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ONE

THERE was no high drama, no intuitive awareness and certainly no danger signal. It appeared to Maynard that he merely changed his mind. One minute the hot dinner he had been about to order seemed worthwhile and, the next, he was no longer hungry.

He re-pocketed his coins, shrugged and began to shoulder his way unhurriedly out of the eatateria. Dinner at noon was habit, but not always a necessity. Today, the thought of the menu-serve regurgitating a plateful of food had taken away his appetite. Again, there were the crowds, no matter where one went to eat, there were always crowds.

He became suddenly aware, as he approached the exit, that there was a man on either side of him. They looked straight ahead, apparently unaware of his existence, but somehow they were too close for comfort. They were also too determined to keep level.

Maynard hated being crowded, he also hated people walking too close behind him. Automatically he slowed his pace and began fumbling in his pockets as if searching for something.

It was then that something hard pressed into the small of his back and a low voice said: "Just keep walking, friend, make it casual."

Outside there was a low, waspish but luxurious vehicle and he was almost ushered into it—but for the unchanging pressure in his back.

The men took positions on either side of him and the vehicle whispered away.

"Where are we going?" On subsequent reflection, it seemed a futile sort of question but he realized he had asked it to relieve his growing alarm.

"You'll find out."

"That I could figure out myself. What are you—police?"

"Spare us, please. Do we look like police?"

"Then clearly you have made some sort of mistake. I'm a nobody, I'm a second-class technician named—"

"Maynard. We're familiar with your name and background. Incidentally, you appear to be a reasonably sensible man, you obeyed our orders. Continue to do so, that was a congealer we had pressed into your back."

Maynard said nothing, aware only of a remote faintness. A congealer caused blood-clotting with an immediate and invariably fatal heart attack. Had his warders chosen to use the weapon, they would have got clean away with it. Only a post-mortem would reveal the true cause of death which was of no consolation whatever.

The car stopped and he was ushered out. The men guided him to a tall building and they were whisked upwards in the gravity shaft to almost the highest floor.

"This way."

He found himself in a high, wide room dominated by a huge ornate desk.

"Sit down." A fat, brown-faced man sat behind the desk, resting his chin on his hands as if brooding.

"You heard. *Sitdown* !" Someone pushed a chair against the back of his knees and he sat rather heavily.

The fat man said: "That's better, I prefer the minor courtesies, don't you?" He removed his chin from his hands and showed small white teeth, briefly. "For identification purposes, you may refer to me as Smith—*Mr.* Smith. You are Peter Maynard, aged thirty years, two months and ten days. You are a second-class technician employed by Allied Electronics."

He paused and looked at the other directly. "A third-class technician holding on to a second-class ticket with his finger nails. You don't rate second-class, not really, you wear it because of a naïve honesty. So far, you have 'lost' nothing, disposed of nothing or acquired anything for your personal use. Honest techs are rare and your employers appreciate it."

He smiled again, the eyes remaining cold and calculating. "You are a nobody, Maynard, and I expect you are wondering why we bothered to pick you up. The answer is brief, you are a deviant. Before you get big ideas about that, permit me to cut you down to size. The word 'deviant' is an official label denoting minor psychological variations. Actors, artists, musicians and various other creatives are thus bracketted. Occasionally, however, someone crops up who is a little different. They may possess some minor asset which could prove profitable and we like to get hold of them first."

Maynard said: "Presumably you have gained access to the psychological tapes in the Institute of Psychiatry. The information contained on those tapes is supposed to be private."

The fat man laughed. "What an engaging little innocent you are." He looked beyond Maynard and said: "Difficult to believe that such can exist even in the ranks of the neutrals."

He looked again at Maynard. "We are a large organization, employing experts. You will be passed on to these same experts for routine tests. Should these tests reveal something useful, you will be enrolled in the organization at ten times the salary you are now receiving."

“With or without my consent!”

“Thank you for saving me the trouble of explaining, that is exactly the position.” He leaned back and nodded briefly. “Take him away.”

Hands descended on Maynard's shoulders. “Come along, friend.”

Once more he was led to the gravity shaft, this time, however, there was no pressure in his back and he was less dazed.

He wished briefly that he was some sort of superman or highly skilled agent such as one saw so often depicted on the three-dimensional. Unfortunately his knowledge of self-defence and applied violence was second-hand and basic.

His two escorts were lean, broad-shouldered and, all too clearly, professionals. He stood about as much chance with them as a new-born lamb with a couple of tigers.

