

THEY BROUGHT it to me, of course. I'm the head of this outfit, since they have the idea I'm a diplomat, and so they brought it to me.

It started in my office; I'm the Terran attaché to the Venusian Embassy in New York — the catch being that the Venusians don't know that a fellow named Mart Robinson is attached to them.

My job, mostly, is simply to sit around and keep an eye on our blue-skinned brothers from space, and make sure they're only double-crossing us and not pulling a tripple cross. Which, knowing them, I consider altogether likely at any time.

The Venusian Embassy is a tall, imposing building in midtown Manhattan. It looks just like every other office building in the midtown section. The only difference is that you can get inside any of the other office buildings without much trouble. No Earthman has entered the Venusian Embassy since the day the Treaty was signed, and the windows are pleasantly opaque.

No Earthman except one, that is. His name was Hilary Bowie, and he was a short, sad-looking, washed-out little fellow with an uncommon faculty for getting into places he wasn't expected to get into. He, and he alone, was my pipeline into the Venusian Embassy.

He walked into my office, carrying a fairly large, ominous-looking wooden box, and having a hard time of it. He sat it down in front of me, and let me contemplate it unopened for a couple of minutes. "A present for Daddy," he said. He smiled. Somehow Hilary Bowie's smile has a way of making me feel even gloomier.

I looked at the box. It was about two feet long, about the same high, and had airholes punched in it. "You bring me a pet?"

Hilary nodded. "A cute one," he said. "Real cute." He tapped the box, and I heard an unpleasant scrabbling sound come from within. It sounded like an army of crabs.

"Cut the suspense, I told him. "I'm busy, Hilary. There's a new Treaty revision coming up next month and I have to —"

"Sure," Hilary said, and he smiled again. He's got a smile that makes a person

feel like crying. "But you're going to have to write a different kind of treaty when you see what I've got here." He shivered. "Now that I look back, I don't see how I got the thing out of the building."

But now I was starting to get impatient, but I didn't dare open the box. "Go ahead," I urged. "Show the damned thing to me, will you?"

"Get me a bird cage," he said blandly.

"*What?*"

"All right, so don't get me a bird cage." He reached for the lid of the box.

Hold it," I said nervously. I flipped on my intercom, with none too steady fingers.

"Cindy? I want a bird cage, on the double. About two feet high, and I want it here in five minutes, if not sooner. That's all."

Yes, Mr. Robinson," she said, sounding more than a little puzzled. I could imagine some vivid cursing going on in the outer office, but I knew she'd get the bird cage.

And sure enough, she did. That's what I like so much about this job: when I say something, they *hop*. She walked into my office about three minutes later, clutching a great big gleaming bird cage in her lovely milk-white hand.

"Here you are, sir," she said coolly, as if digging up bird cages on a moment's notice were part of her everyday routine.

"Good girl. Just put it on the desk." She looked queerly at Hilary's canon for a moment and left. As she went out she shrugged her shoulders, making sure I caught the gesture. Hilary has never impressed the rest of my staff much, but he's worth his weight in plutonium to me.

"There's your bird cage," I said. "Now show me." I glanced at my watch. Hilary had used up fifteen minutes of valuable time, and I had sixty-two different projects on the line with the brass upstairs breathing on my neck about all of them.

"Here you are, Mart. A little bit of poultry I picked up while visiting the Embassy this morning. As far as I know, they haven't missed it yet."

He leaned the box up near the open door of the bird cage and gingerly slid the lid off. There was a flutter of snow-white wings, and then I heard the door of the bird cage clang shut in a hurry.

I stared at the creature inside. A good ten seconds passed, and I just *stared*.

"All right, Hilary. You've hit the jackpot. What is it?"

"Can't you tell, Mark? It's plain as day, of course. It's a pigeon."

"Oh, sure," I said. "A pigeon! I should have seen it immediately, beyond any doubt."

But," I asked, "where'd it get that extra head? And what about those talons?"

"That's your problem, my friend," Hilary said. It sure was. I stared glumly at the weird-looking thing in the bird cage.

Underneath it all, I could see now, there was a pigeon— an ordinary, perfectly conventional, harmless little fan-tail. But someone or something had redesigned this pigeon drastically.

Each of its two heads ended in a razor-sharp beak. Its legs were sturdy things tipped with claws like steel knives. Its four eyes were beady, bright, and, I thought, unnaturally intelligent. This particular pigeon had been converted into a pretty deadly sort of fighting machine. I gestured out the window at the gleaming, opaque-windowed, unapproachable Venusian Embassy.

