

The Game-Players of Titan

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Extract

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Chapter 1

It had been a bad night, and when he tried to drive home he had a terrible argument with his car.

'Mr Garden, you are in no condition to drive. Please use the auto-auto mech and recline in the rear seat.'

Pete Garden sat at the steering tiller and said as distinctly as he could manage, 'Look, I can drive. One drink, in fact several make you more alert. So stop fooling around.' He punched the starter button, but nothing happened. 'Start, darn it!'

The auto-auto said, 'You have not inserted the key.'

'Okay,' he said, feeling humiliated. Maybe the car was right. Resignedly, he inserted the key. The engine started up, but the controls were still dead. The Rushmore Effect was still taking place inside the hood, he knew; it was a losing argument. 'All right, I'll let you drive,' he said with as much dignity as possible. 'Since you're so eager. You'll probably louse it all up anyhow, like you always do when I'm - not feeling well.'

He crawled into the back seat, threw himself down, as the car lifted from the pavement and skimmed through the night sky, its signal lights blinking. God, he felt bad. His head was killing him.

His thoughts turned, as always, back to The Game.

Why had it gone so badly? Silvanus Angst was responsible. That clown, his brother-in-law or rather former brother-in-law. That's right, Pete said to himself; I have to remember. I'm not married to Freya anymore. Freya and I lost and so our marriage was dissolved and we're starting over again with Freya married to Clem Gaines

and I'm not married to anybody yet because I haven't managed to roll a three, yet.

I'll roll a three tomorrow, he told himself. And when I do, they'll have to import a wife for me; I've used them all up in the group.

His car hummed on, finding its way above the deserted midsection of California, the desolate lands of abandoned towns.

'Did you know that?' he asked his car. 'That I've been married to every woman in the group now? And I haven't had any *luck*, yet, so it must be me. Right?'

The car said, 'It's you.'

'Even if it were me, it wouldn't be my fault; it's the Red Chinese. I hate them.' He lay supine, staring up at the stars through the transparent dome of the car. 'I love you, though; I've had you for years. You're never going to wear out.' He felt tears rise up in his eyes. 'Is that all right?'

'It depends on the preventative maintenance you faithfully follow.'

'I wonder what kind of woman they'll import for me.'

'I wonder,' the car echoed.

What other group was his group – Pretty Blue Fox – in closest contact with? Probably Straw Man Special, which met in Las Vegas and represented Bindmen from Nevada, Utah and Idaho. Shutting his eyes, he tried to remember what the women of Straw Man Special looked like.

When I get home to my apartment in Berkeley, Pete said to himself, I'll – and then he remembered something dreadful.

He could not go home to Berkeley. Because he had lost Berkeley in The Game, tonight. Walt Remington had won it from him by calling his bluff on square thirty-six. That was what had made it such a bad night.

'Change course,' he said hoarsely to the auto-auto circuit. He still held title deed to most of Marin County:

he could stay there. 'We'll go to San Rafael,' he said, sitting up and rubbing his forehead, groggily.

A male voice said, 'Mrs Gaines?'

Freya, combing her short blonde hair before the mirror, did not look around; absorbed, she thought, It sounds like that awful Bill Calumine.

'Do you want a ride home?' the voice asked, and then Freya realized that it was her new husband, Clem Gaines. 'You *are* going home, aren't you?' Clem Gaines, large and overstuffed, with blue eyes, she thought, like broken glass that had been glued there, and glued slightly awry, strolled across the Game room toward her. It pleased him, obviously, to be married to her.

It won't be for long, Freya thought. Unless, she thought suddenly, we have *luck*.

She continued brushing her hair, paying no attention to him. For a woman one hundred and forty years old, she decided critically, I look all right. But I can't take responsibility for it . . . none of us can.

They were preserved, all of them, by the absence of something, rather than the presence; in each of them the Hynes Gland had been removed at maturity and so for them the aging process was now imperceptible.

