently shoved her down again. "They have a televid unit aboard," he said, "remember?"

Sria nodded. The jet sped on.

They landed at the spacefield. They were the fourth jet down and one of the other three had taken off on the return leg of the flight. A

Denebian Pandit had never seen before was supervising the loin-cloth garbed laborers loading the crates aboard a Denebian spaceship. With Sria he delivered their crate on the trundle-sled, returned with the sled to their jet, and took off.

Just short of four hours from the time they started they returned to the Empty Places. They had gained a little time and were the second team down. From the jet ahead of them, Raj Shiva led a puny, middle-aged co-pilot.

Orkap stood in the underground storage room. Looking at his wrist chrono he said to the four Ophiuchans who came down the ramp: "You made fine time." Raj Shiva's puny companion said something, but Raj Shiva grabbed his arm and they began to load a second crate. Pandit and Sria loaded theirs in silence.

They made their second round trip in four hours exactly. It was completely dark when they returned to the Empty Places. Sria was worried they would overshoot the cargo point, but Pandit brought the little jet down within a few hundred yards of its takeoff point.

They could see nothing when they shut off the jet's running lights, except for the glow which came from the underground room. They reached it and went down the ramp. Pandit judged that half the crates were gone now. He took a quick tour of the dimly-lit room while Sria got the trundle-sled into position against one of the crates.

"Nobody here," Pandit said in a whisper. "The Denebian must be sleeping in the sand-sled."

"Yes," Sria said a little breathlessly.

"I was thinking—"

"What?" Sria said. "Don't stop."

"If we wanted to examine one of the boxes, it would be suicide to open the one we take. But we could open one of them down here, see what it is, take another for ourselves—"

"You would do this?" Sria asked him. "Why?"

Pandit shrugged. "I have eyes," he said. "Our gurus did not broadcast the death-wish to outworlders until the Denebians came. Then they started. Have the Denebians sold them on the idea?"

"I don't know," Sria said.

"Well, let's assume they have. Why? Why would they do such a thing, Sria?"

"Let me get this straight, Pandit. First, you think the gurus actually are making the outworlders kill themselves?"

"Of course," Pandit said. "It's mental suggestion, on a scale only our gurus are capable of. But don't you see, Sria, they wouldn't do it on their own. The gurus are dirty, careless about their bodies—but terribly arrogant. Left alone, they wouldn't think the outworlders important enough to be concerned over one way or another. They certainly wouldn't kill them."

"Go on," Sria urged.

"All right. The gurus have great knowledge of the mystical, but externally they're naive. Let's suppose someone came along—the Denebians in this case—and found something they wanted very badly on Ophiuchus. These crates here, Sria. What would they do? They'd go to the gurus and convince them—it wouldn't be difficult—that any intercourse with outworlders would be harmful to Ophiuchus, that the outworlders want to colonize and exploit our world, that sort of thing. While the gurus are stewing it over, the Denebians could have prepared this shipment here—whatever it is—for departure. But the gurus, too well convinced by them, could have acted sooner than they expected, making it all but impossible for the small handful of outworlders, the Denebians among them, to go abroad without fear of taking their own lives. Perhaps a few, like Orkap and that other Denebian, are not at all suicide-prone. Perhaps a few can withstand it. As for the rest, it's indoors and away from the mental influence of the gurus, or off Ophiuchus entirely. Which would leave the Denebians with a problem they hadn't thought of." His words made sense.

"Yes!" cried Sria excitedly. "Now that they have their valuable cargo ready to go, how can they get it off Ophiuchus without help?"

"We," said Pandit softly, "are that help."

Sria asked: "What are you going to do about it?"

"I don't know. I honestly don't. I never had anything against the outworlders. How could I? We're all progeny of outworlders who came here almost five hundred years ago from a place called India on Earth. But the gurus—"

"—have been deceived. You said so yourself."

Pandit was sweating, and it was more than the heat which made him sweat. He paced up to the crates, then back again, then to the crates. Suddenly he said, "All right. All right, I'll do it. Someone's got to find out what the Denebians want here."

And Pandit began to pry at one of the boxes with a knife he carried in his loin cloth. Sria said, "I'll keep watch. You call me when it's opened."