"I suppose you got this little pet over there?"

"I did," Hilary said. "I found him in a laboratory on —let me see—the forty-second floor. No, the forty-third. It was the devil's own job getting him out, too, but I figured you'd like to have a look.

"There were some other cuties in there too. A six-legged cat, a dog with three heads—an honest-to-God Cerberus—another cat with the damndest mouthful of teeth you'd want to see, each one about six inches long and sharp as needles. They have a whole laboratory, filled with these pretty beasts."

"Each one having the basic form of some common Terran animal," I said.

"Right. They've taken our animals and built them into things like this." He pointed to the bird cage. Just then the intercom buzzed. "What is it, Cindy?"

"Mr. Garvey to see you, sir."

I frowned. Garvey was a scientist in government service. He also happened to be my sister's husband, and he felt that gave him some claim on my time. He had made a habit of dropping in on me every time he had some hair-brained project that he thought could use my political influence.

"Tell him I'm in conference, Cindy," I said, watching the ex-pigeon making ferocious attempts to escape its cage and start slicing us up. "Tell him I can see him in a while, and he can wait if he's in no hurry."

"Yes, Mr. Robinson."

I turned back to Bowie. "Look, Hilary. You say the Venusians are playing around with Earth animals?"

"That's my guess, Mart. You know how shrewd they are at genetics. I guess this represents one of their little experiments."

"You don't have any notion why they're doing this?" I asked.

"Not the slightest," Hilary said. "For the sheer love of pure science, I suppose. Doesn't that sound likely?"

"Yeah," I said. "Real likely."

I got up and walked to the window and stared out. My office faced the Embassy Building, and that gave me ample opportunity to spend long hours staring out, wondering what the hell was going on behind its opaque windows.

Earth had been on more-or-less friendly terms with Venus for nearly fifteen years, which meant we had an Embassy up there and they had one down here, and that was the size of it. It was an uneasy sort of friendship, with not much warmth about it. We were both somewhat scared—hell, scared stiff—of the Martian Combine, and the Earth-Venus alliance was one of pure convenience. Though we didn't admit it publicly, of course.

The Venusians were fairly well humanoid, if you don't mind the blue skin and the extra set of arms. But we didn't trust them too much; they weren't, after all, human, and you can never tell what an extraterrestrial will do next.

That unpleasant but painfully true fact explains why I had a job. Someone had to watch the Venusians; and I did, or tried to. I had a carefully-nurtured spy-system (consisting mostly of Hilary Bowie), and I had some contacts here and there who—well, there's no point going into details which might better well be kept out of the open.

But there was a revision of the Earth-Venus treaty coming up next month, and I had been warned from upstairs to keep a double patrol out. Before we committed ourselves to yet another alliance with Venus, we wanted to make thoroughly sure that we weren't tying ourselves into knots. The Venusians were too shifty to go signing peace treaties just like that.

And now this.

"You know the scoop on this, don't you?" I asked. "If we don't find out just what the hell is going on in that building, and stop it before that treaty gets signed, we may find that we've handed Earth over to the Venusians on a stainless-steel platter."

Hilary nodded. "I'll be in there digging, Chief. Meantime you can keep the pet."

"Thanks," I said. I buzzed Cindy. "Send in Mr. Garvey, will you, dear?"

As Garvey entered, I surreptitiously slipped the bird cage down out of view behind my desk. I didn't want him to see it just yet.

"Hello, Frank," I said. "What's on your mind?" "Just thought I'd drop in to see how business was going," Garvey said cheerily. There are times when I wonder what Jackie sees in that utter fathead; but she never questions my tastes in women, and so I keep from venturing my opinions on her husband.

He took a package from under his coat. I couldn't resist a quiver when he did that; after Hilary's visit, I was half expecting Garvey to produce a six-headed leapfrog or something like that.

"I've been doing some experiments. Mart. I thought you'd like a sample." He unpacked the little box. I watched, more nervously than usual.

And he drew out the biggest tomato you ever want to see. Pretty near the size of a melon.

I'm afraid I looked at him awfully impatiently. "Say, Frank—"

"Just a minute, Mart. Take a look at this tomato. Big, isn't it?"

"Yes," I admitted. "So what?" I glanced at my watch. He grinned. "It's mine; I grew it."

"Didn't know you were a farmer Prank! A new sideline?"

"I grew this in my lab, Mart, I told you I'd been dabbling with hydroponics." He held the thing out proudly. "Ever *see* one that big?"

"What did you do to it?" I asked. "Blow it up with hot air?"

