
Zero Data

Charles Saphro



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Author: Charles Saphro

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ZERO DATA

By CHARLES SAPHRO

All the intricate, electronic witchery of the 21st century could not pin guilt on fabulous Lonnie Raichi, the irreproachable philanthropist. But Jason, the cop, was sweating it out ... searching for that fourth and final and all-knowing rule that would knock Lonnie's "triple ethic" for a gala loop.

LONNIE RAICHI was small, heavily built, wet-eyed, dapper and successful. His success he attributed entirely to his philosophy.

Not knowing about Lonnie's philosophy, the whole twenty-odd years of Lonnie's success was the abiding crux of Jason's disgust. And this, in spite of the more and more men Jason came to control and the fitful stream of new techniques and equipment Gov-Pol and Gov-Mil Labs put at his disposal.

Jason was a cop. In fact, by this Friday the thirteenth in the fall of 2009, squirming on what had come to be his pet Gov-Park bench right across from the Tiara of Wold in the Fane, he was only one step short of being the Head Cop of Government City. He was good. Gathering in a lot of criminals was what had brought him up the steps.

But he hadn't gathered in Lonnie.

It wasn't for lack for trying. Way back, when Lonnie was known simply as "Lonnie," Jason managed to get a little help from his associates and superiors. Sometimes.

But as Lonnie came to be known as Lon Raichi, then Mr. Raichi, and finally as "THE Launcelot Raichi" (to Everyone Who Mattered), and as Jason's promotions kept pace with his widening experience and painstakingly acquired knowledge; peculiarly, there seemed to be fewer and fewer persons around who could be made interested in "Lonnie."

Inside Government and Gov-Pol-Anx as well as among the general Two-Worlds public.

So Jason got less and less help, or even passive cooperation, from his superiors. As a matter of fact, the more men he could command, the fewer he could use on anything that could be construed as concerning Lonnie.

Equipment, though, was a little different matter. There was usually enough so that one unit of a kind could be unobtrusively trained on Mr. Raichi under the care of Jason's own desk sergeant. In 1999, for example, Moglout, that erratic and secretive genius in Physlab Nine, came out with a quantum analyzer and probability reproducer. The machine installed in Pol-Anx, reconstructed crimes and identified the probable criminals by their modus operandi and the physical traces they couldn't avoid leaving at the un-mercy of any of its portable data accumulators.

On Jason's first attempt it almost came close to Lonnie. It did gather in the hidden, dead, still twitching, completely uncommunicative carcasses of the five men who actually relieved the vault of the Citizen's Bank of Berlin of its clutch of millions. It even identified the body of the rocopilot found floating in the Potomac a few days later as being one of the group, and the killer. It did *not* locate the arsonized remnants of the plane, though, nor the currency; and only achieved the casting of a slight, or subsidiary, third-hand aspersion in the direction of THE Launcelot Raichi.

But Lonnie came up with an irrefutable alibi, somehow, and the hassle that followed made Jason's luck run out. And on Jason's stubborn, secret, subsequent tries, all the analyzer could produce was a report of zero data whenever Jason, reasonably or unreasonably, believed that Lonnie was involved.

Every time.

Zero data when Schicklehitler's marshal's baton disappeared from the British Museum.

Lonnie on his dream throne ... Jason at his instruments. Was the struggle endless between these two?

Zero data when Charlemagne's Crown lapsed unobtrusively from its shrine in Vienna during the Year 2000 Celebration.

Subsequently, Jason realized that the Berlin job in 1999 had marked Lonnie's last essay after money. Other things seemed to occupy Lonnie's mind after he'd sprouted publicly into the status of full-fledged, hyper-respectable, inter-planetary business tycoon; complete with a many-tentacled industrial organization in Moon Colony and a far-flung prospecting unit headquartering at Mars Equatorial.

Tycoonship was a status with which Everyone Who Mattered was always pleased.

Jason's next attempt on Lonnie had to wait until 2005 and was the result of two unconnected circumstances. The first was Physlab Nine's secretive genius, Moglaut, evolving another piece of equipment, a disarmer, which, subsequent to its first use, saved countless cops' lives. The second was the discovery in the Valley of Kings, of Amenhotep III's own personal official Uraeus. Positively identified beyond the shadow of doubt.

Jason, playing the hunch he'd built up about Lonnie, rushed a man, armed with the brand new disarmer, instantly to the scene.

The next morning, Amenhotep's Uraeus was gone and the corpse of Jason's man was found—part of it. The right hand, arm, shoulder, and most of the head were missing; burned away. And of the disarmer, only a fused hunk of mixed metals and silver helix remained.

And the analyzer reported zero data.

Lab Nine's taciturn and exasperating Moglaut failed to derive an explanation for either circumstance.

"I won't shut up," Jason said, standing on the carpet in front of his superior. "He did it. I don't know how, but he did."

Another spasm of frustration shook him and he slammed his fist down on the sacred desk. "I've known Lonnie all my life. I know he doesn't know phfut about anything scientific, and yet he makes a horse's—"

"Captain Jason, I insist that you stop referring to—"

"Makes a—" Jason raised his voice, "horse's—"

"CAPTAIN JASON!"

Jason subsided.

"Captain, Annex has been most forbearing all these years. We've overlooked your incomprehensible phobia—this—this confoundedly unfounded impossible bias against such an irreproachable philanthropist as Launcelot Raichi—because of the sterling quality of your ... ah ... other work. However—"

On the desk, the Commissioner's fingers took up a measured tattoo. "—should this fixed idea begin to encroach on—uh—uh—"

"All right ... Sir." Sullenly, Jason submitted. "I understand."

With a self-congratulatory smirk up at the ceiling that separated them from Executive Level, the bland face of the Commissioner smoothed out. "All right, Captain, as long as we understand each other ..."