Nonetheless he was aware of desperation building something up inside him which, at any moment, was liable to explode into action. Ill-considered and probably suicidal action he thought pessimistically but he was unable to stop the tension building up. It was like a steam-head building up inside a boiler with no safety valve and, in the long run, he knew, something would have to give.

In the street they urged him towards the waiting vehicle and he realized suddenly they were casual. Perhaps they had decided he was harmless or, by now, so cowed that his resistance level was beneath contempt. No weapon was pressed into his back and the men were doing their best to appear normal before the surging crowds.

It was then that the pent-up desperation exploded into action but, even as he acted, he realized that his mind was cool and detached and strangely uninfluenced by panic.

He lurched sideways, catching the man on his right in mid-stride. He spun, his nobby technician's fist clenched, and hit the other man in the stomach with all his force.

'Right', clutching desperately at his pocket, staggered sideways, tripped over his own feet and went sprawling. 'Left' folded in half with a wheezing noise and sank to his knees.

Maynard leapt for the surging crowds on the sidewalk and, dodging and side-stepping quickly merged with them.

Within two minutes he came to an intersection, he turned left and found himself level with a subway entrance. He followed the crowds entering and was successful in catching the first train he saw just as it was leaving. At the next station, he crossed platforms, changed trains and went back five stations in the opposite direction.

Thirty minutes later he emerged in the outer suburbs, having changed trains nine times. Surely, for the moment at least, he must be safe now.

Sweating and shaky he bought an iced drink from a street auto-vendor and looked about him.

Some distance away, an arched and ornate gateway bore the words “Green Belt”. One of the city parks, there at least he could relax on one of the benches and think. Furthermore, there were attendants at frequent intervals, closed-circuit cameras to deter vandals and always a comforting policeman or two.

Inside the gate, a wide gravel path wound away between green and beautifully tended lawns. In the

distance, a lake shimmered, there were tree-lined walks, benches under spreading oaks and, despite strolling people, a measure of solitude.

He found an unoccupied bench and sank gratefully and rather heavily into the soft pseudo-wood. Now he must think. He was aware, however, that he had come to a dead-end. A period in his life had come to an abrupt stop. He could never return to work or his apartment—they would be waiting. He had a small nest-egg saved over the years which he could draw from any bank but it was no fortune. It would be enough to carry him across the ocean to another continent but would do very little more. Certainly there was not enough to approach the transmitter banks for transport to one of the stellar colonies. Unsubsidized transport cost three thousand per light year and, even then, one needed official sanction both from Earth and one's intended planetary destination.

He realized, with a kind of dull despair, that he was now a man on the run with very little future. The police? What could he tell them? Only an unlikely story which he was unable to prove. If they believed him, which was doubtful indeed, what could they do? An over-taxed organization like the police force would hardly provide a permanent guard on such a slim story.

He sighed aloud and fumbled in his pockets for a cigarette.

“Here friend, save yourself some trouble.” A hand, holding a lighted cigarette, appeared suddenly in front of him. At the same time, something cold pressed against the back of his neck.

“It's okay, take it, it's your brand but don't try anything.” The man came round from behind him and seated himself at the far end of the bench. He was as lean, as professional, as his previous captors and although of a different colouring and build might have been stamped from the same mould. His hand, casually in right-hand pocket, clearly held and pointed a weapon.

Maynard shrugged and accepted the cigarette. “It didn't take you long?”

“Should it? We have agents all over, friend. In a way, it's a good thing, taught you a well-needed lesson. There is no escape, nowhere to run and nowhere to hide, wherever you go, or how fast, you will always find someone waiting at the other end. No, no need to get up yet, finish your cigarette, because, when we get you back, you have another lesson to learn. After which, no doubt, you will be less inclined to independent action.”

A policeman strolled past and his captor said: “Hello, Fred, nice beat.”

“Hello, Mr. Combes—yes, do with months of this, like a paid holiday.” He strolled on without glancing back.

His captor smiled. “Well, go on, run after him, tell him that a familiar local business man has a gun pointed straight at your guts. Another lesson, Maynard, one I don't have to spell out for you. Look around you, all these people, but which one can you trust, which one is not watching?”

Maynard, cold inside, took another drag at the half-smoked cigarette and stared at a world which had suddenly become hostile. What the man had said was probably true, the elderly man apparently half asleep on a nearby bench, the strolling youth with his hands in his pockets, both could be enemies. Then there was the tall man contemplating the flower bed, the young couple approaching with the baby-float. No hardly, not with a baby, but one never could tell. They looked like normal people leading normal lives and, as they drew level, he could hear them talking animatedly—It was then that the man spun the baby-float and thrust it suddenly forwards so that it crashed against the bench between Maynard and his captor. At the same time, something flashed in the woman's hand. His jailer half rose and fell back limply with his mouth open.

