

SHAGGY PLANET

Ron Goulart

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CHAPTER 1

When they changed partners for the third time, he found he was dancing with a robot. Peter Torres kept on snapping his fingers and stomping his feet. The android, who resembled a plump blonde girl, was wearing a white ball gown rich with fine lace.

"You work for the embassy?" Torres asked.

"Act natural," said the android. She tossed her long blonde hair, clapped her hands above her head. "I do this pretty well considering it's all programmed on punch tape."

Torres was a tall lean man in his early thirties. His face, which had been out in too much bad weather on too many odd planets, had a slightly knocked-about look. He grasped the robot around her lacy waist and they went stomping and snapping through a portion of the crowd at the embassy ball.

He asked, "Who sent you?"

"You know," replied the blonde robot.

Stepping into an alcove, Torres asked, "You're with the Mirabilis Agency?"

"Don't say the name out loud," cautioned the android. "But, yes. He wants to talk to you right quick."

Torres exhaled, rubbed one knobby hand over his short-cropped dark hair. He then reached out to toy with an icon on an alcove shelf. "I came out to this planet of Murdstone for a vacation. I'm here in Peluda Territory just relaxing. I'm having an affair with that red-haired girl over there. I don't want a job."

"Dyed red," said the robot. "She is fetching, though. A little too frail, but she has nice bones. Bones are the most difficult things to simulate when you're building an android. Did you know that?"

"No. What sort of job is it?"

"He'll tell you. I was only to infiltrate this ball and get you."

"How much is the Mirabilis Agency offering?"

"Six thousand dollars."

Torres turned to watch the slim red-haired girl, who was dancing now with one of the associate ambassadors from the planet Barnum.

"Have they raised the fee they pay free-lance agents?"

"We're offering an extra thousand because you may have to go into the jungle."

"Which jungle?"

"Is there more than one? I don't know too much about Peluda Territory. They didn't provide me much local input. I'm mostly

stuffed with dance tapes."

Torres steeped his fingers under his prominent chin. "Six thousand, huh?"

"And a wardrobe allowance," said the blonde robot, "in case you have to buy sun hats and things for the jungle."

"Where is he?"

"Parked behind the embassy. Up just off the bridle path."

"Okay, I'll go talk to him."

The head of the Ruling Junta, old Janeiro Frambosa himself, came up and asked the robot to dance. She accepted and they waltzed away from Torres.

Peggy Freed, the red-haired girl, was waltzing, too, with another associate ambassador. Torres made a back-soon motion at her and she smiled as she dipped in his direction.

Moving across the short gray grass, Torres spotted three small yellow ovals floating in the darkness of the Barnum Embassy grounds. These grew to windows as he approached closer to the parked landcar. Torres crunched across the synthetic cinders of the wide riding path and tapped on the passenger door of the long, night-black car. The door swung open and he hunched inside with, "Six thousand you're offering?"

"I told her to offer that only if you were hard to persuade," said the compact computer built into the back section of the big automatic landcar. "Were you?"

"Yes." Torres dropped down into a nearleather seat opposite the computer. "I'm on vacation. I'm involved with a girl."

"I know. Peggy Freed. Age 23. Home planet Barnum," said the computer. "Height five feet, seven inches, weight one hundred ten pounds. That's sort of skinny, isn't it? Employed by the Barnum News Synd as a reporter and documentary producer for the past nineteen months. What's she doing on Murdstone, Peter?"

"She's about to start on some assignment or other. Until then she's involved with me."

"Don't think we care about your private life," the computer assured him. "The Mirabilis Agency feels that the unconventional nature of your life is a plus factor."

"What's unconventional about sleeping with a girl? You people put me dancing with robots."

The computer said from its crosshatch speaker grid, "You do like machines, don't you? I know you've often implied you thought I was a nice guy and a good sport."

"You're the perfect field boss," replied Torres. "What's the job Mirabilis wants to hire me for?"

"I've been told I'm very personable," said the computer. "Well, let's get on to this job we have for you. This is highly . . . Look, Peter, you don't talk shop with Peggy? Tell her trade secrets, anecdotes about your work with our private mercenary agent service?"

"Nope."

"Because this is something we wouldn't want the press media to get wind of. They've already made a small frumus. You know how they distort things."

"What thing is it you don't want them to distort?"

A bank of tiny green bubble lights flared on across the computer's surface. "About a month ago a Barnum official came out here to Murdstone on a fact-finding mission. As you know, our home planet of Barnum supervises, very quietly, the running of the various governments on Murdstone.

There've been rumors about increased repressions and worsening conditions throughout this territory."

"The Junta has started public executions," said Torres. "There's famine in the outlands."

"Those are some of the rumors this official was to look into," replied the Mirabilis Agency computer. "The Barnum Embassy here is not always the best source of information, so an independent official was sent out to gather facts and file reports. He, however, never got to file a single report."

"Why?"

"Look up at my left monitor screen."

A forty-one-year-old blonde woman, handsome and distraught, appeared on the small playing-card-size screen. She was twisting a plaid scarf into intricate knots, touching at her eyes with the knots, "That's Mrs. Beatty Dunnlin, isn't it?" said Torres. "Socialite wife or Beatty Dunnlin, the olive oil tycoon and political trouble shooter. That's right, he disappeared just before I got out here. There was a mention of his being still missing on the news the day after I arrived."

"Distorted no doubt," said the computer. "Mrs. Dunnlin wants the

truth and she's hired the Mirabilis Agency to find her husband. Which is why I've come to you."

Torres glanced again at the monitor screen. It showed a very old man handing out golden coins to ghetto urchins. "Who's that?"

"Dunnlin's grandfather, the original salad oil king. He liked to hand out fifty-cent pieces to underprivileged children. I thought you might like a little family background."

"That little Venusian kid just kicked him in the knee," said Torres. "And there he goes whacking at him with his aluminum cane. Okay, that's enough family background. You want me to locate Beatty Dunnlin?"

"Exactly."

"Didn't the Barnum government send out their own agents to search for him?"

"Yes, Peter, the Barnum government did look into his vanishing. Then they quit."

"Maybe old Frambrosa and the Peluda Territory Junta put on the pressure."

"We don't know," answered the computer. "We do know Barnum dropped its search efforts very quickly. This perplexes Beatty Dunnlin's wife."

"Some kind of cover-up? I heard there was a possibility he was kidnapped out in the wilds someplace by the guerrilla army that's building up in the outlands."

"From what we've been able to find out so far, Peter, that simply isn't true. There is a large rebellion force roaming the forests and

jungles of Peluda Territory led by a man known only as Tio Mazda. We don't believe he and his minions are involved. There's been no attempt to collect a ransom either."

"Beatty Dunnlin was out in the wilderness when he vanished, wasn't he?"

"According to our sources, which include bribed Barnum government people and Mrs. Dunnlin, he was at the edge of a vast area known as the Municipal Jungles when last heard from."

Torres said, "Our planet supports the Junta here, but they wouldn't let the Frambosa crowd get away with doing something to Beatty Dunnlin, would they?"

"We assume not."

The second monitor screen from the left flashed on. Torres now saw a block of rustic suburban cottages, rolling lawns and leafy trees.

"What's this?"

"Watch for a bit."

Frolicking among the shrubs and lawns were two dozen four-footed shaggy animals, man sized and vaguely doglike. They were mostly pale yellow and light orange in color. "This was taken out in the suburbs," said Torres. "In the Las Cadenas section, wasn't it? I saw some of this footage on the news last night."

A thin man in a lounging suit ran out of one of the cottages and chased a group of the shaggy animals with a stun rod. Two more men, in conservative jumpsuits, came into view and commenced battering at the animals with their briefcases. The animals rolled and tumbled and did not anger.

"Those creatures are called hummels," explained the computer. "Up until a couple of months ago the hummel was thought to be a vanishing breed of herbivorous animal, limited to the remote jungles and forests of Murdstone. Then dozens of the hairy things came cascading out of the woods and into the suburbs. There's talk of forming vigilante committees to round the hummels up."

"So?"

"There may be nothing to this, Peter," the field computer told him. "Except Mirabilis got a piece of information suggesting there's something odd about this sudden hummel migration. I'm showing you this footage as more possible background material. While you're hunting for Beatty Dunnlin, see if you unearth anything about those shaggy animals. It may be there's some connection with our problem."

"Who was your informant?"

"He's since disappeared, too."

"Any other leads? Anybody who knows anything about what Beatty Dunnlin was up to?"

"Yes, we have a contact in the Barnum Embassy."

"Someone who's here at the ball tonight?"

"No, he's busy on some propaganda venture and couldn't spare the time. His name is Booker McCrystal."

Torres nodded. "I know him."

"I'm printing up a précis of all the information the Mirabilis Agency has," said the computer. "That's going on inside now, in case you

hear that funny whirring noise. Study the précis, then destroy it. Go talk to Booker McCrystal tomorrow." Three spools jumped in unison below the vocal mechanism. "Mirabilis was quite happy when we learned you'd picked Peluda Territory for a vacation. Made it much easier to hire you."

"I came because of the beaches mostly," said Torres. "The tour office didn't mention the troubles here." He leaned back, frowning. "Okay, I'll find Dunnlin for you. Give me one thousand dollars in cash now and put the rest in my bank account on Barnum. Do you still have some deposit slips?"

"Oh, yes. We have a very thorough file pertaining to you, Peter. We like you at Mirabilis, even though you are slightly quirky," said the computer. "We even have some very cute baby pictures of you, one where you're wearing little bunny slippers and trying to suck your toe."

"That is thorough," said Torres. "Give me the money."

A little lid flapped open and new crisp Murdstone money fluttered out into the knobby hand Torres extended. The computer said, "You'll have to drop your friend Peggy while you work on this for us, Peter. And please try not to talk to her about your assignment at all."

Torres grinned and counted the money.

CHAPTER 2

The black man looked from one body to the other, shaking his head.

"I'm having an awfully difficult time making up my mind," he said to Torres. "I hope you'll excuse this creepy meeting place, Pete, but I'm terribly rushed. Which one would you pick?"

"For what?" They were in a chill, domed, metal room, cupped in by curving pale yellow walls.

"For the opera," replied Booker McCrystal. "I'm dreadfully afraid I don't like either one of these fellows." He took one of the plyosacked bodies by its broad shoulders and lifted it partially up off the vinyl table it was lying on. "This one is the better of the two. Can you imagine him with a beard, Pete?"

"I suppose if I had to," said Torres. "What opera?"

McCrystal let go of the body and tilted up the one next to it. "No, I can't see him in a field of grain. I tell you, Pete, I'm horribly overworked at the Barnum Embassy. Now the word comes through I've got to go out as publicity man for their opera." He stepped back from both wrapped bodies. "Neither of these will do. Where'd that dreadful reanimation attendant go?"

Torres said, "I want to talk to you about Beatty Dunnlin."

"I haven't even explained the opera to you yet." McCrystal leaned toward the bodies on the table. "The trouble is that horrible reanimation man insists he's only got these two tenors in stock. They're simply not right for the part, not as I conceive it. Though I could be as terribly wrong about this as I am about most of what Barnum is up to here on Murdstone."

"You've come to this frozen body center to find a cast for an opera?"

"Didn't my secretary explain all that when she set up this appointment?"

"I didn't speak to her when I called the Barnum Embassy offices this morning. I got some guy who said he was your answering service."

"Him again," sighed the black McCrystal. "Big swaggering blond freckled young fellow? Yes, he's not as horrible as the last one. I can't let myself get too awfully upset since they think they're doing me a favor."

"Who?"

"The burly blond lad is with the Murdstone Crime Bureau," explained the embassy man. "They have a tap on our pixphones and when my girl is busy they help out by answering and taking messages."

"Doesn't Barnum object to the local government doing that?"

"Barnum is being very cautious with Murdstone and especially with this territory, Pete," said the black man, "which is one reason they stopped looking for poor Beatty Dunnlin. Even though he wasn't that high-ranking, you'd expect more than a week's hunt. And for the last three days of the search I think they were just up in their hoppers flying around over the ocean."

"Dunnlin, I thought, disappeared inland."

"He did. The whole entire search operation was terribly wasteful and slipshod. Poor Beatty." McCrystal had taken up the nearest body by the shoulders again. "Hey, I just realized. You've been hired by the dreadfully adventurous Mirabilis Agency to find our poor lost Beatty. Is that it, Pete?"

Torres nodded. "That's it."

"Horribly exciting. I wish I didn't have to leave tomorrow with the opera tour. Have I explained about the opera yet?"

"No." Torres sat in one of the chill, rounded room's two metal chairs. "Do that now, Booker, in about three or four minutes. Then tell me what Dunnlin was doing out in the jungle."

"Oh, he wasn't even anywhere near the jungle. He was at a private resort." McCrystal left the two frozen tenors and settled in the other chair. "You can only keep these fellows off the ice, or whatever it is they store them with, for about a half hour and then they spoil, I think. Time-limit situations always make me monstrously anxious. About the opera. It's really propaganda."

Torres rocked once in his tin rocker and said nothing

"A local composer wrote it, a very talented young man. Then Barnum had some Propaganda Wing people out to revise it, you know, slip in various messages we'd like to help the local government get across to the people. The title of our opera is *The Dancing Plowman*."

"Rustic."

"It's an agricultural opera. I tell you, Pete, it's terribly hard merely to put together an agricultural opera without having to worry about getting in propaganda," said the embassy man. "We're taking *The Dancing Plowman* out to the Steppes and to the farm lands, doing what promises to be a dreadfully tiring series of one-night stands in farm communities and some or the refugee centers."

"Most of that country is hit by famine, isn't it?"

McCrystal smiled, sighing. "One of the purposes of the opera is to convince people there really isn't a famine at all but simply a slight imbalance in the distribution of foodstuffs."

"What has happened to the welfare food system?"

"It's horribly screwed up—like everything in Peluda," said McCrystal. "Our opera is intended to glorify the rural resident and make him realize the food shortages aren't as bad as some radicals have made them out." His voice lowered. "You know Barnum has been funding an experimental food research facility out beyond the jungle, Pete. They're very close, so I hear, to a terribly exciting breakthrough. I have a special aria about a new cheap protein substitute already written and standing by."

Torres asked, "What happened to your tenor?"

"The original one? Oh, another of these screwups. The police had him in for questioning on some simple matter or other and they managed to break not one, but both his arms. Maybe he could have sung some roles after that but not the cultivator operator in this show. Besides which, he got stage fright or something and ran off to the wilderness to hide." McCrystal slowly exhaled. "These reanimation places always keep a supply of impoverished actors and singers on ice. People who've had themselves frozen until a good job turns up. One poor old ventriloquist has been here for almost a century and still hasn't had a call."

Torres said, "Now about Beatty Dunnlin."

"Would you like a couple passes to *The Dancing Plowman*? You may get out our way."

"No. What was Dunnlin looking into when he disappeared?"

"It was supposed to be a preliminary report on famine and food distribution," said McCrystal. "Poor Beatty was supposed to be going around to the refugee centers out on the Avalon Steppes and seeing how people were making out. You know, Barnum has been helping the Ruling Junta relocate a lot of people because of the rebel armies forming out in the wilds."

"What else was he doing?"

"We're old friends, aren't we, Pete? I'll tell you a few things for old time's sake, things I didn't even tell the political agents Barnum sent out here."

"Things you figured you might be able to sell later to some outfit like Mirabilis," Torres added.

"If you want to be monstrously frank, yes," admitted McCrystal. "Poor Beatty had a tip there was a person in one of the big resorts up the coast who had some very important information for him. Something the Barnum government should know, perhaps."

"He didn't tell anyone at the embassy or back on Barnum?"

McCrystal said, "Beatty had the notion he should trust as few people as possible. I was one of those he, wisely, had faith in. Pete, I think poor Beatty got in trouble because he tried to follow up that lead. The dreadful thing is, I'm not at all sure who made his trouble for him. So I've kept quiet thus far. Fortunately your awfully well funded Mirabilis Agency came along and tempted me to talk a little."

Torres asked, "Is Beatty Dunnlin dead?"

McCrystal looked away toward the two packaged bodies. "I don't know. Really, Pete."

"Who was the source of Dunlin's tip?"

"There's a man here in Frambosaville," replied McCrystal. "He's a big, frighteningly handsome fellow, though he's starting to age subtly now he's nearing forty. His profession is . . . well, the courting of women—rich women, widows, heiresses, celebrities. This means he's often up the coast to Freeport and in the Europa Sector where many of the wealthy of Murdstone live."

"What's his name?"

"Terranova," said the black man, his voice dropping even lower.

"His name is Jose Luis Terranova. I haven't wanted to dig into the frightful problem of poor Beatty any further. Not that I could have with this beastly opera thing to put in order. Anyway, Pete, I haven't been in touch with Terranova since the disappearance. He is in town at the moment, and I'm sure, for a price, he'll talk to you. Be very discreet, as I'm sure you will." He told Torres how to locate Terranova, then added, "Now I have to be horribly quick about making up my mind on a substitute tenor."

Torres stretched up out of the chair and its metal frame whacked back once against the cold yellow wall. "Thanks."

"Our opera won't be as dreadfully bad as you might imagine," said McCrystal, rising. "The messages in it may not appeal to you, but that's merely the insides of the work, the nuts and bolts. The entertainment part, on the other hand, is what hits the people. The outside covering, the frosting, the . . ."

"False whiskers," supplied Torres.

"That's it, Pete. With the right false whiskers you can sell anything."

Torres turned and climbed the lone chill corridor out.

CHAPTER 3

The last three swats of the tennis racket hadn't sounded right. After Torres climbed to the top of the noryl plastic wall around the court he saw why. The android pro, all bright silver and enameled white, was striking his human opponent over the head with his metal-frame racket. Torres, tightroping along the six-inch-wide fence top, cupped his hands. "Are you Terranova?" he called.

A chubby, forty-year-old man was running along the base line of the plaskolite surface court. His short-legged tennis suit was smudged with machine oil and dust. He cut across the court, leaped over the net. Planting his feet wide apart he faced the pursuing android, a double-handed grip on his own racket. "Unfortunately, yes," he shouted in reply. "Would you be Peter Torres?"

"Yes. I didn't get an answer to the gate chimes so I decided to climb up and take a look."

"This mechanism is trying to kill me," explained Terranova. He grunted out his breath and his bushy brown mustache fluttered.

The android said, "Ang!" He jumped to Terranova's side of the net, chopping at him this time with the metal edge of his racket frame and not the simulated-gut face.

Flexing his big, knobby hands Torres swung over the court side of

the wall. The same tough noryl decorative ivy was implanted here and he used it to go down as he had used it to come up. "Who?" he asked as he descended.

"I sense an annoyed husband somewhere behind this," gasped the handsome, chubby man. He pivoted away from the tennis-playing android, getting in a thwacking blow to the side of the machine's silver skull. "He's stuck a parasite computer on my tennis instructor's back, programmed to kill me."

Torres dropped to the green sunlit court and moved across its controlled coolness, stalking toward the back of the now-murderous android. "I see it," he said. As the pro lunged again his singlet flapped up and a small yo-yo-sized metallic object showed at the small of his back. "I thought you only courted rich single girls and widows?"

"All men are liable to error; and most men are, in many points, by passion or interest, under temptation to it. Right? I made a mistake." Terranova used the racket one-handed, fencing. "There was insufficient backgrounding on my part."

Torres, slightly crouched, slid across the bright afternoon court. He jabbed tight-together fingers into his left armpit shoulder holster and found, by touch, his portable, diamond-bit drill. "Get ready."

The android chopped his metal racket, with extreme swiftness, at the spot where Terranova's head had an instant before been.

Torres sailed over onto their side of the net.

The android was aware of him now. It turned abruptly. "Ang, ang!" it cried.

Torres ran straight at the temporarily crazed teaching machine. When he was four feet from it he faded to the left, tossing the drill around the android. "Just above the ass," he told Terranova. The android made a swing at Torres. The chubby Terranova discarded his racket, caught the drill, clicked it on, and stabbed it into the tiny computer on the android's back. "This reminds me of a safecracking tool I once had."

From the small parasite computer came a huge sound like a dozen washing machines falling over. The silver and white pro sat down on the cool green court surface. "That serve is still pretty rough, Mr. Terranova," he said, and then toppled back with a clicking-off noise. Terranova shifted the drill and shook hands with Torres. "I was right about the girl's money at any rate. A jamming unit like that, one to take over a whole android and pull him out of circuit with the central controlling unit up in the sports pavilion, that's expensive. Gold is the touchstone whereby to try men. Right?"

With one foot Torres rolled the android over, frowning at the parasite mechanism. "You sure this is somebody's husband and not a political thing?"

"Too subtle to be the Junta," said Terranova. "They don't know I'm connected with anything political anyway. No, I'm fairly certain it was this girl's unexpected husband. He called me on the pixphone this morning, at an even earlier and more unwieldy hour than you. A very nervous-faced young guy, making threats. Sometimes I suspect a taint of hereditary stupidity in my make-up. Usually I check out my targets by computer, but this time I let my heart call the turn. Not good business thinking at all."

"Are you okay?"

"Gigantic knockers."

"What's wrong?"

"The girl in question has gigantic knockers. Great things are done when men and mountains meet. Right? Which is why I fell head over heels in love with this particular bimbo and waived the computers."

Nodding, Torres bent and got hold of the android by the armpits. He dragged it off the court and into a wide strip of shade along the far wall. Back with the chubby Terranova he retrieved his drill and holstered it.

"You've got one under each arm, very proficient. How much are you offering?"

Torres grinned and small forks formed at the edges of his dark eyes. "I can pay you five hundred dollars to sell me what you sold Beatty Dunnlin."

"I should be above haggling with someone who's just saved my skin, but I want seven fifty."

Torres shook his head. "Then I'd be paying you out of my own fee."

Fluffing his mustache with a knuckle, Terranova stooped, and caught up his racket and that of the pro. He wedged both up along his plump side, starting for the exit doorway. "Come on and join me for a drink."

"You taking the five hundred?"

"When money is involved, only money and not the heart," said

Terranova, "I'm a good judge of people. You seem honest, so I'll help you for five hundred."

Torres hesitated at the open door of his inn cottage. At his back a cool twilight was slowly moving in through the transplanted grove of evergreens. He flexed his shoulders, allowed his jacket to swing open.

"Don't shoot me or anything, Pete."

Torres moved, grinning, into his cottage. "Hello, Peggy"

"I have a key, remember?"

"Yes," he told her. "I'm feeling a little twitchy today. I had to help a guy fight off an android this afternoon."