Sourly, Jason got himself back to his own office. Drumming his own fingers on his own desk and glaring at his own desk sergeant, he purged his soul.

"—damned equipment would only work, I'd gather him in! They couldn't stop me, then! But—" Jason choked. When he could speak again, "He's never studied a lick in his life, I tell you! Yet he makes a he-cow's behind out of the best man and the best scientific equipment Annex can provide! How? How, I ask you! He doesn't know the first blasted thing about any blasted thing in any blasted science!"

THAT was true. Conversely, Jason didn't know about Lonnie's philosophy.

Nowadays, Lonnie called it a "philosophy." He told reporters it was "based on a triple ethic." (Inside his skull, a small boy jumped up and down in glee over the magnificent language he was able to use.) But he always replied only with a superior smile when asked by reporters to put the philosophy and the triple ethic into words. If pressed, he paraphrased an Ancient Man: "You know my works. Judge by them."

He was referring, of course, to his having branched out into patronizing the Arts. He'd even erected Raichi Museum just across the velvety green circle of Gov-Park from Government's own Fane of Artifacts.

The reporters would go away and write more articles about his modesty and the superlative treasures of Earth, Moon and Mars that were gathered in the Raichi Galleries; protected, the papers always boasted, by the same ultra-safety mechanisms that guarded the mile-long, one-gallery-wide, glass-fronted Fane itself. Government affably made up two of every anti-break-and-entry device nowadays. One for the Fane and the other for Raichi Museum.

Despite occasional grumbles in the letters-to-the-editor columns, the papers never seemed to inquire into why so many priceless trans-worlds artifacts got into Lonnie's private ownership instead of Government's public Fane. And while some artists and architects (unendowed by Lonnie) succeeded in publicly proclaiming Raichi Museum gaudy, such carpings were but to be expected, particularly from modernists.

Actually, Everyone Who Mattered felt Raichi Museum's granite walls were much more dignified than the narrow, glass-faced arcade that was the Fane, wide open to the most disrespectfully casual public inspection all the time. Why, even late at night gawking loiterers pressed their noses against the glass; black, clumsy images pinned to the blazing whiteness hurled by radionic tubes against the back wall of snowy marble from Mars' arctic quarries. Besides, that glass, proof though it was against anything but an atomic explosion, still made every true art lover feel disquietingly insecure.

No, on the whole, the papers and reporters and true art lovers who felt the Public's treasures should be more secure than visible, never questioned Lonnie's doing good to so much Art.

Thus, nowadays, nobody did anything but accept Lonnie. Except Jason. And he, perforce, took out his disgust not on hounding the sacrosanct Lonnie, but on that crackpot, mumchance, captive genius of Physlab Nine. With the result that, late in 2007, Pol-Anx had an electronic servo-tracer.

Pending construction of sufficient hundreds of thousands more for full Anx use, Jason swore Lab Nine to secrecy and installed the pilot model in his own office. He had enough authority for that.

It was a hellishly unbuildable and deceptively simple gadget, that tracer. Simply tune it in on the encephalo-aura, the brain wave pattern of any individual ... and monitor. It never let go until deliberately switched off by the operator. It tracked; pinpointed the subject accurately up to twenty thousand miles. It stopped humming and started panting in proportionately ascending decibels when the subject became tense, nervous, afraid. It also directed pocket-sized trackers of its own Damoclean beam. It made it a cinch to gather in known criminals in the very midst of their first subsequent flagrante delicto.

Jason latched the servo-tracer on Lonnie and settled down to wait.

At 10 p.m., local mean time, January 25, 2008, the tracer hiccupped and, all by itself, *went to sleep!*

Jason blinked. Jiggled the gadget. Swore. Either the gadget was haywire or Lonnie was up to something, and, as usual, was making a—

Jason bawled for four reliable squad men he'd mentally selected before. If he could find Lonnie—catch Lonnie in actual performance of an act—then Commissioner or no Commissioner, Executive Level or no Executive Level...!

He roared from Pol-Anx with the men, past the flank of Government Fane, across the Park and around the bulk of Raichi Museum to Lonnie's mansion in its shadow. Leaped from the gyrovan, sweeping his men out into a fan for the neighborhood.

Nothing. Placid. Tree-shadowed, lawn-swept streets, ebony and silver in the light the moon reflected from solar space.

He'd missed. Too late. Lonnie was gone ... or was he?

Jason didn't give himself time to think; his men time to get even a momentary hesitation started. He shoved his thumb hard against the door chimes and his shield under the butler's nose.

Yes, Mr. Raichi was at home. Then, after an interval nicely calculated to allow Jason to feel how acutely precarious his position stood, "Mr. Raichi is accessible."

Lonnie was bland. Blandly accepting Jason's urgent story of a known ... er ... jewel thief traced to the neighborhood. Blandly amenable to Jason's suggestion that his men be permitted to go over the mansion (once he'd started this damfool caper, he had to go through with it). Lonnie so bland that Jason felt a skitter of perspiration down his backbone while his men hustled up the soaring circle of the stair.

II

"SINCE I've been disturbed anyway," Lonnie offered, "I'll show you around."

"Thanks," Jason shook his head stiffly. "I'll just wait."

"I think you should come."

Shrugging, Jason followed, eyes stubbornly downcast.