His rescuer—if rescuer he was—was beside him in one stride. “All right, Maynard, up. We haven't much time—this way.”

They almost dragged him away from the trees and, as they did so, something descended from the sky and stood there whispering about a foot above the grass.

"In!" Hands swifter and stronger than his own, lifted him and thrust him bodily through the door. He was aware of them, leaping in behind him, the slamming of the door and a sudden heart-stopping ascent which gradually slowed before he lost consciousness.

He looked about him, saw that he was in what appeared to be a normal air-taxi and struggled shakily from the floor to the nearest seat.

“Close,” said the woman, “nicely timed and well executed but too close for comfort.” Maynard saw that she was quite striking in a gaunt but rather strained kind of way.

“Aren't they all?” The man was fair-haired, short, broad-shouldered with fair skin sun-bronzed almost to blackness.

He looked directly at Maynard, extracted something from his pocket and held it out for inspection.

“Right, you can relax, police, Special Branch. You are, within somewhat tenuous limits, safe now—safe and committed. How do you feel about your change of status?”

“Eh?”

“Sorry, I see by your expression that you don't follow. You were a neutral, now you are a combatant but I'll explain that as we go along. In the meantime, we'd like to hear your story.”

Maynard told it.

“Ah, so that's the reason. One of our monitors picked up your escape and, since you were not a member of the opposition, we reasoned that you must be important to them. Anyone important to them is important to us, hence the rescue act. We'll have your psych-tapes thoroughly checked.” He extended his hand. “Call me Dawson, my partner is Maureen, no one ever calls her anything else.”

“Charmed. In the meantime, I'd like to know what's going on.”

“Certainly. It's very simple. Divide mankind into three, the neutrals, the law and the organization. You were a neutral, that is to say that you were unaware of what was going on. One-third of mankind are in the same position, they are unaware of anything taking place within their midst. Both sides work hard to keep it that way. The hard-pressed law, because complete realization on the part of the neutrals would bring anarchy and the collapse of civilization. The opposition, because they can use it and, at the same time, hide behind it. Again, no predator can exist without prey, and ninety billion neutrals provide an almost fantastic revenue. The organization—hereafter referred to as the Enemy—operates behind a legitimate front and wallows in the luxurious rake-off.”

“You're trying to tell me I'm living in the middle of a war and don't know about it!” Maynard was shocked.

Dawson said, without malice: “You have unwittingly provided the Enemy with funds. Organized crime took over the Trade Unions more than five centuries ago.”

“How big is this thing?”

“Too big. The enemy control two-thirds of the news services, all betting, all sport, all vice and ninety-two per cent of entertainment services. In other spheres such as the regular police, the armed services and local and provincial government, every third man is in Enemy pay. Further, no criminal, large or small, operates outside the Organization. If he does, the Organization itself exposes him and the police make a spectacular arrest, much applauded by Enemy News Services for obvious reasons.”

Maynard frowned at him. “It sounds as if you're on the losing side.”

“We're outnumbered by approximately four hundred and twenty to one,” said the woman, Maureen. “We have our backs to the wall and the Enemy knows it. Every vehicle we possess is known and we suspect that they have a complete dossier on each and every one of our operatives. Our only assets are a higher degree of efficiency and, in an outmoded philosophy, a greater degree of sheer dedication.”

“Bluntly,” said Dawson, taking up the words, “this is war and, once again, how do you like your change of status?”

Maynard scowled at him. “I would say I had been mobilized. How do you know I'll suit?”

“We don't, and if you don't we'll have to turn you loose. We can't afford passengers. Sorry to be so brutal but this is war. Perhaps the tapes will turn up something helpful or, maybe, under routine tests, you may have the makings of an efficient operative.”

He laughed briefly. “Off the record, I'd say you stood a good chance. That smack in Grimmond's stomach when you escaped places you in the *elite* class.”

Before Maynard could comment, the taxi stopped and the door slid open.

When he stepped out, he found himself in artificial light with a roof over his head.

Dawson waved his arm vaguely at the roof. “Can't leave a vehicle in the open. The Enemy are too smart with their remote-control sabotaging devices. Come on, there are experts waiting to talk to you...”

The experts looked like businessmen and the ‘talk’ was virtually a grilling.

“Well, Mr. Maynard, we have been through your tapes and, yes, certainly, there is a slight variation from the norm—Oh, do sit down—no—over there in the light, please.”