"Is this part of the Mirabilis Agency job you've just started?" The slim red-haired girl was sitting on the edge of a vinyl hammock in front of the largest round-view window.

"The crazed android may only be peripheral to the real job." As he watched the lovely girl she stretched out one long bare leg and her toes tipped over a valise. "You moving in?"

Peggy said, "An assignment has come through for me, too. I have to leave Frambosaville early tomorrow."

Torres closed the cottage door and walked to the wall valet hole.

"Coat and holsters," he said to the stall. "I'll be leaving town for a while, too."

The valet hole reached out fine wire hands and took Torres's coat off him, hanging the garment inside itself.

Peggy puckered her lips for an instant, then smiled. "Don't think I

don't love you, Pete. I do. But this is such a special assignment that, well, I'm almost thrilled enough not to miss you. On top of which, you're not going to be here anyway. So it's not actually a separation. Well, it is, but we'll both be working at our chosen professions. I do love you, though."

Torres held his arms straight out and the valet hands unhitched the twin weapon holsters. "Let's not talk about love and business. I've just been with a guy who makes his living out of a combination."

"A male hustler?"

"No, a gigolo," answered Torres. "Not a bad guy actually."

"Is he the one you saved from the crazy android?"

"That's right." The valet cubicle made a throat clearing sound.

Torres told it, "You can turn off.

I'll do the rest myself."

Peggy folded her hands in her lap. "Don't you want to learn about my news coup?"

Torres shrugged one shoulder. "Tell me."

"This is really something enormous, Pete. Barnum News Synd has worked months to set it up.

It's really, well, an honor to be picked for this."

Torres hopped and gripped off his left shoe. "Oh, so?"

"You're very dependable. You always start undressing with shoes first. And always the left shoe."

Torres backed off a few steps. He sat on a copper hassock and looked not at the slim girl but at the big, bright fireflies filling the

darkening brush outside. "The assignment?"

"Well, I don't really have to tell you right this minute now. You'll think I'm too career oriented." She licked her upper lip. "Where are you going?"

"To a villa in the Europa Sector." He dropped his second shoe. "To visit a wealthy friend of the gigolo. And you?"

Peggy rubbed her long fingers over her knee caps.

"Well, I almost can't believe I snagged an assignment this important. Barnum News is sending me into the wilderness to interview Tio Mazda himself!"

"Who?" Torres made his face blank.

"The guerrilla leader who . . . oh, you already know who he is."

Torres laughed. "I've heard of him, yes."

"Just me and my cameraman are going," continued Peggy. "This will be only the second interview he's ever granted. The screening I've had to go through has been something. Really something, Pete. I didn't tell you before because I wasn't sure. At first I thought I might only get assigned to do a feature spot on those tacky hummel animals who are mooching around the suburbs." She paused to smile at him. "Aren't you proud, somewhat, of me? How many twenty-three-year-old girl journalists do you know who get jobs this important?"

"You're the first one so far." Torres unseamed his shirt and got out of it.

"Well, you're older than me by nearly a decade, Pete. You're a hardened professional mercenary agent. So you don't get excited."

"Not about guerrillas, no." He stood up, dropped out of his trousers, and walked toward the girl in the hammock.

CHAPTER 4

Agent Brakeman was standing far above the ocean and thinking about mechanical dogs, a large, round-edged man in a rough pullover suit with vinyl patches at the elbows and knees. Brakeman was forty-five, second in command of the Peluda office of the Murdstone Crime Bureau. He was wishing, standing near the one-way view wall of the MCB office dome, he could afford to retire this year and not wait until he was forty-seven. Brakeman wanted to get back into the computerized animation business. He had spools of notes about cartoon characters that would sell. Especially here on Murdstone where the level of sophistication was behind that of Barnum. His favorite idea was a mechanical dog character.

"What?" Brakeman asked.

"Wouldn't it be easier to kill Peter Torres himself?"

Brakeman stopped thinking about the future, blinked at the bright water below. "They don't keep your dome here in Surveillance & Scrutiny very clean."

"All our window-washing robots were transferred to temporary riot control," replied Monitor Seames, a thin, partly metal man of thirty-three.

"I thought I noticed a radical get beaten down with a squeegee on the news last night."

Monitor Seames said, "I don't know why you watch television when you can come here to S&S and see everything that's really happening in the territory."

"There's a cartoon show I like that's on right before the Controlled News Hour," answered Brakeman. "I guess I don't really care who we kill, whom we kill. I'm coasting my last two years with the Crime Bureau."

Seames was unscrewing his right hand. "You didn't want to hear this tape again, did you?"

"No, I don't like it when there's no visual stuff along with it."

The S&S man uncoupled his tape-playing hand and screwed on a five-fingered aluminum one. "Our treaties with Barnum don't even allow us to do this much," he said. "From our bug in Torres's inn we know he'll be leaving for the Europa Sector this evening. You're going to have to make up your mind about killing him."

"You didn't get any pictures at all of him in bed with Peggy?"

"What we did was risky enough. I didn't want to try for visuals. I can show you the new reel of pictures we made at the embassy ball two nights ago, if you want to see sex pictures."

"I've seen that stuff. This girl is interesting, this Peggy, even though she's on the skinny side. Well, I don't care. I'm happily married after all. I am still happily married, far as you can tell?"

"Yes," replied Seames, scratching at a bolt in his neck. "Without offending you, Agent, I must say the monitoring equipment at your home brings in some of the dullest footage I've ever had to look at. Your wife is completely faithful, as well as pretty damn sedentary."

"She's put on some weight the last couple years," said Agent Brakeman. "Not that I really care, but I don't think we want to risk killing anybody who works for the Mirabilis Agency. They have strong ties with the Barnum government, don't they?"

"From all I've heard."

"So far most people on Barnum think this Beatty Dunnlin thing is an unfortunate accident. I don't want a lot of aroused political agents coming out to our planet. No, we'd best not take a chance with Torres."

"Who does that leave?"

Brakeman absently buffed his left elbow patch. The ocean was growing a darker blue as the afternoon clouded. "If today gets much more humid I'm going to get another sinus headache. What I liked about the computerized animation business was I could stay inside most of the time."

"You ought to transfer to S&S." Seames's left hand had a miniaturized projector built into the thumb. "How about this gentleman?"

The thumb whirred and a motion picture appeared on one of the tray-size screens hanging near them. "What's that?" asked Brakeman. Birds were flapping on the screen.

"Just a little establishing footage, be patient. There. Him."

Terranova was grinning at them. "Is he naked?"

"Swimming. There, see, the camera is zooming back a bit. One of our robots was hanging from the mast of the pleasure boat next to the one Terranova was visiting."

"Turn your thumb off," said the MCB agent, "I know what that gigolo looks like. No, if we kill him that still leaves Peter Torres to nose around. And it leaves the source of information."

"Then the answer is obvious." Seames showed Brakeman someone new on the screen. "Kill the source of information."

"Really doesn't make much difference to me." Brakeman turned his back on the screen. "I hope those dogs won't be there."

"They're not guard dogs. They're purely decorative," explained Seames. "A dozen of them, dyed to match the color scheme of the villa."

"I hate to kill dogs," said Brakeman. "Especially now I'm working on an idea for a computerized animated dog cartoon show in my spare time. I'm thinking of calling it Cog the Dog. A robot dog."

"Interesting concept. I'm not sure I go for the title though."

"Cog the Dog," repeated Brakeman. "Maybe it is too whimsical. Okay, I'll get out to the Europa Sector and take care of the information source. Thanks for briefing me."

The frail Seames smiled, depressing one of the push buttons set in his upper right arm. "Take a look at this before you go."

A wide sheet of man-high viewing material rose up out of the simulated cork floor. A life-size picture appeared. It was a still shot of thick woodland foliage. "Now what?" asked Agent Brakeman.

"We believe this was taken only two miles from the main guerrilla encampment out in the Madera Forests."

Brakeman walked toward the big screen, which was about ten feet

away from him. "I'm not really all that interested in the guerrillas in general." He poked at a projected pine tree. "You mean Tio Mazda might be two miles from this spot?"

"One of our field men got the picture telexed to us before he was blown up. It's very difficult to use robot equipment out there. They'd hardly blow our man up unless he was on to something."

Agent Brakeman said, "Well, you needn't worry about Tio Mazda anymore."

"Why is that?"

"You people ought to dust your equipment more often." He rubbed his thumb over the finger he'd touched the picture with. "All I can tell you right now, Monitor Seames, is that we've worked out a way to get an agent inside Tio Mazda's camp, wherever it may be."

"An assassin?"

"I'm hoping this agent will get a chance to kill Tio Mazda."

"How can somebody from MCB get so close?"

"We're counting on his vanity." Agent Brakeman wiped the tip of his dusty finger on the backside of his knee. "I've got to get over to Logistics and work out the details of this Europa business. Good-bye." He left the S&S man, strode to the descend chute in the pseudocork floor. As he dropped gently downward in the softly lit shaft he decided he'd better get a new name for his mechanical dog.

CHAPTER 5

A large lemon yellow hound was running round and round down on

the pseudomarble landing area, barking up at them.

Torres had brought the aircruiser in low over the black night water surrounding the estate. He was circling the small, oceanside landing pad. He watched the big dog dancing and yowling down there.

"Shall we throw him a bone?" he said.

"That's Juanito," said the handsome chubby Terranova. "He's on a low-calcium diet as I recall. When I used to visit Nancy more often I memorized all dozen diets. She's got twelve dogs and each one is on a different diet. Variety is the soul of pleasure. Right?"

Torres punched out landing orders on the cruiser dash. The ship commenced humming in a wobbly falsetto, dropping down through the clear night.

Another dog, turquoise blue in color, jumped up at Terranova when he stepped out of the aircruiser. "Easy, Pepito," said the gigolo.

"This one eats whole grain mush. It's difficult to get a dog to sit up and beg for that." He stood on the marble field frowning, knuckling his mustache.

The blue dog trotted over, yelped at Torres, chewed at his wrist.

"This one seems to be on a Torres diet."

Still frowning, Terranova said, "They're agitated about something."

Real ferns and vines surrounded the landing area; a marble stairway led up from it and onto the ten grassy acres which fronted Nancy Vespa's villa. Off in red-flowered vines to the right something went, "Awk."

Torres got his wrist free of the blue-dyed Pepito. Moving toward the sound, he raised his hand toward his left shoulder holster.

A light wind was sailing in from the sea, ruffling the leaves and petals. A white swan lay among the dark underbrush with its webby feet in the air, "Awk," it said again, then tiny cogs and swirls of fine wire spewed out of a hole in its front.

Terranova paused an instant beside Torres, then went running up the staircase. "Nancy," he called. The two hounds went bounding after him. Torres, after drawing out a blaster pistol, followed. Up on the wide patio which circled the right side of the turreted villa an android butler was mixing martinis. He had made over two hundred of them and had them sitting on the portable bar top, on the patio table and chairs, and all along the pseudomarble railing. He'd run out of olives and tiny onions and was now adding the little white buttons off his butler suit. The left side of his head was dented in and sea green oil ran down one cheek and over his stiff white ascot. "Cock," he said, noticing Terranova and Torres run up. "Cock . . . cocktail hour is almost over, gent . . . gent . . . gentlemen."

Four more large hounds, scarlet, emerald green, sand brown, and off white, were here. They sat in a mournful half-circle, baying.

"Oh, Jesus," said Terranova.

A woman of thirty was sprawled on the round patio tiles, on her back with arms and legs twisted at impossible angles. She'd been shot twice with a small blaster and there were two singed holes in the front of her lemon yellow cocktail shift.

Torres shooed the ring of sad dogs back, knelt beside her. "Is this Nancy Vespa?"

"Yes." Terranova's plump face was pale.

"Dead two hours or more."

There was a bloodless line around part of the dead woman's neck. A single ruby rested on a tile near her head. "They took her necklace. Thieves?"

Torres said, "An attempt to make it seem like that."

Terranova looked away from the body. "She's got a dozen or more mechanical servants, Pete. I don't see any of them around. Only this guy with the cocktails."

"What model servants. What kind?" Torres stood up and away from the dead woman. The quartet of colored hounds edged nearer to her body.

"That's right," remembered Terranova. "Most of them are low-level andies, controlled from a central computer. Except for the butler and Alex."

"Who's Alex?" Torres was crossing to the drink-making butler.

"Nancy's chef," said Terranova. "A very expensive one. She had him teleported in from the

Earth System, from someplace called Paris, back when she was still married to Colonel Vespa."

"Could her husband be mixed up in this?"

"The colonel?" Terranova stroked his mustache. "I understand he still loves her. Anyway, he's no longer a member of the Ruling Junta. They've got him living off in exile someplace or other. Of course the Junta itself might have good reason to keep her quiet."

"You haven't told anyone but Beatty Dunnlin and me about her?"

Terranova shook his head, glancing back at the sprawled body. "No one, no."

The butler had used up all his buttons and was putting pebbles from a decorative border into the drinks now.

"They could turn the other servants off," said Torres. "Not this one, so they whacked him. What's his name?"

"Farris."

"Hey, Farris," said Torres.

"Sir?" The wounded android kept mixing martinis adding gin and vermouth to a blue crystal pitcher stirring with a crystal wand.

"Who was here, who did this?"

"Cock . . . cock . . . cocktails on the patio Farris," replied the butler. His left eye popped out suddenly. He caught it and added it to the next martini he poured.

"Let's find Alex," suggested Torres.

"The kitchens are on the other side of the villa," said Terranova.

As they started off, the mechanical butler said "Wait."

"What?" Torres halted.

"Won't you have a drink, sir?"

They left the one-eyed android at the bar and ran. Behind the vast villa a large pastel purple hound came out of one of the formal rose gardens to run alongside them.

"This is Primo," said Terranova. "He's the vegetarian of the pack."

"You hear that?" Torres said to the dog, who had his teeth on Torres's wrist.

The kitchens took up four big all-white rooms. In the pastry room an unmoving female-type android was frozen in the process of kneading a ball of dough.

Terranova called, "Alex."

Primo, the purple hound, barked his way into the next room. The master chef android was not there, or in the other two kitchen rooms.

Leaning against a butcher's block in the final kitchen, Torres asked, "You're sure she didn't tell you anything?"

"Only that she had some information she felt the Barnum government should have. Nancy found out something while she was still married to the old colonel, while he was still big in the Junta."

Terranova poked at his mustache. "She didn't quite trust the local Barnum Embassy people, but when she heard about Beatty Dunnlin's visit she asked me to contact him for her."

"So the fee to her was your idea," said Torres.

Terranova looked down, patted the purple dog on its knuckled head.

"By right means, if you can, but by any means make money.

Right?" Torres paced the kitchen, reaching up and tapping at hanging pots and skillets. "Somebody," he said. "Somebody wants Dunnlin to stay vanished."

"You're sure that's why Nancy was killed?"

"Coincidences aren't too frequent in my line of work."

"Which means I'm responsible then," said Terranova, "for what's happened to her."

After a moment Torres answered, "Maybe."

The handsome chubby gigolo continued to pat the purple dog.

"Hey," he said.

"Huh?"

"Two things occur to me," said Terranova, brightening slightly. "I think I know where Alex has gone to."

"What's the other thing?"

"We still may be able to find out what Nancy told Dunnlin."

CHAPTER 6

Mechanical angels were caroling gently off in the misty darkness.

"Princess Lena lives in a transplanted cathedral," explained Terranova.

They had flown a mile inland and set down again. Acres of neat-rowed trees rose up around the cleared estate grounds. Fine mist was gliding in at their back, spreading itself low along the ground.

"You think the missing chef might have come here?" Torres flexed his shoulders.

"Lena has coveted that android of Nancy's for a good year," said Terranova. "Alex is pretty independent. Once he knew about Nancy he may have come over here to look for a job."

They moved up a wide flagstone path. "And you think he knows something about what Nancy Vespa had to tell Dunnlin?"

"I'm hoping so." Terranova gave up tugging at his mustache and

pointed. "The Cathedral of St. Norbert the Divine, teleported from the Earth System. It's really been a problem to heat the thing."

Placed up among the spires of the cathedral were bright silver-plated angelic androids. They played at harps and lutes, singing sweetly, their white feathery wings beating time. "That one with the violin is awfully shaggy for an angel," mentioned Torres, watching the cathedral's main tower.

The shaggy creature flung his violin away and clambered up to the top of the bell tower to do handstands.

"Tan," called an angry voice somewhere in the dark. "Tan, you're a bad hummel, bad. Don't be sacrilegious, Tan. Come back to Princess Lena."

The big hummel shinnied down the side of the tower, cupped one shaggy paw to his ear.

On the wide front steps of the cathedral home a pudgy young man in a one-piece black evening suit was sitting with his elbows on his knees. "Upstaged by a hummel," he said when he noticed Terranova and Torres.

"What's the trouble?" the gigolo asked the pudgy boy.

"See, you do it, too. Ignore me and show concern for that big goop. You don't introduce me to your buddy, don't ask after me or my career. Boy, give the public a hummel climbing up a church and they'll ignore real talent every time."

"Pete, this is the Great Yarko," said Terranova still watching the hummel up above. "Peter Torres."

"I'm not calling myself the Great Yarko anymore," said the pudgy

young man. "I'm Yarko the Magnificent now, master of illusion. Doesn't that sound better?"

"Is that Lena up there, scaling the bell tower?" asked the gigolo.

"I suppose," replied Yarko. "She's goofy over this new hummel of hers. Had the big ploop smuggled out of one of the suburbs. Over there they like the hummels about as much as they like chiggers and bedbugs, but Lena dandles him on her knee and feeds him strawberry yogurt with a souvenir spoon."

Yarko held a golden egg up toward Torres. "Want to see an illusion?"

"You're a magician?" asked Torres.

"My fame hasn't spread as fast as it should have," explained the pudgy young Yarko. "Partly because I have to lay off during the summer to nurse my hay fever. Being the constant companion of her highness isn't all a bed of roses either."

Torres sat on the step next up from Yarko. "Has the princess acquired anything else new? An android chef, for instance."

"Oh, him," murmured Yarko. "Listen, pay attention to my trick first, why don't you?"

Torres nodded. "Okay."

"Lena's in pretty good shape for a woman of fifty-six," observed Terranova. He was watching the chunky blonde princess go tightroping along the edge of a tile roof after the shambling hummel.

"Fifty-six?" Yarko blinked and dropped his gold egg.

The egg cracked evenly on the real marble and two mechanical birds fluttered out along with gobs of plastic confetti.

"She told me she was forty-nine," said the young magician.

"Well, she swings from those eaves like a much younger woman," said Terranova.

Yarko watched his illusion disperse in the fog and wind. "There goes another trick. The same darn thing was always happening when I played two weeks on a pleasure satellite orbiting Tarragon last winter. Maybe I'm not cut out to do egg tricks."

"What about the android chef?"

"Oh, him. He's installing himself up in the organ loft," said Yarko.

"I have a duck in my hat. Would you like to see that?"

"On my way out." Torres was going up the cathedral steps. "Come on, Terranova."

Terranova lowered his head. "He's swinging on the bell ropes now."

Deep rumbling bells began ringing. The organ loft had been converted to a kitchen, though the pipe organ was still there. Alex was a small lank-looking mechanism in a white tunic and cap. "It was Alex they were actually after," the android was telling Terranova. "If I'd seen the fellows sooner I'd have punched them." He shadow boxed a little, demonstrating.

"Did you see who killed her?" asked Torres.

Giving one more short jab to the air, the android chef replied, "Actually, no. I was in the meat locker thawing out a side of grout when the unpleasantness must have occurred. I'm certain, though, those bravos probably came to do me wrong. Alex is much envied

in the Europa Sector. At any rate, once I realized my employer was dead I took off to seek a new situation."

Torres shrugged, looking at Terranova.

The handsome chubby man had his fingers in a cookie crock. He drew out a lump of a cookie rich with powdered sugar. Nibbling, he said, "Alex, you recall our arrangement?"

The android said, "Alex never forgets. Another reason there's so much talk against me. My memory banks are probably much superior to yours. For instance, I know over six thousand *haute cuisine* recipes. Not six hundred, my friend but—"

"I arranged with you," interrupted Terranova, blowing flecks of sugar off his mustache, "to keep an eye on Nancy. That was some months ago when I was more interested in her than I have been of late."

"You must realize I had a very demanding schedule over at that place," said the android. "All those hunt breakfasts and midnight snacks for upward of a hundred guests sometimes. I'm really glad to be with the princess now." He adjusted his small white cap. "Still I did my best to listen to some of her conversational exchanges with the men she seemed serious about."

"What about Beatty Dunnlin?" asked Torres.

"He has terrible taste in wine," said the small android. "Imagine asking for a Venusian blue cabernet to drink with grout tongue."

"Do you know what Dunnlin and Nancy talked about?" asked Terranova as he ate another lump of cookie.

"There wasn't any romance there," said Nancy Vespa's former chef.

"They talked mostly politics."

"You listened, though?"

"As best I could," said Alex.

"Do you know what she told Dunnlin, or where she sent him?"
asked Torres.

Alex smiled toward Terranova. "You'll enjoy those anise balls much more with a little glass of synthetic Pernod. Let me find you some."

"Talk first," said Terranova.

"She wanted him to get information from a young fellow she'd heard about through some connection of her former husband." Alex walked to a cabinet next to the enormous pipe organ.

"Do you know the guy's name?" asked Torres. "Do you know where he is?"

"Let me find the Pernod," said the android chef. "Then we can have our chat."

Torres sat on the organ bench to wait.

CHAPTER 7

Torres, traveling alone now, slouched comfortably and let his rented landcar drive him along the plains highway. He took a bite out of a reconstituted red apple, watching the dry yellow fields which stretched away on either side of the rutted road. The morning was warm and clear, and sleek crows circled the plains.

The dash pixphone buzzed. Torres took one more bite of the apple

before flicking the respond toggle. "Hello."

The plump blonde android he'd met at the embassy ball showed on the little oval screen. "Mr. Peter Torres, please."

Torres took the apple from in front of his lean weather-beaten face.

"It's me, go ahead."

"Can you talk?"

"Yep."

"You-know-who wants to talk to you."

"Okay." Torres sat up slightly.

When the blonde girl robot ducked out of view part of the Mirabilis Agency computer was there on the screen. "Good morning, Peter. Couple things I wanted to go over with you." The voice grid gave a gentle rattle. "What's this about needing another thousand dollars in cash?"

"There seems to be an inflationary trend in the bribe area," said Torres. "And last night I even had to bribe an android."

"What does an android need money for?"

