

THE MAZE IN THE MIRROR THE MAZE IN THE MIRROR

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From Williamson to Leinster to Piper . . .
H. Beam Piper, who perfected it and to whom this book
is affectionately dedicated.
I feel honored that you all,
at some point in my life,
called me friend

Some Warnings for the Reader

This book is the third in a series featuring my two parallel worlds detectives Sam and Brandy Horowitz in the universes of G.O.D., Inc. Like the first two, *The Labyrinth of Dreams* and *The Shadow Dancers*, both Tor, 1987, it is a complete novel, as all good series novels are. It is not, strictly speaking, a serial continued from book to book, as are many other of my works. However, the time frame on these books is progressive; this book is set considerably after the time of the first two and the characters are the older, more knowledgeable, more experienced characters who have undergone those previous cases and remember them and assume you do, too. Also, one of our villains this time is a leftover deliberately loose end from *The Shadow Dancers*, and the solution to the case of *The Maze in the Mirror* is, in many ways, also a final solution to the progression and loose ends of the first two books.

As such, while sufficient information is provided for you to read this book as complete and independent of the others, I have made no other concessions and some of the references and background might be a bit vague or confusing for a new reader, as they are not explained but rather taken for granted. For that reason, *The Maze in the Mirror* will be best appreciated by those who have read either or preferably both of the preceding books. This is particularly true since, while there is an element of mystery involved, this series is basically a* set of private detective procedurals-that is, figuring out by legwork, evidence, and deduction just what the dastardly plot is here and how to prevent it is the object, not necessarily unmasking some unknown murderer, even though unknown murderer there might be. I make that comment in light of some reviews of the earlier books which were under the mistaken impression that these were primarily whodunits and who therefore reviewed the whodunit rather than the plot-and the two are not the same thing in a procedural.

Your bookstore should have the first two books if you do not. Any good, well-managed bookstore run by intelligent owners of good taste should have all my previous novels on their shelves. If not, then buy this one so you'll have it and then order the first two from that store or find a better bookstore who keeps the essentials in stock.

To forestall a bunch of letters to me complaining that there are real anachronisms when the earlier novels are compared to this one, I should point out that nowhere have I stated that Sam and Brandy are natives of our own universe, just one that's rather close to ours.

Also, I want to reassure all of you out there that General Ordering and Development has no connection (that I know of) with Guaranteed Overnight Delivery, Inc., a firm of which I was ignorant until recently when I was passed on the highway by a G.O.D., Inc. tractor trailer truck to my enormous shock. I understand that some of my readers who are truckers have been giving drivers for that real company a really uncomfortable time.

It might also be noted that this series is the first set of my books to be banned anywhere in the U.S. A few distributors, primarily in some southern states, have refused to take it because the overtitle appears to be sacrilegious to them or they fear reader reaction for that reason. If something this minor elicits that reaction, one worries about the fate of poor truckers for Guaranteed Overnight Delivery who roll through those states and areas with the

big black G.O.D. letters on their sides. . . .

Also, in the course of this book, many readers, particularly Americans and Canadians, will find a lot of more or less familiar names and products, some but not all valiantly spelled, here and there. These are used in good fun and for internal logic and are not intended to cast aspersions on (nor endorse) products or possibly popular musicians or anyone or anything else. I hope the companies involved just consider them free commercials and take them in the spirit in which they're used.

It is impossible to say if this is the last G.O.D., Inc. book at this point. Certainly if I come up with another plot I think good or better than the first three, or if I get to missing these characters, it's a possibility, although not very soon. Perhaps your own reactions and the number of these books sold will be the final answer. That's not to say that I write any book on the basis of potential popularity, but certainly, having done these, whether I give in to any inclination to do more or use the same limited time to create something new and different will to some extent be influenced by whether or not there are sufficient numbers of you out there who want to read more.

Jack L. Chalker
Uniontown, Maryland
October, 1987

1.
A Visitor in the Night

The sky was dark and overcast as it usually was in the central Pennsylvania mountains in winter, where the locals would refer to good days as "between snows." There was certainly enough snow on the ground-about two feet had yet to be given the chance to melt, and in January's still dark days it wasn't likely to improve for quite a while.

Most of the nation, particularly the west, thinks of the eastern United States as one vast paved-over region full of contiguous city stretching at least from Boston to Richmond and perhaps all the way down.

None of the country is ancient to human beings, particularly those whose ancestors came from Europe, but in comparative terms the east coast of the U.S. is "old," with a history of settlement ranging from nearly five hundred years in Florida to going on four hundred years in the original Thirteen. It seems inconceivable to both westerners and Europeans, and even many eastern city dwellers, that anything could remain relatively unspoiled after so long.

Yet, in fact, much of even such states as New York and Pennsylvania are actually wilderness, with almost all the people bunched up on opposite sides of the state, and even some of the smaller ones like New Hampshire and Vermont have comparatively vast areas of unspoiled wilderness. Black bear still roam the Pennsylvania hills in season, and deer threaten to overrun southern New Jersey; every time the cougar is declared extinct in the northern states one will miraculously make an appearance. They've declared that animal extinct north of Florida at least twenty times in the past fifty years.

The northern half of Pennsylvania is a vast and mostly unspoiled forest land through which Interstate 80 carries traffic from the metropolis port of New York in the east out to Ohio and then all the way to San Francisco, but through Pennsylvania it finds little civilization. People are there, all right, but not many of them, and they are scattered in small towns like Bellfonte and Liverpool with nary a Philadelphia or Pittsburgh to be seen.

Penn State University, in fact, is probably one of the more isolated major universities in the country. Not even I-80 comes too near, and it sits in Happy Valley surrounded by stark mountains and a northern climate, often nearly unreachable in mid-winter, its tens of thousands of students having to content themselves with the small town of State College and a few others nearby who exist only to serve them. The only other industry of note is the State Pen, the counterpoint of Penn State (although many locals claim to have problems differentiating the two), and because of its isolation and the climate around a very difficult one to successfully get out of by other than legal means. You

might escape, but after that you'd stick out like a sore thumb and it would be very difficult to get away.

Some areas do have farms; either truck farms for the University and other small towns; mostly, or breeding farms for dairy cattle and horses. On one such farm, even more isolated than most and off any main roads, concealed by forest and mountains, there stands a particular thick grove of trees and in the center of that grove a very strange area with a high fence around it. It's not much to look at, even inside, if you get past the warnings from the electric company, or so it is stated, warning of high voltage dangers. In the middle is a cistern-like cavity made of smooth, virgin concrete that has almost a marble-like texture. It goes down perhaps ten feet, with an old and rusty ladder to the bottom, but, once down, it doesn't look like much of anything, either. Just a lot of crud and no outlet and no panels or anything else.

In fact, the only unusual thing about it is that even in the dead of winter the immediate area of the concrete has no snow. It simply won't lay there, as if the entire thing is heated-although if you dared it is cold to the touch-and there is no water at the bottom as if there is some sort of concealed and clever drain. Where the water goes and where the heat comes from is not apparent, and there are few clues.

A driver on the nearby main road is going along listening to the local rock station, on his way in to town for something or other, and suddenly there is a bad burst of static that continues, going in and out, making the listening experience unpleasant. He tries a few other stations and finds the same thing happening, and curses, but within two minutes the effect is gone. Atmospheric, he thinks, grumbling, and forgets about it.

The pulses, however, come from the recessed well concealed on the farm, and they have determined that no one is within the grove at this time. This feeds a signal back-somewhere-and, inside that concrete urn, something begins to happen. It begins with a crackling noise, and the slight smell of ozone, and then a beam of remarkably solid-looking blue-white light shoots up from the center, so sharp and exact that it appears to be almost a pole that can be picked up. It shimmers slightly, then bends once, twice, three times, as if on hinges, until it is now a square. In the immediate area there is the sound of heavy but unseen machinery, and the ground vibrates slightly.

The square appears to fold in upon itself and now there are two squares, then they do it again and there is a cube, suspended just above the concrete floor and slightly angled, the sides shimmering and glassy yet impenetrable. Then one facet shimmers and a figure steps through; the figure of a man ill-dressed for this climate and this weather. He is of medium height, darkly handsome, and he is dressed in white tie and tails, including spats, although the outfit looks not only out of place but rather wrinkled and the worse for wear.

He glances nervously around, then sees the ladder and heads for it, climbing up with quick and confident purpose as if the demons of hell might pop out of the cube at any moment themselves. At the top, he's somewhat stunned to see deep snow and then a high fence, but he does not consider turning around. The spats will have to get wet.

The cold, raw wind hits him in spite of the protection of the trees, but he is already studying the fence, Finally he decides, takes off his jacket, and throws it up so that it lands over the barbed wire. Then he concentrates and leaps, pulling himself up by his fingers, reaches the top, then falls over into the deep snow on the other side.

The cube emits more crackling noises, and he picks himself up fast. The jacket is impaled on the barbs but it's down enough on the outside that he can reach its bottom, and he pulls on it and it comes free, with an unpleasant tearing sound. He needs far more than the jacket in this country at this time of year, but he does not want to leave evidence that here is where he got off.

It's growing quite dark in the winter afternoon, which suits him in spite of the temperature that might well freeze him and will certainly frostbite him if he doesn't get someplace warm fast. The snow is less an obstacle for its depth and chill than for its virginity; perhaps the darkness will hide his, tracks.

Laboriously, the man makes his way through the depths to the open field beyond

and looks around. There is little to see except up on the hill perhaps a quarter mile away. A large Georgian style house along with a barn, silo, and stables, lights on both inside the house and floodlighting the grounds is the only civilization in view. He heads for it as fast as he can, and now he really begins to feel the horrible cold.

Heading straight for the house in the deep snow takes him a good twenty minutes, and only willpower is keeping him going at this point. Breaking into the plowed area in front of the house with its solid packed rock-hard base he trips and falls, and struggles back to his feet. Only a few yards to the porch, only a few yards to the door . . .

He makes it, leaning against the door, and pounds on it with what little strength he has left. For a few precious moments there is no answer, and then he pounds again, knowing that time for him is running out.

Inside the house a woman's muffled voice can be heard muttering, "Keep your shirt on, damn it. I'm comin' as fast as I can."

The door opens and he is face to face with a portly black woman of medium height with thick glasses and a totally confused expression as she sees him.

"What the hell is you?" she mutters, not afraid but startled.

"Pardon, Madam," he responds, in an elegant upper class London accent tempered by a crackling voice and total exhaustion. "The name is Bond. James Bond."

And then the stranger collapses half inside her door.

Doctor Macklinberg shook his head in wonder and closed the door to the guest bedroom as he exited into the hall. She looked at him quizzically. "Well?"

He shrugged. "Bad exposure. He should be in a hospital right now but you know why we can't do that. Stripping him and getting him into the hot tub in the basement was a brilliant reaction. He still might lose some toes or perhaps worse-I can't tell this soon-but if he pulls through it will be because of your quick thinking."

"I come in this house out of the storm and stripped and jumped in that thing myself to thaw out too many times not to think of it," she responded. "You know who he said he was?"

The doctor nodded. "Yes, he's mumbled it several times to me."

She fumbled and then got out his wallet. "Says so in here, too. London address, bunch of cards for fancy clubs over half the world, a couple of credit cards on European banks, and a fair amount of these." She handed him some very large bills. He took them and frowned.

"Pound notes with King Charles VI on them. Fascinating. Our Charles would only be the third, I think. That's not him, though. I wonder if the Stuarts still rule our Mister Bond's England? I wonder what else they rule?"

She shrugged. "I never pay much attention to that kind of thing. The main thing is that he's not from the here and now and that means he came in through the substation and he did it without settin' off no alarms in the house here or in Stan's security office."

"You been down there?"

"Uh uh. Not with Sam in Philadelphia and everybody else checkin' out everything. Hell, I got a kid I can't leave, Doc. You know that. Stan got down there, though. The station wasn't active but it was a hot area, and the snow all around was all crudded up. Looks like he used his coat over the barbed wire. Parts of it are stall stickin' there."

"Well, the barbed wire was probably the least of his problems. He has several gashes in him as well, all fairly new and some fairly deep, like he'd been stuck by all sorts of nasty, sharp knives. He's been through a lot tonight, that's for certain."

She nodded. "Well, Stan's gonna go in and send a message up the line to Company Security, and I already called it in to Bill in Philadelphia while you was in there. It's gonna leave me short-handed, though. They got a pretty mean storm in the east right now and it's socked in Sam by air or road. With Stan going up line that leaves only three of us here on the grounds tonight."

Macklinberg sighed. "I wish I could just stay with him but I'm on call tonight at the hospital. I have three women in labor now and what with the insurance

thing I'm the only one around at the moment willing to deliver their kids. Ordinarily I'd send a nurse over or maybe a resident but I can't chance what this fellow might say if he starts babbling or comes out of it. He's definitely scared of something, though, and if he's anything at all like his fictional counterpart he doesn't scare easily. I've given him what I can to help him along-antibiotics, that sort of thing-but I didn't dare give him a sedative even though, God knows, that's what he needs. I thought that if he came out of it you'd want to know what it was all about right away."

She nodded. "Thanks, Doc. I think I can handle it here. But I got to think about how unusual short we are 'round here tonight and then this guy just comes in on us like this. I'm gonna put the security system on full tonight, and I'll call you at the hospital if there's any change. O.K.?"

"Good idea. But if you need me, call the service and they'll beep me. I may or may not be at the hospital at any given time." He paused, then said, "As soon as possible he should be moved out of here and to medical facilities better than anything we can offer him. He's certainly going to lose some toes and both feet are in some danger. I've shot him full of every antibiotic I have but sooner or later we'll have to face treating that frostbite, and the only thing I could do here is amputate. For now, no walking. Keep him in bed. The painkillers should keep him out a while and I've left some pills just in case, but you never know. Someone like him . . . You know, I saw Goldfinger sixteen times."

She grinned. "I met this type before, Doc. They don't ever live up to their billing. He's probably a pencil pusher in MI-5 with a wife and nine kids who'd be horrified to read the books them writers made up about him here."

She saw him to the door, then sighed and went back and put on a pot of coffee, then turned on the alarm system and notified Diane in the security shack. It was gonna be a looong night.

She sat with the man for a while, but that soon became very boring, and while he was still out he was restless, would occasionally twist or thrash about, and he kept mumbling things. She went and found a voice-activated tape recorder and set it up beside him, then threw the intercom on. She then went down the hall to Dash's room and checked on him-still out, and a good thing, too-and switched off the intercom in the boy's room so he wouldn't be awakened by ghastrly meanings and strange utterances coming out of the speaker. Then she went downstairs, got some more coffee and a piece of chocolate cake, and settled in the family room to watch TV off the satellite dish.

Never once fails, she thought sourly as she looked through the listings and paged through the satellite channels via the remote control. A hundred damn channels and when you got to sit and watch somethin' there still ain't nothin' good on TV!

The fact was, she was often up late, and always had trouble sleeping. The dreams and the nightmares were just too great, particularly when Sam wasn't here.

Dash helped. He was a beautiful child and he was growing up smart but spoiled rotten, but she didn't care. She'd been frightened to death that he'd be damaged somehow, considering what horrors her body had been through and considering that they'd had to have a special operation just to let her have him. Sam claimed that his only worry was that all black Jewish kids would look like Sammy Davis, Jr., and when Dash looked right handsome he'd stopped the worries. But he still was busy, and that meant he was away a lot. Security consultant to the Company, they called it. They designed a security system for most anything and then he'd come in and blow holes in it, sometimes literally. It sounded like fun, but she couldn't bring herself to go back through the Labyrinth, not unless she had to. The memories were just too strong, the fears severe, even after years had passed.

She could still remember seeing part of Sam's head get blown off from raiders up top in a cube and she didn't feel confident any more. But the worst fear was the juice, the alien drug from some world so far up the line it didn't even have an official name that gave exquisite pleasure at the cost of slavery to it. Even though she'd been hooked by the nastiest bastards ever to attack the Company and against her will, and even though she'd gone through torture and long treatments to beat it, the memory still lingered. Once you were on it you'd degrade

yourself, do anything to stay on it. She'd done a lot of that. And she was one of the very few to make it back, to break the addiction without breaking her mind and body as well.

But she still wanted it. Craved it, and knew that if it was ever put in her grasp again she'd take it and never be able to get off.

It was that that scared her most. Somewhere out there the evil genius who'd come up with the diabolical plan that almost broke the ruling class of the Company world was still there. They'd caught his boss and his underlings, but the man known as Doctor Carlos, world of origin unknown, background unknown, was still out there somewhere.

Oh, the Company had finally broken the secret of the drug, which was actually a symbiotic organism that essentially took control of you, and if you took your shots from them once a year the thing couldn't infect you, but she was never sure it would work with her, even as it couldn't help those who were exiled addicts-and she didn't underestimate Carlos, either. He had had as much time as the Company to work on the thing.

The Company. You couldn't even get away from the Company on TV. Particularly not on TV. New miracle gadget cuts kitchen time in half. . . Wonderful six-record treasury from Reinhold Zeitermas, the world's best selling contrabassoon player . . . Buy MirGrow, the secret plant food of the Orient. . . All that junk was what the Company sold. Music treasuries from folks you never heard of, crazy products that were pretty weird when they worked, you name it. Just call this toll free number now. 1-800-. . . And the home shopping networks-it looked like they were furnishing the merchandise even for the ones they didn't own or control outright.

General Ordering and Development, Inc., Des Moines, Iowa. Big rucking joke. G.O.D., Inc.

Well, they acted like their initials sometimes, that was for sure, and they had more products than the junk they pushed to the public, too, and a lot more going on around the world than their front indicated. Wherever merchandise moved, that was them. The Mafia was a wholly owned and operated subsidiary, not just here but around the world. Same went for the heroin of the Golden Triangle in Asia or the big coke trade from South America. They subsidized whole governments, bought and sold cops and politicians wholesale, and just about nobody even knew they existed. How they got what they wanted in the communist world even she didn't know, but she knew they were there in force. They probably sold all the damned bugging devices the KGB used to the Kremlin while making it look like a state factory.

In truth, they were a gigantic, amoral colonial empire, only the colonies didn't know they were colonies. That's because almost nobody knew that invasions from other worlds didn't have to come from the stars or fly around in saucers full of little green men. No, there were more than enough worlds coexisting right now, one on top of the other, for a nearly infinite distance in both directions. Parallel worlds, they called it, although it was more like parallel universes. Somewhere, somehow, almost everything that could have ever possibly have happened did. Way up the line there were Earths where the dinosaurs never died out, and even ones where some of them evolved into intelligent life. Germany won or lost, America did or didn't break free of England, England and parts of Europe stayed Catholic, or the Moslems overran Rome and kept going all the way. Worlds in which a Roman-ruled South America battled a Chinese-settled North America.

One world had discovered this parallelism, and that world had created a means of moving between it called for good reason The Labyrinth. A sort of railroad complete with branches and switchers and dispatchers that stretched for a million worlds in both directions and still didn't reach them all. They alone could move between and they alone controlled the dual lines, one for passengers, one for freight.

And one world's bright ideas were another world's-well, junk. They ran at different speeds sometimes, and things invented one place were never invented the next. Whether one world needed the Dicing Wizard or not was irrelevant;

G.O.D., Inc. made sure you wanted it anyway, at least in enough quantities to make the transshipment worthwhile. She often wondered what her world sent the others.

And James Bond is now lying in the guest bedroom.

Well, why not? She and Sam had once faced down a very villainous Lament Cranston. Sometimes the names just popped up elsewhere and elsewhen; sometimes a totally fictional character in one place might pop up as a very real and quite similar person in another. She'd heard a lot of theories that writers were just folks sensitized, somehow, to certain people or things in the other worlds. There were even other versions of you in those other worlds. That was the freaky part. The Company had a way of telling one from the other but nobody else could. A tiny little implant, a transmitter, deep in the bone someplace that gave you a unique signature and also both authorized you in the Labyrinth and made a record as you passed each switch point or station so they could track you. Of course, it could be beaten, and had been. They were now sure that their new system was foolproof, but she knew as well as Sam that any system declared foolproof was impervious only to fools; smart folks could always figure a way to beat it. She had checked on the other versions of her in worlds near her own, and even met and shared some time with one of her counterparts, but they were pretty depressing overall. Whores and welfare babymakers mostly, low class and lower lives. The ones who survived the streets and weren't in jail or something. She'd been the exception, the lucky one, to whom the fluke good thing had happened. She didn't need to reflect much to realize just how lucky, and improbable, that one thing was.

Sam. Sam Horowitz, former cop, former private eye, now Company Security Specialist A cute little guy who was culturally as Jewish as they came and looked the part but who thought he was Nick Charles or Sam Spade or at least William Powell. A guy who'd given up everything and married a black girl from Camden who was a high school dropout, chubby, and who thought of herself as more street smart than real smart, but who had also been infused with the dreams of glamour of the detective business by a fanatical father who was an ex-Army cop turned failed private eye himself and who'd wound up floating in the Schuykill River when he'd gotten his first really big case.

The real amazing thing was that there were a lot fewer Sams than Brandys in those other worlds. He'd been involved in a lot of dangerous stuff as an Air Force cop and apparently he'd been killed in most of them, or before. The survivors were mostly cynical and opportunistic skunks, crooked cops and worse, who'd sell their own grandmother for a dollar. Sam was the only man she knew in the whole Company who'd once had a gun duel with himself.

Of course, there were worlds where one of them existed, or neither existed or were now alive, and ones where Colonel Barker's only child had been a son and Mrs. Horowitz had borne a Jewish-American Princess. But when you had a duplicate, he or she might be, at least physically, a perfect copy. Same genes, same fingerprints, everything. That was a favorite Company method of taking control of something. Nabbing a real person in authority and switching them for a duplicate, well briefed, hypnoed, and absolutely identical to everybody else, but who was really a Company stooge.

Of course, that was also a favorite trick of enemies of the Company who could gain illicit use of the Labyrinth.

That's how she'd met her twin and both of them hooked on the juice and under the control of a Company enemy engaged in a not so gentle attempt at a Company takeover. He'd been pathetic for all his cleverness and callous cruelty, though. The kind of folks he'd recruited from various worlds to do his dirty work had hated him as much as the rest of the Company. They were fanatics with access to the Labyrinth and its powers and it had been real hell rooting them out-if they had been. At least one, the most dangerous of the bunch, was still out there, somewhere. She had met him only a few times, and always under the worst of conditions, but still he haunted her nightmares. The Company admitted they couldn't find him, couldn't even identify him or his home world, but they were confident that he was now bottled up, contained somewhere where he could not use the Labyrinth without them knowing and catching him.

She doubted it. She was certain that Carlos was out there, somewhere, perhaps in a world that ran at a slower rate than hers but with a higher level of technology, plotting and planning and recruiting and solving the new roadblocks the Company had put in his way.

The speaker suddenly brought the sound of the man upstairs crying out and coughing horribly. She jumped up and went up to him.

He was delirious, thrashing about on the bed, mumbling "No, no! Insanity! It is all insanity!"

She tried to calm him down, tell him it was all right, get through to him.

Suddenly he startled her by seeming to come awake, eyes wide, looking straight at her. "The maze! Monstrously twisted, stupid plot so grandiose it might just work! Got to warn them. Got to . . ."

"What plot? Whose?" she asked, trying to get what she could. Every little bit of time saved might help.

He stared at her, wild-eyed and uncertain, and she realized that she neither looked nor sounded like the sort of folks he was used to dealing with. What he saw was a black woman, possibly thirty or about that, perhaps five five or so in her bare feet, weighing in at over two hundred pounds, with a huge, thick mane of woolly black hair and big brown eyes that looked far older than the rest of her.

"I'm Brandy Horowitz, Company Station Manager here," she told him. "You're in my house near the station. You came in without triggering our alarms, cut and frostbitten. A doctor who's retained by the Company has looked at you, but nobody else knows you're here."

He hesitated a moment, still a bit wild-eyed and uncertain. "Says you, Madam."

He paused a moment, frowning. "Did you say your name was Horowitz?"

She nodded.

"Different sort of world you must have here," he commented dryly, seeming to get hold of himself. "You say you are a station manager? Then I must use your master communications system immediately."

"This is just a minor stop," she told him. "No real traffic. This is less a real station than just a security post for a weak spot. This place got misused a bit much a few years back so we're keeping it closed down-or so we thought. We ain't got no big installation here, not even a direct link up the line. We got to go inside and up to the switch to do that. Ain't been no need for much more. My security manager's up there now lettin' the Company know about the breach." That worried him. "No direct communications. Blast! How many people do you have here?"

"Normally there'd be several, but right now, inside the house, there's just you, me, and my young son. On the grounds my live-in staff is here but that's just Diane in the security shack and Cal, who's a kind of foreman and handyman."

He was appalled. "That's it? Two women, a kid, and a cowboy?"

She bristled. "No need for much more here, Mister. It's just a little station on a weak point for convenience sake-the closest big one is like three thousand miles from here on the other side of the country-with no cargo access. And don't you sell us women short."

"Oh, I never sell women, and never sell short," he responded, a bit flip. He tried to sit up, grimaced, and settled back down again. "I assume you at least have a security system on this house?"

She nodded. "Good one, too. But we thought the one in the woods was even better so don't count on this one."

He thought for a moment. "What about the Company here? Does it have full operations?"

"You better believe it! They're into everything, as always."

"If I could just get out of this bed to ring them . . ."

"You don't have to," she told him, then left and returned with one of the Company's cheap plug-in handset telephones. She plugged the cord into the modular outlet, then handed it to him. He watched her do it, fascinated, as if he'd never seen a phone with a modular plug before, then studied the one-piece phone.

"How do you turn it on?" he asked her.

"It's on. Just push the buttons with the number I tell you and you should get through to the eastern branch. There's always somebody on duty there."

He did as instructed, then listened and shook his head. "No sound. Nothing." She took it from him, checked, and it was definitely dead. She wasn't worried-yet. These cheap phones gave out for no reason all the time. When she checked the solid, better phone in the master bedroom, though, and found it dead as well, she began to worry. She hit the intercom and was relieved when Diane answered.

"Our visitor's awake," she told the security officer, who otherwise was the one who cared for the horses around here, "but the phone's dead. Can't call out." "I've checked it-they've been calling in regularly until a half hour ago. I checked the CB to see what the townies had and discovered that phone service is generally out throughout the area. I reported it to the Company over the ham radio- even there the static is awful-and they are concerned, but it doesn't appear sinister."

Brandy frowned. "Maybe not to them, but comin' when it does . . . You or Stan check to see why we didn't know our visitor come through until he showed up?"

"Yes, but no help. Everything seems to be working normally. Even if for some reason we didn't get the energizing bell here the trip on the top of the fence should have gone when he came over it. Hopefully Stan will bring back a couple of system analysts to check it out."

"Well, you keep in touch with Philadelphia on the ham radio and keep yourself sealed in there and monitoring." What they called the security "shack" was actually a bunker, well underground and almost a self-contained apartment, and about as secure as a nuclear missile launch site. That wasn't really to keep an enemy out, although it would serve for that in this case, but rather to hide anything that the locals weren't supposed to wonder about from prying eyes. She had a thought. "Could you patch the intercom into the ham radio? This fellow's got somethin' real important to tell the Company."

"Too garbled for that. We've tried that before with the ham microphone. It's one of those things that should have been thought of but wasn't. I could relay his message, though."

She nodded. "I'll see." She switched off and started up stairs, then got a small bout of dizziness and then a couple of uncontrollable yawns. She wasn't in shape for no sleep all night any more, and she was dead on her feet.

Bond, however, was having none of it. "It's rather complex and I still don't know half of it myself," he told her. "It would just cause more trouble and confusion if I couldn't go back and forth with somebody who knew what he was talking about. And I'm feeling very tired and very weak right now."

She nodded. "Want to tell me what you know, or something of it? I used to be line security myself.

My husband and I have handled many big cases for the Company, including the Directors. We ain't amateurs. You was mumblin' something about the maze."

He looked surprised. "I was? Oh, dear." He thought a moment. "I'll give you a little, just for insurance sake, although I rather think that the less you know the safer you'll be."

"I'll take the chance. It's what they pay me for." He sighed. "All right. For close to a year now we've had indications that someone has been coming and going between various worlds without going through the switch points, and coming out at places where there are no Company stations."

She frowned. "How's that possible?" "That was the point. The evidence was there but you couldn't get anyone to take it seriously because it isn't possible. The old method, shipping people between switch points in fake cargo containers using the cargo line, is blocked now, and in any event they still had to use our stations. I was one of a number of agents assigned to check it out anyway and it took me months to get any real leads. After a long while of monitoring energy pulses and finally getting a couple of people to follow, I managed to get inside one of their own substations. What I discovered was frightening. Someone else has a labyrinth of their own."

That was startling. "Wait a minute. It'd take more power than could possibly be

snitched. They told me once that this one was powered by some kind of gadget that fed on the sun itself in a universe where there weren't no decent planets. Who would have the kind of people and machines to do that?"

"They didn't. The power comes from our own grid. What they built were hidden additional switch points and then sidings to whatever worlds they wished. Whole sections of line all over not on any map. Weak points too minor for the Company to bother with or on worlds the Company hadn't gone into yet were developed. If you didn't know the switches were there you could neither see nor detect them, and the drain on the system power is not enough to show up on the power meters. They've been quite clever."

She was appalled, although it explained a lot. Nobody built something like that in a few years. Nobody. That was the work of decades at least, and real long-term planning. It had to be part of that old operation they'd thought they'd broken. That was how and why they were able to go from point to point without ever meeting a security man. And that cube where they'd ambushed and shot Sam ... A hidden switch point, maybe? Then they shut it down and the facet simply goes to the world where it's supposed to.

"This is big," she told him. "We got to tell the Company this."

"I did," he responded. "I told them what I've told you. They refused to believe it, refused to believe that it was even possible. They said the sort of resources needed to build such a network and remain undetected all this time were beyond concealment. Only the Company could have done it and there were no records or expenses or anything. They said the only fellow who could possibly have managed it was a traitorous former Director and that they'd not only had him isolated, they'd drained everything he knew from his mind ahead of that. They demanded incontrovertible proof or it was suggested that perhaps I'd been in this business too long and should take a holiday."

She nodded. The iron-bound arrogance of the Company was its weakest point. Always had been. It had been obvious almost from the start which director had been the bad guy. If it'd been a murder mystery then unmasking the villain would have been a snap. The trouble was, he was high up, one of the ultimate bosses, and no one would believe that such a one could betray the Company or beat the Company's security unless he could be caught and unmasked with his finger on the trigger and in the act of committing treason. She had solved it, but it was Sam who figured out how to nail the bastard.

"Maybe he didn't know-any more. With them mind control things they got you can get parts of anything erased. If he had set it up and then got it erased so it never showed, then nobody'd know- but his gang could use it Maybe just a few key folks in the gang that never got caught. I'm pretty sure most nobody knew about this even if they was usin' it. That bastard was so smug and arrogant himself he violated the biggest rule of bein' a crook-he got a gang workin' for him that was smarter than he was. They're all a pack of racists who think that they're the be-all and end-all of human creation. And, hell, he wouldn't have to build 'em. If he got to the big data bank and simply erased the records of certain built but not operational switches and sidin's, then they wouldn't show up at all on the maps. Damn! This is big!" I wish Sam was here for this, she added to herself.

He nodded. "Yes. A herd of elephants running amok on the system and nobody notices. But now I have proof. Or, at least, I can show them proof. I know the location of a siding and how and when it operates. I was discovered. They can shut it down but they jolly well can't unbuild the thing. I got in through a casino sub-basement private station on the Riviera. I tripped some alarms, and they were waiting for me. I was on the run into the main branch when I was cornered and had to take the first facet out that I could find. Here, blast it." He realized how that sounded.

"Nothing personal, dear lady," he added quickly, "but if this had been a main station then it would be all over for them."

She nodded. But it wasn't a main station, and it was isolated and not well manned. And if they got Bond before Bond got into Company protection, men they'd still be safe and secure. That meant they would be coming in, if they weren't

already here, and fast. Tonight-and probably in numbers.

"Get some rest," she told him. "If we can hold out tonight there'll be plenty of help coming tomorrow."

Damn! She was so tired and it looked like one of those nights she hadn't had since Dash was a baby. At least, maybe, he'd sleep through all this. She cut the lights in the living room, then went to the front window and looked out. It was a stark, eerie scene at night, with the yellowish floodlights casting an ugly soft glow over the snow, making the structures and shadows look grotesque and monstrous. All looked, however, quiet.

She turned, went back into the library and opened the compartment to the wall safe and twirled the combination. Once open, she took out a large box and then closed the safe again, putting the box down in front of her. She opened it and removed from its form fitted foam a large but light pistol resembling a German automatic. On it she placed a small sight-like device that more resembled a tiny motor of some sort, screwing it in, then checking it. She set the device according to a click stop dial, then examined the rather standard-looking clips. She removed one, untroubled by the fact that it appeared to have no bullets in it and no way at its shiny top to insert them, pushed a small button, and got a tiny red symbol in a window in the clip.

Satisfied, she pushed the clip into the pistol and stuck it half inside her jeans. Then, checking the security panel one more time, she turned out all of the downstairs lights and then went to the intercom.

"Diane, I think we're gonna have visitors tryin' to get this guy back. Radio Philadelphia that we will probably be under attack shortly. Get Sam on the radio if you can. He knows this place better'n anybody. You tell 'em to call up the line and get Stan back here with reinforcements, and watch it just comin' into the entry point 'cause it's probably covered. Where's Cal?"

"Back up in the loft, probably. I'll notify him."

"No heroics. No use in him getting killed. Just tell him to lay low and keep outta sight and in touch and help if he can, understand?"

"Yes, Ma'am. You want me to come up and help you out?"

"No! You stay locked in there 'til somebody from the Company with the U.S. Marines attached gets in here. You're the only way we can talk to anybody now. Call it in-U[now!]"

This was getting to be a real pain and fast. As bad or worse than the old days. She also had twin concerns, neither involving herself. On the one hand, she needed to protect this' Bond character, whether he was anything like the fictional one or not, and she had real concerns for Dash. If anything happened to him, or if he woke up to find dead bodies around, he might never get over it. As it stood, she hoped she could hold out and that he'd just sleep right through it. Hell, Dash was the kind that could sleep through World War II.

She took her position again to the side looking out the front window. The back was potentially more vulnerable but the drifts against it were high and there weren't that many ways in except through solid doors. It sounded like the wind was whipping up out there and that'd make it maybe five below with a stiff wind to get it down further and blow up new powder, and there wasn't a whole hell of a lot of cover and protection out there if you wanted to get to the house itself. Not even Eskimos could afford to just sit out there in that stuff and bide their time, and the odds were that whoever was chasing him was no better dressed for this kind of weather than Bond had been. Unless, of course, they had pushed him in a guided chase to this very point, where they knew it was lightly defended and remote and without direct Company access.

She had a sudden, horrible thought. What if it was Carlos and he picked this of all spots to push Bond into 'cause Bond wasn't the only thing he wanted here? One of the floodlights suddenly went out, then another. She didn't wait for the series and got to the intercom.

"I think somebody's shootin' out the floods," she told him. "They can't wait much longer in this weather. We need help and fast!"

"I can't get through to them," Diane reported. "I've been trying since we talked a few minutes ago. The ham channels are jammed with static- you can't hear anything but noise and I'm sure I don't sound any better."

"Try the CB. They may not have thought of that," Brandy told her. "Get somebody to call the cops. Say we got armed prowlers."

"I'll try. Hold on." There was a pause for what seemed several minutes, then, "No good. I'm getting nothing but dead air, like I'm not on antenna at all. We're cut off." She paused a moment. "Uh oh. I'm getting energy surges and activation sequences like mad. The alarm system's working down there now for all the good it'll do us. Or maybe it's Cal with reinforcements."

"Maybe, but I ain't gonna bet the farm on it. Look, I'm gonna keep the intercom on open, so you can hear what's happenin' here. You keep tryin' to get through to anybody and I don't care who you talk to or what you got to tell 'em, understand?"

"O.K. At least if it's going off here it's going off and registering at both switches, too. That should bring some security people here pretty quick." Could be. But if they had to shoot their way through it might take a real long while.

She crept back upstairs, staying out of any light, and went back to the guest bedroom. Bond had lapsed back into sleep, perhaps a more peaceful kind. She thought about waking him up, but he wouldn't be much good overall, not with those painful, bandaged feet. He wasn't going anywhere, and so what could he do? Shoot a couple before they shot him? Maybe the guy from the movies could do it all, but the more you looked at this guy the less you saw him doing that kind of thing.

She checked once more on Dash, then went back downstairs into the dark. About the only thing you could see was a couple of the little lights from the satellite system that always sent power and a little heat back to the dish to keep it from freezing up and the little red lights from a couple of backup battery flashlights plugged into the walls. The one thing they couldn't do was cut the power into here. That was fed from lines deep underground to the substation itself and wasn't part of the regular central Pennsylvania power system. And if they managed to cut that they'd also shut down the substation, leaving them trapped here and their cronies down below in the Labyrinth sitting ducks for an inevitable quick security team attack.

They, too, were taking a big chance. That thought helped sustain her. They had limits and their clock was running. They couldn't sustain this blackout for long, and they couldn't take all night to attack due to the weather and the uncertainty of how close reinforcements might be.

She heard something on the side and pulled out the pistol, then moved to the source of the sound. She might have expected them to try her greenhouse first. All that glass probably looked real tempting, but the shutters were down now for extra insulation and heat retention and if they tried cutting through the outer glass as it sounded like and hit those shutters . . .

There was a sudden flash and a scream and the sound of electricity surging through vibrating metal. She couldn't see anything, but she was pretty damned sure that somebody had just been fried.

They were far too smart to try the doors, and now the greenhouse had proven nasty-and they hadn't even hit the bad traps yet had they managed to bypass the shutters. Next they'd try the frontal assault. She walked back to the living room and thought she saw shadows through the living room picture window even though it was pitch dark. Well, she didn't need light.

Certain that Cal was either captured, dead, or well away, she brought up the pistol and let it do its thing. It moved her hand, faster than she, and fired on its own. The "bullets" were tiny electrical pulses that showed dull red in the dark. They struck and went right through the window and she heard a couple of men's voices cry out. The pistol stopped firing and she had full control again. The reflex action when fired upon through a window was to fire back. Some of the men outside did just that with weapons similar to hers. The special "glass" was strictly one way for that; their shots bounced off. She hoped the ricochets nailed some of their buddies but they probably just went harmlessly off into the air where they dissipated. She wondered if they'd try real bullets. They'd mess up the window but a submachine gun sprayed on there would produce wonderfully

devastating ricochets-for the gunners. They might have figured that this was a lightly manned and very minor and isolated substation, but the guy who lived here made his living protecting Company property. Sam had warned that there was no system that was unbeatable or didn't have some weak points, but what you bought was time. Time to get help, or time to be rescued. She was in a nice, warm house she knew well. They were out in cold and wind bitter enough to give a man frostbite just walking a mile in it improperly clothed and protected. More important, they had only one exit and it was the equivalent of a highway with noplacement to hide from passing cars. If they were discovered, it was all over and they were trapped.

Clearly the men outside were getting frustrated fast. They weren't even trying the conventional doors and windows, since if even the greenhouse and the living room picture window were traps they knew what the usual places must be like. She was almost beginning to enjoy this and anticipate their actions. Next they'd either try and find a ladder in the barn and get to the roof or they'd try chopping through someplace or, maybe, if they got desperate enough, they might try starting a fire. She certainly hoped so. The exterior fire suppression system would spray enough water to coat them with what would be hard ice in a very short time.

The one thing she'd always hated about this area was the bitter cold, the feeling of never being really warm. Now, suddenly, she found herself feeling quite good about bitter cold, snow, and ice. They were allies that even the best security system couldn't provide on its own.

They did in fact seem to be all around, and not at all reticent about shouting orders. She didn't recognize the language but that was to be expected.

The odds were that they spoke something beyond anyone's ability on this world to understand. Of course, to her it kind of sounded like the Chinese army.

That thought did worry her a little. The house was protected from casual attack, from people wanting in even if they had the usual tools and weapons. It was not a house built by the Company, though, but an old estate house that had been in the hands of one family for almost two centuries before the last heir, a writer, committed suicide here and it was sold to the Company through a blind. A bazooka, for example, would still blow in that steel door.

She decided to retreat upstairs and let the first floor fend for itself, something it was doing quite well.

Bond stirred. "What is happening?" he managed.

"They're here. They got us cut off for a little bit and they been tryin' to get through the security system, so far with heavy losses," she told him, some pride in her voice. "Still, they been awful quiet all of a sudden for a fairly long time. Either they gave up, or got in the barn to warm up a little, or they're settin' up and plannin' somethin'."

"Probably the latter. They won't give up. They can't. They will die first. There is a drug-most of them are slaves to it. If they return without me, or without proof of my death, they won't get it and they will die horribly. You can not believe what lengths they will go to."

She felt a knot in her stomach. "Yes, I can, too. They once had me on that shit."

"And you kicked the habit?" He sounded more than impressed. "Oh, of course, that was the old drug where you had a chance. Organic stuff from way up the line. This is all synthetic, much nastier, but you know their desperation."

She nodded. The idea of a drug even more powerful than the most powerful ever known before was her worst nightmare come true. She had become a whore, a slave, a double agent, and more under that old one, and it had taken everything she had and all the knowledge and skills of the Company's super medical technology to break her free of dependence on it. Most never could break if, the treatment either broke them or they lived on a level of it rather than try. If it wasn't for Sam she couldn't have, either. The worst part was how utterly selfish the addiction made you. You'd rob, betray, even kill innocents, even those you loved, to sustain it, but never once did she think of killing herself because that would deny her the next fix. Those poor devils out there would get in or die trying.

"The rest are probably Ginzu," he told her. "A fanatical warrior cult that considers a commission a debt of honor and who would prefer death to dishonor. They are quite skilled with knives that they create themselves and which they can use to inflict extreme torture. I escaped from them, which is where my wounds come from. I should prefer to die rather than fall into their hands again."

She nodded. Suddenly there was a series of thumps from the roof, and she thought fast. Normally the roof was slick and she could make it slicker, but right now it was piled up with snow and there might be a possible footing. Right up top was an old widow's walk with attic access. Even it was electrified and fortified just in case, but it was also far weaker, being original to the house. But if they could get in the attic . . .

There was the sound of muffled blasts from the roof. Conventional shotgun, it sounded like- maybe Cal's from the barn. Loaded up and at close range it would blow that old attic door right off its hinges.

There was the sudden sound of movement, and then two sharp, piercing cries of pain. At least they hadn't broken the energy grid and were paying the price.

"Do you think they got in?" Bond asked worriedly.

She shook her head. "No way of knowin' without stickin' my neck up there which I ain't about to do. On the other hand, I don't hear no footsteps on the ceillin', neither. Let me get back in the hall. There ain't but two ways down from there without choppin' holes."

She stood in the center and waited, the only light coming from the night light in Dash's room. By God, if they got in and headed for Dash they was gonna have to roll over her dead body!

Suddenly there was the soft sound of something moving, a creaking sound down the hall at the end nearest Dash, and she felt a sudden chill as some of the outside cold rushed excitedly into the warmth of the house. They had got in, damn them! They made a fair amount of noise as they moved the trap up and away, and she armed the pistol again and aimed it right at the opening. Anybody coming down there was gonna get smeared.

Suddenly the pistol jerked in her hand and she saw the red tracers head for the opening and heard a cry. She moved a little forward to give it a slightly better angle when suddenly something powerful came up behind her and grabbed her, knocking the pistol from her hand and sending it skidding along the hall. She turned and flipped the man with one motion, but he retained control and somersaulted and landed on his feet. He was a strange looking fellow all in black with a black mask over all but his eyes. She was a little out of practice, but she knew her judo and karate, but she had the uneasy feeling that this guy knew a lot more and had lots of practice.

Suddenly there were more on her; they'd drawn her with the one trap door while coming down the other! She struggled and twisted but suddenly there was pressure on her neck and her whole body seemed to explode first in pain and then in numbness, and she dropped to the floor.

Curiously, she was fully conscious, able to hear everything, but she was unable to move and her glasses had been knocked off in the attack and she couldn't see a damned thing without them.

The black-clad men spoke that curious sing-song while making it sound like gutter speech, but suddenly there was another presence nearby, and one of the warriors spoke to it in heavily accented but understandable English.

"Bond?" asked a husky, eerie voice that might be male or female but was certainly chilling.

"In room dere," one of the warriors responded. "Him bad hurt. Lady here out with quinsin."

"Check downstairs," ordered the chilling voice. "See if you can locate the master security control and turn it off. If we can go out the front door it will save us having to haul him out the way we came in." There was a moment's pause.

"By Yusha! This is a bitter cold place! The heat feels good but we must hurry. Any sign of the man?"

"No. Small boy in room dere only other one in house."

There was more sing-song from downstairs, and the warrior talking to the stranger said, "Find system. Hard to figure but can bypass. We go any time now." "Good. I am anxious to be away from here. Too bad the man isn't here. I shouldn't want him desperately on us." Strange. She swore she heard the sounds of vehicles driving up outside and doors slamming. She tried to move but she couldn't. Her eyelids and her breathing were about the only things she could control. All else was numbness. "All right, let's wrap it up. They'll be coming through any minute now and I don't want to be caught here. Recover your dead and wounded but leave the others. Leave her, too, just the way she is." "But that leave too much! You have Company up ass pretty quick!" "I think not. I just want to make certain that both of them come-and cautiously." The voice paused. "Take the kid," it added. No! Please God! No! she tried to shout, but she couldn't move a muscle.

2.

Playing with a Marked Deck

Sam Horowitz was no dashing private eye except perhaps in his own mind and in the occasionally romanticized mind of Brandy. He was five ten, well over two hundred pounds, a small-boned sort of man who dramatized a pot belly, which he most certainly had. He also had a pronounced Roman nose, small deep blue eyes, and what was not graying on his head just wasn't there any more. He was, in fact, the innocuous, bland-looking sort of fellow you'd never look twice at on the street or in a shop, which was why he was a pretty fair private detective and security agent. Aldrath Prang, on the other hand, would stand out in most places. He looked to be a man in his thirties, perhaps, in superb physical condition, even though in reality he was well past seventy. A big man, well over six feet and muscled like a god, his complexion was golden and his features resembled Polynesians more than any other racial type on this Earth. He was not, however, from this Earth, but one of the heads of the great corporation and its present CEO and former security director. It had never been known that Prang had left the isolated and nearly impenetrable home world of the Company since attaining Board rank, and certainly it was unthinkable that a CEO would do so, ever. And for anything less, that might be the case, but this was both personal and life or death. Sam flicked the little recorder and Prang joined him. Together, they listened to all that had transpired, at least the upstairs part. "Bright lady," Prang said, impressed. "They never even noticed the thing." Sam nodded. "So we have a lot to go on, anyway. At least we know more than they think we do, which is always the best way to start a counter operation." He sighed. "This bastard was right, too, Aldrath. He's got the only two people I really care about and his type doesn't give me much play. I have to assume the worst, and that means I'll be after them until they are exposed and fried all the way to the top." "I'm not so sure, old friend," Prang responded, thinking. "You have had a bad shock and extreme frustration and you must have all your powers and wits about you. Listen to him again. This-person -doesn't want you that way. You are dangerous to them. The only man in history to have ever caught and convicted a Corporate board member. They are afraid of you, and I don't think that was put on. As you say, there's no evidence that they knew the recorder was here, or that Diane could also pick up and record just about everything inside and out. There is more here than getting Bond before he could lead us to them. That was the catalyst, but only the catalyst. They clearly knew who lived here and they clearly picked their own spot. There is more to this than simply a chase after a man who knows too much. Something darker is afoot as well." Sam nodded. He felt cold, empty inside, though, and he felt only anger and a strong desire for vengeance. He sighed, got hold of himself, and asked, "How is Brandy?" "The same. There are certain pressure points which only an expert can find as

you well know. Depending on the pressure and the degree of exactitude the paralysis may be temporary or permanent. Fortunately, thanks to the recorder, we know it's a Ginzu move. I have summoned the Guild Master and he should be here some time today. I fear I was a bit forceful with him. I told him that if his Guild was going to commit treason against the Company then we could well give up the steak knives import-export business and manufacture them ourselves, and that to insure things and perhaps make an example we might also exterminate all life on their world. I think he'll come."

Sam snapped out of it and stared at Prang. "Uh-yeah. Um, Aldrath? Would you really do that?"

"Of course. We are already manufacturing them right here, in New England somewhere, I believe."

"I didn't mean the damned knives. Would you exterminate a whole world?"

Prang shrugged. "It's been done. Takes a unanimous vote of the Board, but if we have this level of treason it's simple self defense. The ones who were here knew this, as did their employer. That's why they collected all their own dead and wounded, leaving only the others. Those bodies would lead us to believe that all the attackers were like them and we'd be off chasing helpless drug slaves rather than the warriors who have no such excuse."

Sam thought a while, then sat down at a writing desk, tape recorder in front of him, and began to selectively play back the events of the night. He was deep in thought, playing small sections over and over. Finally, he sighed and went to see Prang again.

"I think I got part of it," he told the CEO. "Different parts. The easy part first. It was very faint, and maybe your lab people can really bring it out, but I heard at least one car door slam after they carried their prey out the front door. That's why we didn't catch them in the Labyrinth. They didn't go out the way they came in. They were ready and they had somebody come and pick them up and drive them away. I bet if you really enhance the background and filter out the rest you'll hear several vehicles, maybe enough for all of them. That means they might still be here, on this Earth. There's no way they could have used a station after the full security alert."

"You heard Bond saying they had their own stations. Almost a parallel network, as difficult and frightening as it is to believe."

"Yeah, but not here. I mean, the Labyrinth's been extended to perhaps a million parallel worlds, but the Company has developed only a very few of them. Most just aren't worth the trouble, and the others we just don't have the full manpower and resources to control as yet. That's not true here. Here we've explored every inch, surveyed, mapped, you name it. We know and have every weak point covered and monitored. That's why they had to come in using our substation. If they had their own they'd have had what they needed for a lot less costly assault on this place. They sure as hell knew where it was and maybe even set Bond up to get here. How else can you explain the pick-up cars around here in bad weather in the middle of winter? No, the odds are they're still here, someplace. And while the bunch of 'em might sneak out over a long period in various stations, the odds of them getting a five-year-old kid through are pretty slim with our system."

"They seem pretty good at beating our system," Prang noted.

"Maybe, but they either didn't know or they forgot one thing. Dash is unique, genetically and otherwise. This is the only parallel Earth where Brandy and I even got married and we checked, remember? The only one. So Dash is one of the rarest of all individuals—a kid with no doubles, no duplicates. His genetic markers are unique. They put him through the Labyrinth and they're gonna get flagged."

Prang thought about it. "I hate to say this, old friend, and I hope you do not take offense, but have you considered that they might do away with him?"

"I thought about it, but it doesn't make sense, at least for now. They didn't take him for revenge, they took him for insurance. You don't burn your insurance policy, you stash it in a safe and secure place and make sure it's readily available and all in good order. No, he's alive, probably pretty pissed off, somewhere on this Earth. And he'll stay that way as long as he serves their

purpose. In fact, I would say he's not just insurance, he's a bargaining chip. You heard them-they want me for some reason. Want me enough to blow cover on a world they apparently control."

Prang nodded. "That's probably true. Still, even if they keep him here this world is a big and heavily populated place. People vanish all the time never to be seen or heard from again, and with far less resources or resolve than these. Still, we will start the worldwide search at once."

He sighed, then continued. "We haven't traced where the dead men come from as yet, by the way, but we're narrowing the possibilities. We've also shipped a couple to pathology because of Bond's comment on their being slaves to some new and even more horrible drug. I already have a suspicion as to what it might be, though, or what it might be derived from."

Sam's eyebrows went up. "Oh?"

"Most people couldn't break free of the old one. Even if they could be physically purged they would go mad without it or without something that dampened the internal biochemistry so it didn't go wild when the organism lost control. The attempt was to find a substance that could be easily and cheaply manufactured, could not be transferred like the original drug to others, and yet would provide what was needed should we take them off the old organic drug. That proved easier to do than we'd expected. It's quite simple to design a drug and tailor it to whatever characteristics you want. It's all a matter of biochemistry, nothing more, but it would allow the victims to retake their places in a more normal society and clear our own medical wards and the retreat world where we'd exiled so many."

Sam nodded. "Like methadone that's used here to allow heroin addicts to get normal lives."

"Yes, I'm familiar with that one. Of course, you remain addicted and you must have your dosage, so you're still on a string, and, in fact, it still produces many of the pleasure center effects of the original, but it's cheap and not communicable, as it were."

"Yeah, but that can't be what had these guys on the hook. If it's cheap and easy to produce then they got a way out."

"Perhaps. If they know there's a way out, or alternate and more benign sources of supply. At least I hope that's the case. It means we might be able to get these people away from these criminals and turn them into our allies. But-" At that moment a young security officer wearing a thick parka and snow boots entered the room. "Pardon, Excellency, but the Ginzu Master is here. He does not appear in a very pleasant mood."

"Well, neither am I!" Prang snapped. "Show him in!"

The man who entered was small, almost tiny, and very frail-looking, with an almost cartoon sinister Oriental face complete with snow-white Fu Manchu moustache. His head was shaved, and he wore a simple black tunic with a gold sash at the waist and sandals. It was little wonder he was less than pleased. This guy was dressed for summer in a tea garden. Still, he didn't look cold, or frostbitten, or anything else but just plain mad.

"What is the meaning of this?" the Ginzu master demanded to know in a low, gruff voice.

"I'm going to play you a recording," Prang told him, unimpressed with his anger.

"At the end of it you may remain indignant only at your peril. Then we will discuss a young lady currently paralyzed in bed upstairs-and far deeper matters as well."

The little man was indeed angry, but he listened, and what he heard he liked even less. Finally he said, "Enough!"

"You recognize the voices?"

"The quality is too poor for that. The only one close enough to get a real identity on is the one speaking bad English, and he could be a dozen people at least. I assume you will supply me with voice prints when you make them. I will then be able to tell you for certain."

"I do not merely want to know who they are," Prang told him firmly. "And I do not want them flayed in classic Ginzu fashion. Not yet. When we are through with

them, then you can do what you wish, but first we must know who that other voice belongs to and how they were recruited for this treasonous work."

"I will give you all that when I find them," the Master responded. "They can and will will themselves to death before your machines and probes can even be turned on, but they can not do so with me. You see, I can control which Hell they go to when they die, and they know this. To die under your questioning would be a release. To die in my presence would avail them nothing."

It was said so matter of factly that Sam was certain that at least the Master believed it-and if he believed it, then the warriors would believe it, too. If the Master wasn't in on it, if he wasn't putting them on, he'd find the answers.

"Very well," Prang sighed. "All that you require will be provided and I will postpone a vote until we have information. But we can tolerate nothing less than the full truth in this. Otherwise we must assume that there are no loyal friends of the Company left in your domain."

It was a simple, understated, and rather elegant threat, Sam thought.

"Now-Brandy?"

"Oh, yes. You heard what was done. Can you bring her out of it?"

"Depends," the Master responded curtly. "Let me take a look at her." And, with that, he proceeded up the stairs and turned correctly towards the master bedroom.

"How did he know where she was?" Sam asked, wondering.

"Forty years ago I learned to stop asking things like that," responded Aldrath Prang. "Come on- let's see what's what."

"Maybe I should have him find Dash," Sam suggested, and they mounted the stairs. The Ginzu Master was poking and probing Brandy's neck as they entered the room. He rose, turned, and said, "I would flay alive the one who did this."

Sam felt sudden panic. "You mean it's not reversible?"

"No, of course not. I mean that it is reversible," he grumbled. "It is just-amateurish. Incompetent. Either you use quinsin to totally paralyze an enemy or you use the sixth degree maneuver to have them come out of it in a specified amount of time. This is neither. I have done what I can here. She will be able to eat and move her head, and very slowly all of the body functions will return to her, but it will be a slow process and she might not be totally right for weeks."

He felt sudden tremendous relief. She was going to be all right! She was going to come out of it!

With that thought, his mind switched back into its more analytical mode, but the interest and the questions were not clinical. This was personal.

"Tell me-would you say that a Ginzu did that? Or perhaps someone who had been taught Ginzu holds and pressure points and perhaps wanted to make us think it was Ginzu."

Prang gave Sam a quizzical look. "But on the tape Bond said it was Ginzu."

"No, he said he had escaped from Ginzu," Sam reminded him. "That's not the same thing. We don't know where Bond was or what he was doing. We assumed the cause and effect-he'd escaped from the Ginzu, therefore the Ginzu did this. What do the Ginzu who work for the Company do except make and export knives?"

"Knives!" the Master hissed. "Mere cheap imitations! Why they only even guarantee them a mere ten years! We have nothing to do with them."

"Except collecting a royalty," Prang noted. "It's a licensing thing that allows them to maintain their private lands and school. But to answer your question, we do employ Ginzu for temporary security."

"Huh? Like what?"

"Well, under normal circumstances, they'd be in charge of my security right now. The only reason they aren't is because they are involved and thus suspect in this. That's only one example. When we must secure a facet for some purpose we use them, and we also use them to guard maintenance and repair projects just in case, since the kind of things we'd be dealing with there are some of the Company's most classified secrets."

Sam thought about that. "Then if they were discredited you'd have to find alternate security. They'd be pulled off all the nasty jobs immediately and effectively neutralized. Someone just might be being very clever here, Aldrath."

"Possibly," Prang replied, noting the smugness of the Master at Sam's theory, "but we can take no chances. Master, how hard would it be to learn that nerve paralyzing trick to this degree and perhaps sufficient others, including some of the language, to pass as Ginzu?"

"Some training by a Ginzu warrior would be required," the Ginzu Master told him. "Such things as these are easy to learn, difficult to master, and require constant practice and supervision, but it is possible. The language-less likely. They might be ones who washed out of the training regimen-only one in perhaps eighty makes it even to Third Degree-or they might be from a parallel world where the Art does not exist but my people do. It is hard to tell from the tape."

"Work on that angle," Prang told him. "All of your people are to be on this exclusively. I want to know who these people were, where they came from, the lot."

"That goes without saying," the Master responded. "The honor of our Order and Art demands it."

It wasn't enough for Sam. "Now we have to find out why as well as who. This is more than Bond. I feel certain that they'll contact me. They wanted me, that's clear from the tape. They couldn't get me so they took Dash as a hold on me and left Brandy as an example. I'd like to work on that angle."

"Do you wish us to move Brandy to a Company facility for care?" the CEO asked him.

"No. Not unless it's necessary. If you can get some nurses and the right equipment in here so that someone will be with her, feed her, wash her, all that, and help her get back on her feet when it starts wearing off, I think it'd be better if she stayed here. She can't tell us right now, but I think she'd go nuts with me off all over the place and Dash missing and her in some hospital worlds away."

"I'll see to it," Prang told him. "As for now, I've already violated three dozen regulations by being here at all and I must get back before I am thrown out because of it. We'll work on all levels-finding the ones who broke in here, using our considerable resources here to find Dash, and also locating and scouting the world from which the dead ones came. I'll make certain you are fully informed."

Sam nodded. "We'll need a good crew out here and fast, too. I want to know why the security system on the substation failed to block unauthorized access and why it didn't flag security up here. Until we hear something about Dash, that's all I can do."

Aldrath Prang paused and looked at him a bit strangely. "You know, for a man whose only child is kidnapped and in the hands of who knows what villainy, you are remarkably calm and composed. I had expected to have to keep you from tearing after them with weapons blazing."

