

*Ron Goulart*

# **SPACEHAWK INC.**

DAW BOOKS, INC.

DONALD A. WOLLHEIM, PUBLISHES

1301 Avenue of the Americas New York, N. Y. 10019

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Cover art by Hans Arnold.

**FIRST PRINTING, DECEMBER 1974**

123456789

**PRINTED IN U.S.A.**

## Chapter 1

He was glad to see the priest come through the wall.

Kip Bundy rolled out from under the heavysset catman, now distracted, who'd been pummeling him. He grabbed his trousers off one of the twelve silver bedposts of the floating bed, went hopping and dodging around the room as he tugged them back on.

"Can we not all work in harmony, brothers and sisters?" asked Father Cog, his right forefinger still smoking. "For truly, 'tis clearly the will of the Mysterious Something which—"

"Get the little fleshie before he hightails it through that hole in the wall!" shouted Murdstone Slim, the catman who'd been jumping up and down on Kip until recently.

Kip was six feet tall, with sandy hair, but he seemed small compared to the huge three-hundred-pound Slim. "Watch those slurs, Slim," he warned, stopping in front of the oval opening Father Cog had just cut in the wall of the bedroom. "Making fun of a man's size or components isn't considered—oof!"

Two slightly smaller catmen tackled Kip. One's head burrowed into his groin, the other got a shaggy grip on his throat.

"You ain't hardly a man," observed Murdstone Slim, "more a boy."

"He's twenty-seven," the girl on the floating bed pointed out. She was thin, lovely, silver-haired. Twenty-two years old and wearing a lycra all-season pajama top. The Rehab Bureau tattoo number showed on her bare upper arm.

"What is chronological age?" asked Father Cog. "For are we not all but babes in the eyes of the Mysterious Something which—"

"Break a couple of his limbs!" Slim urged the two catmen who were struggling with Kip.

"Unk," said one of them, as Kip managed to kick him in the knee.

"Ah, this violence," sighed the black-suited android priest. "Tis a sorrowful sight to the Mysterious Something which—" He raised his left hand, pointed his forefinger at the furry struggle. A sizzling yellow beam shot from the tip of his finger.

The catman who'd said "Unk" said it again. He swayed, going slack and falling over onto the tinted lucite floor.

"That's very neat," remarked Murdstone Slim. "How much would it cost me to have—"

Father Cog's middle finger hummed.

A sonic wave slammed into Murdstone Slim, lifted him up, threw him back. The catman's large furry head bonged into one of the dozen bedposts before he toppled down onto a spun-wire rug.

"I hope the Mysterious Something will forgive me for resorting to such measures. Yet, as several of the oldest texts tell us, it—"

"The other one!" The silver-haired girl waved her hand at Kip, who was being throttled by the remaining catman.

"Here now," said the android priest, turning. "We'll have no more of your brawling." His little finger sent a thin purple beam toward the cat-man's back.

"Yow!" he exclaimed, and collapsed on top of Kip.

"There now." The android smiled benevolently at the girl. "I've surely done a good afternoon's work for the Mysterious Something which—"

"Schmuck!" the girl said to him as she leaped from her bed. "He's going to smother."

Kip was still underneath the senseless catman, choking, waving his hands and trying to unseat him.

"Will you please help?" the girl asked the priest.

"To be sure, my dear. In fact, I have a finger here, some place, which has telekinetic abilities. I'll lift that oaf away in a jiffy." He aimed his right hand and pointed his ring finger.

A hymn started playing, but the catman remained weighing down Kip.

"Well, sir, may the Mysterious Something bless me if I can figure why that—"

"Your thumb, idiot," gasped Kip.

"Oh, so it is. I'm so involved with the work of the Mysterious Something here on Barnum that I sometimes forget, which finger is which." He cocked the thumb and the catman went flipping off onto the floor.

"Oh, dear sweet Kip," The girl put her hands on his shoulders, lifting him up. "Have they done terrible things to you?"

"No, they were talking about doing terrible things, but fortunately ... well, that isn't quite the word." He got to his feet, with the lovely girl's help.

"Tis all right, I expect no thanks." Father Cog slid his hands into his black pockets. "Now go ahead and kiss the lass, I'll turn me back."

Kip narrowed one eye. "What's wrong with your voice mechanism?"

"Not a blessed thing, me boy."

"You didn't have a brogue, if that's what that is, the last time I saw you."

Nodding his head, Father Cog replied, "Aye, lad, but that, I needn't remind you, was over a week ago. Up on the family satellite 'twas. Since then, me lad, a good deal of—"

"Peterkin," said Kip.

"Don't get angry and swear," said the girl, stroking Kip's cheek.

"Peterkin is my cousin," said Kip. "Peterkin Bobbs," vice president in charge of Research and Design for the Barnum division of Bundy Konglom Enterprises."

"You never talk much about your family."

"Me boy," said Father Cog, " 'twas indeed Peterkin, bless the lad, who modified me some. 'Twas his feeling, it was, that I should be a little mellower for the work I'm doing down here among the fallen and—"

"That simp," said Kip, striding up to the hole in the wall. "I told him not to go tinkering around with the basic designs."

"But 'tis a sad fact, lad, that Peterkin outranks you in the family company," reminded the mechanical priest. "Now, far be it from me to sermonize. Still and all, I can't help thinking that a lad with your potential would rise much higher in his own family's vast company if he didn't, well, fuck up so much."

"Your shoes," said the silver-haired girl. "You don't want to go storming out of here without your shoes, Kip."

Kip let his breath out through his nose and turned his back on the hole. "I guess I won't go storming out at all. Let Peterkin fiddle around, I'll stay here in the Fetlock Estates Minimum Security

Rehabilitation Condominium. Looking after our therapy machines is okay work for me."

"Would that I didn't have the news that I do have for you, me lad."

"What now?"

"Twas not merely to save your bacon that I burst in here, though the Mysterious Something knows I'm glad to do that," said Father Cog. "I was sent by your Uncle Wenzel to bring you home."

"Home?" Kip pointed at the ceiling. "Up to the satellite, you mean?"

The android pointed to the wall on their right.

"Actually, lad, the satellite's orbit pattern should have it in a position about there at this—"

"What does Uncle Wenzel want?"

"The Mysterious Something only knows. I'm to gather you up and deliver you to the connect-ship port in time for the next shuttle."

"Oh, sweet dear Kip," said the girl, sitting down on the edge of the bed and crossing her long lovely legs, "we're to be separated. For weeks, months, perhaps for an eternity."

"I'll be back tomorrow at the latest," Kip assured her.

"How little we know of our own future," said Father Cog.

"You hinting at something?"

"I can only suggest you don't make any appointments for tomorrow, not on this planet anyway."

Kip had been walking toward the seated girl. He stopped now. "Where's he sending me? This job here was supposed to last... as long as I wanted it to."

"Hum." A small, nervous lizard man in a lycra kimono was standing on the threshold of the hole in the wall. "Please, Mr. Bundy, Father Cog, don't think I'm ungrateful for all Bundy Konglom Enterprises has done for Fetlock Estates. On the contrary, this is one of the finest criminal and social misfit rehabilitation and readjustment centers in the entire Barnum System of planets. However..."

"We'll fix the hole," Kip told him.

"In fact, I have a finger for that," said Father Cog, examining his hands. "No, now that I think of it, it's a toe."

"Would that it were only a gaping hole ripped out of a lovely wall which was the problem," said Second Dr. Geechie, the acting head of the rehabilitation center. "Alas, it is not. Oh, no."

"Don't step on the catman," warned the girl.

Second Dr. Geechie had been in the process of climbing in through the hole. "I'm not in any way bigoted about alternate life-forms. We can't all be lizards, can we? Still, Mr. Bundy, catmen all over the floor.... It's a dreadful mess for someone to have to clean."

"They tried to kill him," explained the girl. "That's not Kip's fault. They broke in here and—"

"You're looking very fit, young lady," observed the lizardman as he plunged over the prone catman and into the girl's bedroom. "One would hardly guess that a few scant months ago you were a notorious brain-tapper."

"Thank you, Second Doctor."

"Which is why it saddens me to see you cavorting with young Bundy here."

"We weren't cavorting, Geechie," said Kip. "And even if we were cavorting, that's not a crime on this particular planet."

"I mustn't let my justified wrath get me off the main point." Geechie rubbed his dry green hands together. "These catmen I see before me ... I know why, or at least I've heard disturbing rumors as to why they came here to take revenge upon you." "A misunderstanding, Geechie," said Kip, grinning at him and easing toward the gap in the wall. "I'm not even going to press charges against them."

"The bioenergetics robots," continued the lizard doctor slowly. "The six bioenergetics robots donated so graciously by your family's company, Mr. Bundy. You tinkered with them."

"They were too stodgy."

"Stodgy they were, perhaps," said Geechie. "Now they are all playing whist, blackjack, coon-can and honeymoon bridge." He rubbed his scaly hands together once more. "Not only do they play cards with those patients entrusted to them, but they also cheat at it."

"No, they don't cheat," said Kip. "They beat Murdstone Slim and his cronies fair and square. See, Slim may be a cardsharp on Murdstone, but this is a more sophisticated planet. He was simply outclassed by my robots."

"Besides wliich," added the girl, "he allowed his passions, not his head, to rule him."

"Nevertheless," said Second Dr. Geechie, "I find myself with—"

"May the Mysterious Something bless and keep you, Doctor," put in Father Cog. He took hold of Kip's arm. "This clever lad and I have a fast-approaching appointment with a connect-ship. You needn't fear, BKE will put all your mechanisms back in topnotch order before many a day has passed."

"Goodbye, dear sweet Kip," said the girl.

Kip was yanked out into the corridor before he could reply.

## Chapter 2

"How the heck are you, Kipper?"

"Splendid, Peterkin."

"Oops, did I get lubricant on your tunic sleeve? Sorry as heck about that. I've been tinkering—"

"Speaking of tinkering, why does Father Cog have a brogue?"

Really humanizes him, doesn't it? But let's not stand around here in the corridors gabbing, Kipper. Uncle is pretty anxious to have a little gabfest with you. Oops, did I get that acid on your elbow. Oh, yeah, there's a patch of it eating the seam of my lab smock."

"What does Uncle Wenzel want?"

"He has some kind of family chitchat in mind, Kipper old kid. Do you see something right here on my ear?"

"A rust tick."

"Darn. I've been having trouble with those little buggers lately. They've completely infested Al Jolson."

"Who?"

"Not who, what. Al Jolson is an entertainment andy I'm working on in my spare time, special order for an entertainment complex out on Murdstone that calls itself Showbiz Heaven. Gee, it looks like I got blackface all over your back when I greeted you. Excuse it, please."

"Blackface makeup, that's something from your android work?"

"Al Jolson made himself up as a Negro person, got down on one knee and sang about his mother -Earth System, mid-twentieth century or thereabouts. It's quite interesting, Kipper old kid, when you realize a good deal of lizardman mother songs are really variants of—"

"You sure, Pete, you don't know what our uncle has in mind for me?"

"Honest injun, Kipper."

"It's not something you suggested to him, some exciting assignment at the far edges of the Barnum System maybe?"

"Heck no. I don't have that kind of drag with Unc anyhow, Kipper. You may think I do, on account of I'm a little higher up in the company than you are even though we're roughly the same age. But I really can't put a bug in his—"

"Okay. Here's his office door.">

"See you soonest, Kipper. Maybe we can have lunch before you embark. I remodeled the kitchen andies while you were away. The crepe chef, in particular, is greatly—"

"Embark?"

## Chapter 3

The silver door in front of Kip opened, then, before he could enter his uncle's office, wooshed shut again.

"Hold on, Kip," called out a voice on the other side of the door.

The door wobbled, reopened.

Kip dived through. "Where are you going to send me?"

"Sit down, we'll have a little gabfest."

"You've got to stop talking like Peterkin." Kip ignored the lounging chair which wheeled up and nudged against his leg.

His uncle was a long lean man of sixty, with crinkly white hair, window-plastic spectacles and an aluminum nose. He sat behind a desk made of the Bundy brand of hugging neoplastic. It was wrapped tightly around the older man, fitting itself to the contours of his lower body. "I hear you've been kicking up your heels down on Barnum again ... oh, ha ha ha!"

"Something funny in my conduct?"

"Ha ha! No, it's this silly desk tickling my toes," replied his uncle. "Every once in a while we get a silly piece of neoplastic and ... ha!"

Kip wandered over to the oval window which gave him a look at the planet Barnum. He thought for a few seconds of the silver-haired girl. "Hints," he said. "Hints are being dropped that I'm going to embark on a new job, on a new planet."

"Well, Kip, as a matter of fact," said Uncle Wenzel, "I might as well tell you that not everyone in the top echelons of the company is happy with you."

"Peterkin and who else?"

"Your cousin is very fond of you. He told me only yesterday he thought you were 'plenty okay' in his book."

Kip left the view hole. "Every time I improvise at all, everybody acts as though—"

"Converting those robots into mountebanks Kip," said his uncle. "We have enough to worry about with the now and then—oh, ha ha—now and then malfunctions of the products in our machine and mechanism divisions. There's no need for you to—"

"Playing cards, that's a lot better therapy than anything Peterkin or Second Dr. Geechie came up with."

"And cavorting with one of the inmates. Now, Kip, you know I'm not the kind of person to insist that the family name be kept spotless. However, you might ask yourself the next time you're about to cavort, 'Is this worthy of a Bundy? Is what I am about to do going to besmirch the honorable name of...?'"

"Did you ever say that while you were dropping your pants?"

Uncle Wenzel replied, "I never led the kind of life you do, Kip. Oh, not that I didn't... but let's get to the business at hand. Sit down, will you?" He gestured at the hugging neoplastic chair in front of his desk.

"I don't trust that particular chair. I suspect, maybe, it's a little gay."

"Really? I've never been very good at detecting that sort of thing. Once, as a result, the

Archbishop of Jupiter ... Well, where are my notes?

Yes, here. Could you at least squat? I like to look at a man eye to eye."

Kip carried a tin hassock from the corner, sat in front of the desk. "Where do you want me to go?"

"You have to understand that this job, Kip, isn't a punishment," began his uncle. "Not that there aren't those in the higher echelons who are dissatisfied with your nonchalant approach to the family business. This assignment, however, calls for both skill and daring."

"Oh, so?"

"You've never, I believe, been to the planet Malagra?"

"Malagra?"

"It's actually not as unpleasant as it's been painted, so they tell me."

"It's known as the pesthole of the Barnum System."

"Well, it is a pesthole, but there are compensations."

"Such as?"

"I'll give you a travel brochure before you leave."

"That's where you intend to ship me?"

"Malagra, yes. This assignment comes under the heading of trouble-shooting, and calls for both skill and—"

"Butlers," said Kip, snapping his fingers.

His uncle blinked. "As a matter of fact, yes. How'd you guess that?"

"I'm a lot better informed about what BKE is doing than you think," answered Kip. "About a month ago, at the suggestion of the Barnum government, and especially the Political Espionage Office, we shipped a dozen—"

"Ten," corrected Uncle Wenzel.

"Okay, ten of our new valet-butler androids, the improved MMG-762 models," continued Kip. "Usually such a small order isn't worth the trouble, but this was done at the insistence of PEO. Diplomatic relations with Malagra are touchy right now, and we depend on them for most of our dummler beans, synthetic gluten and malzbergium ore."

"Doing the government of our home planet a little favor is a lot cheaper than the old kickback system."

"What went wrong?"

"The MMG andies weren't sufficiently tested, because it was a rush job. Always is when you're involved with those Political Espionage boys. Well, some new testing results came in yesterday, based on experiments conducted with MMGs still here in our Barnum warehouse. They indicate, well, that there's a possibility, not a strong one perhaps, that under stress these mechanical butlers may refuse to serve. What's more, they got a very high potential surliness rating. Obviously, nobody wants a butler who's going to refuse to carry out the garbage or help you out of your tunic. Nobody wants a valet who's going to get salty with him."

Kip laughed.

"Is that chair bothering you?" his uncle asked.



"I was really laughing," he said. "I just realized the problem—we can't recall the androids."

"Obviously not, in this case," said Uncle Wenzel. "In a normal situation we could simply recall the damn things, make the necessary repairs and ship them back to the customers. Which is what we did when those masseuse androids developed cold extremities. This, as you realize, is different... a very ticklish situation."

"Does PEO know about it?"

"Oh, yes, they know," answered his uncle, rubbing at his aluminum nose. "Frankly, they're even more determined than our own board of directors that the MMGs we sent to Malagra don't get recalled. A recall of even one of them, so the Barnum government feels, might cause hard feelings. Lots of them up there at Malagra are very touchy. It could lead to a major political incident"

Kip said, "Suppose some of the android butlers do go blooey and start getting surly? That's going to make for an incident, too."

"So far, from what I've been able to find out, all of them are behaving well," said Uncle Wenzel. "Malagra, as is common with pestholes, doesn't have the best of communications systems. Each of the MMGs, as you may be aware, was sold to a different customer. Communications being what they are, we can't be completely certain of the exact status of each one."

Standing, Kip asked, "You want me to go there and repair them, huh?"

Uncle Wenzel blinked once again. "Well, as a matter of fact, yes. You are, when you put your mind to it, a very skilled young fellow." He began struggling, pushing at his hugging desk. "I want to get up now, idiot... oh, ha ha ha. Let loose."

Kip booted the desk in the side, causing it to release his uncle. "I don't know. I like what I've been doing at the rehabilitation center, I like most of the people. I don't—"

"There's no possibility of your going back there, Kip," said his uncle. "I might as well tell you that some of the board members wanted to transfer you to the contest division of our pseudo-soap division on Esperanza. I stood up for you, since, after all, your late father and I started this—"

"Okay, you don't have to bring Dad in. I'll go to Malagra."

"Good, very good, Kip." He walked to a stuffed calico table near the wall. "You have a very difficult job ahead of you, one that is going to require the utmost skill and daring. You have to locate each of the MMG androids, give them a checkup and make the repairs that are necessary." He took a sheet of faxpaper off the tabletop. "This seems to be a list of the customers.... Oh, and not only do you have to repair the damn things, you have to do it on the sly. None of the owners must know you've been at work, because that in itself may cause an incident."

"It's going to take skill and daring, sure enough."

"You can probably guess that some members of the board don't feel you can accomplish this. I believe you can."

"I can," said Kip. "When do I leave?"

His uncle was frowning down at another sheet of faxpaper. "This next isn't My idea exactly, Kip. Some of the fellows on the board thought it would be a good idea if you had someone to look after you on the flight out. The idea be—"

"Look after me? You mean a chaperon?"

"You could put it in those terms," replied his uncle. "This fellow seems to be highly dependable. Our Publicity Corps hired him to go out to Mala-gra to do a photo essay on our new kelp plant there. He has a list of credits which is quite impressive, been working on a lot of the Coult chain of magazines."

He's free-lancing at the moment, and his name is ... Palma. Yes, Palma. You'll be sharing a suite on the space-liner."

"That's splendid," said Kip. "Does he take me for walks around the decks and play games with me?"

"This is the board's idea, not mine. They feel an older, more responsible man will be a stabilizing influence for you."

"Okay, it's only a three-day trip, isn't it?" Kip nodded toward the calico table, "What else?"

"This shouldn't annoy you," said Uncle Wenzel as he picked up a third sheet. "You're going to need a cover story, some reason for being on Malagra. We're going to pretend you work for one of our subsidiaries out there."

"Which?"

"Spacehawk, Inc.," said his uncle. "That's our private investigating service, as you probably know. You won't mind pretending to be a detective?"

Kip grinned. "Nope, not at all."

## Chapter 4

The green girl screamed.

She stumbled, clutching a bunched-up diaphanous lycra pajama top to her green, breasts, out of the stateroom and into the corridor.

"Oh, it's terrible," she said in a small calm voice.

"Umf!" said a doubled-over lizardman as he fell out backwards onto the glossy imitation hardwood flooring of the corridor.