"He wants to teleport a professor of the pipe organ out from the Earth System," said Torres. "According to my maps there's a bank in the village near the Avalon Steppes Relocation Camp Number Twenty-six. Have the thousand dollars waiting for me there."

"Although I read the message you left with my answering mechanism last night, Peter," said the Mirabilis computer, "I'm not clear as to why you're journeying to that particular camp."

"According to my informant, our Beatty Dunnlin went out there

about three weeks ago to talk to a young guy named Joel Mercer. This was at the suggestion of Nancy Vespa."

A blue dot of light flashed on the computer's surface. "That reminds me, Peter. For a time there this morning the Murdstone Crime Bureau had you listed as a murder suspect."

"Oh, so?" said Torres, working toward the core of the apple.

"Why?"

"Seems the butler gave them your description and said you'd been at this poor girl's villa drinking at the time of the killing. Claimed you downed one hundred and eight very dry martinis."

"Who's going to believe a one-eyed andy."

"I applied some pressure and you're off the wanted list," said the computer. "Perhaps you should have reported the killing."

"That's against Mirabilis Agency policy, remember?"

Several random clickings came out of the computer. "You don't happen to know who did kill her, do you?"

"No. Somebody who didn't want her to talk about where she sent Dunnlin," said Torres. "I've been thinking this morning. This same somebody was pretty good at anticipating my moves. Why don't you nose around, see if my room at the inn was bugged. If so by whom."

"Peluda signed a treaty about not bugging Barnum nationals."

"Even so," said Torres.

"All right, I'm starting the bug check now," said the computer. "I take it you got a lead anyway, despite the unfortunate death of the

girl."

"Yeah, which is why I'm heading for the refugee camp. This Mercer is supposed to be working in the infirmary there."

"Oh, here. Look at this." The phone screen was momentarily filled with a picture of a flat-faced, curly-haired young man. "This is Mercer. I checked on him after you left his name last night. Mercer, Joel Gilbert. Age twenty-nine. Formerly employed by the government at the Trophologist Co-op Research Center. Resigned four months ago. Suspected of being idealistic. Etcetera, etcetera."

"What does the Trophologist Co-op do?"

"Food research. Experimenting with higher-yield crops, finding new synthetic substitutes for natural foods," explained the computer.

"The government on Barnum is funding about seventy-five percent of the operation."

Rows of decorative pines were showing on each side of the road now. A little squawk horn mounted on the dash began to make faint noises. "I'm just about to the village." Torres finished his apple, got in position to resume control of the vehicle. "Telex that money."

"Could you possibly get by on five hundred dollars?"

"No."

"All right. It will be there," agreed the computer.

"And did you fix it so I can visit the camp without too much frumus?"

"Yes, give them your name at the gate. You're to pretend you're a lieutenant with the

Intergalactic Red Cross. Maybe you can get some sticks of candy to give out to the children, to make your cover more believable. One last thing, Peter . . ."

"Yes?"

"Don't get too close to any more murders if you can help it."

Torres grinned. He turned off the phone and took over the steering wheel of the landcar.

A big hovering olive colored box dropped two ragged old men into the mud. "Here's your long-lost father," announced a speaker mounted on the roof of the hover-truck.

"Bullshit," said a thin woman of fifty. She was leaning in the doorway of a noryl dome-hut some ten feet from the low-hovering, territorial government truck. "Neither one of them is."

"For crying out loud," said the voice box. "They must be. At least one of them. Take a good look."

"My long-lost father isn't no raggedy-assed old fart," replied the frail woman.

A thin little boy of six ran from the hut and toward one of the two old men, who were getting to their feet in the soft mud. "Grandpa! Grandpa!" he cried.

"See?" said the truck.

"What's he know?" said the woman.

"Your child ought to know his own grandfather."

"He's not my child," said the frail woman. "He's that dopey kid you stuck me with last week."

"You're awfully critical of our relocation program," said the voice box. "Our Peluda government is working night and day around the clock to move you wretched people out of potential war zones and possible war zones and peripheral possible war zones and all you do is complain we haven't reunited you with your right relatives."

"As a matter of fact," said the woman, "you didn't even reunite me with the right husband. But the one you found is better than the old one so I won't bitch on that score."

Torres was on his way to the Camp Number 26 infirmary. He'd halted to avoid the falling grandfathers. He walked over to the muddy tangle and gave the little boy a reconstituted carrot, saying, "Here you go."

"This ain't no candy stick," said the little boy, muddy now himself.

"You need carrots more than candy." Torres had a sack of vegetables on his back and an improvised Red Cross band around one arm.

"Blah," said the little boy. "What kind of Red Cross are you? Where's my lousy candy stick? Or if not candy, how about a donut?" One of the ragged old men snatched the carrot away from the protesting boy.

Torres helped the old men up, giving them each vegetables.

"Compliments of the Intergalactic Red Cross." He continued on his way.

"Wouldn't you like to keep maybe one of these old fellows?" asked the hover truck of the frail woman.

Beyond more jagged rows of dome-huts stood the infirmary, a

cluster of larger domes.

Immediately inside the entrance a tank-shape medical robot, speckled with blood, was sitting in chair. "What's up?" he asked Torres.

"I'd like to see Joel Mercer."

"So would I," said the robot, rocking slightly in his tube chair.

"He works here, doesn't he?"

"Not since two days ago," answered the bloody machine. "Joel Mercer quit. Indicated he was disgusted with the setup hereabouts and was going off into the wilds to join the guerrillas." Torres went back outside and took a bite out of a turnip.

CHAPTER 8

Agent Brakeman shook his head negatively. A dented aluminum hooker was trying to sell him dusty cotton candy. The Murdstone Crime Bureau man was sitting, round-shouldered, in front of a four-legged peepshow machine in the lounge of the MechSex Pavilion in the steamy jungle town of Soneca. It was midday and the air in the rundown arcade was raw and humid.

"How about a kiss then?" suggested the orange-haired hooker. "On the cheek, three for a buck. On the mouth, one buck each. Or do you want to look at my complete price list?"

Shaking his head again, Agent Brakeman said, "No, thanks. Go away, Miss." He swung the eyepiece of the peepshow machine up to his eyes, watching again the animated pornographic film. The

animation wasn't bad, especially the little black dog.

The aluminum hooker moved away, her left knee joint rasping. She went to lean on one of the robot pianos across the nearly empty room.

When the arcade's revolving door ratcheted, Brakeman looked up. A bedraggled man in a street-colored suit tottered in, shoved a half dollar piece into a robot piano, requesting, "Play something frisky." The doors ratcheted again. A lanky young man in a white pullover suit entered. He was tan, blond, and grinning. He noticed the MCB agent, winked. Then he came over and sat at the machine next to his. "I almost didn't find this hole," he said, still grinning.

"I told you where it was."

"You said, all's you said, it was in the rundown part of town," the young man said. "I been wandering around Soneca most of an hour trying to decide which was the rundown section. The first place picked turned out to be the city hall."

Brakeman sneezed. "We're not in a whimsical business, Billy John." Grinning, Billy John Wengle said, "Not so. I find a good lot of whimsy on my daily rounds. Hey!" He waved at a copper-plated hooker who was standing in front of a wall of barrels. "Bring me a schooner of green ale, will you?"

"You shouldn't drink the stuff here," Agent Brakeman cautioned. Wengle swung his white-booted feet up on top of the waist-high peepshow machine. "You wanted me to report in?"

"That's why I set up this secret rendezvous, Bill John."

"Okay, good." Wengle took the mug of green ale from the wobbling android, slipping two silver coins into the slot between her breasts. "God bless." He sent the copper-plated hooker away with a pat on her hollow buttocks.

"Well?"

Wengle sipped at his ale. "It's a lot better than the brew at the hotel Barnum News Synd has us booked in."

"I want to know how you're progressing."

"All's I can say is—" Wengle broke off, then paused to drink once more. "All's I can say is, I'm not making much progress with Peggy Freed at all."

"I don't care about that."

Wengle's light fuzzy eyebrows jumped high. "No? Monitor Seames told me you're always asking after footage of her in the sack with that big greaser."

"Careful who you slur," cautioned the MCB agent. "The best undercover man is one who doesn't attract attention."

"You say." Wengle swished a mouthful of ale from left cheek to right. "Well, as far as the knock-off is concerned, we're right on schedule."

"Caution. Use a little caution, Billy John."

Wengle smiled. "Oh, yes. Sorry. Well, our little insurgency control project is whizzing right along. We'll move on to Acorda tomorrow, meaning I can't have any more of these whimsical secret meetings with you, because Mazda's people will contact us there. In fact, they may have a watch on Peggy and me already."

"Nobody followed you here?"

"How? Nobody follows me I don't want following me. All's I'm telling you is, keep away from now on."

"I've got a heavy enough case load as it is," said Brakeman. "I don't intend, or have the time, to nursemaid you. But I want to make certain this thing is going smoothly. I think Frambosa exaggerates the danger from Mazda, but if he wants him done in, we'll do him in."

"Everything is going lovely," the blond young man assured him. "Peggy thinks I'm merely a gifted young cameraman, even if she won't as yet visit the old sack with me."

"Don't let your romantic interests get in the way," warned Brakeman. "We planted you with the local Barnum News people over a year ago, just hoping for a chance like this."

"Fear not. I won't screw up." Wengle finished the ale, wiped green foam from his lips. "Anymore advice?"

Brakeman stroked his elbows, frowning at the blond young man.

"No. No, you can go, Billy John. I probably won't see you until afterward, so good luck."

"Don't feel glum." Wengle swung his feet to the floor, tossed his empty schooner toward the copper-plated hooker. "I'm going to do the job and get out free. I might even score with Peggy on the side. Bye."

The android missed the flung glass and it smashed on the floor. Wengle grinned as he pushed out of the rundown arcade.

Brakeman watched the revolving doors until they were still. Facing the peepshow viewer he pressed his fingers to his cheeks, sniffing.

The viewer began to make a very faint blipping sound. Glancing around, Agent Brakeman reached under the body of the machine, inserting his forefinger in a concealed whorl lock. The blipping subsided. A panel in the underside of the machine slid open and an earjack-mike dropped into the Crime Bureau agent's hand. He inserted the jack in his ear, put his eyes to the view piece.

Monitor Seames had replaced the dirty cartoon "Well, how's the weather out there?"

Brakeman took the combination jack and mike from his ear and said into it, "Lousy. Now what have you got for me?"

"Anything exciting happening around there at the MechSex Pavilion?" asked Seames. "I find the notion of our having a concealed receiver-transmitter in a place like that to be moderately interesting."

Brakeman took the jack out and said into it, "Report, will you, Seames?"

"You sound all stuffed up," observed the thin Seames. He was holding a sheaf of fax paper in his mechanical hand. "I thought you ought to know about this. Peter Torres is still working on the Dunnlin problem."

Brakeman took the jack out of his ear and said into it, "How can he? I made certain the trail ended."

"Not quite," said Seames. "He's apparently on to this Joel Mercer fellow, the one who gave Dunnlin his first lead. Torres was out at

Relocation Camp Number Twenty-six this morning asking for Mercer."

"Joel Mercer. We should have fixed him, too."

"Well, now Mercer isn't there anymore. Torres didn't get to talk to him at all. The word is Mercer took off for the wilds to join Tio Mazda's bunch."

Brakeman took out the earjack and said into it, "The simplest thing, I'm afraid," he continued slowly, "the simplest thing is to stop Torres. Before he goes any further something accidental looking will have to happen to him."

"You don't want to try the same thing as was used on Dunnlin?"

"Lord, no," said Brakeman. "Do you have a location fix on Torres?"

"He's heading your way, according to the last report we have, driving a cardinal red landcar."

"Coming toward Soneca is he?"

"I'd guess he's eventually going to head into the jungle to look for Joel Mercer."

Brakeman said, "He'll have to have an accident. Good-bye." He reconcealed the earjack and closed the panel. The peepshow machine switched back to normal.

Brakeman sat and watched the end of the pornographic cartoon. The little black dog did not reappear.

CHAPTER 9

Torres was eleven miles along the detour route to the town of Soneca when he saw the naked girl by the roadside. He set aside the reconstituted celery stalk he'd been eating and slowed his vehicle.

Twilight, a muddy brown color, was filling in the forest at the girl's back. She was young, about eighteen, and tall. Her dark hair was pulled back and held by a single scarlet ribbon. Her left breast was a quarter inch higher than her right. "Help, the leopard!" she cried.

Stopping his rented cardinal red car some six or seven feet from the pretty undressed girl, Torres lowered the window. "Beg pardon?"

"The leopard," repeated the girl, running across the dusty bypass road to him. "He tore all my clothes off and now he's chasing Father round and round the dining salon."

Torres reached his spare pullover jacket out of the rear seat, handed it out to the naked girl. "Dining salon?"

"Over there, over there." The girl ignored the proffered coat. "It's Togo and he's gone completely blooey I think." Her left breast bobbed two inches higher than the right when she waved.

Torres noticed lights glowing back in the dusky pine woods. A low scatter of square pseudowood buildings had a sign over them in dim light strips announcing: *de Wilda's Animal Farm and Restaurant*.

He swung the landcar over to the side of the road, the girl trotting anxiously alongside. "Togo is your leopard?" he asked.

"He's a cyborg leopard in point of fact," explained the pretty naked brunette, clapping her hands together excitedly. "He's gotten into so many fights with the other beasts that we've had to replace all kinds of things with synthetic parts. Right this very minute he's probably

devouring Father! Please hurry."

Torres drew the blaster pistol out of his right shoulder holster, transferred it to his right hand "Okay, I'll come and have a look."

"Thank heavens." The girl took the jacket now and tugged it over her bare shoulders. "Our road is so little frequented I didn't expect help so soon."

"How long has Togo been chasing your father?"

"Since right after he broke out of his cage in the main dining room and tore off my clothes." The girl caught Torres's arm and pulled him into the darkening woods with her. "Father has caged animals all around the dining room—for atmosphere."

"Does that attract many customers?"

"No," admitted the girl as they ran toward the lopsided wood buildings a hundred yards away, "Though we did a little better before they built the new road to Soneca. Thank heavens you had to take the detour."

Torres's left eye narrowed; a thin line shot out from it and across his weathered face. "Yes," he said, "it's providential." From inside the animal farm came mixed animal roarings.

At the top of the flight of swayback wood steps the girl halted. "I don't know what we're liable to encounter in there now. Would you go in first?"

His eye narrowed further, then opened wide. "Sure." Torres turned the brass knob, pushing the door. It swung inward. A dim room, dim as the twilight outside, showed across the threshold.

Torres went in and stepped suddenly sideways, but he didn't quite

avoid the swung pipe he'd sensed swishing toward his head. It snapped hard against his neck, then cracked again, harder, against his wrist. His pistol dropped to the hardwood floor of the main dining room and he fell toward it.

Torres made a clutching motion, caught somebody's sleeve. Something ripped as he hit the floor, spread eagle, among the dingy white tables.

One more whack came from the pipe, hitting where his skull and neck met. It made him bite his tongue and give up the notion of rising immediately.

"All's I hope," said a voice behind him, "is that this looks sure enough like an accident. Seems too bizarre for my tastes, but orders is orders."

Torres felt his pistol grip digging into his sternum, but he couldn't make his hand retrieve it. He got his head to turn with a mechanical-sounding creak. A white figure was across the room opening a cage set in the wall of the deserted restaurant.

Torres's head wouldn't stay up. When he got it raised again the white figure was gone and a large yellow leopard was jumping cautiously from the open cage. Squinting, Torres watched the animal land on the smooth pseudowood. Above the cage a faintly lit sign said: *Togo. So tame your kids can feed him table scraps.*

"Oh, so?" muttered Torres.

The leopard was loping, nails clacking on the flooring, over toward him, zigzagging around the tables.

Torres grunted, got himself up to a sitting position. He made a

yawning inhalation of breath and reached into his left holster for his other pistol. He had it almost out when the leopard hit him full in the chest with its front paws, one of which felt like it was made of metal.

The new pistol spun away. Trying to wrestle the animal, Torres felt something on its arched back—something smooth and about the size of a yo-yo.

Torres made a guess the object was a parasite computer. Placed on the usually mild-mannered Togo to make sure he devoured Torres. Torres jammed his left elbow into the powerful cyborg animal's snout, got bitten with sharp vinyl teeth. With his right hand Torres jerked out the same diamond drill he'd loaned Terranova for use on the berserk tennis pro.

Kicking the big leopard in where he figured a leopard's private parts ought to be, Torres clicked the drill to whirring. He jabbed it twice, not able to see the yo-yo-size target, and then felt the bit connect with the parasite computer. The attachment ceased to function with a huge sound like a room full of malfunctioning refrigerators.

Togo shook his head twice, then licked at Torres's nose. He purred heavily, rolled onto his back and indicated he wanted his stomach rubbed.

Torres patted the now-amiable cyborg leopard; then stood. He gathered up his two fallen pistols, reholstered them, listening as he did so. Across the room a door closed, followed by the sound of running feet down wooden steps and into underbrush.

Apparently they weren't going to make another try now.

Torres noticed Togo poking at something with his real front paw. He patted the leopard's head and picked the thing up. It was a coat button with a twist of white thread attached to it. Putting the button into his trouser pocket, Torres carefully left the dining room of the animal farm.

There was darkness all around now; no sign of the girl or of anyone else. Torres moved through the new dark to his landcar.

Determining no one had fiddled with the machine, Torres got in and drove on.

The aged bellboy gave Torres a shove. "Plenty of room," he assured him.

The six chubby men already in the grillwork elevator shuffled and shifted, making room for Torres in the cage.

The plump man to Torres's right was clutching a long thin black suitcase to his middle. "Merle isn't here yet," he said as the bent old bellboy reached for the start button.

"He's probably out sniping at the rabble," said a wheezing fat man who was pressed against the rear wall of the elevator. His long thin black suitcase was mashing into his chubby face.

"He hadn't ought to do that," said the plump man next to Torres. "It spoils the team spirit which is so essential to our work."

"You know how Merle is," said another chubby man. "He's a loner at heart."

"Going up," announced the old blue-uniformed bellboy.

The ornate grillwork doors closed halfway, then caught on the handle of one of the chubby men's long thin black suitcases.

"Ooops," apologized the chubby man, jerking the suitcase clear.

The chubby man on Torres's right grinned up at him. "You a witness?"

"To what?"

"Didn't you know the Starvation Commission is holding hearings here in Soneca all this week?"

"No."

"Well, they are. The six of us, seven counting Merle who's off fooling around with his rifle and doing things he's not supposed to really do, are all witnesses." "We're from over in Acorda," explained the chubby man who'd pulled in his long thin suitcase so the elevator could begin its climb. "Perhaps you've heard tell of us—the Acorda Seven?"

"I don't keep up with the local music scene," Torres informed them.

"Ha, ha," said several of the chubby men.

"We're not musicians," said the man on Torres's right. "We're a firing squad. The Acorda

Seven. They mention us in all the public execution stories filed from this area." "I'm not an execution fan either."

"You never can tell about fame, eh, fellows?" said one of the chubby men. "Here we've publicly executed—what is it?—eighteen vicious enemies of the territory, and this gentleman, who looks to be otherwise bright and well informed, has never even heard of us."

"It's only seventeen," corrected the plump man next to Torres.

"Don't go starting that business about Professor Potter again. He

certainly counts. We all agreed to include him in our total tally."

"No, we didn't. At least I sure did not."

"You and Merle are getting more and more counter-group every day."

"It isn't counter-group to be forthright. After all, Professor Potter had a fatal heart attack and collapsed on the cobblestones. All our shots went clean over him and sizzled the courthouse wall. I don't think we should score that."

The elevator stopped and the bellboy beckoned Torres to follow him out. The bent old man's key ring rattled as he clutched it out of a uniform pocket. "I'd like to get into that fine of work, the execution business, but the old peepers are too far gone. You have to be able to see from the firing line to the execution wall. It's a young man's world for sure." He came to a fluttering halt at a door marked 14B, got it open, threw Torres's small suitcase across the threshold. "Hope you enjoy your stay at the Soneca Plaza. Don't bother to tip me. It's added onto your bill. Nighty night."

Inside the narrow-roomed, pastel-colored suite, Torres went into the bathroom compartment to get a closer look at what the cyborg leopard had done to him. He found he wasn't badly mauled.

He was changing into a new pullover tunic when the pixphone buzzed. When his head emerged from the neck hole, Torres looked around for the phone. Tracking the buzz he located it under the aircolumn bed, next to a half-full bottle of plum brandy. Setting the instrument on a pseudomarble table and, blowing the dust off the screen, he clicked the answer switch. "Hello."

"Shall I avert my eyes?" asked the Mirabilis Agency computer.

"From what?"

"You're alone then?"

"I was with some of the boys on the firing squad a few minutes ago, but they went on up to the twentieth floor."

"I'm alluding to Peggy Freed," said the field boss computer.

"Why do you expect she's with me?"

"I just recently learned she and her cameraman are registered in the Soneca Plaza. When I couldn't reach you earlier I assumed you were with her and . . ." The computer noticed Torres's grin. "If you haven't been in touch with her as yet, Peter, I'd suggest you refrain. I don't relish the idea of the Barnum News Synd tromping all over our private affairs. You look a little bedraggled, by the way."

"I was set upon by a leopard."

Two tiny yellow lights flickered on for a second on the Mirabilis computer's face. "Now they're trying to kill you. Instead of keeping away from any further murders, as I suggested, you're getting closer."

"You'll be happy to hear I prevented them from actually murdering me."

"Of course, of course," said the computer. "Excuse it if Mirabilis makes me play the Dutch uncle with you, Peter. Now then, who exactly tried to murder you?"

"I don't know yet." Torres fished out the sleeve button he'd found at the sideroad animal farm.

"All I have to go on at the moment is this."

The computer said, "I don't like little bitty clues."

Torres pulled his pullover the rest of the way on. "What about my room back at the inn in

Frambosaville?"

"It was indeed bugged," said the computer, "which makes me very angry."

"Know who did it?"

"You may be embarrassed to learn where they had the device hidden, Peter. In the rigging of your hammock, indicating every time you and—"

"Who planted it?" Torres cut in.

"We can't be certain," replied the computer. "Judging from the make of the thing and the way it was installed, I'd guess the Murdstone Crime Bureau is involved."

"MCB, huh?"

"They're not supposed to do anything like this. I haven't yet lodged a formal complaint because

I don't want to have to explain what you're up to."

Torres sat down on the soft floating bed. "How about this room here?"

"I had a free-lance agent, posing as a maid, clear that room an hour ago. It's not bugged, Peter."