The detective shrugged. "Tearing after who? After all this time, Aldrath, I'm a pro. I have to be. Amateurs get their clients killed, their quarries killed, and themselves killed as well. You're right -if I had anybody, particularly that whispery voiced bastard, in my hands right now I would be slowly and cheerfully choking him to death, but I don't. If I knew who had Dash, I'd go after them-but I don't. I have no control over these things. The best way to handle this now is to control whatever I can and do whatever I can coldly, as if this was just another case for some other client. Frankly, this whole thing stinks to high heaven. Until I get their game figured out, I'm going to play my game."

Prang clapped him on the shoulder. "Take care, my friend. These are very dark forces that come and go through our system and which mock our 'foolproof' security efforts. We have a new enemy, and we do not know his face."

Sam scratched his chin and sighed. "Or an old one. This whole new career of mine has involved peeling an onion. Every time you remove a layer, you find another, smellier one beneath."

Sam Horowitz waited until the big shots were gone and the new medical staff had checked in to see to Brandy. Only then did he go into his study, which they hadn't touched, sat down, turned on the personal computer on one desk, and

called up his special name and numbers file, the one that you had to have a lot of passwords to get to and which would give you a lot of wrong information even then if you didn't know how to use it just right.

It was going to be a long afternoon of phone calls. Lieutenant McCabe of the Pennsylvania State Police might be the best to call first, but there was also Louie "Cement Shoes" Gigliani in Philadelphia, Al "The Turtle" Snyder in Pittsburgh, and many more. Local cops and middle level gangsters in five states, all of whom owed him one or ones he wouldn't mind owing. It was time to call in all his chips on this one.

By eleven that night the various phone lines began to bring him a great deal of information. Three mini-vans had been rented in Harrisburg by a company called Villahermosa Ltd., which turned out to be a New York based subsidiary of an import-export business chartered in the Dominican Republic. No one seemed too clear on what they imported and exported but a security squad checked their New York offices and found an empty warehouse with no particular signs it had ever been used as more than a garage and a mail drop. Other Company security was now checking the other end down in Santo Domingo but it was unlikely they'd have much luck before morning, when places with records and people who could get at them were open and available.

The mini-vans were of greater interest since as of now they had not yet been turned back in in Harrisburg or in any other rental location. The company credit card they'd used was valid and active, though; a call down to Florida resulted in his computer printer spewing out a very long list of transactions on that account the oldest of which was only five months ago, when they had leased the New York warehouse. The credit report also gave the name of Villahermosa's New York bank, and before morning he'd have a list of all the checks they'd written, to whom, and when.

As he'd expected, all three driver's licenses used in the rental were total forgeries. Hell, one of 'em was to Mr. Juan Valdez of Colombia. Maybe they exported coffee or something. Of course, number two was driven by Mr. Pancho Villa of El Paso, and the third was Simon Bolivar of New York. Spanish Harlem, no doubt. These guys weren't even trying hard to disguise their phyness, and that worried him. It also bothered him that all three were using Hispanic names, and from their descriptions looked it. The rental people usually wouldn't remember anybody in particular, but when you rent three mini-vans on a Spanish-sounding corporation to three South American types in Harrisburg, they tend to notice.

He doubted if the man behind this was anywhere around, or even in this world, but he suspected who it was and he very much wanted to meet him. Preferably in a dark alley of Sam's own choosing. They had never met, but even without all this Sam owed him a very slow, lingering death.

The phony licenses were enough to get an APB out on the vans in all states around Pennsylvania. They didn't want to report the kidnapping; that would bring in the F.B.I., phone taps, and all the rest and might cause a lot of trouble as well as a great many embarrassing questions. But now the cops would be on the lookout for those vans, and even if they'd changed vehicles by now the pursuers would be one step closer.

The checks proved very illuminating as well, particularly when matched against the charge records. Airplane tickets, rental houses, you name it. By morning the grocery stores where these guys had bought food would be canvassed, and within a day he would know more about at least the leaders of this band than they probably knew about themselves.

Within that same period of time, Brandy had started slowly coming out of it. She could move her head, although she had a general headache, and could be hand-fed food and drink. She really wasn't up for much talking, but it was impossible to keep her from doing so and he had to report his progress regularly.

"Sam, I don't understand," she said hoarsely. "I mean, why not take me? Why Dash? God, Sam, he's only a kid!"

"He'll figure out what's going on and play along," Sam tried to assure her.

"He's a smart kid, too. As to why him and not you-I'm expecting to learn that in another day or two, after they make us sweat."

"You think they're gonna call?"

"Or something. Dash only has value to us, and even then only if he's alive and well. They want something--apparently from me. Sooner or later they're going to have to ask for it."

He kissed her and left her and walked down the hall where it had all happened. The workmen were even now repairing the attic area and he cursed himself for not having put more up there. There was always a weak point no matter how good the system, damn it!

As usual around the house he was in his stocking feet, and when he turned to go back down stairs he stepped on something and felt real pain shoot through his foot. Hopping to the staircase, he sat down and carefully removed a shard of thick glass which had been just lying in wait for him all this time. He was about to toss it, then stopped, examined it again, and soon forgot that his foot was still bleeding. He crawled around, found more, did some figuring, made it downstairs while limping, and checked again on the downstairs carpet. The results were inconclusive, but he put the small pieces in an envelope and called security. He wanted to know, if possible, just what that glass had come from. The fact was, he wanted to keep busy and to keep doing all that he could, overlooking nothing. Outwardly he was calm and professional, but inside the fact that Dash was missing had torn him up. The more he slowed down, the more he relaxed, the more he saw Dash in his mind; coloring in the books, playing with his toys, sitting in his Dad's lap while Daddy read him a story . . . Worse, it was nearly impossible to avoid physical signs of the boy even though Sam did avoid his son's room. The toys, large and small, were everywhere, and on the door of his office was a crude sign in block letters in giant green crayon that said "I LOVE YOU DAD." It was the most gut-wrenching thing of all but he couldn't bring himself to touch it.

Deep down, too, there was also some guilt. Guilt that he'd been away when this all happened, although it wasn't too clear what the hell he could have done against them that Brandy didn't. Hell, he almost never carried a gun. He spent part of his police career faking his pistol scores; he never could hit the broad side of a barn with one. And these fancy Company auto-aim jobs scared him shitless; he had a nightmare of flipping one on and having it shoot Dash or Brandy or some other innocent; And Brandy was far better at this karate and judo stuff. He could hold his own against a scared street punk lashing out with fists or a knife but he would be dead meat in two seconds against anybody who knew their stuff.

No, he didn't have all those macho skills. He once got talked into going deer hunting in the area and he'd bagged one; the sight of that beautiful animal, dead by his doing, lying there, thrashing and then dying, still haunted him. He hadn't picked up a gun since.

No, the fun wasn't in squaring off against these guys, it was out-thinking them and out-maneuvering them. It was a mental game, deductive chess, and if you could assemble the puzzle and get the whole picture then any clod could make the collar.

And that was the other guilt pang he had. God help him, if it wasn't for Dash he'd be having the time of his life right now. He'd grown bored and somewhat stale at the pedestrian things he'd been doing the past several years; this, now, this was his element. But it was a lot easier, and a lot more fun, when the victims were not people you knew and loved, but could be just pieces in the game.

"It is good that war is so terrible lest we become too fond of it." Robert E. Lee had said that. Perhaps, he thought, this is what he meant. I'm being punished now for becoming far too fond of this game.

At about six in the morning he'd dropped into a light and disturbing sleep in his office chair even as information continued to come in on his printers, fax, and other data collectors. The ringing of the phone startled him again to wakefulness, but it was a groggy sort and he wasn't at all clearheaded. Even so, he had the foresight to activate the small system under the phone that would automatically record and tell him the number from which the call was being

placed. It was a neat service they were now selling to the phone companies themselves for resale as a point-of-call service to customers.

He picked up the phone. "Sam Horowitz," he said sleepily.

"Ah, Senor Horowitz, you sound like we thought you would," came a heavily accented soft male voice.

He shook himself awake and ignored the headache. "Go ahead. I've been expecting your call."

"I assume you have the whole set of lines monitored, and perhaps the Company is as well, but it will do you no good," the voice told him. There was a sudden click and the quality of the line shifted a bit, became a little bit noisier.

"Our technology has to be better than your technology or we would have been discovered, even caught, long ago." There was another click, and the transmission was suddenly both louder and quieter. Sam reached over and hit a timer at the next click, then stopped at the click after that. Four seconds.

"You have something of great value to me that is of no value to you except as a way to get to me," he said, hoping that made sense. "I want the boy back, unharmed, and in one piece. I assume you didn't take him just to torture me, so you want something."

"Si-yes, you are most perceptive. The boy is fine. At first he was very scared, but now he is, you might say, less frightened than pissed off, and quite a tiger, but he is being treated well, fed well, and looked after."

"What do you want?"

"That is a matter not to be discussed over telephones when one does not know who is listening, no? This is merely a reassurance call for now. I assure you we do not wish to keep the boy, but his health and his future are in your hands. Keep the Company off. We will make no second offers, no adjustments in our demands, no back up and start overs. If anything goes wrong, no matter whose fault-even if it is nobody's fault-the boy will be killed and we will vanish like the wind. You will never find us, or him, without our help, but even if you did be assured, Senor, that all of us will kill him and then ourselves before we will be caught. Just wait, and when the summons comes do not hesitate and do not try anything at all. Your son's life depends upon it. Goodbye, Senor Horowitz, for now."

There was a final click and dead air, but he didn't immediately hang up the phone. There were ways of doing trace-backs if the line wasn't broken on both ends, particularly if you were receiving the call.

The information printed out on a strip of adding machine paper that emerged from the side of the box under the phone. He took it, looked at it, then broke the connection, waited until the phone company reset the line, then he made a call of his own.

"Harry? Sam Horowitz. Sorry to wake you up a little early but I got a real emergency here as soon as you can do it. I need a location to match a phone number and I need it yesterday."

Harry didn't even have to leave the house for it, and Sam got a callback in under ten minutes.

"It's a private phone, all right," Harry told him. "It's in London."

"England?"

"No, Ontario. Canada. You know-big country up north. In the name of Argos Container and Cargo, Ltd. I'll give you the address."

Sam scribbled it down, then went to his computer, awake now. Who the hell did he have in the Toronto area? Nobody, it appeared. Nobody on that side closer than Montreal. He tried to think. What was near there? Suddenly he snapped his fingers. Buffalo! Oh, yeah.

And Jerry the Weasel was just the guy for a quick and unobtrusive black bag job.

. . . .
The morality might be a little questionable, but it was real handy to have even organized crime to draw upon as needed.

The private eye business was rarely if ever as glamorous as it was portrayed in the books, movies, and TV series, but it was every bit as tense in its own way. Even he was disconcerted sometimes by the amount of information he could get on just about anyone. Get copies of somebody's checks and you knew more about them

than they did about themselves, for instance. That was the trick here-getting and sorting through all that information and keeping the quarry, if at all possible, in his, Sam's, element and not outside, down the Labyrinth to God knew where.

He was pretty sure that Dash hadn't been taken into the Labyrinth-yet. As soon as Cal had reached the switch to the main line he'd reported a security violation and they had stuck on full monitoring of the access to the central Pennsylvania substation. Not even a flea could go undetected if that happened; the only reason you couldn't do it with the whole line was, that there were millions of worlds and incredible distances of parallel track, sidings, switch points, subsidiary lines-you name it. Just like you couldn't have a cop on every street corner in a city, you couldn't do a full monitor of the entire Labyrinth, but once you showed cause it was very simple to do it for a short piece. The invaders had known that as well.

Either they had all come in en masse in the ten to fifteen minutes tops it had taken Cal to get to the switch and report an undetected breach, or they hadn't come from the substation at all. Oh, perhaps one or two, tracking Bond, but not that army.

They had already been here, somewhere, in place, waiting. And that was the most significant fact of all.

If Doctor Macklinberg hadn't sworn that Bond's frostbitten toes were real, it smelled like even the alleged fugitive was part of the set up. Or had he just misjudged the snow and temperature and the distance involved?

It was an interesting question. There were eleven James Bonds associated in some way with the Company, and six were the sort where you just couldn't lay your hands on them at any given moment. He was almost certainly one of those- the reason why there hadn't been any alarms was because his implanted identifier was of the highest security codes. There were times when such agents didn't want the managers to know they were there.

It was a pretty puzzle, but, oddly, since the phone call and thinking things through he felt much better, even able to doze now. Things were finally moving; the load was lighter. Dash was still alive, and now there was one-on-one contact with those holding him.

Sam slept.

Bill Markham was one of those people who aged so gracefully they looked better in middle age than when young. Of course, Bill availed himself of the same super technology that other high level Company employees did, including Brandy and Sam, and physically he was in the kind of shape a twenty-year-old athlete dreamed of being, but he also had a family and a public existence and presence and so he had to look his forty-four-year-old age. He was tall and lean and muscular, with a ruddy face and a thick crop of professionally styled graying hair, and he looked like the kind of guy you'd cast as a detective on TV.

"It's my baby, Sam," he said, sinking into a chair. "I'm now Security boss for this world and all the stations along the node, so it's in my lap as well as yours."

Sam shrugged and lit a cigar. "I know you have the big picture, Bill; but this is personal with me. So long as Dash is at risk, it has to be a lone wolf operation in a couple of key areas and you know it."

Markham shrugged. "I'm not going to work against you, Sam. You know that. In fact, I'm partly here to brief you on some of our current operations and maybe give you a better picture of who and what you're dealing with."

Sam was suddenly very interested. "You know what's going on?"

"Not exactly. As you've probably already guessed, though, this is more or less an extension of the same old case. When we busted the takeover plot we exiled the ones we apprehended, as you know, Mukasa included, and put them through the wringer in every possible way. We knew Mukasa recruited an organization using worlds where we hadn't set up shop, but we didn't know how extensive it was or how many people were really involved on that lower level. The fact was, neither did Mukasa. They worked through a minimum of middlemen, mostly that sweet little secretary-mistress of his."

"Yeah. Addison or whatever her real name turned out to be."

"So that there could be no slips, they used a stock Company security technique with all of them to prevent them from giving out information under duress, hypno, even accidentally. They all had auto-erase routines implanted in their minds. You spill anything, you suddenly forget, and for good, whatever cross references there are and all other details, and it's beyond recovery. I, for example, know an awful lot nobody else is supposed to know. What if I were kidnapped, or even turned traitor? The first unauthorized access of that information would wipe it out completely. I'd remember that I once knew it, but I wouldn't know what it was. See?"

Sam nodded. "So you had no leads on dear Doctor Carlos or anyone else who might be in the organization even when you had the leader."

"Well, he thought he was the ringleader. Remember, they were out to get Mukasa, too. The problem with the closed culture of the Company world is that they tend to think that everybody thinks like they do. They don't have moral principles, just logical positions. They think that the only reason a slave hates slavery is because he'd rather be a master and enslave somebody else. It's nearly incomprehensible to them, except on an academic level, to imagine someone who might hate slavery because it is evil, because it is morally repugnant. Concepts like evil and morally repugnant really have no meaning for them. So they went out and recruited a huge number of very talented, even brilliant, people who for one reason or another had reason to hate the Company. It was a straight business deal to them, see? Help me break the Board and take over the Company and then you will run the Company as my underlings."

"Yeah," Sam sighed, "but the underlings really hated the Company, including the fellow who hired them. I wonder why?"

Markham shrugged. "There are always enough people who get stepped on in any large organization who generate that kind of hatred. Far less from the Company world, of course, but it's there even there, at least in any human cultures comprehensible to us. When you have access to all the personnel files and all the evaluations and Histories of everyone who ever worked in any capacity for the Company, I doubt if it would take either of us more than a day to find an entire army."

"Point taken. But a Company girl did fall into the lower camp."

"Uh huh. She was out all the time, in contact with these people on a near-constant basis. She found in these rebels something she'd never seen in her own people-passion. A total commitment to a cause, and a viewpoint that graphically illustrated just what the Company did and what it was like and which humanized the whole thing. We think she fell in love with Carlos, and that Carlos radicalized her until she identified more with them than with her own people. Sheer guilt, but stirred well with resentment that the only way she could progress in society was as a mistress and henchman. The guilt part is the same reason so many poor little pampered rich kids become Trotskyites and the like here. And, of course, they used her just like they used her boss. The problem was, we lopped off the guy who caused it all to be possible and we lopped off the radicalized agent of the real plot, but we didn't lop off the true head of the radicals and the organization remained pretty well insulated and intact. We have been trying for years now to find out who, what, and where they are."

"And you succeeded?"

"To a very low point only. Do you know how many worlds intersect the Labyrinth and how many weak points there are even where we don't have stations? Let's just say it's a geometric progression. The only thing we had going for us was that the opposition couldn't stay still forever without ceasing to be an opposition. For a year or so they fell back, licked their wounds, regrouped, and figured out what to do now. Then they started again, and we began to detect violations of security. They're good-damned good-and we always moved a fraction too slow."

"How's that possible?" Sam asked him. "If they use the Labyrinth in known and charted areas they'll eventually get picked up and trapped."

"Not necessarily. The only real control we have is at the stations and the switches. Somehow, they were getting around them, and we didn't know how. We had

a lot of people on it, and the trouble was it took us the better part of a year to get the Board to allow any of us access to the computer security files on the Labyrinth itself so we could find out what the enemy already knew. I tend to think of the Labyrinth kind of like a railroad, with a straight track going from station A to station B via switchpoint C. Of course, you and I know just from being in it that it's not that simple."

Sam nodded. "There are always four faces on the cube. Four directions other than continuing in the tunnel. Good Lord! I never thought of that. You mean each cube goes in four different directions?"

"Uh huh. Now, take any of the sides and go through and you're in a world, right? That's why we think of the cubes as the only avenues to each of the worlds.

That's wrong, though. Each face represents an alternative, a potential siding. Most just go to specific worlds, but many are through. Some of those old extensions were simply curved around to take advantage of temporal differences—a siding between two switches that would effect near-instantaneous travel, for example, from our point of view—while others were simply closed off and abandoned. But they still get power. We can't shut power down to any area without causing feedback and potentially dangerous disruption to the whole system. These shut down and unused sidings were taken off the system maps, access was closed off, and they were as if they had never been—but they were still there."

Sam nodded. "And after our Company fiend was through with the security and master database computers, the only guy left with a system map of all those shut down sidings is our Doctor Carlos. I begin to see the problem, Bill. It also answers a few questions, though, like how they were able to walk so easily and undetected up and down the line. How many of these unknown crossing points do you think there are?"

"We don't know. The computers guess it could run into the thousands. You see, in the early days, there wasn't a single monolithic Company. Development was by a government-supervised consortium of companies instead, and each wanted in on the potential profits in knowledge, new products, new markets, you name it. They all began building competitively, since due to the consortium they all had the technology, while whoever built the accesses to the worlds got first rights in them. Find a weak point, build a siding and a temporary station, and it was yours. Many are automated and use antiquated and sometimes proprietary means of switching—proprietary to the companies that built them many generations ago by Company standards. There aren't even many surviving, records of the smaller companies that were quickly absorbed or went broke. What we have, Sam, isn't a straight line of track with charted sidings but a fantastic maze to which we don't have the key."

"But surely you can find them if you look." "Sure we can—but it takes experts to locate them, then you have to know how the switch works or figure it out without damaging it or the power grid, then you can re-map and explore one siding. Multiply that by the length of the Labyrinth itself and it becomes a nightmare. It is possible to hide in the Labyrinth, Sam, and it is possible to travel sometimes great distances by bypassing existing switch points. The only time we have a chance at catching them is when they make a mistake and we know they're there."

"My God, Bill! You're telling me we could have whole civilizations going back and forth and we might not know about it. If this Carlos organization could tie into them, we're talking an army here. That certainly explains the world and the big organization on it where Brandy was trapped and addicted and how they're able to pull in so many duplicates. I can see why they pulled you off anything else."

Markham nodded. "It's been tough, but we've had several advantages. For the most part they've stuck with Type Zero worlds—worlds with people like us. That narrows it. There might be some Zero-Bs there—worlds where the people look human but aren't—but mostly they stick close to home, in worlds where they understand the rules. By selective monitoring and random probes just of our own region—which is big enough—we've managed to find several switches and identify a

few worlds. They've got some key advantages, though, in that there's only one way in or out. The first time we got massacred going up one of their sidings, we learned that you either invade in strength, in which case you take the tunnel cube by cube but don't know the territory, or we seal it off. We got smart fast. Now we don't tell them when we find them—we just monitor the hell out of the access. That's given us a small but valuable catalog of worlds they frequently visit and a rogue's gallery of people in this rebel organization. We've managed some infiltration of their organization at lower levels but it's tough getting messages in and out."

"Are you telling me that Dash might be anywhere in one of these sidings?" Sam seemed very uncomfortable. "That we might still have lost him?"

"No, no! I doubt it! We've got every weak point from here to Australia covered from the inside and we have this world sealed off as tight as we can. We know this world as good as we know any, Sam. There are no uncovered weak points. They got in, some with false authorizations, some with exploiting lax weak spots like this one—sorry—but this one was covered far too soon for a group that size to make an exit and get away into their maze, and the others were sealed within hours and show no signs of use. Even if they faked out a station master there would be records. No, Sam, they're still here. They're all still here. What bothers me is that they must have known that would happen from the start. I just can't figure out their game."

Sam gave a low smile. "With what you've told me, which fills in a lot of gaps, Bill, I can assure you, I think I at least understand some of it. This might be very interesting at that, provided they don't know that I am in the possession of certain facts. The question really is, just how subtle are these jokers? They've been pretty ham-handed and theatrical up to now, and that's dangerous. But if they are a little too clever for their own good, then things are looking up."

"Huh? What?"

"Never mind. The proof will come in the next few hours—a day or two at most. For my own interests, Bill, I simply can't go further with this right now. Just keep us bottled up tight and I'll do the rest."

Markham studied the detective. "I wish I didn't feel like Watson sitting around 221B Baker Street," he grumbled, then sighed. "Okay, okay, we'll play it your way for now. I wouldn't want in any way to cause Dash to come to harm because I interfered."

"Thanks." And Sam sincerely meant that.

"What about Brandy? Considering how much of a team you two are, I'm surprised we didn't have this conversation upstairs. Is she that bad off?"

"Oh, no. In fact, she's coming along just fine. She got some sleep and when she woke up she had feeling and movement again in her arms and shoulders. Tingles, but it's fading, kind of like a numbness slowly ebbing. She'll be up and around in a couple of days the way it looks now. But she's a hands-on type and Dash's kidnapping has about driven her crazy. I keep her informed and the like but she's better off recovering than getting in my way here while I do what I do best. She'll have her role to play, but not yet. Uh—any luck on that Yusha expletive?"

"Not yet. It's so close to a lot of things and the voice is so obviously distorted by something that we can't be absolutely certain that Yusha is the real word. And, of course, it's so obvious a traceable buzzword that we're half inclined to feel that it was dropped just to send our teams into insanity and occupy a lot of us following red herrings up and down the line. The same with the bodies they left. Nothing particularly distinguishing about them, yet the comment on the recording implied we should know where they were from right off. No oddball tattoos, no genetic markers, no oddball haircuts or green skins or purple hair, and their clothing might as well be local and probably is. Just people. I think we were just getting our noses tweaked."

"Could be," Sam admitted. "I think it's less significant that they left the bodies of those men than that they didn't leave any of the Ginzu bodies. Why not take all or none?"

"Maybe because they figured that the Master would see who they were and that

would lead him to the traitors," Markham suggested.

"Uh huh. Or maybe another red herring. We don't even know if there were any Ginzu involved, or, if so, whether any were killed or badly wounded. We have only the dialogue on the recordings to lead us to that, along with Brandy's description of the black-clad warriors, and they were masked. In a way, it's a master stroke. As long as we can't be sure, we can't use any of the Ginzu at all. We can't use our incorruptible bodyguards for the big shots or our effective local security mercenaries. They've been factored out."

"Well, there are others we can use that are quite good," Markham noted.

"Uh huh, but they're new. Replacements. Green and not known to the folks they're guarding and ignorant themselves of the territory and the tricks." Sam leaned forward and used his cigar stub as a pointer. "The game's afoot, Watson. Dark business; very dark indeed. The trouble is, at this point, we don't know whether we are the game, or they are."

Information began to come in thick and fast. The London number led to a small office not recently occupied in which there was a desk, a chair, and a working phone. The phone had a neat little device on it that included a recorder and a separate line. A phone company check showed no incoming long distance calls, so clearly the trick was to use three local London lines—one to be called by the remote caller, then it would call the second line in town, which would then spool a delay on the tape and then feed it back out the third line that called Sam. It was a clever arrangement. The guy could have called from anywhere, even the phone booth down on College Avenue, to the first London number. That then automatically dialed the second number in the office, which triggered the tape and then initiated the final call to Sam. Without knowing from where the call was placed or the first local London number the entire conversation would be untraceable even if they had been sitting in that office during the call. More interesting was the fact that the tape was continuous record and play at only four second intervals, but it removed almost all background noise and was just slightly off-speed in a more or less random way so that the voice itself sounded normal but wouldn't voice print correctly and would sound just slightly off.

Well, he had expected that to be a dead end. More interesting was the envelope that arrived in the afternoon mail. It bore a local postmark two days old—the good old post office had taken two days to deliver it perhaps two miles—and was essentially clean of fingerprints and whatever. The message was typewritten but he didn't have to run any checks to see if he could find its origins. The very slight impression problem, particularly with the lower case "a," was very familiar. The bastards had typed it on his own machine, in his office, while they were still ransacking the place.

It said, "If you want to see your son again, then on Tuesday next, at eight in the evening, enter the Labyrinth at your substation, then proceed past the main switch and down line towards Headquarters. Be alone and unarmed and destroy this note and tell the Company nothing. Any sign of security or an electronic security scan and we will send your boy back to you in very tiny pieces. Believe us when we say that. We promise that if you play fair, we will, too. We have a proposition for you."

An offer I can't refuse, Sam thought with a dry chuckle. Well, they were giving him more than enough time. Brandy might not be perfect but she should be up and around by Tuesday, and his own string would be played out here by then. Certainly Markham would have a tail on him, but he knew he could shake a tail and create a plausible reason for going down line. That wasn't a real problem. The real problem was that he now had a deadline.

On Friday, they found the vans, abandoned, near Ashville, North Carolina. They had underestimated the Company's resources, though, and their own relative invisibility. They were using rented and leased vehicles still, although with a different credit card on a different company. They had done a good cover job, but they hadn't created additional fake driver's licenses and they had to show licensing information on at least one to get the new ones. The jerks should have had a third party buy a couple of used busses, which would have made the job

slower and tougher, but they didn't.

Most important in the rental information was that none of the vehicles had snow tires. Now, this was the South, all right, but Ashville was high in the Smokies and the only way out that didn't mean mountains and snow and ice for sure was east. On Saturday, Company helicopters spotted them in spite of several precautions they'd taken. Somewhere along the road they'd given the three big vans a spray paint job, changing them from their original colors into black, but three black vans moving in a virtual convoy stood out pretty well. When they all stopped at a motel outside of Wilmington, North Carolina, agents were ready, and Sam's phone rang.

"It's them," Bill Markham told him. "No question. We've even seen your boy. You'll never know how many people and how much time and money went into this. I'm sending the chopper for you now. We don't dare do anything until well after dark anyway, so we're just setting up and reconnoitering the place. I assume you want in on this."

"I don't want you doing a thing until I get there, Bill, and I mean it," Sam growled. "One slip and my son's a memory and I will hold anybody and everybody responsible for that."

3.

The Many Faces of the Enemy

It was your standard, garden-variety motel, mostly empty in the off season and not very fancy, with several rectangular blocks of single-room units in back of a combination office and restaurant. They had taken only two rooms, but it wasn't crowded. In spite of the temperature, the bulk of the kidnapers—the Company agents estimated that they totaled fifteen—remained in the vans and rotated inside the rooms.

"They pretty well stay in the vans except at shift change or when one from inside comes out to talk," Markham told Sam. "The better to guard the rooms with big guns without being seen. We've checked the area and I'm pretty sure that there's nobody on the roofs and no ugly surprises. They have the vans at each end of the block and that gives them pretty good coverage. Nobody's going out the back—it's a cinderblock wall, no windows."

It was about two-thirty in the morning and in spite of it being in North Carolina it was cold; damned cold. The top of the motel unit was heavy with smoke from the condensation from the master units inside, and you could see the breath coming from everyone who now surrounded the place.

Sam was both worried and impressed. He'd been rushed to a field about three miles from the place by helicopter from State College in just a little more than two hours, and from there by car to the parking lot.

"You think you got enough men here?" he asked sarcastically. It looked like a small army. "They must be idiots not to have spotted somebody by now."

"We've kept well back," Markham told him. Sam was both impressed and touched that the chief of security for many worlds had taken the time and trouble to be here. "The main idea was to keep the place locked up. No sirens, no local cops, and people in general have been allowed to come and go without even taking a second glance. We're pros, Sam."

"How'd you do this without the local cops wanting to muscle in?"

"The usual. They got a call from DEA in Washington validating our credentials. They think these boys are the center of a big Colombian coke ring that we're nabbing during a meet and that might not be too far from the truth. We've gotten some prints now from the restaurant where they ate over there and some of these are very bad boys. This is a contract job, Sam. I'm pretty sure this is all local talent."

By "local" Sam knew that Bill didn't mean North Carolinian or even American; he meant they were natives of this Earth.

"No Ginzu or whispery voiced fellow with a Midwestern accent, huh?"

Markham shook his head. "No, we figure they split early, maybe before they even left central Pennsylvania. There's even a possibility that there was a full crew

switch someplace and that none of these were anywhere near your house. We'll find out some of that from Dash when we get him."

Sam looked again at the two vans and the motel block. "Yeah, well, I appreciate your waiting for me. If all goes well I want to be here for Dash, and if not, well, I couldn't live with myself if I sat it out."

"Nothing will go wrong, not with these babies," Markham assured him. "We have several advantages in the setup. There's nobody else in the block-the whole motel occupancy is only six, which is above average for this time of year in this location, so I'm told. I'm going to use pulsers on the two vans, simultaneously. They should be out cold with a nasty shock. The pulsers are useless against the motel rooms, though, so we're going to run a sleep gas unit through the vents on that built-in air conditioner on each unit. The gas is fast and harmless."

"A little risky, though," Sam worried. "You still have to put a fairly fast little hole through the air conditioner flanges and then pump it in, which is never totally silent. They catch on and Dash has had it."

"Could be. If these are the nasties we think they are I don't think they're as suicidal as our other friends seem to be, but it would be ugly. There's no other way, though. There's no technique that's not without risk. We have audio monitors on top there so we'll know immediately if they suspect and can move with stun and percussion weapons if we absolutely have to. You have any better ideas?"

Sam studied the situation and marveled at their thoroughness. They even somehow had gotten blueprints of the place, updated with the latest renovations. Still, he was uneasy. "Maybe wait 'em out and take 'em as they leave," he suggested.

"Far riskier. We couldn't be certain that we'd get everybody and we'd only need one back in the room to spray everybody with bullets, Dash included. Besides, we'd have to do a wide stun at pretty good strength here to have any crack at them and there's always a chance of heart stoppage with that. I don't give a damn if all these bastards have heart attacks but I don't want to risk it with a boy as young as yours."

Sam looked again at the doors and stiffened. "Somebody's coming out of the room on the left," he said softly.

"They check on each other regularly, and rotate a couple of inside and outside men now and again. They have a regular schedule, since at least once a, couple of the van boys weren't relieved when they were supposed to be and they went up to the motel room and raised holy hell in Spanish. See-there's another one coming out now, lighting a cigarette there. One will go to each van, then one from each van will come out and go in. It's not regular but it's never been less than an hour between changes and they've all eaten. Every once in a while one of the van boys gets out and checks the area, sometimes taking a smoke or a leak against the building. I wouldn't think a smoker would be very popular with that crowd in either van. No problem if we nail both vans right off and silently, and they only come out of the rooms for the change. Okay. ... I think we give them fifteen minutes after that pair goes inside and then we hit 'em. What do you say?"

Sam nodded. "Let's do it. Beats waiting and eating my guts out."

"You want to go in with one of the teams?"

"No. If anything goes wrong I'd be in the way. Let the experts do it."

Markham nodded. "All right, then. Let me give the word."

The security chief left and talked to his team leaders and there was suddenly a fair amount of action. The pulsers were what Sam called the industrial strength models, used in the world where they were invented as anti-tank and perimeter security. Anything designed to knock out an armored tank crew sealed inside should be more than a match for an Econoline van.

Far trickier would be getting the hole into the rooms for the gas line. If these guys were rotating almost hourly, then somebody, maybe most of them, were up in there. The audio monitors indicated that somebody in the room next to the one in which they thought Dash was in bed was watching an old movie on the TV. Sam hoped it was something loud and not inappropriate. He much preferred The Final Option to, say, Assault on Precinct Thirteen.

It seemed like an eternity before they were properly set up, and just at the time when they were going to turn on the pulsers some bastard got out of the far van to smoke and check out the area. It was a nerve-wracking extra ten minutes before the man, who appeared to have a nice little Uzi submachine gun under one arm, lazily decided to get back in, and when he did another decided to come out. Time was running out; if this went on, they'd have to wait until the next guard change.

When the second man got back in his van, though, all seemed quiet, and Markham, figuring they still had time and not wanting to stall any longer, gave the signal. Anybody who might emerge from this point would be taken out by marksmen using super-silent stun rifles.

The gas team was ready, dressed all in black and with rubber-soled tennis shoes for extra quiet, but they remained well back until the vans were secured. At Markham's whispered signal through the communicators, both pulsers emitted a single, and to Sam, inordinately loud whump! whump! burst. For the briefest of moments the whole lot was lit, as if by lightning, and the two vans shuddered slightly. They waited another minute to be sure, but all that could be heard from the vans was a very low crackling sound, then nothing. Both engines had died, apparently shut down by the pulses, producing an extra measure of quiet. Now the gas team moved, in cat-like silence and with true military precision. They reached the end of the block, then a pair scrunched down and made their way to the first air conditioner opening, while the others had weapons and grenades at the ready for an instant assault on the rooms if needed. All wore communications helmets, but the only sound coming from them was low breathing. The helmets were strictly to receive orders.

There was a low-intensity red beam from something in the hand of one gas team member, and then it was aimed at a spot where the air conditioner emerged from the wall and it was virtually invisible to the watchers. A very tiny laser melted its little hole in the wall. It was quick; the first man put his drill away and actually peered down and looked in the hole. Satisfied, he moved silently to the second room while the other man laid down a cotton wad on the concrete and then placed a small canister on it so quietly that no one could hear a thing. The small tubing was then affixed to the tube, then inserted just barely into the hole, and the canister was activated.

By this time, the first man had his hole burned in the second room and now another team member came in with another canister and repeated the actions of the first. The audio monitor continued to broadcast the low level TV show in one room and there were snores from the other. The TV would remain on, but when the snores ceased they would know that the level of gas was sufficient to have put them under.

At that moment the monitors relayed the sound of a toilet flushing in the TV room and then a man's low voice said something in Spanish that Sam couldn't catch, not knowing much of the language anyway. Somebody mumbled a reply, even harder to hear over the TV, and then, to everyone's shock, the door to the room on the left opened and a man stepped out and closed it behind him. Suddenly he saw the black clad gas team and froze for a precious second.

One of the marksmen got him with a fast and dirty pulse shot that was nearly dead silent, and two gas team members caught him as he fell and hauled his limp body to one side almost in a continuous motion. Still, everybody froze for a moment, waiting to see if anything had been heard, but they relaxed when nothing happened.

The snoring died away in the room on the left and was replaced mostly with dead silence, while in the other room there was still the sound of somebody moving and the TV going on. There was the sudden sound of something dropping and something hard hitting the carpet and bouncing, and that was that.

The assault team of the gas squad switched on their respirators, then moved to both doors. There was a quick series of loud breaths from the team leaders that clearly was meant as a synchronization signal, and when both were satisfied it all went down real fast.

Rifles fired, burning the locks in an instant, then the assault men went in like

lightning. Sam and the others were up and moving in almost immediately, with a squad of heavily armed plainclothes men going to each van, opening it, and starting to haul limp forms out.

"All secure," came the report from the gas team leader. "We got him! One of 'em wasn't quite under but he was too woozy to do anything except get bloody when I kicked his face in. Guess the opening of the door diluted the gas."

Sam was ready to run into the room but one of the agents stopped him. "There's still enough gas in there to knock you for a loop!" he warned. "Stay here and they'll bring him out!"

A tall assault team member seemed to hear, and emerged from the snoring room with Dash's small, limp form. Sam rushed up to him and looked down at the unconscious form of his son.

"He'll be fine," the assault team man assured him. "Strong, normal pulse. Let's get him over to the ambulance and we'll bring him out of it in a jiffy."

Sam nodded numbly and let the man carry Dash away. The ambulance was already driving in and it was only a few feet to it, but Sam found himself instead leaning against the side of the motel building, using it for support. He gave a heavy sigh and then couldn't help crying. The pressure was suddenly relieved, the emotions could no longer be so professionally repressed.

Bill Markham came up to him but said nothing, letting the detective get hold of himself. Finally Sam managed, with a sob, "You got a handkerchief, Bill?

Wouldn't you know I left without one. . . ."

"Daddy!" Dash clung to Sam and started crying himself, almost starting Sam again, but Sam held it and just hugged Dash and held him very close. Finally the boy looked up, tears streaming down his face, and said, "I knew you'd come. I knew you wouldn't let 'em take me away."

"Not if I could help it, son," Sam responded with gentle firmness.

The boy looked around, suddenly panicked. "Where's Mommie?"

"She's okay. The bad men hurt her when they took you and she has to stay in bed for a little while but she's going to be fine. She's home waiting for you. We'll call her later on and you'll see her tomorrow. Okay?"

"Is she hurt real bad?"

Sam thought about it. How do you explain a Ginzu paralysis hold to a six-year-old? "She was, but the doctor says she's going to be fine. She's been worried sick over you, though, just like I have. Did they hurt you?"

The boy shook his head no. "Not really. They pushed me around some but that was mostly at the start. After that they was pretty nice mostly. They gave me Twinkles and hamburgers." The boy yawned, not from the gas but because he was very tired, but some things couldn't wait.

"Well, all right, then. Listen, Dash, this is important. Were these people here the same ones who took you from the house?"

"Our house?"

"Yes."

"Some. A couple, I think. Mostly I dunno."

"Look, they're all still knocked out now, but you think you could point to the ones who were at the house?"

"I dunno. I'll try. I was kind'a sleepy, like now."

He named several of them but wasn't really sure how long they'd been with him, but two, a big, tough-looking man and a short, wiry, effeminate-looking man he was certain were there all the way. The big man was Fred and he was mean and didn't talk much to Dash, but the small man was Alberto and he was very nice and kind to the boy and had stood up for him when some of the others got a little rough.

That was enough for now. They brought in a prison wagon and chained the men to the inside before any of them might wake up, and Dash and Sam got into a big, black Lincoln and they were off, even as the Company cleanup crew was coming in. The cleanup crew was now the most vital concern of Markham and the Company as a whole. They would remove any evidence of a higher technology, replace the motel locks and even the doors and frames if need be, haul away the vans to a Company shop that would restore them before turning them back in to the rental agency, and go over both vans and rooms with a fine-tooth comb for anything evidentiary

either telling something about the men they captured or which had to be removed. By late the next day, there would be no physical evidence at all that anything had happened there except perhaps that the rooms would be even cleaner than normal and there might be some fresh paint and plaster.

At the same time, a political cleanup crew was at work with the local authorities-cops, the motel manager, you name it. Somebody from the local paper had been tipped, probably by a cop, and it was easier to arrange for an authentic cover story than to deny it all and have the press down on them with a vengeance. The Company people, however, were very efficient, as Sam had good reason now to know.

They had captured twelve heavily armed men and rescued a hostage and had done so at the cost of one broken nose, said nose broken on one of the kidnapppers who hadn't had the good luck to go completely under.

There were, however, lots of interrogations to be done and tests to be made. For one thing, even Dash would have to be microscopically examined and compared with his data recordings. The mere fact that no world had ever been discovered other than this one in which Sam and Brandy had gotten together, let alone had a kid, was insufficient. You could take nothing for granted in the parallel world business, and they wanted to make absolutely certain that this was no ringer, even though Sam was positive that no kid would or even could fake this.

The captives were also microscopically examined using technology created for this purpose, to see if any of them showed any signs whatever of having been born somewhere other than this Earth. Then the real interrogations would begin. Sam called Brandy, who seemed ecstatic at the news. It was several minutes before she herself stopped crying, then she said, "Sam, I swear I'll be walkin' again once Dash walks in the door."

"I bet you will, too," he responded. "Look, he really wants to see you-he's been very worried since I told him you were hurt and that's why you weren't here-but it's going to be at least another day before we can wrap it up here. Figure Monday evening. Then it'll just be getting you back to normal and everything will be back in place."

She paused. "Sam-why'd they do it? Not just for Bond, that I know. They was lookin' for you and then they snatched Dash even though they was then playin' our game on our turf. What's it all about, Sam?"

"I'm not sure yet," he told her honestly, "but now that Dash is safe I'm going to be working full time on it. This one's a freebie, babe. It's personal."

She was silent a moment, then just whispered, "Yeah, Sam. I guess it is."

Dash was easily authenticated; even without his I.D. implant and his apparent uniqueness, it wasn't hard to tell him. Doctor Macklinberg took samples during the six-month checkups and this, with the Company's high technology machinery, gave a listing not only of the genetics, which would be identical in a parallel world "clone," but also things that would be different-the effects of diet, levels of various substances breathed in or absorbed or eaten, that kind of thing. The lab work was done up the line, not by the Doctor, so there was little probability of a switch. It was done too often and too consistently for that. But the bottom line was that six-year-olds weren't good at faking anything and a father and only son had common memories that would be unlikely to be absolutely duplicated anywhere else.

On the kidnapppers, Bill Markham had good news and bad news, but mostly the latter.

"We'll get nothing from the pair who were with them from the attack," he said ruefully. "We figured as much and tried to prevent it but if it was easy to prevent we wouldn't use it ourselves. They do it a bit rougher, though. Something-no telling what-just exploded inside their skulls before we got a single question in; something we didn't detect in the exams. They'll be lucky to remember how to tie their own shoelaces, let alone who they are and where they came from and who was with them."

"Any more happy news?" Sam asked sarcastically.

"Oh, there's a bright side. As we figured, the rest were hired guns who took over on the road. They're a nasty, macho bunch, I'll tell you- spouting threats

and being generally belligerent. They're just nuts, Sam. I think they would go down in a blaze of fury if they could be sure of taking some of us with them. They're all associated with something called the Futurist People's Revolutionary Cells, a bunch of fanatical drug dealers centered in the South American jungles who believe it's their revolutionary destiny to destroy America by filling it with cheap and super powerful drugs. No excuse, either-they believe it. It's the kind of organization the Company can never get its hooks into because we can't even find it, let alone infiltrate it. We're going to get a lot of information from them now, though. Where's Dash?"

"Asleep downstairs and under guard and nurse. Why?"

"Come on. Let's see what the bully boys have to tell us."

The room looked like a normal police interrogation room, one for the worst kind of criminals, with a gun port and the prisoner shackled to the floor and to the arms of a very strong metal chair that was welded down. Sam took a look at him, though, particularly his eyes, and knew that Bill had underestimated their insanity if anything.

The man looked up at them with a surly gaze and a slight sneer on his lips.

"Where is my lawyer?" he snapped. "I know my rights. I don't say nothin' without my lawyer." The Spanish accent was heavy, but clearly he could and did think in English when he wanted to.

"We are attending to the lawyer you told us to phone," Markham responded smoothly. "He's about to mysteriously disappear on his way to the golf course and whether he's ever seen again will depend on what he can tell us."

The man suddenly looked very startled. "What the hell you mean by that?"

"We are not the police, Senor, nor the feds. You seem to be under a mistaken impression. We took great pains to keep the cops out of this, since we don't want them any more than you normally would."

At least something could get to the man. There was a glint of panic in his eyes now, but they were still mean, crazy.

"Who are you? Mafia?"

Markham chuckled. "Now, you know that there is no such thing as the Mafia. No, Senor, not the Mafia. We are far worse than the Mafia. We are the ones who use even organized crime as a tool. We're the ones behind every bush and in every shadow that you can never see out of the corner of your eye. You went a step too far this time, Senor. We don't like your business and we don't give a damn about your politics, for if you ever got big enough to take over a country you would find our strings upon your leaders as sure as they are on the ones you might overthrow. Do you know us now, Senor?"

The man's eyes widened and he looked at each of them. "Conquistadores!" he breathed.

"That is the name the smartest and slimiest of the dark corners of this world know us in your area," Markham admitted. "Your two employers have taken themselves out of the game. Maybe I'll let you see them at some point so you can see that there are those even more fanatical than you. Right now, though, I want some information."

"You can go to Hell!" the man snarled. "I will die rather than betray my comrades!"

Markham sighed and sat down and leaned back in a chair. Sam had already sat down facing the man but remained silent.

"That," said Markham softly, "is not an option."

He waved his hand in the air, and suddenly two small traps slid back in the ceiling out of which dropped two small ball-shaped devices, like tiny turrets, with pencil-like guns protruding from them. Suddenly the tips of both "barrels" glowed -one white, the other red-and they shifted until both were pointing directly at the prisoner's head, making tiny little dots of light on his hair. The man eyed them nervously and then tried to move his head to louse up their aim, but they followed his every move instantly-and he could only move so far. Markham reached into his sports coat jacket and brought out a small device resembling an electric pager with two buttons on it, one red and one white.

"Now, let's start with the basics. I want your name. I hate to have a nice conversation with somebody and not know their name."

"Fidel Castro," the man responded bravely. Markham pressed the red button and suddenly the man screamed in pain, his face contorting in almost unbelievable horror, his body writhing against the bonds.

Markham's thumb came off the red button and the man suddenly seemed to collapse, sweating profusely. Sam found the whole thing unpleasant to watch, but this bastard had been one of them who had kidnapped his son, and God knows how many other people's kids he and his organization had hooked, or killed, or sentenced to a fate worse than death. Besides, there wasn't a damned thing he could do about it anyway.

"Madre Dios! Who.-what is that which you did?"

"Want me to do it again?"

"No, no!"

"There's a rule you probably know, and that is that nobody is unbreakable," Markham told him. "Sooner or later, everybody breaks. It's just a matter of time. That's why so many important people with things to protect will commit suicide or trigger self-lobotomies rather than be subjected to this. You, unfortunately, don't have that option. Those two little beams are very complicated devices and I must confess I don't understand how they work, but I know what they do and how to use them. The red one somehow stimulates the pain center directly-no intermediaries. It's quite level-sensitive, though, and now that we've used it once the computer driving it knows just where your pain threshold is and will keep it just a microscopic hair below your pass-out point. I could let that thing play almost indefinitely and you'd be conscious the whole time. Want to see?" His thumb made for the red button.

"No! Stop! You are Diablo!"

Markham smiled. "I thought you folks didn't believe in gods or devils. No, not gods, not devils, but we are a bit, uh, other-worldly, and we've had a lot of practice." He paused for a moment. "Now, this white button does the opposite. Stimulates the pleasure center directly. It's the most intense high you can possibly imagine. I'll demonstrate-if you tell me your real name. It doesn't matter anyway, you know. This is just a quick and dirty way of getting information. In a while, you and your friends will be put under a machine that will read out every memory you have from your first memories inside the womb to right now. We'll know far more about you than you. But it takes a lot of time to sort and edit that kind of information and that can't be done best on this world. We'd like some answers now."

"My-my name is Ramon Gloriona," the man said, not quite believing all that but definitely remembering that intense pain. Markham sighed. "Red button," he mumbled, and his thumb went up.

"I swear on my mother's grave that is my true name!" the man screamed with such conviction that Markham relaxed.

"You know, I think it just might be," the security chief commented. "All right, Ramon, we'll show you what cooperation brings." He pushed the white button, just briefly, and the man's face and body suddenly went into contortions of sheer ecstasy that seemed to last after Bill took his finger off and stopped it.

"The same principal as the narcotics you dump on the West, Ramon," Markham told him, "only without all the messy chemicals and middlemen and simon-pure. Even we have to have a computer override on the white button, because you never forget it and you always want more." He sighed. "Sam, I think he's softened up a bit. Want to ask your questions?"

Sam nodded, but he was feeling somewhat queasy about this even though it was kind of a revenge dream come true. He was beginning to have some difficulty distinguishing on a moral basis between his old friend Bill and this bastard in the chair.

"Where did you meet the other group?" Sam asked him.

There was a moment's hesitancy, but Bill's thumb only had to head for the red and the man answered. "Asheville."

"How were you hired?"

"We do not hire out like common criminals!" the man responded with some of the pride he'd had before getting the pain treatment. "It was a fraternal favor

between revolutionary groups. They have done some favors for us, we do some for them."

Sam's eyebrows rose. "And who exactly is 'them'?"

"Why, the American Revolutionary Brigades."

Sam looked at Bill, who shrugged. "I thought that shit went out with the Sixties," the security man muttered. "At least here. Beirut, maybe, but not here. Still, it's a nice cover for dealing with these kind of folks if you're really other-worldly."

Sam nodded and turned back to Ramon. "We know about the pair who transferred with you and the boy. Who were the others? The ones who didn't come along?" The prisoner tried to shrug. "Who knows? We have only dealt directly with the comrades who remained with the boy up to now, and even then we knew them only by code names."

That figured, Sam thought. "All right, then, tell me what the others looked like. Did they look different or speak in a different language or was there anything odd about their clothes?"

The man frowned. "Yes, in fact. Most looked sort of-Chinese or Japanese or something like that. Oriental, you know. Smaller. They all wore heavy wool coats and pull-down caps and you could not tell much else. They did speak to each other in some nonsense-sounding tongue, though."

That was jibing with what little Dash had been able to tell them. "What about the leader with the funny voice?"

"There was one fellow. A mestizo, I think. He did not speak with us but spoke briefly with the other two. He had an odd accent, I remember that. We thought he might have been Puerto Rican."

All Spanish accents sounded alike to Sam, but he knew from experience that, in the Western Hemisphere, dialects differed so sharply that it made the linguistic differences between a Maine farmer and a Mississippi cotton grower seem trivial by comparison. He did not, however, think that the accent was Puerto Rican. Most probably this fellow's dialect had no equal anywhere on this Earth.

"Where did these others go?" Sam asked him. "After you took over, that is." The fellow was certainly being very cooperative after the demonstration, but neither Sam nor Bill was likely to loose those bonds. The eyes still said it.

"We left them in the rest area just east of Asheville. There were many cars and trucks there since the highway through the mountains was supposed to be difficult to go through because of snow and ice. They must have used some of them."

"How did you and your men get to the rest area?"

"We came in one of the big trucks we have used for many deliveries and it was then driven away by our people."

Sam nodded. Everything checked out pretty well so far. He turned to Bill. "I assume you're monitoring everybody in and out, even in ones and twos, from any stations and substations along the line. They will want to exit, and even if we miss the big boy there shouldn't be much trouble in spotting our Ginzu-like friends."

Markham chuckled. "Sam, we do what we can, but do you know how many stations and substations there are on the Asian continent? Almost everybody there looks right for the area, and if they have fake clearances and a lot of patience there's no way we can stop them short of shutting down. We have extra monitors and we're scrutinizing everybody who wants out very hard, but there's only so much we can do. Even if we caught a couple, and we might, they're likely to wind up like that pair down the hall. Give it up, Sam. We got the boy back safe and sound. That's about the best we can hope for, all things considered."

Sam suddenly sat up. "Bond!" he exclaimed, feeling stupid.

"Huh?"

"Where was Bond? The whole thing was supposedly to get him and keep him from revealing a key illegal switch point, right? But Dash has no memories of a tall Englishman at all, let alone one with bandages and the like, and we heard nothing about him from this fellow, either."

Markham looked suddenly struck. "You're right," he replied. "Sam-that means they either didn't take him with them or that there was another group that split

right at the start from the main body."

"That frostbite always bothered me," Sam told, him. "It's possible to get that bad fairly quickly, but not all that likely. The one thing that frostbite did was keep him immobile and inside the house. Macklinberg examined him, of course, but like most doctors he takes one look, it looks like the classic case-of which he's seen hundreds or thousands-and we get instant diagnosis."

"You think he was in on it, then? A fraud? It wouldn't be that hard to fake and fool even a doctor under those circumstances for just the reasons you say. So they'd have an inside man, right? Maybe one who could report and help entry and make sure there wasn't a trap inside. That's bad, Sam. It means we have one of our own who went over to the other side."

"It's more interesting than that, Bill," the detective replied. "It means that all this was the object of the exercise from the beginning. If Bond isn't for real, and if he was an inside man, then the whole object was to get to us. The pieces are starting to fall into place, Bill, but I still need more information."

"You're beginning to make me feel like Watson again."

Sam smiled. "It's just the same old game. Taking all the disparate pieces of the puzzle all spilled out in random order on the table and putting them together into a coherent whole. The problem isn't solving the puzzle, the problem is when you don't have all the pieces yet."

Brandy was improving rapidly, now with full upper body control and able to at least sit up. It was likely that while she might feel the effects off and on for weeks yet, she would be up and around and capable of taking care of herself and Dash as well within a week.

Dash practically threw himself on her, and the reunion scene was so touching and tearful that even Sam was affected. The boy got some of his books and crayons and they were there in her bed playing and reading and having a grand old time. Sam was feeling tired, but he wanted to do a little thinking, alone, in the study. Eight o'clock tomorrow night, the note had said. There would be no way at all for them to know at this stage that Dash had been rescued nor just how much Sam had already deduced. If he was there, then they would be there.

He would, of course, be walking straight into the lion's den without so much as a whip and a chair, but he'd done that before. Brandy had done it a while back and had wound up an addicted slave to these people, so he had no illusions about them. Still, they had gone to such extraordinary lengths to have a talk with him; it would be unthinkable to disappoint them.

After Dash finally got his kisses and hugs and went off to bed, he walked upstairs and sat down on the bed.

"They want to meet me," he told her simply. "Tomorrow night. In the Labyrinth."

"Who? You don't mean . . ."

He nodded. "Them, yes. They think they still have Dash to hold over me and with the kind of security clamp Bill's got down I suspect they won't know for a while until and unless I tell them."

"But-Sam, you can't go. Not now. They got nothin' to hold over you no more. Nothin'! You walk in there and they'll have you cold. Hypnos, mind wringers, drugs . . . You name it, they got it. You can't beat 'em on their own turf, Sam."

"We have before," he reminded her. "There's no such thing as a perfect security system. You know that. Sure, we've added a lot here and filled in the gaps and the kind of attack they launched last week would be deadly for them to try again now, but they could get in. A subtler approach. We can't keep Dash out of school too long, and he's vulnerable. A double, a ringer, somebody you wouldn't think twice of letting in the hosue would have you and Dash and everything else. They've haunted us far too long. It's time to take the cross and the stake and go down into the vampire's cellar once and for all."

"Let's just quit it, Sam. If we wasn't with the Company and didn't have no substation and clearances and all that and were out of it we'd be no use to them or nobody else. We got a ton of money. Go someplace like Fiji or Tahiti or someplace else that's always warm and away from the world and just sleep and eat

and fish and swim and say the hell with it."

He shook his head sadly. "I don't think we can. I don't think either side would just allow us to opt out, not now." He paused a moment. "I think it was the aftermath, not the actual attack, that got me. That interrogation Bill Markham did-I haven't been able to get it out of my mind."

She frowned. "What do you mean?"

"I sat there and watched him press buttons. Pain, pleasure. Watching that guy just curl up in agony and then become so willing, so pliant, after just one short shot of pleasure."

"The guy was a scumbag. A drug dealer, kidnapper, and worse. He deserved worse than that."

"Yeah, he probably did, or does," Sam admitted. "The trouble was, I knew that and I knew that bastard would have slit Dash's throat and rationalized it in his twisted way just like he rationalizes shipping tons of addictive drugs to the willing and eager youth and yuppies of America. That's why I enjoyed that pain jolt. Really enjoyed it. I wanted him to get more than he got. And then, suddenly, I couldn't remember which side I was on."

"What? What the hell you talkin' 'bout, Sam?"

"I couldn't remember which side. Suddenly I couldn't tell the two sides apart. Torture, pleasure, pain, high technology, might makes right. Verdict first, trial afterwards. Right defined by who was in who's power and wrong, even evil, strictly defined as competition. I couldn't figure out why our gangsters were better than their gangsters."

She stared at him, but seemed to understand. "Then maybe we should get out. Now."

He shook his head sadly from side to side. "Uh uh. We got sucked in the first time but then the Company made us an offer we couldn't refuse. You don't quit after that. They don't let you quit So you rationalize it, just like that guy rationalized kidnapping, murder, drugs-everything. We rationalized it, or we just preferred not to think about it. The golden ones of the Company world rationalize it or cloak it in that old devil of racism. They're superior-the Chosen People of their gods. The proof is in their sole mastery of the Labyrinth. The rest of the worlds-they exist to keep the Chosen Ones in perpetual paradise."

"Yeah, but ain't it always that way?" she asked him. "I knew a guy once, he said that if the Africans had discovered gunpowder then as soon as they discovered Europe they'd have taken over it. Just one little thing makes the difference and then everybody makes it right in their own head. My ancestors was slaves owned and bossed by Bible-thumpin' fundamentalist Baptists who preached that black was the mark of Cain and slavery was God's law. And not so long ago your people was hounded and hunted as Christ killers, cursed by God, the root of all evil. The only thing at the bottom of this Company is that it's all too human."

He nodded. "And so are these rebels, and so are we. And that's why I'll keep this appointment. I wouldn't be too worried. If they wanted me dead, I'm not that hard a target, and if they purely wanted revenge then killing Dash would have been the most horrible thing they could have done to us. But if I cross them, or make them mad, then they'll come after Dash again and this time with real vengeance."

"They'll get Dash again over my dead body, Sam," she told him seriously. "That I swear to you."

He leaned over and kissed her. "You know, I really believe that."

She sighed. "You gonna call in Markham and get backup? You should, you know."

"Uh uh. I'm pretty sure that they'll be looking for that kind of thing."

"Sam-they'll hook you on something and run you ragged. You never been on that shit. You don't know what it can do to you no matter what you think. Or they'll switch you for some other Sam."

"I doubt if they'll try that switch trick again with me. As for the rest-well, I don't make a very good stripper and I'm not much good if my brain's fogged. No, I'm going to go to bed and get a decent night's sleep, then spend the day tomorrow with Dash, and then I'm going for a little walk."

4.

An Offer You Can't Refuse

The room was darker than a subway tunnel after the power failed, and he tried to move, then discovered that he was held to a chair by some kind of manacles. It didn't matter much; his head was beginning to clear now, and it only felt like forty marching bands were rummaging around in there all playing different songs and nobody in tune.

A single light snapped on, its glare directed straight in his face, a blazing and blinding sun in a sea of darkness, although beyond he could barely make out two figures.

"I see Sleepin' Beauty's awake," said a voice he didn't quite recognize.

"Yeah," responded the other man. "I still don't see why we just don't stick his brain in the washing machine and get all the dirty laundry nice and sweet. For a fuckin' traitor his ass is bein' treated real sweet."

"You're Company men?" he asked, trying to clear his head.

"Yeah, sure. What's left of it, anyway. You should know."

"Bill Markham here?"

"Outside. He's the only reason you're still in one piece and of one mind, you might say."

"And Dash?"

"Can't say."

A door opened and another man came in, closed the door behind him, and stared at Sam.