"Oh, it's brutal," said the naked green girl. "It really is."

"Pay this no mind, sir," said Kip's porter robot, a tank-shaped, six-armed model. "There's always much conviviality on B Deck."

The lizardman got himself up, muttering, "I'll fix that skinhead." He flung himself back into stateroom B22.

"Oh, it's going to be horrible." The pretty green girl put her hands up to her ears, which caused the bunched-up diaphanous lycra pajama top to fall from her grasp.

"I believe you dropped this." Kip retrieved the top and handed it to her.

"Oh, thank you," she said. "My name is Zita, what's yours?"

"Kip Bun—"

"No, on second thought you better not tell me, or they'll think I'm friendly with you and do terrible horrible things to you like they're trying to do to poor Mr. Palma in there."

"Is that Palma the photographer?"

"Oh, you have heard of him? He told me he was universally famed, but I thought that was maybe only a line."

"Yow!" A bald man in his early thirties came shooting out of the girl's stateroom.

"Oh, Mr. Palma, if you have a minute, here's someone who'd—"

A shaggy paw reached out, jerking Palma back into the heart of the brawl.

"We had best move along, sir," suggested the porter robot, jiggling Kip's two suitcases. "Plenty of similar fun to be had on A Deck where you're lodged."

Ignoring him, Kip stepped over to the doorway of B22.

Three men were in a tangle with the bald photographer, who was, Kip noticed now, wearing only a suit of all-season underwear and one healthsock. One of the attacking men was the lizard who'd fallen into the space-liner corridor; the other two were husky catmen.

"Need any help?" Kip asked Palma.

"I wouldn't turn it down," replied the photographer as one of the catmen tossed him against the bunk.

"This makes me feel like Father Cog." Kip drooped a hand into his tunic pocket, came out with a small silver tube. He aimed it at the lizard-man, squeezed it.

The lizard froze, fist two inches from Palma's jaw.

Kip next used the test model stungun on the two catmen.

It froze them, too.

Palma wiped his perspiring scalp. "You think that's quite sporting, a stungun?"

"Very few brawls are run along sporting lines." Kip dropped it back into his pocket. "Usually—at least that's been my experience— three guys jump you when you haven't got your pants on."

"That's been my experience, too," said Palma. "My name is Palma, I'm one of the better known—"

"I know, the girl told me. I'm Kip Bundy."

"Did you get a good look at her? Ah, those ka-nockas she's got are fantastic. And green. I've seen bigger ones, and greener ones, but never such big green yonkers as that girl's in possession of. ... Kip Bundy, did you say? Hey, we're roommates on this voyage."

"My uncle said you'd be a stabilizing influence."

"I usually am," admitted the photographer. "Unless I happen to become fascinated with a pair of sensational mambos. And then, being the artist I am, I'm compelled to photograph them."

"That why you don't have your clothes on?"

"No, that's the result of an entirely different impulse." Palma rubbed his bald head again, began searching the stateroom for his garments.

"Oh, how impressive," said Zita, peeking into her cabin. "You overcame them all." Very cautiously she stepped in.

"Do you happen to know where my other sock is, wonder girl?"

"No." Zita glanced around. "Oh, there it is. Under Mr. Martin's foot. Can you tug it out?"

"Never mind, I've got more socks up in our room."

"Oh, wait, that's not Mr. Martin, it's Mr. Marlowe." She tapped one of the stunned catmen. "Reed Marlowe, Brett Martin over there and Rod Marshall. Yes, that's it."

"Reed, Brett and Rod," explained Palma while he located his trousers and got them on, "are all gainfully employed by William Carlos Munt."

"Is he universally famous, too?" asked Kip.

"He's a big man on Malagra."

"And I," added Zita, "am a protegee of Mr. Munt's. He's the one who had me dyed green. Do you like this shade?"

"Goes with your hair," said Kip.

"Oh, he dyed that, too. I used to be a blonde with very fair skin. You know, the kind who gets all pink if they're out in the sun for more than—"

"Zita, my associate and I," said Palma, fully dressed except for the one sock, "had best take our leave. You'll explain to William Carlos, no doubt, that my motives were entirely artistic and there was really no need to have his goons descend upon me."

"I'll surely try, Mr. Palma."

Palma tapped the camera hanging around his neck. "Even though I'm offended by his actions, I'll send him some proofs. And now, farewell, Zita. It wouldn't be wise for us to meet again during the voyage."

"Oh, no, it might lead to further horrible things happening." Zita turned to Kip. "How long will Mr.

Marlowe and Mr. Martin and Mr. Marshall stay that way?"

"At least an hour."

"Oh, good. That'll give me time to do some reading." She stroked Palma's bald head once before showing them out.

## Chapter 5

"William Carlos Munt," said Palma from the floating morris chair in their stateroom, "is what you call a kingpin in the rackets on Malagra. I worked on an expose of him a while back, for *Muckrake* magazine. He's got an interest in most of the gadget parlors, plus the brain-stim bars. Probably half of the wild talent heavies work for him ... telek-heisters, brain-tappers, evil-eye throwers and so forth. Munt is also very big in various smuggling ventures, though information and details on that are harder to come by."

"Maybe you shouldn't have become attracted to his girl."

"No, he won't do anything beyond what he did," said Palma. "It's considered bad form to knock off journalists in his circle. Of course, if I could curb my fascination with chabobs I'd avoid a lot of these tussles. When you get into your thirties, which you'll find out some day, a rough-house isn't much fun anymore."

"I don't even enjoy them now." Kip gave his suitcases to his wardrobe closet and it began to unpack them with its many tiny hands. "It's because of a ruckus I got into on Barnum that I'm being shipped out to Malagra."

"Ruckus over a girl?"

"There was a girl in the background."

"What sort of... no, I've got to get my mind off boobs," said Palma. "Particularly if I'm going to be a stabilizing influence on you."

Kip asked, "You've been out to Malagra before?"

"Twice."

The pale blue walls of their cabin quivered, very slightly. From a small grid in the pale blue ceiling a voice announced, "Welcome aboard the SS *Cachalot*. My name is Captain Elder and if you ever have any problems bring them to me on the Lido Deck. We are now departing for the outer reaches of the Barnum System. Bon voyage!"

"What's Malagra like?"

"A pesthole," said Palma.

## Chapter 6

It was raining on Malagra. A hard-falling, pink-tinted rain clattered on the aluminum roof of the disembark tube, splashed on the rutted and muddy fields beyond the space-liner landing area.

A little chunk of Old English treacle brittle came sailing through the steamy air of the tube to ping on Palma's bare head.

"We ain't forgetting you, Mr. Cleanhead," called someone far back in the slowly moving crowd.

Turning, the photographer said, "Was that Reed Marlowe or Brett Martin who flung the *dornik*?"

Kip looked back. "The one with the white stripe down his nose. He's giving us the finger now, or the claw in his case."

"We got your number, too, schoolboy."

"You have to admit," said Palma, returning his attention to their fitful progress toward the customs dome, "I've been a great help to you so far, Kip. You've barely landed and already one of the biggest thugs on the planet, plus several of his minions, has you on his—oof!"

"I'm dreadfully sorry," said the crisp, white-suited young woman in front of them. "I seem to have thrust the ferrule of my all-season umbrella into your crotch, sir."

"Think nothing of it, miss." Palma eyed her front, nodded to himself. "Under these conditions it's difficult not—oof!"

"There, I've gone and done it again. You must think I'm a dreadful ninny."

"Not at all, you seem quite bright," Palma assured her.

Kip glanced out the porthole-style window they were slowly passing. Pink rain, muddy fields and, far off, scatters of stunted, leafless trees.

"That's very nice of you to say, Mr.... ?"

"Palma," said Palma. "And you?"

"I'm Miss Malagra," replied the dark-haired girl.

"Any relation to the planet?"

"It's not actually my real name, you see. It's, rather, a title I won. In a beauty contest."

"Well, congratulations."

"I think I won. See, I'm not actually a native of this planet. To be truthful, this is the first time I've ever set foot—I'm sorry, did I jab your groin again?"

"No, my solar plexus that time."

"I'm sorry anyway. As to the contest, we all sent our pictures in and I won and they invited me to come out here to Malagra and reign. Except now I hear there's some resentment amongst the local girls because they think an offplanet—"

"Step lively, step lively," suggested the dented robot beside the doorway they had reached. "Have your passports and medical card in readiness, please."

"Would you hold my umbrella, Mr. Palma, while I fetch out my passport?" requested Miss Malagra. "I always stuff it between my nabobas."

"Is that what you call them?"

The girl inserted two fingers into the slit of her tunic. "Is that an offensive term to you? I'm never sure if—"

"No, no, it's merely that I thought I knew most of the terms. Nabobas. It's similar to kabobs and chabobbas. I wonder where ..."

"Maybe I've been pronouncing it incorrectly," said Miss Malagra as she produced her passport and papers. "The gentleman who introduced me to the word had a tendency to mumble."

"I think you've got it right. Nabobas ... yeah, that sounds okay to me."

"Mr. Kip Bundy?" A very small catman in a one-piece orange business suit approached them from across the dome they'd just stepped into. "Do I have the pleasure of addressing Mr. Kip Bundy?"

"I'm Kip Bundy."

The catman purred, bowing. "I am Monsignor Jupō. Though a dignitary of the Church of the Electrified Buddha, I also hold a high position in the government of this territory," he said. "I've come to greet you on behalf of the rulers of the territory. On behalf of President Lakkon, Vice President Jadgor, Associate Vice President Giesy, Secretary of Agriculture Zollaria—"

"I'm overwhelmed, or nearly so," said Kip. "Now I'd better see about getting through customs."

"There is no necessity of that," said the mon-signor. "I have taken care of all the details and am here to escort you to your hotel, you and your entourage."

"That's fine. This is Palma."

"And Miss Malagra," added Palma, "an important part of the team."

"You're very attractive, young lady, by human standards," said Monsignor Jupō, bowing. "Now, if you'll accompany me to the—"

Out in the rain there was a whomping explosion. It shook the curving walls of the customs dome, unsettling the crowd of new arrivals.

The monsignor stomped one foot, angry. "Damn, there goes the limousine." He hurried to a window and looked out. "Yes, I was afraid of that. Blown to smithereens." He turned, bowing. "One of our radical groups seems to have picked today, of all days, to blow up the state limousine, Mr. Bundy. It will take a good deal of time to obtain a new vehicle here, plus a new driver. They seem to have blown my driver to smithereens along with the car. May I recommend our nearly completed rapid transit system, and provide you each with a handful of free tokens?"

"You could ride in to town on my float," offered Miss Malagra. "There's supposed to be a flower-decked float here for me."

"We'll just take a landcab," said Kip.

Monsignor Jupō bowed. "Let me repeat my sincere welcome to you all. Now I had better see about cleaning up the debris of this unfortunate accident." He went backing away through the crowds.



## Chapter 7

"Hey, schlep," called the shiny black landcar, "how am I doing in back?"

Kip, alone now and en route to the capital city offices of Spacehawk, Inc., slowed. "You're okay."

There didn't seem to be anybody in the parking vehicle. "Thanks, pal."

Three dingy six-year-old boys came skittering out of an alley. They had wheel-removing gear clutched to their tattered chests.

"Buzz off, brats," warned the car.

"Up yours," said the lead urchin. He made a grab for one of the decorative silver hubcaps.

"Oh, yeah?" A sizzling commenced in the hubcap.

"Holy gee!" The little boy's hair stood up; his raggedy cap went flying off.

"Now, amscray," the car told them.

The three little boys scattered.

Frowning, Kip walked on. The tough-talking car reminded him of a BKE project Peterkin had been anxious to get approval on. Nothing had come of it, though. He stopped, went back to read the maker's name on the front of the machine.

"Lose something, rubberneck?"

There was more than one speaker outlet apparently. "Trying to read your name," said Kip, squatting.

"The name is Ace," said the car.

"Not your own name, the name of the manufacturer."

"There's only one like me on this planet, and that's me," Ace said. "Hard as nails, tough as they come and ready for bear."

"They don't have bears on Malagra."

"If they ever do, wise guy, I'll be ready. Who the hell are you, if I may ask?"

"Merely curious." Kip resumed walking.

"See you around, junior," called the parked car.

A man with rusty arms was lying on the sidewalk in front of the Spacehawk, Inc. office building. "Nix, nix, leave me lay," he whispered when Kip bent to help him up.

"I thought you'd had an attack."

"This is my mode of earning a living," explained the sprawled cyborg. "Care to drop a coin in my cup?"

"What cup?"

"Shit, those bastards stole my cup again." He sat up, swiveling his shaggy head around. "What a pesthole this is."

Handing him a coin, Kip said, "Maybe you can carry this around with you till you get another cup."

"Another cup? Shit, do you know what panhandling cups cost nowadays? Especially the Earth Danish-style imports I go for. Naw, it's back to the cupped hand for me."

There was another man slumped in the corridor inside. A sign on his chest read, "Self-induced drug stupor. Do not disturb."

Kip stepped over him and into the Spacehawk, Inc. reception room.

It was empty, Except for a hugging neoplastic chair and a lucite table piled high with old book spools. The spools included the complete works of Bulwer Lytton, several by Charles E. Fritch and one by Roland Pertwee.

"Ah," said a blurred voice. An inner door opened. A stocky man of thirty-seven looked out. He was in the process of being shaved by a parasite razor. "You must be —what is it?— young Bundy. Good to see you. Have a nice trip out?" The small black razor zizzed up his pink left cheek. "Come on in, come on in."

"You're Buck Kirkwood?" asked Kip, entering.

Something thumped against the plyo window of the office. Kirkwood flinched. "I don't know where those little devils get bricks to throw," he murmured. "Hasn't been a brick building in this quarter for a couple of decades. Yes, I'm —what is it?— Buck Kirkwood. Good to have you with us — what is it?— Bundy." Half the floor was unrugged. Kirkwood's metal desk sat over on the rugged half. He got behind it, scratching absently at the crawling razor.

"This isn't an inspiring part of town."

"There is no good section in this pesthole," said Kirkwood, trying to sit down, "Actually the street crime statistics for our area are comparatively good. Did I introduce myself? My name is — what is it?— Buck Kirkwood."

"My uncle asked me to stop in, Mr. Kirkwood. You're supposed to provide me with some credentials and—"

"I wish those little assholes would stop with the bricks." Kirkwood gave up trying for the chair. He held onto the desk edge. "Let me be brutally frank with you —what is it?— Bundy. I have a drinking problem. It wouldn't be so bad, except I'm also fond of gadgets, brain-stim, illicit needle puncturing, massive doses of glucose and fructose and illicit megadoses of Vitamin E. I'm not trying to justify my conduct, you understand, but when you're stuck in a pesthole, you've got to do something."

Nodding, Kip asked, "Do we do much business out of this office of Spacehawk, Inc.?"

"I'll be brutally honest with you, Bundy—aha, got it that time!" said Kirkwood. "No, we do not. You're only the second client this month."

"And I'm not a client."

"That's true, brutally true," acknowledged the Spacehawk, Inc. detective. "I really ought to stop smoking. It's making me dizzy lately. Do you ever feel dizzy? No, you're probably too young. Now then, what can I do for you?"

"Some identification, something to show anyone who asks what I'm up to. I want to pass as an operative for Spacehawk, Inc."

"Isn't that a grand name for a detective agency? Spacehawk, Ltd."

"Spacehawk, Inc."

"As you say, it's a grand old name. And, young Bundy, I'm going to do more than merely provide you with identification. I'm going to lend you my car."

"That's not necess—"

"It is, it is," insisted the detective. "Besides which, I cleared all this with your uncle, via tele-portgrams, an hour ago. Or maybe it was two hours. I may be groggy but I'm efficient."

"Okay, I'll take the car."

"It's a son of a bitch, that car," said Kirkwood "Nasty and mean ... sometimes the things it says to me. It breaks my heart. You know, even when you're hardboiled, you don't like somebody calling you schlep and putz all the livelong day, especially when that someone is supposed to be your car."

"That's your car, Ace out there?"

"Ace, that son of a bitch."

"Look, I don't—"

"It's all settled. Now listen, I've also cooked up a great cover story for you. I got you a client."

"A client. Why do I—?"

"With a client, schlep, you've got a perfect excuse for going around anywhere in this pesthole. Especially with this client, since she's looking for her lost —what is it?— her lost brother."

"I have to drag some forlorn girl around with me? Is that all settled between you and Uncle Wenzel, too?"

"Who? Oh, yeah, Uncle Wenzel. All settled."

"Who's the girl?"

"Her name is —what is it?— April Arthur."

"April Arthur," repeated Kip. "I don't know if it's fair."

There was a knock on the door.

"Could you, since I'm a little wobbly, catch that, Bundy?"

Kip went to the door and opened it.

A slim, blonde girl was standing there. "I'm April Arthur," she said, smiling tentatively at him.

Kip was never the same after that.

## Chapter 8

The waiter rolled across the living room of the suite, waggling and lurching, and presented Palma with the tray. He bowed, his head whacking the cover of the copper serving dish. "Ah, forgive it, effendi."

The bald photographer rescued the serving dish just as the waiter robot stumbled, falling against the light-strip floor lamp. "You need some air in that right rear tire of yours," he pointed out

"You ain't just whistling Dixie, bwana." Using one of his extendible arms the waiter got himself upright.

Palma lifted the lid off the dish. "What's this on top of the sandwich?"

"Lettuce perhaps?"

"I refer to this foreign substance here."

"Ah, that is neopaint, which fell from the peeling wall of the hotel kitchen, sahib," answered the robot. "Nothing to get your bowels in an uproar about."

"Okay, that'll be all."

"Could you, effendi, give me a push toward the door. I'm not so very good in low gear anymore."

Using his foot, Palma obliged. "God speed," he said.

The door of the suite opened before the lurching robot reached it.

"Things are going great," announced Kip. He stepped aside to let the waiter wobble out.

Palma was peering between the slices of gluten bread at the slice of ham-flavor soyloaf. "Could that be more flecks of paint? No, because paint doesn't have little tiny legs. What things are going great?"

Kip sat in a liquid-filled tube chair, bounced up to his feet, circled the room, "My client," he said. "She's ... I don't know. She's ... I can't quite put it into words."

"What sort of tits does she have?"

Kip said, "I didn't notice."

Urging the tiny fleck-like insect to take flight from the soyloaf, Palma said, "You must be falling in love."

"That's possible, now that you mention it. April is ... I don't know."

"The young lady is named April?"

"April Arthur and—"

"Does she happen to have a brother?" He let the sandwich slap shut.

"She does, yes. His name is Dillon Arthur, do you know him?"

"Not directly, but a guy named Dillon Arthur got in touch with the local stringer for *Muckrake Magazine* a couple of months ago," said Palma. "Implied he had a story, something big, for the magazine. He never followed through. Maybe I ought to talk to him."

"He's been missing for three weeks."

"And his sis wants to find him?"

"She came to Spacehawk, Inc. to hire a detective." Kip tried sitting again. "That's not much of a detective agency, by the way, the local branch."

"How do you tie in with the girl's problem?"

"It's Uncle Wenzel's idea, he and this guy Buck Kirkwood who runs the local Spacehawk office. To make my cover more convincing, I'm supposed to pretend I'm looking for April's brother. That'll give me an excuse for roaming through the various territories of Malagra."

Palma, after inspecting the inner workings of the sandwich once more, said, "As I recall, Dillon Arthur works for you folks, too."

"He heads up the Malagra office of the Bundy Servomech Publicity Division." Kip tugged a sheet of faxpaper out of a pocket. "In his public relations capacity Arthur traveled all over the planet. Matter of fact, he hit a good many of the towns and cities and encampments where I have to do my surreptitious repair work."

Palma set the copper dish atop a balloon table. "Pretending to hunt for him will be a pretty good cover then."

"I'm not going to be pretending," said Kip, standing up. "I am going to find him."

Grinning, Palma said, "I deduced as much." He crossed and took the list of MMG android owners from Kip. "Does the girl have any idea where he was last seen?"