"She didn't do a very good job of tidying up."

"He," said the computer. "The best I could do in the Soneca vicinity

on short notice was a female impersonator. But he's supposed to be very reliable."

Torres nodded. "I missed contacting Joel Mercer. According to the people at the camp, he's taken off to join up with Tio Mazda's guerrilla army. I came on here to our prearranged meeting spot to see if you had any notions about how I can get together with Mazda."

"Whatever you do, don't accompany that Peggy Freed girl on her interview," warned the computer. "Hold on a sec." The machine commenced making a low bumping hum. After almost sixty seconds it said, "According to my sources, your old chum, Booker McCrystal, should be able to help you—for a fee. He'll be arriving over in Acorda, not far from you, tomorrow morning sometime with that touring opera of his, *The Dancing Plowman*. Have you been seeing any of the reviews on that? Anderson of the *Steppes Gazette* gave it only two—"

"Okay, I'll talk to Booker tomorrow. Anything else you have for me?"

"Not that I can think of," the Mirabilis Agency computer said. "Let me request once again, speaking mostly for the humans back in the home office on Barnum, that you go easy on the money. For myself, I hope nobody else tries to murder you. And, please, keep clear of that girl reporter. Good night."

Torres waited until the image of his field boss faded from the screen. Then he punched the hotel desk button. "Connect me with Miss Peggy Freed's room, please."

The clerk with the lopsided mustache smiled with apology. "I didn't realize Miss Freed was an intimate of yours, Mr. Torres."

"What room is she in?"

"Since you are friends you will no doubt be saddened by the news I am about to impart to you," continued the clerk.

"What's wrong?"

"The course of true love never runs smooth, they tell us," said the clerk. "Sometimes we miss each other by mere seconds, sometimes we are like ships that pass in the night"

"I appreciate both your philosophy and your poetry," said Torres in an even voice. "Where's Peggy Freed?"

"She and her partner checked out a half hour ago, sir. I trust my news will not give you a heavy heart, nor cause you to think of us at the Soneca Plaza with else but—"

Torres broke the connection. He swung up and stretched out on the floating bed, watching the pastel ceiling. It was dusty.

CHAPTER 10

Torres found Booker McCrystal behind an upright piano. The long black embassy man came up slightly out of his crouch to shake hands. Another high window in the meeting hall broke, another rock flew in from the yellow morning outside.

"This rehearsal is going frighteningly bad," said McCrystal.

Up above him on the small elevated stage a half dozen singers were ducked in back of a large red robotractor.

"I've been talking," said Torres as he dropped into the orchestra pit, "with my boss at Mirabilis. I called him when I hit Soneca last night. He suggested I come on here to Acorda and see you."

"Don't step on any shards of glass," cautioned the black man.

"They're awesomely behind the times in Acorda, still insist on using some kind of near-real glass in their windows. Yes, I heard from your boss computer. He's awfully nice, isn't he?"

Torres pulled the piano stool over near the ducking man, sat on it. Its clawfoot wheels crackled over broken bits of glass. "I want to contact someone who's with Tio Mazda's guerrilla army, Booker."

"So I hear. Listen, Pete, do you think that's where our poor misplaced Beatty Dunnlin is? Off in some devastatingly remote part of the jungle?"

"You're certain you don't know?"

"Pete, I've told you every single thing I do know." He rested long lean fingers on his narrow chest. "I was drastically upset when I heard about that poor Mrs. Vespa being slain and your being, albeit momentarily, involved. She was the person poor Beatty went calling on, I assume."

"Yes, and she sent him on to a guy who now seems to have joined Mazda."

McCrystal moistened his lips, smiling faintly, "Your horribly amiable computer boss promised me three hundred dollars for this new tip, Pete. I'd ask for more but I'm so momentarily overworked on this *Dancing Plowman* tour I simply haven't the time or strength to bicker over money."

Five more large rocks, followed by two bricks came sailing into the hall from the street surrounding the Acorda Municipal Meet Hall and Theater, "Here," said Torres. When everything had stopped falling he handed McCrystal three one-hundred-dollar bills.

From the street outside came cries of, "Food not songs!" and, "Screw the opera!"

The long thin Barnum embassy man pocketed the cash in his two-piece rehearsal suit. "We've run into a lot, an awful lot, of anti-intellectualism so far. It's gigantically distressing," he said. "And as far as food goes, we give away dozens and dozens of jelly donuts at each performance."

"My boss tells me you have a contact with some of Mazda's people."

McCrystal shook his head. "Don't go saying monstrously unsettling things like that. I made it quite clear to your computer when he contacted me very, very late last evening—I was still awake and revamping the opening duet to the potato—I made it quite clear, Pete, I am in no way connected with any group which openly opposes the government of Peluda Territory. After all, our Barnum government has vital oil and mineral agreements with the Junta."

"However . . ."

"However, I do happen to have a cousin here in Acorda. He's a fantastically liberal fellow who happens to have close ties with Mazda. I've arranged for you to talk to him later this morning."

"Good," said Torres. "There's something else I'd like to know."

Smiling thinly again, McCrystal said, "Since I'm fond of you, Pete,

I'm always willing to give you a little additional info at no extra cost."

"Somebody tried to kill me yesterday, off in the woods," said Torres. The protesting outside was silent for a moment and a hollow kind of quiet filled the hall. "Have you heard anything about that?"

McCrystal reached out to touch Torres's knobby wrist for an instant.

"No, I haven't. That's dreadful news. Do you have any idea who made the attempt?"

"Nothing substantial," answered Torres. "Mirabilis went over the rooms I used back in Frambosaville. They got there soon enough to find a concealed bug in the rigging of one of the hammocks. The type of bug is one favored by the Murdstone Crime Bureau, I understand."

McCrystal was turned to face the row of small smashed windows across the room. "The militia has arrived to disperse the rabble. That's why they aren't being raucous anymore. Stun guns." His narrow head bobbed. "Don't think I'm completely indifferent to these poor people, but it's been grindingly difficult to put on this opera with all this rioting in the streets. Besides which, I'm almost certain I picked the wrong tenor to thaw."

Torres said, "Could the Murdstone Crime Bureau be involved in Dunnlin's disappearance?"

Shrugging, McCrystal said, "They could be involved in almost anything, Pete. They're majestically intrusive, as I've told you before."

"Would they go so far as to kill me?"

"If they could make it appear to be an accident," replied the black man. "Was this attempt on your life intended to look accidental?"

"In a bizarre way, yes."

"It might well be MCB then." McCrystal sighed "I really do wish Barnum would put its foot down. The present Junta is getting much much too uppity." After one further sigh, he said, "I have to get back to the show now. Our little tractor number is still awfully ragged around the edges." He stood up from behind the piano.

"You're to be at an archly quaint little bistro known as Harpoon Louie's—some sort of Earth-System-style place, I gather—in an hour and a half. Walk right up to the bar and ask if Barney has the merchandise for you. If Barney has the merchandise, Pete . . . it's an identifying phrase."

"So I figured."

"Are you sure you wouldn't like a couple of freebie tickets for tonight's performance? You ought to catch us now before we move on into the cold country where we'll have to do our little opera wearing warm coats and mittens."

"I may be in the jungle by tonight."

"If my Cousin Barney is as effective as he should be you probably will. I also hope—" A final brick came through a window and clunked against the side of McCrystal's head. "There's somebody they failed to stun."

"Unless the militia is throwing bricks, too." Torres left the piano stool and walked back out into the bright morning.

CHAPTER 11

They were all inside a whale. Peggy Freed, wearing a short-skirted green suit, was angry and striding back and forth by the whale's vinyl ribs.

"It isn't that I'm not happy to see you, Pete," she said finally, her eyes on the floor of the whale-shaped back room of Harpoon Louie's restaurant.

Torres, his arms folded, was slouched in a driftwood chair. He smiled at the pretty red-haired girl, said nothing.

Perched on a barrel and toying with a candle-shaped lamp, Billy John Wengle said, "All's I can say is, Peg, we ought to leave the matter up to Mr. del Rio." He winked at Torres, giving a who-can-understand-women shrug. He was wearing a forest-pattern jumpsuit with fawn boots.

Del Rio was a middle-size brown young man in a dusty businessman's suit. "I've heard of Torres," he said. "So has Tio. Even though you're a mercenary, Torres, you're a liberally oriented one. Besides which, McCrystal vouches for you."

He was referring to Booker McCrystal's cousin, who'd met Torres up in the main room of the seafood restaurant and sent him down here. Torres had found Tio Mazda's lieutenant meeting with Peggy and Wengle.

The pretty girl reporter came over to stand behind Torres's low chair. She rested her slim fingers on his shoulders, saying quietly, "I really have missed you these past few days, Pete. The thing is . . .

well, I've already told you how important this particular interview is to me. I want to do it alone and undistracted."

"I can stay ten paces behind while we go through the jungle," said Torres.

"Couldn't you find some other way, or some other time, to get to Tio's camp?"

"Nobody told me you and your," Torres paused, glancing at the blond Wengle, "cameraman would be here. I came to Harpoon Louie's to meet Booker's cousin Barney."

The whale's wide jaws creaked open and a small solid man in a long white apron looked in between the vinyl teeth. "Are any of you going to order lunch? I usually reserve the whale for bigger parties than this, you know."

"Go away, Harpoon," suggested del Bio. "You've been paid for the use of the room already."

"My impression," said Harpoon Louie, "was that there'd be a clandestine meeting *plus* lunch."

"Good enough," said Wengle, grinning. "Bring me a tankard of green ale."

"That isn't lunch," said the proprietor, stepping in onto the whale's tongue. "The lunch you got to start with tossed green salad or the soup of the day. Today's soup is New England Clam Chowder—and don't ask me to stop and explain to you what New England is. I've got my hands full already with a bunch of drunk librarians up in the Squid Boom. I will say the chowder tastes a little queer today and I'd take the salad. The endive I teleport in fresh every day from

Venus."

"Harpoon," replied del Bio, "go away and leave us."

"Not that I'd clear that much of a profit on only four lunches," said Harpoon Louie as he backed out over the teeth. "I lavish too much on my lunches." He left and the whale's mouth snapped shut.

"I could have used that ale," said Wengle. To del Rio he added, "Can we trust that guy?"

"Yes," said Tio Mazda's lieutenant. Peggy knelt on one knee beside Torres. "Pete, you won't be mad if I don't have any time for . . . well, for anything romantic out in the wilderness. Until I get this interview with Tio wrapped up I'm simply not going to allow myself any distractions at all." She rested slightly arched fingers on his knobby hand. "I really do care for you an awfully great deal, but I don't want to get sidetracked now of all times. Do you see?"

"Sure," answered Torres.

"That's really all I'm anxious about," said the girl. "When I first saw you come bursting in on us I was unsettled. I have to admit the first thing I thought was, 'Here comes Peter Torres to spoil everything!' " She stroked his wrist and his sharp knuckles, then stood. "I guess I don't have any objections," she said in a louder voice.

"Great," said Wengle. "From what I've heard about Torres he's going to be a lot of fun to have along on our trek." He grinned. "I'm looking forward to being out in the woodlands with you, Torres."

"So am I," said Torres, who'd recognized Wengle as the man who'd helped ambush him back at the animal farm.

CHAPTER 12

Up ahead in the twilight jungle loomed a five-story office building. Bright yellow and scarlet birds were fluttering down through the thinning day to roost on the window ledges. A flagpole which protruded out of a fourth-floor cornice was now running in a tattered and unfamiliar flag.

"Two coups back," explained del Rio, pointing, "the king of Peluda, which is what the dictator was calling himself that season, ordered the capital office buildings erected out here. The idea was the capital city would eventually transfer out to the jungles, thereby expanding the territory. This one structure is as far as that notion got."

Wengle, who was second in their procession along the narrow trail, reached over his shoulder and fork fingered another plastic bubble of ale out of his open knapsack. "Who they got taking their flag in at sundown?"

"The building is run by two miniaturized computers, powered by solar energy. Even though it's long abandoned most of it still works," said the guerrilla. "We'll camp there tonight."

"Good-o," grinned Wengle. "I'll appreciate a little touch of civilization after this all-day hike in the woods." He unscrewed the ale bubble's cap with his teeth, drank.

A few yards to the rear of the blond cameraman

Peggy was walking close beside Torres, who was carrying her pack along with his. The slim red-haired girl exhaled by blowing her

breath up over her upper lip. "Have you noticed technically oriented people like Billy John are more cheerful than we creative types?"

"That's a cheerful white suit he's wearing," said Torres, who still had the button from Wengle's sleeve in his pocket.

"Not too very appropriate for the wilds." Peggy was wearing a short-skirted khaki dress and tan knee boots. Insects had bitten little red dots into the back sides of her knees. Bending to rub at the newest bite, the girl continued, "I suppose we have at least another day of all this before we get to Tio's camp."

"According to del Rio."

"I'm glad you're along."

"Is sentiment winning out over duty?"

"No, I mean so you can see what I go through to get my stories," answered the lovely slender girl "Lots of people imagine reporters sit around with their feet on the desk, smoking cigars and tearing news off the telex."

"No," said Torres, "I've never imagined you sitting around smoking a cigar."

"I suppose," said Peggy, "when I'm ten years older I'll be as cynical as you are, Pete." She reached out to stroke his leathery hand. "I really do like you, though. I feel very secure with you around."

"I'm good at carrying things, too."

"Oh, is my pack getting too heavy?"

"No, it's not any heavier now than it was when I started carrying it."

"Even with the latest compact interviewing gear," said Peggy, "it

makes quite a load. I left most of my cosmetics and such back at the hotel, but I really thought I ought to bring some extra food and a few things to read."

They had reached the abandoned office building. Waist-high yellow grass had taken over the plaza fronting the high cylindrical building, yellow grass and high thick-veined ferns. Vines and flowering thorn bushes grew up the cream-colored sides of the building. Lights were popping on in about half the windows. From inside drifted the sound of slow and gentle canned music.

Del Rio stopped still, watching the building. He nodded to himself, his hand resting on the belt of his holster. He knelt in the grass, lost from sight for a moment. He bobbed up again, sniffed at the darkening day. "Yes, it's safe," he said. "As I sensed earlier, no one has been here in weeks.

We'll use the ground floor to camp in. It will be more comfortable than the outdoors."

"I wonder if there's a working shower stall in there anywhere," Peggy said to Torres.

Wengle chuckled back at her. "I spotted a municipal fountain off over there, Peg. Why not settle for a midnight dip?"

The redheaded girl shook her head, taking hold of Torres's hand again.

"I didn't mean to suggest the two of us would share the dip, dear Peg," said the grinning blond young man. "Golly no. All's I was thinking of was your comfort. I'm a great respecter of privacy." He winked at Torres.

When del Rio's booted foot touched the slight ramp leading to the empty building, the wide front doors slid aside. Beckoning the other three to follow, the guerrilla said, "There's an employee's cafeteria at the rear of the first floor. Perhaps Peggy would like us to take the food supplies there so she can prepare the evening meal."

"I don't know any more about cooking than he does." Peggy said close to Torres. "I'm a working journalist not somebody's domestic andy."

"I'll come along and help you tell the mechanisms what to do," Torres offered.

"Do you know all about culinary things?"

"Just the other day I bribed a *cordon bleu* robot."

"Listen," said Peggy. "I've been thinking, Pete."

"Yeah?"

"Well, if there are rooms here with doors you can lock and privacy . . . well, we could spend the night together, and it probably wouldn't get in the way of anything. There's no use being a working journalist every single minute of the day, is there?"

"Nope," agreed Torres. "Even those guys with the cigars fool around now and then."

"So you'll come and see me after dinner," said Peggy.

Torres nodded in the twilight.

The grinning Wengle hailed Torres when he was about to turn down the corridor leading to the room del Rio had assigned to Peggy. The guerrilla himself was up at the front of the building, sitting on the

hall flooring and watching the night jungle.

"Hey, buddy boy," called Wengle. "I been exploring and I've come across some great stuff down below."

Torres halted, turned to face the white-suited young man. "Down below?"

"There's a whole entire floor underneath this one," said Wengle.

"Must of been used as a municipal garage; all kinds of automatic car equipment down there. The niftiest part is there's a couple of halftrack landcars. I don't see why we can't use them, instead of going the rest of the way on foot. All this walking is mighty rough on Peg."

Torres watched the grinning cameraman. "You want me to come down to the basement with you and look at the halftracks?"

"You got it. I guess we should be able to get one running in an hour or so," Wengle said, winking. " 'Less you got something else on tap."

"Nope."

"Good enough." Wengle led him to a dim ramp which curved downward. "I'll go first and guide you." He trotted on, disappearing around a bend.

Torres dropped to his hands and knees, coming around the turn far to the right and low to the ground.

The electric lug wrench Wengle swung whished through shadows, missing Torres entirely. "Son of a gun, but you are the hardest guy to make an accident for." He grunted, charged at Torres, swinging again with the heavy silver wrench.

Torres dodged and spun away, crossing the threshold of the underground garage.

"I got me that halftrack all set to accidentally roll over you while we are looking at it," Wengle told him. He came for Torres wide legged. "Don't you go frustrate my plans."

Torres backed, hopped over a robot lube rack sunk in the floor. The rack's on-light was glowing red in the wall behind it.

As Wengle made a leap for him, Torres said, "Up!" The robot rack obeyed, rising straight up out of the floor. Its right front track took the blond cameraman full in the chin, lifting him four feet above the ground before bouncing him loose.

The blond young man hit the hard pitted floor with a whapping slap. Torres had his hand in his right shoulder holster. He whipped out his palm-size truth kit and ran for Wengle. Straddling the slumped Wengle, Torres smacked a small truth-node against the back of his head. The silver jelly bean burrowed through Wengle's blond hair to his skull. Standing away, Torres said, "Now you're going to answer all my questions. Understand?"

"Yes, sir, I surely do." Wengle sat up, folding his hands in his lap. His grin was slightly blurred, his eyes were open too wide.

"Who are you working for?"

"The Murdstone Crime Bureau, sir," replied Wengle, controlled now by the truth-node.

"Whose idea was it to kill me?"

"My orders come from Agent Brakeman."

"Where is he?"

"I don't right know, sir. He moves around an awful lot."

"Why were you supposed to kill me?"

"That was all Agent Brakeman's idea, sir. So as to stop you from finding Beatty Dunnlin. See, my original job isn't even you. I was originally assigned to infiltrate—"

Torres cut in: "Where is Dunnlin?"

"I'm not altogether sure, sir. But I figure they done something with him over across the black mountains, at the Trophologist Co-op. From what scuttlebutt I've picked up I'd say that was a good guess."

"The food research center?"

Wengle's fuzzy grin broadened. "That's all you know. They been using the place as, mostly, a chemical biological warfare lab since even before Frambosa and his mob grabbed control of the territory. Before that the lab was at a university on this side of the black mountains, place they used to call Tech. As I recall it."

"What kind of CB work?"

"All kinds. They do do some piddling little food work, to show the Barnum officials who go out there on a tour, but it's mostly hidden CB facilities."

"Are they holding Dunnlin there?"

"I don't think so," said the truthful Wengle. "I think they used something on him and then got rid of him."

"Killed him?"

The young cameraman shook his head. "No, he's alive. I'm not

rightly sure where he is, though, sir."

"Who's in charge of the Co-op?"

"Dr. Orlando B. Nesperson."

"How can I get inside the place?"

"Well, sir, if you was a Barnum official you might get into the food part. The other part, I don't exactly know. They don't even tell me the passwords and all for entering. I'm truly sorry I can't help you there, sir."

Torres rubbed a sharp knuckle across his chin. "Why are you on this jaunt to interview Tio Mazda?"

"Not merely to kill you, sir. That was only a darn lucky coincidence," said the grinning Wengle. "Course, after that awful screwup at the animal farm I felt real sheepish about you. I told Brakeman it was too goofy an ambush to work, but he swore by it. He's got this real fondness for animals."

"Your main reason," reminded Torres.

"To kill Tio Mazda," replied Wengle. "MCB got me a job with the Barnum News Synd a year or so back—I'm actually a darn sharp cameraman, besides being a gifted assassin—figuring sooner or later Tio's ego would make him respond to the news service's requests for an exclusive interview. We worked the same trick with Generalissimo Anmar a couple years back."

Torres took a shuffling back step, then asked, "What about Peggy Freed?"

"I can't get to first base with that girl. I don't rightly know why."

"Does she know who you're really working for?"

"Heck no. She's too upright and career minded to sit still for an assassin on her team," said Wengle. "That girl, all she thinks about is news. And maybe perhaps you, sir, once in a while. Skinny ones are like that, if you want the truth. Plump girls are more passionate and they think about humping before they—"

"That's enough confessing for now," said Torres. "I'll turn you over to del Rio. You should make a valuable hostage."

"Indeed he will," said the guerrilla from the arched doorway.

"I didn't hear you," said Torres.

"Such was my intention. I appreciate your unmasking of this one."

"Peggy is okay," said Torres. "Let her have the interview with Tio Mazda."

Del Rio nodded. "I heard him put her in the clear." From a slash pocket in his trousers he took a coil of fine strong wire. "We'll tie him up and you can take back your truth button."

When Torres reached Peggy's room the girl said, "You look even more bunged up than usual, Pete. What happened?"

Torres put his hands on her shoulders. "I'll tell you in the morning," he said.

Peggy led him into the municipal office she was using as a bedroom. Her jungle-wear clothes were hanging on the several arms of a rusted stenorobot. She'd pushed some aluminum desks aside to form an alcove. Her knapsacks rested there, next to an inflated camping mattress. Toying with the belt of her midhigh robe, the lovely girl reporter asked, "Have you been in a brawl?"

"So to speak." He followed her to the edge of the mattress.

"Well, this is no time to be curious." She faced him, placing her palms against his cheeks. She kissed him, then inquired, "You weren't in a fight with del Rio, were you?"

Resting his hands on her buttocks, Torres answered, "Nope."

"Because he is my pass into the guerrilla camp after all. If you did something to turn him peevish it could screw up this whole business." She circled her arms around his neck, pressing her slim body against him.

"Your interview will go ahead as planned."

The pretty red-haired girl rubbed her pelvic region against his. After a quiet moment, she asked, "Who were you punching around? Billy John Wengle shouldn't be fighting, you know. He needs his hands to run the camera and recording equipment."

Torres undid the tied belt on her plyo robe. "Wengle won't be working for you anymore."

Peggy's eyes went wide. She stepped back from Torres. "Pete, you haven't killed my cameraman, have you?" The undone belt swung free, the short robe fell open.