'I like you, Freya,' Clem said. 'You're a refreshing person; you make it obvious you don't like me.' He did not seem bothered; oafs like Clem Gaines never were. 'Let's go somewhere, Freya, and find out right away if *luckwise* you and I - ' He broke off, because a vug had come into the room.

Jean Blau, putting on her coat, groaned, 'Look, it wants to be friendly. They always do.' She backed away from it.

Her husband, Jack Blau, looked about for the group's vug-stick. 'I'll poke it a couple of times and it'll go away,' he said.

'No,' Freya protested. 'It's not doing any harm.'

'She's right,' Silvanus Angst said; he was at the side-board, preparing himself a last drink. 'Just pour a little salt on it.' He giggled.

The vug seemed to have singled out Clem Gaines. It likes you, Freya thought. Maybe you can go somewhere with it, instead of me.

But that was not fair to Clem, because none of them consorted with their former adversaries; it was just not done, despite the efforts by the Titanians to heal the old rift of wartime dislike. They were a silicon-based life form, rather than carbon-based; their cycle was slow, and involved methane rather than oxygen as the metabolic catalyst. And they were bisexual . . . which was a rather non-B system indeed.

'Poke it,' Bill Calumine said to Jack Blau.

With the vug-stick, Jack prodded the jelly-like cytoplasm of the vug. 'Go home,' he told it sharply. He grinned at Bill Calumine. 'Maybe we can have some fun with it. Let's try to draw it into conversation. Hey, vuggy. You like make talk-talk?'

At once, eagerly, the Titanian's thoughts came to them, addressed to all the humans in the condominium apartment. 'Any pregnancies reported? If so, our medical facilities are available and we urge you to -'

'Listen, vuggy,' Bill Calumine said, 'if we have any *luck* we'll keep it to ourselves. It's bad luck to tell you; everybody knows that. How come *you* don't know that?'

'It knows it,' Silvanus Angst said. 'It just doesn't like to think about it.'

'Well, it's time the vugs faced reality,' Jack Blau said. 'We don't like them and that's it. Come on,' he said to his wife. 'Let's go home.' Impatiently, he waved Jean toward him.

The various members of the group filed out of the room

and down the front steps of the building to their parked cars. Freya found herself left with the vug.

'There have been no pregnancies in our group,' she told the vug, answering its question.

'Tragic,' the vug thought back in response.

'But there will be,' Freya said. 'I know we'll have *luck*, soon.'

'Why is your particular group so hostile to us?' the vug asked.

Freya said, 'Why, we hold you responsible for our sterility; you know that.' Especially our spinner Bill Calumine does, she thought.

'But it was your military weapon,' the vug protested.

'No, not ours. The Red Chinese.'

The vug did not grasp the distinction. 'In any case we are doing all we can to -'

'I don't want to discuss it,' Freya said. 'Please.'

'Let us help,' the vug begged.

She said to it, 'Go to hell.' And left the apartment, striding down the stairs to the street and her car.

The cold, dark night air of Carmel, California revived her; she took a deep breath, glanced up at the stars, smelled the freshness, the clean new scents. To her car she said, 'Open the door; I want to get in.'

'Yes, Mrs Garden.' The car door swung open.

'I'm not Mrs Garden anymore; I'm Mrs Gaines.' She entered, seated herself at the manual tiller. 'Try to keep it straight.'

'Yes, Mrs Gaines.' As soon as she put the key in, the motor started up.

'Has Pete Garden already left?' She scanned the gloomy street and did not see Pete's car. 'I guess he has.' She felt sad. It would have been nice to sit out here under the stars, so late at night, and chat a little. It would be as if they were still married . . . damn The Game, she

thought, and its spins. Damn *luck* itself, bad luck; that's all we seem to have, anymore. We're a marked race.

She held her wrist watch to her ear and it said in its tiny voice, 'Two-fifteen A.M., Mrs Garden.'

'Mrs Gaines,' she grated.