"In a territory known as Wilds B," replied Kip. "Know anything about it?"

"It's a lot worse than Wilds A."

"Well, Wilds B is also one of the places we've got an MMG customer."

"Could be Dillon Arthur is more tied in with your repair problem than you think."

"What do you mean? Did he say something to your stringer?"

"No, it's only a hunch," said Palma. "After lo these many years in the muckraking business, I tend to get hunches." He returned the list to Kip. "I'll probably cross paths with you myself. A couple of your satisfied customers are near places where I'm going to be shooting pictures."

"I'd like," said Kip, "to talk to your local stringer, see if he can tell me anything about Arthur."

"He's with the local thermopaper. We can drop over now to—"

"No, I'm going to have dinner with April. Tomorrow, though, for sure."

"My curiosity about her is waxing," said Palma. "What's she like?"

"She's ... I don't know. . . . She's . . . well, I don't know."

"Never mind." Palma went over and took a bite of his sandwich.

## Chapter 9

Dozens of three-foot-high robots were cluttering the corridors of the thermopaper offices. They were shuffling, muttering.

"Paper's having a newsboy strike," explained Palma.

"Scab!" accused one of the small newsboy robots.

"On the contrary, I'm a working stiff myself," said the bald photographer, "and have a good deal of sympathy for your cause."

"Wuxtry! Wuxtry!" cried another little robot.

"Zepp's office is around the next bend," Palma told Kip.

"Hum?"

"Zepp, the stringer we're calling on. You remember my regaling you with yarns about Zepp's many stringing achievements for *Muckrake*, don't you?"

"Oh, yeah, probably." Kip almost walked into a cluster of little chromed newsboys.

"Isn't one of the first rules of the private op business not to fall in love with your clients?"

"You know how it is with a new job," said Kip, "takes a while to learn all the rules."

The photographer reached out to push a door open. "Here's Zepp's office."

There appeared to be no one in the square orange-walled office. Behind the desk something was making a low groaning sound.

Palma sprinted behind the desk.

Kip joined him. "That's not Zepp," he said.

"No, Zepp is a human-type, as you and I." Palma ran his hands over the front of the fallen secretarial android. "Somebodys used a disabler on this guy, and possibly a brainbox-tap."

"Trying to find out what he knows," said Kip. "He is Zepp's assistant, isn't he?"

"Right, so what he knows Zepp knows." Palma got the stunned android propped against the wall in a sitting position.

"Can't be a coincidence." Kip took a palm-size disk out of a pocket, leaned and placed it on the neck of the droning android. "Let's find out what he told his inquisitors."

"Blah blah," said the android.

Kip peeled off the disk, frowning, and reset the dial on its surface. He slapped it back onto the synthflesh.

"Blahblahblah," said the android now.

"They washed the brainbox clean of everything." Kip pocketed the disk.

"That's the niftiest drain I've yet encountered."

"A BKE project, in the experimental stages still," Kip said. "I brought a few gadgets along with me from home."

"I noticed." Palma went to the door and called into the hall. "Who's been in here so far this morning?"

"Not us, mister."

"None of your beeswax."

"Scab!"

"Okay," said Palma, "and where's Zepp?"

"Not here."

"Don't know, don't care."

"Scab!"

"Sick, home on account of illness."

"We'd best pay Zepp's home a visit." Palma pushed out of the newspaperman's office.

## Chapter 10

Snow was falling in Zepp's neighborhood.

"Why the snow?" Kip asked.

"Landlords are harrasing this area again." Palma flicked snow off his bare scalp. "Some kind of countermove to a tenant strike a while back."

A cyborg dog was sniffing, cautiously, at a man asleep in the gutter. Snow was collecting all along the man's broad back.

*Spong!*

A section of noryl sidewalk cracked just ahead of them.

They skirted it, crossed the rutted street to the lucite-block building where the missing stringer lived.

The garbage processing chute in the lobby was malfunctioning. Its flap door kept opening, tossing out leaves of imitation lettuce, remains of candy-coated tomatoes, tangles of soygetti, lumps of all-purpose gravy compound, feet and heads of digestible plastic chickens.

Kip and Palma dodged through the spray of garbage, reached the elevator entrance.

The doors of the cage were open. The elevator was muttering to itself. "Sizzle sizzle muzzle rizzle ..."

"Might be better," suggested Palma, "to use the ramp."

As they approached the door of Zepp's third-floor apartment Kip got a little plyo cube out of his side pocket. "Wait before we announce ourselves." Crouching, he set the cube on the neo-linoleum carpeting.

The tiny block skittered up to the door, rubbed against it, then came rolling, like a dice cube, back to Kip. It was glowing red.

"What's that indicate?" Palma asked.

"Booby trap inside, set to go off if we open the door," replied Kip, after reading two sides of the cube.

"Perhaps we ought to try the emergency chute on the outside of the building."

Kip glanced up and down the silent corridor before taking a six-inch-long metal rod from another pocket. He aimed it at a section of wall three feet to the left of the door.

In thirty seconds an oval, man-size, was cut out of the wall.

"We can go in this way."

"Have you got another gadget that fixes walls?" asked Palma as he stepped through into the living area. "Zepp may not care to have a porthole here."

"I don't think he's going to object."

"Zepp?" called out Palma. "You here?"

"Somebody was here."

The aluminum and grout-hide sofa had been thrown against the triangular corner mirror. All the data boxes and spool housers were dumped together in a heap next to the radiance outlet.



Another android, similar to the one they'd found in Zepp's office, was stretched out on the floor next to a wine-filled tube chair. It was making a soft blubbering noise.

"Very thorough, these guys." Palma scanned the room. "Even if they're not very good at cleaning up afterward."

The two of them searched the whole of the three-room apartment. Zepp was not there.

"He must have known something important," said Palma finally.

"I don't think we're ever going to find out what."

## Chapter 11

"Scatter, you little schleps!" crowed the car as it went barreling along the jungle trail.

Its rocketing advent had caused a gathering of small blue monkeys to take to the trees.

"Hey, Ace," said Kip from what was supposed to be the driver's seat, "stop chasing the wildlife."

Ace swung close to the edge of the tangled trail to sideswipe a curious orange baboon. "Set 'em up in the next alley."

After another futile twist of the control rod, Kip shrugged and leaned back. "Might as well relax and enjoy it," he said. "I can't seem to control it. When we stop maybe I can—"

"It's all right as it is," said April, who was in the seat beside Kip. "You ought to work on accepting people as they are without—"

"Ace is a car, a servomechanism, not a person."

"The basic point is the same," said the girl. "It took me a long time to—"

"You're sort of critical of me this morning. After all I—"

"Perhaps you're right." She reached over, placed her hand on his. "I suppose I'm always a little unsettled when I start any kind of journey, especially one this important."

"Now," announced Ace through one of its indoor speakers, "we take a little shortcut I know about."

"No, stick to—"

The car leaped off the trail, heading for a grove of high crimson bamboo. A series of metal arms, each bearing a machete, popped out of the hood and swiftly hacked the bamboo out of the way.

"Notice," added Ace, "that you don't feel a thing, we continue to cruise along smooth as a feather."

April said, "I'm really very worried, Kip, after what you told me last night, about the stringer and all. His apartment being torn up, the man himself missing."

"Okay, he's missing, but we don't know he's dead," said Kip. "They may be holding him some place. Kirkwood is going to—"

*Thunk!* A large six-legged green sloth landed on the hood, blinked through the windshield at them before slouching off.

"Beat it, creep," warned the speeding car, "or I'll put your tuchis in a sling."

April said, "They, whoever they are, seem damn efficient. I can't help feeling—"

"We're going to find your brother, alive."

She smiled fleetingly. "I appreciate what you're attempting to do, Kip."

"Not just an attempt," he told her.

"I'm afraid all you're going to do is screw yourself up with your family. From what—"

Kip laughed. "I'm as screwed up as I can get now."

"Yes, but your real job here on Malagra is to fix those andies," the girl said. "I'm only supposed to be a prop."

"That was the original plan," admitted Kip, "but I'm modifying it."

"Which is what always gets you in trouble, isn't it?"

He shrugged his right shoulder. "We'll find your brother and fix the machines," he said. "Your brother visited, or at least was intending to visit, quite a few of the places where we have MMG customers."

"Yes, though he didn't tell me why he was—"

"Hold on to your lids," cautioned Ace.

The car went sailing across a wide stream. It landed a few feet short of the far side, splashing green muddy water up and around.

"Misjudged that a smidgen," muttered Ace as it spun its wheels and got them onto the shore.

"Dillon didn't say why he was going to call on this first guy on my list, on Rich Mowber?"

"No, I don't know. Something to do with his work probably, I'm not sure."

"Buzz off, jerks!" said Ace.

A half-dozen gigantic silver and blue snakes had dropped out of the thick foliage above. They were twisting and twining on the hood and windshield.

"See how you like a little jolt, fellas!"

The hood sizzled. The serpents went up into the air, some of them straightening out to their full ten-foot length, and then fell by the wayside.

"When I say no joyriders, I mean no joyriders."

Kip watched the girl for a moment. "From what Palma tells me, and from what I got out of Kirkwood before he fell asleep the last time, Malagra gets worse from here on," he said. "We're barely into Wilds B and already—"

"I know what to expect," said the girl. "I did some research on the planet before I came out here."

"Well, I'm ... It's great to have you along, April, but maybe ... I don't know if it's safe."

"I can handle myself," she said.

"You forget, kiddo," put in Ace, "you got me to look after you both. With Ace on the—oops!"

The car had rolled over something which crackled and gave way beneath them. They went plunging down into a deep man-made hole in the ground.

## Chapter 12

A huge shaggy young man, dressed in a forlorn pair of celanese camping shorts, leaped down into the pit. He landed, flat-footed, on the hood. "This here is a highway robbery," he announced. "We'd be much ob—yowie!"

"Exercise those gunboats, clodhopper." Ace had sent an electric shock through the hood.

Two more shaggy heads, one wearing a khaki-colored wide-billed cap, showed up at the pit edge. "What for are you jigging and howling, Woody?"

"Yowie!" repeated the shocked highwayman, still hopping from foot to foot.

"Tell them to back off," said Kip.

"Hit the road, punks," advised Ace from several of its speakers. It switched off the shock mechanism.

Woody slowed in his hopping, ceased. "Oowhee! That was surely something, I hope to tell you," he said. "Now, where was I? Oh, yeah. This here is a high—"

"The next jolts going to fry your tuchis, buddy," warned Ace. "So scram."

"Can it," asked April, still somewhat joggled from the drop into the pit, "drive out of this hole?"

"Can you?"

"Sure thing. I got only to shift to treads, then we're off to the races."

"Hey, you down there in the smarty ass car," called the shaggy young man with the cap. "I guess as how you don't know who you're messing around with."

Kip touched April's hand. "I'll see if I can negotiate with these guys."

"Let me cream 'em," requested the car.

"Well try negotiating first." Kip opened his door, swung out of the car. He climbed up onto the hood next to the shaggy Woody.

"Ahem," said Woody, who was squatting and rubbing at his hairy ankles. "This here is a highway robbery and—"

"Who's the boss?"

The one with the cap shouted down, "No bosses in this outfit, friend. We is all equal. I suppose you and your smart-aleck car ain't yet aware as to whom you're messing with here."

"That's true."

"Well, sir, we're the Boy Scout Liberation Army."

The three shaggy young men watched Kip, searching for some sign of recognition.

"Oh, so?" he said.

"The Boy Scout Liberation Army?" said Woody hopefully. "You must of heard of us, we're world-famous almost."

"That explains it," said Kip. "This isn't my home world." He noticed several badges and medals attached to Woody's shorts. "You've got a lot of decorations."

Woody blushed, buffing at some of the brighter medals with blunt fingertips. "Aw, I ain't got as many as Merle and Pinto. That's Merle and Pinto up there."

"If you knew the local reputation of the Boy Scout Liberation Army," called down Merle, the one with the Boy Scout cap, "you'd know we're devils in human form."

"Ruthless," added Woody. "We're absolutely heartless."

"You used to be Boy Scouts, is that it?"

Woody nodded. "We come out to Wilds B on a camping trip 'bout three years back," he explained. "You know, you're a Boy Scout they always got you camping somewheres. So we, that being me and Merle and Pinto, we liked it so much hereabouts we decided to stay on. We cold-cocked our scout master, robbed the other pansy scouts and we been living by our wits ever since."

"Does that pay well?"

"We do pretty darn good," shouted Merle.

"That's for sure," agreed Woody. "We loot and pillage quite a bit. Ain't above a little rapine now and again."

"Well, I tell you," said Kip. "I'm working on a fairly important assignment right now. I don't mind falling into a pit—it adds a little excitement to the journey. But we just don't have time to be looted and pillaged. So if you'll climb back up to your friends, Woody, we'll be on our way."

"She-it," said Woody. "We're the masters of this situation. We tell you what to do, not you tell us what to do."

"Punch him in the face a few good ones," urged Pinto. He produced a blaster rifle and aimed it down at Kip. "I'll see he fights fair, and lets you whomp him good."

"You guys recall," asked Kip, "what happened to Woody a few minutes back?"

"When he was flopping around like a hoppy toad, do you mean?"

"Exactly," said Kip. "If you guys don't all go away now, we'll have to do much worse to you."

"Hit him in the nuts, Woody," suggested Pinto.

Kip turned toward the windshield of the car. "Ace, can you take out those two up there while I handle this one?"

"Want them iced permanent?"

"No, just disable them long enough for us to get going again."

"Okay, sure thing," replied the car.

An instant later two thin silver rods rose out of the front section of the hood. Each one produced a tiny binging sound.

"Good golly!" exclaimed Merle. The thin purplish beam of light from the left-hand rod hit him between the eyes. His cap erupted into the air. He lifted, made a grab for it and slapped down flat on his face.

Similar things happened to Pinto.

"Holy gee," murmured Woody.

Kip swung on the distracted BSLA member. He connected with Woody's chin.

The shaggy young man slumped, collapsed flat out on the hood.

"Nice punch," said Ace. "It's good to clobber people without gadgets once in a while."

Rolling Woody off the car, Kip got back inside.

"You're very efficient," said April.

"When I'm sufficiently motivated."

"Hang onto your hats, kids." Ace backed a few feet, wobbled slightly, and went roaring straight up the side of the pit.

## Chapter 13

The android butler bowed. His sleek-haired head kept on going toward the floor, and he fell over with a thunk. "Whom ... whom ..." he said as Kip helped him up off the veranda floor. "Whom shall I say is calling, sir?"

"Miss April Arthur and Kip Bundy."

"Very good, Miss Arthur," the MMG butler said to Kip. "If you will be so kind as to park your keaster on the rattan settee, I will inform Mr. Mowber you've arrived." He smoothed his thin moustache, winked twice, spun around and went back inside the low sprawling plantation house.

"You've got your work cut out for you," said April. "Or is that standard behavior for this type of andy?"

"No, it isn't." The veranda was protected from insects by an invisible force screen. Hundreds of yellow wasps came buzzing toward the thatch-roofed porch, then exploded in sizzling puffs as they hit the force screen. Kip turned away from that. "Not all our BKE products behave like Ace."

*Whang!*

The android butler fell, backside down, onto the veranda. "Mr. Mowber will see you in the library," he said without opening his mouth.

"He seems to be talking out of his ear," noticed April. "Is that a bad sign?"

Stooping, Kip got the android upright once more. "Well, if its not a major defect."

"Right this way, sirs." The butler lurched, stumbled and got himself into the house. "I might also advise you to keep a weather eye out for the carrion crow."

"Crow?" said Kip as they followed him down the long hallway.

"The master's sense of humor, if I may be so bold as to comment on it, has not been improved by his long, and relatively isolated, stay in the wilderness." The butler made a grab for the doorknob, missed and fisted the door.

Kip reached around him to turn the knob.

The library was a large oval room with opaque lucite walls. Most of the shelves were empty. On a top most shelf roosted a relatively immense green-feathered crow. Mowber himself was seated in a rubber chair with a drink on his knee.

"Mr. April and Mrs. Kip Bundy to see you, sir," announced the MMG android.

"Tell him what I think of him," Mowber said to the green crow.

"He's full of poop," the bird said.

"Ha," laughed Mowber.

"Very good, sir." The butler withdrew.

"Taught this bird to talk myself," said Mowber, rising up and holding out a hairy hand to Kip. He was a stocky man of fifty, dressed in a tight pullover jungle suit. His hair was mostly gray, curled like wire. "You'd be young Bundy?"

"Yes, and this is April Arthur."

Mowber smiled at the girl. "Why, if you don't mind my saying so, you're a real looker, Miss Arthur."

"Thank you." The girl moved closer to Kip.

"And Bundy's a sturdy looking lad, isn't he?" Mowber asked his crow.

"He's full of peepee," replied the bird.

"Always wanted a bird who could swear and curse like a dock walloper," explained Mowber.

"Everybody's full of doodoo," remarked the crow.

"Is that what he's doing?" asked Kip.

"What do you think? He's been taught to curse like a trooper."

"Poop," said the green bird.

"Those aren't very fierce words," said Kip.

"Oh, really?" Mowber sank into his chair, looking tearful. "Well, that's another thing you can blame on my mother."

"Doodoo in your pants," said the crow.

"Yes, my mother, I'm still discovering, rather restricted my horizons in my youth," said the plantation manager. "She told me she had no objection to my swearing, went so far as to teach me a few gross phrases she claimed she'd picked up from a grout-skinner on Murdstone. I suspect the old girl led me up the garden path on that score, too."

"Weewee."

Mowber smiled at April again. "Sit down, won't you," he invited. "Tell me how I can help you young folks. Boy, you're some dish, Miss Arthur."

"It's about my brother Dillon." April sat in a neoprene wing chair far across the room from him.

"Dillon Arthur? A top notch lad. He was by here. . . . When was Dillon Arthur by here?" he asked the bird.

"Poop in your hat."

"Well, it was at least two weeks ago, maybe closer to three. Let me see, I'd just returned from hunting lizardmen and—"

"You hunt people?" asked Kip.

"Not human types like ourselves, God forbid," said the plantation boss. "Although, as my sainted mother often reminded me, man is the most dangerous game. But you get into too much hot water when you try that on Malagra, even out here in the wilds." He paused to sip his drink. "Nobody, fortunately, objects if you pot a few lizardmen. I bagged a couple of beauts out near Water Hole Nineteen. This may interest you, Bundy. I use only a Nolan & Johnson handheld zonkgun to bring the biggest one down. Now you hear stories that—"

"How long did Dillon stay here?" asked Kip.

"Oh, not more than a day," replied Mowber. "He'd helped me get the andy butler and he dropped in now and then to take a look at it."

"Did he mention," asked the girl, "where he was going next?"

"Yes, he did."

After a few seconds April said, "Well, where?"

"You know, Miss Arthur, I could remember much better if you'd come over here and sit on my knee." He smiled at her and then at Kip. "You wouldn't mind if the young lady sat on my knee?"



"I wouldn't look on it too kindly."

"Oh, really? You two are that way, huh. Well, you can't blame a man for trying, as mother used to say. Now, what was it you wanted to know?"

"Go doodoo off a bridge."

"We want to know," said Kip, "where Dillon Arthur went when he left your place."

"Eames would know," said Mowber. "Eames is what I dubbed that andy. Feel free to go ask him, Bundy."

Kip stood. "Okay."

"Miss Arthur won't mind staying here and listening to a few of my hunting yarns."

Kip frowned at the girl.

She said, "You'll do better alone, Kip."

He remembered that he was also here to repair the damn MMG android. He wasn't happy about leaving April with Mowber, but he decided he'd better take advantage of this chance to work on the android alone. "Shouldn't take long," he said.

"Keep a tight poopsy," advised the crow.

## Chapter 14

"Certainly, sir," said Eames. He began to disrobe. When he had his tailcoat three-quarters off it made a ripping sound. "Ah, most unfortunate."