"Maybe you ought to get out of here. In case anything happens, I don't want to get you involved."

But Sria went up the ramp and crouched there, waiting, watching. The desert was very quiet, entirely windless, and hot even at night. Stars sprinkled the sky overhead and far off she thought she heard the distant whine of a jet. "Hurry," she called. From below she heard the sound of wood being pried away from wood. She heard, or imagined she heard, the jet coming closer. "Hurry!" she called softly.

Finally three words drifted up to her. "Come here, Sria." She felt a little relieved. Now that he'd finished.

She listened for the jet. Now she heard nothing. She went swiftly down the ramp.

Pandit stood before one of the crates, perspiring freely. He had pried loose one of the side walls and a smooth metal surface with stenciled lettering on it was exposed.

He said: "I can't read that. It's a language I never saw before."

Sria bent closer and looked at the stenciled lettering. A voice, not Pandit's, said:

"I thought it would be you two... . No, don't move!"

A big muscular figure silhouetted against the starlight, and a smaller, puny, thin-legged figure. Raj Shiva and his co-pilot.

"A hundred credits each, Handus," Raj Shiva said as he ran down the ramp. "Can you keep the girl from getting away?"

Handus rushed down at his heels.

Pandit met Raj Shiva at the foot of the ramp. Pandit was a big man by Ophiuchan standards, but Raj Shiva was bigger. "Run, Sria!" Pandit cried, and met the giant with his knife.

Raj Shiva parried the blow with his forearm, then his big hands moved swiftly and the knife clattered to the floor. Sria ran for the ramp, her bare feet padding swiftly against the stone floor. Handus was waiting for her at the foot of the ramp in an awkward crouch. She had a glimpse of Raj Shiva and Pandit straining together, then Handus struck her with his balled fist. It was a puny blow, but Sria staggered back, her jaw numb. Laughing shrilly, Handus leaped at her. She was shoved back, tripped over something, and fell. For a moment all the lights blinked out inside her head.

Inside—no! Raj Shiva and Pandit stumbled about the room, struck something, there was a loud popping sound, a tinkling, and the lights in the storage room went out.

"Where is she?" Handus called. "I can't find her!"

She heard him groping about, heard the others struggling together. She got to her feet and stood perfectly still, waiting for anything. She wished she had a weapon—something—she was only a woman—

Then a voice whispered: "Hurry, Sria! Hurry!"

"Pandit?"

He took her arm in the darkness. She couldn't see him. They went to the crates and wrestled one on their trundle-sled.

"Not the open one?" Sria gasped.

"No. No."

They heard footsteps... . Saw a figure for a moment silhouetted against starlight. Handus was fleeing, probably for help.

They took their sled out into the night and dragged it across the sand toward their waiting jet. They loaded the crate in the cargo bay. While Pandit was finishing the job in the darkness, Sria sat down at the controls.

"Ready?" she shouted above the whine of the jets.

Pandit said that he was. She hardly heard his voice.

A moment later, she took the small cargo jet up.

She heard Pandit moving in the small cabin behind her. She said: "We ought to take it to the League authorities, don't you think?" She had to shout to be heard above the whining roar of the jets.

"Why?"

"I was able to read the writing. It's Procyonian, Pandit. Do you know anything about the Procyonians?"

"Well, a few centuries ago, they were the most warlike people in the galaxy. It was rumored they had a cache of thermonuclear bombs hidden somewhere, after such weapons were outlawed in the twenty-fifth century. The cache was never found, until tonight. We found it, Pandit."

"But Orkap and—"

"That's true. It was found by the Denebians first. Don't you see, Pandit? Orkap and the others, private Denebian traders. It wasn't the government. It never is the government these days. But unscrupulous individuals, Pandit, armed with two dozen hydrogen bombs—why, they could take over their own world on threat of imminent destruction, or some outworld plum they had their eye on, or—"

"I see." Pandit's voice was barely audible above the whine of the jets.

"It's a job the Galactic League can handle," Sria went on. "Now that it's out in the open—or will be as soon as we get to the spacefield. You've done your work, Pandit, and your people won't forget you for it. As for me, my work here is finished too."

"Your work?"