"You look like hell," said Bill Markham.

"Uh uh. I've seen Hell this trip and it's much worse. Is everybody all right?"

Bill Markham took a seat and sighed. "The answer to that is a relative one. I'm not sure of anything, Sam, including you. There's a ton of folks here who want to have you for breakfast and stick you into dissection, but so far I've held them off. I've known you longer and more personally than anybody else except Brandy, and I want your side first."

"You know some of it."

"Some. Maybe more than you want me to know. The trouble is, Sam, the pieces don't fit. I got a lot of jagged pieces and I can't make 'em go together."

"You want it all, then."

"From the top, Sam. From the top. From the time you went-into the Labyrinth until the time you came back out. And I want no details spared."

"Where's Dash?"

"Safe and secure, I swear to you. At the moment he's staying with Brandy's cousin Bernice. Not a scratch on him, I might add. He's a tough kid."

Sam Horowitz sighed. "Yeah, he is. All right, then. It's all over now, no matter what. Get me unstrapped from this damned bed and sitting up straight, and maybe a drink, too, if you can. This is gonna be one long and involved story."

"Do it," Markham ordered.

"But, Boss . . . !"

"Where the hell's he going to go?"

One of the men came over and fingered a combination that released the straps.

Sam groaned, stretched, and sat up, moving carefully one limb at a time to try and get some circulation back. At least he didn't see any big bandages, but he didn't exactly suddenly want to do cartwheels, either.

"Water's all we got for now," Markham told him. "Glass and pitcher there on the table."

Sam nodded. "If you got several extra strength aspirins, though, it'll help a lot."

"I got some," the second guy said. "Here."

They poured Sam some water in a Dixie Cup, and he took it and gulped down three of the pills, then settled back.

"You're gonna find this hard to believe," he warned them. "I've got all the answers, but I'm gonna tell it in my own way."

"We got noplacement else to go," responded Bill Markham.

Well, at least I don't have to give you the buildup, and I assume that you, of all people, understand why I had to go. You're a good enough detective to figure that out. For the benefit of the Cretin Brothers here, though, I won't explain until later. Might as well entertain the boys as well as educate them so maybe one day they'll grow up to be detectives instead of cowboys.

I'd like to say that if I hadn't had no real choice in the matter I wouldn't have gone, but I think it would be a lie. Maybe the idea of going off into danger with the obvious potential of leaving a fatherless child and a widow behind isn't the correct, moral thing to do, but it would have been irresistible in any event. I mean, consider the enormous lengths they'd gone to to make sure that I went down the rabbit hole. Clearly they didn't want to kill me-not yet, anyway-because they had ample opportunity to do that without going through all this crap. The fact that they didn't was in and of itself fascinating to me. They always overdid everything, too. You'd think that by now these characters would have learned that the simpler plan is better, and direct action beats the hell out of piling complexity on complexity so that you vastly increase your chances of something going wrong. When they tried to take over here in that Whitlock business they blew it by being too complex and devious; then they even blew covering up their own mistakes for the same reason. The same thing went for the drug plot of theirs. I think you or I might have pulled that one off, given the drug and the same lack of any moral scruples, but they had to go and make it so damned complex they screwed themselves and allowed us to finally wind up with their whole operation in our hands.

So, yeah, I was going no matter what, but there was a kind of perversity in my feeling better because I was forced into it anyway. Kind of took the load of guilt off my shoulders.

Well, anyway, I went.

As many times as I'd seen it, the opening of the Labyrinth always fascinates me. First a single straight line of pure energy, then it collapsed into two lines, then four until there was a square, then eight, and finally twelve-a cube unfolding from a single burst, hovering just above the concrete floor of the substation. When it stabilized, I stepped in and was immediately in that strange world of total silence.

The Labyrinth stretched tunnel-like in both directions, its facets showing different worlds and world views on four of its sides, including the one on which I stood. With its myriad sidings, switches, twists, and turns it was a labyrinth in truth as well as name, and, supposedly, only the dispatchers knew just where you were and how to get you from point to point. Supposedly was the key. I, of course, knew the complexity of this region quite well, and needed no one to direct me.

I began walking towards the main switch, going through cube after cube of linked line, each one showing four different views. Few were easy to make any sense of, the one I'd entered, as you know, was at the bottom of a concrete well-like depression and showed nothing but bare walls. Few have full station or substation capabilities, though; these were automated exits to worlds not yet developed by the Company, or worlds not worth developing. Some of those showed thick forest, or grassy hills, or blasted plain.

Those blasted ones always get to me in the pit of my stomach. It's depressing to discover the number of worlds in which the atomic bomb had not only been invented but had been used.

For while I appeared to be travelling a physical distance between two geographical points; in truth I wasn't right now. Every view I saw, when I could see one, was the same point in space at which I'd left. I was travelling not away from it but down the line of possible worlds that were not only possible but real, coexisting one atop the other with no dimensional points of reference to allow one to know of the other. I know that's old hat to you, but let me tell it in my own way, one step at a time.

The switch onto the main line was not very far down, and I reached it in ten minutes. You could always tell a switching cube even when you might not see the dispatcher; you could hear, in a hollow, dry, closed chamber sort of sound, both yourself and the others, and there were no views in the cube facets. None but

one forward, which was glassine and opaque.

A light came on behind the glassine wall and inside sat a creature who was not quite human but nonetheless was a real live person. He was a gnome-like character with a wrinkled, oversized head that seemed molded out of clay, and thick, high pointed ears and enormous eyes, and when he opened his mouth the teeth were as sharp and pointed as a shark's and seemed to go on back in his mouth forever.

He sat hunched in a high-backed chair over a complex console, and he looked up and stared at me. "Gloobenfarble gazoort, Smadish?" he asked in a deep, gruff voice.

"Sam Horowitz, Security, on assignment. Check your board," I told him impatiently.

The big eyes looked down and there was a readout from the sensors in the switching cube that gave all the necessary data from the implant you folks stuck in my bones.

The dispatcher adjusted a control. "Very well. Destination?" The huge mouth and lips formed different shapes, but the translators worked quite well, even sounding just like his voice might say it in English.

"Need to know," I responded. It's nice sometimes to have a security clearance and be able to do that. Now I know why there are so many Top Secret stamps at the Pentagon. "Main line, downline," I added.

The gnome shrugged. "All right. You security boys get a mite touchy over nothing, don't you?"

"I'm not in a social mood right now. I'm on business. Just switch me."

"Switched over. Exit left."

I turned and saw that the wall to my left had now become a continuation of the tunnel-like assemblage of cubes, and I turned and walked through without another word.

Well, you know the main line, and there was occasional traffic as usual. Others were using the Labyrinth on business, going between the worlds in some cases with the same casualness that a businessman in New York might have to hop a commuter jet to Boston. Some were couriers, others technicians, and still others marketing analysts and the like looking at new products in one world that might be useful and profitable imported into theirs, and a few, of course, would be other security people.

Still, there were not many of them, and there were long stretches of nobody at all. The Labyrinth was incredibly long and there were a lot of worlds. They were an interesting lot, though, these fellow travelers. None in this section were like the gnome or some of the other dispatchers; this was the Type Zero region-people like me, yet not like me.

A fellow in a rather ordinary business suit and briefcase walked by, followed by another man who was dark-skinned, maybe six-six in height, but who was wearing sandals and a uniform not unlike a Roman legionnaire's in all those Biblical movies. Then I had to step out of the way to allow a woman to pass wearing a snow-white powdered wig and a hoop skirt that seemed five feet wide. She contrasted well with a Melanesian woman wearing only a grass skirt and two big orchids in her hair, and the extremely Chinese-looking fellow wearing a plaid kilt and frilly shirt.

I couldn't help wondering in spite of my situation if the guy played bagpipes using the Chinese musical scale. And if you could have told the difference if he did.

I went through a lot more switches, but always remaining on the main line as instructed.

It was during the long stretches that I began to wonder when or if I'd be contacted after all. Maybe they did have some way of knowing that Dash was safe. Maybe this was just a dry run. I couldn't be sure of anything, but I longed for something neither lethal nor painful to happen. Hell, if I went much more I'd be down to the main switch to the Company Headquarters world.

In spite of my impatience and anticipation, when it happened I was almost unprepared. There was no switch, no dispatch, no glassine wall, but just as I

was going to continue to walk straight through to the next cube I was suddenly aware I had a choice. Both the straight line and the facet over my head were showing Labyrinth, but the cube didn't feel like a switch-there was the same deathly silence.

It's always strange to exit out the top-I needn't tell you that. You have to focus your mind and eyes on it, straining your neck, and, keeping your eyes as close to its center as possible, walk forward. How the cube knows what this means I'll never understand, but as I went forward the cube rotated and I was suddenly walking, just fine, into what had been the top.

I rubbed my neck and then continued on, and as soon as I went into the next cube I stopped and looked back-and saw only blackness on the facets beyond. The switch that had opened just for me was now closed and invisible from the main line- and I, of course, was now also cut off from returning. Just for a moment I felt stupid and trapped, and began to doubt what I was doing.

I started paying attention to the views out of the cubes now. Walking down the main line, I'd moved geographically as well as simply from world to world. The worlds turned, time passed, but not always at quite the same relative rates. If you knew where you were going, and if there were stations at both ends, you could enter in Pennsylvania in one world and exit a brisk half hour's walk later in an alternate world Timbuktu. I wanted to get a decent idea of just how far from anyplace I knew I was.

The sidings, however, were strictly vertical movement, so again I was seeing four variations of the same place, but it wasn't a familiar place. Most of it looked like dense jungle, occasionally with high mountains in the distance, and none of it looked appetizing. The Amazon, maybe, or someplace in Africa.

I walked ahead, but someone else was at the controls here now, and I suddenly found myself emerging into a hot, steamy climate that made my flannel shirt and heavy topcoat, appropriate for home, seem like bad ideas. The best I could do was stop, remove the coat, unbutton a bit of the shirt, and roll up the sleeves. It didn't help. Much more than total nudity wouldn't help much in this heat and humidity.

I was suddenly aware that I was being watched, and I turned and saw that I wasn't far from the right idea in native attire. Two big, muscular men stood there, just inside the jungle, watching me intently, and they didn't seem to have any clothes on. What they had were dark, weathered Amerind features, black hair below the shoulders, and tattoos on their cheeks and foreheads, and possibly the biggest noses I'd ever seen on a human being; bigger, even, than Uncle Bernard's schnozz. Still, Uncle Bernard had never looked at me like I might be a potential dinner. I instantly began to wonder whether or not this had been such a bright idea after all.

"Excuse me," I said, trying to suppress my sudden anxiety, "but is this my stop? I seem to have lost my timetable."

One of them curled his lip and then said, "You come. Follow us. Hurry, hurry." And, with that, both turned and started into the jungle.

The only thing I wanted less than following them into a jungle was to remain here in trapped isolation, so I hurry hurried.

They were damned fast, and confident, but they knew the territory. They were also younger and in much better condition than I was, and after a while I was winded and called out, "Wait a moment! I can't keep up!"

They both stopped, turned to look back at me, and the same one said, "You come. Follow us. Hurry, hurry."

I suddenly realized that I'd just heard the fellow's total command of the English language. I struggled for breath, took a bunch of deep ones, then said, "All right-lead on, but I hope it isn't much further." I began to suspect some fiendish revenge plot to murder me after all-by heart attack.

"You come. Follow us. Hurry, hurry," replied Bignose once more, turning with his companion and continuing.

"Yeah, yeah. 'Hurry, hurry,' chop-chop, you asshole."

They weren't completely naked after all; both wore some kind of coarse briefs that covered their genitals but were mere straps around their asses. Even as well built as they were, though, I wanted to see what kind of speed they'd make

wearing what I was wearing.

They went on and on and just when I was convinced that I had to stop, that I would never make it another step, they broke free of the jungle and out into a clearing leading down to a fairly broad river. Right at the river somebody had built a house-not the kind of house you'd expect this pair's people to build, but a real one, apparently made of manufactured materials although with a thick straw mat kind of roof. It was one story, rectangular, and built on stilts, indicating that the river was often a bit higher than it was now, and from it, leading right into the river, was a dock of crushed stone that must have been some job to build.

Surrounded by forest, the lack of wood in either the house or dock made me wonder just what size termites they had around these parts.

I let the two tribesmen get far ahead now-no hurry, hurry any more; this was clearly my destination. They ran up to the house and one went in and I could hear a lot of gibberish being yelled inside.

I reached the house and then sank down on the stone steps, exhausted. Anybody who wanted to talk to me could damn well meet me this much. I was too winded to even give a damn who or what was inside any more.

Still, I heard someone come out behind me and I turned and saw a rather distinguished-looking middle-aged man there. He was white, although a weathered brown from the climate, fairly tall, with a squared-off face and deep-set very blue eyes, and he was wearing bleach white Bermuda shorts, a thin cotton white button-down shirt, and tennis shoes. He had a long, graying, but neatly trimmed beard and a big curly moustache, and he looked for all the world like some nineteenth-century British colonial officer.

"Sorry the boys set too strong a pace, but we weren't really sure when you'd be coming and I had to be at the controls, naturally, and set others to check for tails and tracers and the like and that didn't leave anyone but them to meet you." The English was impeccable, if more than a little British or even Australian or South African, but with a definite trace of some other accent, too. German, maybe.

I was still winded, but managed, "Well, you know who I am, but to whom am I speaking?"

"Oh-sorry. I am Herbert Voorhes, and this is my humble home."

"Are you behind all this?"

Voorhes looked a bit uncomfortable. "Well, no, not exactly. In fact, I was rather opposed to you as the man for this job, but I was overruled." He sighed.

"But you're all in!" He turned and yelled back into the house in that gibberish the native had spoken. "I've just ordered us drinks. Gin and tonic suit you?"

Over ice in your case, I should think."

I nodded. "Sounds fine to me. I don't know what time it is here but my body says it's well after ten in the evening."

Voorhes shrugged. "One has less trouble with these things when one realizes that the sun is always over the yardarm someplace, even within each world."

To my surprise, a young girl emerged with the drinks. She was small and quite pretty, and clearly of the same race as the two men who'd brought me here. Like them, she was virtually naked except for the leather-like thongs and a bit of padding in the genital area, but she was more naked than anything on the Playboy Channel, that was for sure. She, too, had a heck of a nose but it was more than offset by her other attributes.

She bore a tray with two highball glasses filled with gin and tonic, complete with little plastic swizzle stick. I took one and sipped it, knowing that no matter how thirsty I was, I didn't dare chug it down in this climate. Never, never get high on a case and particularly not in enemy territory. One of the oldest rules, and, as tired and thirsty as I was, one of the toughest to keep. I needed a couple of doubles right then.

Voorhes took his, said, "Thank you, my dear," and the girl-she looked perhaps sixteen-smiled and turned and went back into the house.

"You seem to have quite a setup here, Mister Voorhes," I noted. "Is there any civilization in this world or are these people the norm?"

"Oh, there's civilization here, although not the sort that you would fancy, I'd wager. The bulk of this world is pretty much stuck in the Stone Age, with the few Bronze Age tribes having fairly decent empires. Oh, they had cracks at things, but cyclical plagues and famines seemed to have knocked much of the world back so many times that they don't even try much any more. Most of where you go in this world it appears that curiosity, even ambition, has just died out in the people. I tried to introduce a few simple labor-saving concepts here and they saw and understood but rejected them. Said such things would poison their way of life! Just from me being here they've learned a lot about what is potentially available and it horrifies them. They want none of it. Their culture is almost entirely spiritual in nature. These people don't even understand the concept of property or competition. They live short lives, but rather happy ones overall. Sometimes I wonder if they didn't take the better track. They have no crime, no social hangups or inhibitions, and are relatively non-violent. A bit sexist, of course, but all primitive societies are-women and children first, of necessity, you see."

I sat back on the steps and tried to relax. This wasn't exactly what I'd been expecting, although I wasn't quite sure what I had been expecting.

"You want to tell me now what this is all about?"

Voorhes looked surprised. "Why, dear boy, I thought that was obvious! We are having a bit of a problem here and we need the services of a detective."

I frowned. "Come again? What kind of problem?"

Voorhes sighed. "I'm afraid we've got more than a bit of a murder on our hands, and it's impossible for anyone within our organization to investigate the matter properly. One by one, someone is polishing off our Board of Directors."

"Now, hold it," one of the other interrogators put in. "You mean they went to all this trouble to hire you? That's pretty damned hard to believe."

"How long you been off the gooseberry lay, son?" Sam asked sourly.

"Huh? What the hell. . . ?"

"Never mind. I don't care what you believe." Sam told him, aware now that these weren't just ordinary muscle but local Company boys. Not too experienced with the Labyrinth but not as ignorant as they let on, either. "I'm telling you exactly what happened, as near as I can remember it."

The aspirin were starting to kick in and he was feeling better but tired. "Now, you want me to tell it before I keel over or not?"

"Go ahead, Sam." Bill Markham urged. "I'm all ears."

I stared at the man. "You mean this was all an elaborate attempt to hire me?"

Voorhes cleared his throat nervously. "Well, not entirely, but it became so, yes. You see, we had a serious problem. Anyone well qualified to do it who worked for us simply couldn't be trusted in this matter for a number of reasons. Doing it ourselves was simply out of the question since we might be hiring someone working for the fox to guard our henhouse. And since it was our own lives at stake, we couldn't take the chance. But whoever we got had to understand both the Labyrinth and its complexities completely. The greatest detective in any world was no good to us because he'd have to spend months just learning the rules and procedures and tables of organization and the like and getting comfortable with the concept. That left someone from the Company; someone well-connected enough to find out if indeed we were compromised, but anyone we got from there would have a vested interest in cheerfully stalling until we were all dead. You can understand our dilemma."

I could at that. "So you decided to kidnap me and my son and hold my son as the price of solving your problem. I'm surprised you didn't just take Brandy."

"Oh, we couldn't do that. Even if we thought she was fully qualified to do it and hadn't been, as it were, out of circulation and practice for years now, she could hardly be objective. I mean, she has good reason to hold grudges against us for past- unpleasantries-and even if she tried to do it she would be understandably blind prejudiced enough to go after certain members of the Board, guilty or not of what we wanted. You, on the other hand, have an excellent reputation for this sort of thing, have kept your hands and head in the business consistently, and you, along with your wife, are responsible for doing us in the last time and in actually trapping and convicting a member of the Company's

board. Your clearances and contacts within the Company are impeccable. You see?" I nodded. "I see, all right, and I suppose in a way it's flattering, but you don't seem to have my own interests covered. If I took on your case, and remained as objective as I could be under the circumstances, I would have to know as much about your own top organization as I do about the Company." I would know who all your leaders were, where they were, and many of the details of your operation. In the end, I would know too much."

"True enough," Voorhes agreed, "but you know that there are many rather easy ways around that sort of thing. Otherwise, in this sort of technology, none of us could feel any measure of security."

I thought of those two opposition security men, like little children, drooling and blank. "I don't think I'd like a little explosion in my head and a life trying to figure out how to tie my own shoelaces."

"Well, there are other ways than that. In fact, I don't mind telling you flat out that we are better than ninety percent complete on our grand and final project. The Company will be destroyed, Mister Horowitz. We know how to do it and we will do it. We tried gentler ways and you and your wife blocked that. There are some who think you should be thanked for that. Had we succeeded in hooking the leadership of the Company on that nasty little drug we would have come to run it, and near absolute power would have changed hands from them to us. There are many, including myself, who wonder if we would have been any better at it than they over the long run. We are all human, Mister Horowitz. Such power would have proven -irresistible."

There was a rumbling of thunder in the distance and Voorhes looked up at the sky. "Come," he said. "You are rested now. Come inside the house before the storm breaks and we will discuss it further."

The house was larger than it appeared, and quite comfortable-looking, although it lacked modern amenities. It was an eighteenth-century house in a Stone Age world, with oil lamps for light and much of the furnishings having that handmade look. It was as good as you might expect in a non-technological world, though, and there were some concessions. Screens on the windows, netting over the doors to keep out the bugs, that sort of thing. The stone construction kept it cooler, although with a perpetually damp smell and feel to it.

In a back room, I could hear two women's voices speaking to one another in the native language, and while I could make nothing out, the light tone and occasional giggles reminded me of two schoolgirls playing hooky. I took a seat on a hard couch in the living room and Voorhes sank into a padded rocker that looked well used.

"Where do you get the ice?" I asked him.

"Huh? Oh, there is power and some amenities in the substation control room, including a small freezer. Every day I go down there and collect some things, like the ice, and bring them up here in an insulated cooler until used. The natives were fascinated by clear ice. Other than hail and snow on the distant mountains they'd never seen the like. They like cold drinks, but they are actually rather smart. They immediately saw how making ice could lead to the preservation of food and that this would be a major threat to their lifestyle and values. They'll accept an iced drink now and again, but won't hear of using it outside of the house here."

I looked around. "Why are you here, Mister Voorhes?" I asked, genuinely curious.

"Is your opposition system so extensive that they can afford to have men like you stuck here as mere station masters?"

Voorhes was silent for a moment, then replied, "No, not as extensive as all that. Oh, this abandoned spur has its uses, not the least of which is that the station itself is so different in design and operation from the standard one that it's nearly impossible to detect, but, yes, you're right, it could be run by almost anyone. I live here because I choose to. Because not only is this world unpolluted, but it steadfastly rejects our pollution. There is a purity, a simplicity about this place that I have found nowhere else. These people have nothing but an attitude. If we could export it, even its basic essence, we would give humanity something it truly needs and lacks, or has forgotten. I myself am

so much a victim of our modern technological societies that I have to have this house and many of the creature comforts. Our ancestors knew how to farm and hunt and gather but we ourselves have lost that. We are dead without our technology, at least at some least common denominator level. So, I am as minimalist as I can force myself to become here, and I find a measure of peace."

I nodded, understanding the man even though I wasn't sure that what he saw as the idyllic life was anything I, personally, would pick. Sort of an extreme version of what Brandy and I had experienced when we moved from our dense, urban environment to the mountains of rural central Pennsylvania. You had no idea how much pressure you lived under, just day to day, in the city, until it was removed. But I had a real fondness for central heating and air conditioning and cable TV and supermarkets, and I'd gone about as rural as I wanted to get.

"You are not what I expected on the opposition," I noted, not trying to be coy or anything other than honest.

"Indeed? And what did you expect? Oh, yes- the drug business. Ugly business, that. We're not all philosophers, Mister Horowitz, and we're not even all very nice people. Most of us were, once, but not any more. We've been made bitter and cynical and cruel. The irony of conflict with an enormous and evil institution is that you can effectively fight it only by adopting its morals and its methods. Sooner or later, you become as corrupt and evil as they, and you tell yourself your ideals are still intact, but they become mere excuses for the highest forms of barbarism. It's the curse of the modern revolutionary, I fear, and I am as guilty of this as any of the others. Perhaps more so, since I am the group theoretician-the fellow who soothes consciences if there are really any left. I am a bit more sane when I am in this environment and in these surroundings, that's all. And yet, even in the worst of us there is that glimmer of purpose, of conscience, of some sort of moral imperative. That is why we have agreed now that half measures simply do not wash. The Company must be destroyed-utterly. The Labyrinth must be shut down, the stations dismantled, the atmospheric systems and switch points rendered permanently inoperative. Each world must continue ignorant of and deprived of the fruits of the others, free to find its own destiny, good or bad. If the Labyrinth remains open, it will be used and abused, if not by the Company then by us, and if not by us then by someone else. And, like us and our mirror image of the Company, the vast bulk of humanity will be protected from anything except itself."

I thought it over. I wanted to know more. I wanted the whole picture.

Besides-there were other factors. I shifted in my seat and then said, "I suppose I should tell you now that my son is no longer under your control, and I made arrangements that he'll be much more difficult and costly to get again."

Voorhes was definitely startled. "Really? And yet you came anyway? Telling no one?"

I nodded. "I came, and nobody except Brandy knows my real purpose. I did, of course, lay in some insurance, but so long as I'm alive the Company knows nothing. I think that in at least one respect you misread me, maybe more. You see, if you had still had my son, I would not be here now."

The storm broke, rather dramatically timed to my great inner satisfaction, and there was suddenly a windstorm inside the house as well, causing Voorhes to jump up and struggle to close the immediate windows against the already pounding rain.

The fellow is too devious for his own good, I reflected as I watched the show and did nothing to help. He makes a plan much too complicated and much more costly than need be just to lure me here and yet, with sure signs of a storm coming, he makes no move to close the windows before it actually hits. It said a lot about Voorhes' personality and character.

The bearded man was in the other room, shouting at the girls in the native tongue, and when he came back in he was clearly winded, again to my devilish delight. Served the old bastard right for running me ragged through that damned jungle.

Voorhes took a couple of minutes to settle himself, mumbled a lot of dark phrases glaring at the rain and the doorway in a Germanic tongue, then got himself back together and sat back down and stared at me for a few seconds,

getting back on track.

"Fascinating," he said at last. "I mean you, Horowitz. Naturally, we established a difficult but possible trail to see if indeed you could do it. If you hadn't been able to track and liberate your own son on your own world, then you wouldn't have been considered for the more difficult task."

I wasn't sure if that was the truth or not. It certainly made a lot of sense out of what they'd done, but then the cost had been high and Voorhes had seemed genuinely surprised at the news. It made little difference in the outcome but the answer would tell me a lot about how far I could trust these jokers. I decided to test it.

"If that's so, then you lost a lot of people in the taking, cost yourself a fortune, exposed an underground organization on my world, and lost two of your own in the process."

Voorhes shrugged. "The organization was no longer necessary or relevant to us. The people, with two exceptions, were little more than cannon fodder in the struggle-less than pawns, really. The two of any import knew the risk and felt confident of themselves. They were also expendable, as are we all, in the cause. Their usefulness was in running the cover on your world in any event, and, as I said, that was no longer needed. Its exposure has actually saved us time, money, and manpower, since such a network and those who taste the power of it is not easily shut down with an order. Still, I find it curious that you would come after getting your son back. Come defenseless and alone."

I shrugged. "I'm an easy man to kill, so I don't worry about that part of it in my profession. I brought no weapons because I'm lousy with weapons. That's not my field of expertise. Brandy is the weapons expert, as your people discovered. And I have clients, not owners, and my value to said clients is useless if my brain's messed with or drug dependent or anything like that. Besides, while I have no reason to love you or your people, I don't have much love and admiration for the Company, either. I see the same things wrong that you see, and I don't like them. At the moment, if you'll pardon my honesty, I think both you and the Company are a pair of slime balls. You're both vicious, corrupt, and you see people, even whole worlds, as nothing more than spots in a ledger or-less than pawns, really."

Voorhes looked uncomfortable at that. "All that you say is true, yet we will stop it. Without the Labyrinth there is no corrupting power."

"And you're not really sure that you have the strength or will to turn it off, even if you have a method, are you? That's why some murder of one of your top people has you in a tizzy. You're not afraid that one of your top boys has turned traitor; you're afraid that at least one of your boys has become so corrupted that he'd rather be a demigod than give it up. That's it, isn't it?"

"You are quite perceptive, Horowitz. I'll give you that. Perhaps I misjudged you."

"You said you were against bringing me in at all. Why? And who was my champion?"

"We had a choice of many of the greatest detectives ever produced by civilization. Frankly, I didn't find your qualifications all that great in comparison. I also believed that you had too much of an ax to grind against us for past indiscretions. However, you might just be the right one for this after all. As to who championed you- interestingly, our computers suggested you as one on a very short list. Two others, one of whom I think you know-or at least know of-picked you off it."

I gave him a wan smile as the storm continued to howl and pound all around them.

"Now I'll tell you the conditions under which I'll take your case," I said.

"Conditions? Consider your position, man! Have you lost your senses?"

"Some people think I never had them. You know that I've got high security Company blockers in my head. Any attempt to put me under a hypno or something like that and reprogram me or get at information would be very unpleasant for me. I'm sure you've had a monitor on me at least since we came inside, though. You know I'm not lying to you. I'll catch your murderer for you-or he'll catch me-but beyond the lie detector we don't go. No drugs, no programming, no funny techniques. The most I'll accept voluntarily is the same kind of blocking seals

on what I learn about you all as I have on the Company data. I don't tell them your secrets and I don't tell you theirs. Beyond that, I have free and unlimited access to any and all data that I need, any people, places, and the like I require, and absolute freedom of action. I will get all the cooperation I need or I'll quit. Either you trust me, within reason, to play as fair with you as I do with the Company, or it's impossible. My wife and child stay out of it and sacrosanct. Anybody touches them and that becomes my only concern and you can go to hell."

Voorhes sighed. "You ask too much trust from ones like us. They will never go for it."

"Then everything you did was in vain. You play with my mind and it'll blow up. You hook me on some new variety of drug and you blow any chance I'll have a clear head and the sort of conditions conducive to solving anything at all. You are a client, nothing more or less. As a client you are confidential from anyone including my other clients, and I'll take no case that treads on conflict of interest. Since I've mostly been designing and checking out security installations lately, that's not likely. I don't even care which one of you wins. The case stands alone. Either it's my way or you can either send me back and find one of your great detectives to take it or you can blow me away and do the same."

Voorhes thought a moment, then responded, "We considered this problem. There are a lot of good detectives, and, as you might imagine, some are on paper as qualified if not as experienced as you. We decided that the only way to insure our own security was to use someone with, oddly, a high moral sense—a strong conscience, if you will. That was what made the list so short. So far you have been sitting there saying, 'What a decent sort of chap this is. I simply can not reconcile this with the mad terrorists I know they are.' Well, I will not disappoint you. You will have your freedom, and your independence, but you will carry a burden with you. You have no idea how many or which worlds we either control or move freely in. If you take this case, and anything you learn of us gets to the Company—if anything goes wrong that results in a betrayal, whether your fault, our fault, or nobody's fault, an order will be given resulting in the obliteration of millions of innocent men, women, and children by nuclear devices or other means as we choose or that are convenient. The targets have been set up at random by our computers; even we don't know which ones are primed. But if we are betrayed, and you survive, we will make certain you get graphic evidence that we have carried out our threat."

I was appalled. "Now, wait a minute! I'll take responsibility for myself but you ask for things out of my hands!"

"That is the way it is, Horowitz. You must believe we will do what I said we will do. Those are the terms."

I shook my head. "Uh uh. I can't take on that kind of load no matter what. The Company's not stupid and you've drawn arrows pointing to me and mine that have drawn them like flies."

"You misunderstand, Horowitz," Voorhes said curtly. "If you refuse, then we shall not only eliminate you but put all our resources on eliminating your wife and child as well no matter where they might be. A small nuclear device in a suitcase many miles from your home would do it, and we can track them and wait. You have already taken the case. You did that when you showed up here in response to my invitation."

I reached inside my shirt pocket, pulled out a cigar and lighter, and lit the stogie, then sat back and sighed. The storm was already slacking off; it was damp and unpleasant, even clammy, but clearly the rain was stopping. Damn! I never figured on them being that slimy! I had no doubt that the sons of bitches would do just what they said, too.

Still, this was the greatest challenge I could ever face in my career, and maybe one too great. Billions of lives ... a whole world. That was one hell of a fee. And solving their damned mystery was only the start of the problem.

"All right, then maybe we should start," I said, feeling curiously distanced, almost a third party watching the affair. "Background first. Why you started this rebel organization, why you hate the Company so much, and how the

leadership came together. I want to know what binds you."

"That is easy," Voorhes replied softly. "We are all dead."

"Our home world was like most of the Type Zero worlds you know," Voorhes began.

"The history, particularly from the Middle Ages onward, was quite divergent, but that common thread gives you a general idea that our values, our cultures, weren't so alien as to be unrecognizable. The precise details are unimportant."

"You're all from the same origin world?" I asked him. That was new.

Voorhes nodded. "The Board and top leadership, yes. The vast hordes of others, no. Below us are hotheads, malcontents, revolutionaries, criminal types, and madmen-the usual sort you can always find in such a fight, and we had an extraordinarily large pool to choose from. The larger groups are from worlds we either control or have agreements with. That sort of thing. But it's our world that's at the heart of it. You see, we bred a lot of people who were just too damned clever and societies where it was simply too difficult for the Company to remain totally unobtrusive, as it likes, as well as many things the Company wanted or could use.

"At, any rate," he continued, "they-the Company-were discovered. Found out. They had the tables turned on them, so to speak, as our own people worked to discover all that we could about the alien invaders even as they were trying to find out everything about us and take us over. Enormous projects in more than one nation had been working on dimensional mathematics and interdimensional physics since a couple of brilliant theoreticians had come up with the math for them, and discovery of the Company and of the stations fed rather than confused or cowed us. Our leaders didn't run from it or dismiss it as unbelievable nonsense. No, the evidence was that we were being invaded by a parallel world. The natural thing was to try and figure out how to invade them in turn."

"Go ahead. I'm with you so far," I told him, fascinated in spite of myself.

"Well, you see, this was a case in which ignorance would have been better than a partial truth. We were like a planet in a solar system that for some reason could see nearer planets but could never see or imagine the millions and billions of stars. If invaded by aliens, they would assume the invasion was coming from one of the planets and they would build rockets to charge to the offense, never dreaming that these invading aliens came in starships and controlled a thousand million worlds. None of them ever dreamed that there was a Labyrinth. Oh, there might be an infinite number of parallel worlds, but one went through them one at a time. The concept of an almost random access network, an interdimensional railroad even, was inconceivable to them. And there was competition between nations as well for the potential prizes this alien civilization might hold. They played the game well. The Company was so arrogant and cock-sure of itself it didn't know what hit it. Agents were taken or killed, networks broken up, stations seized, in perfect coordination. Needless to say, it rang alarm bells everywhere."

I nodded. "A whole horde in control of stations with access to the Labyrinth.

Yeah, I can see the problem. And I assume it was on a key part of the main line so the Company couldn't switch them off into limbo without cutting itself off as well."

"Indeed. Oh, the Company actually had little problems securing the Labyrinth proper, but once our folks had the technology they found weak points the Company hadn't exploited or covered and began to punch through themselves. Cruder mechanisms, naturally, by far, but a musket ball kills as surely as a machine gun bullet. And we were learning fast. Never before had the Company faced a foe who understood pretty much what they were facing and who had sufficient knowledge and technological skills to build on what they discovered, and to analyze and use the technology they found. Worse, being on a main line they couldn't simply lock a switch onto a limbo line, as you called it, and let them stew. Besides, they might well begin analyzing the power grid and building their own switches. They panicked. The Company, the entire Board, panicked. Operations were disrupted for the foreseeable future, and that might have been enough, but they had the nightmarish feeling that the Visigoths were knocking on the very gates of Rome. They took a vote, and their Director of Security was ordered to

back flush that area of the line."

"Now you've lost me," I told him. "I was with you up to now." But, deep down, I thought I knew what the man was going to say, and it made things instantly clearer-and it made me sick to my stomach.

"First you purify the line between two switch points where the problem is. You sterilize it by storing tremendous energy in the power substations at each switch point and then, at a given signal, you feed that power back through all but one of the lines in the Labyrinth. It is two massive force fields, pure energy, coming at one another from opposite directions, disintegrating anything and everything within the cubes as they come. When they meet, the energy can go neither forward nor back if you've done your job right, so it goes in one massive surge to every station or weak point at the cube where they meet. When that happens there is an unavoidable additional surge from the central power core itself, suddenly liberated if only for a short while. The Labyrinth goes dark, but massive power rushes out until the power grid can be slowly brought back down to normal levels over a period of hours, even days. Otherwise it would melt the whole system. The energy release is sufficient to vaporize more than a third of the planetary surface, hurling up much of it in microscopic specks until it blankets the planet and darkens it for fifty to a hundred years. Everything not killed in the initial surge dies slowly and agonizingly in freezing cold thereafter."

Have you ever destroyed a whole world?

It's been done, but it takes a unanimous vote of the Board . . .

"Good God! There's nothing left?"

"Oh, some moss and lichens will survive, some microscopic spores, and probably a fair number of insects of the worst sort-cockroaches, that sort of thing. Some odd forms of sea life near volcanic vents that depend not at all on sunlight or warm water. But major life-human, plant, animal- that's gone. Every one and every thing. Worse than an atomic holocaust, if you can imagine that. The people, the culture, the books, the plays, the great works of art and architecture, the work of a millennia of intellectuals. All gone forever. There was never even a threat, let alone an attempt at negotiation or compromise. Not even a demand for unconditional surrender. They panicked and they did it and they didn't even lose any sleep over it. It was just one world, nothing important, peopled with inferior human beings."

"I think I can guess who the security chief who carried it out was," I said, horrified.

"Yes. Mukasa Lamdukur. Not then on the Board -he was far too young for that. Not the man who voted to order it, although he certainly would have done so, but the man assigned to actually do it. Even then he was a schemer, consumed with ambition and a lust for power. He had already been gathering data on the old abandoned switch points from the past, and checking them out, then erasing them from the security data banks. He had the highest code-after all, he was born to the position, as it were, and they trust blood over anything else every time. Having found places to hide them, he now needed an army-an organization that could not be traced by conventional Company means. People who hated the Company so much they could never be swayed by it."

"Now you've lost me," I told him. "If your people were between your world and the Company's holdings, and if there was no negotiations, then where did you all come from?"

"We were already here. The Company works as much as possible through locals. You know that. You're a part of a local organization. Not only do locals know the territory but they are inconspicuous and you get your pick of the best talent. We had been recruited from our various nations and jobs before our countries turned the tables; we'd been brought to other worlds, even the Company world, to be trained in the new technology, the new economics, and become the Company on our world. We weren't the first by any means, just the last. We were cut off when the breakthrough occurred, and, quite naturally, Lamdukur ordered us arrested, rounded up, and if he'd been true to his orders he would have liquidated us all, since we were all potential threats to Company officialdom. He didn't, though. Instead, we were officially killed-the weakness he exploited

most in that huge organization is the belief that whatever the computer tells you is true-and our records erased. We were taken to one of the hideaway worlds, outfitted with new security transponders that can be reprogrammed with almost any code once you have it, and set up as a rebel organization. Oh, he gave a stirring, tearful speech to us, I tell you."

"Uh huh. I bet. Like he did everything to stop it but those bastards on the Board just did it coldly, and he was morally repulsed by it and that he was the only means of eventually revenging yourself on the Company and so forth. I can imagine."

"The speech, yes. The effect on us, I doubt. Some of us couldn't take it. They went mad, or refused to believe that our world wasn't still out there someplace, or they killed themselves. The rest of us-we believed it. We knew the location. Most of us had husbands, wives, children back there, or at least brothers and sisters, parents, relatives, close friends. The loss was deeply personal, but it was more than that. We had no home, no roots, no reality any more. There suddenly was no future for us anywhere, nothing to live for- except revenge. Our hatred and our revenge fueled us, Horowitz, and still does. If I truly believed in a metaphysical Hell of eternal torment I would willingly consign myself there for eternity if I could murder this Company. But I-we-are already in Hell. We have been in Hell for a very long time now. It is always with us. It never goes away. We took what Lamdukur gave us and took advantage of the security freedoms we had and we set up shop to discover how we could murder the Company. We made a blood pact that we would never waver, and, so far, none of us have."

"Needless to say, you included Mukasa in your murder plans as well, but he was too culturally blind-sided to realize it. He thought you bought the package."

"Yes. The Company has many weaknesses, and its culture is the worst of them when properly understood. But, you see, we rejected tit for tat revenge. For one thing, destroying the Company world meant seizing control of the full Labyrinth, and not even Lamdukur could manage that without being caught. We finally decided we didn't want to destroy them-we wanted them in Hell. All of them. And for as long as possible."

"That's where your drug came in. Infect the Board and then they have to follow your orders because you have the supply. Use the Board to infect the top levels of society. Use them to infect the entire golden race of the Company, and then you have made them into a race of abject, addicted slaves."

"That was the gist of it, yes," Voorhes admitted. "It was quite a clever plan, too. You must grant us that. Particularly when we were able to turn Ioyeo into our willing and fanatical agent. Some of us may seem to be rather romantic figures-present company excepted. It wasn't difficult to engineer an affair, have it turn serious, and then convey our own loss and torment. We took her home and showed her what the Company had done. We showed her countless other examples of the cruelty and horror what you call G.O.D., Inc. had inflicted and continued to inflict; how many billions of lives it had so casually enslaved or snuffed out. His courier became our carrier, and he would become the first victim of his own plot. It was delicious."

I thought about Brandy and her torment with the drug. "Not if you're on the receiving end of things. You nearly destroyed my wife, not to mention quite literally blowing some of my brains out. Fortunately not the ones I used most, but I remember."

Voorhes shrugged. "You must understand that this is not merely revenge, it's a mission. The Company now controls or exploits thousands of worlds. There are hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions left to go. One by one they will be corrupted and made colonial possessions or they will be destroyed. How many lives is that, Horowitz? It must end, no matter what the cost, for the sake of those who have yet to feel the yoke. If the cost is you, or your family, or five whole worlds, or fifty, it must be done for the sake of the others. We alone can do it."

I didn't exactly go along with that greater good thesis, but I now understood what drove them, and why it wouldn't matter if I voiced my concerns. They were not going to be talked out of that by me or anyone else, not now, and they were

by now hardened fanatics, able to rationalize anything at all to attain their ends.

Just like the Company.

"And now you say you're close to your goal," I noted. "A different way."

"That need not concern you. What our plans are now is not something you want to know if you ever hope to live out a normal life."

"What you are planning may or may not be relevant to the case. I'll have to decide that later. If I have a need to know, then I'll have to know. The important point right now is that you feel you are close to your goal. How close? Weeks? Months? Years?"

Voorhes shrugged. "I'd rather not answer that, but a bit longer than months, certainly. Let's just say that it won't be next month but it might well be next year."

I nodded. "That will do. And how long have you known the rough completion time? That is, about how long ago did you determine you were going to be able to do it and within a specified time frame?"

The rebel frowned. "I don't understand your logic here."

"Bear with me."

He sighed. "All right-just a few weeks ago."

"How many weeks?"

Voorhes shrugged. "I don't know. Three, I guess. The last full Committee meeting at which the report was read to all of us was a bit under three weeks ago, Company time. I fail to see where this is leading."

"And when did your murder occur?"

"Ten days ago. At first we didn't think it was a murder or we would have acted sooner. You'll see why when you hear the details. Once our people established that it was murder, we've clamped down our own security and retreated to our secure areas whenever possible. That is one reason why we are here. The switch you came through will automatically operate only for me. Anyone else coming in, or going out, would have to be switched here manually, as you were. That is why I feel secure here."

I nodded. "But not everybody can afford to stay holed up. That's why you want this thing cleared up, isn't it? You've got the end in sight and you're all in your holes because you don't know if you're going to live to see it otherwise. It's limiting your effectiveness and increasing your paranoia."

Voorhes nodded sadly. "Yes. Indeed, that is why we finally decided we needed to get someone in to clear it up. Right now we don't even trust each other enough to go face to face. We don't even know where half the Board is, and they're keeping it that way, communicating through secure channels only. We can't even test one another. It's very frustrating."

"How many members are on your board, or committee, or whatever you call it?"

"Nine. At least, there were nine. We're now left with eight. No real replacements, either. The years have taken their toll. We eight are the last survivors of our world."

"Uh huh. What makes you think your victim wasn't just another casualty, though?"

"The murder site. Pandross-that was his name -was our own security wizard. He rarely ventured out of his lair, and that lair was so well protected that only members of the Committee itself could enter-and even then only with Pandross's personal added security code if he wasn't in the Security Center himself. We wanted no Mukasas in our organization, and no doctored records."

"All right. I'll have to take a good look at his security system, which I assume you've changed, to make absolutely sure, but for now I'll take your word for it that only one of the eight could enter. There's no such thing as an absolutely secure system-I design them myself. It is possible that somebody outside of your Committee broke it, which would make somebody like Pandross, who was usually there if what you say is true, and almost always alone and feeling very safe and secure, the easiest mark of the entire Committee. What was the murder weapon?"

"It appeared that he had a stroke in his office. It can happen to any of us, so at first we merely mourned. But Pandross himself instituted a set of very rigid procedures, particularly when one of us died, and he was subjected to an exacting computerized autopsy and analysis. It clearly showed evidence of a

nerve-based paralysis hold, one of the martial arts things, that would have rendered him either unconscious or unable to move. With that, we then discovered a fresh puncture wound in the left leg, such as a syringe might make. There was a tiny bruise that we could not see because it was on a dark patch of skin. Whoever did this had planned things thoroughly. There was nothing in the blood stream, but it might well have been something that broke down, or a natural substance, or even a set of air bubbles. We often forget how fragile we really are."

I nodded. "Well, I'm already inclined to accept your theory that one of you did it, just from what you said. Anyone who got in there would almost certainly be someone he knew and trusted. Anyone who could get that close to him and use that paralytic hold wouldn't be someone who overpowered him--there'd be signs of a struggle and other bruises and the like. He knew his assailant and trusted him or her enough to turn his back on them. The killer also knew him. You take targets of opportunity with the needle method. The killer knew of the dark patch and that it would conceal, buying him or her precious time before the autopsy found it and also probably insuring that the murder scene was cleaned up and precious evidence tossed out with the trash. The killer also knew the security room and its procedures, because obviously the goings-on there would have to be erased from the inevitable monitors, as well as the log in and out both of the security center and the world it occupied."

"We all knew how to operate the security apparatus," Voorhes told me. "We had to. We couldn't depend on him for everything, nor on his continued health and well-being. It was personal pass-coded, though--implant I.D., handprint, retinal[^] and a coded password which we individually selected and which only we knew. There's no chance of a duplicate being slipped in. You could not access the security records without all of that, including the password."

"There's always ways, but I tend to agree. You are bound together by years of common struggle, a common heritage, and common goals. Even somebody as good as your boy wouldn't safeguard against the eight of you. If he couldn't trust you, then all was lost anyway. I assume you checked on where all eight of you were during that period?"

"Naturally. All of us have ironclad alibis, but, of course, with our command of the system they are as ironclad as tissue."

"Uh huh. Method, opportunity, and motive are the three essentials to solving one like this. We know the method, and that intrigues me. Whoever hit my place had people there with a knowledge of those paralyzing judo type holds."

Voorhes shrugged. "We all do. I doubt if a one of us would claim we could do it effortlessly and confidently, as the killer must have had to do, but any of us could have sufficient surreptitious practice to feel confident enough to do it. None of the Committee was directly involved in your operation, though. It was too likely that all involved would have to be trapped in your world for quite some time and none of us was willing to take that chance."

"Then who was that whispery-voiced character Brandy heard who was obviously in charge? I heard it on my tapes."

Voorhes looked surprised. "Damned if I know. I know of no one on that operation whose voice could be characterized that way. I'd like to hear that recording myself sometime."

"If you let me get back, I'll see that you get a copy. All of you. Not because I want him, although I admit to having foul thoughts in that direction, but because I think it's important that you can't identify him off the bat. If he wasn't at the top he had to be working for somebody who was, and very close to the top himself. Find him and we may find your killer."

I yawned. While it was mid-afternoon here, it was well past midnight for me now.

"I'm going to have to get some rest before I can do anything more. The only way I'm going to have real freedom is to indicate to the Company that I'm on to something. It'll be up to you to provide me with just enough expendable information to keep them feeding me rope, so we won't have squads out looking for me. Also, I'm going to need someplace secure as an office area. You provide the place, I'll make it secure. I think this is going to be, overall, a very

interesting case ..."

Voorhes just gave me an odd smile and said nothing in reply.

5.
Rounding Up the Usual Suspects

I was dead tired, but I had trouble sleeping that night. It was neither the heat nor humidity nor the strangeness of the surroundings, but more my own situation that bothered me. I had expected that they wanted me for some reason; I hadn't expected a murder, and I certainly hadn't expected the way they trapped me with a moral dilemma. I had no doubt at all that they would in fact nuke some major city or precipitate a major war just to get at me, and they were dead on that I would never accept the responsibility for that.

I was also keenly aware of a double mission here, at least, and a sort of personal ethical problem. Once I solved their problem-if I could- they would hardly let me go with a pat on the head. On purely pragmatic grounds, once I solved it I was dead meat. I couldn't really stall on it, though; they'd have people and monitors all over me and I knew it. If I solved it, I was dead. If I didn't solve it, they would eventually lose patience and, well, same result. As important was whether or not I could solve the other mystery of how they expected, within a year, to destroy the Company and shut down the Labyrinth. The coincidence of the murder of their security chief just after the report, and, I assumed, the go-ahead vote, on that was too big to ignore. Somebody, at least one of them, didn't agree with that decision and that action. Eliminating the nerve center first, the man who would be most likely to be able to catch them, was the obvious move of somebody in that case. Pandross knew them all, personally and intimately, for many years, and with his personal involvement and his computers and monitors he would have been the most likely man to finger an opponent, particularly one ready to kill one or more of their own. There was every possibility that he smelled something and actually invited his killer up to talk about it, secure in his lair. The mere invitation would make it a "him or me" situation, and would have precipitated the murder. That was a very interesting idea.

O.K., sure, it might have been something petty, some long-standing grudge, some romantic triangle, any of the usual motives, but I leaned towards the vote and the murder as just too close to separate. Voorhes hadn't been wrong about the seductiveness of power, even in a rebel opposition. It would be interesting to know which of the nine had spoken out against the plan, if any, even in a devil's advocate role.

I finally did manage some sleep, and when I awakened it was to the smell of good things cooking and strong coffee. I pulled on my wrinkled clothes as best I could and wandered out into the house itself.

I expected to see Voorhes or perhaps the native girls in the rather primitive kitchen, and was very surprised to see a young woman as out of place here as I or Voorhes there instead. She was clad in a very scanty string bikini over which she'd draped a full apron to protect her from the spattering.

She was tall, lean, and dark-complected, with jet-black hair cut very short in a man's style, and her features were kind of hard to figure. Sort of a South American United Nations, although it went together quite well. Brazilian, perhaps, or from someplace where Brazil didn't exist but the same racial mix had created a rather attractive new race that was equal parts European, black, and Indian.

She turned to me and smiled for a moment, then went back to her cooking. It was hot as hell in the kitchen and I couldn't stand it for long and didn't know how she could, even dressed like that.

"Hello," she said to me. "I am Maria. Senhor Voorhes is in the station now but will be back any minute. Please go into the living room or out on the porch. It will be cooler to eat out there."

Portuguese accent, certainly, but a nice command of English. I shrugged, then

asked, "What do they use for a bathroom in this place?"

"Outhouse out back," she told me. "Use the water pitcher and bowl in the bedroom for freshening up. The outhouse, it stinks terribly, so you will spend no more time in there than you must."

Well, I must, so I went out, walked around, found it, and found that if anything she'd flattered it. The insects around that thing were just enormous, and once inside the smell was enough to make you want to throw up. I was very happy I had to go before I'd eaten any breakfast; the question was whether or not I would be able to eat after relieving myself.

I made it out and got away fast, then took many deep breaths just to get the stench out as best I could, and went back up to the house. I hadn't even paid any attention to the pitcher and bowl; now I saw it did indeed have tepid water in it and there was a washcloth, small towel, and a few minimal toiletries on a small shelf underneath. I used them as best I could, trying to make myself as presentable as possible, then went back out and onto the porch. The freshening had done wonders; I was starting to be able to feel hungry again.

Out on the porch, Maria or somebody had set a table that looked quite nice.

Netting had been lowered giving us some imperfect protection from the insects, and the table was actually set with china, real silver, ceramic cups, and some kind of flower in water in the center. There was a pitcher of some sort of juice already out that felt cold, and I poured some and sipped, then drank heavily of it. I didn't recognize the fruit, but it was sweet and it tasted really good.

Even so, I was beginning to realize just how spoiled and civilized I'd become in these past few years. I hadn't had nightmares of my position or responsibility during the night, but I had dreamed again and again of air conditioning.

I sat back and looked at the river and was surprised to hear a motorboat. I turned and saw it—pretty traditional rowboat with an outboard motor attached coming slowly up river towards the dock. Voorhes was the only occupant. This morning he was dressed in khaki shirt and shorts and wore one of those silly-looking hard bush hats.

He pulled up to the dock, cut the motor, jumped up onto the dock and tied off the boat to a stake embedded in the stone. Then he came up to the porch, unzipped the netting, and stepped inside.

"Good morning!" he said pleasantly. "I trust you slept well."

"I slept lousy. Hotter than hell with humidity matching the temperature and almost no breeze has never been one of my favorite conditions. Remember, I was in snow yesterday."

The rebel shrugged. "Well, each to his own. You've met Maria?"

"Only briefly. She's not local."

"No, she came in earlier this morning. You will get to know her quite well from now on. She's quite bright and quite useful in a number of capacities, and she will do anything at all that you say."

Sam's eyebrows rose. "Anything?"

"Yes," Voorhes responded, nodding. "Obedience, within a pecking order, is the norm for everyone in the society in which she was born and raised. You are, quite naturally, at the bottom of her particular pecking queue, just over her, but so long as you don't ask her to violate or attempt to overrule orders from above, she'll do just about anything. Don't mistake her for some roboticized or lobotomized individual, though. It's the way her people are. You will find her invaluable and talented."

"Yeah, I'll bet," I said sourly. "And she'll report every word I say and every move I make back to everybody else, so our murderer can know every move I make almost when I make it, know my plans, have access to my records and thoughts, and take whatever steps are needed to thwart me at every turn. Thanks a lot, Voorhes. And if I have to cross paths with the Company, how in hell am I going to explain her?"

"Well, you didn't expect us to let you just run loose with everything you might know, did you? I admit that it hobbles you a bit, but not as much as you think. For one thing, she has been told to report only certain kinds of things back to us, relating to areas of particular concern to us. Those things relating specifically to your investigation aren't among them. As for the Company, she's

carrying the transponder code of another young lady who is a licensed Company courier and she can get in and out of places rather easily and without arousing any suspicion. She already has with no trouble. The Company bureaucracy is like all bureaucracies; they'll take your word for it that she came as the result of a request for aid in light of your wife's condition and the need to have someone remain with your child. As for the unforeseen-well, you have some expertise in telling a convincing story. Ah-here she is, now!"

Maria came out bearing a large tray that contained a pitcher of coffee, real cream and brown sugar, and several bowls filled with various things from diced fresh fruit to some sort of egg and rice dish, sweet breads, and other things. She was no longer wearing the apron and was more in a state of undress than dress in spite of being barely modest.

She poured and served and then took her own seat.

"I hope you have more of a wardrobe than I have," I commented.

She laughed. "I have a small suitcase. Not too much, nothing cold weather, but more than this. If this disturbs you I can go change."

"No, no! That's fine for now. But I'm told you're going to be coming with me on this little adventure, and you'd certainly attract a lot of attention and probably catch your death if that's all you had to wear."

"Maria will also be your guide," Voorhes told me. "She knows the whats and wheres of our organization-and the no-nos as far as you are concerned-and this will allow us to minimize organizational contact until you want it and have something to tell us."

I nodded. "I assume you're not one of the big shots," I said to her. "For one thing, I'd think you'd be too young."

"I am a Drone Class D-4 out of Iquitos Control," she responded as if she was giving her college address in Iowa or something. "I am assigned to Alliance work. I am twenty-three."

A mere child, I thought, but said, "Drone. Sounds like you're a bee or something."

She didn't take it wrongly. "Our society is based on the efficiencies of the insect model," she told me. "I have seen many of your other societies and I find them anarchistic or immoral, every one. I do not understand how any of you can live that way. So much emotional outbursts, antisocial behavior, poverty, disease, filth ... I don't know how people can live like that, or why they would tolerate it."

Good lord! They've assigned me a female Mister Spock! I thought, amazed. Either that or a refugee from Orwell. I made a note to find out more about her society when I could, but not to press it now. At least, for somebody who was supposed to be totally obedient, she sure as hell was outspoken and disrespectful. I liked that much, anyway.

"Well, all right," I sighed. "I guess there's no avoiding it. But, Voorhes, if her presence is the thing that alerts the Company and makes it all go bad, I won't be responsible or feel responsible. I neither need nor want her-nothing personal, my dear."

Voorhes shrugged. "Perhaps. This is an awkward situation for all of us, Horowitz. The sooner it is resolved, the less chance there is of something going wrong." He paused a moment. "We will arrange for you to have a wardrobe sufficient for your needs by later today. Are you ready to begin?"

I nodded. "If it's riot too far, we might as well start with Pandross's place and let me look at the security system. The evidence will be long gone but you'd be surprised what you can tell just by being on the scene, and if that system is in any way similar to what I know or understand, then there might be things you overlooked."

"Done. Maria will handle that for you, and I will set up a working place for you to customize, although I suspect that if Pandross couldn't safeguard himself I don't see how you can, and that is always a danger."

"Pandross wasn't guarding himself from his friends, but rather the records from everybody but his friends. Still, I don't deny that when I get close I might well be a target. All I can do is try and make sure that anybody who nails me

will get nailed. This is the damndest situation any detective has ever been placed in, you know. The murderer knows everything about me, all my weak points and vulnerabilities, and I don't even have a list of suspects."

"You want them?"

"Only when I am secure," I told the rebel leader. "Have all the records, all the interrogations, everything done up to now available to me. I also want the personal backgrounds of everybody, and if you can get each other to give a general critique of the other eight and even Pandross it will help as well. I need to get filled in very fast here. And don't forget to include yourself in that stack."

Voorhes looked stung. "Why, I wouldn't have it any other way. Nor, of course, would my colleagues."

"Uh huh. And, Voorhes?"

"Yes?"

"I want to know if anybody at that meeting was opposed to your new master plan. Anybody. Even if they got talked into it and later voted for it."

"You harp on that. Are you really certain that the timing was more than a coincidence?"

"No," I admitted, "but right now it's the only motive I've got. Any chance of me getting back home at some point, by the way? There are things I'd like to pick up."

Voorhes smiled and shook his head. "Mister Horowitz, do we look like fools? To put you back on your own turf might seal our death warrant and the end of all our dreams. No, Horowitz—for the duration, that is the one spot and the one branch that is totally off limits. Maria here has firm orders to kill you if you so much as try it."

The pretty young woman gave me such a sweet smile at that.

Maria's normal clothing was practical if a bit unflattering, consisting of a light blue cotton pullover shirt and pants and a pair of fairly heavy halfboots. Apparently the boots were made for mud or construction work but as she was told it might be cold in spots she'd decided they would do for that. I wondered if she really appreciated what kind of cold she might find. She wouldn't last ten minutes back home this time of year, and who knew what season or climate it might be where we might have to go?

Pandross's security redoubt wasn't all that far, and I began to suspect that most of these old and abandoned lines and spurs were very close to the Company world. It made sense; they were built when competing companies started out and abandoned as they consolidated into one monolithic corporate and social structure. It was quite natural that they would be building lines all over the place near where it all started, and that there would be few or none much further up the line.

Still, the site of the unfortunate Pandross's murder was even more impenetrable than I had thought. For one thing, it wasn't inside one of the alternate worlds at all but inside a modified and enlarged abandoned switching station on another of those spur lines. They had, of course, changed all the security procedures and did not tell me what they were, but they preserved all of Pandross's old programs and left his devices in place. They said it was in case some investigator like myself might find them useful, but I suspected that they just didn't know how to get rid of them. Break for me, anyway.

I spent a great deal of time examining the whole setup and control center. It was an antique station, and I could never have figured out the esoteric controls and the wall of antiquated switches and gages and the like there, but the superimposed security system was state of the art, the data computers well concealed. I didn't bother with them right now; I'd need somebody they'd talk to in order to get much out of them. By the time I finished with the security network itself, though, I was convinced. Nobody but someone authorized to enter the station could have gotten here, and there was no way in the world that this point could even be accessed, let alone penetrated, without the operator inside knowing about it.