"... my library ... my den ... bar. Care for a drink? Well, suit yourself." As the lights of the den dimmed and one wall swooshed smoothly into the ceiling. "My theatre ... The usual tri-di stereo, of course, but I've had a couple of the new tight beams installed to channel Moon and Mars on the cube. Much better than the usual staged bilge. Say, that reminds me, a couple hours ago Mars projector had a scanner on one of the exploration parties caught out in a psychosonic storm. Jove, did they wriggle! Even in atomsuits they were better than Messalina Magdalen working on her last G-string. Here, I'll switch it on. Maybe the rescue team's—"

Building up inside the hundreds of thousands of layers of crystallized plastic came a reddish, three-dimensional landscape, as if viewed from a height. Orange dust swirled across a gaunt, clawed plain under a transparent pink haze. A feeling as of sub-visual vibration, emanating from the cube, tugged at Jason's eyelids.

No life.

"—Nope; they've cleaned up the carcasses already. Too bad. Tell you what, though. Next time I catch it happening, I'll phone you and—"

"Don't bother."

"Suit yourself." Lonnie shifted and went on, lightly. "I'm not at all satisfied with the color, are you? It's off a little, don't you think?... Well?... Well!"

Unwillingly, Jason moved his attention to the cube. Eyes widening, he studied it. "No. You're wrong. That's good! The tech who poured that stereo did a damned good job. It's—"

"Not good enough for me! That's not exactly what I saw up at Vulcan City. If those lazy—"

"Look, you can't expect exactly the same reflectivity from crystallized plastic that you get from molecules of atmosphere, no matter how scientifically the pouring and layering is controlled. It's—they're two different materials. Leaving aside the ion-index differential and quality of incident light, you still can't—"

"I can ..." As the pause lengthened, Jason's gaze was finally drawn to Lonnie's face. "You still haven't changed a bit, have you, Jasey? Still all wrapped up in *how* any collection of doodads work instead of just for what it'll do. You know, I wouldn't be surprised if that hasn't always been the difference between us. Where's it got you?"

Jason strode for the door.

"Wait a minute." Lonnie's voice came louder. "Better wait, copper. I'm not through ... That's better."

From behind Jason came the sound of rubbing palms. "We've come a long way from Gimlet Street, haven't we, Jasey? You particularly. Captain. Promotions. Pay raises ..." Then Lonnie was in front of him, staring up. "You're quite a substantial citizen now. Yes? Well, look at that. Go on, look at it."

Against the side wall stood a gigantic triptych. More than life size, the central panel canopied the statue of a Mongol potentate; the two side wings, a pair of guards in bas-relief. All three wrought in chryselephantine gold and ivory; the gold with flowing pallid highlights. Damascened armor, encrusted with jewels, girdled the chest of the Asiatic Prince; helmeted the sullen head carved from a single immensity of ivory.

Ruby eyes glared arrogantly under ebon brows. Against the statue's folded shins, its pommel negligently gripped by one immovable, ivory hand, leaned a short Turkish scimitar of watered steel. Beneath the carved hassock upon which the statue sat, a dais of three steps fell away to the floor.

"That's Genghis Khan," Lonnie said. "I had him made. That isn't gold he's made of; that's aureum—and it cost plenty to have the silver mixed in. It makes it better. And I get the best! A hundred thousand, it cost me. And thirty-six thousand more to brace the wall and floor. It's good. It's the best that's made!"

He came up on tiptoe, thrusting his chin as close as possible to Jason's averted face. "Why don't you buy one for your place, Captain?"

JASON stared into the malevolent eyes of the statue.

"Huh ... hu-hu ... hu-ha-ha-ha ..." At the dais, Lonnie put his foot on the second step and patted Genghis Khan familiarly on one ivory knee. "I like this old boy. He had the right idea. I have it. You haven't. You never had. If you had, you'd'a listened to the proposition I made you way back then. Remember when Aggie told you about it? Say, I wonder what's become of her, anyway. Do you know? What? What'd you say?"

Jason cleared his throat. Hard.

"Well?"

Jason swallowed. Blood pounded in his temples.

"Jasey, you're stupid."

Jason made his eyes close. Let them re-open slowly.

"You were born stupid and you've stayed stupid."

Still Jason held back an answer.

"You're nothing but a stupid, go-where-you're-sent, do-what-you're-told cop! What do you say to that! If you want to keep on being one, answer me! Answer me!"

Deliberately, Jason jerked his chin at the statue. "That's another example of what I mean."

"*What?!!*" screamed Lonnie.

"Reflectivity. The silver in the gold. Two different metals and where they're not well fused. That sword blade, too. Just the misalignment of molecules in the surface of the steel makes it look wavy, and ripple when the light changes or you move. Different even in two parts of the same material. That's why you can't get the stereo cube to reproduce color-feel exactly." Breathing heavily, Jason had to let his voice fade out.

"Gaaa ..." Lonnie convulsed. "Who cares!" Laugh sounds rolled out of his throat. "You'll never change."

He flicked his hand at Jason, brushing him away.

But, as Jason, white-faced, herded his men out through the costly grandeurs of the vestibule, Lonnie called from the inner hall: "Copper ..."

Jason turned, waited.

"You amused me, so it's all right this time. You can keep your penny-ante job. But don't try for me again. You cross my path again, I'll smear you. And what's more, I'll use whatever you're trying, to smear you with. Get that! Get it good! Now get out!"

Back in Jason's office, the desk sergeant reported as Jason came in. "Funny thing. That there tracer started to hum again soon after you was out for a while. Quit again 'bout five minutes ago, though."

Jason gritted his teeth, banished the sergeant, and spent five minutes alone gripping the edge of his desk. Then he yanked Lab Nine's silent genius down to his office. That didn't help for the tracer stayed asleep. Not even a hiccup rewarded Moglaut's most active efforts on Lonnie's wave length. On others, fine. Through the night and on into the next day, Jason kept Moglaut at work.

Late in the morning, Authority at Peiping televised publicly that the Mace of Alexander was gone from its satin pillow in the proof-glass case in the alarm-wired room off the machine-weapon-guarded main corridor of the security-policed Temple of Mankind.