"Here, I'll help you." Kip pulled the jacket the rest of the way off.

"I'm excellent at mending, sir," said the android. "Allow me to mend your coat while we converse."

"This is your coat, nitwit," Kip reminded him. "Just hold it, while I take a look at your inner workings."

"As you wish, sir."

Kip had attached a small parasite control box to the side of the defective machine's neck. This meant, in theory anyway, that Barnes would cooperate with him. "Don't bother to take off your shirt, well untuck it."

"Ow," said the butler.

"What?"

"I thrust my darning needle into my thumb, sir."

"That's a knitting needle, and put it away. I don't want you to patch your coat until I'm through examining you."

The two of them were in a remote corner of Mowber's long low kitchen. Kip had left the door a fraction open, so that he might hear anything, at least anything violent, that occurred across the way in the library.

"You've got your all-season undershirt on backward," observed Kip as he shoved the garments up out of the way so that he could get at the door in Barnes's back.

"Oh, really, sir? How does one tell front from back?"

"Decorative buttons go in the front."

"Fancy that."

"While I'm working, tell me about Dillon Arthur."

"Would that not be a violation of professional ethics, sir?"

"You don't have that kind of ethics."

"I suppose that's true," said Eames. "Well, then, it's a most interesting coincidence, Mr. Bunny—"

"Bundy."

"Bundy, of course. As I was saying, Dillon Arthur also examined me during his visit."

Kip was selecting a tool from the tiny kit he had strapped to his left leg. He hesitated. "Huh? You mean he tried to do some repairs?"

"Not exactly, sir," replied the android butler. "He didn't chose to confide in me and, since he also made use of a parasite control, I was obliged to cooperate. I had a distinct impression, and you know how difficult it sometimes is to tell what someone is doing behind, or inside in this instance, one's back. Still and all—"

"How about perching on merely one of my knees?" Mowber inquired across the hall.

Kip forced himself to ignore it. "What did Arthur do?"

"It was my notion, sir, that he was conducting some sort of test, perhaps seeking traces of something."

"Traces?"

"I believe he was not expecting to find something concealed in my backside," explained the MMG android, "but rather that—"

"Pat her fanny," urged the crow across the hall.

"Rather that he was testing to see if something had been stashed there."

"What?"

"Of that, sir, I have no idea."

After a few seconds, Kipp commenced the adjustments which would improve the functioning of the butler. Fortunately, at least 'according to his uncle and the BKE technicians involved, no new parts were required. Only a series of adjustments. "Wouldn't you know if something'd been stored back here?"

"Not necessarily, sir. Perhaps I was programmed, by parties unknown, to forget it. If such, indeed, were the case then—"

"I'd rather not," said April across the way.

"Not on the lips then," said Mowber.

Kip took a step toward the doorway, then halted. He resumed working on Barnes. "Okay, what happened to Dillon Arthur after he searched you?"

"I believe he mentioned his next stop was to be the Ruins."

"The Ruins? Did he say anything about a guy named Prince Xicara?"

"How about your fingertips?" inquired Mowber across the hall. "What would it hurt if I nibbled at your fingertips a wee bit?"

"I'd rather you didn't, Mr. Mowber."

"Peepee up a rope."

"Now that you mention it, sir," said Eames, "it was Prince Xicara whom Mr. Arthur was journeying to the Rums to see. Are you, if I may venture to ask, a friend of the prince?"

"He's a customer," answered Kip. Apparently April's brother had intended to call on some, possibly all, of the MMG buyers. But why? "You're sure he left here?"

"Indeed, sir, I waved him off myself," said Eames. "You may rest assured that no harm befell him here."

"Suppose I sat on your lap."

Kip slammed Barnes's back shut. "All right, you're in good shape now, you won't have any more trouble. I'm going to take the parasite off; you won't recall any of this." Kip first rearranged Eames's clothes, then plucked off and pocketed the control box.

"Ah, Mr. Bundy, sir, how may I serve you?"

"I'd like a glass of water."

"Certainly. One moment, sir, I'll draw one for you."

"How about your toes?" asked Mowber.

"Bring it to the library if you would, Eames."

"Very good, sir."

Kip sprinted across the hall. "Drop something, Mr. Mowber?"

The plantation owner was on his knees before April's chair. She had her legs tucked up under her.

"Boy, do I feel like a dub," said Mowber. "I must confess—it's a habit inculcated by my late mother—that I was making advances toward your young lady."

"You picked an awkward position for it," said Kip. "We can go, April."

Mowber rose up. "You mean you aren't staying the night?"

"No, though we certainly appreciate your offer of hospitality." Kip took hold of April's hand.

"Your water, sir," said Eames, entering with a tray.

"Now what, oaf?" asked Mowber. "You've gone and ripped your coat up."

"Sir, I'll thank you to treat me in a more acceptable manner henceforward," said the android. "I may not be a gentleman, but I have feelings."

## Chapter 15

The innkeeper dropped Palma's suitcase again and began whirling around. He slapped at himself, patted various parts of his body violently. "Zounds," he said, his fur standing on end.

"Something?" The bald photographer inquired, stepping aside to let two more ragged men descend the shadowy, twisting stairway.

"Didn't you notice them?" asked the thickset carman.

"More pick pockets?"

"Those three who passed us but a moment ago," said the furry innkeeper. "They got my pouch of rubies."

"Where'd you have that one concealed?"

The catman lowered his head, brushed a paw at his whiskers. "A quite intimate place, sir, and I— zounds!"

"What else?"

"My purse of uncut zubers. Gone, without a trace. That pair of rascals who were just in proximity with us are no doubt the culprits."

"I can haul my stuff to my room if you want to give chase."

Sighing, the innkeeper retrieved the suitcase and resumed the climb. "I am not allowed to chase the guests," he explained, "nor to knock them down. The owner of this establishment has made that momentarily clear."

Three lizardmen in cloaks came thudding down the stairs.

When they were gone Palma said, "I noticed the banner you put up 'in front of the inn and—"

"Not I. I had nothing to do with that banner. The owners had the thing strung up."

Palma said, as they reached the landing, "Well, I was going to remark that since it said 'Welcome, Thieves, Cutpurses and Rogues! that might account for the wave of—"

"Zounds!" exclaimed the carman. "Would you feel the small of my back?"

Palma did so. "Very furry."

"Those slimy lizards also relieved me of my packet of black pearls."

"A shame, maybe that sign—"

"The sign, sir, is for the convention."

"Convention?"

"It's the Fifth Annual Thieves, Cutpurses and Rogues Convention, now being held yonder in the Ruins." The innkeeper stopped before a numbered door. "So many of them have come flooding to that already vile city that we get the overflow across the river here."

"I see it all now."

Opening the door, the catman stood aside with a bow. "Your room, sir."

Palma crossed the threshold, then slowed. "Before I settle in for the night, is the girl part of the regular service or an extra charge?"

"Zounds!" He trotted into the slant-ceilinged room. "What girl?"

Pointing, Palma said, "The one whose legs are protruding from under the bed."

"Don't tell me there's another strangler loose."

Palma crossed to the prone girl. "She's not dead," he said. "Miss?" He bent to tap her calf.

"Don't send me back, please don't."

"Back where?"

"Into the cake."

The catman cleared his throat. "If you'll excuse me, sir, I'll be returning to my desk before those bravos loot it further," he said. Plopping the suitcase on the ancient rug, he backed out of the doorway. "I trust you'll enjoy your stay."

Palma got down on his hands and knees. "Cake?"

"It's a terrible situation I find myself in," said the girl. "Indeed, I fear it is not yet at an end."

"Would you care to crawl out in the open? I'm fairly good at extricating people from trouble."

"I suppose so." With a delicate grunt, the girl began to back out from under the bed.

A nice ass, Palma remarked to himself. Even though I'm a tit man, I can appreciate it. Aloud he said, "Allow me, miss."

She accepted his hand, got to her feet. "I sincerely believe, though I appreciate your kind offer of aid, that mine is a lost cause." She was tall, with hair the color of golden autumn leaves. Very pretty, wearing a lycra singlet and a short skirt.

"You mentioned somebody wished to put you in a cake?"

"Allow me to explain, sir, that I have long nurtured in my bosom an ambition to enter the theatrical world as an actress."

Very impressive bobos, Palma decided inside his head. "Ah, so you're an actress."

Blushing, she replied, "My aspirations incline in that direction, yes."

"So you probably signed on to work out here in the Ruins," said Palma, his eyes still on her chest. "When you arrived, however, you found the job was not what had been promised you back home."

"My heavens," said the girl, pressing one lovely hand against her breasts, "how did you know the exact nature of my plight?"

"I've traveled through several planet systems. It's a familiar plight."

"Would that I possessed your sophistication," said the girl. "Alas, I came here from my native planet of Murdstone under the impression that I would be appearing with a touring theatrical company devoted to performing morality plays of an allegorical nature. I learned on arriving here, much to my chagrin, that I am expected to remove the majority of my garments and leap from a large cardboard cake at the height of a testimonial banquet being given tomorrow evening for the man voted this year's King of the Pickpockets."

Reaching out, Palma patted her bare shoulder.

"Things like this happen to everybody when they're starting out."

"I'll wager you never had to jump forth from a cake."

"Not a cake, no, but a good many bedroom windows," he said. "Now then, would you like me to get you out of this?"

"If you only could, I would be eternally grateful."

"Okay, first tell me who you're hiding from."

"Basically it- is Mr. Sheldorf, a rather aggressive lizardman who professed, while recruiting talent on Murdstone, to be a theatrical producer of some repute on Malagra."

"Doesn't take much to gain repute out here. How'd you get away from him?"

"He has housed four of us in a room at this inn," said the girl. "I might add that the other three young women see nothing unusual or degrading about this particular assignment. Indeed they—"

"How'd you get out?"

"The four of us, I should have mentioned, were put under the watchful eye of an obese old cat-woman named Mrs. Crittenden," continued the golden-haired girl. "About an hour ago there was a brawl, a particularly loud and violent one, in the corridor immediately outside our room. When Mrs. Crittenden opened the door, unlocking it with the key she wears around her fat neck, I at once realized this might be my only chance to escape and I seized it. I ran from the room, fled blindly through a labyrinth of corridors. When I came upon what I believed to be an unoccupied room I concealed myself within, intending to resume my flight when darkness had more securely fallen."

"Where were you planning to fly to?"

"The nearest spaceport," replied the girl. "I have managed to conceal upon me sufficient funds to book passage home."

"Nearest spaceport is about fifty miles south," said Palma thoughtfully. "Okay, I'll postpone my excursion to BKE's new Kelp factory for half a day or so and escort you to the port."

"You are most kind, and would earn my eternal gratitude by so doing," said the girl. "However, I fear I am diverting you from more important work."

"I'm supposed to catch a landbus near here tomorrow morning. It'll take me three hundred miles north of the Ruins," said the bald photographer. "But there's an evening bus, too. By the way, my name is Palma. I'm a universally known photographer." He waggled the camera hanging around his riecek.

"I have never, I must ruefully admit, heard of you," said the girl. "My life on Murdstone has been a relatively sheltered one. I am Emily Kingsley."

"Okay, Em, we'll wait here in the room another couple of hours," Palma told her. "By then there should be sufficient rioting inside and enough darkness outside to cover our escape."

"Yes, that sounds quite a feasible plan," Emily Said as she seated herself atop the bed. "What shall we occupy ourselves with in the interim?" Palma smiled.

## Chapter 16

Easing up to the door of his room, Palma pulled it a fraction open and looked out. "Oops," he said and withdrew his bald head.

Three catmen went galloping by on grout ponies.

"Some guys grout-riding out there," he said to the girl.

"Indoors, do you mean, dearest?"

"Yeah, so we'll wait a couple of minutes more." Palma took another look. "Okay, they're riding their mounts down the stairs. We can head for that emergency exit down the other way."

"Would it not be best, beloved, to spend the entire night here in your quarters?" inquired Emily. "Here, locked in each other's arms, we—"

"The longer we stay here, the better chance Sheldorf and old Mrs. Crittenden have of finding you." He beckoned to her. "Come on."

When they were both in the hallway, with the lovely girl clinging to him, Palma locked the door of his room.

At the hall's end, some hundred feet off, was a door marked Emergency Exit.

Palma slipped an arm around Emily's slim waist and guided her toward the door.

"Perhaps you might neglect your duty, my love, to the extent of returning to Murdstone with—"

"Quiet, Em, until we get out of here." He stopped in front of the exit door, took hold of the handle.

He opened the door and saw there were four people, seated cross-legged on the floor, on the landing beyond it.

They all looked up, surprised. Palma realized at once that he had obviously intruded on some sort of clandestine meeting.

He recognized three of the four. They were Reed Marlowe, Brett Martin and Rod Marshall, the hirelings of William Carlos Munt—the lizard-man and two catmen he'd tangled with on the flight out.

The fourth member of the group was a tall skinny human of about thirty, a nearly chinless young man with spiky red hair.

"Hey, it's the cleanhead bastard," exclaimed Reed Marlowe.

Palma slammed the door on them. "Not this way," he said. He pulled the girl toward the other stairs. "Run!"

They ran.



## Chapter 17

"Set 'em up in the next alley," chortled Ace.

"Hey, stop sideswiping pedestrians," ordered Kip.

"These shrabs aren't pedestrians," said the car, "they're street vendors. You got to knock a few of them on their keasters, otherwise you can't get through these junky streets at all."

"Nevertheless," said Kip.

They had reached, as the muggy yellow day was commencing, the outskirts of the Ruins. Before them stretched the vast tumbledown city. Once, centuries back, the city had been filled with stately towers, spires, minarets. Great archways of mosaic stones had joined the aspiring buildings; colonnades of marble linked castle-like structures; curving suspended walkways interlaced high above the broad cobbled streets. That was many centuries, and many wars, ago. The city was fallen, tottering, lopsided. Hardly a tower remained complete, and the archways were jumbles of multicolor stone and mortar. The citizens were nothing like, the most of them, the inhabitants of the city in its better days. A ragged disorderly lot, even the tradesmen and merchants and the traders.

"Valuable souvenir, sir," cried the rickety old woman who threw herself upon the hood. "A lovely hand-tinted portrait of the notorious Silverthorne."

"Watch me fry this old bimbo's kazoo," said Ace.

"Leave her be," ordered Kip.

Muttering, Ace refrained.

The old woman, with a quivering slap, pressed the drawing against the windshield. "A magnificent likeness of the rebel, eh?"

A one-legged catman, with a portable electric lute tucked under his arm, dropped down from a pile of rubble onto the car's front. "Portraits, bah!" he croaked. "What you want, sir and missy, is a ballad."

"Beat it," suggested the old woman.

"Just a little jolt," said Ace, "and we'll be free of the pair of 'em."

"No," said Kip. "According to this map, we're almost to the prince's palace anyway."

"I'm still not yet exactly clear," said April, "what this Xicara is prince of."

"Thieves," said Kip. "He runs all the rackets which operate out of the Ruins."

"Oh, Silverthorne is a brave man and bold," sang the catman balladeer in his ruined voice. "Oh, Silverthorne is a brave man and bold. Oh, Silverthorne is a brave man and bold ..."

"Who's Silverthorne?" April asked Kip.

"Not sure, a local legend it seems."

*Whump!*

A black-bearded man with finger-puppets on all nine of his fingers had sprung onto their car from an askew balcony on their right. "One small dollar buys you the complete works, folks," he announced. "*The Career and Magnificent Accomplishments of Silverthorne the Great*. It's a five-act tragicomedy. Here's what the *Ruins Showcuse* had to say: 'I was enthralled. Very good of its kind and...'"

"There's the alleged palace," said Ace as they swung to park on what had once been a vast

marble esplanade.

Prince Xicara's palace had once been a real palace. There were still portions of some of its towers standing, and the marble staircase leading up to the main entrance was half intact.

"If Dillon got in trouble anywhere," said April, "I bet it was here."

"Let us say fifty cents," said the puppeteer. "For that fee I perform the play with one hand, but it will be the hand with five fingers, not four. What say?"

"Stay here, and don't seriously hurt anyone," Kip told Ace.

"A little jolt doesn't do any permanent harm."

The vendors hopped from the hood to circle Kip and the girl when they disembarked. Fishing three dollars out of a pocket, Kip distributed them. "Be gone."

Before skittering off, the old woman pressed a broadside sheet into his hand "Bless you, lad."

Kip glanced at the portrait. " 'Silverthorne the Great, Magnificent Champion of the Hill Country.' He reminds me of somebody." They began climbing the unruined side of the wide stairway.

Leaning close, April studied the woodcut portrait of the bearded rebel. "Yes, I have the notion I've seen him somewhere be—"

## Chapter 18

"Which way to the prince?" asked a chubby lizardman in a white five-piece touring suit.

"We're going to his suite now," replied Kip.

"Could I nudge in ahead of you perhaps? I have a complaint I'm anxious to make," said the lizard, adjusting his straw hat. "In point of fact, I'm hopping mad."

"What's the problem?"

"It's not only my wife," said the lizard.

"It's not?"

"Though having your wife in the foul Ruins Emergency Hospital with an unscrewed foot is no fun, believe you me."

"Somebody unscrewed her foot?"

"We never should have come on this tour. This, let me tell you, isn't what the Barnum Travel Bureau painted it. No, this isn't two lovely weeks of exotic luxury." The lizard paused to snort, angrily. "The inn, I'll give them that, is quaint. And I suppose you could call what charm it has 'an old-world charm.' But the cockroaches ... they're huge and belligerent. The other guests, those who don't seem on the verge of expiring from respiratory complaints, are all noisy hooligans. But the final indignity, the topper, was that bald man this morning."

They had reached the cock-eyed entryway. "Bald man?" asked Kip.

"A photographer, I think, at least he had a camera with him," said the disgruntled lizardman. "Barged into our rooms at an unlikely hour this morning, claiming he'd just delivered a distressed young woman to the spaceport and had come back to collect his effects only to find a bunch of men with improbable names waiting to do him dirt. Red Matthews, Rich Marston, Rog Madden I believe..."

"Reed Marlowe, Brett Martin and Rod Marshall?"

"Now that you mention it, yes. Have they been carrying on in your digs, too?"

"They were," asked Kip, "all in your rooms?"

"The bald fellow claimed he wanted to hide until the coast was clear," explained the lizard. "The other three came, or rather smashed, in to stomp on him. That's the point at which my wife lost her foot. In her agitated state, she unscrewed it and flung it at them as they scrapped. It did no good, of course. They rendered the talkative bald chap unconscious and hauled him off."

"Palma," said Kip. "They got Palma, but ... Do you know what they did with him?"

"I sure do, they brought him here."

"You certain?"

"I overheard this Roy Martin say, 'Prince Xicara will take care of him.' And that's exactly why I am here. Someone's got to clean up that room, and what with rushing around to buy bouquets of jonquils and five-pound gift boxes of saltwater taffy to bring to my ailing wife I hardly have time. Matter of fact, I can't really spare the time to complain to the prince."

"Tell you what," said Kip. "We have to consult Prince Xicara about a similar complaint. I'd be happy to handle your case as well, then you can get back to your wife."

"Say, that would be swell," said the tourist. "My name is Lloyd F. Ewing, and the site of the brawl was the Hilltop Transient Inn at an unlikely hour this morning. I'd appreciate it if Prince Xicara would spring for a good cleanup, including a wet mopping." He saluted them, went trotting down the steps.

"What does this mean?" asked April.

Kip shook his head. "Have to go in and find out"

## Chapter 19

Prince Xicara giggled. "Beg pardon, old man?"

"I said there was a cockroach, a large orange one, crawling across your boot," said Kip.

"Oh, no, old man," the huge green prince of thieves assured him, "we have no cockroaches in palace."

"Might be a beetle then, but it sure looks like a cockroach from here." Kip was sitting in a gold armchair which was inset with rubies and emeralds.