'Two-fifteen A.M., Mrs Gaines.'

How many people, she wondered, are alive on the face of Earth at this moment? One million? Two million? How many groups, playing The Game? Surely no more than a few hundred thousand. And every time there was a fatal accident, the population decreased irretrievably by one more.

Automatically, she reached into the glove compartment of the car and groped for a neatly-wrapped strip of rabbit-paper, as it was called. She found a strip – it was the old kind, not the new – and unwrapped it, put it between her teeth and bit.

In the glare of the dome light of the car she examined the strip of rabbit-paper. One dead rabbit, she thought, recalling the old days (they were before her time) when a rabbit had to die for this fact in question to be determined. The strip, in the dome light, was white, not green. She was not pregnant. Crumpling the strip, she dropped it into the disposal chute of the car and it incinerated instantly. Damn, she thought wretchedly. Well, what did I expect?

The car left the ground, started for her home in Los Angeles.

Too early though to tell about my *luck* with Clem, she realized. Obviously. That cheered her. Another week or two and perhaps something.

Poor Pete, she thought. Hasn't even rolled a three, isn't back in The Game, really. Should I drop by his bind in Marin County? See if he's there? But he was so stewed, so unmanageable. So bitterly unpleasant, tonight. There is no law or rule, though, that prevents us meeting outside

The Game. And yet – what purpose would it serve? We had no *luck*, she realized, Pete and I. In spite of our feeling for each other.

The radio of her car came on, suddenly; she heard the call-letters of a group in Ontario, Canada, broadcasting on all frequencies in great excitement. 'This is Pear Book Hovel,' the man declared exultantly. 'Tonight at ten P.M. our time we had *luck*! A woman in our group, Mrs Don Palmer, bit her rabbit-paper with no more idea of hoping than she ever did, and –'

Freya shut off the radio.

When he got home to his unlit, unused, former apartment in San Rafael, Pete Garden went at once to the medicine cabinet in the bathroom to see what medication he could find. I'll never get to sleep otherwise, he knew. It was an old story with him. Snoozex? It now took three 25-mg tablets of Snoozex to have any effect on him; he had taken too many for too long. I need something stronger, he thought. There's always phenobarbital, but it slugs you for the next day. Scopolamine hydrobromide; I could try that.

Or, he thought, I could try something much stronger. Emphytal.

Three of those, he thought, and I'd never wake up. Not in the strength capsules I've got. Here . . . he let the capsules lie on his palm as he stood considering. No one would bother me; no one would intervene –

The medicine cabinet said, 'Mr Garden, I am establishing contact with Dr Macy in Salt Lake City, because of your condition.'

'I have no condition,' Pete said. He quickly put the Emphytal capsules back in their bottle. 'See?' He waited. 'It was just momentary, a gesture.' Here he was, pleading with the Rushmore Effect of his medicine cabinet – macabre. 'Okay?' he asked it, hopefully.

A click. The cabinet had shut itself off.

Pete sighed in relief.

The doorbell sounded. What now? he wondered, walking through the faintly musty-smelling apartment, his mind still on what he could take as a soporific – without activating the alarm-circuit of the Rushmore Effect. He opened the door.

There stood his blonde-haired previous wife, Freya. 'Hi,' she said coolly. She walked into the apartment, gliding past him, self-possessed, as if it were perfectly natural for her to seek him out while she was married to Clem Gaines. 'What do you have in your fist?' she asked.

'Seven Snoozex tablets,' he admitted.

'I'll give you something better than that. It's going the rounds.' Freya dug into her leather mailbag-style purse. 'A new, new product manufactured in New Jersey by an autofac pharmaceutical house, there.' She held out a large blue spansule. 'Nerduwel,' she said, and then laughed.

'Ha-ha,' Pete said, not amused. It was a gag. Ne'er-do-well. 'Is that what you came for?' Having been his wife, his Bluff partner, for over three months, she of course knew of his chronic insomnia. 'I've got a hangover,' he informed her. 'And I lost Berkeley to Walt Remington, tonight. As you well know. So I'm just not capable of banter, right now.'