The Mace, symbol of Alexander's power, was a pretty little baton barely two feet long. Its staff was mastodon ivory, the paleontologists had determined. One end sported a solid ball of gold hardly as big as a fist; studded with rubies, but none set quite so close as to actually touch.

The other end, balancing the ball of gold, mounted the largest single polished emerald crystal in the discovered universe. Neither the Moon or Mars had produced anything in the emerald line equivalent to what had come out of the mists of Earthly history.

DISREGARDING the bulletin, Jason kept Moglaut at the servo-tracer. In the night's smallest hours it began placidly to hum on Lonnie's aura again.

"What happened?" Jason said. "What did you do?"

Moglaut shrugged.

"You must have done something. What was it?"

Moglaut, not looking up from the purring machine, shook his head.

"All right. You can go now." Jason watched the genius disappear hurriedly through the door. From the door he watched the man scutter down the long, long corridor out of sight. The first thing in the morning, Jason promised himself, he'd have a session about Moglaut with Lab Nine's chief.

The first thing in the morning brought word that Lab Nine's erratic genius had stumbled himself out of the seventeenth-floor window of his suburban apartment to his death. Lab Nine's chief clucked sorrowfully.

Jason shook his head and wondered. After exhaustive investigation (zero data) he still wondered. That's all he was able to do, wonder.

The second time Jason's servo-tracer on Lonnie hiccupped and dozed off was at 12:01 a.m., August 7th, 2008, just one day after the Diamond Throne arrived on Earth. The single, glittering diamond crystal, misshapen like an armchair and larger than one, had been mined out of the core of Tycho's crater. And it was also just two days before the Moon Throne would have been installed in the unbreakable safety of Raichi Museum!

"Jason, you're insane," his superior told him when Jason, reinforced by an astounding public furore, brought the matter up. "He owned it. He had no reason to steal it from himself. Besides, one man alone couldn't budge that enormous—"

"It won't do any harm to look-see."

"It can do a lot of harm!" The Commissioner glanced quickly at the ceiling. "I'll have nothing to do with it. That's all."

Officially, Jason's hands were tied. But secretly he maneuvered the transfer of a five-layers-down undercover man from Madras to Government City. And, coincidentally, in the ordinary

routine of operation, Raichi Museum took on a new janitor; a little brown man who grinned constantly and was fanatical about dust. He was a good, reliable man and when he reported that neither the Diamond Throne nor any of the other missing glories were anywhere in the Museum, Jason had to believe him.

As a matter of fact, it wouldn't have done Jason any good to have installed the little brown man in Lonnie's mansion, either. The lock—not the apparent one openly in the den door, but the real one—was as unobtrusive and foolproof as twenty-first-century engineering could make it. And Lonnie always made sure he was alone and unobserved in the den before he locked it and sauntered across to bestow a peculiar, multiple tweak to the nose of Genghis Khan.

He enjoyed the gesture. On Christmas Eve he grinned broadly while the triptych pivoted in the wall, let him off in the Kruppmartite-walled, pulsing radiance of his very secret, very, very personal throne room, and swung back into place.

His grin changed to an expression of imperial dignity as he encased himself in Catherine the Great's ermine Robe of State and grasped the Mace of Alexander in his good left hand. But then the royal mien gave way to a sullen scowl as he hesitated between Charlemagne's Crown and Amenhotep's Uraeus.

Actually, neither one was worthy of him. Both purely regional coronets belonged over in the farthest dusty corner behind the curtain, along with Schicklehitler's shabby baton and that crummy Peacock Throne. What he really needed was a crown worthily symbolic of the position he'd make it possible to publicly assume in the not-too-distant future.

It was a damned imposition that he had to put up with. Well, he'd make them do since they were the best to be had. Adjusting the Crown of Charlemagne upon his brow, he stood on tiptoe to wriggle his way back into the embrace of the titanic crystal that was the Diamond Throne. There, he relaxed and gave himself over to the contemplation of the glories of Lonnie.

Who but he had developed such an efficient philosophy to such an unfailingly incisive point? Certainly not Old Boswell who, back in the early days had thought to be teaching him.

"Rule One, my boy," he remembered the old patrician twittering, "there's always someone to pull your chestnuts out of the fire for you—for a price. Pay it. Then add a plus to the payment and the man's yours to use again and again."

But even in those days as a callow, trusting youth, he'd been smarter than Boswell. Observing, from the safety of the sidelines, the way the old fool had finally tripped up, he'd added a codicil of his own to Rule One: "Make sure the payment's *final!*"

(... witness the Berlin chestnut pullers. And the unobtrusive and undiscovered spate of their predecessors whose usefulness had become outweighed ...)

Then Boswell had said, "Rule Two: You don't have to know the how of anything. All you have to know is *the man who does*. He always has a price. The currency is usually odd, but find it, pay it, then proceed per Rule One."

Even tonight, in his own Throne Room, Lonnie flushed heavily at the way he'd accepted at face value what came next. "By the way," Old Boswell had added smoothly, "no connection of course, my boy, but the topic reminded me. Here are the keys to that daffodil-hued tri-tribian you ogled at Sporter's exhibit. I must admit you have an eye for dashing machinery even though I can't agree with your esthetics. No—no ... It's yours. I feel that you've earned it and more by—"

He'd rushed to the garage to gloat over the mono-cyclic, gyro-stabilized, U-powered model with the seat that flattened into a convenient bed at the touch of a button. The tri-trib, he recalled, in which he'd coaxed Agnes into taking her first ride.