They drew up chairs facing him. “According to your record, you were an uninspired but conscientious worker. You were also highly ethical—why?”

“I don't quite understand—”

“You made no money on the side, disposing of waste material. Everyone else did, why didn't you?”

“It wasn't my property.”

“Quite so, and was this principle or fear of the consequences?”

Maynard flushed angrily. “I never bothered to reason it out. One abides by a set of rules or one doesn't.”

“What rules, no one else abided by them, why should you?”

Maynard half rose. “The rules were there, because others brushed them off I don't have to follow suit.”

“You are an individualist?”

"I stand on my own feet if that's what you mean."

"Excellent, but we should like to hear if, due to these self-imposed principles, you felt noble or superior to your fellows."

"I don't know what you're getting at but I never really thought about it. All I considered was living comfortably with myself."

They looked at him expressionlessly, then one of them said: "You keep yourself to yourself, do you think you are different from other people?"

"Not really, they just don't seem to like the things I like. No common ground, if you understand me."

"Yet your popularity rating is reasonably high—how do you account for that?"

"I mind my own business and I like to listen."

"Reason enough, we can proceed from there. Can you think of anything which makes you different from others?"

"No."

"You have no creative talents?"

"I play a harmonica, read verse and like classical music—no."

"Have you thought of, studied, or experienced any form of extra-sensory perception?"

"No."

"How do you sleep, Mr. Maynard?"

"Very well, as a rule."

"Do you dream?"

"Yes, I dream. Everyone dreams, don't they?"

"We are asking the questions. Do you dream every night?"

"I couldn't say, but fairly frequently."

"Do you remember them?"

"Only when I wake as a rule."

"Are they vivid dreams?"

"Yes, they are."

"In colour or in black and white?"

"In colour."

"Ah, one moment, please." They conferred in low voices.

"One more question, do your dreams, generally, make sense?"

“About half and half.”

“Fifty per cent, a high average.” One of them rose. “Mr. Maynard, we are fumbling in the dark but your dreams are the only lead we have to this unspecified deviation. We therefore, propose putting you to sleep for a short period. We shall give a small hypnotic pill and, under its influence, you will tell us your dream as you dream it.”

“How can you be sure I shall dream?”

“Dreams take place at certain levels of sleep well known to science. The drug ensures that your sleep state will be maintained in that level.”

One of them came forward. “Now if you will just swallow this please—take a sip of water, fine. Now, if we adjust your chair so—just relax, Mr. Maynard, nothing to worry about, nothing at all—”

He drifted into sleep and into the dream in an almost leisurely way. He knew as soon as it began that it was a dream and yet at the same time it was so vivid, it seemed like waking elsewhere.

The first things he saw were the stars in a night sky and the stars were myriad and brilliant. He had never seen stars like that before and yet, in some odd way, they were familiar.

Somewhere there was the slap and sigh of water and a creaking noise—rigging! He was on a ship! A high-bridged wooden sailing ship with the sloping sails of the ancient Arab dhow.

Later when trying to recall the dream, he tried to pinpoint the time when he lost his identity but was never able to do so.

One minute he was Maynard, asleep and knowing he was dreaming, and the next Matt Kern, and Matt Kern had never heard of Maynard.

He walked to the rail nervously and looked down at the water. Still brightly phosphorescent, no sign of *King-spinner* which so often tore ships apart. In which case, of course, they would make Terrentis at dawn with everything in their favour. Well, almost everything, the sun would be in the eyes of the land gunners and Portis Royal fleet.

He fingered his knife nervously. The Royal fleet, seventy six men-of-war and thirty heavily armed Speedsails. This lot plus all the shore batteries which surrounded Terrentis harbour they were going to take on with one ship.

He shivered. He didn't mind a fight, a fight in which he stood a chance but this was suicide. Unless—he looked uneasily forward—unless the gun worked.

TWO

KERN edged forward, looking uneasily at the long, slender barrel with its sort of funnel end. It didn't even *look* like a gun and those brass coloured things were certainly not cannon balls or chain-shot.

In truth he suspected that the gun was some kind of sorcery. It was rumoured that the Monarch had made a pact with the devils who dwelt in the dark mountains. Devils whose dancing lights could be seen from the high towers of the keep on a dark night.

He realized abruptly that it was growing light, it would of course be some time yet but—It did not seem like some time, it seemed to come all too quickly with the great yellow sun rising rapidly above the sloping green land of Terrentis.

To the left of the harbour a thin column of black smoke began to climb skywards to be joined almost immediately by another on the right.