'Then fix me some coffee,' Freya said. She removed her fur-lined jacket and laid it over a chair. 'Or let me fix it for you.' With sympathy she said, 'You do look bad.'

'Berkeley – why did I put the title deed up, anyhow? I don't even remember. Of all my holdings – it must have been a self-destructive impulse.' He was silent, and then he said, 'On the way here tonight I picked up an all-points from Ontario.'

'I heard it,' she said nodding.

'Does their pregnancy elate or depress you?'

'I don't know,' Freya said somberly. 'I'm glad for them. But – ' She roamed about the apartment, her arms folded.

'It depresses me,' Pete said. He put a tea kettle of water on the range in the kitchen.

'Thank you,' the tea kettle – its Rushmore Effect – piped.

Freya said, 'We could have a relationship outside of The Game, you realize. It *has* been done.'

'It wouldn't be fair to Clem.' He felt a camaraderie with Clem Gaines; it overcame his feelings – temporarily, anyhow – for her.

And in any case he was curious about his future wife; sooner or later he would roll a three.

Chapter 2

Pete Garden was awakened the next morning by a sound so wonderfully impossible that he jumped from the bed and stood rigid, listening. He heard children. They were quarreling, somewhere outside the window of his San Rafael apartment.

It was a boy and a girl, and Pete thought, So there have been births in this county since I was last here. And of parents who are non-B, not Bindmen. Without property which would enable them to play The Game. He could hardly believe it, and he thought, I ought to deed the parents a small town . . . San Anselmo or Ross, even both. They deserve an opportunity to play. But maybe they don't want to.

'You're one,' the girl was declaring angrily.

'You're another.' The boy's voice, laden with accusation.

'Gimme that.' Sounds of a physical scuffle.

He lit a cigarette, then found his clothes and began to dress.

In the corner of the room, leaning against the wall, a MV-3 rifle . . . he caught sight of it and paused, remembering in a rush everything that the great old weapon had meant. Once, he had been prepared to stand off the Red Chinese with this rifle. But it had never seen use because the Red Chinese had never shown up . . . at least not in person. Their representatives, in the form of Hinkel Radiation, had arrived, however, but no amount of MV-3s doled out to California's citizen army could fight and conquer that. The radiation, from a Wasp-C satellite, had done the job expected and the United States had lost. But

People's China had not won. No one had. Hinkel Radiation waves, distributed on a world-wide basis, saw to that, god bless 'em.

Going over, Pete picked up the MV-3 and held it as he had long ago, in his youth. This gun, he realized, is one hundred and thirty years old, almost. An antique twice over. Would it still fire? Who cared . . . there was no one to kill with it, now. Only a psychotic could find grounds to kill in the nearly-empty cities of Earth. And even a psychotic might think it over and change his mind. After all, with fewer than ten thousand people in all California . . . he set the gun back down, carefully.

Anyhow the gun had not been primarily an anti-personnel weapon; its tiny A-cartridges had been intended to penetrate the armor plating of Soviet TL-90 tanks and cripple them. Remembering the training films they had been shown by Sixth Army brass, Pete thought, I'd like to catch sight of a 'human sea' these days. Chinese or not . . . we could use it.

I salute you, Bernhardt Hinkel, he thought caustically. The humane inventor of the ultimate in painless weapons . . . no, it hadn't hurt; you were correct. We felt nothing, didn't even know. And then -

Removal of the Hynes Gland in as many people as possible had been instigated, and it hadn't been a waste of effort; because of it there were people alive today. And certain combinations of male and female were not sterile; it was not an absolute condition, but rather a relative one. We can, in theory, have children; in fact, a few of us do.

The children outside his window, for instance . . .

Along the street a homeostatic maintenance vehicle swished, collecting trash and checking on the growth of lawns, first on one side of the street and then on the other. The steady whirring of the machine rose above the children's voices.