Garvey looked hurt. "You never take my work seriously, do you? This tomato's been treated with a growth hormone I've developed—an improved auxin."

"I thought oxen pulled plows."

"Very funny. For your information, auxin happens to be a well-known scientific term for the group of hormones that induce growth in plants. It's a relatively simple hydrocarbon, and has been commercially available for years as beta-indolyl acetic acid. But I've been working on a sort of super-auxin that puts the old stuff to shame."

He held out the tomato for my inspection. I hefted it in my hand. It was big all right.

"That was produced with a one-in-two-thousand concentration of my new drug, Mart! If I'd wanted to I could have grown a tomato the size of a watermelon! The size of a cow! But—"

*Here comes the catch*, I thought.

"My appropriation's been cut off," he said sadly. "And Jackie thought, if I saw you, perhaps you could—"

"—get you some money for experiments," I completed. I started to say no, then stopped. Bluntness is wasted on him.

"I thought we might go partners on the deal," he said timidly. "It has great commercial possibilities."

"Let me think about it a while," I said. "Sounds good."

Suddenly he was all gratitude. "Would you, Mart? It—"

I quieted him with a gesture. "I've got something more on my mind than big tomatoes, Frank. What do you think of this baby?" I reached down and lifted the bird cage into view.

He stared silently for almost a minute. "Venusian?" he said at length.

"Partially," I said.

"It was a pigeon once," Garvey said. "I mean, is it the Venusians who—oh, it has to be. There's not a geneticist on Earth who could produce a creature like that."

"You're sure of that, Frank?"

"It's my field, isn't it? That pigeon's been genetically manipulated by experts, and I mean experts. The Venusians have forgotten more about genes and chromosomes than we've ever learned. I'd stake my reputation as a geneticist that that bird's a Venusian product."

I nodded. For once I took him seriously. Frank may be a featherhead in many ways, but I trust anything he says professionally.

"Any opinions?" I asked.

"That's your job, isn't it? All I can tell you is that he's been manipulated, and a damned good job of it." He leaned over and whispered confidentially. "Tell me—have you people made any progress in combing genetic techniques out of the blueskins? They know more about genetic engineering than —"

"I know," I said. We'd been trying frantically to steal genetic info from the Venusians, but we hadn't been half so successful as they had in lifting our atomics knowledge. "Do you think this thing will breed true?" I asked.

"I don't doubt it," said Garvey. I'm sure he's a genetic mutation, not a mere phenotype alteration. Nasty-looking thing, isn't it?"

I nodded. "It's a nasty business, Frank." I stood up, and started to shoo him out. "Try me on that tomato deal soon, will you?"

"Sure, Mart, sure. I don't want to interrupt anything—"

"And give my best to Jackie, and, uh, drop around sometime soon, huh?"

"Sure thing," he said, as I nudged him through the door.

The brass reacted as expected. I took the bird to Pitman, my immediate superior, and spent about half an hour explaining the meaning of genetic manipulation—no easy job, since for one thing explaining things to Pitman is a task for a supergenius and for another I'm pretty vague myself about genes and chromosomes.

His reaction was a simple and predictable one.

"This looks dangerous to me, Robinson. I'd suggest you let Colonel Kennerly have a look at it before we go any further."

Kennerly bounced me up to Madison, and Madison sent me on to the Chief. I half expected him to refer me to the Archangel Gabriel, or someone, but he didn't.

"You say your men saw dozens of these experiments being carried on in the Embassy?" the Chief asked, his thin lips set in a grim mask.

I nodded.

"Hmmm. This looks dangerous to me, Robinson. Put a stop to it before the treaty's signed."

He looked at me with that what's-the-matter-you-need-an-engraved-invitation? gleam in his eye, and I got out of there in a hurry.

*Put a stop to it.*

Sure. Walk into the Venusian Embassy, which is so bottled up that not even the Chief could get in there, and demand that they cut out their genetic monkeyshines. I could just see it now.

I pictured myself staring up at some big blueskin and saying pompously, "One of my spies has found out about your nefarious doings. On behalf of my government, I demand you Bring These Activities to a Halt or else."

Oh, sure.

There had to be some more subtle way about it. I had to do it, quickly, to be sure, but with great subtlety, so that the Venusians got scared and laid off.

But how do you scare a Venusian?

I blasted off for Venus later that evening on a chartered ship, figuring the best thing was to go straight to the root of the trouble. Besides, I'd always had an urge to see the place.

It was hot and sticky. I got a native carrier to take me to the Terran Embassy, which was a frumpy-looking building about three stories high, in an obscure corner of some village.