Signal fires! Already the intruder had been sighted, the bright scarlet sails determining its identity. Enemy vessel approaching under full sail!

Even as he thought, the booming of warning gongs rolled faintly to them across the water. The garrison, the town and the entire fleet were now alert and waiting. So much for the advantage of surprise.

They sailed on steadily and, in the harbour, sails began to climb the masts of the Royal fleet. He could imagine winches turning and anchors rising from the green water.

More important, at the moment, however, were the coastal and harbour defences. Black powder being poured into squat cannon, naked men ramming down ball and chain shot with long poles.

“Heave to!”

Kern stiffened. Heave to? Had he heard aright? Yet the sails were coming down and sea-anchors were being tossed over the side.

They needed another four hundred lengths at least before they could begin to fight. Worse, three Royal men-of-war were breasting the harbour side by side, vessels which out-ranged and out-gunned their own by a good twelve lengths.

It was then that the sky seemed to split. Kern was hardened to the noise of cannon but not a sound such as this. It was like someone striking an enormous gong with an iron hammer too quickly to follow.

Open-mouthed he saw the leading man-of-war literally fall apart in a geyser of red flame and black smoke. The mainmast, complete with sail, rose high in the air and fell with a splash into the green sea.

Before he could take it in, fire and smoke ripped the entire side out of the second vessel which immediately keeled over and began to sink. He saw nothing happen to the third vessel but, when he looked for it, it was a mastless wreck, down by the stern and blazing furiously.

Maynard woke slowly and was surprised to see that the three experts had increased to ten.

They began to fire questions at him before he had fully reoriented himself.

“How big was this vessel? Describe, if you can, the appearance of the stars.”

Even as he answered, he could hear others talking quickly: “Cisterine, undoubtedly, it explains the additional stocks of *Cuderium*, no wonder shares fell by twelve points. Our friends have been mining it wholesale.”

“How did they get past the patrols?”

“Your guess is as good as mine. What riles me, however, is the fact that they had to play God to pass the time.”

Another, rather ageing voice, said: “Oh, indeed, no, not merely to pass the time, take a look at this—”

One of his original questioners came over. “Well, Maynard, undoubtedly, you have blown the roof off something as you can see. In the meantime, a few words in private, this way, please.”

He led the way into a small, sparsely furnished room and indicated a chair. “Do sit down, Mr.

Maynard—help yourself to cigarettes, they are on your left."

He sat down himself and looked at the other thoughtfully. "I am pleased to inform you that you passed your test. Your recorded answers to a rather rough questionnaire were checked by our Institute of Psychiatry and found to be satisfactory. Computer analysis confirmed the findings of the Board. In short, Mr. Maynard, you have been screened, psycho-checked as potential agent and registered as suitable."

He paused and smiled. "On a less formal footing, irrespective of your suitability, you have a talent which we can use. One point remains, however, we cannot compel you to join us. The job, despite its urgency, is too exacting and too dangerous for such methods. An enforced operator is no operator at all and the enemy is highly skilled in the exploitation of minor weaknesses. The final decision is, therefore, yours."

Maynard frowned at him. "Where do I sign?"

"There is nothing to sign, verbal confirmation is enough."

"Then take it as said, I'm with you."

"Excellent. You will be given intense courses in various branches of the service quite apart from our normal battle training. During this period, you will be appointed to an instructor—himself a veteran operator—whose sole purpose is to mould you into an operator capable not only of survival but initiative."

He pressed a section of his chair. "Send Reed in, please." The door opened within a few seconds and there were hurried introductions.

"Well, I can leave you two alone now. Mr. Reed has been fully briefed on you, Maynard."

Reed was tall, lean, long of feature and slightly stooped. The faded, tired-looking blue eyes appeared to be completely without expression. He looked, to Maynard, anything but an experienced operator.

Reed extracted a single cigarette from an inner pocket and appeared to hang it from his lower lip. It straightened when he puffed it alight and then he let it hang again.

He inclined his head slightly. "Can't begin too soon—this way."

They ended up at a high, wide window far above the street.

Reed tapped it with his finger. "Transparent steel, opaque on the outer side. Has to be, this is an area control building and a fortress."

He puffed briefly at the cigarette. "What I am about to tell you may sound over-dramatic but it is not an exaggeration, merely a point of view. A point of view which you must never forget if you want to stay alive. Look down there at the streets, the buildings, the people, that is your battleground. Down there is the enemy, an enemy who wears no uniform and cannot be identified from friend or neutral. He walks behind you in the street, sits with you when you eat and perhaps swims beside you in the public pools. He may ask for a light, bow you into an hotel, try and sell you a flyer or, in another form, leave the smell of perfume on your pillow.