III

THE details of that recollection brought up his spirits again and, he reminded himself, the lesson had sunk in; had developed into his most useful ethic. After his narrow scrape with Jason's quantum analyzer in the Berlin incident, it hadn't taken long for a good, one-man

detective agency to locate Physlab Nine's frenetic genius, Moglaut. It had taken longer to discover Moglaut's currency but, after much shadowing, the 'tec had come through handsomely. Lonnie, automatically applying his fully-developed Ethic One, always considered it a nice sentimental touch that the one-man agency's final case was successful.

Moglaut's price was a prim, brunette soprano who wore her eyes disguised behind heavy tortoiseshell. The ill-cut garb she could afford added greatly to her staid appearance, obscuring a certain full-bodied liteness. She earned a throttled existence soloing at funerals and in the worship halls of obscure, rigidly fanatic offshoot sects.

Her consuming passion was to be an opera prima donna.

Lonnie never tried to understand why Moglaut sat fascinated through endless sin-busting sermons and lachrymose requiems. To hurry afterwards, with the jerky motions, the glazed eyes of a zombie, to subsequent rendezvous with the soprano at his suburban apartment. It was entirely sufficient in Lonnie's philosophy that Moglaut did.

The soprano's continuing suburban cooperation was insured by Lonnie's judicious doling out of exactly the cash to keep a tenth-rate opera company barely functioning in a lesser quarter of Government City. Oddly, he found it pleased him and from that grew his wide patronizing of the Arts.

The immediate result of the situation he created and controlled so deftly was Moglaut's production of a closed-plenum grid suit.

None of Gov-Pol, Gov-Mil or Gov-Econ labs found out about it; much less Pol-Anx or Government itself. Moglaut did all the work in the tiny complete lab Lonnie set up in the suburbs.

Lonnie didn't care what electronic witchery took place in the minute spatial interstices between the finely-woven mesh of flexible tantalum. Sufficient for him, the silvery white suit once donned and triple-zipped through hood and glove-endings, he was immune to ordinary Earthly phenomena; free to move about, do what he wished, untraceably. In it, his words were not vulnerable to the sono-beam's eavesdropping. Photo-electric and magneto-photonic watchdogs ignored him. Even the most delicately sensitive thermo-couples continued their dreams of freezing flame undisturbed. Jason's quantum analyzer couldn't pick up the leavings of a glance—all that the suit permitted out into the physical world.

The suit had its limitations, of course. Lonnie could see out, but the suit could also be seen. That required sometimes intricate advance planning to offset. Also, occasionally, manipulating the field of the grid to permit mechanical contact with the physical world was a trifle cumbersome but never annoyingly so. All it took was a modicum of step-by-step thought and some care not to leave a personal trace for the quantum analyzer to pick up. No actual trouble. And, finally, Moglaut had warned that the compact power unit pocketed on the left breast had a half-life of only thirteen years.

That left Lonnie placid. He took the suit for granted and used it for what it let him do.

When something more was needed, he was convinced his philosophy would provide it.

He didn't waste time trying to determine whether possession of the suit or previous experiences leading to his insistence on its development brought into focus the third ethic of his philosophy: "Rules One and Two are valuable and have their use. But when the chips are really down, *do it yourself!*" Instead, he toddled about personally acquiring the trappings of omnipotent royalty with little thought for the means.

BUT while he was about that business, the very limitations of the grid suit furnished an unending challenge to Moglaut's genius. And out of a sideline experiment incited by that challenge came the disarmer which Jason greeted with such fruitless glee.

Fruitless because, of course, before turning the disarmer over to Lab Nine and Pol-Anx, Moglaut devised a new, infinitely stronger, more versatile power pack for Lonnie's suit. A power pack controlled by a simple rheostat in the palm of the left-hand glove, but whose energy derived from the electron-kinetic properties of pent and shielded tritium. Not simple. In fact, solving the problem of penning and shielding tritium in a portable package delayed the appearance of Jason's disarmer two whole years.

That power pack and the reciprocating properties of the fields of the grid suit itself made a dilly of a combination. Before, the closed-plenum mesh kept Lonnie from leaving traces. Now, anything once embraced within the palpitating fields of the grid moved with and how the suit moved; not in accord with the natural laws of the surrounding continuum. That neat new attribute took care of the cubic yard or so of Diamond Throne.

And the ravenous tritium was malignant. Let any external power be applied against the plenum and it would be smashed, hurled back full force upon its source.

Jason had an undiagnosed example of that when he got only part of his man back from the Valley of Kings.

It was the power-pack-grid-suit combo that made a sleeping Buddha of the servo-tracer on the night of Jason's call at Lonnie's mansion; bollixed up the elaborate guards of the Peiping Temple of Mankind; and, when Jason so openly displayed suspicion of the genius, made child's play of what the newspapers headlined as "Scientist's Amazing Suicide Love Pact."

Lonnie grinned, remembering the incident. Then other memories—things he'd witnessed through a tight-beam scanner secreted in the suburban apartment—crowded his mind; stirring him restlessly on the Diamond Throne. Divesting himself of imperial appurtenances, he started for a certain locked file in the den to check the specifications of available per-diem empresses.

Making sure the triptych was snugly in place behind him, he paused to flip the switch on the stereo cube. Maybe Messalina Magdalen or one of the lesser ecdysiasts was presenting the perfection of her techniques over the private channel at the moment, an event he would appreciate.

Instead, the private channel presented, as the cube glowed and cleared, the same red, clawed landscape he'd shown to Jason months before. The disembodied voice of the commentator on Mars—not the lyrical public announcer, but the industrial economist who served the private channel—picked up in mid-word: "... early to have much data on the science and material resources this dead civilization possessed, but I recommend that every Corporation in Induscomm Cabal should place a technical party at Mars Equatorial as soon as possible. We shall now key in with the public spacecast. Note the texture and color range of the adornments and artifacts. I venture that these items will prove popular among you who can well afford such rare treasures. However, subtlety in acquiring them is suggested. While common clamor for Public ownership is under control, overt provocation is not recommended. Here is the cut-over ..."