"I'll tell you the entire story later," promised Torres.

Peggy stood silent, rocking on the ball of one foot. She said, "Yes, I'd best curb my reporter's curiosity." She moved close to him again, shrugging out of the robe. "Though I would like to know why you and Billy John got into a fight in the first place."

Slipping an arm around the now-naked girl, Torres lifted her up off

the office floor. He stepped onto the mattress with her and sat her down. He sat, too, turning his back to her. He tugged off his tunic. "Were you fighting over me?" asked the lovely undressed girl. "I don't see why. It's you I'm in love with, Pete."

Torres dropped his tunic down next to a knapsack. He hesitated a few seconds before removing his shoulder holsters. "Wengle is a paid assassin; he tried to kill me. We'll discuss the significances and ramifications of this new development much later."

Peggy leaned her head against Torres's bare back. "You're absolutely right, Pete." She moved one warm hand up and down along his ribs. "I've really missed being with you."

Torres bent forward to yank off first his left boot, then his right.

Locking her hands over his navel, the girl asked, "Could you just tell me now what sort of an assassin Billy John is? I mean, paid by whom?"

"MCB." Torres flung his boots away.

"MCB? You mean the Murdstone Crime Bureau?"

"That MCB, yes." Torres stretched out beside the girl, raised his knees in the air to pull off his trousers.

"Here, I'll do that," offered Peggy, shifting position. She grabbed his pants just above the knees and pulled hard. As the dusty trousers came down over his ankles, the girl asked, "But why would the Murdstone Crime Bureau want to kill you?"

"To keep me from finishing my job for Mirabilis." He gave a slight kick and his trousers dropped off.

Peggy hooked a forefinger in the waist of his all-season shorts, pulling down. "There's one other thing I'd like to know. Why is Billy John on this trip with me? I mean, he couldn't have known you were going to horn in."

"His primary job was to kill Tio Mazda. I'm simply a lucky coincidence."

The girl left the shorts tangled around Torres's knees. She sat up and away from him. "You mean Billy John was a complete fake, somebody planted with Barnum News?"

"That's right." Torres took off his own shorts.

Peggy shook her head, crossing her palms over her breasts. "That's awful, Pete. What will Tio

Mazda think of me now? Dragging some kill-crazy assassin into his midst. 'Hello, Mr. Mazda, I'm Peggy Freed, and this is my kill-crazy assassin assistant. He tagged along to kill you.' Boy, the whole job's gone up the flue."

Torres caught her bare shoulder and pulled her gently down beside him. Stroking her long hair, he said, "You're going to get your interview. Del Rio promises."

The naked girl popped up to a sitting position, poking a hand into Torres's side. "You mean del Rio already knows all about it? Pete, you should have tried to keep this a secret from him until I had a chance to smooth it over some."

"Del Rio walked in while Wengle was trying to kill me down in the cellar," said Torres. "I could have asked him to wait outside until the assassination attempt was over, but I didn't hear him come in."

The girl folded her arms and her breasts poked closer together.

"Here comes some famous Peter Torres cynicism," she said, looking away from him. "I don't think it's such an awfully big laugh that I'm practically branded as an accomplice of a mad-dog killer. On top of which, who's going to take my pictures now and run the voice machine?"

"You know how to do all that." Torres got hold of her shoulder again, but she wouldn't tilt.

"I suppose I can work all the equipment single-handed," admitted Peggy. "The thing is, I don't work at my top form with a lap full of gadgets." She allowed herself to be eased down to a horizontal position close beside Torres. Next to his ear she said, "Pete?"

"Yeah?"

"You know all about handling documenting and interviewing machinery. And you're going to be tagging along to Tio Mazda's encampment. So you could—"

"I'm not coming to the camp, though. I got a new lead from Wengle and I won't have to talk to any guerrillas after all."

Peggy rested a hand on his chest. "You could take a few days off from Mirabilis, couldn't you? You are pretty bunged up, you know. You could do with a vacation in the wilderness."

"Nope."

"Honestly, Pete, you're being very self-oriented."

Torres turned to her. "Enough shop talk."

The lovely girl sighed once more. "Very well. I don't want you to think I'm one of those career-happy harpies." She kissed him, then

glanced downward. "What happened to your erection?"

"I don't know," replied Torres. "I had it when we started."

CHAPTER 13

Snow was flickering all around Torres in the late afternoon. His rented aircruiser was jittery, fighting against the rising winds.

Torres looked down between his legs. The flooring of the airship was a transparent noryl plastic which showed him the snow-crusted black mountains below. Knocking knobby knuckles against the small robot navigator mounted on the control panel, Torres said, "I thought you predicted blue skies and gentle breezes over the Montanyas Negras area today."

"Apparently I erred," replied the navigation instrument in an apologetic metallic rasp.

The bright white snow increased, swirling round the see-through aircruiser.

"Prong, prong," said the navigator robot.

"Huh?" Torres was clutching the control rod.

The navigating mechanism was silent.

The phone rang.

"In a minute," said Torres, trying to keep his ship from losing altitude. The sharp black mountains, seemed to be sucking the aircruiser down.

The phone rang again.

Torres swung a hand out to click the dash pixphone on. "Yeah?"

"Am I speaking to Mr. Peter Torres, please?" asked the green phone company robot who quivered fuzzily on the phone screen. The cruiser gave a downward swoop, then swayed far to the left. The snow was heavier now, the flakes sticking to the clear surface of the ship.

"Peter Torres, please. I have a collect call."

"I'm Torres," Torres told the little oval screen.

"Will you accept the toll charges for a call from the Mirabilis Agency in Frambosaville?"

"Sure," said Torres as he got his ship climbing again.

The plump blonde girl android was on the pixscreen now. "How are you today, Mr. Torres?"

"Just wonderful. Yourself?"

The snow was piling up on his left-hand view window, cutting off sight of the thick spinning snow and the ragged mountains, which seemed much closer now.

"Androids are always about the same. Stand by for you know."

When the Mirabilis computer showed, Torres asked, "Why in the hell are you calling collect?"

"I really hate to, Peter, but that last thousand dollars you asked for has them upset in

Accounting back on Barnum," the compact computer told him "I thought it best to humor them for a bit. They still have three human bookkeepers."

The aircruiser plummeted again, bouncing and bouncing on the snow-cluttered gray air.

"Why don't you let me call you back," suggested Torres.

"Your face is looking odd, Peter. Are you ill?"

"Might be from tangling with Billy John Wengle night before last," said Torres, both knobby hands on the control rod.

"Would that make your face all greenish yellow?" asked the computer. "Oh, wait, it's my phone. There, you're looking much better."

The ship made two sharp bounces, then flipped suddenly far to the right. The robot navigator woke up to say, "Prong, prong, prong," and subsided into silence again.

"Listen, Peter," said the computer, "I understand flying conditions over that Montanyas Negras range can be very tricky. Perhaps you ought to pick an alternate route to the Trophologist Co-op. Have you thought of that?"

"Quite a bit in the last half hour," answered Torres, getting the ship level and on course. "Why are you calling?"

"Firstly," said the computer, "to tell you you'll have to get yourself inside that food research facility on your own. Think up one of your clever stratagems. They're not allowing anyone in now, no matter what kind of weight you throw around."

"What," asked Torres as his small cruiser plummeted again, "about the story I got out of Wengle?"

"A blank wall," replied the Mirabilis computer, "is what we've come up against there. I've been tracking that down ever since you called

from Acorda this morning. No one I can reach will admit there is any unauthorized chemical biological research being done at the Cop. Though Barnum's embassy people are being exceptionally circumlocutive about this. Peter, doesn't your friend Peggy Freed have anything on this? Barnum News sometimes has contacts we don't."

"No, she doesn't. And right now she's thinking exclusively about her interview with Tio Mazda. I left her in the wilds with del Rio and came back to Acorda to call you and hire this alleged flying machine."

"I fear you'll have to play it by—"

"Oops," said Torres.

The control rod jerked out of his grip. The cruiser, overcome by the heavy weather, began to fall straight down toward the black mountains.

"Peter?" asked the computer.

Torres was able to get a grip on the control rod a few hundred feet above the snow-blanketed plateau his cruiser was dropping waveringly toward.

He got the ship's nose up and held it level just as it hit the snow and rocks.

The aircruiser went grinding and scraping across the rocky plateau, scattering up great sprays of snow and ice. The pixphone screen cracked in half, popped out, fragmenting the image of the Mirabilis computer away into ragged bits.

The cruiser was stopping against the high black rocks, its front

crumpling. Torres let the various safety devices take care of him, hold him and cushion him.

While he got himself out of the piloting seat he said, "Mirabilis will probably bill me for this nitwit cruiser, too."

He reached under the seat for his emergency pack of food and supplies.

For a moment after he dropped out of the ruined ship Torres heard only the last metallic groans of the cruiser, mingled with the wind circling the sharp cliffs above and below the small plateau.

Gradually he became aware of chanting, a dozen voices, mixed and young, droning something.

When he had walked a few yards from the mangled cruiser he saw them. Fifteen lean, ragged, young people coming down a narrow pass in a black mountainside.

They stopped across the plateau, watching him, still chanting. They were carrying an assortment of broken-down gadgets and scraps of mechanisms. These they rattled while they chanted.

One of them, though, held a new blaster rifle. He detached himself from the chanting group, taking several steps nearer to Torres. He was a thin dark boy of nineteen in a frayed knit tunic and scuffed high boots. Smiling, he raised the rifle and pointed it at Torres.

"Come on over here, shithead," he suggested.

They had Torres at the midpoint of the single-file procession climbing up through the rocky pass. Eight of the ragged young people, a mix of boys and girls, were escorting him upward through the wind and snow. The rest of the chanting youths had stayed

behind with Torres's cracked-up ship. "I'd be glad to give you a hand with that pack," Torres said to the pudgy young man just behind him.

The pudgy boy was grunting, taking slow clomping steps in the thick snow. In his hands he lugged a heavy portable solar heat stove. On his back was Torres's knapsack. Inside the sack now were both of Torres's shoulder holsters, which the chanters had found on him. The pudgy boy didn't reply. He went on grunting uphill.

"Quiet in line there, shithead," ordered the thin dark boy. He was at the rear of the group, his rifle still pointing in the general direction of Torres.

Immediately ahead of him marched a frail girl of seventeen. She had pale blonde hair showing under a red knit cap. Her only garment was an overlarge khaki-colored overcoat, wrapped tight around her and tied with a length of plyo cord. Held in her dry weathered hands was the top portion of an electric cocktail shaker.

"I'm fond of you. I really like you. I think you're okay," she had been muttering to the mechanism. Turning her head very slightly, she asked Torres, "Whereabouts?"

"Huh?"

In a soft voice, which the hard wind almost kept from reaching him, the frail girl asked, "Whereabouts in the outside are you from?"

"I'm from off planet," answered Torres.

"Ah," said the girl. "Which?"

"Barnum."

"How are things on Barnum?"

"Probably more comfortable than they are hereabouts," said Torres.

"And more understandable."

A gust of wind slapped prickly snow in their faces, killing the girl's reply. "What don't you understand?" she asked.

"Who are you kids?"

"We got tired."

"Tired of what?"

"An assortment of things on the outside," answered the girl.

"Haven't you ever felt like that, tired of it, of everything?"

Torres shook his head. "Not lately, no. Where are you taking me?"

"To the next plateau. To the shrine."

"You've got a shrine up there?"

"It's not much of a shrine, compared to your big outside shrines, but it's a source of comfort and understanding. It helps you to relate to ___"

"Oof," cried the pudgy boy behind Torres. He'd tripped on a thrust of black rock, fallen face down in the snow.

Torres turned, reaching a hand toward him.

"Back off, shithead," said the lean dark boy with the blaster rifle. He came trotting up the narrow pass. "Get up, Cuz," he told the pudgy boy. When he reached his side he nudged his spine with the rifle barrel.

"Crap," said Cuz in the snow. "I got to lug this dumb stove I'm supposed to be learning to relate to, and on top of which I got to tote this gonzo's kit and kaboodle."

"Don't you start sounding like a shithead." The dark boy unstrapped Torres's backpack, grabbed it free of Cuz's back. He stepped a few paces away, snapped it on himself. "This is hardly heavy at all for anyone who's in halfway decent shape. Now get on up, Cuz."

The pudgy boy was on his knees, spitting snow. He grunted, tottering erect.

When the procession resumed climbing, Torres asked the frail girl in the too-big coat, "Why are you taking me along?"

In her soft voice she said, "You have to be brought to the shrine. That's a steadfast rule."

"Then what?"

Snowflakes spun around the girl's thin face. "Your fate will be decided," she explained.

"Probably you'll either be sacrificed or eaten." "Oh," said Torres.

CHAPTER 14

The place they called the shrine was on a higher plateau, housed in a big left-leaning plank barn. The youths, after the one with the rifle had used its butt against Torres's head a few times, had left him on the floor of the shrine.

Snow was falling inside the building. Torres, scowling from the pain in his head, sat up and looked at the ceiling. There were several substantial holes up there. Snow flickered down, spreading on the floor, piling up on the rundown appliances which crowded the big room.

Far across the room Torres noticed a small middle-aged man resting against a high, dented servowasher.

The man, who had deep-sunk, pale blue eyes, smiled. "You recognize me of course. Most people do."

Torres sucked in snowy air while getting himself upright. "You must be the head nitwit."

The small man watched Torres regain his balance. "No, no, I'm alluding to my reputation in the outside world."

Torres weaved through the junked mechanisms, working his way closer to the man. He shook his head, then stopped because it hurt. "Nope."

"This is very odd. I'm Eli Goss." He waited, watching Torres's face. "Eli Goss?"

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Goss."

"I was on all the front pages not all that long ago," said Goss, "and was talked about in the prime spots on all the newscasts. My sensational escape was on every tongue."

"Give me another hint."

"Eli Goss, the Academic Strangler," said Goss.

"Oh, yeah," remembered Torres. "I heard about that back on Barnum. You killed some women a few years ago and got away."

"*Some* women? I killed twenty-seven of them. I know the press disputes a couple of them, but the true total was twenty-seven. As my diary clearly documents. You're read that?"

"I read mostly light fiction."

"Very odd. My diary was printed in *Galactic Life* and in both the Murdstone and Venus editions of *Reader's Digest*. It was called *Confessions of a Strangler*. Not a bad title. We used that on the album."

"Album?"

"Record album," explained the former strangler "Do you mean to tell me you haven't heard that either? We must play a little of that for you before we get rid of you. 'Eli Goss Sings and Reflects,' was the subtitle. Sold two million on Tarragon alone. There's a big true crime—"

"You're figuring on getting rid of me?" Torres stepped nearer to the small Goss.

"Yes, but it will be ritually done," said Goss. He produced a blaster pistol from within his loose tunic. "Don't totter any closer." He cleared his throat. "You see, out here in the snow country food is not always easy to come by."

"You're cannibals?"

"When we get the chance."

Surveying the clutter of appliances, Torres asked, "And all this hardware?"

"Don't you even know about my new role in life? Ah, this being a fugitive puts a real crimp in my public relations." He crossed to a sprung-doored refrigerator, opened it, and took a paperback book off the top of a stack inside. *Getting Along with Machines* was the title on the yellow cover. "*Getting Along with Machines*. It's a book which can help millions. So far, unfortunately, it hasn't done as well

as the strangler records. You see, hiding out as I am forced to do, I can't make too many public appearances. Well, what do you need to sell a book these days? To turn it into a hot item, a bestseller. You have to promote it. Naturally I'd like to do the talk shows, pop into the department stores for autographing parties. That can be very difficult for a wanted strangler."

"Where'd you get the kids?"

"I used to be a professor of Violent Politics and I still command a considerable following on the campuses," explained Goss, handing his book to Torres. "Young folks, tired of the sham and helter skelter of university life, leave it and come to me. I teach them to love our servomechanisms and to work up to loving the universe. For our universe, you see, works very much along the lines of an electric clock—only larger."

"I hadn't heard," said Torres. "I would have thought you'd locate someplace like Tech rather than in a barn. That old abandoned automatic university is near here, isn't it?"

"Ah, yes," said Goss. "Yes, I'd very much like to be inside Tech. It lies only fifteen miles beyond us, over the ridge and across the Great Plateau. Tech was originally built to expand this area and bring in commerce and industry. What with one thing and another, mostly assassinations and coups, the territorial government lost interest and the entire wonderful complex was allowed to close. Ah, the mechanisms they have there . . . so easy to love. Big handsome quietly purring devils. If . . . if I could only get my young people in there we'd have no doubters, no backsliders."

"And you can't?"

"Do you know why?" Goss rapped the side of an open washing machine, jiggling off snow. "Because of one annoying young girl. She's some kind of independent stray. Came into the black mountains a few months before we did and squatted at Tech."

"This one girl keeps you out."

"The Campus Cops keep us out," replied Goss sadly. "She's managed to get the whole lovely, still handsomely functioning, university to work for her. Which means she's got herself an army of a hundred or more really nasty disciplinary androids, nasty, fully armed disciplinary androids, guarding the place. I've made a few overtures. She opens fire with her cops, after calling me a quack and worse." He gave a small regretful snort. "If I hadn't taken a vow never to take up strangling again, I'd put that terrible annoying girl on my list."

Torres asked, "How'd you get these appliances here?"

"One way and another: raids, forages. And we've been very fortunate with crashes. Very fortunate, Right this minute some of my young people are down dismantling your air cruiser."

"I work for an outfit called the Mirabilis Agency," Torres told him. "They don't take kindly to people who murder their agents. Maybe old Frambosa's Crime Bureau is too preoccupied to come hunting you, Goss, but Mirabilis isn't likely to let it pass."

"Mirabilis, eh?" Goss's small head bobbed. "They have a fine reputation in the mercenary field. You don't seem to understand—how could you, not having read or studied my work—you don't seem to understand that the universe is really one big machine."

"So?"

"Well, the machine has dumped you here," said Goss. "There's no arguing with that."

The thin dark boy sat cross-legged atop a robot piano, his blaster rifle dangling. "Eat up, shithead," he told Torres.

Through the battered ceiling fine snow was falling. The night sky was a streaked black. Torres, with one elbow resting on a rib-high home entertainment unit, held a bowl of brindled porridge in one knobby hand. "You look like you need this more than I do," he said to his lean guard.

"Don't worry about me, shithead." The rifle end swung up until it pointed again at Torres. "It's you we want to chubby up. Anyways, I'm a lot sturdier than you might imagine."

"Oh, so?"

"Sure. Mr. Goss's way of living, out here in our religio-philosophic community, it toughens you up."

"I wouldn't have guessed." Torres tried a spoonful of mush.

"It isn't what appears on the surface which is your key factor," the lone guard told him. "You have to consider the inner resource potential. When it comes to that, shithead, I'm okay."

"Being strong inside is one thing, but who does the heavy work?"

"Me," replied the lean boy. "You don't seem to comprehend the basic drift of what Mr. Goss's theories amount to. What I'm trying to convey to you, shithead, is that I'm tough both spiritually and physically."

Torres ate some more porridge, letting his left eyebrow rise.

The guard said, "I bet I'm actually a good deal stronger than you."

"Inwardly."

"Outwardly, shithead."

Torres set the porridge bowl down on the dance music compartment of the entertainment unit. "Take that compact laundry machine there next to you," he said, inclining his head toward the waist-high blue cabinet. This caused a second of dizziness. "I'd say it weighs about two hundred pounds."

"At least."

"Could you lift something like that?"

"Well, of course I could, shithead. I could take it and . . . oh-ho, no. I see what you're trying. You get me to lift it and I put down my gun."

Torres said, "That's a good excuse for not being able to lift it." He returned to eating his mush.

After a few seconds the lean guard said, "I suppose you could pick it up and hold it over your head with one hand."

"Two hands."

"I'd like to see that."

"Sure." Torres set the mush bowl aside, walked to the square heavy cabinet. He swung both knees slightly to the right, got a grip on the bottom of the blue box.

"Don't bust anything inside yourself, shithead."

Granting once, Torres lifted up the cabinet until it was between him

and the armed guard. Then he pushed it straight into the boy.

"Hey!" The lean young man went over backward, falling between mechanisms, with the heavy box on his chest pinning his arms to him.

Torres touched at his head until a new sharp pain went away. Then he swung over the robot piano the guard had been sitting on. He knocked him unconscious with three blows to the side of the head. Shoving the cabinet off the guard, he grabbed the rifle. He tied and gagged the lean boy. Retrieving his pack of food and supplies, Torres climbed up the wooden wall of the barn.

One of the holes in the ceiling was big enough to crawl through. Torres used it, then sidestepped down the slant roof. He dropped into a bank of snow behind the big barn.

To the front of the shrine were huts. Lights and cook fires showed in that direction. Torres went away from the lights. When they'd brought him in this afternoon he'd noticed another pass leading upward. He decided to follow that. He traveled an hour before the blizzard hit. The wind sprang up, howling, from the ground and prickly flakes of snow began to fall fast and heavy. The harsh wind grabbed at Torres, spinning him around at times. He kept climbing. Finally he reached a vast flat area, which must be the Great Plateau Goss had mentioned. Torres was moving along in a crouch now, his back arched. The bones in his face ached now and the places where he'd been hit with the rifle butt throbbed with increasing intensity.

All at once Torres stumbled and fell over.

CHAPTER 15

A paw nudged his shoulder. "Since we're less than a mile from campus I can't offer you anything hard," said a chesty voice. "How about a mug of chicken souplike drink?"

Torres yawned, stretching his weather-beaten face. He did an off-kilter push up and noticed a jowly dog face looking into his.

It was still nighttime. The snow was gentler now, falling in slow swirls. The mechanical St. Bernard thrust a paw in Torres's armpit, helping him sit up in the snow. "Or I can give you a simple injection to perk you up. The trouble there is, you have to administer it in the flank and that can be a booger to do in a blizzard."

"I'll settle for the soup," said Torres as he scraped caked snow off himself. "Who are you?"

"Officially I'm Mountain Rescue Mechanism SB-Seventy-seven." The big android dog opened a compartment in its shaggy chest and took out a plastic pouch of cloudy orange liquid. "But I've been nicknamed Corky."

Torres took the proffered pouch of soup, pulled at the heating tab. "You said campus. Are you from Tech?"

"Right you are."

"I thought," said Torres, pausing to sip the soup-like drink, "Tech was heavily guarded by police andies." "We are," replied Corky.

"They cleared you, though, and sent me out to bring you in to the infirmary."

"Cleared me?"