"The enemy is young and old, male and female and he is everywhere. He watches you from the micro-speck on the wall and he tracks you in the street, across skies and, should you visit one of the stellar colonies, he will be there, waiting.

"When you enter a restaurant, night club, place of entertainment or house of chance, his instruments pry

into your pockets. He will know if you bear arms, carry a lucky charm and the exact amount of money in your wallet. Recognition tapes will tell him if you have been there before and, if you have, a private dossier will have already been begun. He will know if you are reckless or guarded, tip lavishly or lust after women. He will know if you drink too much, follow sport or devote yourself to business. One day, he may want to exploit your weakness and employ you as a pawn in the name of profit or war."

Reed paused and dropped the stub of cigarette down a wall disposal slot.

"Take a look around us: Hotel Le Grande, enemy held. United Benefits Assurance, second tallest building in the city and an enemy stronghold. From here the Enemy runs a protection racket covering the entire continent but so cleverly manipulated that no lawyer or, for that matter, legal computer on earth could bring charges. Claims are promptly paid with generous bonuses, the people who get hurt are those who think they can get along without it."

Maynard looked at him. "I paid into that."

"No doubt. I suppose you refused and a week or so later there was a small fire."

"Not exactly. A window blew in during a storm, everything was soaked."

"Quite so and, when you were finally persuaded, the premiums had been increased."

"Well, yes."

"It happens every day." He pointed again. "Speed Travel Incorporated, another enemy stronghold. Unless you have your own vehicle or flyer—insured, of course, by United Benefits—the enemy will convey you by land, sea or air wherever you want to go. The Enemy, you see, waxes fat on monopolies."

He paused and glanced at his watch. "Time we had something to eat, after which some relaxation, we have to watch popular dimensional. I have one in my quarters, the programme should prove most interesting."

"Friday Night Spectacular." Reed flicked on the switch with his index finger. "This is a blood and thunder gigantic with all the stops pulled out and has a high popularity rating among the masses. It varies between the ancient western, tongue-in-the-cheek cops and robbers and space opera."

The wall screen lit and there was a woman singing.

Reed said: "Ah, yes, Ethel Raymon, very popular. She's a neutral, by the way. Her gross income is around a hundred thousand a week, of which she receives about twenty-five. Sometimes she observes, innocently, that overheads are rather high—the Enemy run the entertainment business. She must be a singing gold mine for them."

There were the usual commercials and then the spectacular. It was space opera, great ships descending on a primitive planet.

He watched with growing boredom for twenty minutes then jerked upright. He *knew* that harbour! Terrentis! The Royal fleet riding at anchor in the harbour and, far out, a tiny speck with bright red sails.

"I think you've seen enough." Reed cut the picture. "Come along to the operations room, for once the Enemy is going to take quite a clobbering."

The operations room was not at all what Maynard expected. He had imagined machines, bustle, noise, but it consisted only of five men sitting at a long table. It was true there were switches on the small table

and a small number of screens but that was all.

A fat, jovial-looking man rose as they entered. "Ah, Reed, long time no see—how are you? And this, I take it, is our new recruit, Maynard—welcome." He grinned wolfishly. "You are about to see the enemy take a clobbering but first I must put you in the picture. Forgive me if I am brief, but all the facts are nearly marshalled and, with luck, we may knock out a whole chain of enemy commanders."

He paused and indicated a chair. "Do sit down, make yourself comfortable." He sat down facing them. "As you know from history, four hundred years ago, there was a war of independence among our stellar colonies. During that war, four recently colonized planets were completely cut off. Vessels carrying vital equipment failed to arrive and, in the hundred-year combat which followed, the colonists on these worlds lost their technology. Superstition replaced knowledge. They slipped to a period roughly approximating sixteenth-century earth which was pretty good considering that they had only memory, records, and the clothes they stood up in with which to build. Every time someone died, knowledge died with them, you get the picture.

"It was felt, when the first cautious surveys were made, that it would be in the interests of these cultures generally, if they climbed to a period roughly approaching the twentieth century before being united with the Empire. The experts felt that too early a contact might have dangerous repercussions on these cultures. Further, with the growing strength of the Enemy they would undoubtedly be exploited, turned into side-shows and perhaps perish as individual and vital off-shoots of mankind's climb to the stars.