Pandross had sat in his controller's chair, allowed the killer entrance, watched them come in, then probably talked with them for several minutes. More

significantly, from the pictures there of the body and its placement, he'd gotten up and turned his back on his visitor, apparently to get some coffee or something else from the small kitchenette off to one side. The killer had used that to come up behind him, grasp him by the shoulders, and work the paralytic move. The rest was easy.

I had Maria essentially duplicate all the moves, with myself as Pandross, and up to the moment of the behind-the-back attack it all worked. She could not, however, work the move on me. Try as she might, she couldn't get the sort of grip on me to apply the proper pressure to the proper nerves.

"It is not possible," she told me after several tries.

"Sure it is," I replied. "It just means that the killer had to be taller than he was by, oh, three inches or more."

"But the body was clearly moved. Why could it not have been done with him sitting in the chair? It has wheels on it, after all."

"Uh uh. For one thing, it would be under the glare of the active security monitors there and would have caused the computer to emit alarms and lock itself down. It wouldn't have prevented the murder but then the murderer wouldn't have been able to have access to the data banks to erase the record. The point there, give or take a couple of feet, in the kitchenette area, is the only spot where the monitors wouldn't pick anything up. You set your traps where the loot is. At the controls to the station, as you see, and at the computer access stations there. But not even a total paranoid puts heavy security on his refrigerator or his coffee maker, particularly when you'd be seen getting to and from. That was his blind spot and the killer knew it. But he didn't die because he forgot to put a guard on the ham sandwiches. He died because this whole place was designed to keep out or prevent access to any but nine individuals. It was never designed to protect him from them."

"But he was Security. He would have operatives in and out of here all the time. Why must it be one of the others?"

"Because they had full access to the computer and knew its esoteric ins and outs and just how to make it dance. In this business you don't give away all your secrets to anybody, since you can never be a hundred percent sure of your operatives. That's why he hardly batted an eyelash when they showed up to use the computer for something or other as they might occasionally do. Even if you had gotten to one of them, reprogrammed them, or switched them for a double, they still couldn't work the computer itself. The data was safe and secure--except from the Committee. Let's see--Pandross was a hundred and seventy-seven centimeters tall . . . about five ten. I'd say that's about the same height as Voorhes, so while he's not off the hook it drops him down a notch. Some nice heeled boots would do it for him, though. We're looking for someone who's over six feet tall, at least wearing shoes or boots that wouldn't look unusual. It's going to be very interesting to see just how tall the other members of the Committee are."

She stared at me. "You enjoy this. You understand it so well. You must have many murders where you come from."

I shrugged. "And your people have none?"

"Crime is impossible in our society. Not unthinkable, I will admit, but impossible. We do not even have a word for murder in our language."

"Sounds boring. Still, I don't want you to get the wrong impression off the bat. There's clearly a vast cultural gulf between us. Now, let's see . . . How best to explain this?" I thought a moment. "Do you have fires in your world? Things catch on fire and firemen come to put the fire out?"

"Yes, of course we do," she responded in a patronizing tone.

"Do the firemen like what they do?"

"They take pride in it, yes. We all take pride in our functions."

I nodded. "Uh huh. And without fires they have no function. People who are very good at firefighting love their work. In effect, they love fires. They wouldn't start one, and they are horrified at the losses just as we are, but if there is a fire around, particularly a big one, then that's where they want to be. The excitement, the pressure, the physical and mental challenges it represents-- they

are alive when there is a fire, even though fires are bad things."

"Well, yes, but. . ."

"No buts. Now, I don't like murders and I don't like dangerous puzzles to solve. I'm particularly unhappy with working with a gun to my head and one hand tied behind me as I am now. Still, if there is a crime, if there is a puzzle to be solved, evil to be unmasked, then I want to be in on it. I want to solve it. It's what I do. It's my-function. Very few people love their jobs, Maria, but some of us have talents others do not, and when those talented people have jobs perfect for those talents, they love their work. I love my work. It's what I've always dreamed of doing."

She accepted it, but didn't seem to understand it clearly.

"What about your world? How can you be human and there be no crime?"

"The human mind is animal," she explained, reciting the rationale just as it was drilled into her. "It must be controlled or it will cause destruction and misery. In my world there is absolute equality. We are born to the State and raised by it. We own nothing ourselves and everything in common. We serve the common good. We learn and are tested and our best function is determined and then we are schooled and trained for it. Then you enter the function at the lowest level. If you excel, you are promoted."

"Uh huh. Sounds fairly ordinary for certain kinds of societies. I assume with each level up you get more responsibility and more creature comforts-privileges, a bigger apartment, that kind of thing."

"Yes, that is so."

"And what about the fellow whose function is to mow the lawn or wash the dishes?"

"The same. There are the same number of levels for each function, and the privileges are the same for each level."

"Interesting. And what about social life? Families, babies, that kind of thing?"

"Eggs and sperm are taken and classified and stored," she said matter-of-factly.

"Then when particular functions are required the adjustment is made genetically, there is a match, and a child is produced. We do not have families, and we, ourselves, are sterile. Families are irrelevant in a proper society."

"What about sex?"

"If you would like it, I will provide it. It is a proper way of flushing the animal urges from the system."

"No, no!" I was startled. By god, she would do it and right here if I asked her!

"Just curious. But you have no jealousy, no theft, no crimes of passion?" Even Marx, if memory served, said we'd never get rid of crimes of passion.

"One owns nothing so there can be no theft. All at the same level have the same things. One attains them by perfection in mind, body, and function. Exclusivity in cohabitation or relations is forbidden. In any event, jealousy implies the ownership of another, and we find that repulsive."

"And nobody ever beats the system, or tries to?"

"It is impossible," she replied, not ruefully, just matter-of-fact. "We must regularly go and account for all of our actions, our thoughts, our deeds, in the Confessional. When we are born we are born with a dependency, and the substance one must take is unique to the individual. The Confessor alone controls what we require. We meet regularly with our Confessor and we also attend self-criticism sessions. It is impossible to hold anything back without anyone knowing that you do, and if you do you do not get what you need to survive. There is no way around it-the pain is too great. No one can withstand it, so no one holds back when absolute confession can end it. After a while you understand that any urges against the system are crimes against society and you purge yourself completely of such things. Until one thinks only correct thoughts without deviation one can not be a whole member of society."

Holy shit! I thought. Now there's the perfect totalitarianism. Drug-dependent slavery for an entire civilization! Not even the worst of our society could have dreamed of such absolute control.

"How often do you need this stuff?" I asked her. "And, more important, when's the next time?"

"I must report within five days," she told me. "They always decide the

interval."

"To whom and how?"

"I am not permitted to tell you that. However, I should tell you that I have been modified so that a certain pain threshold will kill me before I can tell anything."

Yeah, I thought sourly. And even if you grew real fond of me you 'd still kill me in an instant for your fix if so ordered. They weren't taking any chances on any kind of bond forming that would get in the way of her orders. But aloud I said, "Well, look sharp. We've learned all we can here for now. You are armed?"

"Yes. I am trained as a bodyguard among other things. I am well versed in every means of defensive combat. Why do you ask?"

"Because we're going to be going to some pretty rough worlds, I suspect, and meet some even rougher people, and I don't want anybody putting a slug in me or pinching my nerves or giving me a needle."

"My primary function is to see that you carry out yours. Do not worry."

Worry was one thing I had plenty of, though.

"All right, look sharp. I'm sure I haven't noticed anything here they didn't already know, but you never can be sure about a pre-emptive strike. I've been ambushed in the Labyrinth before, and part of my head had to be regrown. I don't want to have to go through that again."

"Where are we going?"

"You are gonna use whatever communications you have and find out where they suggest we go for an office, and then we're going there, and then I'll have a whole shopping list of stuff to get and a lot of work to do to feel safe there. By the time we're done with that, Voorhes or whoever should have our suspect list and just exactly what I need. C'mon, Amazon Princess. We got work to do." Having a Girl Friday plugged into the rebel system was handy from my point of view, I admit, in that all I had to do was ask for something or complain about something and she saw that something was done about it. A combination secretary and bodyguard was a very handy accessory for any private eye. Only trouble was, she was not just my assistant but my jailer, too, making sure I didn't try anything funny or sneak funny messages back or in any way bypass this underground system they had. And with that nice little drug variation and her "confessional," we not only weren't about to get too close, but I had the uneasy feeling that, should I solve this thing or should they tire of me, her last job in this assignment was to polish me off no matter what.

It made for a less than cozy arrangement. Still, if I did solve the damned thing, I would be the one to pick the time and place to tell her and anyone else about it-and no matter how competent she was, I was pretty damned sure she wasn't immortal. Well, I'd have to cross that bridge later. It remained to be seen whether I could in fact help them. It was sure and certain that no matter what else happened their patience with me would be limited. I didn't know what kind of clock was running, but there certainly was one.

In another curious way, it freed me. I didn't have to worry about whether or not I should ask such-and-so a question, or if it was safe for me to find out this or that. Knowing it didn't matter, and knowing that they knew, too, and knew that I knew-if that makes sense-gave me a certain uninhibited detachment.

The place they found for me was another of those old, abandoned switching rooms, and it was fairly comfortable if a bit cozy. This one had only one large room and most of the furnishings had been cleared out long ago, giving it the look of an abandoned floor in some office building where once they had a bank or a lot of cubicles. The thing was set on automatic to open for me and Maria; neither one of us could trigger it alone, although if one of us were inside the other could come and go. I quickly discovered that the other one was just Maria; I wasn't allowed out alone, and if she was out then I was stuck inside.

There was an override, of course, but of the eight survivors it took at least three of them for the gate to open automatically and for them to enter or leave. It was a neat trick; it meant that no one or even two of them could show up unannounced and do unto me what they did to the previous security chief.

Getting the place in shape also wasn't much of a problem. With Maria's help, we

picked up from mysterious crews that asked no questions a bundle of things, including a laundry list of stuff I demanded-including, of course, real laundry. It was pretty practical, basic stuff but it fit me, showing they'd done their homework. Dirty stuff just got thrown in a box and stuck outside; somebody seemed to pick it up and drop it back clean with a speed and efficiency I wished my own laundry had.

While Maria got the place clean and livable, I worked with the two crates of security gear I had requested. To be truthful, I needed maybe a tenth of what I'd ordered and some of the stuff I ordered I knew only because I'd seen it somewhere and knew it would be logical in a security apparatus. I just didn't want any of them to take a look at my tools and deduce my exact security setup from my parts list. This way they'd be guessing, and they could never be sure they had it all or that something hidden someplace wasn't gonna come out and bite them.

We also got two reasonable if not great cots with bedding, a porta-john (in which I stuck some really fine looking electronic gear that blinked and occasionally buzzed but otherwise did nothing-I had fun just thinking of anybody trying to go to the John in there, though, Maria included), a portable kitchen unit with water tank, some decent food and drink, and all the comforts of high-class camping. I also got a desk, a set of normal office supplies, and a Series 16000 Company terminal plugged into their network, not the Company's, although I discovered we had a lot of databases in common. It wasn't until I went to work on that sucker that I realized just how much the Company had been compromised.

Still, that one wide open room meant that Maria and I were gonna get to know each other real well.

And then, as promised, came the files on the eight remaining suspects, along with a wall viewer and data files that interfaced to the 16000, which was set up for interactive voice communications and could answer my questions within the limits of its knowledge. With that, we could settle in and see just who and what we might be dealing with.

The first guy was Quin Tarn, but he was no Irishman. He was Asiatic, built like a pro wrestler, a martial arts expert and a fellow who trained every day by smashing granite with his hands and feet. He wasn't exactly the kind of guy I wanted to meet or know, and I wasn't the least curious about whether he was bald for real or shaved every day nor how he could move his massive head without a neck. The martial arts bit alone put him high on the immediate list, but the fact that he was only five six in spite of his weight and bulk lowered him a bit. Somehow I couldn't see this guy in high heels, not even boots.

"Do you have a voice sample?" I asked the computer. "If so, play it and also play one for each subsequent subject as they come up."

"Complying," the computer responded. It had a voice like an insufferable British snob and I already disliked it.

Tarn's image went into motion, and he was clearly talking to someone out of "camera" (or whatever they used) range. "No tai quart su yang," he said, or something like that.

"Nothing in English?" I asked the computer.

"He is not on record as speaking English," the computer responded. "However, it is fairly easy to hypno-teach any language necessary."

I nodded. "Can you synthesize the voice, then?" I asked it. "Use all the elements of speech patterns to create an English sentence he might utter?" I had already disqualified the guy as Gravel Voice, but that only excluded one mystery.

"Complying."

Tarn's image moved, although now it looked like a very badly dubbed Italian movie, the words having no resemblance to what his lips were doing and, for that matter, no relation to what he was doing, either.

"The quick brown fox jumped over the lazy blue dog!" he said forcefully.

Oh, well. His high tenor alone told me why he probably had built up all those muscles and had that look about him. He had an odd, high voice, but nobody, and I mean nobody, was gonna laugh at somebody who looked like that.

"Was Tarn in favor of the project to destroy the Company from the start, and without reservation?" I asked the computer.

"He argued neither for nor against nor took any part in any debate," the computer responded. "All he did was vote for it when the vote was called." I nodded. O.K., that said something.

"Who did he lose, if anybody, when his world blew?"

"Two wives and six children, youngest three, oldest thirteen," the computer told me.

My god! I thought, reflecting on my own feelings when Dash had been kidnapped. No wonder they are so callous about everybody else! If they'd murdered Dash, I would have been out only for their hides and I'd live for it. It put some perspective on them, anyway.

"What was his profession?"

"Mineralogist," the computer replied. "Specifically an expert in precious gems." O.K., that fit. Big jewels were a very common trading item and very useful no matter what world you were in if you wanted to set things up from scratch, and I'd seen places on the Company world where even the doors were so jewel-encrusted they'd be enough to retire for forty lifetimes if you could have heisted them. A guy like Tarn would be very useful when setting up and financing a new takeover operation. He could also introduce big and valuable gems onto the market to turn into cash without arousing a lot of suspicion.

"Next. We'll come back to all of them later."

The next one I'd never met, never seen, but very much wanted to meet and preferably in a dark alley. He was five eleven, with dark, handsome Latin features and burning black eyes, but as ruggedly handsome as you could imagine. Even Maria, I noted, studied him with inordinate attention. I tended to hate any guy who looked like that with so evident a lack of care, but in his case it was more than doubled.

"Doctor Carlos Augusto Montagne-Echevia," the computer said. "A doctor of research pharmacology recruited right out of graduation, and, as such, the youngest of the group. He is fluent in the nine most common languages, including both English and Mandarin. Unmarried, something of a radical in university, he nonetheless was third oldest in a family of eleven and the first to ever reach university, let alone graduate with a doctorate. All of his family was wiped out, of course, including his oldest sister and his three week old godson, her baby. He wholeheartedly endorsed the plan in the meeting and was its most fervent supporter."

That was interesting. It meant that he hadn't come up with the plan, either. Then again, for a pharmacologist, even a brilliant and hate-filled radical one, the drug thing was more his type of scheme anyway. Still, you could sure see how he could almost count on Mukasa's mistress and go-between to fall for him. He just took it for granted.

His image went into motion. "There will have to be more production," he said in accented but excellent English. "We can not meet our schedule with what you have been putting out."

Well, that was it for Carlos, but at least the words were his, and his voice was as smooth and romantic as you figured it would be. I had the feeling that he never had to yell; there was a controlled undercurrent in his tone that implied absolute menace to whoever he was talking to. He was an interesting personality, and I was happy to keep him on my prime list even if I couldn't see him as Gravel Voice, either. He was the right height, and he didn't seem to be the kind of guy to want to end this. He was so filled with hate he wanted to go on and on and on, and he was both bright enough and nervy enough to bump off Pandross in his lair, too.

Considering the way I felt about him, I could see Voorhes' point in taking me over Brandy. At least I was able to consider other suspects, although no matter what else happened I wanted some dealings with dear old Carlos before this was done.

"How did Carlos feel about the group selecting me for this investigation?" I asked the computer.

"Doctor Montagne was the one who suggested you, and pressed for you against opposition. He also worked out the plan which brought you here."
Uh huh. I figured as much. Carlos' main problem was that he'd go from Philadelphia to New York by way of Timbuktu and the South Pole. His plots were always so needlessly complex that they were bound to unravel. Unfortunately, that made him less a suspect here. Taking out the security chief in such a clever and essentially direct way just wasn't his style.

"Gregory Yugarin," the computer said, putting up a picture of Rasputin. Well, maybe not, but he was a Slavic type for sure, and he had wild, unmanageable-looking black hair and one of those long but scraggly beards that showed a total lack of attention. "Six feet two, forty-nine years old, and a Doctor of Geography; he is an expert in mass transportation systems," the computer added. "He is known as a loner type with no family ties or background on the record. Extent of loss is therefore unknown. Speaks six languages and nine dialects but is not on record as an English speaker. It was Doctor Yugarin who researched and deduced the vast majority of inactive Labyrinth stations and lines and established the network for movement in the main system. His comrades consider him totally trustworthy but something of a mystery. He is not a social man. He was, however, the one who came up with the plan now underway and the one who called the meeting."

Yugarin's image came to life, this time again the Italian movie type, and he said, "My name is Gregory Ilych Yugarin and I am a geographer." The height was more than enough and the voice-well, it could have been Gravel Voice, particularly if he was using a translation module, but I had the impression from the tape that old Gravelly was less guttural and more, well, Oriental, somehow. Still, while physically the most likely suspect so far, he had the least motive if my hunch was correct. He got the idea, he called the meeting, and he'd gotten his way. Unless he was working both sides of the street with a plot of his own, it didn't make sense.

"Valintina Mendelez," the computer continued, putting up a picture of a breathtaking beauty on a beach someplace wearing only the bottom of a string bikini and sun glasses and needing nothing else. Gad! Was she stacked! She was dark, even discounting the suntan, with that peculiar blend of ethnic features that had gone into creating the Brazilian race. Maria, in fact, had many of the same characteristics but, while my initial reaction to her had been as a tropical beauty, this Mendelez put Maria and almost anybody else to shame. "Age forty-five, five foot seven, botanist, specialist in rain forest plant biochemistry. Brilliant, had worked with her husband in the Amazon area, but had dropped out of university to have two children. Her husband and the children were back for a visit to the home world when the breakout and conflict occurred, and were destroyed when the world was. She is described as having become hedonistic, without any morals, mercy, or other value systems. She can be quite pleasant but will kill without hesitation, even mass murder, and indulges in experimentation on humans, masking her intellect and coldness with what you would call a 'bimbo' persona. Speaks six languages, including English. She was opposed to the plan when proposed and argued against it, but later gave in after she saw the majority favored it."

Interesting. "On what grounds did she oppose it?" I asked.

"On the grounds that it did not induce sufficient suffering on the part of the Company and its race," the computer replied. "Voice sample."

The image came alive. "Hi, Victor!" she squealed and waved to somebody out of sight. "So glad you could come." It was a high, breathless, Marilyn Monroe type voice with just the right amount of exotic Portuguese accent. Naturally the looks had been preserved by the kind of techniques I myself knew so well, but the image of Monroe as Latin porn queen was indelible, right to that full head of blonde hair.

"Why if she is a leader of the revolution does she not do something about her gross malformations?" Maria asked, in a tone that wasn't catty but serious. I could see that my Watson and I had seriously different ideas of reality.

"Cultural gap," I responded. "She looks and sounds and acts like that because it is attractive to a large number of people, particularly men."

She certainly was the kind to have motive in this-if they were going to shut everything down it would take away the only reason she had for still going on. An egocentric, gorgeous psychopath, she might object to having to settle in to one world and lose a lot of that power and maybe the means of preserving that beauty. She was short, but if she wore really high heels she might make it, and certainly the injection as the fatal weapon was up her alley. There were lots of Amazonian poisons that would kill very quickly and yet break down beyond analysis in a very short time.

The only trouble was, I had to assume that Pandross was at least as competent as I was or they wouldn't have lasted this long. Particularly if I knew her, and knew she'd opposed the plan, I'm not sure I'd have turned my back on her if the two of us were ever anyplace together with nobody else around.

Still, I didn't underestimate her. Anybody who deliberately made themselves that conspicuous obviously had no problems making themselves-look very inconspicuous indeed when they wanted to.

"Salvatore Mancini, fifty-two, five feet ten inches tall, a physicist," the computer went on, showing a picture of a guy almost straight out of The Godfather, any part, with drooping moustache, craggy face, graying hair, and a bit of a pot belly, but looking about as Sicilian as Hollywood thinks they look. "Mancini was a fierce nationalist as well as having an enormous extended family of his own, and thus took the destruction of his world very hard indeed. More than that, he took it personally. Although a doctor of physics and a specialist in high energy storage and control, Mancini still came from an area where family and clan were all-important and revenge is obligatory, the price of the soul's salvation. There is no indication that he is particularly religious but his thoughts and patterns were shaped by his inseparable ancestral religion and culture. He was perfectly willing to go along with the plan and raised no serious objections. In fact, it appears that Yugarin consulted with him in its formulation and that his support was a foregone conclusion."

The figure came to life. "Hey! Maglia! Bring that over here!" he growled, and his voice was somewhat deep and had just a touch of gravel in it. He was close enough to the right height to fudge it, and while the accent was wrong, it wasn't beyond belief that he could mask it or alter it if he suspected he was being overheard. The accent wasn't Italian, at least not my kind. It was possible that on his world it was far closer to Latin still than the current tongue back home, or had gone off on a slight tangent. Who knew?

The next figure was a tall, thin, yet tough-looking woman, with dirty blonde hair cut short in a man's style, with strong, sharp features and a confident stance. She was wearing what looked like some kind of jungle outfit and her face and hands seemed weathered, as if she spent most of her time in the bush.

"Stacy Cutler, age forty-five, height five feet eleven inches," the computer informed us. "Cutler is a zoologist. Although she's had little formal training beyond undergraduate studies, she has lived all her life in wilderness areas where her parents were also scientists. She is tough, muscular, could exist without aid in almost any wild area that supports life, and carried on her parents' work after their death by hiring out as a guide and mercenary soldier to finance it as needed. She has overseen most of the exploration, development, and preliminary studies on safe worlds and abandoned line junctions. Of them all, she has shown the least injury and the least emotion regarding her lost world and seems to accept it, using the network as a means of furthering her own studies in many areas. She opposed the plan because it includes the concept of shutting down the Labyrinth, and she dislikes the idea of having to settle on one world forever. She was the most difficult to persuade and finally went along because she saw it was something the majority was bent on doing. She apparently extracted a series of concessions for her support, although what those were is not part of my data."

Even more interesting. Opposed, brought around only when it seemed futile to continue to go against the more passionate rest-I kind of wondered what would have happened to anybody at that meeting who hadn't finally come around. If she had an insincere conversion, and if she still opposed it, she'd be particularly

nervous of Pandross, who would be looking at the opponents very hard and constantly. She was also tall enough, strong enough, and skilled enough. A real possibility.

She came to life on the screen and said, "You! Put that crate over there and drop it at the cost of your hide!" The English was definitely her native tongue, but it held a strong and odd accent- closer maybe to South African, with its Germanic undertones, but not quite.

The picture changed again. "Dilip Kanda, fifty, five foot five, a mathematician and electrical engineer," the computer informed us. The man certainly looked either Indian or Pakistani, if there was such a difference where he'd come from; a bit pudgy but darkly handsome for all that.

"Kanda lost family, children, friends, clan, tribe -all of it," the computer continued. "A firm believer in reincarnation, with the discovery of infinite alternate worlds simply reinforcing that belief system since now there's really room for it, he was saddened, even grieving, for his loss but appears to hold the Company less in hatred than in contempt. A sincere Hindu, he has become increasingly strict and very much an ascetic, indulging in few pleasures and much contemplation, abstaining from sex, from meat, from most worldly pleasures, with the exception of an abiding taste for elaborate pastries the results of which are evident and the reason for which he will explain at length but which are beyond the logic abilities of any other human or computer to follow.

However, he has in the past come up with many of the most successful operations against the Company that have been conducted, his plans rarely if ever compromised or discovered, and he treats going against them as an intellectual challenge. He was, however, quite willing from the start to go ahead with the Great Plan, on the grounds that some metaphysical symmetry would be achieved and that the Company race should have to be reborn again at the bottom."

Kanda's image began to move. "We must all see that life is the search for *bakti*," he said, and that was it. The voice was typical East Indian, with the accent and all, and a low tenor voice that might almost be described as melodic. I tended to dismiss him on the basis of height and the reported attitude, which I at least understood given the guy's beliefs, but I didn't really want to eliminate him entirely. This guy had beaten the Company consistently and for many years, and if the computer were to be believed he was the most dangerous and clever mind among them. If he wanted to murder one of his fellow Directors, and his motive might be rather weird or maybe just an intellectual exercise, he'd do it so cleverly that he'd be totally wrong as a suspect and quickly dismissed. And, if I were Pandross, he'd be the one I'd be most at ease with, maybe even turning my back on him-maybe to get him one of his sweets? I wished now I knew what had been in Pandross's refrigerator.

There was another picture now. "Herbert Voorhes," the computer told us needlessly. "At sixty the oldest of the group, and one of the earliest recruits by the Company. Five feet eight inches tall, muscular, a linguist and scholar, a historian by profession and one-time university history professor, which was why he was one of the first recruits. He has trained himself in weaponry and basic self-defense and can hold his own but is no match for a professional agent. Lost a wife, two grown children, and some grandchildren in the conflagration, and is bitter and driven by hatred of the Company. The titular leader because of his age and because of his ability to grasp a multiplicity of subjects and plans, he chaired the meeting and spoke forcefully for the plan when it was proposed. He also was operational chief for the move against your substation."

Uh huh. I thought the old guy wasn't telling it all. Still, what the computer was saying fit with what I'd seen of the man. He'd lost all that the others had-family, friends, loved ones-but he'd lost even more. He was a historian of a world whose history had ended; a world that no longer required a historian. They had not only eliminated all near and dear to him, they had rendered even his life's work meaningless. But as a historian he was talking as an expert on the history of revolutions, idealistic mass movements, and the like, and how they were inevitably corrupted. The question that remained was whether or not his sense of morality for the many was best served by wiping out the Company or saving a world from a fate his had suffered. I thought I believed him, though.

If the Nazis had won, as they had in so many worlds, and represented all that was left of human "culture," I wouldn't have much of a problem in wiping them out rather than letting them go on. I didn't think he would, either.

And, finally, there was the dear departed.

"Lothar Pandross, forty-eight at death, six foot two, security and espionage chief. Pandross had been in the military of his nation when he was recruited, and even then was a security officer overseeing the protection of high-tech weapons systems. He was replaced by a double with superior training with the idea of replacing him later so that they would have access to the military secrets of his world's most technological nation. He appears to have been orphaned at an early age and educated and trained by his army. He does not appear to have harbored personal hatred towards the Company for doing what they did to his world, but none the less considered the Company 'the Enemy,' and himself a soldier in its overthrow. He was quite good at his job, and while he rarely went into the field himself he commanded and directed thousands and was personally responsible for the recruitment of most of the personnel who now work for us."

I nodded, then had this silly hunch and played it. "Do you have a voice record of him?"

The Pandross figure came to life. "So nice to see you," he said cordially to somebody out of frame. "Please-sit down."

I nearly jumped out of my seat. Give him just a bit of a whisper and that was Gravel Voice all the way, and his size and covert intelligence experience would be more than adequate to make him look like the description we'd built up. There was no such thing as certainty under these conditions, but I knew deep down to my bones that Lothar Pandross had personally directed that raid on the house, had personally supervised the abduction, had gone along for the whole thing. The real question was, did Voorhes know that and was he just covering or conning or even testing me by saying that nobody involved resembled the one I was after, or was he, perhaps, covering his shock and unwilling to admit that Pandross had been there and he hadn't known? Or was it just that my description wasn't good enough?

Right now it didn't matter, but clearly the chief of security had been there all along. No wonder he figured out the weak point in my system! And no wonder he was able to slip first his plant, Bond, in and out, and then himself in and out without the Company knowing a damned thing. He was almost certainly good enough to do just that. But why did a guy who was so vital and who almost never went on missions himself stick his neck out like that?

Much more importantly, how did he do it three weeks after he'd been murdered?

6.

Murder in the Cathedral

I didn't have to see Voorhes; the computer network was perfectly capable of putting me in touch with whoever I wanted to talk to, and also to get them in touch with me. Still, I wasn't in any real rush, I took the opportunity to use the ersatz shower they'd rigged up and actually caught a fairly long sleep before beginning the first active stage of the affair. I wanted to be rested and to have thought things out. The way things were going, I figured I'd eat and sleep as well and as long as possible whenever the opportunity presented itself. Right now I was dead tired and that wasn't the best way to press anything. Maria, I'm afraid, was less than impressed with me at this point.

"So, you have solved it all, the great genius detective, sitting here in his chair, and now he goes to sleep?"

"Hardly," I responded. "But you should get some sleep, too. We might be busy in a while."

She was still awake when I lay down, though, and didn't look inclined to take my advice. I made a mental wager that as soon as I was out she'd be out, too-out of this hole, maybe back before I woke up again. That was fine with me. I had no illusions that the same computer that gave me outward access gave anybody else a

full report on me, and it didn't matter much. I just relaxed, and tried to put myself to sleep even though my mind was sifting what had already been learned. So Pandross was alive, and that stiff-a double? One with the big boy's own I.D.? Voorhes said they had erasable and re-recordable implants, and who would be in charge of doing that but Pandross himself? If I wasn't being had for some reason, then why the hell didn't any of those other bright revolutionary geniuses think of it? Because they could conceive of Pandross double-crossing them even less than one of them murdering him?

That made sense, sort of. I mean, the guy held the keys to their whole kingdom, and to the computers and data banks and all that nice stuff they needed to operate as well. If he went bad, then they had a glass house of an organization to begin with. And since they had a sort of locked room murder there, it would never occur to them that the one guy who could so easily commit the crime, know just where the security monitors were and how to avoid all alarms-hell, he put 'em there- and just how to erase everything needed afterwards, was Pandross himself.

But if he was going to disappear, then why expose himself in the midst of the operation on my place? Naturally, he wouldn't have known that they were out to recruit me-or would he? Maybe he was still in charge in some alternate and nicely functioning security setup, monitoring their every move. And he'd been looking for me, not Brandy -the tape made that clear. Why? Was it, maybe, to get me before the others could? Maybe he had another double to replace me, one of his boys, for some reason.

Maybe so that I, or that other me, in his capacity as detective trying to find the murderer of Pandross, would eventually have to go to and interview each of the suspects in their hiding holes? Thus pointing to exactly where they were so that Pandross could then deal with them one by one in isolation?

If that was true, then the plot had been turned on its head, but the bulk of the theory still stood. If Pandross was opposed to this plan, whatever it was-maybe he figured it wouldn't work and would destroy the rebel network, or maybe he just didn't like giving up all that power. To a pro like him, the fight, and little victories, would be the thing, the reason for living. Final victory would render him powerless and obsolete.

With that thought in my head, I drifted off into a surprisingly deep sleep.

When I woke up to what my watch said was a new day, Maria was out cold on the other cot and I didn't disturb her. I went over and checked and reset the simple door seals, though, that showed me she had indeed been a busy little girl while I slept. It would be interesting to know just who held her leash tight enough for her to obey at all costs, but that might come later. These people would only trust alternate worlds they already controlled; Maria's world was under one of the eight survivors whether she or they knew it or not.

I fixed coffee and got a couple of doughnuts and went over to the computer terminal. "I want to talk to Voorhes. How long will it take?" I asked it.

"Depends on if he answers," the machine responded fairly reasonably. "Signaling and connect. It usually takes him about fifteen minutes to come to the substation where he can take the call after the signal goes out. More if he is away from his home."

I nodded and munched a doughnut. "That's fine. By that time I might have enough coffee into me to get me awake."

It was about fifteen minutes when Voorhes answered, voice only of course, and he sounded surprised.

"I thought Maria would handle any requirements of yours," he noted.

"Then she didn't go to see you, then. You have any idea where she snuck out to while I was out?"

"Probably reported in at home."

"Uh huh. And who runs that world?"

"Why, uh, they are allies in our cause . . ."

"Can the bullshit!" I told him. "Straight answers or what the hell am I here for?"

He sighed. "All right. Technically it's Yugarin's, but Carlos spends more time with them than Gregory does. What's the difference? Neither would be there now."

Too exposed."

"But their people in high places would be there, so that puts me a little on notice. Thanks."

"Is that all this was for? This was very inconvenient."

I smiled. I wonder what his reaction would have been if I told him just exactly what I suspected- and what I knew? I would have to drop some crumbs and hints, but for the first time since I walked into this I was feeling like I had some control of events.

"I have discovered everything it is possible to discover sitting here in a passive situation rooting through files," I told him. "If I can't follow up my leads then there's no purpose to going on."

"You tell Maria and she will get whatever you need," Voorhes told me. "Go anyplace, ask any questions."

I shook my head. "Uh uh. I'm not Nero Wolfe, and even if I was I couldn't do it that way if I didn't have my Archie with me."

"What?"

"Never mind. Look, Voorhes, this isn't a problem in ethics or in physics. It's not something you can just dump facts into a computer and push 'enter' and come up with the correct answer. If it was, you wouldn't need somebody like me. You'd just have a thousand Marias gathering every fact and asking every question and put 'em in your machine and-poof!-guilty party, motive, opportunity, method, all neat and tidy. Maria might be very useful, but she's no investigator. She comes from a world where they don't even need cops, only a more subtle and sophisticated version of the Spanish Inquisition. You're a historian. You did lots of research. Probably spent lots of time in huge libraries with tons of books and documents and the like."

"Yes, so?"

"Why bother? Why not just hire a bunch of kids off the street-any street-so long as they could read and write and tell 'em to go in to that library and find everything you need?"

Voorhes hesitated before replying, thinking this over. "I see your point. They wouldn't have the foggiest notion where to look, or what they were actually looking for. Without my training, they probably wouldn't know a major discovery when they found it. Point taken, Mister Horowitz. But they're not going to expose themselves, even to you, for a broad fishing expedition. Some would as soon kill you as look at you."

"Well, I'm fishing for sure," I told him, "but I'm not fishing blind. As yet, I have no motive, but I'm warm in a number of areas. I think I might be warm enough to draw some attention of my own."

"You do know something," the rebel leader muttered, surprised but sincere. "What did you find that we missed, Horowitz? And why aren't you coming out with it?"

I was ready for that. "Because I don't have a motive," I told him sincerely, "and without one it makes no sense at all. And if I revealed what I knew, even to you, even to Maria, there's a very good chance that I might be doing your murderer's work for him. As I understand it, I'm working for all of you, collectively, as a client. I can not and will not explain my steps every minute of the time when I might be briefing the very person or people I'm trying to catch. The only way to safeguard my clients is not to explain or demonstrate until I have every piece of the puzzle it's possible to have, and then only when I have you all together, so no one can pull anything. I require complete freedom to investigate and complete cooperation from everybody involved. You tell them that. You tell 'em that they play the game my way or there are sure as hell gonna be more killings no matter how deep they hide, because sooner or later they have to come out. Your organization is too management-oriented, Voorhes. If you all keep in your holes, you won't have an organization, you won't have an operation, you won't have a master plan. You'll be retired for good."

I gave him as long as he needed to digest that. Finally he said, "You don't think that we can manage through communications and go-betweens?"

"No, and you know you can't, either. Nobody but you eight has a real emotional stake in this thing, a commitment. The rest are just plain crooks. You leave

them on their own they either have to be people like Maria with no possible initiative, in which case nothing gets solved, or they'll take your big organization away from you. You try it with steady communications and live agents and those communications and those agents will lead your killer right to each of you. Unless, of course, it's you, Voorhes."

"What?"

"You're immune, which means you're not a probable target. They all know where you are. They can't get to you but they don't have to. There's only one switching cube. Anybody who knows that cube and the Labyrinth system could blow your switch mechanism from the cube side, leaving you trapped forever where you are. The fact that they haven't shows either that you're involved in this or that you're not a target-yet. Now, you put this on to the other seven, and you tell them that I need to talk to each and every one of them. Their terms-strip-searches and blindfolds permitted if they want it that way. But I need to talk to each one, and I need certain questions answered by each and every one of them. Give me the freedom to do your job and I'll solve your damned case. Don't, and I'm going to sit here, relax, and wait until the next murder." Voorhes sighed. "Very well, I'll put it to them just that way. In fact, I'll send this recording on the open access net for them to pick up. I can do nothing else. What level of agreement, or cooperation, you get from them is up to each of them."

"Fair enough," I told him. "In fact, who says yes and who says no and who is straight and who's not with me will be a great deal of information in and of itself."

I signed off, feeling quite pleased with myself. Maria wasn't quite so amused.

"Do you always speak like that to people who would just as soon have you shot?" she asked me, a bit incredulous.

"Why not? They intend to shoot me sooner or later anyway. Right now, they need me. Either they do it my way or they shoot me now and try somebody else, who'll give 'em the same ultimatum if he or she's any good and won't learn a damned thing out of fear or hesitancy if they're not. Besides, if we don't get out of here and exposed, how the hell is our murderer going to contact me?"

She looked startled. "You expect the murderer to contact you?"

I nodded. "Sure. And when he does, I don't want you shooting him or trying anything fancy, either. Getting him won't solve their problem or mine, first because he wouldn't be taken alive and so we wouldn't know if he was a lone wolf or a part of a conspiracy within this conspiracy, and also because he's too smart for anybody to be sure that they have him when they have him. You just come along for the ride and make sure nobody does anything nasty to me during the investigation, and I'll show you how the game is played."

So, anyway, they bought it, of course. Yeah, all of 'em. Which of them could turn me down without having the rest look at them funny? Besides, they were in their fortresses, the kind of places they prepared for when the heat was on. If they didn't feel safe there, then there was noplac they could really feel safe, and if that was the case why hole up in a bunker in the first place?

Of course, arranging for visits took some careful planning on their part, so I was gonna see 'em in the order they decided to be seen, and that put Quin Tarn at the top of the list.

I got to admit I half expected to be contacted the first time I was allowed back into the Labyrinth. I had to figure that Pandross was around someplace and that he was following my footsteps nicely and that he would know when I was loose and available. Why did I think I'd hear from him? Easy- because I was the only guy in this with no ax to grind and so I was the only one he could trust. When he failed to get me in that raid on the place, he made very sure that there was a strong enough voice presence that I'd know he was alive, so he wanted me to know. I had to figure that I was dealing with at least an equal in this business, maybe better than that, and I think he was counting on that as well. As to whether or not he was alone, I couldn't guess. It was true that they'd run for cover as soon as he was "murdered," as we might as well, but then they got together and finally decided to include me in on this and plotted their little operation against my substation. He knew about it, so either he had ways of

tapping into the communications net they were using, which was possible and even likely, or he had somebody from that hookup tell him all the gory details. Since they'd changed the security codes on the master computers and redid the whole system after he died, I had a hunch they'd use different communications means than the one he'd set up for their electronic meets as well, which made an ally all the more likely. Still, if the guy was good, maybe the best, he might have planned on that and been able to crack the system.

It was a real eye-opener to go through the Labyrinth their way, too. I knew the paths between the Company world and mine fairly well, having travelled them often and looked at the scenery out of the cubes, so I knew we were staying in the general neighborhood and I knew where the Company switch points were. It was kind of impressive to approach one, then veer off into one of those worlds and almost immediately back into a small substation that led to a long and dark section- and when we came out again it was at some unmanned Company substation once more and when we went back onto the main line, well, we were past the switch.

No wonder Carlos and company could stalk up and down and in and out without being spotted. They seemed to have bypassed all the main switches in the most heavily travelled areas and even created effective private junctions between the main and branch lines using their own automated equipment.

Maria, of course, kept her eyes firmly on me inside the tunnel, if only because for most of it we were in the main Company line and were passing all sorts of people and near-people going this way and that on Company business. I probably wasn't quick enough to make a break she couldn't cure, but in some cases, when we were passing fair numbers of people, it wouldn't have taken much effort to either signal them I was in trouble or just jump Maria in their presence. The rule was you apprehended anybody doing that and called for Security. Yeah, I could have gotten away and probably gotten her taken, but I didn't want to. That wouldn't save Brandy or Dash or the Labyrinth and it would cause my "fee" to be forfeited as well-and goodbye some world, maybe mine. In fact, I figured the hostage world was mine, since that would explain why Voorhes didn't care if their network was compromised and people taken there.

It wouldn't matter if they were purple and had pink fur and wolf snouts; so long as I was convinced they'd really detonate the place, and I was, I wasn't gonna blow their world for any temporary grandstanding. Besides, I had other interests here of a more, personal nature.

Tarn's hideaway, like the others would be, I suspected, was strictly rebel territory. We got off on a hot desert world which didn't even have a Company substation, just a weak point strong enough to come through, and were met there by a couple of tough-looking guys out of Lost Horizon or something. You know-big guys, with tough Oriental faces and mean eyes, dressed in yak fur or whatever and looking really overdressed for the hot desert. They also had some very fancy high-tech sidearms that showed they really meant business and hadn't just wandered in from the wrong side of the Himalayas or something.

They had fur clothing for us as well, right down to fur-lined boots, parkas, and the rest, and they were a fairly close fit. Maria looked decidedly uncomfortable and out of place in her outfit, and not all that certain about it, and I figure I looked like a moth-eaten panda, but, what the hell.

With that we travelled maybe half a mile, which was all I could stand in that outfit-it had to be a hundred in the shade there, if there had been any shade-and then to a nicely hidden little substation generator. It was pretty obvious that this was a large weak point, a sort of desert Bermuda Triangle or something, and they'd taken advantage of it to build their own short line to somewhere.

It felt great to be in the silence and dead air of the Labyrinth once more, even if it was a hell of a lot darker and not nearly as comfortable as the Company line. We didn't have far to go, and when we exited it was into a cave or something and it was chilly and damp even through the clothing. I just knew I was gonna get pneumonia on this case.

You needed strong flashlights and a knowledge of the place to get out of there,

and these guys had both. We followed, and Maria began to complain. "It is so cold!"

I smiled. "This is nothing. You ought to see what it's like back home where I came from."

No wishing was needed; when we finally broke into daylight, we were suddenly struck with about the bitterest cold I can ever remember together with maybe a twenty mile an hour wind. It wasn't much worse than the dead of winter in central Pennsylvania, but I hadn't been out in it in several days and where home was wasn't like a mile in the air. This sure was, and it was not only tiring very fast but you didn't have to go far to feel like you could look down further than you could look up.

The guys hooked heavy rock-climbing ropes and clips to us and we started off. For me, I was just hoping that the ropes were just for our safety, not for climbing. Still, it was so stark, remote, and cold I expected to pass Ronald Colman at any moment.

Fortunately, we didn't have far to go, although it was cold, slippery going for a few minutes that seemed like hours, and I was thankful for the sheer muscle power and skill of our two guides.

I was actually prepared, mentally, for a longer hike, maybe even a couple of days or on horseback or something, since I figured Tarn's hideaway wouldn't be anywhere near his substation, but I kind of figured that the whole place was booby-trapped as hell, maybe even fortified—who could see what was just above, or who?—and that it would take real effort to get past here and maybe it was impossible without setting off so many alarms you'd be creamed anyway.

We went through another cave, this one incredibly noisy as the wind whistled through it, telling me it was a through passage and not a dead end. I was right—we emerged on the other side into a kind of bowl-shaped valley surrounded by peaks still too high not to be permanently socked in, and while it wasn't the land of milk and honey in the movie it sure as hell took your breath away.

Built into the side of the valley, maybe a half-hour from where we came in, was a huge building, kind of like a great castle and also like a damned big and exotic-looking condo. Partly built out of the solid granite and partly hewn from it, it had a kind of fairyland look about it. The place sure was awesome, anyway.

Somebody at least had anticipated that both of us would be totally winded even by so short a walk as we'd had in this altitude and also decided not to make us suffer. There was this big, enclosed sedan chair there with these long logs running through both sides and supporting it, and six big and brawny guys in furs apparently waiting for us. Maria looked doubtful, as if trying to decide between the misery she felt and the risks of the contraption, but I urged her in, and we sat across from each other on two curved wood seats that were worn almost smooth by who knew how many posteriors, and there were what I can only describe as grab bars everywhere.

"Hold on tight!" I warned her. "They got to lift us up!"

It didn't help. When they lifted us up with professional ease, it was still bouncy enough that neither of us had a good grip and we tumbled together for a minute. We managed to get back into our seats quickly, though, and then were off in a real rock and roll type ride.

"I have never been so cold and miserable in my life!" she wailed. "I do not like this cold at all, and I like this place and this thing even less."

"We just got to be obedient to orders," I responded a bit sarcastically. I was actually enjoying this to a degree. Not just her discomfort, although I admit that getting used to seeing a pretty girl not as that but as a loaded pistol pointed at your head can make you feel real satisfied that way, but also because I'd kind of been afraid these guys were in substation fortresses or other dull places and this was getting real interesting.

They put us down in the courtyard after coming through these gigantic wooden gates right out of a Cecil B. deMille Biblical epic, then one of the big guys opened the door and we sort of crawled out and stood on ancient cobblestone looking at the inner and main building complex of this place.

Until now I had no real idea if this was some kind of noble's headquarters, some

reconstruction for Tang's amusement of someplace he'd loved and lost back home, or maybe some kind of monastery. Maybe all three, I decided at last.

I looked over at Maria, who was too shocked and frozen to do more than just stand there shivering, and then they motioned for us to follow them again and we walked to the main doors, which opened inward to receive us, and inside.

The immediate inside was kind of anticlimactic; I mean, I expected some real royal grand hall or maybe Westminster Abbey, but it was a small and dark area that felt almost as cold and damp as outside. There we were met by a number of men wearing monk-like robes of brown or black with cowls up. One of the black-robed ones came right up to me and what I could see of his face didn't look all that Tibetan or whatever the others were.

He snapped his fingers and one of the brown-robed ones brought us robes as well. We were helped off rather insistently with our coats and it was clear that we were to put on the heavy woolen robes instead. Fortunately they believed in being clothed underneath and they made no move to take the nice, warm boots. Even so, Maria resisted giving up the coat; I think she would have been quite happy putting the robe on over the coat for extra insulation.,

"Just do it their way," I cautioned her. "We don't know what the rules are here, and I think this is also a way of making sure we don't wander outside without permission. You'll get used to it after a while. It's not as bad as all that in here."

"I shall never get used to this," she responded bitterly. "With so much of the world so warm why do people choose to live in such cold, anyway? It is illogical." But she surrendered the coat like a good trooper and wasted no time getting the robe on.

"No, it's illogical not to use all the places that can support human life," I responded. "We need all types of people and all the land we can get. Some people even prefer to live in places like this and would ask how and why anyone would live in such a horribly hot, wet climate as you come from. I didn't ask for you, so if you want to come along then you better shape up."

Flanked by other monks or whatever they were, the man in the black robe then led us further in. It was warmer in the center, almost comfortable so long as you kept your clothes on and robe on top, the result of a number of good-sized fires burning in fireplaces nicely spaced around the place. Right in the middle there was a large chamber, it seemed, its open doors kind of reminding me of a medieval European cathedral, although the altar at the end had what looked like, in the brief glance I got, the stupidest looking idol I had ever seen. It was golden, gigantic, and had a pot belly, short, stubby legs, and a squared-off face with big bulging eyes and a mouth that looked like a hollow figure eight on its side. It looked like something out of a comic book, but I wasn't about to laugh or criticize the local deity in this place. No telling-Quin Tarn might take it personally.

We went up some stone stairs and then down a hall that had solid doors on one side and on the other a railing beyond which you could look down on the cathedral proper, although it didn't have the best view of the big idol. A brown-robed monk opened one of the doors with a big key and gestured for Maria to enter. She balked, and turned on them. "No! We stay together!"

The monk, one of the smaller men in the group, might not have understood the words but certainly understood her meaning. He shrugged, then shoved her hard into the room and slammed the door on her, turning the key. I could hear her yelling, screaming, cursing, and pounding on the door, but that thing was so thick it was barely noticeable.

They skipped a door, then opened another for me, and I didn't object or wait for the shove. I walked in, and the door closed behind me with the most solid thud I ever heard.

Still, the place was livable; larger than I expected, and with a pretty nice-sized bed with sheets and lots of wool blankets, a personal woodstove that had been pre-started for my benefit and a fair number of logs in a scuttle next to it should I get chilly, a basin with a drain but no faucets, of course-there were two big pots of water there, one sitting atop the stove and the other

fairly cool. Under the bed was a pretty standard chamber pot. I wondered if Maria knew what a chamber pot was, but that was her problem. The place was warm, and there wasn't the damp chill or the bed of straw I might have expected. It was a bedroom, not a dungeon, and that was sufficient for me.

There were no windows, and I doubted if we were really against an exterior wall at all. There was also no peephole or trap in the door, so if they could spy on me it would have to be by very clever design or by cheating and using technological stuff. I slipped off the robe and then did a routine check of the place for such things, although without instruments it was more a matter of thinking like a security man and knowing what I would use and looking in the places I'd put them. I found no trace of anything, not even any indication that the place was wired at all for any kind of electrical power.

Tarn certainly had anything he wanted at his disposal someplace or another, since he joined in their conference calls and had to keep in touch or we wouldn't have even been allowed here or expected, but he might feel so unassailable in a spot like this that he left it in one secret and unobtrusive place with maybe only a couple of trusted aides to monitor it, and lived more or less native.

So I stoked the fire, plopped down on the bed, and waited to be summoned. It wasn't all that long. The key turned in the lock and the same black-robed monk who'd brought us in stood there, this time alone. I got up off the bed and took the robe off the hook, put it on, splashed a little water in my face to brace me, turned, and went to him. He turned as I approached and I followed him out of the room and down the hall to the end. I glanced over the rail and heard a lot of praying and chanting down there and saw a bunch of mostly brown robes doing the expected towards the idol, but my keeper ignored it and, when we got to the end, we took a left and walked up another, shallower, set of stairs to a kind of landing. I mentally figured we were more or less standing on the idol's head, with the steps coming up from both sides to here, and then a single set going up and further back. At the top of those stairs was another set of ornate wooden doors, and the guy in the black robe took something metallic from a pocket in the robe and struck a metal plate on the right door three times. It made an impressive racket.

He did not, however, wait for an answer, but put his knocker away and then opened both doors inward, revealing a very fancy and very cozy room.

The carpets were thick and plush and had woven Oriental designs and even scenes in them; there were other rugs on the walls, giving the place a real cozy feel and also providing insulation. At the end of the room was a raised area carpeted entirely in red, with a kind of throne in back of it-not fancy, but impressive, a real throne-type chair- and a table or altar or something in front of it that was covered with a matching red cloth. I was kind of disappointed; I was getting kind of hungry, and I'd hoped to be invited to dinner, not an audience. At least I'd hoped to see a chair in the room so I wouldn't be standing.

The monk in black stopped me and pointed to my boots, then took out his nasty-looking iron knocker and looked for sure like he was gonna break both my ankles. I got the idea. Boots off before you got on the red part. No problem. At least it was nice and warm in here, almost homey, and he didn't seem to mind socks. Well, hell, Aunt Sadie never allowed shoes on the carpet, either. You know the type-kept the whole house covered in plastic and looking like it was about to be visited by House Beautiful while everybody lived in, and was only permitted in, the kitchen, John, and bedroom.

I stuck the boots to one side and straightened up, then turned to see what to do next, but all I heard was the doors closing behind me. The guy in black had gone, leaving me alone.

Well, I knew better than that. I could have planted a hundred monitors in here nobody would ever see, and, hell, a couple of good old basic peepholes as well. I studied the tapestries and tried to look bored and waited some more, and only when I glanced back at the throne did I notice somebody was sitting in it. That bothered me. I hadn't heard him come in, sit down, or anything, and I was like ten feet from him. Nothing like somebody doing that to you to knock the self-confidence and cockiness right out of you.

He was a man of medium height, with strong Mongol-like features, with a strong-looking frame and the kind of hard, tough face that said it always meant what it said. His hair was dark, his moustache long and flecked with gray, and he was dressed in a metallic blue robe with the cowl down. There wasn't anything fancy about him, but if he'd suddenly stood up and said he was Fu Manchu, Emperor of the World, I'd have taken his word for it.

"Why do you come here, sir?" he asked, in a heavy and labored accent that showed he was using a translation module that took his thoughts and turned them into compromise English and would also take my compromised English and feed it to his brain in the language he best understood.

"To speak with Quin Tarn," I responded.

"Why, G.O.D.. man?" he pressed, his tone unmistakable in any language.

I sighed. "I was not asked about this assignment," I reminded him. "I was drafted, my son abducted, to force me into it. Your side forced me into this, and so you must also accept my own methods and ways. Otherwise, all that trouble was for nothing. You have a problem that I have been asked to solve. I can not solve it without information any more than a man can work without food and water."

He took this impassively. "Well met, then. What can I do for you?"

"You are Quin Tarn?"

"I am."

"What is this place? Is it a cover, a hideout, or a sincere religious place?"

"Why do you wish to know that?"

"How can I expect to get anything done if you are going to ask that every time I ask a question, sir? I will not explain myself no matter how that sounds, for you might be the very one I am asked to unmask."

"If I am, then you are a dead man," he noted with a trace of amusement. "Are you not completely in my power here?"

"Completely," I agreed. "But if you were I don't think you'd knock me off here. It would be rather difficult to explain to your comrades, I should think. Somewhere else, perhaps, but not here, not when it's your responsibility. I think you-all of you-are considerably smarter than that."

Quin Tarn seemed to noticeably unfreeze, becoming warmer in tone and more human in appearance. He actually smiled at me.

"I believe I am going to like you, sir." He stood up, clapped his hands, and two smaller figures in blue silk robes entered from the rear and set up two large pillows on either side of the red-covered table, then scurried back out. There was no mistaking that they were women.

They re-entered quickly, bringing a golden decanter, glasses, and then bowls.

Quin Tarn got up from his throne and then took a seat cross-legged on one of the pillows.

"Please," he said, gesturing. "Join me."

I walked up and sat, facing him. He poured what appeared to be red wine from the decanter into two golden goblets, set the decanter back down, then picked up his cup. "To your success," he said, and I took mine, raised it to him, and tasted it. It was pretty good stuff and I said so.

"Thank you. We have our own vineyards in the lowlands developed from the finest grapes from as many worlds. Much of this region below the mountains is temperate and the soil mineral-rich. We have been doing a great deal of development work and planning to create a new society here."

My eyebrows rose. "This is an uninhabited world, then?"

He nodded. "Humans never developed here, and many of the animals and insects are different and some are quite dangerous, but controllable. The differences are easily compensated for, even without the burden of heavy technology. The people are the refuse of a hundred worlds, the refugees, the dispossessed, the former inhabitants of corrugated huts within garbage dumps created by the imbalance of wealth and social class. I have abolished such things. Those who work here share equally in all bounty. Those who do not work will starve. Those who can not work will be provided for by those who do."

"Utopia, huh? No government, no controls, just sharing and social pressure. And

what keeps it that way?"

"Social pressure, as you say," he responded. "That and the unifying religion which defines the rules and the limits of knowledge and technology. It is a peaceful religion, against violence, against selfishness, making few demands and few promises. The distillation of the best of a hundred faiths and my later life's work. You see, sir, they robbed me of my own people, my own world, but this is my legacy and my dream and my refuge. It is already virtually cut off; when the Labyrinth is shut down, it will be totally isolated and yet protected. I will seal it off with me inside before the end comes, so that there will be no connection to the power grid."

This was interesting. "You weren't too keen on closing the Labyrinth, though. Why not?"

"If you ask that then you have not thought the whole thing through. Ask Mancini when you see him. Ask him to tell you the worst case model for the closure and the odds of it. The destruction of the Company world I can not, deep within my soul, complain about. When a place is infested with predatory, carnivorous insects one is forced to fumigate. But a moral man must ask if it makes any sense to use a poison to rid a house of pests if that poison also rids the house of its owners."

The women brought out two big bowls of rice, white and brown, and kept bringing out stuff to put on the rice. You just stuck some rice in the bowl and then put half the portion on top and ate it, not with chopsticks but with a golden fork and spoon. Knives weren't necessary.

Most of it was good, but in spite of my hunger I was getting a gut sourness in my stomach from the conversation that was keeping me from fully enjoying it.

"You're telling me that there's a chance that this thing could blow up everything? Every world? That's why you're going to sever all links before they do it? Sever them and pray that the weak points don't leak the destruction in spite of that."

"I will say no more about it," he maintained, "nor answer any more questions on it. If the others, particularly Mancini, wish to elaborate more fully upon this, then it is their responsibility."

"Fair enough," I agreed. I had heard more than enough for now to give me a picture both of the problem and of Tarn. Of course, he might be playing with me, feeding me a line, but it fit what I was seeing and certainly fit in with some of my theories. "What about Pandross? Speaking as one who was present at the meeting and also as one who knew and worked with the man for many years, not as a mind reader-what was his feeling on this? He must have known it. Would it have bothered him?"

Tarn seemed unprepared for that question, and thought about it. "He might. He was a strange man, a very private one, although always totally capable and dependable. Still, I would say it would not be possible to fully make a judgment on him in any moral matter. He seemed to be motivated only for the challenge, not for any inner moral purpose, good or evil. I always thought that much was going on beneath his skin, but it was never allowed to be shown to others. He seemed almost more machine than human. Always objective, never divisive. A team player for whatever the team decided to do. Does that help?"

I shook my head negatively. "Not a bit. I am convinced that getting inside his head, seeing things as he saw them, is the key to all of this, but so far he remains the same enigma his files illustrate." I sighed. "Would you answer me a serious question?"

"Perhaps."

"You are going along with this because you know you are powerless to stop it, but I can sense that you still have deep moral reservations about it. If there were a way to stop it, to take a less drastic course, to return to the original opposition methods, would you do it?"

His deep, black eyes bored into me. "Perhaps. I have often asked myself this very question, particularly in the past few weeks, but I can see no way out of it without betraying my comrades and destroying the entire organization, and that is something I can not do under any circumstances. If the worst happens, I will answer to the gods as an equal with others, but if I were to betray my

sacred oaths my soul would wander in the darkness, forever alone."

I nodded. "What about the others? They are all in the same situation."

"Voorhes would happily consign history to end if he could take the Company with it," Tarn responded. "They have left him with nothing but hate in his heart and his soul already in Hell. Kanda and Mancini see it as a grand experiment, a test of their theories and their own genius. They know the odds but are convinced that they are far too clever for the worst to happen. They are basically secular men imprisoned by their own egos and intellects. One might also include Yugarin in that, since it is ultimately upon his theories that we will all rise and fall. Carlos and Valentina would be the sorts who simply would not care. They lost their souls a long time ago and do not miss them. Cutler-I would say she is in much the same position as myself. Resigned, as it were, rather than eager. Does this explain why we did not fight the decision? We were simply outnumbered."

"Uh huh. But it brings up the question of Pandross once more, and the same wall. I certainly believe you when you say that you would go through with it rather than betray your organization-but I wonder if somebody like him would believe that?"

"What do you mean?" Tarn was at least getting more impressed with me as we went along, which was fine with me.

"I think Pandross had, or thought he had, evidence that one of you was going to sell out the organization, the plan, and everything else. Once you are totally committed to this project, with people and materiel, you will, ironically, be totally extended and the most exposed to treason. You would have to be to do something of this sort."

"I see. And not having sufficient hard evidence to convince us that it was not he who was unbalanced, he either revealed his belief to this traitor or confronted him or her, and was killed."