I walked in, bird cage dangling from my hand.

"Hello," I said. "I'm Robinson."

"Glad to meet you." The short, squat, heavily-tanned, worried-looking man who greeted me was Jansen, the new ambassador. He'd just been promoted. When I had last seen him, back in 2160 or so, he had been a file clerk, but time has a way of moving on.

He didn't look much like an ambassador, clad only in a pair of trunks. I couldn't blame him; I was still in my business suit, and regretting it. It's *hot* on Venus.

"You've met me before," I told him. "You were a clerk in the E-T office, and I was —"

"— the kid who ran the mimeo machine!" Jansen's dark face creased in a smile.

"What brings you up here?"

"Trouble. Big trouble." I unveiled the bird cage and told him the whole story — how the Venusians were plotting something devious with our wild-life, and how we didn't like it.

"That's a beaut," he said, pointing at the pigeon, which was still fiercely attacking its cage. "It's as weird as some of the things they've been doing here."

"You know about them?"

The jungles are full of them," Jansen said. "They just turn them loose after they've manipulated them. You ought to see them. The local fauna is strange-looking enough, but once the blueskins get through juggling them they're *really* out of this world."

He reached up and rang a bell. Another Terran came in.

"Excuse me," he said. He turned to the other. "Bring in a bowl of meat, will you? It's feeding time."

The newcomer grinned. "Your pet's getting hungry, eh?"

"Something fierce. I forgot to feed it yesterday."

He turned back to me as the other left. "Sorry."



"What sort of pet?"

"Local creature," he said. "Helps brighten up the office." He paced nervously back and forth. "You say there's a treaty revision coming up?"

I was astounded. "You mean you didn't know?"

"They never tell me anything," Jansen said, smiling apologetically. "I'm just a glorified file clerk still. The only reason we have an Embassy on Venus is because they've got one down there, and we can't let them get a step ahead of us. Don't you forget it."

"Yes," I said, trying to ignore his outburst. "There is a treaty revision coming up. And I have to put a stop to this genetic foolery before we sign the treaty, or else."

Jansen smiled. "Just like that, eh? I wish you luck. The Venusians are as talkative as clams. You'll have to scare them real hard to get them to bow to you."

"I know," I said, thinking of the calm, inscrutable blue-skins. It'll take a heap of scaring, I thought.

Just then the other Earthman came back in, bearing a little plate with some chunks of meat in it.

"Watch this," Jansen said. "It may amuse you."

He drew aside a curtain and revealed a potted plant, about a foot high — the meanest-looking, ugliest mess of vegetation I'd ever seen. He put the dish of meat down in front of it, and hurriedly drew away his hand.

I watched in horror as the plant lowered a couple of stringy, tendril-like branches, curled them firmly around two red chunks of meat, lifted them, and quickly stowed them inside a gaping orifice in the middle of a tangle of twisted, ugly leaves.

There was a gulping noise, and the tendrils descended again.

*"What is it?"* I managed to say.

"A local plant," Jansen said. "Fairly common in the jungles around here." He grinned. "Carnivorous."

"So I see," I said weakly.

"It preys on small wild life. I don't think the plant bothers the Venusians very much; they keep them as pets too."

I stared at it. "Some pet," I said. "Scares me to pieces. I wonder what a big one would be like."

"Ghastly, I suppose," Jansen said. "But this one keeps us entertained. It keeps our minds off problems."

"Yes," I said. A new light began to dawn in my eyes. "Say — you think I could get a call through to Earth right away? I want to talk to someone, and in a hurry!"

My boy arrived on the next rocket in, very much mystified and somewhat annoyed. He claimed he had all sorts of important work to finish, but I shushed him and very carefully lined out the assignment for him. He nodded grimly and set to work.

And he delivered. And how, did he deliver!

The Venusian Overlord came to visit us, at my request, the day after the job was finished. I dressed formally, in my Earth clothes. I sweated blasphemously, but I felt I wouldn't be able to sound commanding and business-like in a G-string.

Jansen introduced me as special envoy from Earth, and then edged away to leave us politely alone.

We fenced verbally for about five minutes, exchanging pleasantries about our respective planets, and sizing each other up. Like most blueskins, he seemed fully clothed in nothing but his loincloth; he was about seven feet tall, and with shoulders to match. He needed the big shoulders; they provided muscle anchors for his four arms.

Then I began to bring in the genetics deal. I worked around it most delicately, explaining how we were aware that the Venusians were doing all sorts of experiments with our native wild-life. I didn't bother to tell him that we were worried silly about what they might do with the products of the experiments.