"Warning monitors were therefore placed in orbit round these planets and regular patrols instituted. It was known, needless to say, that Cisterine, the planet in question, was rich in *Cuderium* and here precautions were doubled.

"The Enemy, however, has some ingenious scientists on its payroll and they managed to by-pass the monitors and evade the patrols without triggering the alarms. Judging by figures to hand, they had mined and ferried out a couple of billions worth of *Cuderium* before they were discovered.

"While this was going on, the executives in charge became bored. They therefore decided to amuse themselves, playing God.

"The peoples of the planet's two continents, if not friends, had never been overt enemies, so the executives drummed up a little war to make their stay more interesting. It was then that some bright spark had the idea of making a profit out of it. Why not hook up some cameras? Make a good spectacular and profit out of indulgence appealed to them greatly.

"The spectacular, as you did not see all of it, is worth mentioning. It depicted an heroic spaceman marooned on a primitive planet. He falls among a noble race whose lands and seaboard are being constantly ravished and plundered by the brutal Royal fleets of the adjacent continent. Out of love of the people and, incidentally, unlikely local materials, he builds a quick-firing gun and sallies forth in their only available ship to do battle for them. Needless to say, the battle scenes were impressive and the backgrounds so skilfully disguised that, but for your 'dream' we should never have put two and two together."

A tall, greying man at the far end of the table, rose. "We are ready, Mr. Sandling."

"Fine." He nodded at Maynard. "Just listen, you'll get the picture." He grinned faintly. "You'll also get a lesson in dirty fighting without a shot being fired."

He took his place at the table and looked about him. "Well, gentlemen, from reports received, our patrols went in and caught the Enemy unprepared. However, they resisted, losing twenty-eight dead and

sixteen wounded. One hundred and twenty prisoners were also taken. Our own losses were three dead and eleven wounded. More important, however, the Enemy had no time to destroy his records—we can proceed from there according to routine. Ginza was chief executive for the operation."

"Who ran it from this end?"

"Macklin."

"Hold it a minute, I'll check his file." One of the men pressed a switch and peered at the small screen. "Age forty-seven—skip that—ah, this might prove useful. Our friend spreads his ill-gotten gains, despite considerable amounts in local banks, he has a nest-egg in Switzerland. This one would be something he has probably concealed from the organization, all these creeps plan for the possibility that they may one day have to run and hide."

"It is, then under a code number?"

"Yes, 0/43/S."

"How much can we spare from the kitty?"

"For this, half a million. We can impound it later under the Kimber Act."

"Right, transfer one half million bearer bonds to 0/43/S immediately."

"Done. Who is Macklin's immediate superior?"

"Emanuel Supoya, nasty piece of work."

"Aren't they all?" The speaker touched a switch on the table and a microphone rose in front of him.

"Silence please—oh, hell, nearly forgot, what was the Enemy's code name for the Cisterine operation?"

"Mattilda."

"Thanks. Hello switchboard? Listen, this one is special. I wanted Emanuel Supoya—the number is listed. This call must appear to come from a public box and the voice must be changed sufficiently to fool an identifying computer—no, no picture." He inserted an ear-mike and waited listening. Then he said: "Yes, I'm sure Mr. Supoya is very busy but if you would convey a message I'm certain he would find time to speak to me. Pardon?—Yes, certainly, tell him it's about Mattilda, he'll know what I mean."

He waited: "Ah, Mr. Supoya, this is a friend, someone told stories about Mattilda, someone playing both ends against the middle. If you want to know who it was, check 0/43/S. It's the code number of an account in a Swiss bank. I'm sure if you use your influence to check that, you will also discover that the operator picked up a sweet half million on the deal." He broke contact abruptly and grinned. "That should do it."

Reed stepped forward. "Sirs, Mr. Sandling, perhaps some of you gentlemen will remember—?" His voice was hoarse and uncharacteristically hesitant. "This is Macklin, if I could have a final word—"

There were one or two frowns and then faces softened understandingly. "The *coup de grace*, yes, certainly, we think you have the right. Here, take my place. We could have this one on a wall screen, I'd like to watch this one fry myself."

Reed sat down at the table and pressed a switch. "Hello, switchboard, I want this direct, person-to-person. Get me Thorn Macklin and tell him it's Walter Reed from Section Six."

After a few seconds, the wall screen lit. Macklin sat behind a scarlet padded desk, chewing a cigar. He had a bald head, a long horse-like sort of face and deeply-set black eyes.

"What the hell do you want, little man? I'm busy."

"Too busy to acknowledge favours?"

"Favours! What favours?" Macklin displayed large brown teeth in contemptuous smile without removing the cigar from his mouth.