"While you were still slumped in the snow. I don't quite understand the technicalities," said the shaggy android dog. "They put something on your skull when they first found you on your ass out here. They gave you some kind of injection, too. In the arm."

Torres stopped drinking the orange-colored soup to feel at himself. There was a fresh numb spot at the back of his head, a tiny sore lump just above his left elbow. "Truth stuff?"

"Something like that. They determined you are a reputable freebooter, a hapless victim and not an associate of that mother jumper Eli Goss."

"You have a rich and complex vocabulary." Torres finished the hot soup, then tried to stand.

"I was originally intended to mingle with college kids," explained the android St. Bernard. "Don't toss your empty pouch in the snow. We like to keep the grounds around Tech looking spruce."

Torres sat down suddenly, squashing and splashing snow. "I'm not as sure-footed as I thought."

Corky held out a helpful paw. "Being roughed up by Goss's nomads and collapsing in the snow takes something out of you."

Torres got himself standing again, managed to stay that way. "What now?"

"I'll guide you back to Tech so they can take a look at you in the campus hospital facilities."

"I don't think I need a hospital," said Torres. "If I can sit quietly for a few hours, maybe catch a nap, I'll be okay. Then I have to figure

how to get on through these mountains."

"Won't you change your mind?" asked the mechanical dog. "They're all, I'm sure, looking forward to you in the hospital. You're the first invalid who's been through these parts in over a year. They get bored and restless practicing on nothing but cadavers over and over again."

"Maybe I can let them take my temperature." Torres took a few steps forward. "But I'm not an invalid."

"That's not for you to decide," the dog told him.

Five bright silver and white medico-androids surrounded Torres's bed in the enormous silver and white hospital ward.

One of the androids was built to resemble a fatherly old general practitioner. "Let me tell you what I think, Pete," he was saying. He'd been programmed to smoke a briar pipe and the cinders from it sparked up in the air when he spoke, settling on his white tunic front to burn minute black holes. "Now, of course, this is only a hunch and I'm not saying you really have these particular snowbound ailments. After all you know how you feel. However, we can kick a few of these various syndromes around, and when you hear a batch of symptoms that seems to fit you, holler."

Down at the foot of Torres's inflated bed a small round medical android was holding a buff-colored placard in front of his chest.

"Can you read this, Patient Torres?"

"No."

"Sounds like snow blindness to me."

"I can't read it," explained Torres, "because you guys have got me

strapped to this bed so I can't lift my head." He was held down by a series of chest-to-ankle restraining bands.

The fatherly android puffed at his pipe. "Don't let us steamroller you now, Pete. To my way of thinking a patient ought to have a real voice in his therapy. Now then, what do you think is wrong with you?"

"Nothing."

"Oh, I hate to hear you say that," said the fatherly android.

"Look here, Patient Torres, I'm holding the eye chart higher. Can you read it?"

"It says, 'Don't miss the Junior Prom!' "

"I misplaced my real eye charts," apologized the little bed-end android. "I'm happy to be able to tell you you're not snow blind." The general practitioner android said, "You know, fellows, what might do this young boy more good than all the doctors in the world?"

"A brain operation," suggested one of his mechanical colleagues.

"No, his head injuries aren't very serious," said the fatherly android. He clasped his hands behind his back. "I was thinking a visit from a friend of his or some amiable young person would do him a lot of good. We often underestimate, gentlemen, the value of the purely psychological elements in cases such as Pete's. Go fetch Miss Nita."

"You don't have to fetch me, you buffoons," said an angry girl's voice. "Who told you to mess around with this guy anyway?"

The medical androids moved back and away from the bed.

A young blonde girl, small and slightly plump, came striding across the enormous room. "If anybody's going to do anything to him, it'll be me!"

The remains of several ruined disciplinary androids were scattered along the high-ceilinged corridor of Tech's administration building. "Now that there are no students," explained the slightly plump blonde girl, "they sometimes take to hitting on each other." She pointed toward a corridor which branched off this one. "Come along this way now."

Stepping over a fallen nightstick and following her into the new corridor, Torres said, "Thanks for springing me from the infirmary, Miss McKaye."

"You might as well call me Nita," said Nita McKaye. She was wearing tapered trousers and a sleeveless tunic. She tugged at the trim at the tunic's lower edge. "Since we're going to be having dinner together. If you don't mind?" she added.

"No," said Torres. "What do you do for food?"

"They left a whole shitpot of synthetic food behind when they ditched the school," she said. "My big problem is so far I haven't quite figured out how to wipe out the menus implanted in the kitchen computers. So I have to put up with the balanced diet worked out by the Territorial Nutrition Office eight years ago. Tonight it's going to be tossed green pseudosalad, baked nearpotato with soycream, imitation roast duck with wild ricelike stuffing, wild strawberry-substitute with dairy topping, and nearmilk. We aren't allowed hard liquor, though I fixed a couple of the chem robots to make a pretty fair ale out of our surplus of breakfast pseudograin.

Does all that sound all right to you?"

"Sure," answered Torres. "Especially after wandering around in the snow most of the day."

"Didn't those buffoons in the hospital feed you?"

"Your dog gave me some hot soup," said Torres "The paternal doctor andy brought me a basket of imitation fruit and the robot down at the end of the bed kept handing me peppermint suckers."

"He was originally designed to work in the experimental campus nursery," explained Nita as they turned off the corridor and onto a down-leading ramp.

To his right Torres noticed a light strip sign shaped like an arrow. It read: DATA RESERVOIR BUILDING THIS WAY. That should be where the material on the Trophologist Co-op's Tech campus period was stored. "I'd like to look at the Data Reservoir," he said, slowing.

"I'll show you tomorrow, Pete," promised the blonde. "Right now you have to have dinner. Then you can tell me about your Mirabilis Agency job."

He frowned at her. "How did you know I worked for Mirabilis?"

"The buffoons who found you in the snow, remember? They asked questions," said Nita. "Usually, you know, I don't let in visitors. You sounded . . . novel. Most of the few people who pass by here, and try to get in, are misfits and quacks and similar mother jumpers. You're the first free-lance soldier of fortune who's been by Tech in the year plus I've been here,"

"You run the whole place by yourself?"

She gave an affirmative nod. "I've always had a knack for tinkering with machines," said Nita. "People I'm not always so good with." She laughed, giving him a slap between the shoulder blades. Noticing his flinch, she added, "I forgot you're just up off your sick bed. The cafeteria is just around the next bend in the ramp. Can you make it?" He told her he could make it.

CHAPTER 16

The dormitory wall said, "Rise and shine," and commenced whistling a gentle tune.

Torres's bunk tipped him out toward the long view window of the large empty dorm. The window was just unblacking.

Hitting the floor on hands and knees, Torres noticed two dozen Campus Cops revving up on the snowy quad below. Each robot cop was built along centaur lines, a torso attached to a wheeled cart. The wheels had special snow tires and each four-armed cop carried a blaster pistol, a stun rifle, and a bullhorn. The fourth arm ended in a double-size fist. A metal arm snaked up from the dorm floor to grab Torres's mouth open. "Calcium tablet, Vitamin C, and kelp," explained the wall as three pills were slapped on his tongue. The metal hand nudged his mouth shut while the wall suggested, "Swallow."

A portion of the floor began to escalate him up to the natatorium at the far end of the dorm where he'd spent the night.

At the ramp end high doors wooshed back, allowing Torres to pass

over the threshold and fall six feet into a heated pool.

Choir music poured out of six gold speaker-horns hung in the beams of the domed swimming room. Torres heard the music when he surfaced.

"This morning's inspirational message, in keeping with our equal-time policy here at Tech, is from the Reverend Luther Magby of the Double Sun Church of the Way on the planet Jaspur," announced the six hanging speakers.

Torres felt himself floating unavoidably toward the shallow end of the pool.

"Praise Mojab," began Reverend Magby in his falsetto voice. "For my text today I am using the famous Fourteenth Parable told by the Prophet Asno after his tribulations among the custodians."

Another metal arm hooked Torres out of the pool, flipped him onto a ramp moving into a room labeled, *Drying & Massage*.

Padded robot hands pummeled him dry as he struggled through the narrow pseudotile room.

The reverend's voice was heard in here, too. "'And what is your faulty radiator to me?' he then asked the prophet."

One of the hands on Torres's back felt realistic. The sharp slap was repeated. "Morning, Torres, How goes it?"

Torres turned. "Good morning, Nita." The small, slightly plump blonde girl who'd rescued him from the campus hospital last night was standing there. She was wearing a pullover tunic and slacks, had a gun belt with two blaster pistols strapped around her waist. She snapped her fingers and Torres's clothes, fresh pressed, and dry

cleaned popped out of the wall. "Excuse my informality, okay?" said the girl. "Like I told you last night, I don't get many visitors and I let few inside."

Torres scratched his crotch, then picked up his clothes. "How long do you figure on staying here?" The girl's name was Nita McKaye. She was twenty-two and had been living at Tech, and running the whole mechanized campus for over a year. She gave Torres a dimpled smile, shrugging. "You never know, Torres," she replied. "I came out to this setup in the first place to get over a whole shitpot full of problems. Godawful parents, unrequited love affair, low civics grades at Frambosaville Semi-Free Junior College, anguish over the tyranny of government, and the general grubbiness of the way we live now. I needed to get off by myself for a time. I'd heard about this big damn place lying here unused for two, three years. So I finally wandered in here and, being good with gadgets, figured out how to take charge of what was left of Tech."

Seaming up his trouser fly, Torres asked, "All those problems still weighing heavy on you?"

"Not all of them," said the blonde. She hooked her thumbs in her gun belt. "I truly enjoy this feuding with that asshole Eli Goss and his crew. He showed up a couple months after I did, tried to move in." She shook her head. "He looks like what my maternal grandfather used to call a webfoot." She laughed, reached out to slap Torres on the back once more. "There are worse things than parents and a universal grubbiness."

"Such as?"

"Right now I'm being bothered by a nagging sort of horniness,"

admitted Nita. "Androids can only do so much for you."

Torres readjusted his waterproof shoulder holsters before pulling on his tunic. "I'm spoken for."

"I know, you told me last night," said Nita. "That was fun, having dinner with you. I hope you didn't mind dining by candlelight."

"It gave the campus cafeteria a nice romantic ambiance." Torres put his hand on the girl's shoulder. "You were going to show me the Data Reservoir building this morning."

"Sure. I came to get you," said the girl. "But first you—"

Two long metallic arms came down out of the ceiling and plucked Torres off the floor. "First what?" he asked.

"First you have to have a nutritionally sound breakfast," called Nita as Torres was whisked out of the room,.

The long ceiling-mounted arms carried him into a commissary, dropped him into a chair by a long table. The table was covered with plates of hotcakes.

"Sometimes it forgets attendance isn't what it used to be," explained Nita, sitting next to Torres.

Tough-vined ivy was growing over the face of the big, hulking data machine. There was a thick tangle of intricately intertwined ivy vines ankle deep on the floor of this wing of the Data Reservoir building.

Nita, bent from the waist, was hacking a path with the machete she carried in her boot. "They planted this crap originally to give the place a traditional look," the little blonde explained. "It got out of

hand The gardening andies have been on some kind of work slowdown lately."

Eventually they reached the control chairs which faced the data machine. Nita perched on the arm of the deep psuedoleather chair next to the one Torres dropped into. "This guy is okay," she said to the maching, pointing at Torres. "So you can tell him anything, no matter how it's classified."

"F-f-fine, Miss Nita," answered the voice box of the earth-colored data machine.

"This is another thing I can't get ironed out," the girl said into Torres's left ear. "You don't hear too many machines with a stutter."

Torres watched the machine for a few seconds. "I want to know what the Trophologist Co-op did when it was located here at Tech."

"G-g-gosh, Miss Na-na-nita," said the wide machine. "That's plenty sa-sa-secret stuff."

"Torres is a good buddy of mine," she told the machine.

The data storage machine didn't reply immediately. Finally it said, "Okey da-da-dokey."

Two small view screens in a row of ten set across the upper portion of the machine's front face fit up. One screen was two-thirds hidden by ivy. Torres borrowed the girl's machete and cleared the pointed leaves away. On both screens hummels were bounding. In medium-shot on one screen, long shot on the other.

"Hummels?" asked Torres, nodding at the shaggy animals.

"The-the-that's right, Mr. Torres."

"What's this got to do with the Co-op?"

"Ka-ka-chemical ba-ba-biological wa-wa-warfare," answered the voice box. "This was the tata-top project worked on while the Co-op was using our university fa-fa-facilities, sa-sir. In fact, I'd sa-say it still is."

The hummels were lolling now, rolling and tumbling in a white-fenced indoor pen. On the right-hand screen a stoop-shouldered man in a white pseudorubber suit walked into the pen. He had a cylinder strapped to his back. From a long nozzle attached to the tank he sprayed a greenish mist at the mild-mannered hummels.

"What do you mean it still is?" Torres asked the machine.

"Wa-wa-well, I ma-mean I'm still in contact with some of the Co-op computers and da-data machines. You know, you sa-sit around all day and you ga-ga-get lonesome and ra-restless. I sometimes even play a game of fish with the surgical computer over at the Co-op."

The doctor on the screen was shaking his head negatively. He stopped spraying. The shaggy hummels were frolicking around his feet. "What's he trying to do?"

"The-the-that was before they had the antidote worked out."

Torres nodded. "The Co-op invented a spray to turn people into hummels?"

"Ra-right you are, sa-sir. It's only ba-been in the pa-past month or ta-two they've ka-ka-come up with a foolproof antidote."

"Who've they been using the stuff on?"

"Only political prisoners and da-da-dissenters so far. It's more humane."

"More humane than what?"

"Than ka-ka-killing them."

"The hummels who've been bothering the suburbs," asked Torres of the machine, "are they authentic or a by-product of the Co-op?"

"The Co-op, sir. Sa-sa-see, they figured at first they could sa-simply turn these ta-trouble makers into ha-ha-ha-harmless hummels and turn them loose in the woods. That way they'd be rid of them and yet they wouldn't feel ma-ma-morally in the wrong."

"But nobody expected the hummels to migrate to the settled areas?"

"Na-na-no, sir. Real hummels usually shun organized society. These fa-fa-former humans, though, are di-di-different. I hear dictator Frambosa is very upset by this ta-ta-turn of events."

Nita slumped down in her chair and kicked her feet at tangles of the tough ivy. "Got all you want, Torres?"

"Not yet," he said over his shoulder. "Have you heard of a guy named Beatty Dunnlin?"

"Na-na-no," replied the data machine.

Torres rubbed a bony hand across his jaw, pacing across the ivy.

"What else is the Co-op working on?"

"I can give you a printed list. Wa-wa-would you like that?"

"Yeah," Torres said. "How about floor plans of the new Co-op?"

"Sure. I can print you up a nice set. I even have the architectural drawings of the na-na-new place. Those I can run you off in fa-full color. I might even be able to frame them."

"Won't be necessary. What about passwords and countersigns for

getting inside the secret parts of the Co-op?"

"No, sir. All my fa-friends over there have an inhibition gear ba-ba-built in—to prevent them from sharing certain i-i-information with outsiders such as me. Passwords are among the items on the ta-taboo list."

Nita wound a ripped-up strand of ivy round her left wrist. "You planning to head on to that Co op, Torres?"

"Yep." Plans were starting to unfurl from a slit below the picture screens.

"I've got a whole hanger full of old aircruisers," said the blonde. "When they abandoned this place they left everything. Want the loan of one?"

"It would help, yes." Torres was studying the drawings of the Trophologist Co-op. The place was about fifty miles from where he was now, just beyond a small settlement called Jelado.

"I was thinking," said Nita, "I might come along." She made herself a mustache with the ivy. "But, no. I think I'll stay here and pursue the feud a while more. Before you embark, though, leave me a way I can contact you—for when I make my return to society."

"Ga-ga-gosh," said the data machine. "We'll all miss you if you do that, Miss Nita."

CHAPTER 17

Snowballs built around rocks whizzed through the gray afternoon outside. Torres turned on his counter stool, set his groutburger back

on its plate and watched the narrow street.

"Culture," said the robot frycook. He consisted of a tank-shaped bronze torso attached to a waist-high grill, and four arms. His head was a small bronze ball with a chef's hat bolted to it.

Ten ragged men ran by, hurling loaded snowballs and brickbats.

"We don't take to the arts much here in Jelado," continued the robot.

Torres took another bite of his groutburger, asking, "What are they protesting?"

"The famine."

"I didn't know the famine had reached this far."

"Why do you think I'm charging you seven ninety-five for your sandwich?"

"Are you?"

"Haven't I given you a check yet? Excuse it." With his lower right hand the cook fisted his chest. A chit popped out of a thin slot, went fluttering down to the pseudolinoleum counter and landed near Torres's elbow.

Outside in the wind and snow more angry people ran by. "Who are they pelting?" asked Torres.

"Some representatives of the lively arts."

"Specifically?"

"Call themselves an opera," replied the bronze robot. "Before I got into the gourmet end of things I used to run the music system in a big office building in the capital and I know a little something about opera. To my—"

"Would that be the traveling company of *The Dancing Plowman*?"

"Right you are. Only opera that's been through these parts in a grout's age."

Finishing his burger, Torres put eight dollars in bills on the counter. He left as the robot reached out an arm to rake in the cash.

Jelado's main street was narrow and bumpy, A block from the little automatic restaurant was the settlement square. Parked near a pedestaled statue were two large landtrucks. One was painted lemon yellow, the other lime green. ROAD COMPANY OF THE DANCING PLOWMAN. A FUN-FILLED FOLK OPERA! was lettered huge on the side of each truck.

About fifty people, mostly men, were circling the trucks. Snowballs smashed against the truck sides, paving stones bounced off the cab windows.

The rear door of one of the trucks was a fraction open and Torres spotted Booker McCrystal peering out at the mob. The lean black Barnum Embassy man was clutching a bundle of rustic costumes to his chest.

Carefully, ducking flung projectiles, Torres walked through the fight-falling snow to the truck. "Hey, Booker," he called.

"Collaborator," said an angry man to Torres.

"Glutton," said another, waving a knotty stick. "We saw you gorging yourself on ground grout."

Torres dodged a snowball with half a brick in its center, jumped up into the big truck.

"Pete," smiled McCrystal as he backed to let Torres in. "I'm

alarmingly happy to see you again.

I keep hearing awesomely vivid rumors about attempts being made on your young life. In fact, I even heard you crashed in the Montanyas Negras without a trace."

"I've survived." The body of the truck was full of costumes, props, and furniture. Torres sat in a pinstriped loveseat. "You playing this town?"

"If we can ever unload our theatrical equipment." McCrystal let the door close completely as something clanged against it. "I've got the other truck chock full of actors and singers. You know, Pete, I wish you'd have dissuaded me from thawing the particular tenor I thawed. He really is turning out to be fearsomely difficult. He sings offkey. He keeps getting homesick for his icebox. It's all been agonizingly difficult. But I suppose you've been having a rough go, too. Any news or poor Beatty?"

Torres slouched back in the prop chair. "You're quite near the Trophologist Co-op."

The long black man sighed. "Don't mention the place. Not only do we have to stage *The Dancing Plowman* amid the frigid hostility of Jelado, but we have to drag our battle-weary troupe out to that Co-op to put on a special performance tonight."

"Isn't the Co-op off limits for everyone?"

"I wish it were. No, our Barnum Embassy has worked it out so we must do the opera for an audience of Co-op employees and their families. Families, mind you, meaning little children." He hugged the costumes tighter to himself. "Children are worse than anarchists,

Pete." He shook his head. "Here I am in my chosen profession and I'm really not at all content. Sometimes I wish I'd followed my original inclination and become a mercenary like yourself. Though there's an appallingly large amount of insecurity associated with the —"

"I want to get inside the Co-op," cut in Torres.

McCrystal inclined slightly toward the seated Torres. "Have they got poor lost Beatty in there.

Pete?"

"They may have had him."

"I'd be taking an awesome risk."

"Two hundred dollars."

"No, no. I'd be taking a three-hundred-dollar risk at the very least."

Torres said, "If I'm going to be paying eight dollars for sandwiches I'll have to start budgeting."

McCrystal smiled. "I have a horribly crafty notion," he said. "I can put you in the show. Pick up one of those hoes over there."

"Huh?"

"Just let me see."

Torres eased up off the loveseat, selected a new-looking hoe from a cluster of them leaning against a prop rabbit lunch. "Okay?"

"Wave it in the air a little."

Torres did.

McCrystal laughed. "Marvelous! Chillingly effective, Pete. I suppose in your work you have to have some gift for acting." He

walked nearer Torres, his head cocked to one side. "I don't suppose you can sing tenor?"

"No."

"Very well then," said McCrystal, "we'll put you in the weeders' chorus. You open the show."

"I don't want to spend all my time on the stage."

"You needn't tell me what you plan to do inside the Co-op," said McCrystal. "I want to maintain at least a partial innocence. In case somebody tumbles to you and causes some sort of frumus." He held out a hand. "Which reminds me, you'd best pay me right now. It would make me feel ghoulishly awful should I have to take the money off your body."

"Two hundred and fifty dollars," suggested Torres. He set the hoe aside, reaching for his wallet.

McCrystal hesitated, then smiled. "Oh, very well. Since you look so horribly effective in the role of a weeder I'll settle for two fifty." He watched Torres count the money into his palm. "You will tell me what you find out about poor Beatty."

"If I can't I'll leave a note for you on my body," Torres assured him.

CHAPTER 18

The auditorium at the Trophologist Co-op resembled a large domed hothouse made of multicolored glass. The night was a chill quiet black. Stars and moon looked green, purple, and orange from inside the crowded theater.

Torres, dressed in a pseudoburlap weeder's suit and holding a hoe, was at the peephole in the still-unrisen curtain. Two hundred neat and well-fed people were in the audience. A four-year-old blonde girl in a ruffled jumpsuit was screaming in the fifth row, a six-year-old boy was throwing wadded program pages at the five-piece orchestra while it warmed up.

Behind Torres Booker McCrystal was hurrying around the stage fluffing up the row of prop haystacks featured in the opening scene. "These look overwhelmingly tacky," he sighed. "I'll never use vinyl hay again."

Torres shifted, studying the exit doors out in the theater. According to the floor plans he'd memorized he wanted Exit 8, which would open on to the multicolored glass corridor leading to Hothouse 3.

"Don't do that! Watch out!" warned McCrystal. A haystack fell over.

Turning, Torres saw that their lead tenor had accidentally driven his tractor into one of the decorative haystacks.

"You keep yelling at me," said the tenor in his high voice. "I think I was better off dead."