"Oh," said April, her attention caught by a fat gray -creature which went scurrying across the pearl-encrusted floor mat.

"Do not have rats either," said the prince quickly. "No, old girl, all is nice clean here. Better to serve you, distinguished visitors."

"As I explained to your doorman," began Kip,

"No have servants here, all men equal." The prince giggled, jiggling in his platinum chair. ,

"As you know, I'm with Bundy Konglom," resumed Kip. "We understand you are the owner of one of our finest pieces of equipment, Prince."

"Yes, enjoy him very much,"

"As part of a new warranty plan for special customers I've been authorized to inspect your MMG android and—"

"No, not possible talk to him," said the prince. "Is against—naughty!" He swatted a blue cockroach who'd hopped to his plump cheek from the gold trim of his turban.

"We had expected that a man of your acumen, Prince Xicara, would appreciate this opportunity to—"

"Not is possible." He giggled at both of them. "Stay for lunch, long as you here."

Leaving his jeweled chair, Kip approached the prince's chair. "We appreciate the invitation," he said, looking around the large reception room. There was a spyhole immediately to the rear of the green man's chair, a camera nozzle hidden in the silver lamp across the room. "There are, though, a few more things we have to talk about."

"Oh? Did not know that. What, please?"

*Whap!*

Kip slapped the new BKE experimental control disk to the prince's neck. The disk was tiny, had a chameleon factor so that it turned green immediately. "You're now under my control, Prince Xicara," Kip informed him in a low voice. "Tell all your spies to go away and stop watching."

"Under your control, yes." Giggling, the prince raised a green hand, made several different gestures in the air. "Is done."

"Early this morning a photographer named Palma was brought to you," said Kip. "Where is he?"

Prince Xicara giggled, rubbed his glistening cheeks. "Torture Chamber Three."

Kip leaned closer. "You're torturing him?"

"Not torture. Have him awaiting shipment, better than kill him."

"Ship where?"

"To Company County." A yellow cockroach ticked down the prince's neck, causing the control disk to fall off. "What?" The green man blinked. "Ho, the guard! I—"

Kip caught the falling disk out of the air. He thumbed it back in place.

Prince Xicara giggled. "What else you like know, old man?"

April left her chair. "Ask him about my brother."

"Was Dillon Arthur here?"

"Nice fellow. Want see my butler, too. Say no, not can be done," said the controlled prince. "Sneaked off to servant wing, try to get look inside anyway. Catch him, ship out."

"Where?" asked April.

"Where?" repeated Kip.

"Same place send new one, to Company County," responded the prince, twisting in his chair. "We sell them —What? Ho, the guard!"

"It fell off again." April pointed at the floor.

"What is meaning? Ho, the guard!"

"Here it is," said Kip, on his knees and patting the floor. He popped up, slapped the disk back in place.

Prince Xicara giggled, settled down in the chair. "More question, please."

"Where in Company County did you send Dillon Arthur?"

"Underground," said the prince in reply.

A golden door burst open. "Excuse me, your Highness," said the spear-carrying lizardman who plunged into the room. "I thought maybe I heard somebody holler, 'Ho, the guard!'"

"Tell him to go away," instructed Kip.

"You have silly ears, Tomo," said Prince Xicara. "Nobody want you —What? Ho, the guard!"

"Where'd it go this time?" asked Kip.

"I didn't see it," said the girl.

"Ho, the guard!"

"Now look, your Highness, what's it to be? I mean to say, first you says—"

"I've got a spare." Kip whipped out the second disk and fixed it to the prince's fat neck. "Tell him to be off."

"We not need you, Tomo. Only being kittenish, play games. Goodbye, so long."

Muttering, the guard slammed the golden door after him. A half-dozen opals popped out of their settings in the doorknob.

"We're not going to have much more time," Kip told the girl.

"No, I wouldn't think so."

"We want Palma released," Kip said.

"Will do quick." Prince Zicara clapped his hands. "Ho, the jailer."

The clapping dislodged the second control disk. Kip saw it pop free, caught it.

"What? Ho, the—"

"There."

After a moment a man in a long flowered cloak shuffled in. "Tomo says you're prankish today, your Highness," he said, bowing. "Is this an example, or do you really want me?"

Xicara giggled. "Must not question your sovereign, old man," he said. "Bring me prisoner."

"Which prisoner, your Highness?"

"Hairless one."

"We have several of them without hair, not to mention one we ourselves scalped."

"New one, come in today."

"Ah, yes, Mr. Palma." The jailer executed another bow. "I'll fetch him."

"Be hasty," urged the prince.

"I'm not going," said Kip, "to have time to fix his damn MMG andy."

"No matter, not is here."

"Huh?"

"My butler machine in Company County, his is here. Is part of plan, nobody catch on."

"What plan?"

The door opened once more. "Somebody wanted some pictures taken?" asked Palma. His dangling camera had been stepped on, hard, several times. There was a black half-moon beneath his left eye, a purple and yellow welt on the topmost part of his hairless head.

"We better get out of here," said Kip.

"We have to find out," said April, "exactly where Dillon is."

"I can tell you that," said Palma.

## Chapter 20

Bricks came cascading down, bouncing in the roadway, splashing dust. "Better luck next time," jeered Ace as it went weaving, swiftly and unhit, through the falling debris.

*Bong!*

A set of huge brass bells fell to the street.

Ace slammed to a stop, reversed and peeled around the new obstruction.

A plump man in a rough-spun cassock fell next, a long length of thick rope clutched in both hands.

"Jerk ought to know better than to tug so hard on the bellpull," remarked their car, roaring through the outskirts of the Ruins.

From the back seat Palma asked, "Can't you shift it into no-talk?"

"Cousin Peterkin designed it," said Kip. "So it talks whenever it wants."

"Up yours anyway, baldy," said Ace.

"Okay," said the photographer, "I'll discourse around it."

"Do you actually know where my brother is?" April twisted to look back at him.

"What befell me," said Palma, "was that those goons in the employ of William Carlos Munt grabbed me and hauled me to the dungeon in the prince's palace. I thought, initially, it was because I'd aided Emily Kingsley, a young woman with an incredible set of ... At any rate, I had aided the young lady in her escape from a Mr. Sheldorf. Apparently, though, I was abducted for entirely different reasons, as you shall see below. At any rate, whilst I languished in my cell Reed Marlowe, Brett Martin and Rod Marshall discussed my fate. Seems they didn't intend to kill me, although Reed Marlowe favored that course of action."

"I don't want to sound self-centered," put in April, "but you haven't mentioned Dillon yet."

"Forgive a gregarious old man, my dear," continued Palma. "The upshot of all these threats and brags was that I learned I was going to be transported to Company County, to be turned over to a Mr. Sawhill. This Sawhill chap staffs a work area beneath that splendid commercial community which they call the Underground. The staff is made up, for the most part, of involuntary slaves. Rod Marshall implied your brother had recently met a similar fate."

"Then he's there, Underground, and he's a slave?"

"As of this morning."

Kip had been watching forest grow up all around them. He turned toward Palma. "Why?"

The bald photographer said, "I'm glad you asked me that question. I assume you wish to know why Dillon Arthur is now slaving in the bowels of Company County. Okay, from what those guys let out, I'd guess he found out something. Again in his case they didn't want a killing. So Mr. Sawhill was the answer."

"What did Dillon find out?" said the girl.

"Something to do with the MMG androids," said Kip, "with something that was inside them."

"Smuggling," suggested Palma.

Kip said, "Probably so. Prince Xicara said something about switching andies with someone at Company County."

"You've got a customer there," reminded Palma.

"Yeah, Gunther Dillingham, the old boy who owns the whole setup. I don't know, he's probably above smuggling."

"Ha," remarked Palma.

April leaned back in her seat. "I guess I'm not used to intrigues," she said. "I don't seem to understand why they grabbed you in the first place, Palma. You said it wasn't because you'd rescued some girl."

"No, I think it was because I walked in on a meeting they were having at the inn," he replied.

"The three of them and some gawky looking redheaded lad. They were all—"



"Wait now," said Kip. "A gawky looking red-haired guy?"

"Yep, long lank fellow, about thirty, not much in the way of chin. Know him?"

"Damn," said Kip. "Cousin Peterkin."

"Isn't he supposed to be back home on Barnum?" said Palma. "Odd, then, to encounter him in cahoots with three surly minions of Munt."

"Yeah, odd," said Kip slowly.

"Geeze," said Ace, "this almost busts me up. I wish you kids hadn't tumbled to Peterkin."

"What?"

"A guy's got a loyalty to his creator," explained the automobile. "Built in, you might say. I got my orders, you understand. But, geeze, I am kind of brought down by this. Sorry."

"I still don't get what—" began Kip.

The air-conditioners all clicked off. Some sort of sweet-scented gas began to hiss up out of spouts in the floor.

## Chapter 21

"Turn it off", ordered Kip.

"No can do" replied Ace. "I'm programmed to knock off anybody who means trouble for Peterkin."

April had yanked off one of her shoes and was hammering at her window with it.

"Save it, honey, you ain't got a chance against those windows," said the car. "They're made of BKE's new Tuffglaz, designed to withstand—"

"Oy, I'm expiring and I have to listen to a commercial," complained Palma. "I take it this stuff is lethal."

"You bet your butt."

Kip tugged a hand-size drillgun out of a flap pocket in his trouser leg. He narrowed his eyes, trying to recall the plans for this type of car.

"I'm ... my head feels very strange," said April, dropping the shoe.

"Don't worry, kids, it'll be painless," promised Ace. "That's the least I can do under the—Hey, buster!"

Kip remembered the location of the control center, down on the floorboards in front of his seat. The drill bit was whirring through the noryl covering.

"Knock it off, else I'll cream you," threatened the car.

"You can't shock me inside here," said Kip. "You're not constructed that way." He kept on drilling.

"Yeah, but I can sure as hell give you a nice little ride."

*Whump!*

The car jumped off the trail, landed in among brush with a belly-whopping thump. Ace backed, rushed ahead to slam into a broad tree trunk.

Kip had the drill through the lid of the small control box. "Hold on, April," he said. "I'll have him stopped in a minute."

"Try to ... except I..." Her eyes drifted shut, her body went slack.

"Palma, see if you can wake her up."

Ace threw himself at another tree, then went careening through the forest, sideswiping as many trees as he could. The car bounced, rattled, shuddered.

"Palma," repeated Kip.

A snore was his only answer.

"Give up, punk," urged the joggling car. "Take a snooze."

"There." Kip thrust the drill down into the workings inside the locked control box.

"Hey, shit," said Ace. "You hadn't ought to—"

*Bam!*

He rammed into a tree head-on.

This time, though, he didn't back up.

Kip's head banged against the dash. He shook his head, but he continued to feel groggy, heavy-lidded. Breathing in gulps through his open mouth, he got hold of the door handle and shoved.

The door popped open. Air rushed in.

"Okay, now we should be okay." He reached over, took hold of the slumbering girl by the arms. He worked his way, backward, out into the forest. April's smooth skin felt very warm.

Propping her against the bole of a tree, he went tottering back to the ruined car.

"Get you yet, son of a bitch," muttered the dying vehicle. "Blow you to smithereens ... smithereens."

Kip pulled open the rear door, got a grip on Palma's collar and tugged. For several seconds nothing happened, then the dozing photographer began to move across the slick seat on which he was slumped.

When Kip got him all the way out, he dragged him several yards away, dropping him on the far side of a tree. Running back, he picked April up in his arms and started to carry her further from the car.

"Jerk..." rattled Ace.

The concussion of his exploding made Kip leap suddenly into the air. He landed on one ankle, fell with April beneath him.

Twists and tatters of metal and plastic clattered through the trees; the remains of Ace rained down.

Kip started to untangle himself, but one of the girl's arms wound around his neck. "Are we alive?" she asked.

"Yeah, we got out in time."

"Then hold onto me, for a minute, Kip." She put the other arm around him.

"Nothing as invigorating as woodland air," observed Palma as he approached them. "Why, only a few lungfuls and I'm—oops." He stopped with one foot in the air, pivoted and went back behind his tree.

## Chapter 22

Palma frowned at the darkness. That can't be violin music, he said to himself.

But it was violin music, a mournful rustic air. Coming from over on his left.

The photographer, after they had made camp for the night and improvised a meal from what they had with them and what the forest had to offer, thought it best to leave Kip and April to themselves for a time. He went strolling among the giant trees as the darkness filled in all around him.

Now, roughly a mile from camp, he was hearing violin music. And what was that? A tambourine, he decided But what would a—yow!

Rough strong fingers took hold of his throat "Still a few choice seats left, sir."

The hand lifted Pahna completely off the ground. He could do nothing but gasp and choke.

"Here now, Bolo, we don't want him croaking before he buys a ticket."

"You've got something there, Yamos."

Palma was set on his feet again, the fingers let go his throat and took hold of one shoulder. Swallowing, he said, "What sort of ... um ... what sort of show is it?"

"You've heard, ain't you, of the strawhat theater?"

Both of the men were considerably taller and wider than Palma. He had to tilt his head to get a look at their faces. Even then the night darkness and the profusion of facial hair made it difficult "Ah, to be sure," he said, his voice still a bit quaky. "Summer stock, strawhat theater. What play are you lads putting on?"

"See, Bolo, I told you they're always going to ask that."

"We've only rounded up four other audience members in this blooming wilderness so far," Bolo, the one who was clutching Palma so effectively, pointed out.

"Each of them asked the same bloody question, though. Now this bloke up and pops it. As I—"

"We don't exactly put on a play," Bolo told Palma.

"Ah, then perhaps it's some sort of cabaret?" Up ahead in the blackness the glow of a campfire showed. "Myself, I have always been fond of magicians. Once on Esmeralda I saw a magician saw in half a girl with the largest yonkers I had up to that time—"

"What we got," said Bolo, "is gypsies."

"Gypsies?"

"See, he never heard of them either, Bolo."

"No, I've heard of gypsies," said Palma. "I'm extremely well traveled, as you've probably guessed from my sophisticated demeanor."

"Hard to see it in the dark," said Yamos.

"What we got," continued the huge Bolo, "is a renowned orchestra calling itself the Gypsy Harmonikids."

"He never heard of them," predicted Yamos.

"We got also," said Bolo, "Rubinson and his violin."

"I wager that's him I hear playing this very minute."

"On his knee he's got a tambourine attached," added Yamos.

"We got Madam Tich, the fortune-teller."

"He's not going to like her."

"I'll tell you," said Palma, "I'm en route to Company County, which as I understand it, is back some fifty miles in that direction. So perhaps I'd better skip this—"

"You're going to like the supper show," Bolo assured him, tightening his grip. "It opens with the Gypsy Harmonikids, then out comes Rubinson and does his act. That is followed by Madam Tich passing among the assembled audience. After which Ilka sings."

"You haven't mentioned Ilka before."

"She's not a gypsy, she's our sister," explained Bolo.

"Also she's not a robot," said Yamos.

"Android," corrected Bolo. "Ilka is not an android."

"All your gypsies are mechanical?"

"We couldn't afford so many real people," Bolo said.

"We couldn't afford much in the way of entertainment androids either," said Yamos. "All we could afford was ruddy gypsies. Now if we had but waited another year, until we could swing the tab on the follies girls, we'd be—"

"Gypsies can be just as successful as follies girls," said Bolo. "It's only a matter of promotion and advertising."

"Our blooming travel itinerary isn't so good either."

They reached a clearing. Four anxious-looking people, in the garb of woodsmen and trappers, were crouched on logs around the fire.

Rubinson, his tambourine knee vibrating, stood near the flames, attempting another mournful gypsy air.

"You can knock off the overture," said Bolo. "We got our minimum audience."

"Couldn't I simply buy a ticket," suggested Palma, "and get going on my journey?"

"We ain't in this only for the gain," Yamos told him. "It's the excitement, which is why we require an audience."

Bolo pushed down on Palma's shoulder, causing him to sit on a log. While Rubinson rushed through the conclusion of the overture, Palma glanced around.

Ho, what an astounding set of yoyos on that young lady yonder, he said to himself. She must be the fabled Ilka.

The large dark-haired girl was standing beside a landwagon. A bent old woman android, in a tattered shawl, was studying the girl's hand.

Letting go the hand, the old woman pointed a gnarled finger in "Palma's direction. "It is him, I tell you, dearie," she announced in her harsh voice. "The man Fate has intended for you."

"Oh, really?" said Ilka. "I was hoping for one with a full head of hair."

## Chapter 23

Kip awoke first. Several pale blue bugs were strolling along his right arm, the one he didn't have around the sleeping April. The dawn chill was in the air, gray light was dropping down through the rows of trees. Very gently, he eased his arm out from beneath the girl and left her on the improvised bed of moss and leaves.

He yawned, inhaled morning air and stood up. The arm which had been cradling April was slightly numb. He flexed his fingers, making fists. They were still fifty miles, at least, from Company County. Today they'd have to get away from the back roads Ace had favored and over onto the Central Roadway. There'd be a place to rent a landcar, places to buy food and extra clothes. April had been carrying a few small ration kits in her handbag, enough for one more day in the woods maybe.

Palma would probably have some ... Palma?

Kip scanned the campsite. Palma wasn't there. Bent low, he circled the dregs of the fire. There was nothing to indicate Palma had slept here.

Been sloppy, Kip told himself. Should have sat up tending this fire; for one thing. I thought, though, Palma would be back. It was considerate of him to ... but where the hell is he?

From an inner tunic pocket Kip withdrew a small diamond-shaped mechanism. "Yeah, here's what's left of that one camera of his. Take a whiff of that." He held the tracking mechanism over the camera, depressed a pin-size button.

The device made a minute sniffing sound.

"Where'd he go?" Kip depressed another button.

A gauge needle pointed to the right.

"Into the woods over there, that's where he headed last night. So he hasn't come back at all."

"What's the matter?" April sat up, stretching one arm high.

"Palma," said Kip, "he's not here. Looks like he never got back from his walk last night."

"He's been out there the whole night?" She came to stand beside Kip, took hold of his arm. "I thought this area was supposed to be relatively safe."

"It's not as dangerous as Wilds B."

"Can you trail him with that gadget?"

"Yeah, soon as we have a quick breakfast."

"We can start right now, it's all right with me."

"No, I'm concerned about you, too," said Kip. "While you're getting the food out I'll make a note to leave here. He might come back before we locate him."

"I haven't known Palma very long," said April as she crossed to her handbag, "but I think he's pretty capable when it comes to taking care of himself."

"That's what worries me," said Kip. "It'd have to be something pretty formidable to keep him away so long."

## Chapter 24

Palma made another attempt to get out of the bunk bed. "Well, I really must be—"

"Not yet, pet." Ilka caught his bare shoulders, pulled him back atop her.

"Ow."

"Am I hurting you, pet?"

"I bonked my head on the ceiling," explained Palma. "Why don't we shift down to the lower bunk, Ilka my love?"

"With you, pet, I feel elated, like a mountain climber who has conquered some vast defiant peak," said the dark-haired girl. "The upper bunk is more appropriate. If you wouldn't try to bound away, your skull wouldn't suffer. Ah, pet ..." She reached out, stroked his scalp. "To think that but a few scant hours ago I didn't think I could love a man with thinning hair."

"It's no doubt because of those shaggy brothers of yours," said Palma. "And I'm not a man with thinning hair, I'm completely bald."

"It makes no difference, you have a shaggy soul."

"Ilka, my sweet, I am in the midst of an important mission."

"Surely nothing is more important than our new found love?"

"True, but I have a couple of friends who may fall into some kind of dire plight if they hang around these woods unprotected."

"Lady friends?"

"One of each, but they're ... going steady."

"You have such a sweet nature, pet, concerned with others at such a tender time as this."

"Tell you what Ow..."

"You shouldn't try to lunge away from me."

"Tell you what, Ilka, I'd like very much to introduce you to my friends. I'm dying, in fact, to have them meet you."

"I'd be honored. Right after lunch we'll--"

"Sooner than that, sweet."

"It bodes ill," said a rasping voice.