The empty city is kept tidy, Pete said to himself as the

machine halted to send out pseudopodia to grope peevishly at a camellia bush. Or rather, virtually empty city – a dozen or so non-B people lived here, at least according to the census he had last been shown.

Behind the maintenance vehicle came a second construct, this one even more elaborate; like a great twenty-legged bug it propelled itself down a driveway, hot on the scent of decay. The repair vehicle would rebuild whatever had fallen into ruin, Pete knew; it would bind up the wounds of the city, halt deterioration before it began. And for what? For whom? Good questions. Perhaps the vugs liked to look down from their observation satellites and see an intact civilization, rather than mere ruins.

Putting out his cigarette, Pete went into the kitchen, hoping to find food for breakfast. He had not inhabited this apartment for several years, but nonetheless he opened the vacuum-sealed refrigerator and found in it bacon and milk and eggs, bread and jam, all in good shape, everything he needed for breakfast. Antonio Nardi had been Bindman in Residence here before Pete; undoubtedly he had left these, not knowing that he was going to lose his title in The Game, would never be coming back.

But there was something more important than breakfast, something Pete had to do first.

Clicking on the vidphone he said, 'I'd like Walter Remington in Contra Costa County.'

'Yes, Mr Garden,' the vidphone said. And the screen, after a pause, lit up.

'Hi.' Walt Remington's dour, elongated features appeared and he gazed dully at Pete. Walt had not shaved yet this morning; stubble coated his jowls, and his eyes, small and red-rimmed, were puffy from lack of sleep. 'Why so early?' he mumbled. He was still in his pajamas.

Pete said, 'Do you remember what happened last night?'

'Oh yeah. Sure.' Walt nodded, smoothing his disordered hair in place.

'I lost Berkeley to you. I don't know why I put it up. It's been my bind, my residence, you know.'

'I know,' Walt said.

Taking a deep breath, Pete said, 'I'll trade you three cities in Marin County for it. Ross, San Rafael and San Anselmo. I want it back; I want to live there.'

Walt pointed out, 'You can live in Berkeley. As a non-B resident, of course; not as Bindman.'

'I can't live like that,' Pete said. 'I want to own it, not just be a squatter. Come on, Walt; you don't intend to live in Berkeley. I know you. It's too cold and foggy for you. You like the hot valley climate, like Sacramento. Where you are now, in Walnut Creek.'

'That's true,' Walt said. 'But - I can't trade Berkeley back to you, Pete.' The admission was dragged out of him, then. 'I don't have it. When I got home last night a broker was waiting for me; don't ask me how he knew I'd acquired it from you, but he did. A big wheeler and dealer from the East, Matt Pendleton Associates.' Walt looked glum.

'*And you sold Berkeley to them?*' Pete could hardly believe it. It meant that someone who was not part of their group had managed to buy into California. 'Why'd you do it?' he demanded.

'They traded me Salt Lake City for it,' Walt said, with morose pride. 'How could I turn that down? Now I can join Colonel Kitchener's group; they play in Provo, Utah. Sorry, Pete.' He looked guilty. 'I was still a little stewed, I guess. Anyhow it sounded too good to turn down at the time.'

Pete said, 'Who'd Pendleton Associates acquire it for?'

'They didn't say.'

'And you didn't ask.'

'No,' Walt admitted morosely. 'I didn't. I guess I should have.'

Pete said, 'I want Berkeley back. I'm going to track the deed down and get it back, even if I have to trade off all of Marin County. And in the meantime, I'll be looking forward to beating you at Game-time; look for me to take away everything you've got – no matter who your partner is.' Savagely, he clicked off the vidphone. The screen became dark.

How could Walt do it? he asked himself. Turn the title right over to someone outside the group – someone from the East.

I've got to know who Pendleton Associates would be representing in a deal like that, he said to himself.

He had a feeling, acute and ominous, that he knew.