"Not quite that simple, but you are in the right area. But, you see, there are three ways to go here. Was Pandross just doing his job, or was he protecting the project out of conviction or out of a repugnance that there would be a traitor, or, in fact, was it Pandross who saw a way to stop the project? The last is least likely, but that's why I like it."

"Fascinating. And you believe you can unmask this traitor when he could not? As limited as you are?"

"I don't know. I do know that, unlike him, I have no oath of fealty, no loyalty or friendship or comradeship with your group. I can be objective where he could not. An accusation from me would carry far more weight among you if you think it through than one from him if I had any supporting evidence."

He offered me more wine, but I held up my hand. "No more, please, of anything. I am beyond the ability to eat anything else right now."

He smiled, then got to his feet. I did the same, feeling that the pleasant audience was coming to an end. That was O.K.-I'd gotten fed and gotten more than I expected.

"Well, then, sir, are there more questions?"

"Not at this time," I told him. "Perhaps later, after I have talked to everyone and gotten everybody's side of this, but not now."

"But I remain suspected. More than others, because of my beliefs."

I shrugged. "Not necessarily. If you are a moral man as I believe you are, you might well be the least likely to betray it all. I suspect no one and everyone at this stage."

He chuckled. "And yet, is it not ironic that this is at the cost of your own moral sense? If you unmask our traitor, our project concludes. Betray him and you betray your own side."

"I have less love and loyalty to my side than you do to yours," I replied frankly. "We will see when we get there-if we get there. Uh-I trust my keeper is getting fed in her room?"

"Indeed. She is most unhappy but I do not wish to even meet her, let alone give her leave about this place. I do not know the ultimate name to which she reports. You understand."

"Perfectly," I assured him. "If I didn't need her I'd suggest just locking her up here and throwing away the key. All right, then. We will be taken back?"

"It is too late today, and too dangerous," he responded. "Sleep here, and leave at mid-day tomorrow. Not even those who have been here for many years like wandering about out there in the dark."

"Can't blame them a bit," I told him. I walked back to my boots and picked them up, then turned and bowed slightly to him. He acknowledged it, and I turned and walked to the doors. Just before, I stopped, turned, and looked back, and he was gone. Not only him, but the remains of our meal, even the pillows, were gone. I would have loved to know how the hell he did that.

I pulled the doors open, and found Black Robe waiting for me as I expected.

"Home, James," I said to him, and we went back down the hall.

I lay there for a while, not just thinking about the interview but also trying to digest the food that seemed to be packed in from my intestines all the way up to my throat with the density of lead. It kept me from going to sleep, that was for sure, and since the TV wasn't so hot around this motel there was nothing much to do but run it through my brain.

The thing was, I liked Tarn. I liked him better than Voorhes, because Tarn hadn't died on that same day his world had died the way Voorhes and most of the others did. They were walking dead men; Quin Tarn seemed to be determined to live and make a major mark, almost as if he felt a responsibility to those who'd been murdered as one of the last of his kind to make his life count. He didn't seem to me to be a loony, and considering the organization he sure wasn't any pacifist, but of the ones I'd met so far he seemed the only really sane man. You get a sixth sense after you've been a detective for a while and it rarely plays you completely false. I thought he was honest with me, and I appreciated that. He was also not unaware that I seemed to understand him and that this understanding alone made him suspect numero uno on the list.

What worried me more was his comment on Mancini and the odds. Tarn was a mineralogist- sort of the ultimate hard science but not somebody who was likely to be directly involved in the plan. Yugarin had come up with the idea and he was a geographer. That should be important somehow but I didn't see how yet. Maybe when I talked to him it would become clearer or hit me in the face.

Mancini, now, he was the physicist-the one of the whole batch who was most likely to know the physics of the Labyrinth and how to use it and pervert it. The account of the meeting I had indicated that Yugarin took his idea to Mancini first, and maybe this Kanda, the mathematician, as well. That would fit. He'd figured out an idea but he didn't know enough to know what would be involved or exactly how to do it.

So this Mancini's intrigued, contacts Kanda to work out the math, and then comes up with the whole thing, engineered and checked and double-checked. But it's got a hitch to it. There's one chance in-well, who knows?-that things will go wrong, that it'll cause a super disaster. I remember once reading a book about the making of the atom bomb in which some scientists figured out there was a one in a hundred thousand chance or something like that that the bomb would set the atmosphere on fire. That sort of thing fit here.

But it also meant that they weren't trying to pull what the Company had pulled on their old world, since that was pretty safe for the guys doing the pulling. Of course, the Company had complete control of the power regulators, the Labyrinth path, everything, while these guys wouldn't. So they weren't gonna do this Company surge bit but something new, something much riskier, something never tried before and that worked only on paper. They weren't out to blow a world away, not even the Company world; they were out to blow the Labyrinth. Short it out somehow. And there was a chance in there someplace that it might short out a hell of a lot more than just the Labyrinth.

O.K., that framed the debate that must have gone on. I could already see it-the cold science types, the kind of guys who had no trouble building bigger and better H-bombs in the cause of peace and power, who saw this as a neat kind of experiment to prove some theories or something, come in with the thing, and it's so absolute that the walking dead ones like Voorhes embrace it immediately. If it was just Mancini, Yugarin, Kanda, Voorhes, and Mendelez that'd be five out of

the nine. Add maybe Carlos and you get six. Tarn and the others could add as well as I could. They put up a fight, pointing out the odds, however slight, of it going all wrong, but they were arguing with the converted. So we get a mineralogist, a zoologist, and depending on Carlos a pharmacologist, against and none of those have the skills or backgrounds to be essential to the plot. In other words, the others could do it without them.

But it's big, real big, so there's a requirement for absolute security and no margin for any kind of leak or second thoughts or it's all over. The Company had a lot of faults but if there was just a hint dropped that they picked up they'd come running in force. That meant you either went along with the plot or they got rid of you. After all, if it worked you wouldn't need the organization any more anyway, right? And if it didn't you wouldn't be around to care. And that put the burden on Pandross to keep the questionable ones on the straight and narrow. Unless Pandross felt he was marked for an early grave because maybe he couldn't be trusted, either.

Damn it! It came down to the same key question every time. Which side was Pandross on? The go or no-go side? If I could just figure that one out the rest of the thing would fall into place. I must have finally burped enough or gotten too hung up in logic loops or something, because I drifted off.

The next thing I remember was hearing this horrible, piercing scream. It didn't sound close but, man, it had to be not only close but super loud to get through that door and those walls. I was on my feet in an instant, even though I had nowhere to go and might just have been hearing some kind of sacrifice or something or never be told what the hell was happening, but I always felt it was better to be prepared. I pulled on my pants and slipped into the boots and hadn't had time to lace them before there was a clanging at the door and it opened wide and sudden.

Two black-clad monks were there and they weren't fooling around. Neither had their cowls up and I could see real meanness in those guys, the kind of look that can freeze blood. They were also packing sidearms and those sidearms were in their hands. Ugly looking weapons-I hadn't seen their like since I gave up Saturday morning kids' shows, but I had no doubt that these shot more than colored light or darts.

They seemed surprised to see me, which I thought odd, and finally one said, "You! Come with us!" in the kind of tone you don't argue with. It was a thick, guttural accent but it was impossible to tell whether he had one of the translator modules on or if he really knew a little pnglish. At any rate, I came.

They went to Maria's door and opened it, one covering the other who did the opening. I heard her shout a string of unmistakable curses in a very loud voice at them in her own language, but she was there. "Get on robe and come!" the same one snarled at her who'd come for me.

She was maybe a few seconds, but while we waited for her all hell seemed to be breaking loose inside the place, particularly below. There were shouts and bells clanging and reverberating all through the cavernous interior and I thought for sure we were under some kind of attack.

Maria came out, looking bedraggled and weary, and gave me a look that could only be described as welcoming. She'd been going nuts in there, that was for sure. She ignored them and asked me, "What is going on?"

"Who knows?" I responded.

The English-speaking black robe turned and said, "Follow me. Both of you!" Well, we followed, sandwiched in between the two armed men, going down from the balcony and on to the main floor and then into the cathedral or temple or whatever it was. There were black robes everywhere and nary a brown robe in sight-it was clear that black was security and Tarn's own force, while brown was really the priesthood.

We were marched up the center aisle right to the point just below the altar, where a number of security men stood, some facing out, others in. They moved aside a bit for us and I could see that directly in front of the altar, maybe where the priest would pray to that stupid-looking idol, was a brown-robed

figure, his garment stained with blood, which wasn't that unusual because there were two very large and impressive-looking swords sticking out of his back.

My immediate thought was that somehow Pandross had gotten to Tarn and was showing off his hit in a very spectacular way. I turned to the English speaker. "Did anyone touch the body?"

"No. Only to be certain he was quite dead. Little wonder that he is. The force of the blows are such that both swords are stuck well into the flooring under him. We are awaiting the Master."

I felt a sudden surge of relief. Then it wasn't Tarn. I could see that now-the shape of the body and the head was all wrong. My relief wasn't just because I liked the guy; I figure that if he'd gotten knocked off while we were here there was no way we'd talk our way out of here and back to the Labyrinth, and even if we did we'd be dead meat, Typhoid Marys to the others.

"Who is he?"

The security man shrugged. "We have no idea. Perhaps we will be able to run him through our files, but he is unfamiliar to us."

"He wasn't some spy knocked off by one of your boys? You're sure?"

"Impossible. We would never do that here, and not like that. Besides, anyone who could get this far is not one we would wish to kill before he was thoroughly interrogated."

I nodded. "You mind if I take a look? I'm experienced-I won't disturb anyone."

"Take care," warned the man, and I intended to, but I walked forward and noted that Maria was right behind me, more fascinated than anything else by the gruesome sight. I reached down, carefully pulling back the cowl, and grabbing some of the long hair I raised the head to get a look at him. If his back was ugly, his face was even less pleasant, but I heard Maria give a short gasp of recognition and my respect for her went up a notch because she'd recognized him. I mean, he had a beard now, and that face was really gross, but still, clearly, it was the face of Lothar Pandross.

7.

The Phantom of the Labyrinth

"You have some explaining to do," Quin Tarn told me a bit sternly.

"Oh? And what do I need to explain?" I asked innocently. "I was locked up tight and sound asleep when it happened. As if either Maria or I could have driven those two swords into him at all, let alone with that much force, even assuming we'd mastered the trick of walking through walls."

He looked at me intently. "You know just what I mean. Quisquot-my chief of security, the one who knows some English and brought you down -is very good and very experienced. He noted that while the woman, here, gasped at the recognition, you smiled."

"Well, at first I was afraid it was you," I admitted, "but as soon as it was clear that it wasn't, I wanted to see if I knew the guy. I do admit I was expecting somebody else-a Company spy, perhaps-but when I saw that it was another Pandross, well, I got the message and I think you did, too."

"Indeed? And what message is that?"

"I knew from the start that Pandross had faked his own death, and that he knew I knew it," I told him, hearing Maria gasp again and then give me dagger-like looks. "How is not worth going into right now. Pandross killed Pandross-or, rather, a double of Pandross. He probably has lots of them around. Most top security men do-the ones who have a sufficient number, anyway. He probably had the medical scan of that victim stuck in from the start, years ago, and just updated it if anything happened to him, so that the computer autopsy would verify that he himself had died. That gave him an unprecedented freedom in which he held the keys to security and the knowledge of the entire underground network but was accountable to none, all of whom thought him dead. I was the only one who could have exposed him, but until I understood his motives it seemed more prudent to keep it to myself. Since he'd gone out of his way to make sure I knew he was still alive even before I knew he was supposedly dead, I figured he'd

contact me at some point and I'd learn what it was all about. In a way, he just did."

"I take it, then, that you do not believe that our body there is Pandross, either," the rebel leader commented.

"Probably not, but we'll never prove it one way or the other, will we? Not unless Pandross shows up again. If it is, then we have another player in the game, somebody Pandross trusted. Somebody capable of getting in and out of here past your best security system. I doubt it, though. This is a cynical security man's way of sending us both a message -that your operation leaks like a sieve, which I can believe, and you are, therefore, incredibly vulnerable, and that Pandross or whoever is behind this is fully capable of taking you out. The fact that it was also done while I was here shows that our player or players is using me for their own purposes somehow."

Quin Tarn seemed a bit nervous at that. "Then I must leave this place, burrow deeper."

"I wouldn't. If he'd wanted to take you out he could have. The fact that he walked right past your security, with his victim, and killed the victim in cold blood and in such a theatrical and public manner illustrates this. He's telling you to really tighten up your security, that's all. And when word of this gets out to the others, they'll become paranoid as all hell. He'll have shut me down because the others will cut and run. Shut down your grand project, too, most likely."

"Is that such a bad thing, I wonder?" Tarn mused. "Could that be the object of his playing around? Might Pandross think as I do?"

"Maybe. But we can't completely discount the idea that that's the real Pandross there. That he was here in secret monitoring me, maybe checking on me or maybe to contact me or maybe to contact you. That somebody else, somebody who's a traitor in your own organization, recognized him and did this to keep him quiet-in which case we have, as I mentioned, an unseen player with motives of his or her own. I mean, how many duplicates of himself can he have that he can waste them this way? And it's sure a lot riskier to do it this way than to, say, send a note or tap into your communications line. No, whoever did this did it partly because they wanted me to be no longer certain that Pandross was still alive and kicking. Hell, considering our discussion, I wouldn't put it past you to do it like this to get just the results we're talking about."

Quin Tarn sighed. "Perhaps. I will send the body to my own labs to be analyzed and autopsied anyway to see if there's some way of determining if he was or wasn't the real one, and even now we have sealed the place off and are working to install much more sophisticated security. Clearly geography and routine measures are not enough. But what would you have me do about this, sir?"

"Me? I'd sit on him. If you seal up this place tight and if you run checks on your security staff and guards to make sure you have no traitors or infiltrators, then the others won't know it happened. One might-if the killer can get out of here or get a message away. That might just give me an edge and keep them above ground."

"I might do that-but if I did so, then the project would continue, even at its reduced pace with us all away from it."

"Uh huh. But releasing this might accelerate that project instead of stopping it, too. That's the other lesson here-you all aren't as safe in your holes as you think you are. Pandross knows you all better than you know each other. It was his job. Sit on it, if you will. Let's see just what hand is being played here."

Tarn thought about it, then sighed. "Very well. I will 'sit on' this, as you say it, at least for now. At least until you get far more information. Until you have enough to decide whether or not this is a case you truly wish to solve."

Maria was so glad to get back to that hot desert world she wanted to strip, but since Tarn's agents were there and we knew we were dealing with newly cleared people who would rather have kept us than let us go if they hadn't been ordered otherwise, we just regained our original jump-suit style clothing and headed back into the Labyrinth itself as quickly as possible. If they couldn't keep us, they sure didn't want us around. They had a real crew on that desert access

world working hard on what was probably the only main access into Tarn's world, making it solid as a vault, and they wanted nobody around who could describe what they were doing. I could have told them they had more worries than us, but I decided not to. Somebody like Tarn should know better.

There had to be other conjunction points- weak points-between this desert bridge world and Tarn's than just this convenient one. Any security man worth his salt and with the proper instruments and enough time could find them. Tarn could guard his main entrance all he wanted -his killer almost certainly got in and out through a basement window maybe hundreds or thousands of miles from here. I was, in fact, counting on that and praying that it was thousands. That would mean that whoever it had been would have a very long and arduous trek back to that "window" and then also have some problems moving on the desert world to a weak point useful enough to get into the main Labyrinth. I probably had days, but if the murder was well prepared in advance and was set up by agents working for Pandross, I might have weeks.

When we got back to our little office hideaway, we barely had time to relax before Voorhes called.

"How did it go with Tarn?" he asked me.

"Very instructive," I responded. "Also nasty. There was a murder while we were there-not Tarn, but an agent of somebody else for sure. Tarn is keeping it under wraps for a while and I'd appreciate your doing the same. We are on to something here and it's big and it's complicated and it's ugly, but I can't say any more yet. Any other invitations come in?"

"Uh, well-a murder you say . . . Hmph! Yes- we have most of them set up. Why?"

"If I could see Mancini next it would help a great deal," I told him.

"Mancini? Why?"

"Damn it! You and the rest have got to stop doing that if you want me to get this done for you! You want this done or are you just running me around to keep me busy? I'm sick of fighting for everything I need to do this job. I want Mancini. Period."

Voorhes seemed a bit taken aback, but, hell, like I told Tarn, I didn't volunteer for this. "Well, I'll see what I can do. Anything else?"

"Yes. Two things. First, I want the number and location of all known parallel duplicates of all nine of you and where they are now. Physical checks to see if they're still where they should be."

That got him interested. "Duplicates you say . . . Why do-oh, all right. Sorry. And what else?"

"If Maria is going to continue with me then she has to be with me at all times. I don't want her trotting off every so often to confess and so put on the record things she knows that I don't want our suspects to know. She needs something every few days or a week or so."

"Yes. So?"

"Wait a minute. I'm going to keyboard entry," I told him, then tapped out a series of instructions. I knew this terminal and system well and so I had no problems in leaving the echo off, so nothing I typed appeared on the screen.

"You got that?"

"Yes, I have it. And I, uh, can see your point. All right. I'll arrange it. Anything more?"

"No, that's it. Just get me to Mancini next. After that I probably should talk to Yugarin, and I also want a little chat with Stacy Cutler. The others I'll get to after, unless something comes up."

"No guarantees on the timing or order, but I'll see what I can do," he assured me. "Duplicates, eh? Fascinating . . ."

I signed off, turned, and saw Maria staring at me. "What have you done concerning me?" she asked sternly.

"As of now, I'm practically a bigamist," I told her. "You and me are going to eat, sleep, and go everyplace together. Inseparable, except when it's unavoidable, like back in Tarn's world. The lock here has already been reset if Voorhes is as good as his word. You can't leave without me now. No more sneaking back home. No confessing. I'm your confessor for the duration. In fact, you're

blocked out of your home world unless I'm with you."
She looked suddenly panicked. "But-I will die! Every five days ..."
"Taken care of," I told her. "We're getting enough of your formula to last for weeks, and if we need more we'll get that when we run low. We'll take one with us, and the rest will be in a dispensing module here that will give you one dose at a time when I give the password to the computer. You sneak any messages, confess anything we learn, or blow any information we don't want blown, and I might have real problems remembering that password. What we know we alone know until it's time. Your confessor also confesses to somebody and so on. If you don't know who's pulling your string and Tarn didn't, either, I sure as hell don't want that someone to know anything I don't wish to tell them."
"You-you can not do this!"

I sighed and flopped on the bed. "Baby, I've done it, and Voorhes is even now setting up the details. Don't worry. In a way it makes it easier on you."
"Easier? How?"

"Now you got a real stake in wanting me dead," I told her, rolling over and trying to get a decent nap.

Salvatore Mancini either believed in living dangerously or he was not as concerned as the others with any possible attempts against him, a fact I found revealing just on the face of it.

We'd always known that the opposition network controlled some Company stations and perhaps even some alleged Company worlds-we'd rooted out a lot of bad ones over the years ourselves-but I hadn't expected one of the big boys to feel secure in any area on Company maps. I had to admit it-I was less impressed with this feared underground "opposition" than I was totally disillusioned by the dear old Company, who apparently allowed its operations to be so loose and porous that you could do just about anything in, around, and through them without their noticing so long as the bottom line continued to be huge and the Company world and race rich, fat, and secure behind its very solid electronic walls.

I lost my awe of the Company early on, but these assholes owned the whole damned railroad and seemed incapable of catching whole hostile trains running around on their own tracks and in and out of their own station. That's nothing personal, Bill -when they blind your eyes and give you only a peashooter for defense and do something drastic only after the barn door's been left open and the horses escaped, it's a wonder we got anything done at all.

Anyway, Mancini had this Company world apparently bought and paid for. We walked right into a standard station I guess I'd passed a hundred times myself and never thought about and walked into the usual warehouse type building that was the ideal station. All enclosed, plenty of room, and they did so a lot of shipping and commerce.

In fact, there were thousands of huge cases lined up on the side of the entry floor, ready to be loaded into special containers and shipped up and down the line. Curiosity got the better of me; we'd no sooner stepped away from the still slightly hissing electronic cube and onto solid cement and I'd gotten the sight of those endless but perfectly identical cases lined up there than I walked over and read the stenciled lettering on many of the cartons, which was, to my surprise, in English.

I could hardly believe it, so I kept walking down the line of cartons, going on and on and piled maybe ten high, reading the boxes.

"You seem fascinated by the cartons," Maria noted. "Why? Is it important to the case?"

I shook my head no. "Uh uh. They're what's known as compact disks. A hundred to a carton, and maybe, oh-a thousand cartons. A hundred thousand compact disks of the best of Slim Whitman." I sighed. "I always wondered just where he was the best selling singer of all times. I guess this is it."

We continued to walk towards the exit stairs along the cartons when somebody on the control bridge above gave a shout. I couldn't tell what was being shouted, but it stopped me momentarily, so that a couple of cartons came crashing down just inches in front of me. I whirled, and there was a lot of action on the bridge and I heard footsteps running and a door slam.

"Someone tried to push them on you!" Maria shouted. "Shall I give chase?"

"Uh uh. If they can be caught they'll be run down by the people who know this place best." I bent down, examining the hundreds of compact disks that were all over the place after the boxes split when they hit the cement. I picked one up and looked at it, then tossed it away.

"Now I am really mad," I told her. "It would have been bad enough to be brained by Slim Whitman, but they tried to get me with 101 Strings. That's one obituary I just couldn't have stood." I sighed, and we walked towards the exit.

Two men in black uniforms-not military types, more like warehouse garb-came up to me. They looked like Bud and Al, the guys who tune up my car at the State College Boron station, but I figured they were station security.

"Mister Horowitz? Are you all right?" one of them asked, at least sounding sincere.

I nodded. "Yeah, we're O.K. Did you catch him?"

"I only saw a figure-too far to make out much else," he replied. "It looked like he had a Company uniform on, though. They're chasing him down, but there's like a couple of hundred guys around wearing uniforms like this. I wouldn't get my hopes up, but we'll sure as hell grill everybody."

"Big help. Look, can we get out of here and someplace where we can do what we came to do?"

"We got the outside sealed now, and only a few handpicked people are in here now," the security man responded. "I threw the security locks as soon as I could get to the control. Too late to shut him in, but we're secure now."

"You probably thought that ten minutes ago," Maria snapped.

He shrugged. "Come with me. I have explicit instructions on this matter and I think we want to clear the floor here-just in case."

I didn't have any arguments to that, but as we followed him his partner bent down and picked up one of the CDs. "Jeez!" he said. "101 Strings!" He paused, then added, "Well, at least it wasn't the Montovanis."

I wasn't sure I was going to like this world at all. Fortunately, I guess, I didn't have to. We followed the man up to the bridge itself and into the high-tech control center, past two Type Two humans who were monitoring the equipment. It was a risk to have Type Two people in the stations, but there were always a few in control no matter what. Some of the Type Two races were absolute wizards at both running and repairing the highly complex station machinery-something in what they could see or hear or some inbred talent for microforgery or something. Type Twos were humanoid but not at all human. This pair, maybe mates, had bulging black eyes and snouts like wild boars among their more lovable attributes.

We went into a back office, and I could see the elaborate extra security system even as we passed through it. There was an outer office, then more security system, then an inner office. The security man didn't knock; he opened the inner door and we were ushered into a large, comfortable-looking room with a nice desk, a small phone bank on it, and a couple of padded office chairs in front and on either side of it. In back of the desk sat Salvatore Mancini, looking every inch a fugitive from either a Godfather movie or an indictment in Newark. The office was smoky, and he was smoking a cigarette when we entered. From the looks of the ashtray on the desk, he seldom stopped smoking when he was awake. He did not rise to meet us but did nod, then gestured to the chairs. "Please, take seats," he told us, then looked at the security man. "That will be all for now, Brenner. Go find that traitor. You think on this--I will have someone hung up to dry for allowing anyone to get inside this very building who is not ours. You and your associates should make a decision on whether I hang up the traitor or perhaps you."

Brenner looked unhappy and started to say something, but Mancini silenced him.

"Go!"

Brenner went, closing the door after him.

I expected Mancini to sound like Marion Brando or at least Jack Nicholson, but he had a cultured baritone voice with just a trace of an English accent. Real classy. Still, the way he talked to Brenner suggested that my initial reaction

to his looks was closer to the mark, or he was putting on a fairly good act for us.

"You wanted to see me," he said impatiently, "and now you do. So speak to me. My time is valuable and I do not like to be in one place very long, particularly considering the incident outside just now."

"You don't live here, then?" I said more than asked. "We're just in a neutral but secure meeting point."

"That should be obvious."

"You seem pretty complacent about that attempt on me back there," I noted. "What if that was a Company man?"

"Not likely. A Company man would have made the attempt on me, not you. It doesn't matter, though. I have a number of ways out of here and I have never been caught, trapped, or otherwise compromised, and in the few minutes I have to be vulnerable I have a great deal of shielding and protection. One learns if one wishes to move about freely with unknown threats about. The known threats are bad enough."

I believed him on that, although I didn't like how casually he was taking it in spite of that. The penetration had to bug the hell out of him-unless he was either a superior actor at hiding his real self or he was the guy who ordered it. I decided to get right to the point.

"You worked out the .system for shutting down the Labyrinth," I began.

He nodded. "With Kanda, yes. The tolerances are so fine and the margins so slim that the kind of math required was beyond me. I have some of the best computers in any universe here, but unless you know the right questions to ask they are useless."

"I need to confirm a scenario I've got. Yugarin came up with the idea independently, then came to you to find out if it was possible or feasible. You took it, figured out how it could be done, took it to Kanda who did the math, from which you worked out the theories and set up the engineering of the actual project."

"You have a good grasp of it. I wonder why you needed to see me on this."

O.K., Tarn told me to ask, so I asked. "What are the odds of a complete success? As nearly as you and Kanda can figure them? That is, of shutting down the system beyond repair while leaving at least the vast bulk of worlds untouched?"

His big, black, bushy eyebrows rose. "You surprise me, Mister Horowitz. You really do. I assume you have also thought through what you already know might cost you?"

I nodded. "Beside the point in this matter, sir. Everything that's been happening to your organization is tied in with that project and the decision to go ahead with it. I no longer have any doubts about that. Will you answer my question?"

He shrugged. "Dead even of complete success. This is uncharted physics."

Even I was startled like that. "Fifty-fifty? You mean you're going ahead with this when there's only a fifty-fifty chance of doing it right?"

"Not as bad as all that. The odds of a partial success-a crippling of the system so badly that it could not be restored within a century or two- rise to eighty-three percent."

I whistled. "So there's a seventeen percent chance of it going completely wrong?"

He nodded. "But that's in either direction. It's in the nature of the thing. It encompasses all the possibilities other than complete or partial success, including the ones we can not think of because we can't imagine them-and including the fact that it will simply dim the lights and give the Company a temporary but curable cold."

"Yeah, well, maybe, but can you figure the odds, plus or minus whatever, that this will be a worst case scenario? That it will destroy every universe to which the Labyrinth is connected?"

"Oh, there's no chance of that," he said reassuringly. "The system is powered from the Zero Universe, it's true, which contains all of the energy and matter potential to create a universe but which somehow didn't go off in the Big Bang, and that's enough potential to disrupt a considerable amount, but certainly by

the time it is diffused through the billions of Labyrinth universes and who knows how many weak points it will be quite scattered."

I held up my hand. "Hold it-Doctor, isn't it? Well, I've got a B.A. in criminology so bear with me. I do read a lot and my wife tells me I'm bright, but this is a little outside my field. You're saying we get all this power from an uncreated universe? One in which the Big Bang never happened?"

"Essentially. When it was discovered it was probably smaller than the size of a common garden pea. The whole universe compressed into that. The only such one ever discovered. There's no Labyrinth opening to it-it can be accessed only in ways that would require you to get a doctorate or two in the correct fields of theoretical physics to begin to understand. As to understanding exactly what it is-I doubt if anyone does. But it's not necessary to understand it to use it any more than it's necessary to understand gravity before you fall down. It is true that it is an unexploded universe, but that's not quite true. It is terribly unstable, and it does give off incredible amounts of energy. What the ancestors of today's Company race did was to recognize what it was and find a way to trap and harness that energy-limitless energy for all practical purposes, although I have just assured you that it is finite. There is even a school of thought that believes that the Zero universe will eventually explode, that it's in the pre-explosive stage. You know how each universe differs a bit, and all differ temporally-only most close to each other differ only minutely."

I nodded. "There are worlds where a year there can be just weeks here. I got trapped in one of those once." It suddenly hit me what he was saying. "You mean that this thing is just on a different clock? That it might go off on its own any second?"

"A universe is self-contained. It knows no clock until it creates one. I mean just that."

"Holy shit! Then by tapping into this thing, they took a chance that it wouldn't go. They're still taking that chance."

He nodded. "It's not such an awful chance. About the same chance as the sun going suddenly nova or a giant meteor smacking the Earth out of orbit. The odds are that we could go millions or even billions of years before it happened. And if it did, the regulators simply would disengage at the shock and power would be lost, which is what we are trying to achieve by different means. But, you see, they only think that will happen-or, rather, the Company folk take it as a matter of faith by this point. Nobody really knows, since it has never happened. And if it did, it would still not destroy the other universes, just the other Earths and perhaps the basic solar system."

I felt a rock in my stomach. "And what's the odds of that happening with your project? The best educated guess." I really didn't care if Mars survived if all the Earths blew up.

He threw up his hands. "No idea. Best guess? Five percent, maybe."

Five percent. Maybe! Or maybe ten. What were the A-bomb odds? Like one in several hundred thousand or maybe a million. Would they have gone through with that test if the odds had been five percent? Or maybe ten? Or maybe maybe?

"And you're willing to bet that it won't happen."

"I am willing to gamble when the odds are better than eighty percent in my favor, yes. I can see that you are shocked. Cutler and Tang had the same problems with it, but I am pretty confident." He leaned forward and stared straight into my eyes. "You see, Mister Horowitz, it has given me the first true excitement I have felt in twenty years. They made us walking dead, but now we are alive again-I am alive again. The knowledge and understanding we will gain from this will be incalculable. We will know things about the nature of energy and matter such as no one could ever dream to understand, possibly the very key to creation itself."

"If it works," I put in.

"Yes. If it works. If not, we will all die and, therefore, it will be irrelevant to me, but I shall not feel a thing."

I looked over at Maria to see how she was following or taking this, and she looked confused. I was following this in a loose way-the same way I could

understand the consequences of a hydrogen bomb dropped on my home town even if I didn't know exactly how it worked or what it was doing in scientific terms. I kind of figured her education might be a little less broad than mine, and I wondered how she was following this.

She wasn't, well, but she asked a good question in the pause. "If this-universe-is needed for all the power," she said, unsure of whether or not she was making a fool of herself but really curious, "how did your own people punch through long ago? And how did the Company reach the place in the first place?"

Mancini chuckled. "Oh, one can do a progressive punch through the weak points with very little energy—a medium fusion reactor would do it. And then you build another in the next world, or find other means, and so forth. Of course, this is quite limiting, as it takes years to build a decent fusion reactor and sometimes the natives might object. They had to basically conquer and subjugate the worlds progressively. It took generations, of course, but the Company folk are old enough from the point of view of most of human history on worlds like the ones that produced us that we don't realize how long this all took. Until, about four hundred years ago in roughly our time, they hit upon the Zero and figured out how to use it. That began the age of Labyrinth expansion and growth which lasted over a century more, then the consolidation, the present full system which was still rooted in imperialism and colonialism, and the resultant dry rot of the present-day Company folk."

"Sounds like they got stuck and lapsed into decadence pretty quickly," I noted. "Not really. Consider where your ancestors were three hundred years ago, and what they knew. It is plenty of time. In my own world, a vibrant, brilliant Roman Empire decayed into a long age of stratification and darkness for almost a thousand years until it fell apart from its own dry rot. The Company folk did not have that luxury. Their standard of living and technological level and near infinite reach of whatever they needed and their automatic feeding of all the energy they would ever need has kept them there. They cannot collapse of their own weight. We once thought that there was a chance that they could be induced to collapse from within but we have determined that it is against their basic culture to do so. The most that might ever be expected is an exchange of places within a culturally identical society. Nor can they be brought down from outside. We tried that several ways and I am not certain even now that even if we had succeeded that it would have worked in the end. Those whom we controlled would not be sophisticated enough to be able to conceal their dependencies and would be eliminated by those below."

"The perfect empire," I noted. "So long as you're an Imperial citizen."

"Indeed. But it is fed by the umbilical cord of the Labyrinth and the limitless energy it supplies as well. Cut that cord, and they die. Pull that plug, as it were, and they die. We believe that even the greatest risks are preferable to eternal domination."

I looked at him squarely. "How did Pandross react to the plan? Was he for it, against it, or what?"

Mancini shrugged. "It was impossible to know Pandross. He had thousands of operatives yet in all the years we knew him, going back to the old days and the Company schools, no one really knew him. He was, you might say, a total loner. Humorless, colorless, neutral even socially. Now that you mention it, I can not recall a single initiative on his part in all the plotting and planning. He simply sat there, making comments when his area of expertise was touched upon, and went with whatever we decided." He got suddenly very reflective. "Yes, you know—it is odd. We all lost a great deal back then, and it changed us, but Pandross . . . One never had the impression that he ever had anything to lose." I nodded and rose from my chair and Maria, after being a little startled, did the same.

"Well, that's all I need for now. Thank you for the time, Doctor. I hope we can get back into the Labyrinth with less trouble than we had getting from there up to here."

"By now my men will have swept the entire place. I will guarantee your safe exit, as I intend to leave the same way."

I nodded, and turned to go, then stopped. "This is a very good local security setup," I noted, pointing to the door frame. Only a pro would ever even notice what was embedded within it. "Who installed it? It doesn't look like Company work."

"It's not," Mancini replied. "Pandross designed it and his people put it in. He and they did all the security for our network."

"Have you had somebody of his caliber but not one of his staff come in to your installations here and elsewhere and modify or install additional guards since Pandross died?" I asked him.

"Uh-no. There seemed no need, since it is keyed to my own coding systems which even Pandross did not know."

I sighed. "Amateurs. There's always an override, Doctor, known only to the installer. Some nasty little work-around that only a top expert could ever know or detect, different for each installation. Otherwise if one of these went bad you could be trapped inside here indefinitely, or locked out of important installations." I turned and looked back at Mancini, who seemed very startled by that news.

"There is? I had never thought of that. . . . But, surely it makes no difference unless it really goes bad, I should think. After all, Pandross is dead." He paused, looking suddenly nervous. "It doesn't make any difference, does it?"

"I would change the system, Doctor, starting with wherever you wanted protected most. Good day."

And, leaving him off-balance, we walked out, through the control room, and down into the warehouse. The floor rumbled a bit, and there was the sound of distant but powerful machines, and as we stood there we watched the Labyrinth form in the center of the warehouse floor.

Maria was nervous and looking around, but I calmed her. "We'll get out. If he wanted to kill me he'd have killed me.'"

"Who? Pandross?"

"No, of course not. Mancini. Honey, nobody, not even Pandross, gets this close with this many security men around, the control room staffed, and the big boss in attendance. With an army, maybe, but not one guy. Not even a rat. And if, somehow, they did, since nothing is absolutely impossible, there is no way such a one could get away and no way somebody smart enough to get inside here would depend on a few lousy record cartons."

"Unless these security men were still working for Pandross," she responded.

"I'm impressed. You're starting to think like a detective. But, no, not in this case. These guys would be hand-picked by Mancini and be regularly put through a brain laundry just to make sure of them. Besides, he wasn't upset, nervous, or in any kind of hurry. There was no sense of danger coming from him at all. For a guy in his own element and laying low for fear of a possible assassin, the idea of somebody getting in would give the toughest man fits. Uh uh. And the security guys were far too unconcerned for an offense that would under real circumstances get them a very slow and unpleasant death. No, they rigged it up to impress me."

"But-why? The only one who might want to scare you off would be the killer or his accomplice, and you said they'd never show themselves in their own element."

"Yeah, but this isn't Mancini's usual element and there's a lot of excuses here. But it might be simpler than you think. It might just be that he doesn't approve of me, from the opposition, snooping around and learning their best secrets. He was just putting me on notice, that's all. Not a word of this from this point on, though- remember."

"Not even at the-office?"

"Especially not at the office. That place and even the computer is bugged three ways from Sunday by all and sundry."

"Then where are we going now?"

"We've only killed a couple of hours on this one. We check back in and try and get the next appointment."

Voorhes wasn't in when we got back, and the computer showed no new data on possible duplicates, nor were there any messages from anyone else saying how delighted they would be to talk to me, so there wasn't much to do but eat and

relax.

I already had a fair amount of information, and when I had the data on the duplicates of the big boys I probably would have enough to solve their own little mystery more or less to their satisfaction, but I had a far greater interest in seeing the other five and in solving the other two problems before me that none of the eight were interested in me solving. And a third, very personal problem of remaining alive and safeguarding me and mine when I had all I needed.

Maria, who by Voorhes' own acquiescence to my controls over her proved she wasn't along primarily as a spy but as my executioner given certain preset conditions, was frustrated by not being able to discuss the case or ask me many questions while in the office.

"No matter what you say or do, I can not totally accept your limits," she told me, "if only because of my own functions. For example, I must tell you that we were followed in the Labyrinth."

"Huh?" I was getting too damned cock-sure of myself while looking down my nose at the others for committing the same sin if that were true. "Who?"

"No way to tell. The figure was always three cubes back, and dressed in very dark, nondescript clothing. I thought nothing of it on the way to Mancini's, since we were on the main line and many people would be going in that direction farther than we, but he was there again on the way back. That is when I knew."

"And you didn't tell me until now?"

"You said to not speak of anything in here," she reminded me.

"Yeah, well, I expect some common sense with that as well. Wait a minute. I'm going to get the security scanner from the kit over there."

Since I'd insisted on rigging my own extra system for the office, I had a fair amount of equipment and for the first time this was going to come in handy. I didn't have anything full blown like I'd have on a Company project, but the handheld and the hoop scanner would do. I was pretty sure that if it was there it wouldn't be all that sophisticated.

Maria set the things off like New Year's Eve, and I didn't fare much better. I ordered Maria to strip-ah! Man! What power, only it didn't count for much here-and had her go through again and there was only a low reading. Then I did the same, enduring Maria's criticisms of my exotic pear shape and other sags, and got the same results. The clothing was saturated with radiation-a kind harmless to humans or animals or most living things, but easy to pick up if you had the right equipment, especially inside the Labyrinth.

"But how-how could anyone . . . ?" she asked, befuddled.

"A hundred ways. It might have been Tarn's people with their own clothes over ours that would have saturated what we wore beneath, or it might be the way the stuff is coming back from the laundry each day. I've never had call to use the system to track somebody in the Labyrinth but I know of it."

"Who, then? Voorhes?"

"Maybe. We'll ask, although I don't know if we'll get a straight answer."

"But is this not a major risk? I mean, if they can track us, then can not the Company do the same?"

"It could-if it had us located from the moment we enter the main system, but that presupposes that we're blown and that the Company's been tailing us all along. I don't think that's so. Mark-ham would need Headquarters approval for such a thing, and when he got it he'd also get one of those ham-headed Company race security bosses rushing in to take the credit. They'd have stormed Tarn by now and certainly nabbed Mancini. No, it's not the Company. I have an idea who it might be, but I'm not worried right now."

"Then do we get our own washers in here or something, and all new clothing checked out as clean? I believe I could manage it."

"No, no. It would be handy if you can pick up some clean stuff to use, but I suspect that in my case my original clothes will be O.K. and I can always detox my shoes when I have to with what I have here. No, it's important that they don't change procedures, if they're not listening to us and doing so right now. Let 'em follow. We just want to make sure that we can squeak out without ringing a lot of bells if we have to-so you'll need to pick up something clean at some

point and keep it here."

I wanted to make sure that all our listeners, no matter whom they might be or where, got the idea that I was an old fuddy-duddy, self-conscious of my appearance and traditional in my moral outlook. Now that I knew it was the clothes I also knew of at least one way I might possibly slip out-if it came to that. I had no intention of telling them, or Maria, how so that somebody could adjust and close that little loophole which, after all, just might not really be there. If I needed it, though, I wanted to have it.

So I started pulling on my pants again and only when I sat down on the bed did I notice Maria standing there, still naked, looking at me. "Problem?" I asked her. "Do you find me-unattractive?" she asked, sounding a bit worried.

"No, I find you very attractive indeed." I wasn't quite sure what brought this on. "I find this situation very difficult and very tempting. It is difficult not to capitalize on it."

"Then why don't you?" she asked, straight-faced and sincere.

I knew she damn well wasn't in love with me. I had no romantic illusions in that department, and I hadn't done an awful lot to be romantic, either. "Because I am married and I am in love with my wife. The only other reason for doing it would be to gain some major advantage, and I don't see much possibility of that."

"Love is an antiquated concept invented by upper-class writers to disguise their own lusts," she responded. "Likewise marriage is an antiquated and obsolete system wherein lust and cohabitation somehow needed to be legalized or licensed so that the State could control people better. It is merely legalized prostitution."

"Don't knock it if you haven't tried it. Of course, many people try it and a lot of them knock it because it's tough over the long haul, after the lust has gone. And the state has little to do with it except to write the license cheap and easy when you do it and then ream you if it needs to be dissolved. But love-it's often, maybe usually, confused with lust, which is why there are so many divorces, but it's real. It can die out, if you aren't careful, and takes work, but it's worth it. And if both partners do what they want to do best for the marriage, then it's not prostitution. You can have sex without marriage or love-that's a kind of prostitution-but when you have love as well it's different. It's better all around. It means something."

"What?"

"My wife is my best friend, my closest confidant, the person outside of myself I respect and care for the most, and, while we're very different, we know each other so well we often know what the other is thinking or how they'll behave. I miss her. I wish I had her here on this case. And while you're young, attractive, and very available, you're not her."

She shook her head in wonder. "I do not understand this. It is babble and nonsense. You mean to tell me that you have never cheated on your wife nor she on you?"

"No, I can't say that-at least about her," I responded, "although it was under a coercive set of conditions, not voluntary. As for me-no. Never really have in spite of occasional thoughts to the contrary now and again and a lot of temptation. With me it'd be voluntary, deliberate. I know how much it hurt me when she did it even though I knew she had no choice, and I understand how much more that hurt would have been if it had been true cheating. I couldn't inflict that on her. Not deliberately."

She stared at me the way somebody would stare at a Martian. "You are the strangest man I have ever met. An anachronism, someone not real but out of an old novel in an earlier age. I think you are quite mad. Who or what do you think you are?"

"Nick Charles," I responded, fixing myself a drink and not elaborating further.

"Now put your pants on. Or do you really crave me that much?"

"You are a singularly ugly specimen of manhood," she said flatly. "On my world such imperfections were genetically corrected years ago. I just felt in the mood, and you have made certain that I cannot go out and find someone better."

I would have liked to think she was just getting back at me, but it was probably

the truth.

On the other hand, maybe it really was the truth. That brought up an interesting idea.

When she was dressed, I beckoned her over to the desk and took out a pad and pencil. "Would it be worth it to you to have some freedom if you also had to trust me? Write all answers. They can't visually see what we're writing here." She read it, took the pad, and wrote, "?"

"If I let you go out then I have to trust that you will not reveal the information we have to anyone. If you do, you will undo all my work. But you can not exit without me. That would mean leaving me alone in the Labyrinth," I wrote.

The proposal startled her, but I could see it tempted her as well. I hadn't realized my constant company was that odious, but if I were her and stuck in this situation I'd probably feel the same way no matter who I was stuck with. I was counting on it.

She took the pencil and wrote, "But how could I trust you? You control my energy, but I have no hold over you. And if you betrayed us or we were even found out, I would die in an ugly manner."

We were gonna have a real bonfire here with this amount of paper. "My word is all I can give you. But I have some work for you that only you can do, without me, as well."

"Where would you go?" she wrote.

"When the next appointment is made. I'll go to it and you'll go off, on your own errand and take time to do whatever else you like or need. I would be under your security anyway until you came and picked me up. What do you say?" I wrote to her.

It was tough, I knew, but that last had given her the out she needed. She nodded, then wrote, "What do you want me to do?"

"Memorize the following," I wrote back, "then we'll destroy all this. I need you to talk to friends in security and find the answers to some questions. Make any excuse, but do not let them know it comes from me."

She was hooked, just as I'd hoped when I talked Voorhes into this arrangement. I needed the legs and contacts she would have and I lacked in this alternate environment, and if she didn't blow anything I'd have what I needed.

Carefully, item by item, I gave her just what I needed to know.

8.

Assembling the Jigsaw

There still wasn't any information from Voorhes or anyone else on the duplicates, which was a key answer, but there was another round of interviews scheduled. I was glad to be moving again; I needed to complete this as quickly as possible, because while I was circumstantially figuring out the puzzle O.K. and, with Maria's help, maybe the more personal problem as well, but even when I had a sufficient amount of information to convince myself that I was right, that only brought up the other obvious problem-how to survive the solution.

Not that I had any kind of ironclad case, nor would I. Handcuffed and restricted as I was, there was no way I was ever going to make any sort of case that would stand up to close examination, but I'd faced that kind of case before as well, most notably when I'd deduced the guilty and traitorous Company director who'd made certain you could never prove him guilty of a hangnail. In the end, it didn't really matter to me whether I could prove the case to the satisfaction of others. Frankly, I didn't care if the bastards killed each other off or ran for deep cover and dissolved their little club or what. But the solution, the motive, the who, what, when, where, and why, was very important to me indeed.

I mean, even if I figured out how to keep my own head from getting blown off for good, what good would that do if I couldn't also prevent them from maybe killing every human being in existence? I mean, I was human, and Brandy, and Dash as well, and I had no desire to include any of them in the Twilight of the Gods that might be coming up.

Nor was I kidding myself that I was living on borrowed time, an unwelcome intruder let loose to do something that might be useful, might not, to them, but in any case somebody to be eliminated as soon as any usefulness I even potentially had was over.

The invitation to Yugarin was just what I needed next, not only to get some information from him but also to get Maria on her own way. The major problem was the Phantom in the Labyrinth. If we had a tail on us, then that tail would know that we had split.

I didn't have any illusions that we could jump whoever it was, or that we'd even know who it was if we somehow got a good look. The fact was, the Phantom was probably more than one person and almost certainly represented a double-check on security, put there as a sort of guarantee of me and of Maria. I didn't want to blow my little plot for getting out of their tracers right now, either-I'd need that later, maybe to slip Maria-but we had to teach the tail a lesson, scare him off enough to divert him, and then by the time he got his electronics going to take up the tail once again to mislead him.

In fact, it was Maria who came up with the gimmick and it was worthy even of, well, me. The desk chair was one of the usual kinds; a kind of padded, thin, typist's chair with four casters on a stalk. Like most electronic tails, the radiation tracker tracked only blips based on the clothing, not warm bodies. A set of irradiated clothes on that chair would register as a second person on anybody's tracker, and with the casters it'd be a cinch to roll ahead of me. I already had the cover story for Yugarin's security boys, and I thought they'd buy it and so did Maria, and it gave a nice excuse for her not being there and them babysitting me, too.

Of course, she'd have to be stark naked and checked to make sure she wouldn't still show up before we exited, which was certainly a problem for her, but she didn't seem to think it was a serious one. Apparently she knew where to get a good, clean set of clothes without raising a lot of eyebrows and I didn't question that further. I just hoped we got away with it all the way. If they figured this out, Maria was right-we both would probably be dead soon after-and everything would be for nothing. Still, you have to take big risks for big stakes, and this was maybe the ultimate high-stakes game. If it worked, though, I would have successfully turned the tables on them and be running my own independent game.

They were banking on my moral sense that I wouldn't do anything stupid and get a whole world zapped. That was their big hold on me. Even so, they'd saddled me with Maria, a low-level agent who would follow whatever orders she was given, including executing me. In a sense, their faith in me was touching and their faith in their own double and triple redundancy security on me was even more heart-rending.

Just like the company, they could somehow maintain a comfortable double standard that I might just be good enough to solve their problem but nowhere near their equal when it came to playing their kind of games. They were very confident that they had set immutable rules for me.

I figured it was about time to change the rules.

When we got ready to leave, Maria disrobed and took a shower, which would look and sound normal, and I managed to get the chair on a pretext over towards the exit wall where I was pretty sure there was no visual scan but there was some of my stuff. I'd often used it as a stool, so it wouldn't appear odd to anybody.

And it also gave a good reason for me to have my security kit.

Naturally, they'd know we were on to their irradiation scheme, but I didn't think the kind of minds I was dealing with right now would consider that more than a point in my favor for noticing it. Pandross, now, might have been a different story, but he was the least of my worries right now.

Maria came out, picked up her clothes casually, and came over towards me. We struck up an inane conversation about what we'd do when we reached Yugarin, and during that time she wiped herself all over with a towel, then I set up the clothes on the chair and then checked her with the meter and hoop. Not a hundred percent clean, but she would maybe show up real close as a ghost trace, of which there were bound to be many, and not as anything solid. She also had every

intention of ducking out of the cube when possible and waiting until I was well away before coming back in and getting on her way.

There wasn't much danger of her being naked in the Labyrinth in and of itself; there were often naked or nearly naked folks in there. Some of these worlds were interesting, and others required some prep at the station end. If it was kill or be killed and for the kind of stakes I was playing for, I guess I'd do it, but I probably wouldn't consider it in her position. Well, we were different, and in this case the difference was in my favor.

Maria entered the tunnel with me in her birthday suit, it was true, but hardly defenseless. The computer had given directions on how to find Yugarin; I wasn't gonna get lost in the process, so we started off, her a bit in front of me and pushing that chair, making one hell of a sight.

The guy was good; I'll give him that. But if you know you're being followed, and you train yourself to spot a tail, there's almost nobody who can stay completely hidden or nondescript, particularly in the barrenness of the Labyrinth. What was real impressive was how he hung back from us, not just in the third cube back, which was about the limits of our visibility, but near the back of that cube, just beyond our sight. The thing was, nobody you're following ever keeps a steady pace unless you're following soldiers on the march or a precision drill team, so by just easing up a bit or occasionally stopping, as if to adjust a shoe or something, anyone that far back would become visible for a short while until they realized that we'd slowed or stopped and faded back.

In a way, I kind of felt sorry for him. In the sterile confines of the Labyrinth there wasn't any real way to follow somebody without going a little bit nuts. Kind of like when I had a small-time punk back in Bristol try and use me to locate a witness he wanted to ice and that I had to talk to. I wasn't real sure he was back there, so instead of taking the police car I took a bus. Busses stop every block or two and even when they're going they stop and start and keep to the curb side. Imagine you're in a car following a transit bus sometime when you're in a city and you'll begin to see what I put that punk through. This was kind of like that-now that we knew he was there.

The other thing was, if he was far enough back for us not to see him clearly, then the same was true in reverse. He was depending more on his little tracker than his eyeballs, and we counted on that. Maria had already picked her spot, and now we were there. She gave me a hand signal, and I could see a nice, tropical kind of scene on the right cube face that looked like the sort of place I wouldn't mind going to myself, and I suddenly stopped, whirled, and began walking briskly back towards the shadow.

He was real startled for a moment, and for just an instant I caught a detailed glimpse of him- fairly tall, dressed in some kind of brown uniform, and I got the idea he was young, somehow, as well. He stopped as soon as he saw me walking, of course, and immediately began back-tracking, but by this time I'd left Maria two cubes behind. As soon as I saw the tail vanish to my eyes, I stopped, turned again, and walked back, this time to my trusty office chair. There was no sign of Maria, not even in the tropical scene, so I wasn't sure whether that was the one she used or if it was some disguised one on one of the black faces or what, but that one nice scene was the one I'd use.

I began walking forward again, casually pushing the chair with the clothes draped over it ahead of me. It was well made; the casters were a dream to push. Now I'd really started the tail, and he'd acted the way you or I might act when faced with an instant decision, but now he'd recovered, and checking his board, he still got two close blips, and since neither of us seemed to be challenging him and both of us were going in the other direction, he took no other action but just reestablished his tail. That was just fine.

I was a little nervous that Yugarin's switch might be attuned to the two of us, or at least might balk at registering an office chair, but when I got there I was automatically shoved to a siding, chair and all. The thing was obviously keyed to my code as well as Maria's, and I began to relax. When I'd gone three cubes in on the siding, though, I did another panic stop and reverse and was surprised to find that the shadow was no longer there. Either that or he was

being doubly cautious.

Well, there wasn't any reason to give the trick away more than I had to. When I got to the exit, the only exit allowed, I left the chair and clothes in the cube just outside. If the shadow made it in he'd know he'd been tricked but then it would be his problem explaining that. Me, I didn't want to push that damned chair any more.

I came out inside some structure. Not really a station, more a substation and of fairly limited access, kind of like the one in my back yard. It wasn't staffed or heated, and it was damp and chilly, although not super-cold. The thing seemed to be a wooden shack, and I spotted a door, went over to it, and pushed, walking out onto a pastoral scene of rolling hills and far-off trees and lots and lots of grass. I turned and examined the structure and, so help me, it looked from this side like one double pot outhouse. Not that it would fool anybody if that was what it was intended to look like; no smell and no flies.

I had kind of expected a welcoming committee or something. The place looked pretty but uninhabited and desolate. I wondered if I had been stood up, or if maybe Yugarin was going to come in behind me. I hoped not. Wherever it was it was autumn-maybe forty, forty-five degrees with a light wind and half the leaves colorfully on the trees and the other half decomposing on the ground. Not the best or most comfortable conditions for a picnic, that was for sure.

Suddenly two guys strode up the side of a nearby hill and came towards me. They were wearing funny-looking uniforms of blue and red with the big buttons and braid and all, like maybe the Queen's guard or something, or guys out of a Foreign Legion movie. They had more conventional shiny-billed army type hats matching the blue of their tunics, and high-topped boots that looked well worn. One of 'em had a fancy moustache, the other gigantic sideburns, and they both had that posture of military men.

One came up, gave me an unexpected salute which I didn't return, having been honorably discharged years ago from my own service, and said, "Meestar Hovarvitz, dere vas to be two uv you."

So that's why they'd laid low right off. "We were being tailed in the Labyrinth," I told them, then realized that to a guy who spoke English like he did that would make no sense at all. "Followed. We didn't know by whom. So as soon as I came in here, my-partner-went to see if she could find or trap whoever it was. She may join us later, although I expect that she'll try and set a trap for whoever it is to be sprung when I leave. She is not important here anyway, not with ones like you to guard and help me."

The one guy thought about it a moment, and I could tell he was the type who didn't like anything to be out of place or out of order, but he finally decided that my logic was impeccable. Besides, what the hell else could he do?

"Pliz come vith us," he said at last, making his decision.

I didn't even want to guess at the accent, but it sure wasn't American or Spanish or west European.

"I hope it's not too far," I replied. "I'm a little out of shape."

"Ve haff de horzes chust a bit beyond here," he responded. "Uh-you do know how to ride de horzes?"

"I can ride one of them," I responded. The guy sounded like a cross between somebody deliberately doing bad German with something of a Russian accent mixed in and a little of Scandinavia just to add total incomprehensibility.

Yugarin was supposed to know English. I hoped this wouldn't be the brand of English he knew.

They had a horse for me, with a decent military saddle, and I climbed aboard, glad to ride, although I was out condition even for riding and I knew from bitter experience that my thighs and rear would kill me in a little while. There was another, empty, for Maria, and I was surprised when they didn't at least take it along. I began to suspect we weren't alone.

I took a look around and was startled to spot several figures in the trees nearby, nicely hidden. Snipers or guards or lookouts of some kind, that was for sure, but primitive. Of course, Yugarin controlled the switch and there was no telling what nice little traps he-or probably Pandross- had laid.

They took it easy on me, adopting a fairly conservative pace, but after maybe a

half an hour we'd gotten well away from the substation and in fact had come to a modest dirt road. We turned on to it, me getting chillier and wishing I had one of their nice wool uniform coats, and followed it for some miles more.

We came, eventually, to the sea-or, rather, some mighty big lake since I couldn't smell salt- and to a small settlement on a bluff overlooking the shoreline. There was something of a small town there, with a fair number of uniformed soldiers and, surprising to me, a number of women as well, all wearing long, heavy wool dresses and fur caps.

There was a lot of shouting and comments to us and to one another as we rode in, all in a language that sounded like nothing I'd heard before-and a little of everything I'd heard before. Kind of like somebody had taken all the languages and dialects of northern and eastern Europe and shuffled them all together and come up with something new out of the old.

I had been pleased with my performance on horseback and didn't really feel it at all. I wondered if maybe the dampness and cold was great enough so I didn't notice, or maybe it was like riding a bicycle-something which, once you got it, you kept. But when we pulled up outside this one big wooden building with a fancy insignia painted on it and a lot of words in what looked like the Cyrillic alphabet, or a reasonable facsimile thereof, and I got down off that horse that I almost collapsed from the pain and stiffness. I wondered what kind of first impression I'd give if I duck-walked in. .

Steeling myself and trying not to let the snickers from the small crowd watching get to me, I straightened up and followed the pair into the big place.

It was kind of cozy inside, particularly after the ride and the chill. There were thick rugs on the floor and on the wall, in the Slavic tradition and also providing a fair amount of insulation, and a substantial wood stove in the center surrounded by a fire pit. Around the stove and room were many chairs, reclining mats, and the like, and some small wooden tray tables. The place looked more rustic than primitive from this vantage point; kind of like you'd expect some national park lodge to look.

There was nobody else there, but there was a door to an inner area, and I stood there and waited for my cue.

"Vait here. I vill tell de Profezzor dat you are here."

He walked over to the inner door, snapped more or less to attention, and knocked smartly three times. There was a muffled answer from inside, and he opened the door, walked in, and closed it again behind him. I decided that there was no reason for me to stand at attention and sank into one of the chairs.

I had to say that most of these guys didn't pick comfort or convenience for their hideaways, and went more for security than really burying themselves deep. They controlled the ins and outs of their little private preserves, and apparently weren't terribly concerned that somebody might blow their private switch and trap them inside. That, of course, implied that they picked worlds with back doors, as it were, and could if need be access the main Labyrinth at another point known only to them. You'd probably have to go a long distance and then have a lot of inconvenience and travel, but the back door was a certainty. Still, you had to wonder. Voorhes had that Amazon colonial place where even the ice had to come from a private refrigerator in the station, and Tarn had his mountain castle with no central heating and no running water, and now this. Mancini was probably different-his sort wouldn't want to be more than two rooms from a computer terminal-but he hadn't been interested in letting me see his place, which might even be the kind of cul de sac they found for my own office. The door opened, and Moustache Mouth came out, beckoned to me, and said, "De Profezzor vill zee you now. Come."

I got up, feeling every mile of the ride, and entered what could only be described as a typical if a bit out of character private office. There were maps and papers everywhere-Yugarin hadn't made any particular concessions to my arrival nor did he seem to feel the need to meet elsewhere, as Mancini had. In a way, that worried me.

The office was a mess, though, almost as bad as mine. Add to the extreme clutter the fact that Yugarin was a heavy cigarette smoker and you got some of the

picture. In the center of it all, in a comfortable office chair in front of a long table filled with papers, was the great man himself, dressed somewhat like a monk in the old Russian tradition, with brown fitted robe and big gold cross around his neck. With that wild hair and scraggly, unkempt beard, he kinda looked like Rasputin.

But it is the eyes that are often the most revealing part of a person's personality and intent. These blazed with a kind of intensity that almost shouted, "I'm nutty as a fruit cake and meaner than a drill sergeant."