"Didn't you turn her off?" Palma scowled down at the fortune-telling android who was slouched in a chair in a corner of the landvan bedroom.

"She's got some way to click herself back on."

"An ill-fated time for journeys of any kind," said Madam Tich.

"Pay her no mind." Ilka hugged the naked Palma to her.

"I'm very sensitive, Ilka. It's difficult for me to make love properly with somebody telling fortunes in the same room."

"It's a bad day for love," said the android gypsy.

"See?" Palma made a new attempt to get free.

"Also it's a bad day for telekinesis stock," continued Madam Tich. "Sell your shares, invest in old comic book futures."

"If I could but—oops."

For a moment the two of them teetered on the brink of the upper bunk. Then they both fell down to the floor, landing with a fleshy smack.

"A good day for hip injuries," said the fortune teller.

"Palma, are you intact?"

"Sure, I'm fine. Yourself?"

"I felt nothing, pet, except your strong arms around me."

"Good. Well, now we're on the floor, what say I climb to my feet and get dressed?"

"Let us continue here, pet."

"Beware of chills and drafts, the signs foretell respiratory infections," warned Madam Tich.

"Exactly." Palma succeeded in getting up and clear of the unclothed Ilka.

"Oh, my love, I would like to follow you wherever you wander, to the very ends of the earth if need be."

"You don't have to follow, you can come along and give me a lift," said Palma as he picked up his all-season underwear. "And it's only fifty-some miles from here."



## Chapter 25

"Couple of guys," said Kip, indicating the footprints in the loamy earth, "big fellows, joined him here."

"Palma's prints disappear after that."

"Here they are again. They must have lifted him off the ground for a minute."

"That," observed April, "doesn't sound like a friendly thing to do."

"Nope," agreed Kip. "They took him against his will."

"Arrow's still pointing in that direction."

"We'll continue."

The two of them moved carefully through the forest. Pale morning sunlight was spreading, birds were singing and muttering. The running and hopping of scarlet-furred squirrels shook down leaves and blossoms from high above.

"Did you ..." began April.

Kip slowed. "What?"

The girl halted, listening. "Thought I heard something go *crunch* behind us, not a big *crunch*" She shook her head finally. "Nothing I guess."

"Wait, I think—"

Everything stopped for him. Motion first, then all sound from outside. It had never happened to him before, yet he knew a stungun had been used on him. He'd been looking away from the girl when it hit, his head turned toward the forest they'd just come through. So now, unable to move, he could only see part of her from the corner of his eye.

His vision began to fade, slowly at first then accelerating. It was as though April was rushing away from him and darkness closing in.

Soon there was only darkness.

## Chapter 26

"They seem cute to me," said Ilka, swinging her machete and severing several forest vines.

"Cute perhaps," admitted Palma. "I don't think, however, they should have come with us."

Trooping behind him and the large girl were five child-size gypsy androids. These were the Harmonikids and they were all playing: two on an assortment of harmonicas, one on an accordian, one on a concertina and the fifth on an instrument, played with the nose apparently, Palma was unfamiliar with.

"Some day, pet," said Ilka as she felled more vines and shrubbery, "we might have five little ones of our own."

"Not five little harmonica-playing gypsy androids," said Palma. "And why do you keep hacking at the foliage? We can make just as good time walking around the stuff."

"Now it begins, eh?" she asked, gesturing at him with the blade. "Last night it was rapture, comes the dawn it's critiques."

"I'm anxious to locate my friends, love."

"Any requests?" inquired the first little gypsy android in line.

"Ha," said Palma.

"A man who shouts at children, he's mean inside." Ilka chopped more brush aside.

"Kids I like, it's little bitty runty machines that I find—"

"You aren't any prize pippin yourself," the little accordian-player told him. "It's bad enough being bald, without you got also lumps and welts all over."

"That comes from sleeping in upper bunks," explained Palma. "Plus which I was fallen upon by ruffians."

"Are you in some kind of trouble, pet?"

"Nothing monumental."

"Do you like polkas?" asked the concertina-player.

"No," answered Palma.

They continued on for several minutes and then arrived at the campsite.

"Your friends are no longer here."

"So I noticed. It doesn't make—"

"Is your name Palma, curly?" The second harmonica-player found the note Kip had left tacked to a tree.

"Yeah, let's have that."

"What," asked Ilka, "do they say?"

"They're going to come looking for me. If I get back, to wait."

"Well then, pet, we shall wait."

"Kip put the time on this, it was written hours ago," said Palma. "He's got a gadget for tracking with; we should have run into him on our way here." He tapped his fist in his palm several times.

"Bolo and Yamos," said Ilka, "before we went into show business, were excellent trackers. We could use them to find your friends."

"We could," agreed Palma.

## Chapter 27

"This takes the cake," someone was saying. "Am I going to flay this bastard in the media when I'm released. I'm going to score him on every news outlet in the Baraum System. I'll call for his ouster."

Kip realized he could move. Not much, but some. He still wasn't seeing.

"Irate is what I am," continued the voice. "I'll lodge a goddamn protest. You can't do things like this to Hildy McFate. Maybe to your rank and file newsman, but not to McFate."

There was flooring beneath him, Kip could feel it now. Some kind of wooden planking, rough. He rubbed his fingertips in small half circles over the floor. Yeah, real wood.

"How about the time Hildy McFate covered the cannibal story on Esperanza? Did he do a run-of-the-mill job? While the other members of the Fourth Estate were standing around wondering if those marooned space-liner passengers were really eating each other for food, McFate forged right in where angels feared to tread. He got the story. Not only did I get the story, I sat down with the remaining passengers and ate part of the Secretary of Agriculture of Callisto. That's Hildy McFate for you."

Kip's tongue was working. He ran it along his lips, which felt dry and cracked. Flickers of light were getting through, nothing clear yet.

"Or you take the Ilona Sapperstein suicide. There was this bimbo perched up there on the fender of her hovering air-cruiser, threatening to end it all unless Merwin Meadows acknowledged he loved her yet. While the other news' hounds milled about in the street level, Hildy McFate jumped from the rooftop of the bimbo's apartment smack dab onto the air-cruiser. True, that caused her to topple off the thing, but it sure put McFate on the scene. Eyewitness news, that's what the public buys. That's what McFate delivers."

It was a wood floor, Kip could see that. He lay there, face down, studying the pattern of the swirls in the wood. After a while he tried to push himself up. He did not succeed.

"Take the Wisecarver bugging scandal. Nobody else even suspected the government of Barafunda had planted the listening device on Wisecarver during his last prostrate examination. Nobody, that is, except yours truly. I ferreted out the whole shocking story, in detail, and broke it to an anxious public. A typical Hildy McFate performance."

Kip tried again. This time he got to his knees. He managed, though swaying some, to stay there.

"How you doing, kid?"

Kip widened his eyes, closed them, opened them once again. A fat man in a three-piece hunter suit was sitting in the room's only chair. "I... where's... is she here?"

"Nobody here but us chickens," said Hildy McFate. "That's an expression I picked up on Earth when I was covering the New Jersey scandal. Seems the then-president of the United States had, secretly and on the sly, mind you, sold New Jersey to his brother-in-law. They didn't so much mind that in Congress, but they were curious as to how much he got out of the deal. He wouldn't tell them because he said it was a presidential sec—"

"She's not here?"

"No, she isn't. Whoever she might be," said the fat newsman. "You can trust Hildy McFate. If he says the room is not occupied by any comely young girls, he is right. It is a young lady you're asking after, isn't it?"

"Yes.... Was she here at all?"

"You're the only one to grace the premises since early in the day."

"It's... late in the day now?"

"Cocktail hour at least. They took my voxwatch, so I can't be sure."

"That's okay, I've got—Hey, they took my watch, too."

"Took all your valuables," McFate assured him.

"I don't even know who they ... Where are we?"

"In the hill country, in the stronghold of the charismatic leader Of the dissatisfied populace, Silverthorne."

"The hills, huh? Last thing I remember, we were in the forest."

"These rolling hills rise majestically above the primeval forest glades," said McFate.

"Silverthorne's crew is fond of waylaying travelers."

Kip stood and began searching himself. "They took everything," he discovered. His weapons, all his gadgets, his identification packet Nothing was left. "That's going to make it tough to break out of here."

"Well nigh impossible."

"What's the purpose of holding me, after they've robbed me?"

"Some captives they put to work, others they ransom."

"From what I've heard of Silverthorne, he's a champion of the people."

"Not all the people," said McFate. "Like all revolutionaries before him, Silverthorne has found that what it takes to bring off a successful coup is a little capital."

"Who's he opposed to?"

"Originally to the officials who run Company County and ride rough shod over the residents of the surrounding areas. More recently, he's broadened his scope."

Kip slowly and cautiously walked to the wall. He leaned against it, noticing there were no windows in the room. "Did they waylay you?"

"Mine is a more flagrant case," replied the newsman. "Hildy McFate made his way to the mountain stronghold of the notorious rebel leader to do one of his well-known exclusive interview-profile pieces. Silverthorne decided he needed cash more than media immortality so he decided to hold me and ask my bosses for a sizable ransom."

"Will they pay it?"

"For Hildy McFate? Wouldn't you?"

After a moment Kip said, "The girl I was traveling with, how do I find out what's happened to her?"

"Maybe you don't want to find out, kid."

## Chapter 28

Late in the evening it began to rain, heavy straight-falling rain which pounded on the slant roof of their prison shack.

"Do they feed us?" Kip asked.

"They have been known to," said McFate. "Not with any regularity, though." He was still occupying the only chair. Locking his hands behind his head, he studied Kip. "So you're the scion of the renowned Bundy clan? They're going to ask a big price for you when they find out."

"They must know already, since they've got my IDs."

"Not all of Silverthorne's followers are perceptive enough to read or—"

The door of the shack rattled, banged open. A small catman in a yellow lycra raincape stood out there in the downpour. "Where's your doormat?" he asked.

"Must have misplaced it when we rearranged the furniture," said McFate.

"How am I to wipe my feet then?" The catman held a stungun in his left hand. "Honest to goodness, you really have turned this room of yours into a grout-pen, haven't you? I am simply, honest to goodness, not going to come in there and mess it up any further."

"You can just put our dinner down and go," said McFate. "You do have some food under that outfit?"

"Look there," said the dripping carman from the doorstep. "Honest to goodness, you've made ugly unsightly marks all over the floor."

"That must have been when they dragged me in here," said Kip.

"I tell them and I tell them, wipe your feet and wipe the unconscious prisoner's feet. They never pay attention."

"Didn't you bring supper?" The newsman shifted in the chair.

"Honest to goodness, do I look like a messboy or something? I happen to be Silverthorne's aide-de-camp. Oh, and look at those dirty splotches on the wall."

"That's blood," explained McFate, "from when they worked over the last—"

"I don't want to hear about it," said the cat-man. "Well. Mr. Bundy, come along with me."

"Why?"

"It's important, obviously, or I wouldn't be trudging around in the rain. Silverthorne wishes to discuss your ransoming with you. Get a move on, won't you."

Kip went to the door. "Which way?"

"Stay on the stone pathway and, please, try not to get your boots too muddy."

After locking McFate in the shack, the aide-de-camp escorted Kip, with the stungun at his back, to a larger shack. They were on a plateau with a dozen shacks built on it. The one they were heading for was the only one consisting of several rooms.

A bearded young man stood on the porch of the big shack, a blaster rifle in his hands.

"Just look at you," complained the catman. "You've got mud all over the front of your new tunic."

"That's due to the leak, sir."

"What leak?"

The young guerrilla raised his eyes to the porch roof. "Right there, sir. It causes muddy muddy water to come cascading through and spatter me."

"Move then, you booby."

"You instructed me to keep my feet on this welcome mat, sir."

"Honest to goodness." The catman opened the front door himself, stood aside and shoed Kip in. "First door on your right."

Kip walked down the hall and went through the open doorway. There were two chairs in this bare room. April was sitting in one.

In the other was Silverthorne.

Now, seeing him up close, Kip recognized him. Under that beard the rebel leader was actually one of their MMG butler androids.

## Chapter 29

"We always get in trouble, Ilka, when you lets your heart call the shots," said Yamos. "Keep sniffing," she told her brother. "No need for that," said the huge Bolo.

"There's only one likely place this trail can lead."

"Besides, it's never very effective, trying to smell out a trail in the rain." Yamos grunted up off the ground, wiping mud from the tip of his nose.

Palma asked, "Where do you think they were taken?"

"Up there into the hills," said Bolo, pointing at the darkness and clouds ahead of them. "Silverthorne's got them, is my guess."

"Silverthorne the rebel leader?"

"How many Silverthorne's you think they got around here?"

Palma rubbed beads of rain off his sleek head. "What's he likely to do to them?"

"Turn them into blooming soldiers for his army," said Yamos.

"We hear he also holds some prisoners until he can ransom them off." Ilka helped Palma brush the rain off his head.

"Okay, how do we rescue them?"

Bolo growled. "We already missed the supper show tonight because of this blinking little errand of mercy. Now you wants for us to waste more time."

"That's it," said Palma, grinning. "Even grizzled veterans like entertainment. Who could turn down a chance to see a show, especially one of this caliber?"

"Lots of people can turn down gypsy androids," said Yamos.

"I don't half like this," declared Bolo, tugging at his beard. "We got a big show to put on two days hence at Company County. The only first-class booking we got on this whole bloody tour. I'm against sticking our noses in a battle royal with a bunch of commando blokes."

"But, Bolo," pleaded his large sister, "think of this poor young girl. You can't allow her to languish in the hands of such as Silverthorne and his raggletaggle army."

After another rumbling growl, Bolo said, "I wish once you'd fall for a cove without no outside problems. That bloke back on Murdstone whose wife kept having his bedroom furniture teleported away to—"

"Enough, Bolo. Please don't rake over the sad embers of the past." Ilka kissed Palma's cheek. "Forget you ever heard this, pet."

"It's forgotten. Now, about approaching their camp."

"We'll do exactly as you say," promised the girl.

"Oh lord," said Yamos.



## Chapter 30

"I might go so far as to say," said Silverthorne, "that your family is well-off."

Kip was standing next to April's chair, his hand on her shoulder. "They are, yes. They can pay a ransom for both me and Miss Arthur."

The android stroked his silky black beard. "I haven't yet decided whether I'll offer the young woman for sale."

"He's taken a fancy to me," said April in a low voice.

"Do you know who he really is?"

"I... no, I'm not sure."

"He's one of the MMG andies. I don't know how he—"

"Enough of this whispering and murmuring," said Silverthorne. "We must—Blazes!" His beard had come loose from his face on the last down-stroke.

"Now I recognize him," said the girl.

"I don't suppose you've had this problem, Bundy. I can't keep my whiskers on."

"That's because not every kind of adhesive will work on BKE's synthflesh," Kip told him. "What you need is ... well, never mind."

The beardless android leaned forward. "No, I am interested. Do you know of a glue that will work?" he asked anxiously. "To be quite frank, I'm a little reluctant to take over this planet until I can find some way to keep my beard on. For instance, it would be embarrassing if, as I ride under a triumphal arch into Company County with my arms upraised in victory, my whiskers blow away. If I lost them while being carried around on the shoulders of a grateful public, that wouldn't be so good either. Do you see?"

"What you need is Stig Twenty-six."

The android blinked. "Where would I obtain such a product?"

"Most grocomats and notion stores carry it."

"I can't walk into any place like that."

Kip said, "I had a tube with me, but your men took away all my effects."

Silverthorne had the false beard resting on his knee. After stroking it a few times, he rose up. "I'll fetch your things, Bundy," he said. "Don't try to escape, you'll be disintegrated at both doors and all three windows."

April, as the android strode from the room, reached up and touched Kip's hand. "Can you do something?"

"Probably. Create a small diversion while I'm going through my stuff."

"I'm glad you turned out to be alive," she said.

"I like the idea myself."

Jiggling preceded Silverthorne's return. "You certainly carried a lot of junk on your person. Where's the glue?" Squatting, the android shook the contents of the polysak he'd been carrying out onto the plank floor.

Kip knelt down beside the pile. "I know I had it here some place." He began to poke at the

various articles.

"Oh, my lord!" April leaped to her feet, screamed.

Silverthorne shot up, too. "What is it, little one?"

"Someone at the window," said the girl, pressing her hand to her cheek. "Oh, it was dreadful."

"Probably only my aide-de-camp," said the android. "He has a somewhat spooky appearance. Have you located the glue, Bundy?"

"Yep, here's the tube."

"That's not much glue."

"This is a sample." Kip dropped it into Silverthorne's palm. "Rub that on your face, then press the false whiskers on."

"Stig Twenty-six. Even Better Than Stig Twenty-five! The perfect adhesive compound for sticking neowood, pseudopape, faxo, lucite, carro-leum, smix, synthflesh and imaglaz! Use only as directed! Keep out of reach of children, androids and certain kinds of anthropoids!" read Silverthorne off the tiny label. "I like that, keep away from androids. We'll see about that." Unscrewing the cap with his imitation teeth, he squirted a dab of glue onto his chin.

"Be sure," said Kip, "to spread it out evenly."

"I can't see, am I getting it on even?"

"Need a little more there." Kip raised his hand, then stuck the parasite control box he'd palmed against the side of the android's head.

Silverthorne's grip on the tube tightened, shot a thin coil of glue spinning up into the air.

"You'll do exactly what I tell you," Kip told him.

"Yes, very good, sir."

"How many men do you have at this encampment?"

"Fifty-five, sir."

"How many prisoners?"

"Three at the moment, plus five fellows we've put to work digging drainage ditches."

"Who did you belong to?"

"I was in the employ of Colonel Learman in Senior Village near here, sir," replied the android. "Somehow, though, I felt I wasn't cut out for the butler life, for the continual bowing and scraping. I was convinced, felt it inside me, that I was destined for greater things. We all of us, you know, carry prophecies of our future around with us. Many of us, though, fear to act, if I may say so, sir. I chose to act and thus—"

"I've got Colonel Learman on my customer list," said Kip. "I'm not going to repair you until you lead us out of here."

"As you wish, sir. I stand ready to serve you in any manner within my powers."

Taking the whiskers and the glue, Kip fastened the beard back on Silverthorne's face.

"The beard makes all the difference, doesn't it, sir?"

## Chapter 31

The wizened old fortune-telling android rasped, "I see a serious toe infection ahead for you, dearie. I see you limping along the road of—"

"Give me back my hand, lady." The curly-haired young guerrilla jerked his hand out of her rough grip. "Heck, I was figuring you'd tell me I'd meet a stately blonde princess and get my rocks off at least. You don't know what it's like, holed up in these—"

"Move along, dearie. That'll be one buck." Rain pelted the broken-ribbed black umbrella she held over herself.

"A buck? For what? To get told I got some awful kind of foot blight in my future?"

The old woman grabbed back his hand. "I'll take one more look, hot head," she offered. "Ah, what do my dim but far-seeing eyes perceive in the intricate pattern Fate has traced upon your palm? I see ... yes, it is a princess. She walks with ... a stately gait."

"Yeah, that's more' like it. Am I going to meet her?"

"Obviously. Where do you think you're going to catch the toe infection? One buck. Next."

"Gripes," muttered the guerrilla, reluctantly handing over a folded piece of paper money.

Five other Silverthorne rebels, including one hairless old man with only three teeth, huddled around the two show vans. Under the awning over a side window in one of the vans Rubinson was bowing his violin to produce another mournful air.

"This, of course, gentlemen, is but a small portion of the wonders you will view once we are within your gates," Palma, standing in the rain, was telling the straggle of guerrillas. "Already you have been awed witnesses to Madam Tich's lifting of the veil which, for most of us mortals, hides our future and our fate from us. Yes, and that is but one of the—"

"Any girls?" asked one of the young men. He was standing closest to the high board fence which kept Palma and the others outside the camp.

"What would a show be without girls? Most certainly there are girls."