"There's nothing in the Treaty that forbids members of our Embassy from performing genetic experiments," the blueskin reminded me. "We are allowed to do whatsoever we please, just so long *as* we remain within our delimited confines." He spoke clearly and precisely, as if he'd studied our language just for the occasion.

"Ah, yes," I said. "But the animals your laboratories are producing constitute a *potential* danger to our planet, should they get loose. And, on occasion, this has happened." I uncovered the bird cage. *Exhibit A*, I thought.

"We apprehended this one near your Embassy," I lied. You see, of course, how dangerous a beast it is?"

The Venusian frowned, lifting one of his arms to his forehead in a gesture I knew meant annoyance. "Yes, yes, of course. But I'm sure this was a mere accident. Ill see to it that due precautions are taken in the future, naturally, but you understand that our genetics program is an important part of our scientific development, just as — ah — your atomics researches on Earth are to you. You can no more expect us to halt our program than we would expect you to halt work on atomics."

There was a glint in his eye that suggested to me that he might be willing to consider a trade; he might swap some geneticists for a couple of our nuclear physicists. It didn't sound like a bad idea, but it wasn't up to me to negotiate it. Leave that up to the Treaty-makers, I thought.

"Well," I said, "I understand your position perfectly." At that point I decided I hated diplomacy. "And we of Earth will withdraw our objections, provided you instruct your Embassy to take stronger precautions against the escape of any of their — ah — products."

He smiled happily, and reached out with his two lower hands to grasp mine. "Fine. It pleases me that there will be no friction between our worlds."

I stood up, sliding my hand from between his. "Oh, by the way," I said casually. "Earth has begun a small genetic engineering program of its own, you know. Nothing to compare with the magnificent Venusian techniques, of course, but it's a beginning, a beginning —"

I rang the bell. Jansen appeared. "Bring in the meat," I said. "It's feeding time."

I turned to the somewhat puzzled Venusian. "This is one of our first products," I said. "An opening, fumbling effort, shall we say? You'll note that our interests are chiefly in the flora, unlike yours."

I drew back the curtain and revealed one of the Venusian carnivorous plants. This one was some ten feet in height. It reared up from the floor like an immense bear, with its great nauseating tendrils waving slowly back and forth in the air. It made me sick.

I heard a little strangled cry of amazement come from the Venusian's throat, and I swear his blue skin turned a tinge greener.

Jansen reappeared, pushing a little truck to which some poor Venusian beast was clamped—an animal almost the size of a man. He rolled the little truck along the floor.

As soon as it came within reach, one of those immense undulating tendrils came pouncing down on it. I watched, sickened, but yet enjoying the whole thing.

The plant fed, noisily.

I shook Garvey's hand. "Wonderful Job, Frank," I said sincerely. "I've just had word from Hilary that the Venusian Embassy on Earth is scared witless; they've made all sorts of concessions in the new Treaty provided we destroy our

carnivorous plant before it has a chance to spread any seeds. They've even agreed to turn over some genetics information to us."

I shuddered, and knew how the Venusians must have taken it. They'd be willing to do almost anything provided we killed that plant.

I drew out my blaster and clicked the safety.'

"What are you going to do?" Garvey asked suddenly, paling. My respect for him, which had been building ever since he'd produced that marvelous horror, melted immediately. Away from his lab, he was still a fool. I'll bet he expected me to blast him down where he stood.

"I'm going to get rid of your pet," I said.

"What for?"

"Because, you damned idiot, it's dangerous to the whole of Venusian society, and we've already agreed to destroy it before it breeds. Why, if that thing started seeding —"

Suddenly Garvey burst into chuckles. I thought he'd split from laughter.

"What's so funny?" I snapped.

"You never did learn anything about science, did you, Mart? I didn't do any genetic engineering on that plant, man — all I did was blow up one specimen with my hormones, same as I did with that tomato I showed you. But that's *not* a mutation. It won't breed big plants any more than a rat with his tail chopped off will breed tailless rats. Any offspring of our plant here will be small-sized, of course, and so there's nothing to fear from him. Unless you go too close to him."

"You can't be too careful."

"No," he said dreamily. I looked at him. He seemed to be floating somewhere.

"What's with you?"

"I was just thinking," he said. "When the Venusians get around to turning over their techniques to us —"

"What then?"

"Think of the wonderful tomatoes we'll grow!" he said, almost shouting. "And they'll breed true!"

I smiled. What else can you do?