The scene in the cube flashed and coalesced, dazzling Lonnie's eyes for a moment. He was conscious of the landscape rushing "up"; of gigantic walls and spires rising out of the obscurity of a quarried chasm to tower briefly against the pink haze of the Martian sky, then expand to give the impression of engulfing him before the scanner lens settled under the center of a leaping, vaulted dome.

To Lonnie, the many-acred enclosure meant nothing with its shimmering, stone-lace pillars, its tapestries that flamed with color or traced ghostlike, barely discernible outlines on the walls. Nor did any thought enter his mind of the exactness of the reflected color in the stereo cube. Hands clenched into aching fists, he stood leaning forward; striving by sheer will-power to span the void of space and force the scanner lens closer to the truncated pyramid of steps atop which, on a block of plain black stone, a dessicated mummy sat erect, hands folded in its reedy lap and on its head a blazing, coruscating radiance.

A Crown!

IV

DAZEDLY, Lonnie was conscious of the public announcer's rhapsodizing: "... Gov-Anth's ethnologists and linguistics experts are making some progress toward deciphering the inscription carved on the plaque. Wait! Here's a note from Gawley Worin. You remember Gawley Worin, our famous leg-man, folks, don't you? Well, here's a note. It ... Listen to this, folks! Listen! This is the beginning of the first rough translation of the inscription. Listen ...

"We, Wold, last of the Imperial Family of Wold who exercise our Power from Wold, the

Imperial City, throughout Wold, the Planet. We, last of the line of Wold, who alone may wear the Tiara which is Our Power, and our Symbol of Power, and the Symbol of Our Power throughout all the edos of Raii's life-taking light, without fear, facing the fate—"

Hissing, Lonnie cut the stereo switch. He'd seen enough. Darting across the den, he opened his communito. "Get me Sykes in our Mars unit," he ordered the operator. "Make sure what I say is scrambled. While you're waiting, get through to Denisen at Gov-Forn, then Raikes at Gov-Planet, then Butchwaeu in Gov-Int. And keep this line closed—that means you, too—while I'm talking."

Lonnie—THE Launcelot Raichi—was going after what he wanted.

Just under a mile away, Jason turned from the public stereo in the rotunda of Pol-Anx. Tapping the cold bit of his pipe against his teeth as he walked, he sought the ease of his chair. In the privacy of his office he began to ponder.

The months' developments gave him no surprise. Because it was the first contact Humanity had had with a non-human race, the Mars discoveries made an overwhelming impression on the man in the street. The result was that for the first time in Post-Synthesis history all artifacts were reserved for Earth Public!!!

Everyone Who Mattered screamed, except Lonnie. He evinced a biding calmness while attending the ceremonies marking the installation of the Tiara of Wold in the exact center of Government's own Fane of Artifacts; even smiling benignly on certain Gov-Ficials who seemed to perspire more than the coolness of the evening warranted.

Jason, loitering on the grass of Gov-Park, noted the smile and the perspiration. The perspirers reminded him of small boys expecting a whipping.

Once the dedication ceremonies were over, Lonnie never returned to the Fane to examine the Tiara.

It was Jason the Tiara seemed to fascinate. He spent more and more time, particularly evenings, crouching on the bench in Gov-Park across from the Tiara, ignoring the constant stream of awed tourists silhouetted against the blaze of light. He kept in constant touch with his desk sergeant through his pocket communito, so Annex business didn't suffer. And the summer was warm, to say the least, so that several Gov-Ficials were almost regretful that the dignity of their positions forbade following Jason's example.

But then, too, no mere cop had their responsibilities.

None of them was conscious of how habitually Jason frowned, scratched his head, moved uneasily on the pleasant bench. Occasionally, he would snap his fingers and the frown would relax. He'd switch on the communito and speak briefly. Immediately thereafter, one or the other of the hand-picked four in Jason's personal squad would raise his eyebrows slightly—safely, since the pocket communito did not project video—and take up a new position or new duties. Or, an equipment unit in Op-room at Anx would be indifferently retuned by heedless techs.

Then for a while Jason would vent smoke pleasantly from his malodorous pipe until the frown would settle back between his eyebrows and he'd begin to squirm on the bench again, glancing warily at Executive Level, feeling helpless about the inadequacy of his resources.

But Lonnie had gotten over feeling sad about *his* resources months earlier.

The night he'd returned from the Tiara ceremonies he'd locked himself in his den and let the on-view smile his face was wearing lapse. He tweaked Genghis Khan's nose viciously and slammed himself down in the Diamond Throne without donning a single imperial trapping, pounding his fist on the cool mineral facet and staring morosely at the grid suit hanging in its place on the wall.

The grid suit wouldn't help him this time. The cover-alls that had everything except the necessary invisibility to—

Invisibility!

Slowly, Lonnie began to grin. Very little later he had an obscure biochemist hooked, and ended his instructions with: "... don't care if it needs concentrated essence of chameleon juice. Invent it. And it better work for there's going to be a total shortage of neo-hyperacth at two-

twenty-eight per cc for wifey!"

The biochemist delivered. Lonnie didn't stop to question if it really was essence of chameleon juice. He hurried with the beaker of viscous fluid to his throne room, drenched every square centimeter of the grid suit with it and watched breathlessly through the hours while it dried.

In the glowing, shadowless illumination, the suit gradually disappeared. First, the wall against which it hung shone mistily through it. Then there was wall, slightly outlined by a greyish cast. And at last, only an indescribable fuzziness that had to be sensed rather than seen.