"I don't mean wrinkled old squawks," said the young rebel. "What I mean is comely lasses with great big whamos on them."

Palma's left eyebrow rose a fraction. "Whamos, did you say?"

"You know, whamos. Big kazams out front here."

"You mean yonkers," said the bald photographer, "kabobos, knockers, yams, mambos, boobs, chabobs, buns, hangers, the old outfit, twin forty-fours, propos, big berthas, etc.?"

"Yeah, whamos."

The old man chuckled. "You got a good vocabulary when it comes to tits, baldy."

"Well, every special-interest field has its own special jargon," said Palma.

"So do they?" the young guerrilla persisted.

"I can assure you," Palma said, "that once our troupe is inside your camp you are going to see such—"

"Ho, the guard!" shouted a voice on the other side of the gate.

"There's a catch phrase you hear a lot these days," remarked Palma, taking an uneasy step

backward.

"Excuse us a minute." Two of the men trotted, sloshing mud, back to the big gate and pulled it half open.

"Holy moly," exclaimed the three-toothed old man, "it's the big cheese himself."

"Silverthorne?" asked Palma.

"The same, in the flesh."

"Perhaps he's coming to take in the festivit— Hey, there's Kip." As Palma watched, Silverthorne, followed by Kip, April, a grossly fat man and five weary looking men in one-piece worksuits, marched through the open gate and down along the rainy trail.

"Palma!" said Kip.

"Palma." April left the group, ran over and hugged him. "You all right?"

"I'm in fighting trim and at the peak of perfection," he said. "Are you folks prisoners?"

"Oh, no, we're escaping. Are you a prisoner?"

"No, I was in the process of leading a rescue mission."

Kip, holding onto the android Silverthorne's arm, joined Palma and the girl. "Can we use these landtrucks?"

"That's why I brought them."

"Beg pardon, sir," said the android. "I have the distinct impression the beard is slipping once again."

"Only a little on one cheek." Kip poked at the whiskers. "There."

"Possibly the beard was a bad idea, but when I began my career as a rebel leader I felt a set of impressive whiskers added something to my otherwise bland features."

"Um ... sir?" asked one of the young guerrillas. "What would you like us to do?"

Silverthorne turned to Kip. "Any instructions, sir?"

"Tell them to go back inside."

"Very good. Men, return to your barracks."

"Shouldn't we keep on standing guard?"

"No need of that," said the MMG android. "You all get a good night's sleep."

The men, some of them puzzled, drifted back into the camp. The big gate was shut.

The window in the side of the van swung open. Ilka thrust her head and torso out. "Are these your friends, pet?"

"Yes," answered Palma, "chance has brought us all together."

Behind her Bolo appeared. "Ain't there going to be any brawling and scrapping?"

"It's been a bloodless coup," explained Palma.

"I feared this wouldn't be no fun."

Kip asked, "What exactly is this group you're traveling with, Palma?"

"Get in the other truck and I'll explain everything. Or almost everything."

## Chapter 32

They came rolling over the crest of a hill and there it was, spread out over several bright glistening miles, all in shades of white. Spires mingled with domes, interwove with curving ramps—all of it immensely clean, glowing white in the midday sun.

Palma sniffed. "They even have better air around these parts." He was at the controls" of the first landvan.

Kip sat next to him. He nodded at the small sedate roadside sign which read: *Welcome to Company County. Employees Only* "I trust our subterfuge will work."

"The Trojan horse gambit always succeeds," Palma assured him.

As they came nearer to the white city they noticed the flags, small sedate white banners atop evenly spaced white poles. *Dillingham Means Good!* each fluttering flag announced.

"Dillingham is sort of the Bundy of this planet, huh?"

"He's got branches on six of the Barnum System planets," replied Kip. "His company does about a third of the business we do."

"Why'd he purchase an MMG butler, instead of whipping up one of his own?"

"The Dillingham people are behind us in robotics. He probably wanted to see how the thing works."

A new sign, somewhat larger and less sedate, appeared on their left. *Invisible Force Gate 50 Feet Ahead. Stop Here.*

Palma stopped the truck. "That's certainly a spotless city up there."

"Dillingham started in the cleaning servomech line, fifty years ago back on Murdstone. It's still his favorite division."

A modest whirring sound attracted Palma's attention. He turned his head, squinted through the windshield. "Am I having a religious vision?"

A white-robed figure was dropping down out of the clean clear sky toward the van.

"Welcome to Company County," said the hovering android. "While awaiting the arrival of the Inspection Team I'll sanitize your truck. Quite filthy, isn't it?"

"I missed giving it a bath last week," said Palma.

The white-robed android rose up, squirted blue foam at the outside of the windshield.

"Are they going to do that to us, too?"

"I think," said Kip, "Dillingham does make all visitors take a steam bath."

"Might be interesting. Once in a vegetarian bathhouse on Tarragon I encountered a girl with the most extraordinary set of whamos. One of them, the left-hand one if memory serves, pointed up in this direction. Whereas the other—"

"Please step clear of your vehicle." Two new white-robed androids were hovering on Palma's side of the cab.

"We're show peoples" He opened his door and dropped to the dustless street.

Pointing his index finger at Palma, one of the androids sprayed him with a mint-scented mist. "Name please. Object of visit?"

"We're the traveling gypsy group, come to perform at tonight's grand ball."

Kip got out on his side, walked around to stand beside his friend. The other android sprayed him.

"Might you be the Ilka, Bolo and Yamos Galactic Gypsy Show?" asked the first android.

"That's us," replied Palma. "We're going to do our act during the intermission at the Debutantes' Ball this evening. What a show it is, let me tell you. It commences with—"

"How many human males?"

They had dumped Hildy McFate, who was reluctant to go since he sensed a story in the making, and the rest of the freed prisoners at a monorail station some miles back. Silverthorne, who started calling himself Phipps as soon as Kip got around to repairing him, was returning to his original owner by boat.

"Let's see," said Palma, "there's four of us."

"Females?"

"Two."

Six small tickets unfurled out of a slot in the android's hand. "Orange tickets for Male Steam-room Eleven-A, blue for Female Steamroom Thirteen-B. After you've been thoroughly sanitized you'll be escorted to your individual guest cottages. Thank you."

"Thank you." Kip accepted the tickets.

"I was hoping," said Palma, "for communal steam."

## Chapter 33

"How about this one?" asked Bolo. A grunt, a slapping noise and a slick scraping came out of the swirls of thick steam.

"I can't see a bloody thing, I tell you," his brother said.

"It's a one-handed handstand."

Shaking his shaggy head, Yamos said, "Every time he gets his blinking clothes off he wants to do stunts."

"I can sympathize with that," said Palma. He and Kip were sitting on a tile bench a few yards from Yamos.

"Can you see this here now, ninny? I'm balancing entirely on my little pinky."

"Couldn't prove it by me."

Kip said, "We still have to figure out a way to get to the Underground."

"If I can get to the central computer rooms, I might be able to ... hum."

"What is it?"

"This steam is getting damn thick. I can't see either of Ilka's hulking brothers now."

"Ilka seems quite taken with you, by the way."

"Women are continually doing that." Palma mopped perspiration off his bald head. "My problem continues to be how to get them untaken. But that's not the problem at hand. I was saying how I might . . . That's funny, it's so thick I can't even see you, Kip."

Kip didn't reply.

Palma backsided along the tile toward the place Kip had been sitting.

There was someone there, but it didn't happen to be Kip. It was a large lizardman, fully dressed in a spotless three-piece white tourist suit. "How you doing, skinhead?" asked Rod Marshall.

## Chapter 34

The sound of shuffling feet came through the dirt-streaked wall, the humming and thumping of old-time machinery.

"This solves one of our problems," observed Palma, "we're Underground."

At the moment Kip and Palma were in a small square room deep down beneath Company County. The lizardman, carrying a blaster to urge them, had brought them down through a series of tunnels. They'd entered this room through a sliding section of wall. Rod Marshall had left them, and gone back through the wall.

"How did he know we were here?" Kip said.

"Maybe he's got his own gypsy."

"I can see how they might have anticipated us before, with Ace listening to everything we were saying."

Taking a new grip on the towel he had wrapped around his waist, Palma paced the dusty floor. "None of us, not you or me or April or Ilka and her clan, could have told them. So I'm—Duck!"

A small section of roof slid open, briefly, to let two bundles drop down into the room.

"My wardrobe." The photographer poked at one bundle with his toe.

"Looks like I've been relieved of my gadgets again."

"Perhaps that's good. This way you won't get overly dependent on mechanical—"

"Your shoes."

"You like them? I picked them up at a pseudo-hide outlet on—"

"Put them side by side again."

Palma did. "Something?"

"The left heel is a small bit higher than the right." Kip grabbed hold of the shoe, twisted and worried the heel with his hand. "Yeah, there." The heel swung aside to reveal a thin blue disk.

"Holy moly, as the revolutionaries say, a listening bug."

"Which explains how Munt's handymen know all about our coming here."

"Oy," realized Palma, "they also know all about my activities with Ilka."

"Don't you take oif your shoes?"

"Surely, but I leave them nearby. You don't want to get up and trot your shoes outside at moments like that." He pried the disk off, clicked the heel back into place and then continued dressing. "They must have done it while I was en route to Prince Xicara's dungeon, figuring if by some chance I escaped they'd still be able to keep up with me and with you. I should have noticed the damn thing, but when you're beyond thirty your brain starts going a little blooey."

"Well," said Kip. He got into his clothes.

"I imagine," said Palma after a moment, "the noise we hear is being made by the slave laborers."

"Yeah."

Palma turned toward him. "Look, Kip, I'm sorry I let them knock me out and put a bug in my shoe. It won't happen again."



Kip said, "That's okay, I was feeling sulky for a minute. I'm worried about April, what may happen to her."

"Golly, Kipper, she's going to do okay."

Another wall panel moved silently aside. A gangling red-haired young man stumbled into the room, a blaster pistol dangling from his trigger finger.

"Hello, Peterkin."

"Darn nice to see you again, old pal," said his cousin. "Real sorry we're going to have to leave you down here for the rest of your life. Gosh, but what else is there to do?"

"Wouldn't Munt prefer to kill us?"

"That's right, he would. He's a darn nasty customer, no two ways about it," said the red-haired Peterkin. "Heck, though, I can't let some guy like that kill my own cousin. What kind of family loyalty would that be?"

Kip asked, "What are all of you doing?"

"Smuggling dirj."

"Dirj?"

"Gosh, don't you know what it is, Kipper? A real popular drug among the young folks and low-lives of several planets. Happens to be illegal, because of some scary side effects. That only helps make it expensive."

"Is that what the slaves do, process the stuff?" asked Palma.

"Right you are. We have a great big processing, plant set up down here. *Dirj* is derived from a plant which grows all over the wilds of Malagra. No place else, in case you're interested. To get the end product we want you can't use any of the up-to-date methods. Oh, maybe eventually I can figure out why not. Now it's simpler to keep this old-fashioned factory running."

"You've got Dillon Arthur down here?"

"He's a swell guy, isn't he? Yes, old Dillon got wind somehow that we were using a couple of the MMGs to smuggle some of our *dirj* in. So, again, it was either let the boys kill him or put him to work here."

"Why are you bothering with any of this, Peterkin?"

"It's real profitable," replied his cousin. "You know, I may never take over the whole BKE setup. When I heard, through a quiet little connection I maintained with old Dillingham, I decided it'd be a nice way to add to my income. Not the first sideline I've gone into either, Kipper."

Palma said, "Several people know Kip is here. BKE also knows where I am. It's going to be tough to explain what happened if we just vanish."

"I know," said Peterkin. "See, you're not going to disappear, either of you. You're going to have a fatal accident while driving your truck away from here tomorrow. We're even going to let that big girl and her androids put on their show tonight to make this more believable. Anyhow, tomorrow you and Kipper will be killed instantly. Your bodies will be burned beyond recognition by even the most subtle forensic robot. The young ladies suffer head injuries which will cause them to forget much of—"

"You son of a bitch!" Kip sprang at his cousin.

The gun swung up. "Don't, Kipper, old buddy. I may prefer to let you live, but I'll kill you if I have to," he warned. "I don't know why you're so excited, the bodies in the wreck won't really be yours."

"If you hurt April—"

"I see, you're stuck on her." Peterkin smiled. "You don't have anything to worry about, Kipper. The brain operation I've worked out to make them forget is real simple."

Kip kept himself from saying anything further.

Palma watched Peterkin for a few seconds. "Why stick us down here to slave in a dreary factory?" he asked. "I don't know about Kip, but me, I wouldn't mind being cut in on your smuggling operation. That's a much simpler way to keep me quiet."

The red-headed young man laughed. "Gosh, nice try, Mr. Palma," he said, wiping at the corner of his eye with his free hand. "Except I, long since, had you checked out real good. You, despite your vigorous romantic life, are a completely honest man. I'm not stupid, you know. If I had thought there was a possibility of compromising you, I would have tried."

"Damn," said Palma, "screwed up by my innate honesty again."

"Anyhow, I wanted to explain the situation to you." Peterkin moved back to the wall. "Probably won't see you again for a long while, Kipper, So long. Been nice meeting you, Mr. Palma."

He left them.

## Chapter 35

A factory whistle tooted out beyond their doorless and windowless cell.

"The work day is ending," said Palma. "Perhaps the dinner hour is nigh."

Kip was, once more, working his way along the walls of the room. There should be one of those damn sliding panels that could be tinkered with, gotten open with only your hands to work with. "They'll have to feed us," he said.

"I guess that's right, now that we've joined the working class." Palma was sitting on the floor, bald head pressed against a dirty wall. "Do you suppose they have any ladies working in this *dirj* factory?"

"Seems unlikely."

"Oy, I don't think I can long survive without tits to distract me. It isn't always absolutely necessary, to an artist such as myself, to get my hands on them. However, I like to be able to see them. No two yonkers are alike, you know. Even in the same set, you'll find one with perhaps a freckle on it, the other will perhaps tilt a bit more to starboard. In that sense, tits are like people, each one an individual with a special life of its own and an interesting story to tell. In fact, considering all the dull people I've interviewed in the meteoric course of my journalistic career, I'd much rather talk to a tit. Also, interestingly enough, tits aren't always like their owners. You find a girl with a brain the size of a pecan, yet she has in her possession two of the biggest, smartest tits you'd ever want to meet. Contrariwise, many a girl with an IQ of a hundred and eighty and a ready stock of brilliant epigrams and aphorisms has dull stupid tits. Sometimes, as is oft the case with twins, one tit is perky and intelligent while the other is droopy and dumb. I recall once on Esperanza I fell in with a lady motorcycle cop who happened to have three—"

"Hey," said Kip,

The section of wall he'd been examining was starting to slide aside.

"Have your labors been fruit—"

"Hi, Mr. Cleanhead," said Rod Marshall, the broad-shouldered lizardman. Behind him loomed one of the catmen, Reed Marlowe.

"Shit," said Kip.

"You didn't think poking your finger at the wall was going to do any good, did you, schoolboy?" asked the lizard, with a gurgling laugh.

"I had my hopes."

"What a pair, ain't they, Reed? A skinhead and a schoolboy." Rod Marshall jabbed at Kip's ribs with the barrel of his blaster.

"Don't go and damage him too much, Rod. We need these twerps for the swing shift."

Palma sneezed. He frowned at the catman. "Have you, by any chance, been rolling around on the bridal paths upstairs?"

"Huh?"

"One of you smells like grout manure. It must be you," said the bald photographer. "I'm allergic to it."

The caiman's spiky white cheek whiskers stiffened. He pushed up close to Palma. "You implying I been rolling around in crap, curly?"

"Isn't that what cats do?"

Reed Marlowe made a hissing sound. "I don't like no humanoid chauvinistic remarks," he snarled. "Anyway, it's dogs who like to roll around in crap."

Palma sneezed twice, putting a hand on the carman's shoulder to steady himself. "Are you suggesting I'm a bigot?"

"Yeah, you bald-headed mother-humper."

"Nobody can call—" Palma sneezed twice again, placing his other hand on Reed Marlowe's other shoulder. "Act!" he advised Kip, and threw Reed Marlowe against Rod Marshall.

The lizardman's blaster went off, sizzling a saucer-size hole in the flooring material.

Kip jumped, got his hands around Rod Marshall's gun wrist. He spun the big lizard around, slammed the gun hand repeatedly against the wall.

Palma, meanwhile, battered his head into the carman's groin.

"Oof," exclaimed Reed Marlowe as he went toppling backward.

"I brought the coveralls for these bozos to—Hey!" Brett Martin, the other carman, stepped out of the wall. Dropping the work clothes, he whipped out two blaster pistols. "Everybody knock it off," he cried.

Kip threw one more jab to the lizardman's scaly chin before giving up. He dropped his hands, stepping away from him.

Palma had been in midair over the fallen Reed Marlowe. He came down flat-footed on the cat-man's stomach. "Excuse it," he said as he stepped off onto the floor.

"You guys got some nerve," said Brett Martin.

"It's called," explained Palma, "the instinct for self-preservation."

Rod Marshall picked up his gun and slapped Kip across the face with the barrel. "Schoolboy!"

"Don't wreck him too much," cautioned Brett Martin. "Sawhill likes them in good shape when they start here."

"We're getting closer to one object of our quest," said Palma. "Sawhill was the guy we were supposed to look up."

"You'll see plenty of him, skinhead," promised Rod Marshall.

Kip discovered his nose was bleeding. He wiped it on the back of his hand.

"Oof oof," said Reed Marlowe, rising up off the floor. "Took the wind clean out of me." He buffed one furry paw with the other. "Let me whap baldy in the gut a few times, it won't show."

"We lost enough time already," said Rod Marshall. "Okay, you two, get them worksuits on. The swing shift is almost ready to start."

"Does this factory have a cafeteria?" asked Palma.

"Shut up," said Reed Marlowe.

"I'm liable to stage a work stoppage if I don't eat."

"Sawhill will keep you working."

"He sure will," said Rod Marshall. "Remember the time he—"

"Reach for it!" Another part of the wall had eased open. A husky man stepped into the room, a

blaster rifle in his hands. "Drop your weapons."

"Who's this jerk?" Rod Marshall asked.

"It's Buck Kirkwood of Spacehawk, Inc.," said Kip, surprised.

"I won't repeat the order more than once," said Kirkwood. "Drop the guns. That means you, Marshall. And you, Martin."

"Okay, okay," said Rod Marshall. "You don't have to shout."

"This is really your Spacehawk, Inc. cohort?" Palma asked Kip.

"Yeah, let's hope he doesn't fall down before he disarms these guys."

The guns hit the floor.

Kirkwood ordered, "Over against the wall, you three goons."

"Another bigot," muttered Reed Marlowe.

From beneath his tunic Kirkwood produced a coil of neorope. "Tie them up, will you, Kip."

"Sure." Kip set about trussing up each of the men. "I'm glad to see you've given up drinking and the rest."

"I don't drink, nor do I use drugs," said Kirkwood. "That was merely a bit of play-acting."

"Who were you trying to fool?"

Kirkwood strode further into the room. "I assumed, and correctly, that if I pretended to be a typical run-down private eye no one would tumble to who I really am."

Palma asked, "Who are you?"

"Roger C. Kirkwood of the Barnum Political Espionage Office."

"A PEO guy," said Rod Marshall sadly.

"Then you don't," said Kip as he got the last of them securely tied, "work for us at all?"

"No, that was only a cover. PEO has been interested in both the MMG androids and the older *dirj* smuggling racket for some time. Getting a job with Spacehawk, Inc. seemed a good way to mask my real activities here. But enough explanations for now, fellows, we've got Sawhfill, Peterkin and old Dillingham himself to round up yet."

Palma said, "Could you tell us, before we continue on our rounds, how you knew where we were?"

"These goons aren't the only ones who can plant a listening device," replied Kirkwood. "Mine I managed to get into Kip's shoe during his visit with me."

"I wasn't aware of that."