"If I could freeze you right here and now," McCrystal told him, "believe me I would."

"What a dumb role I have." The tenor backed his tractor into an android cow.

"Moo, moo, moo, moo," commenced the damaged mechanism.

"Get that icebox zombie off the tractor," shouted McCrystal.

"You didn't tell me I'd have to do manual work," said the tenor.

"Boy, show business has sure changed for the worse in the years I was on ice."

"Moo, moo, moo, moo, moo."

Torres left the curtain, strolled over to the mechanical cow and turned off her vocal box.

Three hefty blonde milkmaids got the fallen haystack standing again.

The tenor fussed with the bib of his overalls. "Where's my prompter tonight, speaking of indignities?"

"You ran over his foot with your tractor at today's matinee," McCrystal reminded him.

"You can afford to be critical. They weren't throwing cobblestones at you during your best number," said the tenor. "I don't think I remember my lines."

McCrystal climbed up onto the tractor. Tapping time on the reanimated tenor's knee, he sang, "I'm so happy, I'm never blue, when I can take a ride on my tractor with you." He nodded his narrow head. "Then Betsy dances out, leaps up here beside you. And don't let her fall off into the threshing machine the way you usually do."

"It's not my fault you hired a fat soprano. She toppies over into the thresher because of her great weight."

A medium-size man with crinkly white hair growing only on the back of his head walked out onto the stage, coughing politely. "Mr. McCrystal?" he said to Torres.

"Over on the tractor," Torres said.

"Mr. McCrystal," said the crinkly haired man as he approached the tractor, "I'm Dr. Orlando B. Nespersion, director of the Co-op. It's a pleasure to have your splendid company here. We've been hearing nothing but good things about your delightful opera."

"From who?" asked the tenor.

The thin McCrystal dropped to the floor, taking Dr. Nespersion's arm. "I understand you'd like to say a few words to the audience before we begin our show tonight."

"I like to communicate with my people every opportunity I get," the crinkly haired director said, reaching into a lumpy pocket of his dark suit: "Oh, and I brought a few little samples for your people. Here, for instance, is what appears to be, to all intents and purposes, a hot dog."

"And it isn't?" McCrystal took the sausage-like object from the Co-op head.

"It is a hot dog, yes, but it's made from reclaimed magazine pages. When you taste it, you wouldn't know it's not the finest Grade A grout meat."

"That's horribly interesting."

"Here's what looks like a banana." This one the doctor tossed to Torres. "Actually it's a pure synthetic, made of airplane glue and recycled bicycle tires. 'Yum, yum,' you'll say when you take a bite."

From another pocket he withdrew another object "You might mistake this for a catfish if I didn't tell you it is a remarkably realistic and delicious substitute made of histidine, lysine,

phenylalanine, tryptophan, arginine, and a pinch of shoe polish."

The fish he handed to McCrystal.

"You're doing awesomely good work here, Doctor." McCrystal stuffed the catfish under his coat. "Now it's almost time for you to give your opening remarks. I'll walk you to your entrance point and cue our orchestra."

"I also brought you a pumpkin," said Dr. Nespersion. "It's small but a great deal tastier than your everyday, run-of-the-mill pumpkin. Made entirely from discarded cardboard cartons."

McCrystal slipped the pumpkin in with the catfish and walked the doctor away.

When the curtain fell at the end of the first scene, Torres ran from the stage, dropped his hoe and got out of the pseudoburlap suit he'd been wearing over his regular clothes.

"What do you mean?" McCrystal was shouting at his prop man.

"How can you misplace a silo?"

Torres waited until the curtain went up again and the auditorium lights went out, then he stepped down into the theater and headed for Exit 8. The six-year-old boy threw a balled program page at him, but otherwise he made it to the exit unnoticed and unmolested.

The night was clouding, new snow had started to fall. The stained-glass panels of the long, empty, curving corridor were faintly freckled with white.

The corridor took him to Hothouse 3. The smooth floor of the big, domed room was piled high with cartons of the synthetic food the Co-op turned out as a cover for its real work in weaponry. Torres

was half-way across the murky room when all its overhead light strips flared on.

"Couldn't take the opera either, eh?" inquired a voice behind him.

Torres turned to face a plump red-haired man of forty. "The tenor is offkey," he said.

"You the new man down in Death Rays?" The plump man opened a cigarette case. "Want one of these? Doc Nespersion came up with them, made from lettuce."

"No, thanks, I'm trying to give up lettuce." Torres put one hand under his tunic, touching his left shoulder holster. "Which department are you with?"

Lighting a lettuce cigarette, the plump man replied, "I'm Hoch, work over in Brain Waves. Been having a hell of an impressive run of luck with rats this week. Killed a thousand of the little rascals with a new gimmick of mine. I see no reason why, in the unfortunate event of some sort of war, this wouldn't work on the battlefield as well as on rats. Or even, let's face it, on your ordinary everyday demonstration or campus."

Torres slapped a truth bug against the red-haired man's plump neck. The silver device skittered up into his hair, dug into his skull. "I want to get to Lab Fourteen," Torres told the now blank-eyed man. "I can use the heating system conduits, which I was going to enter here in Hothouse 3. With the passwords it'll be easier and quicker to go straight along Corridors Ten, Eleven, Twelve. So give me the identification procedures for getting from here to Lab Fourteen."

"Glad to oblige," said the controlled technician. "For Corridor Ten

you have to tell the two guard robots, *Das/Ewig Weibliche-Zieht tins hinan*. In Corridor Eleven you have to say, Banana Oil! to the wall, while placing your left hand on your right elbow. There's no password for Corridor Twelve, but you must approach the turnstile sideways."

"Anything else?" Torres asked the plump technician.

"Not that I can think of."

"I want to check the files in that particular lab and get the names of people who've been processed in the last three months."

"Processed how?"

"Most likely turned into hummels," said Torres. "Though something else is possible . . . do you happen to know what they did with Beatty Dunnlin?"

"Is that all you want to know?" asked the blank-eyed technician. "It so happens my brother-in-law—maybe you know him, Franklin Thorne?—my brother-in-law worked on that little problem."

"What was done to Beatty Dunnhn?"

"Your guess is right on the nose," answered the red-haired man.

"Dunnlin's a hummel now."

"Do you know where he is?"

"No one is quite sure. Until Directive One Hundred Seventy-six C-Revise Three B came through, our policy was simply to turn the processed dissidents loose in a handy forest or jungle.

Their straying back toward civilization once they were in hummel form wasn't anticipated. You have to expect little mistakes on a

project as complex as this one."

"Why was Dunnlin processed?"

"Well, he came barging in here with some bug in his ear," answered the technician. "He'd talked to some disgruntled former Co-op man, and he knew something of what was going on behind the scenes. Fortunately for us he hadn't made a report back to Barnum yet because he was the kind of stickler who had to see for himself. Dr. Nespersion was able to get hoid of him and give him a good squirt of hummel spray. Dunnlin turned into a particularly shaggy hummel, by the way."

"What does Barnum think happened to Dunnlin?"

"Certain Barnum officials, a few high-placed fellows, have some small notion of what's actually going on here," explained the technician. "They've been led to believe Dunnlin had an accident with one of our new crowd suppressants and is recuperating in a private, and secluded, hospital off at the edge of the territory—recuperating very slowly. The rest of the Barnum government, including the embassy people here, think he was lost in the wilderness."

"Okay." Torres walked a few steps away from Hoch, rested a foot on the edge of a carton. "Where's the antidote to the hummel spray kept?"

"In Lab Thirteen, Cabinet Six," answered the technician. "To get in there you'll have to use Corridors Four, Five, and Six."

"Give me the procedures for those."

"Happy to. For Corridor Four you have to tell the two robot guards,

Der mensch ist, was er isst. For Corridor Five you say, Applesauce! to the wall, while placing your left hand on your right elbow. There's no password for Corridor Six but you have to approach the turnstile walking backward."

Torres drew a coil of wire out of his right-hand shoulder holster and, after tipping him over, tied the plump redheaded man's wrists to his ankles behind him. Next he made Hoch a gag out of his own ascot and detached the truth-node. The plump man began to mutter as Torres dragged him off behind a wall of cartons.

Torres made his way to Corridor 4 and said, "*Der mensch ist, was er isst,*" to the two large gunmetal-colored robot guards at its end.

CHAPTER 19

Agent Brakeman was hunched at his desk in the Frambosaville headquarters of the MCB, doodling cute little dog characters on his memo pad. His desk gave an angry buzz. The big stoop-shouldered Murdstone Crime Bureau agent finished sketching in the tail of a fuzzy little cocker. "I still think Cog the Dog is a fine name for an animated cartoon character," he said to himself. He slowly put aside the electric pencil, fingered his communication switch. "Yes?"

Monitor Seames's thin face snapped onto the picture disc next to Agent Brakeman's cup of nearcoffee. "Things have taken another turn for the worse."

Rubbing at the vinyl patch on his left elbow, the big MCB agent asked, "What's the matter with your ear?"

"Nothing." The Surveillance and Security man touched at his right ear, which was made of tin. "This is my new remote-broadcast tuner ear. You've seen it before."

"I didn't know you'd gotten rid of your real ear."

"I haven't. It's in the box with the rest of them," answered the partially metal Monitor Seames.

Brakeman asked, "What things have taken a turn for the worse?"

"I'm speaking of the Dunnlin-Torres matter."

"Is Torres alive again?"

"He was never dead," said Seames, pointing an aluminum finger at Brakeman. "He survived the black mountains."

"He didn't crash?"

"He crashed, but he survived the mountains."

"And the cannibals?"

"Evidently so."

"He's got what they call a charmed life," said Brakeman. "A lot more charmed than that boob Billy John Wengle." He looked away from Seames, picking up his pencil. He'd thought of a way, by adding spots, to make one of the doddled dogs more appealing.

"Torres also seems to be better at getting into places where he's not wanted."

Spots Brakeman drew well. He concentrated on making each one nicely round. "Where's Torres intruded now?"

"Into the Trophologist Co-op."

Brakeman put down the pencil. "The Co-op?"

"The Co-op," repeated Monitor Seames. "He got in and he got out. He's managed to make off with several containers of AHSG-291-038."

"Antidote for the hummel spray," said Brakeman as he straightened in his chair. "Damn! That means he knows what happened to Beatty Dunnlin."

"Oh, yes, of course. He made use of a very sophisticated truth-node on a member of the Co-op staff." Seames picked up a projector hand from off screen. "We had our probe equipment go over the fellow. I'll show you what—"

"I don't want to see pictures of some boobish technician. Just tell me about Torres."

Seames hesitated with the alternate hand in his hand. "To me a briefing is always more forceful when you add the pictorial element."

"Torres knows?"

"He knows Dunnlin was processed into a hummel to keep him from letting out the secrets of the Co-op."

"What's he going to do?" asked Brakeman. "Does he know where Dunnlin is?"

"Even we aren't sure of that," reminded Seames. "Those synthetic hummels have wandered a good deal since they were turned loose in the wilderness."

"What's your best guess as to where Dunnlin is?"

"I'd say he's one of the herd of hummels at present bedeviling the

suburb of Templar Acres. The biggest concentration of them seems to be there."

"I wish we could talk Frambosa into a hummel roundup."

"He wants to be circumspect, and there's no way to gather those creatures up circumspectly."

"Do we know exactly where Torres is right now, this morning?"

"He was at the Co-op last night. There's no way he can reach Templar Acres, if that's where he's heading, before this afternoon at the earliest."

Rubbing both elbow patches at once, Agent Brakeman said, "I don't suppose there's any way you could point out Dunnlin to me, single him out from the other boobish hummels."

Monitor Seames shook his head and his tin ear rattled. "They took away everybody's rings, watches and personal curios before they processed them at the Co-op, along with all their clothes, of course."

"It wouldn't do any good to go through the pack and call Dunnlin's name?"

"Dunnlin doesn't know his name anymore. The process gave him the look and the mentality of a hummel."

"Then I can't be sure of getting him out of the way before Torres hits Templar Acres."

"Even if you could," pointed out Seames, "Torres now knows most of the truth."

"You're right," said Brakeman. "I was trying to look away from the facts because Torres has turned out to be so hard to kill." He tapped

his forefinger on his desk top. "I'll make one more try to get Frambosa to let me gather up all the hummels and get them hidden away."

"He's not likely to agree to that."

"I know," admitted the round-shouldered agent. "So then I'll have to get out to Templar Acres some time before midday and arrange another ambush for Torres. I'll probably have to kill him personally this time. Delegating his assassination to others simply hasn't worked out. Okay, okay. Good-bye."

Brakeman doodled another dog before he put in a call to the dictator of Peluda Territory.

Halted in a grove of maples on the far side of the moat, Agent Brakeman was instructing his two MCB marksmen. The early afternoon sun glistened on his elbow patch as he pointed at the two bridges over the wide moat which circled two-thirds of Templar Acres. "Torres will have to enter the suburb via one of those two bridges," he explained.

"Torres is the name of the guy we want to get. Am I right?" asked the taller of the two young stun gun riflemen.

"Yes. Peter Torres." Brakeman jabbed a hand into his pocket, located a photo of Torres. "I already briefed you back in Frambosaville, but take one more look. This is Peter Torres. I want you to stun him on sight."

"I don't remember him having a mustache," said the taller stun gun marksman.

"He doesn't." Brakeman scowled at the photo he'd been holding out

to them. "Oh, this is one I was doodling on. I drew in the mustache. You can ignore it."

"Ignore the mustache," said the taller marksman.

"I have a question," put in the shorter marksman.

"Yes?"

"What does via mean?"

Brakeman rubbed at the drawn-in mustache with a moistened thumb. "It means by way of. It means this man here, this Peter Torres here will be coming into Templar Acres by way of one of those two bridges any time now."

"Without a mustache," said the taller marksman.

"Without a mustache and probably driving a rented landcar," said Agent Brakeman. "S and S reports a man answering Torres's description landed, by aircruiser, in a town some thirty miles from here an hour ago and was seen to enter a landcar rental agency."

"You ought to ask them at the rental place if it really was Torres," suggested the taller marksman.

"We are, Meantime we have to act on the assumption it is indeed Peter Torres heading for here."

"Via rented landcar," said the shorter marksman.

Agent Brakeman had the mustache completely rubbed away. He gave his two men a last look at the picture of Torres before putting it away. "Now, you'll notice that on the suburb side of the moat there are thick clumps of transplanted oak and pine trees."

"Make a good place to hide," said the taller marksman.

"Exactly," said Brakeman. "One of you will hide in the trees near to bridge number one and the other one will hide himself beside bridge number two."

"Which bridge shall I take?" asked the taller marksman.

"It doesn't matter. Flip a coin. I don't care," said Brakeman. "Now as soon as one of you sees—

" "Do you have a coin?" asked the smaller marksman. "I've got one," offered the taller marksman. "Do you want heads or tails?" "Suit yourself." The shorter marksman shifted his grip on his stun rifle. "I guess I'd prefer heads." Brakeman said, "Hold that up until I finish telling you what to do." "I think I'd maybe like tails instead," said the smaller marksman. "Okay. It's a matter of supreme indifference to me," said his partner. Brakeman raised his voice.

"When you see Torres in his rented landcar—which is at this very moment hurtling toward us—when that happens, you let him have a blast of the stun gun. Since he'll be in a car this will cause him to have some kind of accident. I'm hoping for a fatal one, though my luck hasn't been good lately. In case he survives his crash, I'll be around to see to it he's carried off someplace where I can finish him off."

"Can we flip the coin now?" asked the smaller marksman.

"Wait," said Brakeman. "I want to caution you to be subtle about this entire operation. Stunning people in broad daylight, even under the present administration, has to be unobtrusively done."

"That should be easy enough." The taller marksman nodded at the suburb across the moat. There was considerable activity up among

the castle-and chateau-style homes which spread out beyond the wooded area facing the bridges. "Looks like some kind of riot in the making. Be a good diversion for our job."

Shading his eyes, Agent Brakeman said, "That must be the Templar Acres vigilantes we're seeing. Apparently most ordinary life has come to a virtual standstill because of the hummels. S and S says the citizens have finally decided to take vigilante action. After we catch Torres I'm going to have to see about talking those people out of anything too drastic."

"Where are these alleged hummels?" asked the smaller marksman. "I don't see any lolling around."

"Way over on the other side of town," said Brakeman. "In the area known as Cottage Row. The citizenry is rallying over this way in the common before heading for Cottage Row I imagine."

"Seems to me," said the taller marksman, "when I saw pictures on the news I noticed a forest where the hummels hang out when they're not frolicking in the streets."

"There is a forest behind Cottage Row," said Agent Brakeman.

"What's to keep Torres from coming through that way and ignoring these bridges entirely?"

Brakeman shook his head. "To do that he'd have to come on foot down through a pathless forest which stretches over several miles of hilly ground. It's very unlikely a man who's been in a rented cruiser crash and been attacked by a cyborg leopard and one of our crack assassins will be in any shape for anything so rugged and rough."

"He sure has an eventful life," said the smaller marksman. He

flipped the coin.

CHAPTER 20

Torres came on foot down through the pathless forest which backed Templar Acres. Strapped around his waist, under his tunic, were six small spray-top canisters of the hummel antidote he'd taken the night before from the Trophologist Co-op. He had a dozen more canisters hidden in the rented landcar he'd left parked off the road far uphill.

The early afternoon was clear and warm. Torres perspired as he worked his way among close-together birches and oaks. Fuzzy pale blue squirrels were scuttering straight up the sides of the oak trees, popping in and out of hollows, making angry clattering sounds. One of them dropped an acorn down on Torres. The spires of the suburban castle-type houses began to show through the trees. Torres hadn't found any hummels yet.

About the time he began to catch sounds and fragments of shouting from Templar Acres he encountered the cub scouts. There were five ten-year-old boys, dressed in untucked blue tunics and baggy shorts, accompanied by a puffing pink man in a business pullover and trousers. Three of the boys and the panting overweight man were looking up into an oak. The other two boys were watching Torres come toward them.

"Mr. Broonzy," said one of the boys who'd noticed Torres.

"When are you fellows going to call me Chuck?" said Broonzy, his eyes still on the high branches of the oak tree. "I've been your den

master nearly a month now, ever since Verna and I transferred here from Tarragon."

"Who's Verna?" asked one of the up-looking cub scouts.

"Mrs. Broonzy," said Broonzy.

"Chuck, there's a big sweaty man stalking toward us," said the boy, pointing at Torres.

"Hello, Chuck," said Torres. He glanced up into the tree and saw a grinning shaggy hummel hanging by its knees from a branch near the top. "You've treed a hummel, huh?"

"Hi, I'm Chuck Broonzy, with the Flox outfit," said the overweight den master, offering his hand. "The boys and I are on a woodlands project."

"He can't make up his mind what badge we're working on," complained a chubby cub.

"The fellows seem to have different notions about this," Broonzy explained as he nodded at the slowly swinging hummel. "Three of them want to photograph this hummel and earn their Outdoor Photography badge, but the other two think we ought to go after our Taxidermy badge."

"He won't let us skin it," complained the chubby cub. "What do you think, mister?"

"I think we ought to spray him." Torres pulled a canister out from under his tunic.

"There's no badge you can earn for spraying wild animals," said another of the cubs.

Giving a hummel-like grin, Torres leaped up, caught a low branch of the oak with one hand. He pulled himself up, went climbing on toward the hanging hummel.

"Pay attention to this boys," suggested the panting Broonzy. "This man is obviously well versed in woods-lore."

"Gee, one-handed," said the chubby scout.

When he was five feet below the big amiable animal Torres aimed the spray can and thumbed down the button.

A smell mingling that of hospital corridors with that of beauty salons spread all around.

The hummel stopped grinning. "Glorioski," he said. He flipped up to catch the branch with his hands. His shaggy hair fell away from his body in large wads. In under sixty seconds he was a skinny young man, pale and naked.

"Avert your eyes, boys," ordered Broonzy down below.

Torres said, "You're not Beatty Dunnlin."

"That old conventionalist? Glorioski, no. I'm Gilly Skubb," replied the naked youth. "The celebrated campus radical. You know?"

Torres asked, "Do you know where Dunnlin is?"

"Most of the guys are down mooching around in town," said Skubb.

"I've always been pretty much of a loner. Even when I get turned into a herd animal by our conventionalist so-called government I maintain a vestige of my former rugged individualism. You know?"

"Would you like some bark-and-leave clothes to put on?" called Broonzy. "The boys tell me they learned how to make them."

"No, don't bother." The naked Skubb began to descend the tree.

Torres followed the radical youth to the ground. "Want to help me?"

"How?"

"I'm going to use this antidote on all the other hummels. I can use an assistant."

Skubb shrugged his narrow shoulders. "We loners aren't too cooperative."

"Until this hummel business gets out in the open," said Torres, "your Junta is going to keep using it. Meaning they may come hunting you again."

"I can appreciate the logic of what you say, even though it has somewhat of a conventionalist tinge," admitted Skubb. "I'll help out. Maybe I'll need clothes for that."

Torres pointed at Broonsy. "We'll borrow your suit, Chuck."

"Wait now," said the den master. "I don't relish being left out here in my all-season underwear."

"The boys can make you some woodland clothing out of leaves and bark," said Torres.

"Yeah, come on, Mr. Broonzy," said the chubby cub. "Now that we can't skin and stuff this guy, we want to do something fun."

"But, boys . . ."

Torres had one of his pistols out. "The clothes, Chuck."

"You have certain loner qualities yourself," Skubb said to Torres while the scout leader got out of his suit.

CHAPTER 21

A blonde housewife with a blaster rifle under her arm ran across the street directly in front of Torres and the thin Skubb, nearly bumping into the young radical. "Excuse me," she said. "I've got to get up into our tower with this."

"You're planning some shooting?" Torres asked the woman. They were on a wide street of chateau-like homes.

"And wouldn't you know we'd loaned our other rifle to the Bensens? Paul went on down to the common to get ready to stampede them, and he told me to climb up into our tower and pick them off when they came galloping by, and I said, 'Sure thing, Paul, sweetheart,' but I forgot we'd loaned this blaster rifle to the Bensens when they were having all that trouble with the gulls dancing on their left turret, and I only just now thought of it when I was halfway—"

"Who is it you're going to shoot?" cut in Torres.

"The hummels. The hummels, of course," replied the blonde housewife. With her free hand she pointed at the five chateaus along her side of the block. "See, there's Madeleine Lowney up there on her roof all ready with her rifle. She's always on time. And there's Rosemarie Weiner with her oldest boy getting set in their tower. I'd best be going. They're always criticizing me around here as it is because I never seem to get anywhere on—"

"You've all decided to kill the hummels?"