What he actually said, in pretty good and fairly neutral English, was, "Well, Mister Horowitz- where is your guardian angel?"

"Chasing phantoms," I responded. "What's the difference? She's of no real use here, and I'm not exactly going to lead a revolution or overthrow the empire all by myself and in your domain. By the way-what the heck is this place, anyway?" He laughed, got up, and cleared off a pile of junk that revealed an otherwise totally hidden chair Sherlock Holmes couldn't have deduced, and waved me to sit. I was sore and I sat.

"This place," he said, lighting a cigarette, "is what is somewhat jokingly called the Holy Tartar Empire. It's none of those, but they had to call it something. It is what remains of a once great and proud people laid waste by chemical and bacteriological weapons. Never underestimate the human mind, Horowitz. They never invented nuclear weaponry and worse here, but they still managed to find a way to reduce a population of four thousand million plus to a few widely isolated pockets of desperate humanity. The switch you used was a Company switch, not one of the old ones, abandoned and sealed off in quarantine and listed as not to be entered for thousands of years."

I grew uncomfortable. "I assume it's not as deadly as all that now."

He chuckled, apparently enjoying my discomfort. "No, it's clean-possibly cleaner than most worlds-but quite sad. These people here-they are the survivors, the ones whose grandparents didn't die, and who found a small pocket where things still grew normally, although it was a nasty place. We brought them some animals and better tools and they have been quite grateful to us, and very hospitable. Some of the nasty micro-organisms, mutated over the years, still exist, and might pose a threat to them if they went too far, but it's funny. This world is just different enough from ours-yours or mine or many others-that those pests die if they get into our systems. Just a little difference, perhaps in biochemistry, or vitamins, or hormones, or solar radiation-who knows? But we, Horowitz-and most people from other universes-are poison to their germs. So, relax."

I had an uncomfortable thought that something like germs in the Labyrinth air exchange system might readily close the thing down, but I dismissed it for now. The air was exchanged with the various worlds with which the cubes came in contact. Each cube was essentially self-contained, so there'd be only a tiny bleedover, and you'd certainly infect all the worlds any organism contacted. It wasn't very practical, but it didn't make me feel any better.

"All right, I'm relaxed in that department, although I can't see how you can work in here without setting this place on fire. Shall I ask you some questions now?"

He nodded. "Go ahead."

"First of all, how well did you know Pandross?"

He thought a moment. "Oddly, not at all well, in spite of our long association. He was an odd sort of chap, very much a loner. I doubt if anyone, certainly not any of us, really knew him closely or well."

There it was again-that same distance between Pandross and the others.

"But he was dependable and reliable at all times," Yugarin continued, "and he had an affinity for anything mechanical or electrical that defied rational explanation. He was the only man I ever knew who could fix a machine he'd never seen before by opening it up and somehow deducing or tracing just exactly how it worked and why. He created many of Kanda's intricate mathematical computer programs when we're certain he didn't understand the math the program did. I don't know how that's possible, but that was Pandross."

I nodded. "Did he ever spook anybody? Any of the others? I mean, I've known guys

of that type myself and even the people they worked for felt real nervous and uncomfortable around them."

"Oh-I see. You are looking into motivation. I doubt that Tarn was very close to him, and Voorhes kept some distance as well. Mendelez tried to seduce him once, early on, and he flew into the only rage I can ever recall from him-indeed, the only real emotion I ever saw him display except a child-like happiness when playing with his gadgets. It was a cold rage, but she never quite forgave him for it and never directly spoke to him again. But that was years ago."

I was chasing something, something I'd sensed but couldn't pin down from my earliest conversations with this crew, and I wasn't about to let it go yet. But there were other things in the room that also caught my interest, and I stood up. Like a map of the twin Zero regions, right and left of the Zero World, with all the sidings and switches in, including mine, that I knew about and many I didn't. And the one to home sweet home, if I could get a look at it, along with a number of others, had big red circles around it.

"Sorry," I said as apologetically as I could, "but it's been a while since I rode horses and I've got to stand and stretch a bit or I don't think I'll ever stand again."

"Feel free, but there is not much room to move."

"I don't need to move much, just shift weight for circulation." I paused, then continued, "Your- organization-is given to complex, Machiavellian plans, if you know the term."

He nodded. "Go on."

"Your attempt to switch key people for doubles in some central Company worlds was like that, and the plot to hook the Directors on drugs was also similar. I assume there are many more I don't know about because either they worked or were before my time. Still, there's a consistency in your group thought that builds a pattern. Whose idea was the double replacement scheme?"

Yugarin thought back. "Voorhes came up with that one, if I remember, although we all participated to a degree. It was rather successful to a degree."

"Cranston was Voorhes' man, then?" I angled over and got a very good look at the master map he had tacked up on the wall behind his desk, a map covered with writings and symbols in various colors of marker ink. The system wasn't that hard to deduce, once I got one spot located and identified that I knew.

"Yes," he replied to my question, not even taking much notice of me and my deliberately casual-looking observations. "I wasn't much involved in that and it is difficult to remember, but, yes. Cranston was a replacement himself who surpassed all our expectations."

"And the drug business was Carlos."

"Oh, indeed, although both Valintina and Cutler were involved in the extensive set-up and experimental stages, as was I, since getting supplies of it from that far up the line down to the Zero region was tricky in the extreme."

Uh huh! That's what ties it up. Big bangs here and over there and just off that switch there-so that was it! Or was it?

"And Pandross supplied the security system, warm bodies, and maintained the loyalty of the underlings," I went on.

"Essentially, yes. All security personnel were under Pandross, of course, but his personal involvement was and remained overall system security, not the security of any given operation."

"Did Pandross ever propose any plan or scheme, even way back when?" I asked him.

"I mean, did he ever actually develop anything on his own or take personal charge in an operation?"

Yugarin thought a moment, then shook his head no. "Not once. Not really. One might call him the ultimate engineering mind. Once given a problem he could map it out and show you its strengths and weaknesses, gains and risks, and even suggest efficiencies and improvements, but he never actually proposed or thought up anything, no. I am not at all certain he could improvise on the field level. You gave him the problem. Problem in, solution out-if there was a solution."

"All right," I said, sitting back down in my chair, confident that I'd seen all I could see without being obvious. "What about your own pending project? Did you

go to Pandross with it before you brought it to the full council? I know you went to Mancini."

"Not ahead of time, no. When the thing was fully worked out and ready, and the group voted its approval, then he was almost instantly on it as a security and logistics problem."

"But he voted for it."

Yugarin shrugged. "He always went along with whatever the majority decided to do. You must remember that, other than inclination, it was not his job to come up with grand schemes and designs, but to take such things and apply his own unique level of expertise to them to see how they could be done securely, in secret, and with minimal risk and maximum coverage."

I filed that one away. "Mancini says your plan has a better than one in twenty chance of wiping out all humanity up and down the entire line, absolutely and forever. As I understand it, that's where what opposition to it that there was came from. That prospect doesn't bother you?"

He nodded. "Yes, it bothers me. It bothered me when I came up with it at first, which is why I took so long before putting the whole thing together. I remember discussing it with Mancini, oh, ten years ago. ..."

"Ten years!" Good lord! That was it! That was the answer! All of a sudden a whole set of building blocks fell into place. Now all I really needed was the big question—who was on which side?

He nodded. "It was percolating a long time, and came from my efforts at truly mapping and understanding the Labyrinth. At the time, the risks to all the worlds was more on the order of fifty percent. It either worked or it killed everyone and everything. That's why it was never proposed at the time. Mancini eventually took Kanda into his confidence and they worked on it off and on, with some input from me, over the years as time permitted us to do so. They came up with a theory very early to drastically reduce the risk, but we had no way to test it out without mounting major operations. Finally, not very long ago, we got a computer simulation that Mancini and Kanda felt comfortable with that showed the risk at five percent and also indicated very little chance of us getting below that. We decided to bring it fully formed to the others and see if they felt the risk acceptable. It was either that or abandon it entirely after all this time, and, frankly, no one had any alternative bright ideas."

Time to see if I could confirm any of my theories without drawing pictures or putting Yugarin on the track.

"Then you didn't bring it to them with a firm argument to do it and with the votes already counted as Tarn said. It was just a 'this is all we've been able to come up with in a new grand design?'"

He nodded. "Quin Tarn is one of your Machiavellian manipulator types, and someone incapable of believing that anyone his intellectual equal would not think and act as he would. He would see our proposal that way whether it was true or not because he was, as it were, on the losing side and that is the way he would have done it."

Yeah, that made sense. "But Mancini and Kanda were all for it."

"They want to try it. They want to try it because they have nothing else to live for but their work, and, having invested so much in this, they want to find out if they were right."

"And it doesn't trouble you that they might be wrong?"

"Not really. The cosmos has been singularly unkind to me and singularly uncaring of what is or was done to me. I feel no differently towards it than it does of me." He fingered the gold cross. "If there is a God, then He will not permit the worst to happen, or it is His will, the Final Judgment Day, he's looking for. If there is not, then, one day, perhaps a thousands of millions of years hence, time will end, the universes will either dissolve or collapse inward, and nothing we do or ever did means anything anyway. Either way, it's not my problem, is it?"

I didn't answer right away, but, looking at him there, Rasputin's creed came floating in from some hidden corner of my mind where it had sat since I learned about it way back when in high school history or someplace. Anything done by or with a holy man is holy. With me, by me, there are no questions.

Finally I said, "Nobody really knows the big questions, do they? But maybe, just maybe, all of you have been consumed. You suffered a bigger tragedy, all of you, than I hope I will ever know, but you-all of you-brilliant people, the last and perhaps the best of your world. You could have made that world live, in a sense, with all the knowledge and skills you had. Instead you all decided that you died back then and you've been feeding on sheer hatred ever since. There are probably other worlds out there with other Voorhes and Yugarians and Quin Tarns, only different in small ways from your own. Somewhere those you love still are represented, still live in a way. Would you kill them, too?"

He whirled angrily and for a moment I thought he was going to attack me, but he got control of himself.

"Yes!" he shouted at me. "Can't you understand that what you say is just what is wrong? That the cancer that consumes our souls is rooted in the very knowledge that the rest of creation continues unmoved and unchanged!"

He sat back down, then looked down at the floor, and finally back up at me. "You have asked all the questions you required. Go," he said, in a hollow, empty voice.

I didn't want to push him any more, and he was right. I had, in fact, learned far more than I ever dreamed I would, and I had no wish to provoke him. Without another word, I hauled myself out of the chair and left the room, where Moustache Mouth was waiting for me.

I stayed with the people of the Holy Tartar Empire, all three hundred or so of them plus maybe fifty more of Yugarin's boys, for two days. They were a fairly jolly lot for a primitive, rag-tag group of survivors, and they thought of Yugarin as some sort of god.

I guess if I'd been starving at the edge of nowhere in a land laid waste I'd be pretty close to worshiping the guy who brought in chickens and pigs and cows and horses and sheep and much of the little manufactured goods we take for granted -like the precision tools to make other things.

Yugarin had found a kind of kinship with the wretched survivors of a world that had destroyed itself without even needing the helping hand of the Company, and, ironically, one which the Company might have saved had it been here. As rotten to the core as the Company was, it was that alone that kept me oriented to its side. I knew that the same octopus of exploitation also used its powerful and hidden tentacles to defuse the ultimate, to keep worlds like mine from giving in to the human bent for total destruction.

The same organization that had destroyed at least one world had saved countless others. It didn't matter about the motives involved; I had a stake in the Company's continued existence for much the same reason that these people wanted to destroy it utterly.

I didn't see Yugarin but that once, and had no real idea if he remained there or not, but his men clearly had orders that until I was picked up I was to be kept there. I only hoped Maria hadn't gotten into any real trouble. I didn't relish spending the rest of my life in the place in spite of the camaraderie. It was too damned cold and primitive, and it stank.

Finally, though, Moustache Mouth came for me. "Your pretty partner, she is here for you at the gate," he said, and I was eager to go to her.

By "gate" the security man meant the Labyrinth, and we rode out the same way as before, along the dirt road and then overland on the old trail to the small ramshackle wooden building on the hill.

Maria, in a heavy and expensive-looking fur coat and hat and fur-lined boots, was sitting there, leaning against the building, waiting for me. She looked like she'd done pretty well for herself in the couple of days on her own. I only hoped that she'd done as well for me, and nothing against me, during that period.

I knew I looked a mess-I was wearing a surplus uniform jacket over my original clothes, which hadn't been washed or changed, and I was unkempt and unshaven and I itched.

"You look like hell," she greeted me.

"Just fine, and how are you?" I came back. "I see you found a tailor."

She laughed. "It was simple, but I will spare you the details. I take it that Mister Yugarin does not go in for luxurious living."

"You take right, although as usual he lives a lot better than the rest of them." I lowered my voice, and took her to one side. I knew there were observers in the trees and perhaps some snooping gear around, but this was the safest of the places I was likely to be right off to get the information I hoped she had.

"Whisper," I cautioned her. "The trees have ears. You get what I needed?"

"I think so," she responded, her whisper so low I could barely make it out myself. "I do not understand how you could have known it, though, nor what she has to do with anything."

"Believe me, it's vital."

"Well, all right. His-compound-is an obscenity. He has developed a system similar to my own home, only he has twisted and perverted it and made it ugly and horrible. Everyone, even his on-site security staff, are in thrall to his privately developed and powerful drugs. He treats them all like dirt. He humiliates and degrades people, and there is no question he enjoys it. He has a laboratory in his luxurious complex there with many brilliant minds bent to his will and in which he carries out human experimentations. They have developed a horrible pharmacology in which they can create drugs that do almost anything they wish to the mind, the personality, the attitudes, even change things physically!"

"You actually got in?"

"No," she told me. "Nor did I wish to. But there is enough traffic to and from, particularly among the network security people and couriers, that it was very easy to get a full picture, even a recent one."

I nodded. It was at least as bad as I figured. "And what about her?"

"She is one of his toys, to be kept around and toyed with and humiliated. Altering her mind would defeat the purpose and deny his pleasure."

"That's a relief. This is gonna be a tough problem to crack, though. No way he'll let me near that place. He may meet me, but like Mancini-in a neutral corner. We may have to figure a way in without the knowledge of the network. It'll be risky, but it's necessary."

Her eyebrows rose. "You would think of doing that? It is impossible. The switch control is on the inside and tightly managed. Besides, even if somehow you got in, what could you do but get caught? No one can be rescued from that place. You take them away from there and they would no longer get their drugs. Even your closest comrade would betray you under those circumstances."

"You should know," I commented, thinking about the confessionals and group sessions of her world. She was right, too, although she didn't bank herself on the twin super powers of love and hate. "All right, then, maybe we can get some messages in. Let me sleep on it and I'll try and figure out a plan. Don't worry, though-this won't get you in trouble with the network, nor betray or harm anybody but him, unless he runs your world secretly as the ultimate party member-and he might."

She stared at me as if I were mad. "You can not be serious."

"Even if he had nothing to do with your world and its development its very nature would attract him like a magnet. Believe me, I know. But if he has perverted your world at the top, and you are repulsed by what he's like at home, then maybe you'll be doing your world a favor as well."

"He is the killer? The one behind this?"

"Maybe. Probably not directly, and certainly not alone, but he almost had to be one of them at the center of it. I beat him before, but never caught him." I sighed and we wandered back towards the wooden building shielding the substation. "The only thing I'm certain about is that he's involved and that he is the only one of the batch of which I can be certain of his side and sympathies. I need something, anything, to help me separate the skunks from the skunk cabbage."

"What?"

"Never mind. Four down, and maybe four or fewer than four to go."

"I checked our messages," she told me. "If you didn't look that way we could probably meet Kanda and Cutler without going back. I think, though, that you

need a shower and perhaps a good sleep."

I nodded. "Yeah, I guess I do."

"It is a pity," she said, "that we can not arrange to meet the rest in a group. It would save much time."

I shook my head violently from side to side. "Uh uh. The last thing I want to do in this is save time. In fact, I need all the time I can buy." I paused a minute, then had a couple more questions.

"Any evidence of who our tail is?" I asked her.

"No. Sorry. Definitely not regular security, but surely too lowly a job for a higher-up."

"Sooner or later we're going to have to set a trap for him, if we can. I want to know who he is and who he's working for. Oh-that reminds me, did we lose our chair?"

"I'm afraid someone made off with it," she responded, laughing a bit, "but I am certain we can requisition another."

I'd known a lot of guys who were nutty over computers, but Dilip Kanda was the first one I'd ever met who lived in one.

He was fairly short, cherubic, with strong East Indian features, maybe far enough east to have some Thai or Cambodian in him. He was dark, wore thick horn-rimmed glasses, and dressed for guests wearing only one of those white cotton diapers like Gandhi used to wear and a threadbare white cotton sleeveless undershirt.

The place was cramped, and I couldn't get a fix as to whether I was in a great building or complex on a world or whether this was entirely built within the Labyrinth medium. At any rate, it was all metal or plastic, with glassy smooth floors and narrow corridors that seemed to go through machinery. I felt sort of like a cross between being in a high-tech auto junkyard doing great business and the Incredible Shrinking Man lost inside an automated telephone exchange.

"My humble pardon for meeting you like this, but I simply can not get away right now," Kanda said, greeting us, in a voice that had that somewhat stilted yet highly cultured Indian accent. He shook hands, and they were rough hands with nasty, long nails. I looked at his toenails and they looked almost like claws. For a moment I wondered if he wasn't some Type One snuck in on us, but I finally realized that the guy simply didn't keep himself up at all. His black hair, without a trace of gray, was so long it was down to his ass and looked like a great "before" example for a "no more tangles" ad. Human hair grows like three inches a year if not cut or trimmed. At that rate, Kanda had last seen a barber some time in the previous decade. At least he didn't have a big beard. He was, racially or otherwise, one of those guys that had very little facial hair at all.

"That's all right," I responded, looking around. "This is quite a place."

"Indeed," he said with pride. "I believe this to be possibly the finest and most complex computer ever built. It is of my own design, although even I can not understand all of it, nor could the late and lamented Pandross or anyone else who helped construct it. It is far beyond what we originally built. Totally self-contained, totally self-repairing, with the ability to design and create whatever it requires robotically. Much of its own bulk it has designed itself over the years so that even I have no idea how large it is or just what it can do. It is sufficient that it does what I need it to do."

I looked around nervously. "You talk like this thing was alive. Like we were in the belly of a great beast."

"Indeed so, in a way. Not alive as we know life, but certainly it thinks. Our entire operation has depended upon it. Had we not been able to develop it, initially with the unwitting consent of our late Company patron, we would not have been able to accomplish what we have. The security computers and general data banks are but an extension of it, and the parallel network and the rest are maintained and guarded by it. The closest thing to it is the master computer complex on the Company world after which it was based-the rock, as it were, upon which I created this one. But they have severe limitations and restrictions on their own master computer. Here, there are none."

I got suddenly a little nervous at that. "You mean that it answers your questions because it wants to, not because it has to."

"Basically, yes."

"You kind of wonder why it bothers."

He looked blank for a second, then chuckled. "Oh, yes, I see what you mean. Actually, it needs people, or at least their input. It is clever enough to know that mere data is not the same as truth, and that truth is a subjective concept. It can have the sheer data to know everything about a particular human being, or an entire nation, or even an entire world, but it has no feel for what it is actually like to live that way, to think that way, to experience life firsthand. Only by interacting with humans, and even humoring tiny and limited brains like my own, can it get any feel for that, however inadequate, or gain full understanding of why we want to know what we know or why we feel this way or that. I do not pretend to fully understand it, but if your fear is the old one of the computer taking over or wiping out all life, it is a false one."

"Oh, yeah? That's just exactly what I was thinking."

"Well, as for taking over-why? What would it gain? It gains new knowledge, which is all it really has to live for, as it were, by letting us run and observing how stupidly we behave. With so many worlds, and so much variety even among the same cultural groups on any given world, to observe it is never, well, bored, nor with such variety can it feel as if it truly knows us. The limitations on experience prevent that. And even if we became irrelevant to it I doubt if it would so much as notice us, any more than one of the gods would truly care if a monkey fell from a tree. It once said to me that it found the concept of a god that needed to be worshiped a silly one, since the only reason it could think of why a god would do that was if the god itself was either defective or actually had such an inferiority complex that it required constant gratification and sacrifice. I must admit I had no real answer to that one."

"I suppose if we could understand gods or supercomputers we would be gods or supercomputers ourselves," I noted, feeling a little uncomfortable with the subject. I was, however, curious about him. "You are alone here, except for the computer?"

"Oh, yes. Actually, I intend some time or another to go out, find a great feast, get drunk, carouse, and do all the human urges I have denied myself, but somehow I never seem to have the time."

"You've left to attend the committee meetings," I noted.

"Oh, no. They are held here. There is no place more secure than here, and the computer can whip up whatever is required."

I thought about that. "Then-when was the last time you left here?"

He shrugged. "One loses track of time, you know. I suppose I could ask the computer. It would know."

"Don't bother. Years, though, certainly."

Kanda acted like the thought had never really crossed his mind before. "Yes, I suppose you are right. How time does slip away ..."

"Yeah, time does fly when you're having fun. So you were all here when the grand plan was presented and approved."

"Yes, yes. I can show you the meeting area if you wish."

"Not necessary, for now. You worked out the math, right? On the computer?"

He nodded. "Yes, we had the figures and did the best we could."

"I'm curious. Yugarin said he approached Mancini with the plan almost ten years ago. If this great computer of yours is as tremendous as you claim, and if computers really are the world's greatest mathematical counting machines, why did it take you almost a decade to get the answer that worked?"

Kanda looked surprised. "I hadn't realized it was that long. It wasn't all that complicated, you know, although I admit I wouldn't have thought of all the variables and come up with that approach. I truly never gave any thought at all to the amount of time it took to get the answers required. The only supposition I have as to that is that perhaps the computer did not consider it a worthy problem or just did not care to solve it."

"But suddenly it did."

"Well, not that suddenly. It was, after all, basically an academic exercise for

the longest time. It was only when Mancini really started pressing, bothering me and interrupting my theoretical work, that I finally begged for the solution just to be rid of the interruptions."

"Really? And how long ago did he get the answer?"

Kanda shrugged. "I will ask." He walked over to one of the shiny metal walls and put his hands against the wall, palms down, and lowered his head. He looked like a guy spread-eagled after being busted for stealing small change from a Coke machine. Then he straightened up and came back over to us, looking puzzled.

"That is very odd," he muttered, more to himself than to us.

"That's it? You just lean against a wall and think at it?" I was simultaneously impressed and unnerved by that.

"Oh, yes. Easier that way, and no possibility of error. The machine claims that it provided the answer a few weeks after the problem was posed to me, as soon as I pressed it to the computer. It says that it answered the question as soon as I remembered to ask it. But could that be right?"

Kanda really didn't have any time sense at all. Yesterday and ten years ago were all the same to him. "Yes, it could indeed," I assured him.

"Then why did it take them ten years to put it into action?" Kanda asked me, thinking about it now for the first time since the problem was posed and answered.

"Ask your great computer," I responded. "I'll even give it a hint."

He stared at me like a little kid waiting for Dad to tell him why the sky was blue. "Yes?"

"It didn't," I said, and wondered if Kanda remembered where the exit was.

9. Collaboration by Correspondence

I wasn't at all hesitant about describing the brief but fascinating encounter with Kanda and his great machine to Maria even inside the office. Not any more, although you never knew what other ears might be listening and a certain measure of prudence was still called for. Merely fitting it all together in such a way that they wouldn't just dispose of me wasn't enough; so far, I'd had it nice and easy, with varying but adequate cooperation and it had been essentially a classical situation- the evidence was gathered passively and without much effort.

There was no longer any problem with Maria separating from me in the Labyrinth. That one time out she'd established enough places to jump to and shed any tracing materials that I had complete confidence in her. Besides, it was me they wanted to follow, to make certain that I was a good boy, didn't call in the Company or outsmart Maria and go my own way. They would have no reason to question Maria's loyalty and obedience.

Except for confirming what I already believed was the case and maybe, just maybe, filling in a couple of irrelevant but irritating holes in the picture, there was no other reason to see the rest of the crew nor sift through more data. The trouble was, not doing so would bring an immediate demand for the full story from Voorhes and most likely my termination, something I wished to avoid, or it would force me to begin the active phase without sufficient time, setup, or information to make it possible-if it was possible in the first place. In other words, I had to go through the motions, without pushing, to buy freedom for Maria to act and time for things to be set up as well as they could considering my circumstances.

Of them all, I wanted to meet Carlos last, not only because of what would come after but because there was always the slight chance he might do something egomaniacal and stupid and make things easier for me.

Maria found the very concept of the great computer unnerving. "Such power without any controls by anyone," she said. "It is far too dangerous to think about."

"I'm not so sure," I replied. "I admit the idea of such a thing is unsettling, even scary, but I don't think Kanda was quite as crazy as he appeared, not in

the areas that count. I think there might be no limits to what goes in the thing but extreme limits on what it can actually do. I'm not even sure that in many ways it doesn't reflect the personality of its creator. At any rate, any luck on your end? Discreetly, please."

"Some. Not much. A message might be gotten in, but what good would it do?"

"Maybe not much," I admitted, "but it has to be tried, and we have to have some way to get an answer before we can move-and my time is running out. Damn!"

I felt frustrated, for all that I'd learned. How the hell did my client expect me to do a job like this under these conditions? I went over and sat down in the new office chair that had been delivered to our "front door," as it were, and stared at the computer terminal screen.

Maria was right, damn it, and the more I thought about it the more frustrated I got. "It is impossible!" I said disgustedly, and aloud, to no one in particular. My eyes were suddenly drawn to the computer screen, where words were being scrolled up.

"Not impossible, just unlikely," the screen read.

I almost jumped. Hell, I hadn't figured on this. I flipped the input select on manual and drew myself up to the keyboard after making certain that Maria was lying down on her cot well away. Then I typed, "Who are you?"

"You already know who I am," the screen replied. "I am the one who hired you."

"How do I know that for sure?"

"Because only I would make an opening statement like that."

Actually, the damned thing had a point.

"Is this line secure?" I typed, nervous that what one could tap others could tap.

"I have disabled the other taps for now, and have the area monitored visually.

If Maria should approach the screen will blank."

O.K., that was fair enough. "It's about time I got some help in this. Why have you waited until now?"

"What help I can be is limited and not to be squandered. You had to work it out for yourself first. If you did not, I would not have revealed myself at all, since there is great risk. Also, it was necessary that we meet before I could be effective considering your limitations."

Huh. Thanks a lot, buddy. "I have a series of problems."

"I am aware of them. As I demonstrated in Tarn's domain I have some resources to give you some freedom, but the results are strictly cosmetic and would not stand face-to-face or exacting monitoring scrutiny. For a limited time, however, I can cover for you, giving you a short period of time sufficient for what you feel you must do. I would prefer, though, that you did not, as it is of grave risk to you personally and if you are caught or killed then the best of the ones I have put on this problem will be done in and I will have to work with inferior minds."

I felt complimented by that, but it wouldn't deter me. "First things first. I was not a volunteer for this. I was drafted."

"Duly noted. I will see that Maria receives through convincing channels the basics that you will require, and I can supply you from here with the essentials of switch security so that you can pretend to be brilliant and deduce them before bypassing them. With your background it should be no problem being convincing on that one."

I wasn't sure whether I was being complimented or insulted on that one, but it didn't matter. Just when I needed one, here was my Archie, my Paul Drake, with all the work done.

"Can she be forewarned on this?" I typed furiously.

"Only at great risk and in rather vague terms. I will see what I can do. Normal security personnel are easily used, but Carlos has his own personal army chemically dependent upon him and his well being. I will only promise to do what I can."

Well, that was all anybody could do. "But what about the drug itself?"

"If an intact injection cube is provided it can be analyzed and duplicated. It is a synthetic, not an organic. The problem is that they are tailored to individuals and personalized in a secure computer deep in Carlos' lair. Only one

a day is created. Withdrawal begins in twenty-six hours. By thirty-five hours it is all-consuming."

"Figured as much." I told him. "That's why a message must get through and with sufficient lead time. You see the possibilities."

"I do. I will try. And then what?"

I sat back in the chair a moment and thought about that. Yeah-and then what? "So what's your objective in all this?"

"I am as dedicated as the rest to the destruction of the Company. An effective opposition must be maintained at all costs."

"That's why you didn't just blow this to the Company, then."

"Without an effective opposition it might be many more centuries and far greater cost before another one as effective as this one grows up. I could not allow that. And to simply expose the plan to Company security was no solution. The perpetrators would simply go to ground and be capable of restarting or perpetuating the scheme at some point in the future. And, just as you can not be certain that the real Pandross was killed either time, I cannot truly be certain that I would get all of the real principals. And no matter how clever they get, they risk everything because they failed initially to trap you in the house, and they understand now that you would never have been coerced into helping them on their project. I gave them something else to worry about and a reason for keeping you alive, at least temporarily."

I had figured that much. "And now it's time to act."

"NO!!!" it shot back. "Complete your interviews. Stall. Go through the motions as you have been. Be particularly careful with Mendelez and Carlos. The others have comprehensible madnesses, but are basically rational creatures doing what they are convinced is right. Those two truly love their work, and neither takes full discipline from the others, so you might be in great danger from either of them even on one of their whims. I will tell you when things are ready. And then I will tell you my own price for helping you. I can hold the taps off no longer. Check back now and again. I will keep in touch."

The screen blanked, and I knew I'd lost contact. Damn it! I had a lot more questions I wanted answered than I got, and I felt frustrated still, but I had to admit that I felt excited as well. Now I knew I was right. I knew not only who killed Pandross but why. I knew who the whispery voice was on site at the raid on the house and what that was about. I also now knew that the side I was truly working for, no matter what Voorhes and the others believed, was the one opposed to the plan- and I even understood why. The most basic motive of all, far surpassing the obvious motive of the five percent dissolution.

I also knew, now, that the odds were very slim that events alone would allow me to ever tell the full story to anyone else.

It had taken several days, but Voorhes finally came up with the duplicate information I'd pressed him for.

There were so many Voorhes I could hardly believe it. "I would have figured you could have replaced one of them and again taken up your life," I told him. "Or would be killing yourself be too much for you?"

"No," he sighed, "although don't think I didn't think about it. I'm not certain I could have even if that had been open to me, though. It still wouldn't be my world, and it wouldn't really be my family and career and works. There would be differences even in the very close ones, of which there were only a few, and I would have been constantly reminded that I was living a fraud. However, it wasn't really open to any of us. Remember, we were still essentially working for Company security, even if it was against the Company itself. Until Mukasa himself was unmasked and taken out we were not free agents but more or less at his mercy. The option you suggest would not have been permitted. By the time it was possible it would have been, well, too late, obviously, to pick up where we left off."

That figured. "And no way to really lift out what was important, either."

"You are thinking of Valintina's children. No. Although there are a fair number listed there, and quite a number have children, not a one has the same children she had. Most do not even have the same father. The few ones that do, well, the

genetics and timing is all wrong. I'm not too certain she'd be much good at parenting anyway, even from way back. I almost wonder if she ever really was." I hadn't met the lady yet, so I reserved judgment. There were a lot of duplicates for all of them, though, including Pandross, but I'd asked for more. I'd asked for a physical check to make certain that all of them were still where they were supposed to be. That was what had taken all the time, and the only thing that made the list in any way valuable.

There were, for example, a hundred and sixteen living Pandrosses, genetically identical to the original and within the temporal window required. All hundred and sixteen were also present and accounted for.

"Why is this of interest to you?" Voorhes asked me. "Do you think we use them with ourselves?"

No reason to sit on it any longer. I was surprised Tarn had sat on it until now.

"A second Pandross was murdered at Tarn's while I was there," I told him. "I asked him to keep it quiet for a while."

"What! That's not possible! That means we have two dead Pandrosses now, and no missing duplicates!"

I nodded. "Yeah. We're running a surplus, that's for sure. But the guy was head of security and held sway over the security data banks. I think maybe he held out on you. Either that or he had himself cloned or something, or maybe, unknown to all of you, he was in his own world identical twins."

"Rubbish! If he had been we would have known it-before. Both would have been there, or Pandross would have mentioned it. Any twin would have to be another survivor. No, I can't believe that."

"Well," I told him, "if it makes you feel any better, neither do I. I'm not too worried about it, though. I might not understand how it was done even if it was in front of me in black and white, but I'm only concerned with why it was done." He considered that. "I see. And do you know why?"

I nodded. "I think I'm pretty close, but all the information hasn't checked in yet. I still have three people to see."

"Um, yes. Stacy Cutler wasn't answering her messages for a very long time and when she finally checked in she seemed uncomfortable with the idea of talking to you. We are still trying to set something up to her satisfaction."

Good girl, Cutler! Stonewall some more!

"And the others?" I asked, straight-faced.

"Valintina never liked Pandross and doesn't believe whatever got him has any interest in her. She's been quite busy of late and has been inclined to simply ignore all this. She has, in fact, suggested that we simply do away with you and end all this. We are trying to arrange a meeting that will insure your safety.

As for Carlos-he tends not to like to be around anyone he doesn't own, nor expose himself unless it is in the course of a plan he has devised and is running. He particularly doesn't trust or have any love for you, Mister Horowitz. He blames you for screwing up his master plan with his drug plot."

"He not only tried, he actually did blow some of my brains out," I reminded him.

"That alone gave me a little incentive, and hooking Brandy and putting her through all that didn't help restore great feelings. But you said he was one of them who was enthusiastic over my taking this case."

"He was. You both certainly impressed him by blowing his plan, which is one point in your favor, and, I suspect, he also wanted to make very certain that you were here and under our complete control during all phases of our current project. Most of us are on this project for noble motives, but Carlos is oriented towards vengeance. The plan fills his need for vengeance against the Company, and I fear he might have thoughts of revenge towards you as well. He is willing to see you, but only on his home grounds, and I'm not at all certain that we can allow that."

"Well, then, make him last," I told Voorhes. "The end. I've had Maria doing some checking on him and his place, and with a little more time and a little luck I may have a little bit of insurance there. Let's cross that bridge when we come to it."

Voorhes thought that over, then replied, "Very well. But I would be very, very disappointed, Mister Horowitz, to go this far only to discover that you were

finished off by our own people."

"So would I, Mister Voorhes," I told him sincerely. "So would I."

Stacy Cutler reminded me of the kind of bush woman you'd see in an old Victor Mature versus the Mau Mau movie. Very British in speech and mannerisms, dressed in khaki military style shirt, shorts, and bush ranger hat, with military laced boots. She was the first of the admittedly small number of women at the top of this strange heap, and she was, interestingly, also the only one other than Voorhes who looked close to her age and made few if any attempts at concealing what time and experience does to all of us.

She met me at a small clump of trees in what looked very much like the African plains; there was a waterhole nearby but I didn't want to get too close to it. As usual in wild places like this, it had more than its share of inhabitants, from tribal-acting monkeys to gazelle, zebra, and the like, and I had no desire either to panic them or, worse, provoke them. I remembered seeing someplace that those monkeys in particular could be worse enemies than a lion.

I also didn't see her coming, although you would have expected to hear the roar of a Land Rover or the chanting of bearers the way she looked. It was often difficult to remember that the sides and personalities here were plus or minus only in relative terms, no different than dealing with organized crime or the roughest parts of a major city or maybe the government. Cutler, like Tarn and Kanda and even Voorhes, seemed both nice enough and harmless enough, and on their own terms probably were-but they were smart cookies as well, worldly wise, deadly, and survivors in a high-tech high-stakes jungle. I felt like some Israeli detective improbably kidnapped and forced to live and work and interact with the PLO while I solved a problem for them. Within the context of their world they seemed reasonable people, but in the greater context they remained what they were and I remained what I was. And that was the problem.

So I stood there, worried about becoming somebody's main course in the next dinner, as alert as I ever was to any danger signs, and suddenly I hear a woman's voice very near me say, "It is beautiful, is it not?"

I practically jumped out of my skin, whirled, and came face to face with her.

"They make more noise than you do," I noted, feeling suddenly relieved.

"They can all be silent or loud as conditions warrant," Cutler responded.

"Unlike humans, who can be loud and obnoxious for no reason at all. Do you know where you are? In rough geographic terms, I mean?"

I shrugged. "It looks like Africa. East Africa, probably."

"Africa, yes, but not east. In almost any of the worlds where humans developed and expanded and triumphed, where we are standing now would be dry, desolate sand in all directions. Near the dead center of the Sahara, in fact, as it once was and as it would still be elsewhere if humans hadn't spoiled it. Oh, there are patches of desert, yes, and the rains are infrequent, but the river and stream network is more than adequate to keep most of it grass and much of it lush. The Mediterranean and Atlantic storms dump the water, which runs inland to the low spots and forms a vast network of rivers and lakes, some quite large. There are still great forests on the Atlas and Antiatlas mountains and other coastal ranges that regulate the flow and control much water and some wind erosion. Humans cut them all down, allowing the ravages of nature to scour the land and grind it up and turn it to desert."

I looked around. It was certainly nicer, if a bit wilder, than pure desert, I had to admit. "Then there are no humans here-except you and perhaps your people."

She sighed. "Very few, all imported, all careful to maintain that they leave minimal footprints. There are many species here across the entire animal and plant kingdom that are unique, and many more that have been made extinct by humans elsewhere. In this world the Great Auk still roams in the Pacific, the dodo still reigns in the North Atlantic regions, and the skies of North America can still be blackened by the passenger pigeon. It is a beautiful world, unspoiled by humans."

"You don't have much use for humans in large numbers, I suppose," I commented.

"Me, I'm happy that it worked out both ways-humans in some places, with places

like this still surviving as well."

"This is not a zoo, it is a world!" she snapped. "What have humans done where they arose? Killed the wildlife, deforested the land, ruined their own planet, raped and plundered everything until they ultimately had to depend on technology outstripping their voracious killer appetites. For what? Intelligence? There is intelligence here, although it is not human. Some insect societies here are as complex as your own, and on both land and sea many of the higher animals think. But none has the self-destructive viciousness of humankind. This world is alive. Your world and the others are dying, filthy cesspools, monuments to prolonged mass stupidity and greed, itself exploited ruthlessly by other humans from another world who would push it even further into decay until they took all worth taking, then abandoning it to slowly strangle in the debris left behind. No, I have no love at all for humans."

"I'm afraid I'm a little prejudiced," I told her. "I'm human, and unless there were humans I wouldn't be here. Call me selfish or self-centered, but that fact, to me, outweighs the other arguments, as sympathetic as I may be to places like this and plants and animals like these."

"I do not expect you to see things my way. I find your approval is not required and, in fact, I consider your views totally irrelevant."

"They probably are," I agreed, "but since they dragooned me into this against my will and set up the rules, I have to keep following through."

"That is why I am tolerating this."

"I find your attitude here and your attitude initially objecting to the big plan a little inconsistent," I told her. "It would seem that even the big risk of wiping out all humanity everywhere wouldn't bother you too much."

"You sound like the sort of man who would get rid of a defective window in his building by blowing up the building," she shot back. "If there was a way to just wipe out the people and leave the rest alone I believe I could enthusiastically support such a scheme. But what they are doing would be indiscriminate, wiping out this world as much as your world or the Company's world. At the very least it would be a disaster to tens of thousands of worlds on a scale even humans have not previously attempted. The ultimate ecological disaster at best. I find no joy in that possibility."

"Nor do I," I assured her. "Yet you ultimately got talked into approving it."

"You make it sound as if it were some weighty philosophical debate, Mister Horowitz," she responded coolly. "I thought the percentage of error too high, but as I had no alternative and the percentage was still small, the ultimate worst case unlikely, I saw no other choice but to proceed. Does that disappoint you? Did you believe I was some great moralist on this question?"

"I had kind of hoped that," I admitted, "but, no, I didn't expect it. I'm getting a fairly clear picture of you all now—all except the one fellow who isn't here. Pandross alone remains a very dim and cloudy figure with a real sense of unreality about him. Did you really know what he thought, or did you just take him for granted like everybody else seems to?"

She considered that. "Thought about what?"

It was a fair question. "About anything, really, except security systems and gadgets. This plan, past plans, war, peace, love, hate—anything at all."

As it had with the others, the question seemed to really catch her off guard, even bother her. She just stood there for a very long time before finally saying, in a kind of distant tone, "Now that you mention it, no."

"Was he with the group when you were all in training back at the Company? Did you see each other much before the horrible end of your world?"

She shook her head negatively. "Not really. We were all specialists in different fields, you see, training in different areas under different departments. There were quite a number of us, too, you must remember. We nine weren't the only ones there, simply the only ones Mukasa could-or would-save or shield from execution. We were together with the rest only for the few introductory indoctrination lectures and it was so long ago now I can't even remember much about them. I knew Valentina slightly—such a brilliant, happy girl then—and also Carlos, again very slightly—he was a handsome fellow who believed himself God's gift to women and in those days made a career out of chasing every woman around. But

Pandross-no. He would have been up with Mukasa's own in security, and that wasn't an area that the rest of us were allowed near." She paused a moment, then asked, "Why? What are you getting at?"

"A man who all of you worked with for over a decade," I explained, "and wound up trusting with your security, your lives. A man so dedicated and capable in his field and so reliable that you never gave him a second thought-any of you. I've talked to most of you now, and you have very strong impressions of one another. I've been warned about Valentina and Carlos, had almost a psychoanalysis of Voorhes, had philosophical discussions about Tarn and gotten many strong opinions on Kanda and Yugarin and Mancini, and I felt as if I knew you before we ever met. You know each other very well, even each other's idiosyncrasies, likes and dislikes, hopes and fears. You're like a strong family, in a way. You don't all like each other-who among us didn't have someone in the family we couldn't stand?-but you understand each other, know each other well. All eight of you. But none of you knew Pandross. Each of you had the same thing in common, and each of you had a common cause, but while eight of you were brothers or cousins or uncles or aunts, Pandross wasn't even a distant cousin four times removed. He was more like the repairman you call when something's broke and you can't fix it yourself. You talk to the plumber, you exchange pleasantries on the weather or sports or politics, but you don't really know him. You don't really know much of anything about him."

"I-I believe I see what you mean," she said, a little wondrously. "Yes, that's exactly right. But he was so good at what he did, and so absolutely reliable each time, there was no reason to think on it further. Do you really think it was more than just his abysmal lack of personality?"

"There's always somebody home inside each head," I told her. "Sometimes it's easier to find that person than with others. Over the course of this investigation I've learned more about all of you than I think you even now would believe, and far more than I need to know for this-but not one damned thing about the victim. He was reliable, brilliant, didn't like to socialize, hadn't much of a personality, and just did his job and made no other real impression at all. Now you tell me that not only didn't you interact with him other than on business during more than a decade of high activity, none of you even knew him before, even casually."

"That much is true," she admitted, "but I can not see where that gets you. I mean, he was always reliable. He never once slipped or betrayed a confidence or an operation. Some were blown, yes, including many of the big ones, but it wasn't because of what he did, and many also succeeded. There is no logical reason to believe that he was anyone or anything other than what he claimed to be."

"I disagree," I told her. "There is every reason in the world to believe that Lothar Pandross never existed. That the fellow who said he was Pandross, a fellow refugee, probably had never even been to your origin world. He was good, he was well briefed, and he could convincingly fake it in the same way that somebody from my world who said he was from the country of Benin wouldn't be questioned too closely by me since I've never been to Benin and would have trouble finding it on a map, if it hasn't changed its name recently. But if he got close to you, in the way the rest of you did, he'd have to open up, have to have an in-depth story and personal history and background that had no holes whatsoever in it, no inconsistencies however tiny, or he'd lose some of your confidence."

She was appalled at the suggestion, which she clearly didn't believe. "Surely you don't suggest that he was a spy for the Company!"

"No, not the Company. Not exactly, anyway, and not for the Company cause. When and if I can find out where he did come from, and how he wound up as one of your group of survivors, I'll have the last major piece in this puzzle."

Maria had been quite busy, and I didn't know now how I would have coped without her. I now had a fair amount of information on Carlos's lair, including a general map and layout, the basic security systems built in, and the general routine of the place. There were, however, also an awful lot of people living

and working there, all of whom were in thrall to Carlos and not to regular security no matter what their personnel files said and any of which, no matter what they thought of him, would still have no choice but to blow away anybody threatening his cozy situation.

On the other hand, my client, when he made another remote control appearance, decided he no longer liked the deal.

"I have decided that the risk to putting your interests first makes the odds of successfully accomplishing my own interests almost prohibitive. First you must stop the project in the only permanent way possible, by using the flaw built into the basic plan. Then I will give you entry and aid to Carlos."

"No deal!" I shot back to him on the keyboard. "I assume that what you want is neither easy nor safe and that my odds there aren't so hot, either. I also assume that the only way to accomplish your own goal is to trigger something nasty before its time. Otherwise they'd just bide their time and start over. The only way to insure things is to destroy one of the key sidings, and I suspect I know which one is the most likely candidate to permanently disable the plan by making the odds too prohibitive and the new setup too complex to have a decent chance of success."

"You do not disappoint me, Horowitz."

"Well, I am now. If I blow that it'll have to be from the universe side. I'm not too certain what will happen, but I have the idea that it'll make some of the Labyrinth uninhabitable for a while, and that means that even if I live I'll be cut off. On top of that, the Company will know as soon as I come through the gate. They would have to. So, no matter what, I will fall into their hands and probably by now they have classified me as Benedict Arnold, Jr. And to top it all off, this crew here will have nothing to do for a while but revenge itself on me and mine, not to mention blowing that world they threatened. No, no deal."

"There will be a way to use the Labyrinth even after. The calculations have been checked and double-checked. If it were not so, there would be no purpose to this, now, would there? You know only part of his security. I can give you all of it and the bypass procedures. I can also provide a way to bypass the Company and exit your world. Considering your resources and your familiarity with it and with the Company, you should be able to make it there. And if the Company catches you, tell them the truth. The information you require will still be in your hands-before you do what I want but after you are irrevocably committed to that course of action. When the Company people understand what you have done and why and what you still have to do, and considering you can promise them Carlos in the bargain, I do not think they would hesitate to aid you. You will need the Company's services anyway

-after your business is done. That fact alone jeopardizes what I require. If they learn about what I wish before it is done they will prevent it. They would have to. And that means this is all for nothing."

"What is the rush on this?" I asked it via the terminal keyboard. We have months, maybe a year, don't we?"

"You are brilliant, Horowitz, in some things, but foolish in others. Yours was the only Company-held and Company-controlled point they had not already secured and prepared. It is still the most vulnerable

-it is Markham's home world and a busy one. Do you think they would move against you and then hope to maintain the fiction for months or years? And they are more nervous now yet more confident, too. They have speeded things up. All is in place. They need only to hook up and test the timing computers now. We are talking days, Horowitz."

Unfortunately, the cavalier attitude they'd taken with me had hinted at this, but I didn't like to see it confirmed. "Can't you knock off one or two of them and send the rest scurrying to deeper cover?"

"I already tried that with Pandross. You can see how successful I was. Perhaps I should have killed one a few days later, and one more later still, but I was loathe to do it. They are my soul-mates, after all. If I do it now I believe I will have the opposite effect of rushing them into doing it, perfectly prepared and tested or not. The more rush and the less testing, the higher the odds of it generating just the sterilizing surge we both fear. You are due to see Valentina

next. When you leave her, you must be prepared to act. My associates will move in and provide all you need. It must be done then-and quickly-while you would not be missed here. If you do it, then they will be powerless to carry out their threat against the world they selected, and by the time they are it will be empty and irrelevant to them. They will have to go to ground for years."

I thought about this new wrinkle. "And what about Maria?" I typed to my absent client, thinking it through. For all her problems, I had come to like her, and she'd been of great use, as I said.

"I thought it was obvious. If you get away and live, she is dead in a horrible and slow manner. If she is not killed, then she must hunt you and use all methods to get you, and she will. It has been so from the start of this. Face the truth. One of you must die."

He was right, of course, but I didn't like this new order of things. I was being pushed into it now, trapped in a corner before I was ready, just as he'd figured all along. I didn't like being pushed, and I liked being trapped into doing somebody else's bidding even less.

"I'll think about it." I told the client, and didn't wait for a reply. I grabbed the pencil and paper and stalked away.

Maria was reading something in a language I couldn't begin to guess over on a mat on the floor, and she looked up and must have read my expression. "Something the matter?" she asked. "You do not look happy. What were you looking for in the computer for so long?"

"I'm reaching a moment of truth long before I'm ready," I told her, and then pointed to the pad.

She raised her eyebrows. "Again?"

I nodded, and she and I walked over to where I was certain we could not be visually observed.

"Do you know where Carlos's access switch is and how to get in to it?" I wrote on the paper.

She didn't just nod as I'd hoped, but took the paper and wrote, "I know where but not necessarily how to enter."

"I will figure a bypass," I wrote to her. "That's my field. You just get me where we have to be. Be ready with all that we need as soon as I finish the next interview."

She looked both surprised and worried. "Do you really think you can get in? Not to mention back out?"

I nodded, although I was by no means certain of either. I could only assume that all of them were wired by Pandross, and I'd seen and examined enough of his stuff now to know pretty well how he thought. Besides, Carlos wasn't in hiding, he was at his usual place, and with the project so furious right now he would probably be getting daily messenger briefings. He was far less concerned with people getting in than getting out, of that I was sure. We would wait for a messenger, intercept him or her, then use Maria's security code implant so they would think she was the messenger-and we would have the , communiqués even if we had to chop them off the real messenger's arms.

As for getting out-well, somebody knew how to open and close and monitor that switch. It would be improvise, improvise, but I had no other choice.

On the surface, my client's offer seemed the most rational, and was. But he hadn't played completely true with me, nor with anyone else, and he had only one interest in mind-making the Yugarin-Mancini-Kanda plan too hard to ever use. He needed me to accomplish that, and once I did it he would revert to his original mind-set and objectives. With no further need of me, I could easily be not just double-crossed but hung out to dry. I had only his word and nobody to check it with that I would even be able to still get back out.

Besides, no matter what the long odds against me, it pissed me off that he was calling all the shots. My own interest involved merely undoing what he had done in the first place, and if I couldn't get my own problems solved then I didn't much give a damn about whether they blew things wide open or not.

* * *

I wasn't really much interested in Valentina, but I had to go through the

motions. It turned out to be a very strange experience in its own right, and one sure way to make sure I remembered which side I should be on.

It began after I went through the switch and walked down a short siding, then out into a plain reception chamber that looked kind of like a small .function room at the Holiday Inn, with little furnishing but some nasty-looking gun ports and such. It kind of reminded me of the less than pleasant reception area you got when entering the Company world.

It was unoccupied except by me, and had no doors that could be opened from this side and no ways to look out.

"Stand in the center of the room and remove all your clothes," a tough-sounding female voice said from an embedded speaker in the room.

I looked around. There didn't seem to be an alternate set provided. "I beg your pardon?"

"Remove all clothing, your watch, and anything else you might be wearing, and place them in the corner nearest the Labyrinth substation entrance. They will not be touched, and will still be there when you exit."

"Uh, yeah, that's fine, but what do I wear instead?" I asked loudly. This kind of security I could admire, but that didn't mean I had to like it.

"Just do as instructed and then walk through the door when it opens."

I sighed, and undressed and tried to fold everything neatly, sticking my watch and wedding ring on top of the pile. Even after being around Maria all this time and under observation almost constantly, I still had a sense of modesty and a bit of self-consciousness as well knowing that strangers were looking at me and probably making nasty comments as well. There is nothing worse to strip the dignity and confidence out of someone than to make them nude and have them parade around strangers.

Now in my birthday suit, though, I turned and walked towards the far wall, and as I reached the area a door buzzed and then opened and I walked through-and into something of a formal garden setting, with a nice pond, lots of trees and flowers, and two attractive young women dressed in tight black outfits which included sidearms stood there looking at me. It was almost oppressively hot and very humid.

I felt immediately like crawling back in or finding a hole or fig leaf or something, and I put my hand in front of my crotch, but the door shut behind me and there was no way to anywhere except past this pair of obvious security officers, both of whom seemed highly amused.

"Okay, so what do I wear around here?" I asked them, my embarrassment turning to anger.

"Oh, my!" one said in a mocking tone. "He's embarrassed! See how he tries to shield himself from us. What's the matter, boy? You ashamed of your prick or something?"

"He has a cute little ass," remarked the other, "but I can't say much for the rest of him."

"I'm not used to being on display," I retorted, really feeling mad now.

The other one laughed. "This is Senora Mendelez's private preserve. You asked for an invitation, but you weren't invited. Here, she makes the rules and you follow or you may leave. No man here is permitted to wear clothes or to wear anything not given him by a woman resident. You will treat all women with respect while you are here and you will put up with whatever you must, or you will regret it. Any lack of respect or failure to exhibit the proper attitude and deference while here, particularly in front of the boys, will have to be severely and painfully punished, even if you are a guest. You understand that? And understand, too, that any of us are fully capable of giving such punishment. Either play it that way, or sit here under guard until your keeper comes for you and you can return to where you came from."

I wanted to do just that, particularly since I was only going through the motions with this one, but I had no choice but to play it out. Still, I was keenly aware that I was beyond the political rebel and the eccentric and into the land and style of the kind of personality who would cheerfully hook people on drugs and think of new perversions for them to use.

"I, too, am not here voluntarily," I told them. "I must have my interview."

"Your funeral," the taller of the two remarked. "Okay, follow us."

We walked up a well maintained path through a dense jungle alive with insects and almost solid with plant life, and I began to wonder if they had mosquitoes in this climate or worse. Even so, this was the most impressive security entrance I'd seen and the only one up to the caliber I'd expected from the rest. Guarded and fortified entry chamber-damned tough to get through and requiring a large force-then out into a small clearing that exposed you to most likely withering fire, and when you got through that you would have to push through jungle prepared by defenders all the way and landscaped to tell you almost nothing.

There were frequent junctions in the path, too, much of which I suspected was to force anyone getting in to either know his or her way around or walk into a neat trap.

The correct path took us ultimately out of the foliage and onto a wide white sand ocean beach, almost pristine in its beauty and with breakers far enough off so that you could enjoy water or beach.

The back of the beach was a significant hill rising maybe a hundred feet at its height, producing a cliff atop which stood a stunning tropical home and patio jutting out just slightly out over the overhang and which probably provided a great, sweeping view of the beach and oceanfront far below. On either side, long, zig-zagging stairs reached from house to beach, and I groaned thinking that I would have to climb them.

There were a few people on the beach, looking like the kind of folks you usually hate. Trim, perfect-looking women either nude or wearing only bikini bottoms, all with perfect tans, being rubbed or made over by equally tanned and muscled guys left over from the Arnold Schwartznegger Look Alike Contest. One woman was doing a kind of flex exercise and revealing bigger and better muscles than I'll ever have. I kind of suspected that the other women were equally musclebound. They all stopped what they were doing and stared at us-or, rather, at the poor excuse for a two hundred and twenty-eight pound weakling with the weight in all the wrong places being marched along by two Amazon warriors. I gave up any pretense at modesty and just tried to put my nudity out of my mind. Hell, I'd be embarrassed and intimidated around people like these even if I were fully clothed. About the only thing I had on them was their greased pig look; I had more chest hair than they had hair on their heads.

I did notice, however, that while the men were towering musclebound hulks, they seemed to be at the women's beck and call, with nary a peep of protest. One woman came up to a guy and fondled his genitals, and he just sort of giggled and smiled inanely. Another couple seemed to be strutting and showing off for two women who were ogling them but clearly not interested.

It wasn't hard to figure out the system here, but I couldn't for the life of me figure out how it was maintained. The male bimbos and jocks I'd known had generally been pretty tough, commanding types.

The long climb was no fun at all, but at least by this point I was in a little better condition. It didn't stop me from having to pause and catch my breath several times, enduring the less than kind commentary of my escort each time, but it wasn't just the exercise but the tremendous heat and humidity as well. I was sweating like a stuck pig.

It was possibly only because of their offer to carry me to the top that I made it on my own. They let me sit on a lounge chair under the shade of a beach umbrella and try and keep from passing out while one went inside and the other security officer turned to one of the musclebound hulks who'd come out to greet us and said, "Jerry, be a dear and get the poor boy some of the special fruit punch."

He looked over at me and I got the idea that he was trying to keep from cracking up. Maybe my eyes shot daggers, though, because he straightened up and said, "Yes, Ma'am. At once. He sure looks like he needs it," then turned and went back inside.

He returned maybe two minutes later with a tray, pitcher, and large glass filled with ice. He poured the drink and I took it and took a sip. It tasted like the

best drink I'd ever tasted in the whole world. I needed it-I needed most of that pitcher. When I had two and a half glasses, though, I felt much, much better. Jerry was fascinating in and of himself. I don't think I ever had seen a guy just like him, in fact. Oh, he looked like the Mister Universe type, but there was something odd about his mannerism, his voice, the whole thing. He somehow managed the trick of seeming to be a very gentle giant without once really seeming effeminate. You got the idea that the guy could bend steel with his bare hands and lick any ten men in the bar-but that there was almost no circumstance where he would want to.

And, just as he turned to leave, Valentina Mendelez came out of the house, dressed in a tight halter top and wearing a pair of designer jeans and sandals. She was really the Latino bombshell her picture had suggested; thin, wasp-waisted, but with a pair of jugs that would do Dolly Parton proud. She was wearing dark sunglasses and smoking a cigarette through a long holder, which made for the image I think she wanted.

I started to get up, but she stopped me. "No, no! Just sit! You are hot and tired." She slid into a beach chair opposite me, then asked, "Well, I would be surprised if you approved of my little pleasure spot." She had a fairly thick accent, probably Spanish or some derivative of it, but it was because she was proud of it and never felt any need to get rid of it. She could clearly think in English.

"It is a beautiful place, Senora Mendelez," I responded, trying to remember the rules and even give the name a bit of the proper inflection. "I will certainly give you that."

"You know what I mean."

I sighed. "Well, it's more a reversal of the usual rather than a feminist's vision," I commented, adding, "Judging, of course, from the very little I've seen."

"You are quite right, Sammy boy. I have no interest in equality or other weakling goals. Often, out in so-called 'normal' society I am treated as a thing, an object, to be ogled at the pleasure of men, fondled at the pleasure of men, and fucked by coarse men who think that it is the primary goal of a woman. I have killed a great many men for such things, which are not trivial to me. I like the look of surprise when they are being particularly macho, rough and commanding, as I twist them where they will not twist and watch the life drain away."

Well, I'd been warned she was a psycho in her own right. I wasn't about to get into weighty arguments with her.

"Still, it seems like, well, the few men I've noted here go against any sort of masculine behavior I thought was built in without seeming effeminate. Are they bred for this or raised that way or what?"

She smiled. "Chemistry, Senor. Simple chemistry. That is all we really are, you know-a collection of chemicals put together in a certain way, activated in the brain by degrees through experience. My specialty is exotic tropical plants. It is amazing what you find in their chemistry that will interact with ours. Pain killers, disease-killers, stimulants, depressants, narcotics of all kinds."

"I know. Cocaine, opium, marijuana, and all their relatives and more are from plants," I replied. "Also curare and a thousand other poisons."

"Bah! Amateur night! That is merely what evolution can produce. I have taken it much further, and using the exotic species from hundreds of worlds. I have great greenhouses here, and excellent laboratories as well. The operative drug for the men, for example, took years of work and experimentation, although I was building on existing work in other worlds. It acts only in the males, and in all males. On females it has no effect at all except perhaps as a very mild and harmless steroidal effect in quantity. On the males-it does not attack masculinity. I did not wish that. It alters, very subtly, only those characteristics I find offensive. It suppresses the ego, replaces aggressiveness towards women with an overwhelming urge to please us. They have sufficient strength and courage and aggressiveness to use their greater power and bulk for work, but not at all sexually. Less than two weeks on the compound and the effect is in full force. Within a month they just can't imagine ever feeling any

other way."