"Of course not, I'm a PEO agent," said Kirkwood. "And, with all due respect to your family company, Kip, PEO has a much better brand of bug. Even your cousin couldn't spot it when he searched your clothes. Now, let's get going."

## Chapter 36

The robot's eight arms flashed in the light from the floating globes high up under the domed ceiling of the vast ballroom. He was seated in the center of a circular control table. "... thisistheBIG nightKIDDOSthoughtitwouldneverrollaroundBUTit sureenoughDIDlikeeverythingdoestothosewho ONLYstandandwaitANDwe'reALLgoingtohaveusa FINEtimeincaseyou don'tknowMEandwhoREALLY knowsanybodyinthisWORLDofoursI'myourdiscjock fortheEVENINGmynamebeingOXIEandI'vegot handfulsandARMLOADSofthelatestandgreatestplus lotsofthedimdarkLEFTOVERsofbygonedaysthat maybewilltouchthosePARENTALearsIsee flapping intheBACKGROUND. . ."

April stood inside Entrance Six of the enormous ballroom, watching the hundreds of young men and women flowing through the room. She hadn't seen Kip since shortly after they'd arrived. It was dark now, the ball was underway and there'd been no word from him. He'd have told me before he tried to rescue Dillon, she said to herself. But maybe he didn't have a chance. It's been hours, though. If he did try, and I don't know why he wouldn't have told me, then ... it could be they failed. But no one has done anything to us.

"... EACHhandholdsamusicSPOOLkiddossoget-readyto...."

"Do you see them?" Ilka appeared beside April.

"No ... I really don't think they're here."

"I've been wondering," said the big girl. "With Palma you get the feeling he never settles down. It could be he's simply ditched me."

"Not Kip."

". . .

EIGHTgreatspoolsof musicMIXINGtogetheratoncekiddosPLUSifyoucancomprehendTHEjoy ofitSIXnoisetapesandIswear toyounoJOCKbutOXIE hassuchNOISESinhislibraryofNOISEyou'llfindIgot thesoundofSIXcarloadsofcrystalglasswareplummet intoaRAVINEpluswhichIhaveGOTaVENUSIAN brassbandfallingintoabottomlessWELLfilledwith..."

"There's someone," said April.

Ilka took hold of her arm. "Where?"

"No, it's only one of the MMG androids. They all have the same face."

The butler android was pushing a wheelchair through the growing crowd of youths. Seated in the silver tube chair was a pile of quilts with a gaunt hairless head atop it. As April watched a thin copper arm snaked from under one of the quilts and wiped the raddled nose.

"Would that old gentleman be Dillingham?" asked Ilka.

"Yes, I believe it is."

"Very striking old fellow. I do hope he enjoys our performance."

"..

.SEVENrecentmodelaircruisersgroundupma-SOYBURGERfactoryduringadesertSANDstormand thatAINTallkiddiesBUTenoughchitCHATlet'shavesomenoise." Eight hands slammed eight music spools into place. Oxie added six more spools after that.

For a second or two there was no sound. Then it hit. It roared out of the dozens of floating amplifiers, shook the walls and the floors. The final movement of a symphony mixed with a religious chant and an all-girl orchestra and the sound of several monorail trains having head-on collisions at once.

"EverybodyDOtheKosh!" suggested Oxie.

"What," shouted Ilka, "is the Kosh?"

April shrugged. "A dance, I suppose."

In the Kosh the boy stalked the girl partner from behind and bonked her on the skull with his fist. When she regained her feet the pantomime was reversed.

Two thin metal arms reached out from under Dillingham's quilts. Fingers were stuck in his wrinkled old ears.

"EveryBODYdotheKosh!"

An overzealous young man, in a faultless one-piece formal suit, stalked the old man's MMG android and koshed him.

This caused the butler to accelerate his pushing. The wheelchair zigzagged swiftly through the koshing couples until it banged into Oxie's control center.

Old Dillingham, shedding quilts one by one, kept on moving. He sailed out of the chair and over Oxie's front turntable to land in a clattering heap beside the robot's chair.

The butler, whose left eye had started revolving, pressed the fingertips of his left hand to his head; "The world is too much with me," he sighed, collapsing into the wheelchair.

"Help me up, you bag of bolts," cried Dillingham.

"EVERYbodydoTHEKosh!"

"Someone ought to assist the poor old gentleman," said Ilka. "Excuse me a moment, dear."

April scanned the crowd again. No, he's not here, she said to herself. It can't be what Ilka said. Palma might run off, though I myself doubt it, but Kip wouldn't. Not with Dillon a prisoner here. And not ... well, yes, not while I'm still here.

"Oh, Tm frightfully sorry, Mr. Dillingham. I didn't realize they were so easily detachable." Ilka held one of the old tycoon's copper arms in her hand.

"Who is this amazon?"

"My name is Ilka, sir. Perhaps you've heard of Ilka, Bolo and Yamos? I was taking hold of your poor arm in order to help you to your feet."

"I don't have any feet, confound you, woman!"

Ilka leaned over, her breasts brushing some of Oxie's controls. "Oh, now that you mention it, sir, I see they've been replaced by little wheels. Isn't that—"

"Fetch my manservant! Where is that rascal?"

"I'm afraid he's suffered a fit Mr. Dillingham," explained Ilka. "Is there some part of you I could take hold of that's a bit more sturdy than this?" She waved his arm at him.

"AreyouDOINGitkiddos? EverybodyDOtheKosh!"

"Stop your caterwauling," the old man told Oxie.

"Excuse me, pardon me, excuse me, sorry, kids." A pale thin man was edging through the dancers toward the fallen Dillingham.

"Oh, what a rogue and peasant slave am I," murmured the android butler, loosening his collar and cuffs.

"Give me back that arm," Dillingham ordered, making a grab for it with his remaining metal hand.

"EverybodydoTHEKosh!"

April sadly shook her head. "Something's happened to Kip. I... I don't know what to do now."

"Excuse me, sorry, that's all right, pardon me." The pale thin man arrived at the control circle.

"Mr. Dillingham, sir, allow me."

"Who might you be, you dribbling puppy?"

"It's I, sir. Lamar Canondale HI. You know, your Senior Secretary."

"So?"

"You must be very uncomfortable down there, I know I would be all hunkered down like that allow me to climb in there and pick you up."

"Be careful," cautioned Ilka, "he comes apart easily."

"Get rid of that woman," shouted Dillingham. "Summon my man."

"Um — he's behaving a bit strangely, sir. Sighing, pressing his temples, reciting gloomy poetry. I wouldn't possibly—"

"Get him!"

"Very good, sir." Canondale worked his way around to the android. "Um ... Willis?"

"My bucket's got a hole in it and I can't buy no more beer," complained the mechanism.

"We all feel that way at times, yes," said Canondale. "Wouldn't you like to come over and -serve Mr. Dillingham?"

"Look out for your head!" warned Ilka.

Canondale wasn't quite quick enough to avoid getting clipped by one of the lucite slippers of the pretty blonde girl who had gone leaping over the control tables. Wobbling, he fell across the butler's lap.

"Nobody knows you when you're down and out," said Willis.

The blonde girl elbowed the eight-armed robot from his swivel chair. Clutching his microphone, she announced, "Many of you know me only as Spunky Wayloft, merely one more mindless deb. Tonight, however, I think it is time to speak out against the mindless conformity which Company County stands—"

"I told you to get rid of that woman," said Dillingham from down on the floor.

"She's a different woman, sir," said Ilka, leaning over. "Tm still out here, you see."

"Tonight we must," continued the pretty Spunky, "make a statement against all the crass venality that Gunther Dillingham and this Debutante Ball stand for. We must throw away the mindless trappings of an empty life!"

Someone stopped next to April. A gawky red-haired young man. "Miss Arthur, isn't it?"

April frowned at him. "Who ... are you Kip's cousin?"

"That's me, sure enough," said Peterkin. "I wanted to meet you."

"We can begin," said Spunky, "with these gaudy mindless symbols we are wearing." She took hold of the bodice of her ballgown, ripped it and then began to slip out of the entire garment. "Are you with me?"

"We are!"



"Yes!"

"Good notion, Spunky!"

"Spunky, stop that this minute!"

"Let's rally around Spunk!"

Other girls started getting out of their dresses. Boys began stripping.

"Where is that fool Willis?" cried old Dillingham.

"Fellow patriots," shouted the MMG android, rising up in the wheelchair, "I see it all now. This is the moment I have been waiting for. I will lead you to a new freedom. Join me! Together we will tear down this mindless world around us and build a better one in its place!"

At this moment several parts of the wall slid open. Kip, Palma, Kirkwood and the freed factory slaves poured into the ballroom.

## Chapter 37

The dancing stopped.

Several young men, with their faultless attire one-half to two-thirds removed, stood stock still and staring. Young girls, all of them pretty and fair, pressed their recently removed garments to them.

The MMG android, his snap-on bow tie pinched between his thumb and forefinger, ceased his rallying speech.

The mix of music and noise went on.

"What is it?" Dillingham wanted to know. "What confounded nonsense is going on out there?"

"It's Palma, sir", explained Ilka. "Are you sure you wouldn't want me to pull you up at least enough so that you can see over the rim of the turntables?"

"Vixen," muttered the old man, whacking at her with his unattached arm held like a club.

"Kip," said April, smiling. "And . . . it's Dillon!"

"Gosh, this looks decidedly bad," observed Peterkin. A blaster pistol appeared in his hand. He thrust it against the girl's side. "Damn sorry about this, Miss Arthur. You'll have to come along with me. I have to get away from here."

"No, I'm going to—"

He gripped her arm with his other hand, began pulling her toward an exit way.

PEO Agent Kirkwood marched through the stunned crowd. He went directly to the control center. "I am Roger C. Kirkwood, a fully accredited agent of the Political Espionage Office," he told the MMG android, the dazed Canondale and the sprawled Oxie. "As such I request you to turn off that din."

The butler's eye had stopped spinning. "Very well, sir," he said politely. He climbed behind the control counters. "Let me see now, dear me, all these switches and dials quite intimidate one."

"What's the meaning of this outrage?" said old Dillingham.

"Are you Gunther Dillingham?"

"Who else would I be, you beefy dolt?"

"I now place you under arrest, acting under the power invested in PEO field agents by the Interplanetary Law and Order Act, sir."

"Arrest? For what, pray tell?"

"Kidnapping, forceful imprisonment, operation of an illegal *dirj* factory and smuggling."

"Oh, that" The old man let his unattached arm drop to the floor.

Palma was watching the freed workers take over the ballroom and disarm the few puzzled guards who stood around the edges of the crowd. "Look at the budding kanockas," he said, turning his attention to the undressed girls. "It's comforting to know well never run out of tits."

Dillon Arthur, a lanky dark-haired young man of nearly thirty, was standing between the photographer and Kip, "Do you think April's here?"

"Judging from what Rod Marshall told us," replied Kip.

"Haven't seen her in months. I wonder if she's changed or—Hey, there she is." Her brother pointed across the large ballroom. "Going out the door there. Wait, April!"

"She's being dragged off by Peterkin," said Kip. He left then, running as fast as was possible, through the tangle of people.

"That is Peterkin, isn't it? He's liable to hurt sis." Dillon took off in Kip's wake.

Palma continued in that direction also, more slowly. There's a splendid set, very wide apart and a trifle low, he said to himself.

The MMG android succeeded in getting the music and noise to stop.

Agent Kirkwood took over the microphone. He began to explain to everyone what was happening.

Kip lunged out into the corridor. At its far end Peterkin was pushing April before him out onto a ramp. "Quit now," he called after his cousin.

Peterkin went on, out into the night with the girl.

When Kip reached the ramp neither of them could he see. The ramp was about fifty feet above ground level, part of a network which connected several large domed buildings. Slowly, Kip began to move out along the walkway. A warm night wind brushed at him.

"Look out!" warned April's voice.

Kip threw himself flat out on the ramp.

A blazer shot sizzled two feet above him.

Peterkin must be over in the dome to the immediate right. Lightsigns glowed all over its smooth pale yellow surface. *Dillingham Means Good; Museum Of Dillingham Progress; Always Open for Your Enjoyment and Inspiration; Dillingham Means Good.*

After long seconds of careful listening, Kip rose up and made a dash to the ramp edge. He jumped over the low guard railing. He landed, wide-legged, just above one of the throbbing light-strip signs.

There was a small servicing door next to the sign. Kip had most of his gadgets back now, having been told by the captured lizardman where they'd been stashed. He took out a tiny universal lockpick. He inserted it in the lock and the door popped open.

Down below in the museum an alarm system began hooting.

Kip ignored it. He dropped down through the door, landing on a walkway, six feet below, in the Home Cleaning Wing. His left elbow jiggled against a silent android guide as he hit the floor.

The pleasant-faced guide began to explain things. "... for Gunther Dillingham this was not enough. Such a robot kitchen maid might satisfy others, especially the likes of the Bundy researchers, but it did not satisfy this brilliant, ever-searching man. No, and so..."

Now he'll know more or less where I am, Kip told himself. And I don't know where he is.

## Chapter 38

This wing of the Dillingham museum was built to resemble a series of idealized kitchens. The one nearest at hand was pale blue, three-walled and open to the ramp which fronted it. One of the early model Dillingham kitchen maid androids was poised at the kitchen control panels built into one neostucco wall.

". . . even the relatively primitive model kitchen maid was, as you'll soon see, a considerable advance over anything the genius of Dillingham had yet come up with. Hulda, if you please."

"Yah, I ban be happy to get to vork, missus," said the plump, pink-cheeked android girl. Her hands began to work the controls.

*Zizz!*

A skillet which had been hanging a foot above Kip's head disintegrated.

He can see me, we've established that. He threw himself through a doorway in the kitchen wall.

"Now, I ban vashing da dishes, you betcha," announced Hulda.

Kip rolled along the new floor he found himself on. This was another kitchen, as well lighted and open as the one he'd almost been killed in.

A large multistove sat in the center of the synth-hide floor. Kip got behind it

"Good evening, I am a primitive version of one of Gunther Dillingham's most popular and, needless to say, brilliant, inventions," said the stove in a deep and masculine voice out of one of its ovens. "I am the Dillingham Multistove. May I Serve you? Mix a little pepper-upper, perhaps? Fix a delicate fondue, or a more robust grout stew?"

"Can you move around?"

"Of course."

"You're good at looking after kids, finding lost ones?"

"Yes, even the primitive models such as myself are quite efficient at taking care of the little ones, sir."

"Go find my cousin for me. He's a big lad, tall and red-haired." A few diversions wouldn't hurt about now.

"Very happy to, as any Dillingham Multistove would be." The stove, a large rectangular hulk of copper-toned neometal and lucite, raised up an inch and rolled off on its underwheels.

Kip stayed behind it until he was near another door. Then he jumped through that.

This was a kitchen of a more recent model. The multistove was more compact; the kitchen maid was slim and pretty.

"Would you like a back massage, sir?" asked the blonde android girl.

Hunching down behind the stove, Kip glanced toward the ramp. The walkways in here climbed and descended, interlacing. He guessed, from that shot of his cousin's, that Peterkin was across the oval museum from him and up a couple of levels higher.

"Or perhaps a carob fudge brownie?"

"Squat down beside me a second."

"You do want the back rub after all?"

Kip snapped a control box to her bare shoulder. "Here," he said, handing her one of the stunguns he'd acquired Underground. "You're looking for a tall red-haired guy named Peterkin. Keep this hidden behind your back until you get a clear chance to use it on him."

The maid took the weapon, concealed it and stood. "A pleasure, sir."

To the stove he said, "Mind backing up to that door behind us? I want to keep you between me and Peterkin."

"Always happy to demonstrate my mobility and ease of operation," replied the stove.

*Zizzf*

The front side of the multistove turned to sparkling flecks of dust and collapsed away.

Kip pulled what was left of the thing, using it as a shield, toward the door he'd mentioned.

"Oh, there he is over there," said the pretty maid. "Oh, I believe I've got him."

Kip counted off ten seconds.

"She did, Kip," called April. "He's stunned good."

Kip stood up. "Should have taken out the andy first, cousin, and then me."

April was hurrying around the museum, running toward him.

Peterkin, frozen with his gun arm straight out in front of him, stood next to a now churning dishware sanitizer.

Kip ran to meet the girl.

## Chapter 39

Palma sat on the floor of the hotel room sorting his photo proofs into two piles. "Tits, business, business, tits, tits, business," he said as he worked. "Tits, business, business, tits . . . Isn't that amazing? It looks very much as though business is going to win."

The door opened.

Not looking up, Palma said, "Are you sure that last lemonade wasn't actually pond water?"

"Search me, sahib," said Kip.

"You've returned." Palma brushed photos off his knees and hopped upright. "Does that mean you've finished the rest of the job?"

"Yep, all the MMG androids are now working in the originally intended way."

"You did all that in the six days since we left Company County?"

"It's been seven." Kip sat in a neon chair.

"Yeah, that's right, I haven't been counting that day I spent with Miss Malagra. I'm trying to wipe that out of my thoughts."

"Is that the girl we met when we first arrived?"

"No, this is another one entirely. That Miss Malagra was disqualified because she was offplanet. Somehow I got entangled with the new-crowned queen. It really should teach me that you can't judge a girl by her yonkers. Oy, what a—"

"How about Ilka?"

"She and the entire troupe got an offer to play six weeks on a cruise ship orbiting Murdstone," replied Palma. "It was a tearful parting. And what of April?"

"Going to see her tonight, once I clean up," said Kip. "She's been staying with her brother over at the Ritz-Malagra."

"That's an impressive hotel. They have one barmaid in the Martian-style pub who has a nipple which can actually wink. Not that it's on continual display, but if you—"

"How about your job? Have you finished shooting all our kelp plants for Uncle Wenzel?"

"Yeah, I've been arranging all my contact proofs. Til be heading back to Barnum tomorrow."

Kip said, "Then you won't be able to chaperon me. I'm planning to stay a few more weeks."

"As is April?"

"Yeah, she is," answered Kip. "Also I want to see if I can get the Spacehawk, Inc. office inoved somewhere a little less wretched and hire someone to run it"

"Kirkwood, I am informed, has already departed for Barnum." Palma picked up a sheet of proofs. "Here's some shots of your Cousin Peterkin as you brought him into the ballroom. The camera I borrowed from Spunky Wayloft isn't much good. Very intelligent girl, though immature, that Spunky. Here are a few shots of her striking a somewhat—"

"Do you know what they've done with Peterkin?"

"He went back to Barnum in the custody of Kirkwood. That was a couple of days back, whilst you were still out doing your clandestine fix-it work on those remaining andy butlers. Even with all your family lawyers and influence, I think they'll put Peterkin away for a spell."

"I'm anticipating that."

"That a reason why you're still on Malagra, and planning to linger?" asked the photographer. "Once you get home they may want to promote you."

"I suppose I do want to stay away from Uncle Wenzel and the rest for a while, yeah," admitted Kip. "Right now I'm really not sure I want to try to take over Peterkin's job."

"You" better start realizing you didn't do too badly out here on this assignment," Palma told him. "Granted Malagra is a second-rate planet, still you excelled. And, with the inspired assistance of Kirkwood and myself, you helped crack the smuggling ring."

"Dillon Arthur was on the verge of doing that weeks ago."

"Ah, but being on the verge and actually doing are not one and the same," said Palma. "In my distant youth, for instance, I was always on the verge of getting laid."

"Okay, so Dillon got caught while he was checking out his suspicions. So were we."

"We, however, stalwart lads that we are, escaped and lived to tell the tale," Palma pointed out. "At least, I've tried to tell the tale. Miss Malagra, that's the most recent Miss Malagra I'm alluding to, wasn't even interested. Her big interest is—"

"I'd better start getting ready to see April." Kip eased up, moved across the room.

"Bring her down to the spaceport tomorrow," suggested Palma. "I'm planning a large spontaneous demonstration for my going away."

"I'll miss you, Palma. So will April."

"Yes, I tend to leave an unfillable void in most people's lives," said Palma.