"It's really the only answer. Well, if you read the *Templar Acres Bulletin-Journal* they have alternatives, but everyone knows they

have to print the government line in editorials," she said. "You probably don't realize how annoying it's been having those things around, those awful hairy hummels. They trampled my tulips, and I'm pretty certain they ate Bozo, though the paper swears they're vegetarians. But all I know is dear little Bozo isn't around anymore and . . . listen! I hear them coming. Excuse me, I must get up to the tower." She left them to go hurrying across a wide, short-cropped lawn.

Torres started running in the direction of the shaggy galloping sounds down hill. "We've got to reach the hummels ahead of the ambush."

"Glorioski, the way the conventionalists live," said Skubb, trotting behind Torres. He held a canister of AHS-291-038 in each hand. At the corner Torres paused. Off to their left there were no houses. A small, hilly park filled several acres. Torres jabbed a thumb in that direction. "Down this way."

They ran a block parallel to the park before they saw the stampeding hummels. A hundred or more of the big shaggy animals, some running on all fours, were galloping up the bright afternoon street. To the rear of the frightened hummels fifty men with sacks and pillowcases over their heads were running, shouting, firing hand blasters into the air.

"They're likely to trample us," observed Skubb.

"The canisters will spray up to ten feet," said Torres, raising the two containers of hummel antidote he was carrying. "When they get that close, start spraying."

A thin swirl of dust was rising off the wide street, spinning toward Torres and Skubb. "Glorioski," he said. He dropped to one knee, started using the antidote canisters.

Torres waited until the lead hummels were three yards in front of him before he activated his canisters. He hopped backward, spinning, trying not to miss a hummel.

Falling hair fluttered all around. The sound of bare feet slapping on pavement grew. Naked men were falling down, tangling, complaining, laughing.

"Glorioski." Skubb pushed through the shedding men, elbowing his way toward those who were still hummel form.

Torres worked along the left side of the mob, spraying with his left hand and then his right. Shaggy hair was thick in the air, mingling with the dust.

"Oof," said a vigilante. Torres had sprayed him by mistake. The face of his flowered pillowcase mask was stained now. Lowering his hand gun, he snatched off the hood. "What sort of crowd control procedures are these, officer?"

Torres saw two men who were still in hummel form. He jogged over and got them both at once.

Another vigilante, a broad black man, tugged off his hood.

"Where'd all these bareass men come from?"

The Templar Acres vigilantes were putting guns back into holsters and pockets, muttering and shifting from foot to foot. Shaking off the last of his shaggy hummel hair, one of the men Torres had just sprayed held out his hand. "I'm Leonard Tufts," he said. "I believe

you're Peter Torres, aren't you? I've followed your career. I'm a free-lance journalist and the Peluda Territory stringer for *Muckrake* magazine. I'd like to get an exclusive interview with you."

"Where'd all those hummel mothers go?" demanded the black man.

Skubb joined Torres. "Looks like we got them all converted."

Facing the vigilantes Torres asked, "Who's the head of this bunch?"

The black man said, "I am. I'm Mayor Posey. Can you tell me what's going on?"

"You almost killed a hundred people," said Torres.

"Where'd the hummels go?" asked the mayor. "All we intended to kill was hummels."

"We were the hummels," Skubb told him. "All of us were processed out at a place called the Trophologist Co-op."

"That smacks of some kind of clandestine chemical biological weaponry research gone completely out of control," said Mayor Posey. "But the *Templar Acres Bulletin-Journal* assures us no such thing is being done in this territory."

A plump woman in a blue pullover shift came trotting down through the park. "Bring all those poor undressed men up to the riding club, Mayor Posey. Well get blankets to wrap them in until the boy scouts go out and collect spare clothes."

"It's Mrs. Kirwan of the ladies' association," said the mayor to Torres.

Most of the vigilantes had their hoods off now, except for a fat man

who couldn't get his stocking mask up any higher than his scalloped chin. One of them said, "We don't even know who these guys are. Maybe the Junta had ample reason for turning them into hummels."

"You shouldn't turn anyone into a hummel," said Mayor Posey. "Let me say right now for the record that I am—"

"Liberal bullshit like that is the reason you didn't get my vote."

Torres left the argument. He circled the crowd of former hummels, searching for Beatty Dunnlin.

"Let's not wait for them to thrash this out," called Mrs. Kirwan from the grassy slope of the park. "You men come on up to the clubhouse with me. We'll get some nearcoffee perking and I'll have my ladies make lots of sandwiches. Come along, come along. And don't bother to hide your crotches. I've raised five sons."

The naked men started uphill after the plump woman.

Torres stopped at the curb, watching them pass around him. He caught Skubb's arm when the young man came by. "Have you seen Beatty Dunnlin?"

"The conventionalist? Not a sign of him. You sure be was supposed to be here?"

"Relatively so." Torres followed the group upward and through a decorative apple grove. "I'll go over everybody once more."

Mrs. Kirwan had halted in front of a long, low, metal-and-glass clubhouse. She held the sliding doors open with a plump hand, waved the men on inside with the other. "Everybody come on in. The blankets should be getting here any minute. I'll have the nearcoffee on the hob in two shakes."

As Torres was crossing the clubhouse threshold the middle-aged man who'd identified himself as a *Muckrake* magazine stringer fell in step beside Torres. "Did I hear you mention Beatty Dunnlin?"

"You know where he is?"

"I've got a pretty good hunch," answered Tufts.

"Try to line up by size," Mrs. Kirwan suggested. "Little men over by the steeplechase trophy case and so on up. You two men with clothes already shouldn't be in line."

"Your hunch?"

Tufts said, "Even when I was a hummel I didn't lose my powers of observation. The reporter's instinct is very strong in me. I was processed right before Dunnlin and I heard them mention him at the Co-op. He was in the lot of us dumped off in the woods beyond here. I kept my eye on him, figuring there was a good story in it."

"Did Dunnlin come here to Templar Acres?"

"Yes, he did. Dunnlin was with us until about a week ago. Until right after the hummels got such a big play on the news. Even while I was a hummel I made a point of keeping up with the media. I used to skulk up to homes and peep in at—"

"Where did Dunnlin go?"

"He was taken," said Tufts. "A couple of trappers came out and caught him."

"They were after Dunnlin specifically?"

"No, they simply wanted a hummel, any hummel, from what I overheard. Dunnlin never took to being a hummel. It was more or less a class thing with him. He

always remained very dignified. He never adjusted to moving around like a hummel. So when these trappers came after a bunch of us, Dunnlin was the slowest. He got caught."

"Any idea where he was taken?"

"Sure. From what these guys said while they were loading Dunnlin into their aircruiser they had orders to bring in just one hummel. From some rich upper-class old broad who wanted one for a pet."

Torres raised both eyebrows. "They wouldn't have been working for a Princess Lena of the

Europa Sector?" he asked, remembering the pet hummel of Terranova's cathedral-dwelling friend.

"That's the name. Do you know her?"

"Hell," said Torres. "I found Dunnlin days ago. Had I but known." He motioned Skubb over to him.

"Yeah?"

"I have to go someplace else," said Torres. "I'll turn most of the hummel antidote over to you and Tufts. You get it to all the other enclaves of hummels around the suburbs and wilds and use it on them."

"That could be a real chore," Skubb pointed out

"But what a story," said Tufts.

"Glorioski," said Skubb. "Are you in some land of profession where you could get a little publicity for me? Someplace to aid my views."

"Sure. What are your views?"

Torres said, "Come on with me to my car, Skubb, and I'll turn the

AHSG-291-038 over to you."

"I'll go along, too," offered Tufts.

"You'll need clothes."

Mrs. Kirwan was coming through the doorway with an armload of blankets. Tufts went over to her and snatched the top blanket.

"Emergency, Mrs. Kirwan. I'm Tufts of *Muckrake* magazine."

"Oh, really?"

Torres left the clubhouse first.

From off to his right a big round-shouldered man came running. He had a vinyl patch on each elbow. "He did get by us," shouted the man. "It's Torres." He came straight for Torres, tackling him around the knees.

The two men fell to the turf, rolling.

"Watch out," said Tufts. He dived on top of the pair. The large blanket he'd draped over his shoulders came loose and covered the tangle.

A tall, lean young man carrying a stun rifle trotted up to the big man's wake. "He's got Torres," he said, stopping fifteen feet from the blanketed group.

Under the large pseudoflannel blanket the big man said, "I'm Agent Brakeman of the Murdstone Crime Bureau, Torres, and I'd like to talk to you."

Torres brought both knees up into Brakeman's groin.

The agent yelled, rose up, shrouded by the blanket and went bobbing across the grass.

"He's trying to get away," said the tall young man with the stun gun. "Halt, Torres." He fired at the dancing figure.

There was a bombing sound. Brakeman, under the blanket, stopped moving and stiffened.

Torres was on his feet and had his right shoulder pistol in his left hand. He shot the tall young marksman's stun rifle away from his grasp. Sprinting to the frozen Brakeman, Torres retrieved the blanket. He bundled it and tossed it to Tufts. "Let's get on up to my car."

"This story is sure going to be rich in detail," remarked the reporter.

CHAPTER 22

The angel held a tray of small round sandwiches out to Torres. "Welcome to Princess Lena's," it said.

Dropping from his rented aircruiser to the twilight landing pad of the princess's Europa Sector estate, Torres asked, "Where is the princess?"

"She and the other guests are having cocktails in the nave," said the android angel. "Mr. Terranova mixed up a rum punch in one of the baptismal fonts. Have a canape?"

Torres, who hadn't eaten since before he hit Templar Acres at midday, reached out and took a little sandwich. "Terranova is still here?"

The angel's feathery wings fluttered as it leaned toward Torres. "He and the princess are an item, sir.

Something bounded out of the dusk, dodged between the half dozen parked cruisers, and grabbed Torres's wrist in sharp teeth. "Hello, Juanito," said Torres, recognizing the big lemon yellow hound.

"Princess Lena has legally adopted the late Mrs. Vespa's entire kennel," explained the serving angel. "She's much given to humanitarian gestures."

Torres began walking away from the landing area. Juanito let go Torres's wrist to snap at the little sandwich between his fingers.

The robot angel gave a metallic chuckle. "You wouldn't think he'd go for a pate made from reclaimed magazine pages, but he's quite wacky over the stuff."

"The spread in this sandwich is synthetic?"

"Synthetics are very much the chic thing hereabouts these days, sir," replied the angel.

Torres let Juanito have the sandwich. "I hope this won't screw up your low-calcium diet." He cut up across the estate grounds.

The darkness was bringing a thin mist with it; the spires of the princess's transplanted cathedral were already dim. The heavy ornate doors of the home were wide open, soft yellow light touched the marble steps of the cathedral.

Torres heard violin music coming from inside the cathedral-house. He recalled the princess's pet hummel had been playing the violin the last time he saw him. He took the wide steps two at a time.

"Even the weariest river winds somewhere safe to sea. Right?" said Terranova, recognizing Torres. He had a violin resting against his plump chin.

Close beside the gigolo was a short squat woman of nearly sixty. She was holding a fried bird drumstick near to his cheek. "Have a nibble, Jose. You'd never guess it's made from recycled bicycle tires."

There were about thirty guests in the room, and three robot serving angels. There was no hummel. "Where's Tan?" asked Torres.

"Who?" asked the squat woman.

"Pete," said Terranova, "this is Princess Lena. You didn't get a good look at her on your last visit."

"Not from ground level."

"Ah," said the stalky princess. "This must be the fascinating Peter Torres. Are you between daring escapades at the moment?"

"Just winding one up," replied Torres. "Where's your pet hummel, Princess?"

She shrugged broad shoulders. "Moping around somewhere or other I imagine."

"Lena waxes and wanes when it comes to enthusiasm." Terranova dropped the violin onto a chair, reached out and rubbed the princess's rough cheek with a hooked finger. "I'm going to talk to Pete for a few minutes, Princess, dear."

"Hasten back, won't you, Jose?"

"With deliberate speed and majestic instancy." The slightly overweight gigolo led Torres away from the squat princess. "Why are you anxious about the hummel?"

"He's Beatty Dunnlin."

They stopped by a marble font and Terranova ladled out a cup of punch for Torres. "If I'd known that I wouldn't have booted him out of Lena's bedroom last night." He gave Torres the cup, filled another for himself. "How did Dunnlin come to become Pincess Lena's pet hummel?"

"Let's find him first," said Torres.

The gigolo ruffled his mustache, then gulped at his punch. "He's probably off someplace with the Great Yarko—I mean Yarko the Magnificent."

"I thought Yarko didn't care for the hummel."

"Now that Lena's more or less dropped Tan—Dunnlin—Yarko isn't jealous anymore."

Finishing the cup of rum punch, Terranova headed for the open doors.

A turquoise blue hound had been taking a sprawling doze on the cadiedral steps. He jumped awake now, trotting over to take hold of Torres's wrist with his teeth. "Hello, Pepito," said Torres as he and the gigolo descended into the misty night.

"The Murdstone Crime Bureau has decided to list Nancy's murder as unsolvable," said Terranova. "For a day or so there they were thinking about you as a suspect."

"The MCB killed her," said Torres. The blue dog snorted, let go of Torres, and ran off into the brush.

Terranova took Torres down along the shadowed side of the high cathedral. "Why?"

"To stop anybody from finding out what happened to Dunnlin,"

answered Torres. "They've been trying to knock me off, too."

"I'm glad they didn't have much success." Through the mist a glass-enclosed tennis court showed. Rose bushes and ivy grew around and about the faintly lighted dome.

Sitting in the first row of bleachers, near the net, were the pudgy young magician and the shaggy hummel. "Take only one card. Tan. Not all of them," Yarko was cautioning the big amiable animal.

The hummel grabbed the pack of cards from Yarko's pudgy hand and tossed it into the air. Stiff new cards fluttered and flapped down on the two of them.

"One card," repeated Yarko. He took a deep breath. "Look, we'll try the egg trick again. If you promise not to put it in your mouth. Promise?"

The hummel poked a furry finger into the young magician's chest, nudging at an oval object in the breast pocket of Yarko's one-piece black evening suit.

"Oh, hi," said Yarko, noticing Torres and the gigolo. "Bored with the cocktail party I bet. Well, let me get my deck gathered together and I'll show you a couple of mystifying tricks. Hey, Tan, get your paws off me a minute."

The hummel was trying to squeeze Yarko's trick egg out of his pocket.

"Let me show you something first." Torres had a canister of AHS-291-038 in his right hand. He walked along the row of wooden seats behind the magician and the hummel, stopped a few feet from Tan.

"Suppose this isn't Dunnlin?" asked Terranova.

"Then I'll have to retrace my steps." Torres sprayed the hummel with the antidote.

Tan poked at Yarko's pocket twice more before bringing his hand up to his head. He blinked and grimaced and the shaggy hair fell away from his face. "What time is it?" he asked in a brusque voice.

The pudgy magician stood up, looking from the shedding hummel to Torres. "Hey!" he said, swallowing. "This is some illusion. I don't think I've ever—"

"Do you have a phone here? Get one brought out here if you don't. I've got to get in touch with my embassy at once."

The hummel had turned into a naked man in his forties, with close-cut graying hair. It was Beatty Dunnlin. "Look, Dunnlin," Torres said to him.

"Here. I'll write out some instructions for you," continued the diplomat. "I'd appreciate your getting me a robot secretary at once. I want to—" He was slapping his bare chest for a pen. He stopped. "Forgive me, gentlemen. I seem to be somewhat disoriented." He put his palms on his bare knees. "You're Yarko the Magnificent," he said to the pudgy magician. "I remember your name from my former state. I wonder if you might be kind enough to round up some clothes for me."

Yarko said, "An amazing illusion. He actually seems to have changed from a goopy hummel into a typical pompous upper-middle-class business type. It beats my egg trick all hollow."

"I had one of my trunks sent out," put in Terranova. "You should be able to find something to fit Dunnlin in my room, Yarko."

"No matter what happens around here I'm always the errand boy."
Yarko started away. "No matter how the wheel of fortune turns I keep coming out on the bottom."

The diplomat said to Torres, "You've managed to get hold of the antidote. How did you do that?"

"I'm Peter Torres," said Torres, sitting down near the man. "I work with the Mirabilis Agency. Your wife hired them to find you."

"Poor Inez. Is she very distraught?"

"She looked distraught in her pictures."

"I'll put in a satellite call to her as soon as I collect my thoughts and get into some kind of clothes."

"I think she's here on Murdstone now," Torres told him.

Holding out his hand, the naked diplomat said, "Let me have a look at that antidote, Torres. This would be AHSB-291-036, wouldn't it?"

"038."

"I'm anxious to make a full report on this whole hummel business to the Barnum government," said Dunnlin, hefting the canister in his wide palm. "Would you be willing to help me out on the preliminary draft of my report, Torres? I assume you know a good deal more about the workings of the Co-op than I do."

"I can tell you what I know " said Torres. "For a fee."

"That's right," said Dunnlin. "You have motivations somewhat different from mine. Of course, I can offer you your usual fee. Plus a bonus for saving me from a life as a house pet. I think, let us say,

five thousand above your regular fee would be suitable."

Terranova rubbed his mustache. "Your line of work pays even better than mine," he said to Torres.

CHAPTER 23

Money was coming out of the front of the Mirabilis Agency computer.

Sitting opposite his field boss, Torres caught the hundred-dollar bills. "This is only three thousand dollars," said Torres when the money had ceased to pile up.

"Mrs. Dunnlin was asked me to tell you how much she and her husband appreciate all you did," said the compact computer built into the back of the car. "Rescuing Beatty Dunnlin, spending three days helping him put together his expose of Frambosa's clandestine CBW operations."

"This is only three thousand dollars," Torres said again. "Dunnlin mentioned a bonus of five thousand."

Up in the front seat of the Mirabilis car the plump blonde girl android giggled once to herself.

"I'm coming to that. Mrs. Dunnlin feels her husband, in the immediate euphoria following his rescue and transformation, promised you too much in the way of a bonus. After she and Dunnlin had a careful discussion about the matter and looked over their budget for the coming year, they decided three thousand dollars was more than fair."

Torres put one foot up on his suitcase, which rested on its side on the car floor. He tucked the paper money away in his wallet. "At least Mirabilis didn't take ten percent of it."

"I talked them out of that," said the computer. "Be prepared, though, when you get home to Barnum to have them try to charge you for the aircruiser you piled up in the black mountains."

Torres looked out the window and across the Peluda Territory spaceport parking lot. "Thanks for getting my passage off Murdstone arranged."

"Frambosa tried to get the Barnum Embassy to let him shoot you as an outside agitator, but his government is in very shaky shape at the moment. We were able to squelch any attempts by the local government to detain you. Booker McCrystal helped out."

"How much did he charge?"

"Only five hundred dollars."

"You could have got him for three hundred dollars."

"And an Agent Brakeman of the MCB," continued the computer, "threatened to bring an assault suit against you, claiming you contributed to the stunning of his cartooning arm. We were able to suppress that, too."

"Aren't they going to charge Brakeman with the murder of Nancy Vespa?"

"Frambosa has promised Barnum sweeping reforms, if he stays in power," said the computer. "No mention was made of cleaning up the Murdstone Crime Bureau or discouraging its habit of assassination."

Torres reached for the door handle. "I'm going to meet Peggy Freed in the Barnum Embarkation Terminal. She's finished up her assignment on Murdstone, too."

"So she'll be journeying home with you?"

"Yes."

"Separate cabins? I don't want the people in the home office to get the notion you're too intimate with the Barnum News Synd."

"Separate cabins," Torres assured him. He put a knobby hand on the door release.

"We brought you a going-away present," said the blonde android as he opened the rear door. She lifted a basket of fruit over the seat, handed it to Torres. "Don't they look delicious? You'd never guess they're synthetic. The bananas, for example, are made of—"

"Airplane glue and recycled bicycle tires." Torres took the basket.

"Well, yes. The oranges are pure lysine and cysteine, but I swear you won't be able to tell. The pips are made of vinyl so be sure to spit those out."

Torres lifted his single suitcase out with him. "Thanks."

"I'm always hopping from planet to planet," the computer told him.

"I'm sure I'll have another job for you soon again." Torres grinned at the mechanisms and walked away.

"Paging Mr. Torrey, Mr. Peter Torrey."

Torres climbed up out of his oit booth in the Barnum Embarkation Terminal bar where he was to meet Peggy Freed. "Here," he said to the wheeled robot who'd been rolling among the sunken booths.

"Mr. Peter Torrey?"

"I'm Peter Torres."

"Oh," said the copper-colored robot, rubbing its ball-shaped head with one of its hands. "With an S on the end and not a Y?"

"Give me the message."

"Well, I suppose even here at one of the crossroad ports of the known universe it's unlikely there'd be a Peter Torres and a Peter Torrey. Though stranger things have happened."

"The message?"

"Call the Frambosaville offices of the Barnum News Synd and ask for a Miss Peggy Freed," said the message service robot. "Does that sound like something intended for you and not this Torrey chap?"

"Indeed it does." Torres started for the phone alcove.

"No need to tip," called the robot.

When Torres asked the Barnum News's live receptionist for Peggy Freed he got instead a freckled young man with a small, orange-colored mustache. "Is Peggy there?"

"You must be Torres. I'm Bo Kittinger," said the freckled young man. "Peggy's told me a great lot about you. The way you handled yourself in the teeming jungles and the manner in which—"

"I'd like to talk to her."

"Peggy's at the palace."

"She's supposed to be here. We board our ship in a half hour."

Nodding, Kittinger said, "I know. Which is why she asked me to give you a call, Torres. I have what she left for me to tell you here

on my desk someplace. You look pretty good, Torres, considering all you went through on our little planet. I sometimes wish I had the time to get out more . . . Yeah, here it is." He paused to clear his throat. "Tell Pete I still love him very much, but it looks like the Frambosa regime is in real trouble over this hummel escapade. The whole darn Junta may well collapse and BNS wants me, because of the way I handled the Tio Mazda interview, to stay on here and cover events as they happen. It means a possible by-line series throughout the Barnum system, Pete. Know you'll understand. Was looking forward to making this homeward trip with you. Why don't you cancel your flight and wait around for me? I'd like that very much. Shouldn't be more than another three or so weeks. Please do stay, love. In haste, Peg.'" The freckled young man let the memo fall, smiling at Torres. "What shall I tell her?"

Torres narrowed his left eye. "Tell her no," he said. He broke the connection and went back to the bar to wait for his space flight.

The End