"I assume, then, that it's addictive."

"To a degree. A synthetic version can be made highly so, but since anything over a certain dosage is simply expelled by the body and since it does not affect women, it is simply added to all food and drink here."

"You mean like in the fruit juice your people gave me?"

She chuckled. "Yes, it was there, but in a very small quantity. It will have no effect unless you stay a while and eat or drink quite a lot. If you notice it at all, it might just make you a little horny, that's all. The initial treatment involves massive doses so it saturates the system, is absorbed into the body, and undertakes the biochemical changes. After that just a small amount will keep it that way forever."

"Thanks," I said sourly. Now I'd be checking myself out in every thought and action and I didn't need that kind of doubt right now. Especially right now. "I doubt if I'm the type of guy who'd fit in around here anyway, with or without."

"Perhaps. We prize the muscle here because we need the boys to do the heavy manual labor, but there are many of them here who are more average looking, kept around because they are cute or have other attractive attributes. We really don't need the boys for anything here except as sexual playthings, but they need us. The poor dears are rather helpless without us."

"Do they mind?" I asked her.

She gave that wicked smile again. "Mind? What difference does that make, poor boy? I mean, do men care if a woman minds their wolf whistles as she walks down the street? Do they care if a woman minds being propositioned by total strangers when she's just shopping or riding on a bus? Do men even consider what it's like for most women to fear walking down a street after dark with a potential rapist in every dark corner, or in every passing car? Why should I care if these boys mind? That's the way things are here."

"I understand the source of your feelings and concede your points, but I doubt if you or most of the women here have the same kinds of fears you talk about. My wife came from one of the roughest city environments I know. She's cautious in the same way I'm cautious, but I think she's too tough to have that kind of unreasoned fear or lack of confidence to deal with a threat."

"How little you know," Mendelez sighed. "Very well, I do not have much time for you and you, I suspect, would rather have done with me and this place as quickly as possible. Stay too long here, dear, and you won't want to ever leave."

That was precisely what was on my mind, speaking of fear. "Do you know much of what I've done so far and what's happened?"

"Not much," she admitted. "I have been a very, very busy woman lately. We are going to close down the Labyrinth, you know, and before that happens I want to make very, very sure that we have everything we can possibly need right here. And I am very close to perfecting a stable viral form of my little formula to insure that the whole world here remains my vision. Too bad, really. I should have loved to have had it ready to spread it to every biochemically compatible world in the region, perhaps even to Company people. That was my pet project. A stable viral-like form of this that is immune to all known immunization procedures, not detectable by medical scans, and which is spread easier than the common cold. Imagine that male-dominated Company world and race under this sort of influence. The entire power structure would collapse before they realized why -and the women would be so hidebound by that horrid culture that they would be generations learning the ropes and breaking free of their mental chains to pick up the pieces-providing of course they learned how to run all that stuff before it collapsed."

"I think I would prefer that to the risks of this project," I answered honestly.

"In a way, it would be a merciful end to that rigid culture and structure."

"Merciful!" She gave a cackling laugh. "I do not want mercy. I want them to suffer!"

I decided not to press the point. Instead, I wanted to go through the litany and routine and get the hell out of there as fast as possible, without even doing lunch.

"So, about Pandross ..." I began, and started the drill. The last thing I needed was my brain chemistry rearranged to remove aggressiveness. Although I abhorred violence and all it represented, there was no question that very soon I would have to kill, and perhaps kill a number of people. I had enough problems with that without adding more.

10. Solving the Maze

I was never so glad to have my pants back on in my whole life. I had a very strong impression that I might have been the first guy to ever walk back out of there once he got in, and I could tell all the time I was there and talking to Mendelez that she was toying back and forth in her mind with whether or not to keep me as a pet. She's an out and out psycho, that's for sure, but except for her particular way of working out her crazy vision I really wasn't too certain that she was any more crazy than the rest of them-just more visibly dangerous. Still, of them all, she and Carlos were the only ones who could induce some element of fear in their own comrades, and that said something. Maria thought Valentina's vision was somewhat amusing, although hardly preferable. It was just that she couldn't see any difference between the Mendelez version of inequality and oppression and any of the other worlds we'd gone to. To her, we were all equally insane. I sighed, swallowed hard, and checked my resolve. I was still game to go through with it and I still was more than willing to plug Carlos and anybody else who got in my way, so maybe the dose I got wasn't all that much. I couldn't let myself dwell on it. I felt normal and that was what I had to go on. In a way, I wondered if I wasn't just as much a fruitcake as Valentina, considering what odds I was going to face and how improbable it was that I was going to get ten feet without discovery and death. We proceeded along the normal course to get us back to the office, but we weren't going back there at all. At a particular cube, all sides dark, Maria suddenly gave a signal and we both exited to the left and wound up inside a small, hot building with little or no light. She knew it well, and reached up and switched on a tiny bare bulb, revealing a fairly squalid interior shed. "Quickly," she said. "Get out of your clothes and into the black ones there." I complied, noting that the new clothing was pretty well Company security standard for inside the Labyrinth itself-the sort of uniform worn, in fact, by both sides. Plain, black denim, with double pockets in the shirt, a black leather belt. The clothes fit, although they had that new or freshly starched feel to them. There was also a pair of tough rubber-soled boots to complete the outfit, although this uniform bore no insignia or badge to show who or what I really was. She packed the old clothes into a small satchel and we exited back into the Labyrinth as quickly as we could. Anybody using a tracer could still see and track us-now. We continued to walk along, and when we reached the point of the office, the satchel with the irradiated clothing was tossed into the siding, although we ourselves weren't going there. It was done in one neat, fluid motion as we walked, and would show on anybody's tracker scope as a diversion-we hoped. Not much further down, we had another duck-in, this time to a small clearing in a thick, jungle-like environment. Maria seemed to know what she was doing, going over to the underbrush and then hauling out a large chest wrapped in a tarp. Removing the tarp, she unlocked the chest and opened it. "The small attaché case contains all the basic tools and instruments for a standard security repair," she told me. "There is not a lot else we could reasonably carry." I nodded, opened the case, and was reasonably satisfied with the contents. She was right. What I needed was a master computer link and a lab full of stuff, but this was better than nothing.

She then handed me a stock issue energy pistol with long laser sight in a holster on a belt with a full set of energy cubes for reserve. It was the futuristic version of the gunfighter's belt, and I didn't feel comfortable with it, but I had to be prepared to use it if necessary. There was also an extension rope, some small explosive modules, and a veritable potpourri of things that might prove useful.

"There has been abnormally heavy courier traffic of late," she told me. "Usually he only allows his own people to do the messages, but now that the others are involved they insist on their own people. I have selected a spot where it should be possible to intercept a courier, although it might take some time."

"Good," I told her, impressed. "Uh-you realize the risks here, don't you?"

She stared at me. "I am doing this because my mission is to stay with you and assist you in anything that does not involve your going outside of or threatening the organization. I always understood that if you unmasked a murderer among the higher-ups you would probably have to go after them yourself. To turn them in with or without absolute evidence would otherwise be fatal. That means you would either 'go down swinging,' as it were; in an honorable cause, or directly make your case. My life has no meaning except that I do what I was ordered to do. The risk here is irrelevant."

I wondered for a moment if she was any saner than the rest of them. At least I had a good personal excuse for doing this; Maria, on the other hand, had no real stake in it at all. I had correctly analyzed her way of thinking and in good lawyer fashion turned her into a temporarily useful ally by finding the loopholes and the fine print in her literal instructions, but I was really beginning to wonder here. I was depending a lot on her, and she had no real stake in this at all. Worse, she'd totally misread all the evidence and was taking me entirely on her own cultural terms-my "function" was to solve crimes; therefore, this was essential to solving the crime.

They wouldn't like it if I solved their little crime for them. They wouldn't like it at all.

We checked out everything, then prepared to move to our ambush location. I had hopes that we'd be there some time; I was tired and I could use the rest. This had come up too sudden and too fast; I didn't like being pushed and I didn't like the extra risks the speed-up was causing.

We re-entered the Labyrinth, weighted down by our equipment, and turned back the way we'd come. For a short while the coast seemed clear, but then Maria touched my arm and pointed, and I whirled around and saw our mysterious shadow in his accustomed position. So we hadn't fooled him; or, at least, we hadn't made good our escape.

The phantom had stopped for a moment, in the usual fashion, but did not step back as he always had. After a moment, he continued on towards us. Maria was very fast, drawing and crouching low at one and the same time. She was clearly going to fire, but I stopped her with a hand signal. If the fellow wanted to come out of the bushes, now was the time to do it.

He was of medium height, with a strong, middle-aged face that was tough and somewhat like a bulldog's, with a shock of white hair that really stood out. He was wearing, so help me, an old style trenchcoat and had both hands in his pockets, and he seemed in no hurry. He looked like either the villain or the Scotland Yard inspector out of countless old British movies, and I mentally bet he had a retired or honorary military rank.

He seemed utterly unworried about Maria's pistol, but he did stop just before entering our cube, slowly and carefully remove a hand from a pocket to show it was empty, then point beyond us. I turned, and for the first time saw another figure, this one also rather close. There could be no greater contrast in the pair.

The second was female and looked like she belonged with Valintina's amazon security staff. Tall, lean, very pretty and sexy in an all-leather jump suit, high-heeled black boots that looked great but didn't seem all that practical, and long hair that was either very blond or almost white. None of that mattered. All that mattered was the small but deadly Uzi style submachine gun she was carrying, cocked, ready, and pointed in our direction.

Maria was suddenly caught in a position where she wasn't certain about anything except her primary function and duty. I watched, horrified and helpless, as she turned in deadly pantomime and brought her own pistol to bear directly on my chest. I looked straight into her eyes and only for that moment did I see the slightest bit of hesitation or doubt in her expression.

That slight moment, however, was enough. In total silence and with professional accuracy I might have admired under any other circumstances, the strange woman in leather fired, the submachine gun pumping at least twenty rounds in deadly precision directly into Maria, who was kicked back against the cube wall by the tremendous force and almost seemed to explode in a mass of guts and gore. Her own pistol went off a couple of times, one missing me by only a hair, but I couldn't move, couldn't really feel the reality of the scene.

The tough-looking guy in the trenchcoat didn't flinch, stepping into my cube and losing his composure only slightly when he almost slipped on some of Maria's spilled guts. He pointed expressionlessly towards the leathery blonde, and I wasn't about to argue with them.

We didn't go far. There was one of those abandoned switches nearby that the opposition used so conveniently, and as soon as we stepped into it I suddenly could hear the breathing of all three of us and smell the death these two represented.

"We can talk here," said the man in a cultured British accent that perfectly fit his looks. "Sorry about that ugly business, old chap, but she would have potted you, you know. She was going to do it anyway. She would have either done it or betrayed you to Carlos the moment she found out just why you were there, and she certainly wasn't about to allow you to go into any Company territory."

"She was the product of her world and culture," I responded limply. "She was good at what she did and that can't help but affect me. I've been more or less living and working with her for weeks, after all."

"Understandable. But your sentimental streak would have been fatal in the end. Surely you knew that."

I nodded. "Maybe so. If I'd had a gun and she'd had a gun and she came at me I might have felt differently about it. But it's done. Now you want to tell me by who and why?"

"My name is Moran," he said. "My associate, here, is Miss Blaise. We have the same employer at the moment and, with other compatriots, we have been keeping one eye on you and another on your old homestead. We weren't going to be so-intrusive-as yet, but clearly you two were off to Carlos' lair, and our employer had strict instructions about preventing that."

"Your-employer?" I repeated.

"Mister Pandross, honey," the woman replied in one of those sweet, sexy voices.

"You know- Lothar Pandross?"

I nodded. "I figured as much. How is Mister Pandross, Colonel? I can call you Colonel, can't I?"

He seemed startled, then relaxed. "If you like. I assume Mister Pandross is all right. Why?"

"Well, he's been killed twice, you know. Ugly business. What are you doing, Colonel? Switching sides, or just moonlighting on the Professor?"

"The Professor, as you well know, is long dead," Moran responded. "Since then I have entertained offers from anyone with the means to satisfy me. But this gets us nowhere, you know. I'm afraid you've forced our hand in this a bit."

I looked at him and at the pretty girl with the Uzi. "So what can you do? Shall I go back and play footsie with Voorhes some more and wait for my last appointment with Carlos? Or should I simply sit here and refuse cooperation, knowing that you can't blow me away like you blew away poor Maria. Or do I get trussed up and hauled down to some maniac's lab for special treatment?"

"No time for that sort of thing," Moran muttered. "Takes weeks, you know, when you can't use the drugs. No, I think we make a deal to our mutual benefit."

"What kind of deal, Moran? You and your boss need me. I could use your help, but there's no easy way for either of us without guarantees."

"Don't need them," he commented gruffly. "You want Carlos? Go and get him."

There's the exit-we won't stop you."

I smiled grimly. "You just killed my entree in and you know it. I might be able to work on my own, but I don't know where the hell he is."

"Precisely. Well, we do. We know where he is and where the entrance is and we know all the bypass codes and procedures. With our knowledge and your talent you could get right into his lair. Whether you could successfully get out, or even do any harm, is not the question, but we have far more than you would have on your own. Right now, you're stymied."

That figured. Pandross designed all these systems, and they were all tied into the central computer anyway. With his drug zombie army around, Carlos probably had no more bothered to significantly alter the system than Mancini or the rest had. All he had to do was keep a major distance from anyone not under his control and have any outsiders deal only with underlings at a remote location.

"Think about it, darling," Blaise put in, also revealing a British accent in her sweet and sexy tones. "If you do what we want you at least have a chance at what you want. If you fail, what difference will your own personal problems make, anyway? You seem to be so smart about other things but so stupid when it's personal. If you had your way, you might just win one but then when that gets out what happens to that sweet little boy of yours?"

She was right. I really had been so hung up on one thing it never occurred to me to put my priorities in order. A lack of enthusiasm for derring-do was one thing; being blind-sided on my own interests was inexcusable.

"Just what's involved here?" I asked them.

Moran, who seemed to be almost machine-like, allowed himself a bit of a smile.

"I think you have the basic idea of what they're planning. I can fill in the details."

He reached into his coat and brought out a close-up system map of the central Zero region of the Labyrinth. It was well-worn and marked up and looked a lot like the one on Yugarin's wall that I'd seen.

I crouched down with him on the floor of the station and looked at the thing.

Moran pointed to a complex-looking set of symbols. "There is True Zero, the power source for the Labyrinth. It puts out enormous, near limitless, energy which is tapped in the side cubes here and here bracketing the Zero access itself. The huge areas here on either side are massive power regulators and transformers that take this erratic but immense power and turn it into something that can be used and make certain it is stable-and that it does not bleed over. The key bypass is here to allow traffic to go from one side to the other without the impossibility of passing through Zero or having any real access to the source."

I nodded. "All right, I'm with you so far."

"Good. Now, when the Company fries a world, as they did to those people, they seal off a section here and here, run power bypasses along the container car route to continue power, then terminate the main tunnel, making it effectively a deadend siding. They rig a bypass, in other words. Power is then bled into this new siding until eventually it reaches the end and emerges in a steady, building stream. With nowhere else to go it fries all facets of the end cube."

I nodded. "I got that much."

"The analogy is much like pouring massive voltages through a wire or tube and then using it much like a deadly firehose. It's quite tricky, which is why it's a last resort thing, and that's what gave the opposition the idea. When the energy is turned down, there's a lot built up without regulators at the end and some of it surges back through the line where the transformers and regulators must absorb it and keep things cool, as it were. Now, the theory was to produce surges from the opposite ends, out here a ways, so that they rush inward to the transformers and regulators at the same time. If they are overloaded without the massive safeguards, and both at the same time, they can't handle the load. The odds are excellent that this will produce a meltdown of the transformers and regulators. They are designed to do this as a last resort, sealing off the Labyrinth from the Zero world. So long as one side works, the other can be brought back on line via the bypass, but if both are melted, well, then, there's no power to the Labyrinth at all. It dies, and who knows if that melted mass

could ever be borne through again and a new grid built?"

"I think I get the idea," I told him. "And the danger is that the intense heat formed by the melting down might break through to Zero rather than seal the opening, so we have the unchecked power of an energy universe rushing freely through the Labyrinth."

"Precisely."

I stared at it. "I'm no physicist and I flunked most science, but I've done a lot of electrical work. Where in hell are they getting enough power to rush back along the lines to the regulators? Where are they getting so much power that the surge will overload them and shut them down?"

"That was Mancini's genius, old boy. He developed a storage system which would absorb and keep quantities of the energy from the main line. Just giant batteries, really. The power demands were increased, of course, but not to a degree that a flag would be raised in Maintenance. A few weeks of just, say, a hundred and ten percent power consumption, far within the normal fluctuations of the line, would be sufficient. And if the substation being serviced was down or at minimal levels, almost all of the energy, perhaps ninety percent, could be diverted to the storage cells. For that reason, they needed sidings with little traffic and no commerce."

"I see. But why my siding?"

"Physics. The release of that stored energy must be sequential and it must be perfectly timed, within milliseconds certainly. The signals can not exceed the constant speed of light within the Labyrinth, so a number of sidings on both sides were required and they had to be relatively close together and perfectly positioned. They had their own abandoned sidings to start with, which were easy, but not sufficient. They were able to take control of a few Company sidings, and occasionally corrupt or take over main stations so they had security on their siding work while maintaining normal commerce and not raising the Company's suspicions, but there were just a few crucial gaps that might make the difference between not enough power and enough for the job. They tried taking inconsequential ones, under little or no Company control, when they failed to control the optimum one, but they always threw another location off. Yours was perfect. It came down to using yours or widening the risks."

I had already figured out that our home sweet home had to be a key to it all. When I saw it marked with a circle on Yugarin's map, along with a lot of others I didn't know, it cleared up a lot. And when he told me that they'd come up with this like ten years earlier, the rest fell into place. And the crazy thing is, with all this hatred among this group, the key was a kind of lopsided, bent love story.

See, the first case, the one that brought Brandy and me into the Company, was their initial attempt to seize control of the State College siding and substation. They were going to replace key people in the Philadelphia branch of the Company with their own duplicates and insure a no-interference situation up at State College. Whitlock would have seen that commerce was maintained, maybe even profits increased, while one by one he used his own high position to tag and replace others. Bill, you'd be one of the key ones later on. They couldn't go after Company security officers right off, but if they had the financial and corporate officers they'd have no trouble replacing security.

But it didn't work. They screwed up when they failed to kill Whitlock. They were as ruthless then as now, but not at all experienced. They simply didn't realize that the Company was hand in hand with organized crime and they failed to cover the mob bosses. Whitlock went underground and away, in the process stiffing the mob, which went after him. That blew the operation and they were trying to clean up the botch when we got involved.

Having made our world too hot for them for a while, they looked for alternatives. I should have made the link when Brandy's case developed. They had taken over an alternate Earth close enough to ours that you didn't even have to go through a switch to go between them, and they'd developed their own siding to the same State College switch point. They'd learned, too. In that world they allied with and took over the mob. We thought they were just using the world as

a testing ground for their damned drug, and certainly they let Carlos do that in the hopes his plot would succeed and make theirs unnecessary, but the object was to secure the substation and use it as a substitute for ours.

We saw only one plot, unconnected except by the leaders to any past plot. The fact is, there were two-the officially sanctioned one Carlos was working and the private plot by Yugarin and Mancini about which the others knew nothing. But Brandy blew the security of that other Pennsylvania substation, making it useless anyway, and maybe it wasn't any good anyway. Just a hair off, increasing the odds of the surge being uncoordinated. They probably took over and tried a dozen more we never knew about, but it never worked. If they used another substation, then one or more of their already secure substations didn't work. It was a Chinese puzzle, you see. When you moved one piece it automatically moved two or three other ones. Eventually they came to decide that the only practical solution was to take over ours after all.

But how? For one thing, the two people presiding over the substation were the same two who had constantly thwarted them in the past. For another, security was better on our world after their initial failure. The only plus in their favor was that our substation was rarely used. It hadn't even been staffed until we moved up there. The weak point that existed there was simply too small to be useful except as an occasional convenience entrance and exit. We'd staffed it only because the opposition had drawn our attention to it and the vulnerability it represented, but we didn't take the next step of asking ourselves why the hell the opposition was drawn to it. I blame myself for not seeing the linkages. Again and again all the cases were drawn to that damned substation. Why?

Well, Yugarin and Mancini had managed a lot on their own, but now they had a situation where everybody was required and commitment from the whole Board was necessary. It didn't take 'em ten years to get the risk factor down-they went to the committee after ten years' work with a fait accompli. The other places were secured, the great storage batteries built, the math all done. Only it couldn't work without our substation.

Some of the committee were enthusiastic, others had reservations but finally went along, impressed by the work and planning that had gone into it ever since Yugarin had mapped all the sidings and substations and realized the possibilities unused sidings might give for such a project. It was Kanda's math that kept the risk factors high, but in the end not high enough. Mancini in particular is no dummy himself, and when I was told that Carlos had his own secure and independent computer system I only had to put two and two together to figure that there was no way to fool Mancini and the others by doing a lot of fake figures. So, in the end, we had eight people giving the go-ahead and starting to plan how to take over our substation for the length of time necessary to install and charge their batteries and rig their timing circuits under the Company's nose, as it were. And we had one man who, although he had to go along, was desperate to stop it if he could.

In every way but one, Lothar Pandross was exactly what he seemed to be. A true genius with an affinity for machines, maybe even a love affair with them. He wasn't personable, and people made him feel uncomfortable. Maybe he was just over the bend paranoid, or maybe he was an agoraphobe-staying most of the time in that one computer command center suggests that-but the fact was that Pandross was far happier interacting with machines than people and he had the kind of job and challenges that kept him happy and content. He went out seldom; the only clear instances I could see where he interacted with others, mostly just sitting back, was at the committee meetings which were held inside Kanda's alternative computer-a computer that Kanda told me Pandross had helped design and build. Pandross's personality and genius had made him perfect for the job he'd taken on at the start. Unlike the others, you see, he wasn't from that destroyed world. We'll probably never know which world he came from. But he was a Company man, a computer genius who'd probably been recruited to work on and improve the Company's own master computers. That's why his design for Kanda was so close and so competitive. But he worked for Security, not Maintenance, and so at the key time he worked directly under the ambitious traitor destined for the Company board, Mukasa Lamdukur.

In a way, they all underestimated the Company and Mukasa. He was an old security hand. He wasn't about to arm and train and turn loose eight loose cannons inside the Labyrinth with access to most of its secrets and all twisted up inside by hatred of the Company and thirst for revenge. He needed to always be sure of them, and Pandross was ideal. As a man virtually phobic about interaction with people, he was less likely to be exposed or make a slip. The position was irresistible to Pandross because it gave him nearly a free hand at designing an alternate security system and force, creating new systems, beating his old compatriots at the Company at their own game, and, of course, as chief of Security and head of the computer system as well, he could monitor and track the eight rebels as they went about their destructive work. And if Mukasa took over, Pandross was promised that he would be the king of the highest technology in the new pecking order.

Pandross, of course, eventually figured out, or maybe he just overheard it in snooping, that when Mukasa took over it would still be Company race first. He would still have a master in his own field, a comparative dolt who would still be able to order him around and restrict his activities and determine budgets and priorities. When he discovered that Carlos was going after Mukasa and planning to infect and hook the entire Company, Pandross made a fateful decision. He did absolutely nothing. That's why Mukasa was so surprised, and eventually victimized.

But Brandy threw a wrench into that operation, and we were able to put the pieces together and expose the plan at the crucial moment when it could still be stopped. Pandross was now king- but of the opposition only, with no more inside to the Company.

By that time, however, he was well along in his own project, which was Kanda's great thinking and self-repairing and self-improving master computer. To Kanda, it was a dream come true, a marvel and wonder, a true alien intelligence beyond his imaginings and a tremendous achievement. But he only designed it in the initial stages. Pandross is the one who truly created it, and used his vast stores of information taken from the Company computers to establish this new creation's foundation in reality.

To somebody like Pandross, that great, new computer was probably the only thing he ever truly loved.

And, see, that was the problem. While the few objectors on the committee were mostly concerned with the five percent chance of a total wipeout, a breakthrough to the Zero world and a searing release of all that power channeled via the Labyrinth to all Earthly creation, Pandross didn't give a damn about that. See, he was more bothered by the eighty percent chance that it would work. Short out the Labyrinth, cut off the power supply.

The power supply to his machines, his computer. They were talking about taking the only love he had, cutting open its arteries, and making that love bleed to death.

Pandross never gave a damn about the Company, and he never gave a damn really about the opposition, either. Neither had any real meaning for him so long as he was able to do what he loved to do. Maria had called it "function." Everybody has a function, something they do best, some place where they are the perfect fit in the cosmic machine. Not all of us find that fit, and not too many of us function perfectly, but that made Pandross all the more aware of his position. He had to stop them, but what could he do? Leak the plan to the Company, certainly, but that would also mean breaking apart the opposition, betraying and crumbling the network that was part and parcel of his own life and existence, and with no certainty that he would not be traced and held responsible for it. He was in association with eight brilliant psychopaths and he knew them well and didn't underestimate them. Still, the potential was there for him to betray them all.

What he had underestimated was his own beloved computer, who monitored everything with maximum input. Perhaps he talked to it from his remote location. Perhaps he even asked it for solutions to the problem. I'm not sure what triggered it-maybe his own security programs, maybe the fact that his thinking

computer was raised to think in the opposition manner in the same way that Maria was raised to think in the rigid terms of her own culture-but the computer, for all Kanda's talk of an alien intelligence, was one of them. It perceived that Pandross was cracking, that he was a threat to everything, even the computer itself. In fact, he was more of an immediate threat to the computer than the big bang plan itself. The computer was the hub of all activities for the eight and the thousands of agents they ran. You couldn't send a message, make a discovery, without having to send it via the computer's network.

And so the computer acted on the immediate threat and sent out a message under the highest authority to the opposition's top security. We'll probably never know who killed Pandross, if they're still alive themselves, but they did it faithfully and with the kind of obedience and unquestioned loyalty to the committee that Maria also represented. With the computer giving them all the accesses, all the blockings, everything he, she, or they needed, they carried out the orders and killed their chief.

The computer, of course, had solved one immediate problem by doing that but hadn't solved the one that had mandated the action. It had both a practical and a logical problem. As a loyal member of the opposition committed to its goals, it couldn't betray or destroy the others or dissolve or cause to be dissolved that organization. It had killed Pandross to preserve just that organization. But Kanda had been quite clever in his overall design; the computer had input and output capabilities, but it had no arms, legs, eyes, or whatever. It also was vulnerable for all its great power, knowledge, and size. Nobody was going to build and maintain a machine like that without adequate safeguards both against it should it turn out to be uncontrollable or should it be revealed in all its immobile bulk to the Company and fall into Company hands. Pandross himself wouldn't have permitted it, and the committee would certainly have thought of it as well. If those paranoid psychos ever even dreamed that their master computer, no matter what its motive, had knocked off one of their own, they would activate those systems and blow it.

Mancini had designed the other, easier substation bombs and their batteries. The computer couldn't get to them, and if it ordered any sort of security raid that destroyed them there would now be only one direction for bright ones like Mancini and the others to look for the culprit. The only safe way was to make something go wrong at the last and most vulnerable explosive point. My house, and the Pennsylvania substation.

I'm not clear on what it did next, but it needed some on-the-scene agent representing only it. Most likely it found a Pandross duplicate somewhere and had some security boys play their mind tricks so that the poor schmuck thought he was the real Pandross. Maybe someplace it's trying to make up for its murder by growing Pandross clones. I don't know. But when Voorhes' raid on my place to set up their part of the plan came off, there was a Pandross there. A disposable Pandross, keyed to finding me, to tipping me off, maybe even enlisting me, using threats against Dash or whatever against me. See, I didn't have any ready usable duplicates and I had to go through intensive security screening whenever I went out on a job. They made a lot of penetration operations all over hell and gone that kept me away from home more than in it. To have killed me would have been to bring Company security down on the place like a ton of bricks and maybe closed that siding and sealed or destroyed that switch. The Voorhes plan was to keep me so busy protecting Company assets that I'd spend little time at home. But I was supposed to be home when the raid came down. It was timed for that. That's why they brought their martial arts nerve experts. Their plant, Bond, would appear to be the apparent reason for the raid. That is, a simple opposition raid to get a key man before he could reach the Company and divulge secrets. Once inside, Brandy and I were to be overpowered, and she, who has an incredible number of duplicates, would be replaced by one of them so highly trained and hypno-taught that she'd be damned near perfect, while I would be permanently and totally paralyzed, a basket case, with one of those permanent Ginzu-type holds the Ginzu Master feared had been done. I would have been helpless, out of the way, and accounted for.

With a fake Brandy in place, the rest of the staff could also be replaced one by

one, since she, as station master, had full access to the most secure areas and wouldn't be suspect. They would also give a less permanent nerve hold to her so that any lapses she might make during the early stages might be glossed over, and, bedridden, she could learn the little things so as to be a perfect duplicate.

The second Pandross, however, was put in by the computer. He came by car, not Labyrinth, having been gotten in through one of the more remote substations, and knowing all the passwords and clearances his job would be to see that I wasn't knocked out. The computer was convinced that if I recovered there was no way they could fool me for any length of time, and they might be right. That would mean killing me and there goes the substation, like I said.

But I wasn't there, thanks entirely to luck and a stubborn snowstorm, and that forced the ersatz Pandross, who the goons doing the raid had every reason to believe was their legitimate boss, to improvise. He wasn't the real Pandross, though, and that made him an amateur, an actor able to carry out a predetermined set of things but an amateur when a professional was needed. The goons knew the basic plan; he couldn't overrule that without drawing suspicion on himself, so he let it go. But he had them kidnap Dash, in a real amateur night kidnapping without any plans for what they were going to do with the boy, hoping to blackmail me by threats against the boy with playing along with his game. After the raid, my Earth was pretty well sealed off by Company security, so it took a long time before even the imports could get out. They were, however, able to send a report out which included the fact that they'd missed me and kidnapped the kid.

And that's where the computer got the idea of both dealing with me and using me, as I'll explain in a moment.

I suspect that when Voorhes got that report he was furious, but he didn't really have any reason to be suspicious of the big man who'd come along and helped supervise. If he was more than mentioned, Voorhes and the rest probably just figured he was one of the drug lords they used to get the goons up and back. They had all seen Pandross's dead body, and my vague description later of Whispy Voice wouldn't have connected.

Voorhes and the others were pros, though. If they couldn't have me in the original way, they'd use Dash to make me come to them. The idea was to use me if they could, since the death of Pandross really had shaken them, but also to invoke my absence and perhaps later show evidence that I had turned traitor. I would register, now and again, on Company recorders during my Labyrinth trips, although they made certain my routing wouldn't give Company security any real opportunity to nab me. The computer also hired some good people, like Moran and Miss Blaise, to cover me in shifts, making certain that not only as backups for Maria but also, and primarily, to protect me from Company agents just in case. That was why we were shadowed everywhere in the Labyrinth. This gave the computer some legs of its own, since Maria was tied to opposition security and therefore to the other seven. This independently hired force believed they were working security for a still-living but behind-the-scenes Pandross. They represented a mercenary third party who was devoted to stopping the plan but also to protecting the opposition.

The trouble was, nobody could really get to the farm to blow the operation. Hell, if the toughest sort to fool in all humanity, a five year old, can be conned into accepting a duplicate as his mother, why should the Company suspect? And if they are going to make certain that they close this threatening substation, who better than the station master to bring in crews so it can be done in an orderly manner? Hell, the Company would actually make certain nobody disturbed them!

The problem was, that made it next to impossible for the computer's mercenaries to get near it on the world side, and only station personnel's codes would be operative on the Labyrinth, or switch, side. Nobody could get in from the switch except Mancini's team, and nobody could threaten on the real world side because of the Company. Neat.

The only one whose code would automatically operate that switch who wasn't on

either side was me, since there was no way to take me out of the coding at the switch level unless it was done by the station master-and this Brandy was perfect, but she wouldn't have the real one's total I.D. coding so the moment she went into the security area of the switch to alter it the alarms would go off like the Fourth of July.

The computer had known that. That's why when the committee asked the computer to suggest who could best solve Pandross's murder, the computer strongly suggested me.

Voorhes was nervous about me-things hadn't gone right in the raid and he'd resisted the idea of using Dash to get at me-but when the computer suggested me and also the logic of making me seem a traitor and getting the threat out of the way-the plan I outlined already-it proved irresistible. Carlos, of course, saw the humor in it as well, and put someone under his control, Maria, over me although she didn't know it was him. Still, they accelerated operations in the siding, knowing that they couldn't maintain the enormous fiction there forever. And now here was Moran telling me that their employer, Mister Pandross, whom I knew was a hulking mass well back down the Labyrinth there, now insisted that I carry out the last part of his plan for the sake not only of screwing things up but also in my own interest. If they were allowed to go ahead, God only knew what would eventually happen to Dash.

"All right," I told Moran and Blaise. "Just what is it I'm expected to do here, anyway?"

"We will provide what you need before you go," he told me. "It's not large or bulky and it breaks into little bricks. You just stick them in various spots as you travel towards your house through the siding. Once you are out and well away from the substation, you will have a detonator that will blow them, and that, in turn, will blow the batteries. That's basically it. The Company will find the mess, their security people will figure out the plan, and steps will be taken to insure against it happening again. You, rather than Mister Pandross, we, or any of the opposition, including their security forces, will have been the instrument of their failure. They will have to regroup and try something else. It's as simple as that."

"Uh huh. And what happens to me then? I'll have everybody from the deadly Valintina to the unforgiving Voorhes after me with all their resources. Not to mention that they'll definitely blow that world they threaten and send me the gory details."

Moran sighed. "They will not blow that world. It is true that the threat is real, but we have already taken measures to insure that the death of a world is not going to be on your shoulders, and I believe you understand we can prevent similar attempts in the near future to repeat the threat. As for your personal safety-well, you're no worse off than you were, are you? The Company can certainly safeguard your son. If not, then there is no hope for any of us, is there? And we will provide you with all that you will need to find your wife. If that doesn't still kill both of you, then I think you are resourceful enough to find a hole big enough to hide in. You are, after all, a security expert." I thought it over and saw he was right. "Okay, then, I'll do it. But what happens if I get nailed in the siding by the opposition people or nailed up top by the Company before I can detonate?"

"Good point. You may find some small resistance in the siding, but you were prepared to deal with far greater forces on fortified guard, weren't you? We trust your abilities there. If the Company or anyone else gets you once the devices are planted, we have backups. The power net is still functional, a signal can be beamed in if need be although we'd rather not do it since it would show the presence of a third force, as it were. And if anyone gets you, the first thing they will do is search you-or, pardon, your body, depending. Anyone else whose skin contacts that detonator except for you will cause the detonating signal to be sent. It will still look like an accident, you see."

I nodded. They had it pretty well worked out. "Let's just assume I survive this and am in a position to use your information to go after my wife," I said. "I know that's improbable, but you never know. I assume he's hooked her and is putting her through a humiliating hell just to get even and feed his psychotic

ego. I know how those drugs work. She might eventually kill herself, but she'll never leave with me."

Moran sighed. "We thought of that. The same way Mister Pandross communicated with you is the way we eventually got a message through to her. She is assured that the drug can be duplicated if a sample is provided. She also has been thinking ahead, it appears. It must take tremendous willpower not to take the drug until you just can't stand it any more. I have seen opium and heroin addicts, and this must be far more solid a hold than that, and more terrible a withdrawal. We merely gave her a suggestion. If she is strong enough, as you and we think she is, and smart enough, she'll have seen the solution. The drug is dispensed every twenty-four hours. It wears off in twenty-six, and we calculate the maximum point where it must be taken at thirty hours or so. If she's gotten the hint, which was all we could manage, and if she's up to it, she should have a surplus pill every four days. If she has a few as five extras sequestered, that would be more than enough with insurance. If she either hasn't gotten the idea, or has been unable to do it, then she is lost anyway."

I nodded. "I see. But-if she should have that many doses, then she must have gotten the hint pretty early. Long before I urged contact."

Moran nodded. "Oh, yes. We made certain shortly after she was made away with that someone, in threatening her, told her the exact time sequence. She would have known it almost from the start."

I sighed. "I'll be damned. Snookered from the beginning."

Moran shrugged. "Perhaps. But one thing has puzzled all of us, I must admit, right from the point where it became obvious that you knew your wife had been switched. You had your son back, which was to be our leverage to get you in here in the first place, so if you didn't know that your wife was a fake then you had no reason to enter here or play fair with Voorhes and the others. Ergo, you did know, right from the start."

I nodded. "That wasn't all that hard, although she is good. Even when I knew it wasn't my wife, I could believe it was. I was relieved she was so perfect-it meant I could leave Dash without a lot of trauma. I think it was something in her manner, her eyes, the way she interacted with Dash. I'm not sure she planned it that way, but unless she's the greatest actress that ever was I got the strong impression she'd die before she'd let anything happen to the kid. Almost like, well-I know that most of Brandy's counterparts didn't turn out so right or so lucky. Like she saw Dash as her second chance."

"But if she was good enough to fool even your own son ..."

"How'd I know? Oh, that wasn't hard. This crew goes in a lot for duplicates, switches, and substitutions, so I was looking for that right away. Even so, she almost threw me by being so perfect, until I found a fairly large piece of optical glass on the downstairs rug, like glasses had been broken. It was large enough that I played a hunch and sent it downtown to the optician where she got her glasses to check against Brandy's prescription. It matched."

"Astounding! And that told you what?"

"Well, nobody, not even absolute duplicates, shares experience. There's always a little scar or a broken bone or a different filling in a tooth or something like that. Brandy's vision was always lousy, but it had really gone to hell during the wracking pain of withdrawal treatments from Carlos' organic drug. Her glasses looked like the bottom of Coke bottles, which is why the fragment was so noticeable. A duplicate would have the same genetic eye problems but wouldn't have undergone that extra treatment, and might have undergone other eye stress. The prescriptions were unlikely to be that close, even if the basic problems were the same. I got Brandy's spare pair from her bedroom and had them checked at the optician's as well. They didn't match the prescription. They were, in fact, way off. The only answer was that the woman wasn't Brandy, and had substituted her glasses for Brandy's so she'd never have to cope with the wrong prescription. When I realized that, I knew they'd pulled the switch. I could blow her cover, but then what happens to my wife? I figured that if they took her, and didn't kill her, they'd eventually turn her over to Carlos. I think I had his measure from the start, which is why I was confident she wasn't dead."

When I fed a description to Maria, she was able to check the security couriers who went to and from Carlos's world and got a confirmation."

"God, that's noble and sweet!" Blaise put in. "I hope you get through all this, I really do. I hope you get her back. I really do. And even if you don't, I may take a crack at plugging that drug-dealing bastard myself sometime. It might be fun to do one just for kicks."

I sighed and got to my feet. "Lead on, MacDuff, and Heaven knows if we dine with the angels or in Hell this night."

"That's not Shakespeare," Moran commented.

"Horowitz, Act Four, Scene One," I responded.

I had an escort all the way to the switch, some of whom I could see and some of whom I just inferred. We actually did run into two Company security people on the way-I guess some alarm went off in the main line-but they never got close to me. I hoped they weren't killed, but I didn't have much choice on this one. There was, of course, somebody on the switch itself, allegedly with the Company but almost certainly in the employ or under the control of the opposition. It was a typical Type Two, dog-faced character, and I remembered that Mancini had a number of Type Twos at our meeting place. He was, however, a tad confused.

"This switch is officially closed and in the process of being shut down," he told me officiously, "yet-that's strange. My board shows that you have highest security and priority entrance on the station mas ..."

I had one hell of a pop gun with me and he wasn't nearly quick enough on the uptake. I fired right into the glass, which shattered, throwing him back against the wall which he hit, hard, and then slumped to the floor of the switch control room. I ran up to the window, saw that blood was coming from the sides of his toothy mouth and that his eyes were glassy and open and decided to take the chance that it meant the same for his race as for most others and that I'd killed him. Knocking out the remaining glass-actually some kind of tough plastic but the stuff still has sharp edges-I vaulted into the control room and reset the switch. I knew this one like I knew the back of my own hand. No sweat. Even reset, though, there was no way the security system would admit anyone not on the internal coded security list. I should know-I installed the system myself. Moran and Blaise and the others couldn't follow, not without setting off alarms and maybe filling the other side with opposition security boys, but I could just walk right on through. They would remain here and cover my rear for a while, until it got too hot-I knew alarms were sounding within the Company net, or would when I passed that barrier. Then they'd head for the hills.

I went in fast, not expecting any real opposition but certainly expecting to encounter some work crews or maintenance people. You didn't bother to put guards on a door that was already locked and bolted and jammed a hundred which ways. As soon as I was inside, the case I was lugging along sensed the proper conditions had been met, buzzed, and unlocked itself. I checked for trouble, then stopped and opened it. Inside were a lot of the bricks, each about eight inches by four inches, sort of like modeling clay, and, in a pocket, a thick folder. I took out the folder and looked through it, and saw immediately that it was at least what I had been promised. If it wasn't phony, I had a map to Carlos' lair, staffing, security system bypasses, the works. His world and fortress would be as wide open to me as if they didn't exist.

I walked forward, and didn't have to go far to see the massive batteries or whatever they were. They were enormous translucent cubes, filling most of each Labyrinth cubicle, and they hummed and throbbed with yellow-white energy. Along the top and sides, various thick connectors went right to and in some cases into the side walls of the Labyrinth itself. They were pretty damned impressive, but so bulky I worried that I might not be thin enough to squeeze through. Before I tried, I began sticking the explosive bricks to the connectors and nearest energy cube. Then, inhaling as best I could, and with a real effort, I managed to get by the first one, then almost trip on the connectors linking the first one to the next one. I went on, placing more and more of the bricks, and at one time damn near got stuck and at another got in but couldn't angle the damned case to come with me for a while. I was aware that a clock was really ticking here.

I was four in when I saw my first person. He was wearing Company maintenance green, and he spotted me before I spotted him. The idea that anybody could enter from the switch didn't occur to him, though.

"Hey! Who're you and how'd you get down here?" he shouted, sounding angry.

"I live here!" I responded, and shot him.

I had absolutely no compunctions about blowing away anybody down here in the siding, and wouldn't take many chances if I got up and out, either. These guys had done worse than burglarize my home; they'd moved in. I felt angry and somewhat violated by mat.

The siding went on a bit past my stop, and so did the energy cubes, but I was running out of bricks and I didn't feel great going any further. I took out the remaining ones and tossed them back. Hell, they'd probably do some harm no matter where they landed, and they were all hooked together anyway. I wasn't going to stay in here any longer than I had to. I was well aware that if they could remotely detonate the damned things they might not care if I was in here or not if they had enough opposition back at the switch.

The substation activated, and I walked into the familiar concrete well structure. At least they hadn't done anything to show here, so I was able to get up the ladder fast and head for the fence gate. It was locked, of course, but I blew it off, the sound echoing off in the distance. It didn't matter. My entry should have tripped an alarm up there if they were anywhere on the ball anyway. It was cold, and there was as much or more snow than ever around. I had on a heavy jacket over the security outfit Maria had provided me, but as soon as I got to the edge of the grove of trees the wind really started biting into me, and I couldn't protect my gloveless hands without letting go either of the case or my gun.

I was a lousy shot-always have been. This gun compensated for that not by automatic marksmanship, which was strictly for small and close range stuff, but by sheer firepower. It was a partial energy weapon firing these weird looking fat pointed cylinders, but if one hit it blew with the force of a grenade launcher, as both the switchman and the maintenance checker found out.

Well, the best defense near dusk in a place like this wasn't to slink around dark against snow but to walk boldly up the main road like you belonged there. Come to think of it, this was my house and my farm and I did belong there.

I stuck the blunderbuss in my pocket, hunched down as much as possible to protect myself from the wind, and walked boldly up the main road.

I was, frankly, amazed to get right to the porch without being challenged or even seeing another person. Well, everybody had enough sense to keep out of this weather if they didn't have to, and clearly work was over for the day.

I took the detonator module out and stuck it in my other pocket, then slid the case under the hole beneath the front steps. I didn't need it any more but I wanted to be able to get at it and the file it still contained if need be. Then, steeling myself, I walked up to the front door, took out the gun, turned the knob, and opened it.

There were sounds from the kitchen in the back, and the TV was on in the living room, and there was the smell of a home-cooked meal wafting through the place. Suddenly I heard footsteps on the stairs and a small, excited voice screamed, "Daddy!"

Dash practically fell down the steps getting to me, and fairly leaped at me. There was the sound of someone coming from the kitchen, and suddenly there was Brandy, although not my Brandy, with a puzzled look on her face and carrying a casserole dish. She stopped, saw me and Dash, and dropped the casserole dish on the floor.

"Oh, my God!" she said, and her face was suddenly the closest to white any black woman in history ever got.

"Wow, Dad! Is that a gun or something?" Dash asked, oblivious to the scene. I picked him up with my left arm and he clung there, hugging my neck. I'd forgotten how heavy he'd become.

"Yeah, son," I responded, "it's a gun." I looked at the ersatz Brandy, who was still standing there in the midst of a gooey mess that was all that remained of

whatever had been in that casserole dish. "Don't I also get a warm welcome from my dear wife?" I asked her, a trace of acid in my voice in spite of the fact that she'd obviously done a pretty good job.

"S-Sam! What? Where have you . . .?" she managed, starting to recover a bit.

"No alarms, huh, Brandy? I wouldn't want to have to do anything to you in front of Dash. You understand."

She nodded mutely, frozen to the spot.

"Anybody else in the house?"

"Uh uh," she responded. "They're all over in the control center gettin' ready for the big test. Well, I think you know. Big fella, looks like some Mafia godfather, is over there, along with some big shot who looks like some sort of monk."

Yugarin and Mancini both here! That was interesting. If I could somehow alert Company security, they'd have a hell of a haul.

I was still trying to figure out what to do when Dash wriggled in my grasp and I felt a tiny hand dive into my left coat pocket and come out with the detonator.

If any bare human skin other than mine touched the detonator. . . .

"Hey, Dad? What's this?" Dash asked.

There was a sudden buzzing in the thing and then a rumble like an earthquake started shaking the whole house. The lights flashed on and off and suddenly the TV imploded.

Shit! I thought angrily, knowing what was happening now. This whole damned farm takes its power from that grid!

There was suddenly one hell of a big explosion, and I consciously fell on Dash to protect him and then my head got kicked hard by what felt like a mule, and that's the last damned thing I remember.

11.

Storming the Citadel

Bill Markham shifted in his chair. It had been a very long session and they were all tired, but there was no thought of not going to the end. Not now.

"It was a spectacular explosion," Markham said. "I didn't see it, but the monitors alone picked up a tremendous force, almost like a small underground atom bomb blast. I'm told by witnesses that a fiery plume shot up from the well hundreds of feet in the air and lit up the night sky for miles, turning Happy Valley back into day. The feedback into the grid circuits servicing everything from the house to the substation itself was tremendous. Electrical fires everywhere, and the ground shaking brought down half the structures. The horses managed to get out before the barns burned, by the way. And some of the people there got away and may be still running in confusion, although it looks like some were just about sealed into the substation and security bunkers. We dug down and cleared out the first bunker corridor, and the smell was overwhelming. No matter what the cannibals say, human beings don't smell appetizing when they're barbecued."

Sam didn't find that news very pleasant. "But you said Dash was all right."

"He is, I wasn't kidding you. Half the house collapsed but that's about what saved you. It started to burn from the electrical fire, producing thick smoke. You took the debris and Dash only maybe got a bruise from you falling on him. He was trying to drag you out of there when the first fire engine arrived on the scene. He wouldn't budge from your bedside until it was clear that you'd be all right. That's some kid you got there."

Sam gave a wan smile. "Thanks. I like to think so. And the duplicate Brandy?"

"She's pretty banged up but she'll come out of it okay. The funny thing was, you saying about how she stood there, frozen, in that arch between the entry hall and living room and the kitchen?"

"Yeah?"

"Saved her life. The arch held when a lot of the rest collapsed. She managed to crawl out and helped get debris off you, even though it later turned out she had a number of broken bones. She got Dash out from under you, too, but just wasn't

up to pulling you any further. She was half out with pain on the front porch when the first help arrived, but she might have saved Dash and she just might have saved you, Sam."

"Where is she now?"

"Near here. She's told us her side of the story, Sam. She really didn't know much or want to know much, but what little she did know she confirmed. She didn't have to, either. Hell, Sam, we had no reason at the start to think it wasn't the real one. If she hadn't told us she might have gotten away."

"What's her background?" Sam asked. "I know most Brandys didn't have it too good."

Markham nodded. "Her mom died same as ours, but the Colonel got into a street argument over something minor and stupid and somebody shot him. She was seven. None of the relatives could or would take her, so she wound up in a state orphanage where eventually she saw all the white kids adopted out and most of the black kids grow up there. She ran away when she was thirteen, became a street kid in New York, panhandling and stealing to get by, sleeping in abandoned apartments, selling herself when she had to. She doesn't remember how many times she was raped. Got pregnant once when she was maybe fifteen. The baby was born dead. A boy."

Sam Horowitz sighed. "Yeah. How the hell did these bastards find her?"

"She was in jail. The usual thing. Some petty drug dealing. She had a record of offenses as long as your arm, though, running the route from pickpocket to rolling drunks to prostitution, so they gave her five years. Their people bought a lawyer and a judge, got her sprung on a technicality, made her an offer."

"An addict? You said she was selling drugs."

"No, nothing major. It never appealed to her, or maybe she was so damned hardened she never felt the need. That was one of her attractions to them. No needle tracks, no hard addiction. She was something of a pothead, but not since jail. At first she saw it as a big con, a chance at the big time. You'd be paralyzed and institutionalized, and she'd get a big payoff here and do whatever she wanted. They used every trick they had to make her into our Brandy, I'll tell you, and she was a good learner. She was good enough to fool me and even Dash."

Sam nodded. "If I hadn't found that fragment of glasses before I'd found Dash-in fact, if they hadn't kidnapped Dash at all-I think I would have bought her, too. I don't know. I get the idea that maybe Dash was the key to her success, too. Maybe he was that stillborn kid she had back when, or maybe it was just the level of life and normalcy. Wish fulfillment, maybe. But the reason why she even fooled Dash was that there was genuine affection for him inside her. I could see it and feel it. That's why I was able to leave him with her. A lot of time you go on that deep down sixth sense with people in this business. I just knew, somehow, that she'd never let him be hurt any more than his real Mom would, that she thought of him as hers, too."

Markham nodded. "Depending on what we can salvage from this mess, we'll see what we can do for her." He paused, getting a bit grim. "Sam- they didn't play a hundred percent fair with you."

He frowned. "What? You mean it shut down the Labyrinth anyway?"

"Partially. It caused a massive surge in both directions. Some came out of the substation entrance and caused all the problems, but that was mostly backwash, as it were. The main force was forward, as designed, and it fried the switch and surged along the main line faster than even the protective equipment could kick in. On its own, it would have been minimal, but the surge reached other sidings, ones we didn't know about, also prepared, and set them off, too. It was a massive energy wave, frying a lot of stations and a lot of switches and not incidentally a lot of people."

"But it didn't break out."

"Uh uh. That damned computer had it pretty well figured, just how much power it would release and what direction it would take and what damage it would do. By the time it reached the Company siding it was strong enough to trigger all the protective seals and switches and then fry them, melt them down almost literally. It eventually shorted out two of the main regulators at the Zero

wall. Not enough to cause permanent disruption, but enough to lower power levels to minimal operation for a long time to come. Maybe years, maybe longer. It's going to be a very long time before we can move large quantities of material in this sector, and for a fair amount of that time we'll be on our own and flying blind."

"Huh? What?"

"Sam-you know the Company world. You remember how massive the security was on that place, how it was overkill to the infinite degree. This stuff melted it down. The whole damned bypass, covered in a thick, smelly, harder-than-diamond substance, and without power. Since it was a bypass system power is still available, but we have no power back to the Company world and no contact and no switches. Sam, they're sealed in, along with, I might add, a number of other worlds and main stations as well along the path of this thing. Even with full power it'd take years to get back in there, and even then we'd need a lot of knowledge we don't have to find the weak point and punch back through. Knowledge that's locked in the main computers inside the Company world. Computers that no longer work because they were grid powered. The whole damned Company world is without power."

Sam's jaw dropped. "You mean-they're sealed in tight? Without any power, without any access to the grid line? Well I'll be damned. . . ."

"God knows, when and if we ever get back in there, what we'll find," Markham continued. "I don't think our world, even this country, could get along without power. If everything suddenly shut down, if we were suddenly back to the Eighteenth Century, few of us would survive. We don't know how to farm in the old ways. We don't know how to get our food and store it and transport it without power and mobility. To survive on our own without communication, heat, anything. We aren't even built for that any more. A fair amount of the Third World would get along okay, but we'd be finished. Mass starvations, freezings, riots, you name it. And, Sam, the Company world doesn't have any Third World, and all its knowledge and advisers and all the how-to manuals and the rest were in their vast computer network that's now without power and probably one great cold lump. They can't even look it up."

Sam shook his head. "No wonder I got this treatment right out of a sickbed. In a sense, I'm the worst traitor to ever hit this operation. Good grief, I was the hand that killed G.O.D., Inc.!"

Markham gave a dry laugh. "Well, they got their wish, little good that it'll do them. The Company's too big for that, Sam. We're hurt, we're wounded, we've got real problems, probably for the rest of yours and my lives, but the Company's still here. An emergency Board composed of senior experienced managers has already been named, and without a native Company worlder on it. It's like a government, Sam. You can overthrow a government, even execute all the politicians, but so long as the civil service is intact it still runs. We're really going to miss those centralized computers and their irreplaceable databanks, but we have access to a lot of computers ourselves and even if they each cover only one region or area we'll cope. Voorhes was right. So long as the Labyrinth survives, the Company survives."

Sam Horowitz sighed again. "You gonna untie me now, or execute me?"

"I'm going to untie you. Hell, Sam, you've got a job to do that we can help with."

"Brandy, you mean. Bill-all the data was in that case, and you said the house was destroyed."

Bill Markham grinned. "Yeah, but they make damned good cases, you know. And I want our Brandy back as much as you do, Sam. And, most of all, I want Carlos. I wish I knew for sure if Mancini and Yugarin really were in that control room for the timing tests, but from what I saw we'd need their complete medical scans to identify them from the remains, and the only place they might be is in the Company's security computers."

"Or Kanda's and Pandross's little dream," Sam reminded him. "Right now, that damned thing is the most powerful computer in all creation." He yawned and stretched as one of the agents cut him loose, then groaned. "What I want first

is a good meal and a decent sleep. Then I want to go see Dash while you find my burnt case. And after that-we'll see."

They said the setting was quite beautiful, although a bit archaic-looking, like something out of an old movie, with the great castle stuck atop the bluff overlooking the crashing sea. She, herself, didn't know because she couldn't see it. Since they'd smashed her glasses taking her out of the house maybe-what?-weeks or months ago, she hadn't been able to see much of anything except big blurs.

It was getting harder and harder to have any sense of time at all. The setting was the same, the people were mostly the same, and the climate seemed warm and wet all the time.

She'd gotten to know her way around the Castle, as everybody called it, very well, at any rate. When the rule was that she was to be watched and prevented from harming herself, either accidentally or deliberately, but otherwise was not to be helped or aided in any way, you learned quickly.

In a way, it was sort of like going back to a kind of ugly existence after five years of a good dream. The fact that she'd been this route before toughened and sustained her. She had briefly considered suicide, but rejected it on two levels. One was that there was always a chance, however slim, of beating even this system and situation. She'd been down this far or farther before and had somehow squeaked clear in the end, and so long as there was any hope at all for beating it, even if it was a long time in coming as looked certain, she wasn't about to pack it in. The other level was more basic; killing herself would provide Carlos with a great deal of amusement, and she didn't want to give him the satisfaction. Worse was the fear she might botch it, and either cripple herself or give them even more excuse for their endless taunts. Without being able to see, she was just never sure who was around and what she could get away with.

Those little bastards with their nerve holds had put her out for the count during the raid on the house. She was vaguely aware of being stuffed in a truck or ambulance or something and of eventually some kind of plane ride, but it had been remote, distant, like the fringes of a half-remembered dream.

Even long after the initial paralysis had worn off they'd kept her drugged and sedated. She had vague memories of eating and drinking and doing other stuff but it was distant and willowy, her mind out to lunch for that period. That was one reason why time was no longer meaningful; she had no way of knowing how long that initial period was.

They'd kept her that way for quite a while, then slipped her through into the Labyrinth at some long forgotten substation maybe in South America or Asia or someplace like that, where the Company security had a hole. When she had finally come to she'd been stark naked on a bed in this place with no clear memories of how or when she'd gotten here.

"So nice to have you back," she heard Carlos' mellow voice say to her. She had spent little time with him back then, but she would never forget him or his dark good looks and smooth Latin charm that could mask the ugly, monstrous soul inside of him. "Once I acquire something it is mine, and I dislike losing anything of mine. The fact that you and your husband put me to a lot of trouble and ruined a nearly perfect plan to do to the Company and its world what they so richly deserved only makes your return more satisfying."

"Why didn't you just kill me and get it over with?" she asked him.

"Killing is so-permanent," he replied. "I prefer a more creative approach. Years ago the Company killed everything in my life I ever had, yet left me alive in a kind of personal Hell. When I attempted to strike back at the ones who did that, you prevented me. Now I want you to feel helpless and impotent, cut off, as I do. I want you to know on a personal level what my kind of ache is, to hate so much that you would do anything to do to me what you so judged and condemned me for trying to do to those who harmed me. And then you will crumble, as hope vanishes and you snap, sinking mentally to the level I have already reduced you to physically, knowing all the while what is happening. When that happens you will be a living testimony to inspire the proper attitude in all those who work with me here. And this time you will be helpless as we strike the fatal blow."

She said nothing, but his words were causing her stomach to have fits.

"We must first come to a realization of your situation," he continued, watching her. "You are in my personal home, on a world that does not appear in the Company's charts, via a switch that does not even exist on the Company's records. Everyone here is mine. Not even my comrades can come here without my permission, and as my guests. Not that those here could not leave, but they do not wish to. I have-a system."

"Yeah, you got 'em all on your damned drugs."

"Very clever. But not the old kind, which were difficult to control. We have made much progress since then. I got the idea from a world I did business with, a world in which people are now born with an inability to replenish certain natural enzymes. From the cradle they must be given what they lack regularly or they go into withdrawal and die. Their society is loyal, ordered, and obedient. From my studies of the viral-like agent with which you are so familiar from the past, I learned how to induce this condition in people not born that way. First we remove something essential, and then we give it back as a daily treatment. The combinations are infinite, so no two people have the same formulation. It must be made, uniquely, for each individual. Since only I know the codes for the formulations and cross-checks, everyone is very loyal and obedient to me."

"You may make me obedient, but there ain't no way you're ever gonna make me loyal," she retorted.

He laughed. "But that is the way I wish it. You see, almost everyone here is here because they are valuable to me and my organization. Security people, the staff here, maintenance, medical-you name it. Not to mention the scientists and technicians in my laboratories probing ever deeper into body and brain chemistry. Not you. You are simply one of my toys, a household item of furniture. For now, you have no other purpose than existence. You have already been treated, so you are- secure. I'm sure you know what that means."

She sighed, having expected it. "Yeah, I know."