Above the roar of the jet, Sria shouted: "Yes. I am Johnny Mayhem." She smiled in the darkness. Johnny Mayhem, she thought, in a girl's body. Well, he'd been young men and old, weak and strong, sick and healthy, human and alien outworlder—so why not a girl too?

All at once Pandit's hand lay heavily on her shoulder. She turned around and in the darkness but with the lights of the instrument board on it saw the gleam of a knife blade. The face beyond the

blade, leering from darkness, was not Pandit's. She hadn't actually known it was Pandit. She hadn't seen him. She'd hardly been able to hear his voice.

It was Raj Shiva.

"Fly us to Denebian Exports," he said, "or I'll kill you and do it myself."

"You're making a mistake. Your people belong with the Galactic League, not with a handful of adventurers who—"

"The Denebians are right," Raj Shiva said fanatically. "My people would be better off left alone."

"I'm flying this jet to the spaceport—and the League."

"I'll kill you. I know all about you, Mayhem. You're not a woman, really. You're not even a native. That's a dead body, isn't it? But if I kill it—again—while you're in it, you die to. You'll do what I say!"

This very night, unless something was done about it, the cache of thermonuclear weapons would be space-bound, the first hydrogen bombs loose in the galaxy for almost five hundred years. Wouldn't mankind ever begin to learn? Mayhem-Sria thought wearily. He knew the answer, of course: most men would, but the few who refused could bring destruction to an entire galaxy... .

Moments before, apparent success of a mission. Now, failure. Or death. Or both.

Sria's hand flashed out suddenly and struck the instrument board. The jet plummeted earthward with a loud whining sound. Sria felt herself shoved back by the tremendous acceleration into the cushions of the pilot chair. She heard a wild exclamation from Raj Shiva, but couldn't turn around to see what had happened. Grim-lipped, she kept the ship hurtling Earthward. She knew it was dangerous and might even prove disastrous. Her body could take so much, then she would black out. But if she didn't maintain the dive until the last possible instant, Raj Shiva would get control of the ship and its vital cargo. She was only a girl, but she was protected by the crash-padding of the pilot chair. Raj Shiva, unprotected, was behind her somewhere... .

Down through the thin upper atmosphere of Ophiuchus IX screamed the small ship, its heat-dial blinking on and off in warning as friction scorched its thin shell. The scream of air became more deep-throated as the atmosphere became thicker... .

Ten thousand feet.

Eight thousand.

Six.

Sria's eyes saw black. Her breath was labored. Needles of pain darted in her skull, plucked at her eyes. She opened her mouth to scream but heard nothing. She felt as if she must be forced clear through the protective cushions of the pilot chair.

Five thousand feet.

Four thousand.

Blackness and peace and a settling lassitude... .

Three thousand feet.

With hands that would barely function, Sria with supreme effort brought the jet out of its death-dive. She slumped in the pilot chair for a long time, too weak to do anything else.

Then she looked back at Raj Shiva.

Who lay slack and unconscious against the rear bulkhead of the cargo ship.

Mayhem-Sria brought the jet down and, middle of the night or no, saw Kovandaswamy. Raj Shiva was taken into custody. A jet was sent out, loaded with Leaguemen who had proved immune to the guru death-wish and all armed to the teeth. It landed at the cache and stood guard over it. Pandit was found, unconscious, one of his arms broken, but otherwise all right. A second jet prevented the Denebian Export ship from blasting off with the hydrogen bombs already loaded. Orkap and his companion were taken into custody.

The rest, of course, is history. The gurus of Ophiuchus IX were shown what had been taking place in the name of friendship between themselves and Deneb and in the name of isolation. Most of the gurus retired entirely from active life. The few who did not spent the rest of their days working for cooperation between

Ophiuchus and the rest of the Galactic League. Orkap and his companion were sent back to Deneb for punishment.

Two weeks later, Kovandaswamy shook Sria's hand.

"A girl," he said. "You did it as a girl. I still can't believe it. But then, of such stuff is the Mayhem legend made."

Mayhem smiled. Already the Hub had a new assignment for him. He could feel the old excitement, the wonder, stirring him. He smiled again and told Kovandaswamy: "Better not tell that fellow Pandit. I think he had a crush on Sria."



www.feedbooks.com

Food for the mind