V

HE TOOK the fuzziness off its hanger and threw it up in the air toward the center light. The light was undimmed. The fuzziness was air. It sprawled down across the Throne and became diamond, except for the sleeve that dangled; part air, part intricately patterned Persian carpet. It wasn't a fuzziness, exactly, it was more of a faint tone of difference in the color-texture feel. It was as though what was behind the suit was miraculously translated to its facing surface and then reflected to the eye within the nth of utter fidelity.

Grinning, slowly Lonnie's lower lip crept out and up to squeeze its mate. Then, because it was always better to be sure, he donned the suit to try it against a variety of experimental backgrounds, indoors and out.

Over at Pol-Anx, the servo-tracer went to sleep; the desk sergeant yanked the creaking joints of his bunioned feet down off Jason's desk; on the bench in Gov-Park, Jason's communito squeaked briefly and Jason and his four men rose to emergency alert.

Two hours later, the Wold Tiara still coruscating in the Fane's blaze of light, the servo-tracer picked up its placid humming. Jason's communito squeaked again and Jason's men relaxed while Jason himself clutched his head with both hands and whispered bitter things.

At the same time, Lonnie, whistling cheerfully, drew his legs out of the suit, shook it straight and hung it back on the wall. He was sure now. As sure as he was that the little biochemist and his wife and quintet of daughters would not want for neo-hyperacth or anything else any longer. He giggled a little, thinking of Jason crouched on the bench, glaring vacantly, utterly unconscious of Lonnie passing across the grass so close beside him.

At his own convenience, Lonnie selected his night; a full-moon night because his now-invisible grid suit didn't require dark. He picked a fairly early hour, too, because what matter if a few yawps gawked as the Tiara vanished? And that one of those yawps would be Jason, stodgily on his bench, gave Lonnie an extra fillip. Perhaps it was just for this he'd let Jason plug along on a cold trail all these years.

So that night, wearily from his bench in Gov-Park, Jason looked up at Friday the 13th's full moon swimming amiably through its own reflected night-brightness. His brain, tired of its everlasting shuttle between worries, presented him with a disconnected memory-fact: "As cited by Zollner," Jason found himself quoting a forgotten textbook, "the Moon's reflectivity is point one seven four ... Nuts!" Angrily, he broke off, thumbed the button of his communito, growled into the microphone on his lapel, "Report."

"Adams," came promptly back. "West Entry. Nothing."

"McGillis. Patrolling rear wall. All clear in both directions as far as I can see. An' I can see both ends of the Fane in all this moonlight, Chief."

"Holland. At Raichi House. Nothing."

"Johnson. East Entry. More of the same." Then, "Say, Jase, how about it? These double shifts are getting me."

"What's the matter with you, now?"

"My feet hurt, Jase. Neither one of us is as young as we used to be, remember. How about knocking off?"

"Hmphf ..." Johnson, Jason thought, was getting old. He'd been a good man in his day but—

Hey, he was still a good man! It was Jason's own stubbornness that was wearing Johnson down. Jason's useless stubbornness. After all, without the backing of Anx or Gov, without results from the equipment he had filched to use on Lonnie, what was the use of everlastingly sticking around the Tiara like a fly buzzing molasso-saccharine anyway? Jason opened his mouth to send them all home, pressed the communico button and—shelved the relieving order temporarily. Instead, he blasted into the microphone: "Sergeant! SERGEANT!"

From the communico, an intermittent drone became a gasping gulp; changed into a violent yawn and only then turned into startled speech. "Yeah? Huh?... Yeah, Chief!"

"Sergeant, if I ever catch you asleep again, you won't ever get your pension."

"Chief, I wasn't asleep! Honest! I—"

"All right. What's happening up there?"

"Nothin' ... nothin' ... I wasn't asleep, Chief. I'd'a called you 'f anything—"

SOMETHING bright, or was it dull, plucked at the edge of Jason's vision. Inside the Fane, far down at one end. A thin, vertical bar of difference in the blaze of light. Chin half turned, Jason stared. What?...

"*Chief!* That tracer's asleep—I mean—that there tracer's just GONE t'sleep! I mean—Chief! It's—"

"Shut up!" Jason hissed. "Holland! If you've let anyone slip past you out of that house—"

"Nobody did. You know me better than that, Chief."

"Adams! McGillis! Johnson! What's happening?"

"Nothing ..."

"Not a thing ..."

"*Johnson!*" Jason licked suddenly dry lips. "Dammit, Johnson, report!... *Johnson!*"

Silence.

Grimly, Jason watched the vertical bar of different brightness edge back to the Fane's East wall and disappear into the even dazzle of the marble. He had a feeling it wasn't any use calling Johnson again. Ever.

"Chief, what's up? What do we do?"

"Huh? Oh ... You, Holland, get over to the East Entry as fast as your legs'll stretch."

"There in three minutes flat!"

"You, too, McGillis."

"On my way!"

"Adams, you stick at that West Entry. If anything gets past you, I'll—"

"Don't worry, Chief. I've got Johnson to even up for."

Not watching how he ran, Jason hurled himself toward the East Entry; his eyes following, in the opposite direction, a dullness moving in the blaze inside the Fane. A smoothly moving, white on white, unfaced ghost of whiteness within, a part of, the blazing radionic light. Just as he rounded the East end of the Fane, he glimpsed the vertical bar of whiteness again—the edge of the marble slab that was the entry door, reflecting the blazing light at a different angle. Behind it, McGillis's tightly grinning face. Under McGillis's face, the stab of blue-white light reflected a glancing ray from the old-fashioned solid-missile service pistol that Jason had insisted all four men arm themselves with for this assignment.