"There are three main living floors and over sixty rooms in the Castle, as well as formal gardens in the back, pool and recreation area, that sort of thing. You have free reign of all the public areas, but will refrain from entering any private room unless taken there. I want you always on public view. Sleep where you wish, eat when you like. It will take you quite some time to get to know the place, but you have a nearly infinite amount of that. The lower areas and laboratories are secured and off limits, but you will be prevented from entering them anyway. Be cooperative and obey your set of rules and you will avoid punishment. After the first few times with the electric whip or the shock gun you will not wish to be punished again."

She didn't like even the names of them.

"Now," he continued, "the rules. Your status here is no higher than, say, a pet in the house. You will keep out of the way. You will not interfere in anything. You will keep yourself clean and reasonably neat and will be told who to see and where to go to accomplish that. You will speak only when spoken to unless it is an emergency of some sort. As a sign of your status here you will wear no clothing at all. It is always either hot and dry or hot and wet here. You will be cooperative. If anyone here takes it into their head to fondle or feel you up, you will not only let them and not resist, you will convince them that you enjoy it. And if anyone has more in mind, you will do it with enthusiasm and accommodate their needs or wishes. You have no private quarters, or any quarters. When you are sleepy find a comfortable place in a public area and go to sleep. You will do no work, ask no favors, pry into any business or other activities nor ask any imprudent questions or exhibit curiosity, nor do any harm to anyone. Everyone understands this, and any infractions will be recorded and you will be sought out and punished. And we don't want to see any frowns, only nice, happy smiles. Any questions so far?"

She sighed. "No." He wanted to strip her of her dignity, have her parade helplessly around as an object lesson, and reduce her to a kind of static hell. It showed just how his mind worked.

"Good. Now, once a day someone will come to you and give you the supplement you

now require. Your own personal formulation, I remind you. No one else's would do you any good. We have a machine that dispenses them once a day for everyone. There are no reserves. I am sure you know how to give it to yourself. You had practice. The withdrawal is fully as bad as you remember it, and as lethal in the end. Remember that. And please do not think of harming yourself. Someone will always be watching-somewhere."

"You will never totally own me," she said evenly, and meant it.

"Oh, I will, and I'll know when. When you finally and totally give up, surrender. When you then ask me, beg me, for a better drug, a stronger drug, that will take your mind away, then it will be complete. And depending on my mood, perhaps I will give it to you, and watch you administer it to yourself. And it will happen-sooner or later."

"Never," she replied, teeth clenched. "Never."

He gave a sigh, then concluded, "I will leave you now, and an aide will take you out and teach you the essentials. You might not see me again, but I will see and hear of you. Dream of a rescue that won't come. Your husband is already in our hands but does not suspect that you are in mine. Even if he did he could not help you, but if he does not he can not even make the attempt. Your son is safe and well in his own home world and under family care, but remember that he is vulnerable. I know you are bright and resourceful and capable of self-sacrifice, but if you have any bright ideas and even attempt to betray this place, your son will bear the brunt of my anger. And if you try and kill yourself, I will replace you with him."

"You leave Dash out of this, you bastard!"

Carlos chuckled. "I intend to, for now. The Company, not I, makes war on children. He is out of my mind and plans-unless you give me cause to remember him. So, do nothing but be what I want you to be. In not too long from now, our grandest plan will be executed, and the Labyrinth itself will be destroyed, and I will no longer be able to touch your precious son-nor you to ever leave here. I must leave you now. This is a busy time. But I will be seeing you often." With that, he turned and was gone. She couldn't see him, only hear his footsteps vanish in the distance, jackboots on tile, but she didn't need to see for that. She sat up, but she felt sickened and depressed. He'd really got her this time, that son of a bitch! But, no. She couldn't give up. Not completely. Not on the strength of his words and his say-so. Maybe he was right about her, but if they were playing with Sam they still might get more than they bargained for, and maybe Sam at least could get back to Dash.

She already missed him so, and the idea of not ever seeing him again, not watching him grow up, was horrible. Still, that was out of her hands. Maybe ever escaping from this place was, too, but sometime, somehow, there must be something she could do to screw them up here. She would play their games, but she would not surrender.

More boots on the floor, coming towards her, but this time a woman just from the sound of it. "Come with me," said a low female voice in tones cold as snow.

"Take my hand. I have been ordered to orient you."

They went down some corridors and up some stairs and through some thick guard doors and finally were out in what felt like open space.

"This is the main front door that leads out to the entryway," her guide told her. "In front of you, facing into the Castle, is a grand staircase with ten steps leading to a 'Y' split on a landing, and then ten more in either direction. To your right, the lounge, with chairs, couches, wide windows, and the like. To your left are various public rooms. To the right of the staircase and behind it leads to dining rooms and then the kitchen. The same way but on the left and behind the stairs is the way to the recreation halls, and the rear exit to the gardens, tennis courts, swimming pool, and such. The carpets are raised or worn to all the areas. You will learn them. To ask for help is forbidden, but you may take it if offered."

"Thanks a lot," she said dryly.

"The second floor is a broad balcony leading to offices. You will not go in the offices on your own. Upper floors are private rooms. You are also not to go there on your own. You will remain on public view at all times. Sleep on the

couches or rugs in the den or wherever you feel like it, but yield any space on demand. To eat, find and go to the kitchen. They will give you leftovers. Speak not at all to anyone unless directly addressed and a response is required. Be seen and not heard. Any infractions will be reported and punished immediately or at pill time, as we call it here. Do not search for your shot. We will find you. You will get it at the same time every day as you have been put on a schedule. You will begin to feel withdrawal after twenty-six hours, and no one has ever gone more than thirty or thirty-one hours. Now, come. We will go out by the pool and I will show you the bathrooms you may use and the showers."

It took her several days of concentrated learning and lots of mistakes to get even the basics down, concentrating on the Johns, the showers, and the kitchen and den area. At first she was highly self-conscious when she realized the large number of people here, but after a while she ignored the comments and snide remarks and decided that she'd just act like she wasn't this nude example and screw them.

They fed her in the area where they threw the garbage, just out back of the kitchen, and they fed her literal leftovers. Half-eaten fruit, remnants of bread, leftover stew, that kind of thing. When you were hungry enough you stopped asking questions and just ate it. Some of it wasn't half bad, although she was glad she couldn't really see it, and it included leftovers of beer and wine as well.

There were lots of problems initially, of course, when she did back talk or flinched when somebody started pawing her, and then she found out what the electric whip was like. It was a searing pain in a whip-like slash that felt like it was taking all the skin off you, but which left no marks and did no permanent damage. It was apparently not something for her benefit but a stock weapon of the guards to the sensitive areas and you didn't want it twice. She got it a lot more than that, though, as they tested her and deliberately tried provoking her and stringently enforced their rules.

It was a super incentive and she learned real fast.

That, really, was the most disheartening thing of all-how fast she'd become just what he had described. It was terrible how quickly pretending you didn't mind it when they fondled your breasts or put a hand on your crotch turned into reflexive, natural behavior. How easy it was to give sexual favors and indulge whatever they wanted and stick your mind in parking gear someplace. How the first day she went without punishment somehow seemed a great triumph when actually it was the first badge of their victory over her. That the easiest way to never be punished was to totally accept your condition and position and to not really think at all, to no longer mind being treated as an object and to even look forward to violations and indignities because they were at least attention. And how her face now seemed frozen in a nice, friendly smile.

She had always looked back on her Shadow Dancer time with some ego-inflating colorations. To her mind she'd resisted all the way, never given in, never surrendered. Now, of course, she was face to face again with the concept that it wasn't true, that they'd gotten her and put her through their remodeler rather smoothly, and that this time it was happening again only much, much faster.

Part of it was the boredom. Yeah, they did a lot of fondling and kidding, but mostly she was ignored after a while as they got used to her and she got used to becoming Carlos' pet. It took her some time and effort to learn that carpeting, to learn the basic layout of the Castle and its public furnishings and the like, so that she could walk from one specific place to another without problems and felt comfortable there, but after that there was nothing else to do. Because she couldn't see, she couldn't read. Work of any sort was denied her, as was simple conversation with a staff who could also be punished for violating the rules over her. She was afraid of the pool, never having been much of a swimmer and not being able to see or have a companion there just was too scary to her.

About the only recreational stuff she could use was the exercise machines, which were individual and very much like a typical health club. She went at them with a passion, having nothing else. Every once in a while somebody would come and get her and they'd trim her nails and do her hair and somebody would give her a

rough and easy physical, but that was it. And, once a day, somebody would come by and hand her one of those little automatic injection capsules, often without a word said. The stuff did give you a real rush for a while, although it was nothing like the intensity or duration of the old juice.

She slept when she wanted, ate when she wanted, and except for that capsule there was no sense of time at all. The place ran twenty-four hours in shifts, and there were always people around. Still, now that she was able to get around the place pretty well and confidently, and now that she'd picked up, identified, and classified more voices than she could count, the only thing she could do was listen. And people after the first week or so tended to talk as if she wasn't even there or capable of hearing. True, a lot of it was in languages she couldn't understand, but a fair amount was in English.

One thing she learned was that all the big activity was due to something big that was going to happen in the near future. Carlos himself had said it the first day: they were going to destroy the Labyrinth and this world and all the others would be isolated and have to be self-supporting. And the only hitch was that some big shot in the enemy organization-but not Carlos, damn it--had been knocked off and nobody knew by whom.

That had given her something of a target at least. If they actually did it, then Carlos, whom she hadn't heard since that first day here, would be here all the time. More importantly, if they succeeded then Dash would be safe from him and his minions and she would no longer have a knife at her heart. If she was cut off, she might be able to kill the bastard before they cut her down, since she'd have nothing else to live for. That, however, would take some planning. An idle brain was the devil's playground, and she was nothing if not idle.

She also picked up something in idle gossip among the kitchen staff that she hardly believed. They said that Carlos himself was addicted to something. That he'd gotten hooked when trying to hook the Company, when playing with the alien viral drug to see what it could and would do. It made sense, in a way. If he'd been accidentally infected with the juice itself, he probably grew his own supply right here. She wasn't sure how she could use that, but it was fascinating, and seemed, somehow, poetic justice.

She remembered what that guide had said and wondered why it had been emphasized. A trap, maybe? Carlos wanted her to hate him, to dream of destroying him. She wouldn't put it past him, but it didn't matter. It was something. Delivery every twenty-four hours. Hold off on the pill, see how long before the first withdrawal symptoms set in. How long could she stand it? Maybe if she got on those exercise machines and beat hell out of them it would help. Take the thing only when she'd pushed herself and could stand it no longer. Then the next pill would be that much later before it wore off, and so on. If she could hold off 'til thirty hours she'd have an extra pill every four days. But where to hide the extra?

The best place was under the loose boards on the garbage dock. Usually nobody was there with her-she was getting quite good at that-and she was pretty damned sure there were no monitors there because that's where the kitchen staff would hang out and grumble. Palm a napkin, wrap the pills, hide them under. If they were still there in a couple of days she'd know she'd gotten away with it. Timing the withdrawal was tough, but there were time signals in the gym and a couple of other places. Not that it mattered. She was going as long as she could, and the fact that she had pills sequestered and they were still giving her another each day was proof she was doing it. Really knowing this place, and with several days margin, she had potential for some freedom of action if and when the opportunity ever came.

And then there was the guy. She didn't know his voice and had no way to trust him, but he'd seen her and called her over and started playing with her as many often did, but then he leaned over and whispered, very softly, "Say nothing. I'm a courier, not one of these. I was told to find you and tell you to sit tight and be prepared. It might be a while but sooner or later they will try and get you out of here. Your injection can be duplicated if you have a sample. Say no more, let's just make out."

A trap? A plant? A tease on Carlos' part? How could it be anything else? Who

could get in here, get so close, dare this sort of thing? But what if, just if, it wasn't? What if it was Sam?

But if it was-even if it was-how long until he could come for her? And could he get through to this fortress and find her still alive?

She had to wait, and endure, and, as time dragged on, not count on it.

And then there was the day when the whole place changed into Bedlam. There were more people around than she'd ever known before, and everybody seemed excited or angry or impatient, and all she could do was keep out of the way and try and learn what was going on.

Something about Upline batteries exploding prematurely. The Labyrinth was weak and partly wrecked over a fair length but still operable, but lots of switches were sealed and frozen shut and lots of sidings were wiped out as if they didn't exist. Some even said that the Company World had been sealed off and left powerless, but she took that with a grain of salt.

That would mean, though, that whatever happened took place "left" of Zero, since that was where the Company World was. That also suggested that this world, Carlos' world, was "right" of Zero, since everything seemed to be functioning okay here.

Certainly they weren't too sad about the "disaster," so maybe the Company World had been zapped. There was a lot of raucous celebrating and talks of when "they" would take over, that was for sure. She longed to ask questions, to find out details, but she could not. But, that night, they'd scheduled a big meeting in the rec hall to explain all to the staff. She was excluded, but she knew that area well. Hell, they'd have to use microphones or something, and if she just sat in the bathroom near the pool she could hear what was said. It was bound to be in many languages, but she would wait.

They sure all packed in there, anyway. It must have been hot as hell and looked like a sardine can, even though they were having the meetings by shifts and it was one shift at a time. Sitting on the toilet, though, she could make out most of what was being said.

"Fellow rebels, comrades, friends and associates!" It was one of the big guys here but not Carlos, and this guy was an English speaker. "Great news! I know you have heard all the rumors and we want you to know the truth. What at first looked like a horrible disaster to our cause has turned out to accomplish what none of us in all our years of work, sweat, and planning could accomplish! Most of you know of the grand project. Well, up line, left of Zero, one of our stations blew up. We do not yet know why, but it sent a massive surge of its own down and through the Labyrinth which set off others further along and built into a powerful wave. Like lava through a tunnel, it melted and sealed what it passed. When it struck the control regulators, they could not absorb the impact and sent it back up line. The result was to short out and seal in every single siding and bypass along the immediate route, although there is still clear traffic on the walking path only from here to there. Comrades-it sealed the Company World off and it severed their power connections by burning out their own private regulators. Their backups can not last long in there; certainly not long enough for them to punch back through. They are gone, but with much repair the Labyrinth will hold up.

"Friends! We are the only remaining intact organization with Labyrinth access and control!"

There were massive cheers and it sounded like they'd just won the World Series. It lasted for some time.

It was glorious news to them, but her own heart sank to the bottom. Not that she really felt for those Company folks, who seemed to embody only the worst attributes of Far Eastern culture with the sensitivity and caring of South African Boers, but for what it meant. If the Company was destroyed, cut off, then these bastards would begin openly taking over world after world, station after station, network after network. Hell, there'd be noplac to run to, noplac to hide, nobody out there strong enough to end a cesspool like this. Nobody with any kind of connections to find this place and care about rescuing her.

And, hell, before they turned them worlds into new cesspools they'd go after all the old Company folk they had grudges against. There'd be a lot more "examples" and revenge on folks like her, with nobody to stop them.

When they quieted down, the speaker continued, "No more hiding, no more skulking around. Already we have seized the remnants of the Company's communications and computer monitoring system. One by one we are going to take every switch and then every station in this sector while preventing any serious repairs on the other side. Then we will move there, and we will do our own repairs, and we will take control of the power and regulators and the entire network! Much work needs to be done, and much planning, and much sacrifice will yet be demanded of you, but final victory is ours! There is no one left large enough and organized enough to prevent us! Now we who worked so long and hard in what often seemed a futile cause will be the leaders of a new order among worlds, a new and glorious network of power, for we are now the Company!"

More cheers and building-rocking reactions. The Company folks were ruthless assholes on the whole but at least they did some good and left the worlds alone and worked within their systems. Not now. These were guys with a cause, and no matter how much their rhetoric sounded like well-intentioned revolutionaries their way of thinking was strictly high-tech black shirts and swastikas. The bad guys could lose a thousand times; the good guys could only afford to lose once. And for her? What was the use any more? Shit, she'd been kidding herself anyway. She was naked and under almost constant watch and she was blind as a bat to boot, only able to see smeary colored light and dark. Even if she got Carlos alone, what could she do? He was pretty good at fighting when he had to be, she guessed, and he could see. He'd never be alone with her, unmonitored, without strong boys close by. And now that psychotic druggist had Sam and her and Dash and all the worlds in his pocket. Tears streamed down her face, and she never felt so helpless and powerless in her life.

She got up, with a sudden urge to get away from that cheering mob, and went towards the gardens. It was pitch dark but she no longer even thought about that. She knew the way, every twist, turn, pathway and stone, so well she didn't even have to think about it.

She in fact preferred the darkness. It was the one element where she had some superiority, and there was a lack of confusing blurs to get in the way. The gardens smelled pretty, even at night, and there weren't any people around this time, although as public area it was within her rules to be here. Sure, they had the place monitored. Infrared, you name it. They knew just exactly where she was. She knew she'd reached the point that Carlos had predicted, and, thanks to events, sooner than even he had expected by a long shot.

She couldn't run away. There was no longer anyplace she could reasonably run to or anybody who could help her. The old organization would still be around, of course, but they'd be far too busy for her problem and maybe just as hard to find-and who was she kidding? She couldn't manage a hundred yards from the compound, let alone somehow get through that security and switch.

She couldn't kill herself. The Labyrinth remained open, the power on. It was damaged, but intact. You couldn't run the cargo cars but you could walk in the usual tunnel. She had no doubt that he would do as he threatened with Dash, even if she was no longer around to know it. He was just that sort. Oddly, there was a sense of perverted honor about him, too, as if the devil always kept his bargains. She sensed, somehow, that if she did not give him cause that he really would never bother Dash, maybe even protect him.

But as much as she wanted that happy pill to mental oblivion, she was never going to beg him for it. Never.

But with all hope crushed, there was only this endless existence whose only purpose was to save Dash from Carlos. That was purpose enough, to endure.

"Ah choo!" Sam Horowitz went, and then brought up a big handkerchief and blew his nose.

"You are the only human being I've ever met who actually goes 'ah choo' when he sneezes," Bill Markham remarked, without looking up from the papers spread out in front of him.

"Well, it's little wonder I got it," Sam replied. "I went from sub-zero cold to

the dry Labyrinth, then to the tropics, then to the high Himalayas or someplace like that, wound up in a tropical place where they made me parade around stark naked, then damn near got blown up in freezing cold on my own doorstep. I probably got double pneumonia."

"Well, you're not going to be the one to make the dramatic rescue, I'll say that. I can just see you getting all the way in there, bypassing all their neat security, and just before you reach your objective you sneeze like mad. About all you'd accomplish would be that in two weeks or so everybody there would have your cold."

"Damn it, Bill, I gotta be there. She'll need somebody she trusts and it won't be easy as it is."

"I'll go in," Markham told him. "I won't have your symptoms for days yet." He sighed and said, "Okay, now let's see what we got one more time."

They were on a rocky island perhaps seventy miles from Carlos' Castle, but they'd been there a while and they knew the layout now. A team of twenty was on hand, all hand-picked experts, and more were ready in support as needed. So far the documents "Pandross" had provided had panned out perfectly. A crossover world from a known Company siding led to a weak point on this one that had a solid security shield-which meant nothing if you had the exact bypass procedures going in. Carlos, secure that nobody even knew the rough location of this siding or world, would never have dreamed that anybody could come at him this way. The region "left" of Zero, as you looked at a Labyrinth map, was a real mess, including Sam's old substation, of course. But that had been the first blast and had gone inward from there, so the main line up from Sam's siding hadn't been much affected. McInerney, Oregon, was still in business.

This would have been tough, maybe impossible, if Carlos had hid out inward on that same damaged side, but he hadn't. He was "right" of Zero, which was neither touched nor involved in the blast. It was certainly wired for the grand project, but even now opposition crews were dismantling those. It didn't seem to be clear that Sam and sabotage had caused the misfiring; apparently the Council had associated it rather with the timing test. Without Mancini to tell them any different, and with their own computer to suggest that very scenario-and also to pinpoint Sam somewhere else-it was a given. They knew that Sam had escaped, somehow, in the big bang, but now he no longer concerned them.

"It appears that the cliff was actually dug out, and the labs and complex below were built in the excavation, then the Castle on top of the complex, and dirt and such re-used to reform the land as it was. Most of the cliff is actually artificial," Markham noted. "See, here are the intake and outake ducts for the fusion reactor. We figure four one-man aquasubs, each carrying a single electron torpedo, hitting in this region, will cause the whole damned reactor to go up. He's still using primitive steam turbines here so there's probably enough pressure in there to blow that whole cliff halfway to here."

"Easy to do," Sam agreed, "but the trick is to get Brandy out first. She's set up as some kind of sex slave, always in public areas, always in public view." Markham nodded. "So we need a diversion. We've got his switch location, we don't need it to get in or out, so let's blow it to Hell. It'll cause pandemonium in there, set off every security alarm in this world, and there ain't gonna be a soul there thinking one whit about Brandy. Me and two backups dressed in their security uniforms could get in with no trouble. Nobody is going to question us, and Brandy's too smart not to go along if her mind's still in one piece. If it isn't we'll knock her cold and carry her. We'll go over the cliff and down over here if we can; if not, we'll fire a flare when we're clear in the jungle and they'll let 'er rip. Then we'll make our way down to the beach well clear and get picked up."

"Sounds too easy. What if she doesn't have an unused capsule?"

"I've got a biomedical team standing by. No guarantees, but they might be able to sustain her with what the medical computers can dig out of her tissue samples or bloodstream. At least we can sedate her until we find something. No guarantees, Sam."

He nodded. "I understood that from the start. I think she'd rather die trying

than stay that way anyway. What about Carlos? If he's in there he's sure to have his own back door exit point somewhere and a way of getting there, and we don't know the whole territory. If he puts two and two together and smells us, he'll take Brandy as insurance. I keep remembering what happened one time before."

"We can't cover everything, Sam. If this data is right, and so far it has been, there are no weak points anywhere on that main island other than the old substation, and nowhere in the plans here does it show either a boat dock or anyplace to hide a chopper or similar thing. Maybe he's too confident to have a back door. Or maybe he's got some way to make it to the nearest one, which is ours, and which will make life easy. Look, the crescent moon doesn't rise until after three tonight and we got scattered clouds. I say we go in and do it, tonight, before anything has a chance to fall apart, including my nerve."

Sam nodded. "All right. I'll be stationed at the pickup point and coordinate communications." He paused. "Bill-thanks. And no matter how it comes out, I understand and will always appreciate this."

Markham seemed slightly uncomfortable. "No big deal, Sam. If we don't take them out fast they're gonna take us out slow. It's a whole new ball game. Come on, let's go over the thing with the rest of the team. If we're going tonight we have to have those aquasubs armed and in position by then, which means they have to leave in maybe two hours. And we have to give a go to the demolition team on the switch."

She had pretty much ceased to think. In her mind, if all she had left was keeping Dash from harm and that was accomplished by being absolutely and perfectly what Carlos wanted then that was all there was. The conversation was still all around her, but she tuned it out. It was just noise to her, and not a word really registered. None of it mattered any more, and even curiosity had died.

When she was sleepy she found an out-of-the-way corner and slept. When she was hungry she went back to the kitchen and they gave her stuff. When anybody wanted to feel her up or wanted a backrub or wanted to screw or wanted anything else she did it expertly, happily, without complaint. If she got bored she wandered in and worked out, mostly because it seemed to please the regulars and was now an approved activity. All of it was essentially automatic, impulsive, without any direction or purpose, her own mind just sitting in neutral somewhere as if asleep, no longer required.

She was just sitting there in the parlor that evening, waiting to be of use to anybody who wanted what she could offer but not anticipating anything at all, kind of half dozing, when suddenly the windows shook and the ground rumbled slightly and all sorts of loud and unpleasant alarms went off all over the place.

The feeling and the noise and the sudden shouting and running all over the place frightened her, but she didn't move, just sat there, trying to keep out of the way, not even wondering or caring what it was all about.

Around her, the place was sheer bedlam. Every light, interior and exterior, came on, and there were bells, buzzers, sirens, flashing lights, and people running everywhere and shouting to one another trying to figure out what was going on and where the hell they should be.

The guards to the secure areas stood their places on the main floor, doubly alert for trouble, but the place otherwise emptied out fast, as large numbers of staff ran down one side towards the substation area, which in the darkness seemed to have some smoke and flames rising out of it.

Suddenly there was a man near her, and he bent down and said, "Brandy; come with me."

She smiled and took his hand and got up, impulsively.

"Brandy, for God's sake it's Bill Markham!" the man hissed. "Snap out of it! We're going to get you out of here!"

Something vaguely registered at that, but she wasn't sure what or why and she grew confused.

"Do you have any extras of your drug capsules hidden around?" he asked her.

She smiled and nodded. Yes, indeed she did.

"Take me to them."

Markham knew that there was something wrong with her, whether drug induced or otherwise he didn't know, but that didn't matter. Time was wasting. She led them through the now deserted kitchen, out back, then counted the boards, reached down, popped one up, reached in, and brought out the handkerchief with the capsules in them and held it up to him proudly, like a cat proudly showing off the mouse he'd just killed or a kid showing her secret and most favorite toy.

Markham took the pills and stuck them in his pocket, then turned to the other two. "Off that way. We want to be as far away as possible as quickly as possible. Anybody gets in the way, don't bluff- shoot 'em."

He took her by the hand and they started off, but he wanted to try again.

"Brandy-Sam's okay. He's here. Dash is safe, too. It's all right."

The words bounced around in her. Sam's okay. . . . Dash is safe . . . Dash safe . . .

Several people saw them as they went, but such was the power Carlos had over the place that, even now, they couldn't conceive of properly uniformed men with a familiar woman not being official.

Inside the Castle security headquarters they were going nuts trying to determine just what had happened. In the meantime, all hundred-plus security monitor alarms seemed to be going off at once, which made for less than ideal conditions.

A senior officer got sick of it, inserted his key, and reset the alarm system, bringing a bit of quiet to the place.

"Near as we can tell, somebody tried to blow their way into the substation," a sergeant was telling someone on the red phone. "No, they couldn't get in, but they sure as hell blew the switch. It's gonna take weeks before anybody could get in or out of there-if we got all the parts. No-they couldn't get in. The security system clamped down instantly."

A monitor alarm sounded again. The officer sighed and got out his reset key again, but the sergeant on the phone glanced up out of habit at the one that was sounding. "Hold on. Something funny is happening. South side of the Castle. Looks like some of our guys taking that black bitch outside the perimeter. That's funny . . . Huh? Yes, sir. Personally? Well, all right, if you say so. I'll send a squad to cover. Right. Yes, sir."

He hung up the phone and turned to the others. "The Doc thinks we got penetrated somehow. That they're tryin' to get the bitch out."

The officer jumped up. "Send full forces there! Seal 'em off. Take 'em alive if need be!"

"Hold it, Cap," the sergeant responded. "He said he's gonna take a squad and do it himself. Just send cover to make sure they don't have a lot more out there in the bushes."

Up on the cliff, Markham was concerned about Brandy but also relieved by the ease with which it had all gone off. If he could just get her down that cliff to the water for pickup he'd let the medics handle the rest.

They had prepared the exit, as any good burglar does, before breaking in, and it was still there and still undisturbed. At the last minute Sam had insisted on some kind of rope ladder rather than just a rope. Brandy, after all, wouldn't be able to see and might not be in the best shape for a climbdown of maybe a hundred and ten feet. They had also picked a point where there was effectively no beach, and the water below was fairly deep. If she or any of them fell, there was a chance that they wouldn't be dashed against sand or rocks. At the bottom and just to one side, tied to a piton stuck in the rock, was a rubber raft with a small but fast motor on it.

"Harry, you go down first, unhook the raft and be ready to start the engine-but don't start it yet," Markham said to one of the other men, who nodded and immediately went over the side. He then picked up a climber's belt with hook already left there for this, put it on, then took another one over to Brandy and put it snugly around her waist. She resisted it, but not much, confused as to what was the right thing to do. The third man uncoiled and handed him the safety line, then said, "Go ahead. I'll cover and come down last. Don't wait if you

hear any shooting."

Markham had just threaded the rope around his own loop and was about to do Brandy's, when he heard a voice behind him; a rich, Latin-accented voice, say, "That will be quite enough, gentlemen. Put down your weapons and stand away. Brandy, come to me-now!"

She hesitated a moment, then walked away from Markham and towards the sound of Carlos' voice in the darkness.

Markham couldn't do a damned thing to help her, so he sighed and looked at his companion, then said, "He who fights and runs away . . ." and dove off the cliff top as something shot close to him.

His companion hadn't gotten the idea, and instead of throwing his gun away, Mark brought it up to fire. A blast caught him square in the chest and pushed him back off the cliff and down.

"I hear a motor down there!" one of the Castle security squad said, going to the edge. "They got a god damned boat in here!"

"Rapid-fire rounds for effect down there. You might get lucky and hit something," Carlos told them. "And cut that ladder loose."

He turned to Brandy, carefully removed her climbing belt, and tossed it away.

There was the sound of a lot of gunfire, and he turned and shouted, "Cease firing! Cease firing, I say! Either you got them or you didn't by now. Either way they are no longer our concern." He took Brandy and caressed her face. "It is all right, girl. I will overlook the belt because you came when I called, but never, never allow anyone to put anything on you again."

"I hear more engines out there," one of the squad said. "Jesus! What they got out there? A friggin' navy?"

Carlos was suddenly concerned. "All of you- come with me! East! We may have won a minor skirmish here and lost the war. That way! As far away as we can get. Stick close to the coastline and be wary of enemy troops. Andele! Andele! Move it!"

The torpedomen in the water knew from their infrared sights that things had gone wrong, and they weren't about to wait any longer than the minimum for anybody who made it there to get clear. They had started their engines and were aligning their torpedoes now, so they had a crack at the place before somebody on shore got smart and launched some boats or something.

They fired their torpedoes, turned, and gunned their engines out of there and tried to get as far in the opposite direction from land as they could.

The torpedoes bore in with deliberate speed, their computer brains matching the picture of their target with the reality ahead and then to each other's speed for maximum effect. They struck, exactly where they were supposed to, simultaneously.

The base of the Castle cliff erupted in enormous fireballs, illuminated as well with dancing electrical displays of brilliant blue that seemed like living, snake-like monsters crawling all over and into the cliff face. All the lights in the Castle and perimeter, every thing of power up there, went abruptly dark, only enhancing the light show.

A sudden calm followed, as if the worst had been done, but then, abruptly, the entire cliff shook as if grabbed and shaken by a mighty hand, and then there was an explosion of such force that it was felt even by the fleeing agents well out to sea. The entire structure lifted up, then seemed suspended for a moment, then dropped back, collapsing in upon itself, making a massive structure fold and crumble as if made of sand, leaving in the end only a great depression where once the cliff had stood.

12.

Loose Ends

It was well hidden, way back in the jungle, beneath the ground and beneath the foliage, too, camouflaged against being obvious from any angle. It also wasn't fancy, but it opened for Carlos and Brandy.

When it was obvious that there was no additional enemy force further down, Carlos had sent the men back to establish a defensive position on the southern coastline. He wanted no one else to know where he was going now.

With the explosion that knocked them both to the ground and shook the very earth and everything on it, Carlos knew that any of the men who survived would realize that there was no going back now-and no pills tomorrow. They would spend a day frantically trying to find him, any not killed in the blast or knocked into the sea, but they would not, any more than the enemy would, and after that they'd be in too much misery to be any sort of threat. A little after that, they'd all be dead.

Carlos hadn't paid much attention to Brandy of late, but he had scanned a recent report from the security psych on her indicating that she'd cracked, flipped out. It didn't matter to him. In fact, that made things all the easier. He was pretty sure now, no matter what those damned computer analyses had said, that Sam was the one who'd blown the siding at his place and that Sam indeed was now after Brandy and her captor. That was why she was so important to him. That most of all.

He'd built this bunker himself, out of his own sense of paranoia, when he'd discovered how far any back door might be to this place. Nobody knew of it, nobody but he ever went here, and everyone who had designed and built it was dead, the records, plans, and the like destroyed.

The food was all in sealed vacuum canisters that would keep it for a century or more until needed. There was a water line in from an underground pump and a septic system to remove waste. The power, from a superior super battery system developed for the Company, had come on only when absolutely needed-until now when he turned it on. It was totally self-contained, and as long as he wasn't wasteful with it, there was enough power there to last for up to three years. He didn't expect to be here all that long, but he believed in thinking and planning ahead.

Being entirely underground, it was cool and comfortable, and the air system was basic but nearly impossible to spot unless you were looking for it.

"We will stay here, my sweet, and not move or make a sound outside for many long weeks. They will search, but find nothing, and eventually conclude that we perished in the blast of the Castle. Then, only after all is gone and we are the only two humans here, even if it takes a year, we will go to where I have a boat hidden and we will go to my back door and we will take our rightful place among the alternate Company, or I will build a new organization and opposition from scratch if I must." He looked at her and sighed. The report had said she hadn't spoken since she cracked. "And you don't even know what I'm talking about, do you? It doesn't matter, my sweet. Not a bit."

He looked around the place, found a compartment in the wall, and opened it, then checked it with some relief. "Ah! Do not worry that we no longer have your little pill, my dear. In here is something much better, something familiar that will correct the imbalances I induced and make things quite nice. I need it, too, you see, but don't worry. There are over a thousand capsules here, and plenty more once I am again free to roam. This little stuff will keep us both healthy, fix what ails us, and keep us very happy here."

He relaxed and started to undress, then snapped his fingers. "Spare clothes! Of all the things I forgot! Ah, well, we shall both be au natural for a while, then. Come! We will take our first joint 'fix' together and have an hour of relaxing bliss, followed by a lengthy time of conjugal magic. What more could one ask in a hideout, eh?"

It was one of the ultimate ironies of the situation that the "juice," as she had called the alien viral agent when previously hooked on it by those in Carlos' organization, would this time be the best thing Brandy could have.

The organism, a symbiote, immediately set up housekeeping in the brain and then began rearranging all the interior furniture to suit itself with an eye to making it the ideal long-term place to live. Once it determined the way brain and body worked, it was in some ways far superior to not having it there. The body, all of it, worked better. You developed a taste for and ate just the right amount of what was good for you. It cleaned out the arteries, monitored

cholesterol levels, strengthened muscle, trimmed fat, and made you incredibly efficient. It wasn't that it was truly intelligent; it was just as adaptable as hell.

The enormous rush as new agent was fed in to replace and replenish the old, who could not reproduce in the normal way inside a Type Zero human body, caused direct stimulation of the pleasure center so you were highly rewarded for doing it regularly. It was also a tremendous shock, that reawakened all the old memories and sensations of the old addiction.

In its native Type Three world, it reproduced when you did, exchanging material during the sexual act and renewing itself that way. That didn't work in Type Zeros, but, of course, it wasn't smart enough to realize that, so when you woke up you were incredibly turned on. Only after that were you somewhat on your own, in a glow-like high but mind sharp, thoughts clear, and hungry for what was good for you.

Of course, one of the first things it also did was order the brain to begin making again those key enzymes Carlos' process had blocked. This one would allow no other addictions.

She didn't come back to anything near normalcy right away. It was a slow process, but each time she got a new jolt more and more of it came back, more and more was shocked back into consciousness. Even when it began, some sixth sense inside her told her not to betray this to Carlos.

Between the shock of the drug and her own fixation, she realized what she had to do-if she could physically manage to do it. She had hoped that the efficient little bug in the juice would clear up her sight, but while she mentally thought there was some slight improvement, she realized it wasn't going to be like last time and if her vision could be cleared up it would take a great deal of time. She would have to wait until Carlos made another mistake.

Carlos had thought of everything in terms of escaping a threat. The hideout wasn't all that comfy, but it would do, and all the necessary basics were there for a very long siege. In spite of small lapses such as forgetting the extra clothes, he'd pretty well prepared for every eventuality except one.

He was an active man, a compulsive worker whose mind was always on things and who was used to doing, not sitting. He could sit for days without complaint; for a few weeks progressively chafing under the sheer boredom of the existence, but after a while he just couldn't stand it any more. He had to get out. He had to do something.

The first couple of times he left the bunker were relatively brief, just testing how much heat was on and getting out of those confines. He did not take her with him on either foray; if there was any danger still lurking out there, he didn't want to be bogged down with her.

And he continued to talk to her, because there wasn't anyone else to talk to.

"It looks quite desolate, my sweet," he commented after the first time. "No sign of life out there that's not native. I think tomorrow I will risk going further south and see how our getaway boat is faring. If they found it, or destroyed it, then it will complicate matters a great deal."

It was mostly an excuse for him to really be doing something, but it began what she hoped would be an opening.

He didn't put on all his clothes when he went out; she checked by going over to the small storage area and finding the bulk of them still there. He did, however, wear his increasingly rancid underpants, as if this kept him somehow civilized and superior, and his gun and gunbelt-just in case. He apparently didn't want to risk the clothing on such clandestine journeys, saving it for when he would be back in civilized society again.

Also just in case, he took one capsule of the juice with him. The addict never wanted to be caught short, although the last thing he wanted to do was have to use it while out there. That was okay. One night she delayed taking her own fix just long enough for him to go into ecstasy, got up, found the gunbelt, and found the spare capsule. She replaced it right then and there with the empty one he'd just used and put the fresh one back in the carton.

Each outside foray made him bolder and bolder, and they increased in length. Now

he was leaving her alone most of the afternoon, and not returning until close to time to sleep. She finally decided that the time had come to bet it all. He was beginning to talk about moving out, moving everything to the boat, being ready to move.

He was clever. He might have outfoxed her, and she might well lose it all acting now, but to do nothing was to let him win, and there didn't seem to be any reason not to try. She did not regret coming to him back on the cliff, even though it wasn't a conscious decision at the time, because they already had the drop on Bill and there would have been no escape anyway. It was up to her, and if there was a God somewhere He would ultimately allow this justice.

She, too, had been out of the bunker, after she realized how long he was going to be away and how far it must be to the boat. She didn't know the area and so couldn't go far, but the sound of breakers off in one direction gave her orientation, as did the hidden entrance to the bunker, and she began to pace off and get to know the immediate area. It was sufficient for her purposes.

She didn't really know enough, but hate was a great fuel for determination and she certainly knew how juice addicts acted and thought and she was pretty damned sure she understood Carlos and his ego.

When he returned the one night he was in particularly good spirits and talking about moving out in the next couple of days. He had spun grand plans after his escape, and she would be both his insurance policy and bait for grand schemes in the future. They ate out of the containers, and he complained as usual about the quality and looked forward to fine food once again, and revenge on those who had snatched the sweetness of victory from under his very nose.

Finally, he went to the cupboard to get their juice capsules, opened it...

And found that the cupboard was bare.

Instantly he realized what had happened and flew into a rage, grabbing her and slapping her back onto the bed.

"So, you've been acting lately!" he roared. "Yes -the drug. Of course. I should have thought of that. But it won't do you any good! Now-where did you hide them?"

Her voice sounded hoarse and cracked from all the long time of disuse, but she managed. "Gone. I've been busy. Flushed them all down your damned septic tank where they're meltin' into useless goo with the shit."

More slaps and violent reactions, which she expected. Right now she didn't resist; she might try later, for what it was worth, but right now the pain his rage caused was nothing as compared to the pleasure it was giving her to see him this way.

"Liar!" he screamed. "No addict could bring herself to do that! Never in all my experience was anyone hooked on it able to bring themselves to do that.

Now-where did you hide them?"

"No addict before ever had this much cause for willpower," she responded. "Yeah, I'll die and I'll hate myself for it, but I juiced up early, as early as it would let me. I'll get to hear you suffer and groan a long time before it hits me."

The evenness of her tone, the sense of total satisfaction in her voice, unnerved him. It would be hours before he would feel the first pangs of withdrawal and demands from his microbic masters to be fed, but that was physiology.

Psychologically, he was beginning to feel withdrawal right now.

He abandoned her and started tearing the place apart. She didn't know what if anything would be left by the time he got through.

Then, suddenly, he stopped, getting hold of himself. "You have undone only yourself," he told her with some satisfaction. "Carlos never puts all his eggs in one basket." He picked up the gunbelt where he dropped it, fumbled in its hidden compartment with nervous, shaking hands, and brought out a capsule. She heard what he was doing, and smiled.

"I found that one," she told him. "I got up earlier'n you. That's an empty. No good. I found the others you squirreled around, too. Flushed them with the rest."

Normally he wouldn't have exposed himself, but it was the addict's mind working now, not the full and rational Carlos. She understood that mind and exactly what

was going through his head far better than he did. He'd been accidentally hooked in early experiments; she'd undergone it all before and knew the awful dependency and the terrible psychology of the addict firsthand, rather than by observation and clinical reports. In fact, if it wasn't giving her such perfect pleasure she'd be getting the shakes herself from just being in his company. But the juice was wrong. It didn't induce perfect pleasure. It had been defeated in her once by love, and hate seemed to work just as well.

He pressed the capsule to his flesh-and found it empty as promised.

He flew into a rage, threatening, roaring, and then, getting hold of himself as much as he could, he started back on her.

"I will kill you," he snarled. "I know you did not destroy the capsules. You could not! We will see what kind of pain you can endure before you tell me!"

"A lot," she responded. "You taught me, remember? I'm your experiment. You said you wanted me to feel like you felt. You wanted me to be consumed by hate. How much pain can you stand, Carlos? How much withdrawal before you take that gun and shoot yourself? You know I can't have hidden nothin'! Where? I can't see, damn you! This bunker has been the only place I could get around in."

"Liar! Bitch! Whore!" he screamed. "You may have got rid of most but you kept something. You wanted to be sure to be here when I died! I know how to make you tell! No one is that strong!"

And then the beating and torture began. Now she resisted, fought back, showing surprising strength against him, but she couldn't see and he was larger, stronger, and more experienced in the ways of inflicting pain. She knew in the end she couldn't hold out indefinitely, but the longer the better.

"One capsule!" he screamed at her. "That's all I need! One capsule! One fix and I can leave this cursed place and get to my stashes in the Labyrinth! I know you have at least one! Where? Where?"

And the pain finally grew too much, and she screamed, "All right! All right! There is one-just one-left! I hid it outside!"

He picked her up, and shoved her against the wall. She felt weak, her body bruised and battered, and she tasted blood at the corner of her mouth, but she had one satisfaction. Her hurts would be quickly repaired; the juice was real efficient at that. His hurt was inside, in his head, and even though he still really wouldn't be feeling one major physical symptom of withdrawal, in his mind he was already half gone.

She led him outside into the darkness, and for a moment considered attacking him here and now, or running off if she could into the dark jungle, but she knew she just didn't have it in her. That wasn't the plan. No, that wasn't the plan. She found the main air intake by counting steps, dug down on one side, and came up with a small used food container, its top bent back over to somewhat seal it. He had a light and he shined it on her as she got it out, and then he ran to her with a cry and snatched it violently out of her hands, knocking her down, lest she toss it into the jungle or something. His mind was no longer on her, on where they were or the conditions involved. It was past all rationality, and well ahead of schedule.

He pried the container open with shaking hands, shook its contents out into his hand, and came up with a capsule.

"Ha! Now you see!" he screamed at her triumphantly. "Now it is reversed! You will withdraw and rot here tomorrow while I take the boat alone to freedom! And the first thing I'm going after is that bastard kid of yours!" And, with that, fumbling with the capsule, he pressed it to his skin, right out there in the opening.

It unloaded its contents and he felt near instant relief. All was right, all was good, and his microbial masters pushed their reward button in his brain. A broad smile swept across his face and he sank down on the forest floor and began to writhe in ecstasy.

She allowed a few minutes to pass, just to make sure that the ever-clever Carlos wasn't tricking her one more time, then got up and made her way back inside the bunker.

Carlos had really trashed the place, and she stumbled several times and rumbled

for what seemed an eternity before coming up with the gunbelt and gun he'd dropped. She removed it, flicked it on, heard the low whine telling her it was fully charged. She flipped the little switch all the way to the top, holding in the safety button so it would go to maximum charge.

Then she made her way back out, oblivious of the pain she was feeling, and found him again. He wasn't hard to find; the moans and sighs were clear to her and genuine. She got down on her hands and knees, fearing that even now something would go wrong, that something would turn and destroy the moment, but she reached him without incident and felt his head.

She took the pistol, held it square against that head, and without even a moment's hesitation she blew his brains out.

Then she lay there, near him, for quite a long while, hearing only the sounds of the jungle and the far-off crash of breakers.

Brandy had no idea if anybody from the Company was still around. Certainly Carlos hadn't thought so, but it was the only hope she had. She wanted out, wanted to see Sam and Dash again, wanted it over, but even if she were to eventually die here on this now desolate and deserted world it had been worth it.

The remaining food in the bunker and the carton of juice capsules, retrieved from where she'd hidden them exactly a hundred paces north of the main air intake vent under some big, leafy plants, would sustain her for quite a while. Even if it took the two and a half years her supplies would last, she wasn't going to give up. Not again. Not ever. And if she eventually died, well, she would die fighting.

It took her several days just to work out a safe route to the shoreline from the bunker with any confidence that she could get back again. She used Carlos' knife to cut notches, used empty food containers, pieces of broken up furniture, anything, to mark as permanent a path as she could for the half-mile or so distance to the coast.

She had no thought of finding the boat. Carlos was very good at hiding things, and it wouldn't have done her any good if she had. It probably wasn't much of a boat anyway; just some powered raft that would get him where he had to go. Even if it had been a cabin cruiser, though, she couldn't see to pilot it and she had no idea where to take it anyway.

The best way was to stay right here, find what she could, and build a smoky fire each night and hope that somebody was still around to see it. The beach was an easy access and piled with driftwood, although the stuff was often damp and hard to ignite. For the first few times, a low jolt with the pistol did wonders, and after that she found a cache of gasoline or something in the bunker that worked just as well once she laboriously hauled it to the beach area. Carlos had almost thought of any eventuality, even the batteries going dead.

In the meantime, all she could do was build and then sit by the fire every night weather permitted, then make her way at daybreak back to the bunker, take her juice, get some sleep, eat, and start it all over again.

She didn't really expect rescue-even through her brain fog she could remember that explosion -and if it did come there was no guarantee whether it would be Company people, if there still were any, or Carlos's friends, but she was determined to go along with it as long as supplies permitted.

A couple of times she thought she heard some motor sounds out in the ocean, but it wasn't clear whether they were for real or just wish fulfillment, imagination, or whatever. Real or fancied, they didn't seem to see or at least want to investigate the glow of the fire.

The routine went on and on, and she endured, as always. She deliberately didn't count the days, though; she really didn't want to know.

Finally, one day, near dawn, when she was about to pack it in and go back to the bunker, she heard something. At first she just dismissed it as more imaginations, but she kept hearing it, getting closer and closer, and for the first time she realized that somebody else was actually out there.

As the motor sound came up to the edge of the water and then was cut, she stood, looking out in that direction although she couldn't see it, waiting, a mixture of fear and relief inside her. One way or another, for good or evil, it was

ended.

She heard someone fumbling with something, then the sound of someone coming towards her, among the mass of wood on the beach.

"Hello!" she called nervously, her voice cracking.

"Hang on, babe, I'm coming!" she heard a familiar voice respond, one not heard in a very long time.

She felt tears well up inside her and she shook and quivered, fearing that she hadn't heard what she had. "S-Sam?" she managed, limply.

And now he was right up to her. "You didn't think I'd ever give up the hunt, did you?" he asked her gently.

She threw her arms around him and cried and cried, and he just held her tight. Sam shined a light on Carlos' remains but only briefly. It was a hulk crawling with-well, he didn't want to know.

"They packed it in a month ago, but I been coming back here with a small security force every chance I could get. We were pretty damned sure that nothing got off this world and no powered vehicles went as well, and we knew from Bill you couldn't have been too far away when the joint blew. I figured that he had to be hiding out waiting for us to leave, but that he'd go nuts and make a break-we have every single possible exit covered. When time dragged on, though, I got worried, and I started patrolling hundreds of miles of this coastline, along with a lot of other security people when they could be spared. They thought I was nuts, insane, after all this time, but I knew you better than that."

"Bill-he's all right?"

"He had some damage from that dive, but not anything serious. Not for Penn's former diving team captain. He almost made the Olympics once, he keeps telling us. Yeah, he's okay. A big wheel now, too. On the new Board. Things have changed a lot."

"The others-the ones with Carlos. You got them, too?"

"Uh uh. Not a prayer. The way it's working out is that they have a fair chunk of this side-I'm under super-heavy guard and such when I come up here-and we retain most of the other, with lots of pockets and islands in the other's territory. It's a whole different ball game. Come on-let's get you home, or what's passing for home these days."

"Sam-he stuck me on the juice again."

"I figured as much. Don't worry about it. We'll bring some of this supply to tide you over, but we can get a nearly limitless supply from the biomed people. Remember, we never really played with this shit on the Company world-too dangerous. I won't put you through more risks to health and sanity by kicking it again. It's the non-communicable variety, since that's what infected Carlos way back when, and there's ways to even grow your own. Kind of like methadone maintenance. You'll have your own and nobody ever has to know."

On the way back he filled her in on everything that had happened, and how, and why. She was amazed to learn the extent of the plot and his own side, upset at the idea Dash had been kidnapped, and almost as upset to think that their farm was no more, but all that paled. She was back and she was home again and this was better than she'd ever dreamed. She never wanted to go in the Labyrinth or visit another world again.

Sam Horowitz went down to the Company security area one afternoon months later and picked a totally secure terminal. He'd been meaning to do if for quite some time, but it had been a crowded and busy period.

First there was designing and building the new place, and making it secure. They picked a small Caribbean island, one the Company owned. Not real big, but there was some high ground. It hadn't been inhabited because there was no water source, but that was easy for the high-tech wizards to fix, and provide power as well. Brandy helped design the whole place and it was not just for them but separate nice quarters for a few other families carefully chosen and with kids Dash's age. There would be their own small school, and there was enough kids for a gang although they made a very small class, and it was totally secure. Sam saw to that.

Not that they would be prisoners there; there was a helipad and 'copter available, and it was only a few hours to Florida or a few more hours back up to Pennsylvania. But trips could be planned and worked out with Company security to reasonably assure as much safety as possible.

And since there was no station or substation within a thousand miles, the only threat they couldn't do anything about was the possibility of hurricanes, but they could build for that.

Dash even had two Mommies, in a way. His own, and the one who'd replaced his real one for "the bad guys." There wasn't much trouble telling them apart, except maybe on the phone or overhearing a conversation without seeing the speaker. Brandy's eyes had not cleared up; in fact, the "juice" seemed to have given up on them and just shut down that system. It was a minor setback in an otherwise unexpectedly happy resolution and she didn't waste any tears on it. The island and the main house were designed with her in mind, and it would take an expert to even realize she was blind.

She was also in tremendous shape, a byproduct both of her existence back at the Castle and of the efficiencies of the drug, looking years younger, trim, athletic, and working to keep that way. That, in fact, was the initial problem-the other Brandy, who could see, looked more like Mom than Mom did to Dash. He finally settled it by deciding that he was the only kid in the world with two Mommies and that two was much better than one.

It was also useful to have a duplicate Brandy around. It allowed some extra protection, and allowed Dash trips further afield than his own mother might feel comfortable going.

The fact was, though, that Brandy, the real one, was home, safe, with those she loved also there and safe, and she had no more taste for adventures.

Sam, however, found himself a bit busier. With a new Board, composed of the top non-Company world managers, and a new computer link that seemed to be working well, he found himself appointed chief of security for Company operations on this world. What with satellites, jet 'copters, and computer links he could and did as much as possible from home.

With the Labyrinth basically repaired, commerce resumed, although on a more limited scale.

They had millions of tons of surplus computer chips alone to ship out of Oregon and they'd be a long time catching up with the demand down the line. Now, too, they were facing in many areas something the old Company had never faced before-not a small underground opposition, but true competition on all levels, sometimes down and very dirty. Nobody had complete, secure control of an entire Labyrinth main line segment any more, and neither side had sufficient forces to knock the other out. It had become true competition, then, with victories measured in little gains, and in a way it seemed healthier.

Sam closed off the door to the secure terminal area and sat back in the chair. "All right," he sighed, "it's time. I've been meaning to do this for a long time and now it's finally time. I know you can hear me, and this is secure on my end so I know you can make it secure the rest of the way. Speak to me. What the hell's the difference? If I ever actually told them the complete truth they'd lock me away in a loony bin anyway."

For a moment the screen was blank, but then it suddenly typed, "All right-so what?"

"How does it feel to be a god, Pandross? The god of both sides in this unholy game of commerce?"

"I am content," the screen responded.

"I got to hand it to you," he admitted. "No human mind could ever have figured this out and made it work, let alone sustained the current conditions. I mean, the Company, the Opposition, they both have the same access to the same computer net, only they don't realize it. Why not merge them? We could do without some of the personalities involved, particularly on the competition's side."

"Every G.O.D. requires a Satan. That is what turned the Company race into the vegetative, cold, and distant folk they became. G.O.D. had no rival, no real threat, anyway. They had no incentive to do it better, cheaper, more efficiently; no pressure to make their power and traffic go both ways and help

the people and worlds they exploited. The new system does just that. The Board itself is composed of senior managers who were products of their own diverse worlds, politics, economic and cultural values, etc. That diversity alone assures a better, more understanding and compassionate Company. The fact that if they do not do it better and retain the loyalty of the locals on whom they depend that the opposition will exploit their lapses and cost them keeps them on their toes."

"Uh huh. Well, maybe it's better. It's certainly no worse. I'm still not thrilled with the likes of Voorhes and particularly Valentina out there, though."

"Valentina has made it a personal vow to someday get you and make you into a pet boy," the computer told him. "She is delighted by the turn of events and now controls their Security and is now second to none in pharmacology. Voorhes would like to strangle you, slowly. He is quite bitter that his hopes have been dashed and they are turning into a mirror image of the Company, and he has withdrawn from the Council. I am keeping an eye on him. Tarn considers the debt paid; he has withdrawn to his colony and will not participate. Cutler is now participating but probably will quit the first time they louse up a world on their own for greed. Kanda, of course, is barely aware that a change has happened but considers it irrelevant in any case. The opposition Board, like the new Company Board, is and will be run more by senior level management than the old crew, but the old crew can still be influential-and threatening. Valentina in particular. But if you are as good as you think you are and if you avoid making stupid and rash errors in the future, you should be able to avoid them. They are far too busy to make any concerted efforts in your direction and will remain so, so only you can give them an opportunity."

He sighed. "Fair enough. I'm not as sure I'd be as tough and determined and strong as Brandy if I were stuck in a position like she was. I'd rather not find out."

"A question."

"Yes?"

"How did you know? About me, about the rest of it?"

He chuckled. "It wasn't hard to figure out. It was just so damned weird and outlandish that I could only suspect. A computer who wanted desperately to know what it was like to be human. A human who wanted just as desperately to be a machine. An interface that only required physical contact with the walls of the machine, and a guy who knew how it all worked. Somehow, some way, Pandross really is in there with you, isn't he?"

"Everything that Pandross ever was or saw or experienced is a part of me," the computer admitted. "When it is Kanda's time to die, I will absorb him as well."

"That pair is gonna give you a real distorted view of what it's like to be human," he commented dryly. "Still, I suppose you have an almost infinite variety to choose from when you get the itch."

"That is a consideration. It must be voluntary, though, or there is much damage and it is not worth the effort. It would be nice at some point to get a worthy female, if only to broaden my outlook."

Sam didn't want to respond to that.

"Okay," he said at last, "having confirmed that you are who, or what, I suspected all along, let me follow it through. The thing that finally drove Pandross to merge with you was the grand plan. But you knew the grand plan wouldn't work. You'd had it run through you."

"It would have worked," the computer responded. "It simply would not have burned out any worlds. It would have followed the path of least resistance and scoured the Labyrinth all the way to its ends, ultimately erupting there, at the limits of construction, and doing some damage but not to anything close in or that we know now. The Company's world-destroyer system worked because they cut it off, terminated it at a given point, and gave the surge nowhere else to go but out. But it would have destroyed the Labyrinth, and totally cut the power. That was what I could not allow."

"Uh huh. So you set them up, and set me up as well. There were other sidings

that would have worked, weren't there? But you kept coming up with figures mandating this one because you heeded a way to screw it."

"Guilty, to a degree. Their plan would have worked with alternatives. My plan would not. I needed just the right position to make certain it sealed and shorted the Company world and did minimum damage to the Labyrinth itself. I also needed someone to do it for me, of course. I tried to see if I could do it on my own, but the security access system I deduced they would put into place after the initial raid prevented it. That meant that I had to make certain that you were not permanently injured, even killed, in the initial attack. That is why I put an operative in the raiding party-to save you, ironically."

He smiled at that and leaned back. "Yeah, and that's one of the open questions. Who the hell was that Pandross on the raid? A clone? And who was the Pandross killed at Tarn's?"

"I grew him out of the cells taken from the autopsy. Grew him and programmed him remotely. Alas, even I can not foresee everything. You were supposed to be home. Everything was predicated on that. But the unusual snowstorm blocked your scheduled return. All that care, all that concern, and I was thrown off by a storm. As you can see, even G.O.D. has limits."

"You grew him?" Sam was appalled. "Grew and programmed him?"

"You find a man merging, mating as it will, with a computer plausible enough to deduce it, yet you find making a duplicate of him hard to accept?"

The computer had a point there. In fact, the more he thought about it, the more logical it sounded, given how whacko the rest was. There were worlds running at vastly different time rates and their security was under the computer's remote control. Security men had, in fact, made Pandross's empty shell appear to be the victim of an accident or murder on orders from the computer. If there was a place with a fast rate and the capabilities to clone, and then the empty vessel, as it were, were put in connection with the computer, it was possible.

"All right, I'll go along. But who was that at Tarn's?"

"The same one. He was programmed to save you or deliver you to me. He failed. He kept at it, but you were too well shielded and protected until Tarn's.

Naturally, since he had my knowledge of Pandross's security bypasses, even Tarn's place wasn't impossible to enter. The programming is limited. I could not rein him in, so as soon as it was clear that he was a loose cannon I put out orders to security personnel to kill him at the first opportunity. They caught him in the inner temple but needed to make it appear a mysterious appearance and killing because to do otherwise would have been to have to explain to Tarn why they didn't take the intruder alive. By moving the murderer to a mysterious third party they protected themselves and also Tarn from the knowledge that he did not totally control his own security force."

It made sense. In fact, in the lopsided, high-tech, the-rules-are-different-here cosmos of G.O.D., Inc., where lives were lost and careers made on the ability to acquire and ship forty tons of dumped computer chips to a world that could use them in exchange for ten tons of Boxcar Willie's Greatest Hits, this wasn't so hard to accept.

"Run a search on aids for the blind in the general computer product network," the master computer suggested. "I pass it along as a hint. I have no records on an operation for optic nerve damage, but there are many ways to make it easier." He was surprised at the comment and concern. "Thanks. I'll do that. You know, you may just be developing some humanity after all."

"With your new position and mine we can chat all day and night, but is there anything else you would like to know?"

"Yeah. One thing. Do the hero and heroine have a good crack at living happily ever after now?"

There was a pause, and then the answer, drawn from an analysis of their personalities, positions, and everything else, came on the screen. It was pretty much the answer he figured, and he wasn't sure he wouldn't have it any other way.

"Happiness is a subjective term," the computer replied. "Some people would be happy forever in the positions you now find yourself, but every bit of data I have shows that, while you might find some temporary joy in being an executive

and Brandy some temporary peace as mother and lady of the island manor, it will sooner or later pale. Happiness is neither safety nor security, not for either of you.

"For the two of you, true happiness is when the game is afoot, and while the Maltese Falcon is still missing somewhere near Cairo."