Over the sound of his own labored breathing as he plunged through the East Entry, Jason heard panting behind him. Holland. Holland bettering his promised three minutes—and with a forbidden disarmer in his hand. Guiltily, Jason felt the weight of the disarmer he had himself secreted under his armpit.

Then there wasn't time for thinking or feeling, only for running down the dazzling half-mile inside the Fane to the Tiara. Up ahead, the different-white shape was motionless in front of it. Oddly, a dark, vertical line appeared from the top to what would be the waist of the shape. And for the instant it took the Tiara to vanish inside, Jason saw clearly in the radiant light the profile of Lonnie's unmistakable face. Saw Lonnie's eyes swivel in the direction of the thundering echoes of their footfalls in the silence of the Fane. Saw Lonnie turn toward them, the dark line disappearing from waist to top as if it had never been.

Once more the different-whiteness moved. Toward them. Edging for the back wall to skirt around them; one limb-shape fumbling in the palm of the other.

"No you don't!" McGillis, ahead of Jason, yelled, his howl drowned in the smacking crack of his pistol.

There seemed to be a waver in the different-whiteness. A small black dot appeared against it; hung briefly, apparently unsupported, in the air; then the undistorted bullet dropped inertly to the floor.

"You *still* won't!" McGillis hurled himself, shoulders low and legs driving, at the shape. Two feet from it, he rebounded sharply, trod on the rolling bullet, went down, his head splatting dully against the marble floor.

Holland grunted. Crouched to leap. Thrust his disarmer high, ready to snap into line.

"Hold it!" Jason commanded. Silently, eyelids barely separated to endure the dazzle, he stared at the different-whiteness that confronted him. "I made it this time, Lonnie," he called. "Caught up with you— No!" His arm flung out, startling him with the feel of his disarmer now oddly in his hand.

"Don't move!"

The white-within-white's limb-shapes moved up, the hand-ends one over the other. Through the minute spaces the overlapping fingers left, glimpses of a thin dark line appeared. The hood was open a trifle at mouth level, and from the opening Lonnie's voice emerged, sifting through the protecting screen of gloves. "You can't see me! You *can't!*"

"No? Take one step sideways. Just *one!* Stop!"

The different-whiteness had moved, and Holland had moved with it; crouching now, alertly motionless, in his new position. Jason changed the angle of his own facing. "Now do you think we can't see you?"

"But ... but how!"

"Your albedo is showing," Jason chuckled harshly. "You never would take the trouble to learn the *how* of anything, Lonnie. Sure, your damned disguise is the same color as the marble. Maybe even exactly the same. But the material is different, and the surface texture; it doesn't have the same degree or quality of reflectivity to incident light that marble does!"

"Eighty years ago, even the commercial photographers knew about albedo—one of 'em made a picture of a cat, white on white. I told you about the reflectivity in your stereo cube. But you wouldn't listen, Lonnie, would you?" Jason let out a bursting peal of laughter. "*So you tripped over your own albedo!*"

Through the dying echoes of his own laughter, Jason caught Lonnie's harsh whisper. "You haven't got me, copper!"

THE black line marking the opening in the grid suit disappeared. The barely-discernible limb-shapes dropped, one hand-end again fumbling at the rheostat in the palm of the other.

"I'll get him, Chief!" Holland was in action, his disarmer snapping down into aim.

"No!" Jason roared. "Holland, don't!"

Too late. Under the pressure of Holland's finger, the disarmer's invisible ion-stream tightened to the thread-thin lethal intensity, leaped out against the suit's grid. Then the disarmer was luminous even in the dazzle; even through the flesh of Holland's fist. Holland screamed and squirmed and dropped. Part of him—the part that wasn't burned away—reached the floor.

The stench of carbonized flesh scoured Jason's nostrils. Stupidly, he stared down at the headless, shoulderless, armless torso; black ... sooty ... against the snowy gleam of the floor; conscious of the sidelong, round-about approach of the different-white figure. He'd failed again. Lonnie, in that damned suit, was impervious.

Slowly, he raised his eyes from the thing on the floor to the thing approaching. One consolation, he himself wouldn't go on living after this. With grim frustration, he raised his arm in a final, fruitless gesture and hurled the useless disarmer at the shape of Lonnie.

It halted, dead, in mid-air, a yard away from the shape-thing. Dropped straight down, clanging against the floor.

A quiver as of mirth appeared to shake the different-whiteness. It stooped. One hand-end fumbled at the palmed rheostat, then dropped to pick up the disarmer. Fumbled again at the rheostat while the figure straightened up to point the glistening projector at Jason's belly.

The dark opening in the hood appeared again.

Lonnie's voice chortled, "Told you I'd use whatever you tried to smear you with. Goodbye, Jasey ..."

The dark line was gone. The disarmer, turned to lethal potential, settled in the shape's hand-end and began to spout. Jason went stiff. Every muscle of his body clenching to withstand obliteration.

He waited for it. Tight ... except his eyes that, in spite of themselves, opened.

Caught within the field, the full power of the disarmer poured itself into the suit. The suit's capacity absorbed it. Almost. Then turned the combined energies on itself.

With the smell of frying organic matter, slowly the grid-coveralls appeared in dazzling radiance within the dazzle of the Fane's lights; glowed in it; red—then white—hot. Whiter than the light itself—far, far lighter than any reflected rays could make it.

Inside the all-encompassing, roasting grid of the melting suit, Lonnie writhed. Faintly, as the suit failed, his screams came through—momentarily. Then they were gone as the fused, molten heap subsided lower ... lower ... began to trickle across the dazzling, ice-white marble of the floor.

Afterward, had Jason known anything at all about Lonnie's Philosophy, he'd have immediately supplied another "rule"; making a foursome out of the "Triple Ethic": "If you do it yourself, make sure you know *what* you're doing."

Transcriber's Note:

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