"You don't consider half a million a favour?" Reed sounded hurt.

"What in hell are you talking about?"

Reed smiled without humour. "Oh, come now, that half million we promised you for information about Mattilda. We deposited it to your account in Switzerland this very afternoon."

To Maynard, watching, it seemed that the face in the screen was suddenly frozen. The cigar dropped almost to the chin, the eyes glazed and the taut muscles in the boney face became shiny and wet-looking.

Abruptly Reed broke contact, rose and strode out of the room.

Sandling nodded soberly to himself, got up and came over. "I expect you're puzzled, Maynard. Reed is good. Years ago, he got in Macklin's hair so Macklin sent out his usual execution squad. They were good but not good enough, Reed got all three of them. As a reprisal, Macklin took it out on Reed's family. Macklin's scum put a spore-bomb through the window. Reed lost his mother, his wife and three children."

He changed the subject abruptly. "Did you get the overall picture of the operation?"

"More or less—what will happen to Macklin?"

Sandling laughed shortly. "They'll knock him off, of course. He and his whole chain of command, right down to the bottom, about fifty men. It's the law by which they live, and die. In their business, they cannot afford a suspect and, since their law is ruthless and uncompromising, Mackin will die. Likewise his principal lieutenants, it was their business to watch him."

He paused, shook his head thoughtfully and changed the subject. "I don't profess to understand your personal talent, no doubt our best men are working on it now, but you will find that your training comes first."

He smiled a little twistedly. "Things are going to get rough from here on, very rough."

"Something special?"

"Very special." Sandling laughed briefly and harshly. "We're not fighting fools. They're fully aware already that, acting on information received, we got one of their top men into a corner and skilfully framed him. When Macklin dies, it will not be because they think he betrayed them but because he was inefficient. He should not have possessed a bank account—concealed from his own organization—which we could exploit."

He nodded slowly. "Yes, yes, they are fully aware that we placed them in a position where they were compelled to knock off about fifty of their own men. They won't be happy about it and, sooner or later, there will be reprisals."

When Maynard finally got to bed, sleep was a long time coming. He had, he felt, been catapulted from an ordered world into a madhouse. As for his talent, did he possess some unusual faculty in sleep or had that one striking incident been his only claim to the—let's face it—abnormal.

When, finally, sleep did claim him, his mind was filled with dreams and in those dreams someone kept calling him.

“Peter—Peter Maynard—can you hear me? I am Lia—Lia Sternway. I am like you, I dream dreams. Can you hear me?”

He thought he answered, but later was uncertain.

That dream faded and was replaced by another. It seemed he floated safely on a warm darkness, he could see nothing, feel nothing, but there was no sense of alarm.

Somewhere in the darkness there were voices which, yet, were not voices but complete pictures or comprehensions rather than spoken words:

“It is tragic yet it is glorious. Laws change with growth and, alas, something must die even in birth.

“We have seen it happen so often—as it did to us. When youth passes, one must don the mantle of maturity or perish.

“Nonetheless, the lessons are hard—the unconscious control of one's environment is a frightening transition.”

“True, but—” Then, with urgency. *“Careful, we are overheard.”*

“Calm. It was to be expected, the process has already begun, some seeds grow more swiftly than others. We have said nothing to harm this seedling, nothing to aid, nothing to inhibit—”

The darkness in which Maynard seemed to float, seemed to move, became a river which flowed quietly bearing him into unconsciousness.

When he awoke, he felt completely refreshed but the dreams were clear in his mind.

In his own private opinion, it was just a couple of offbeat dreams and, unlike the one under drugs, without significance.

Funny the things one dreamed, one lived in a kind of insane logic which one accepted without question at the time. Take, for example, ‘the unconscious control of one's environment’ which, in the dream state, sounded so rational. On waking, faced with it, what the devil did it really *mean*?

THREE

THERE were no immediate reprisals and, in the weeks that followed, Maynard learned what intensive training really was. There was hypno-weapon and explosive training, there were hours of unarmed combat.

“War is a dirty business, the Enemy dirtier, before we send you out, therefore, you must be downright *filthy*.”

Maynard was shocked to discover how many ways there were of killing a man with the bare hands.

Reed was an enlivening source of information. “The Enemy has all the advantages. You must watch out

for innocent bystanders, the Enemy doesn't care, he'll mow down ten people in a crowded street just to get you."

Maynard scowled. "I keep hearing about these fights now, why didn't I hear about them when I was a neutral?"

"You did." Reed crossed the room and touched a wall plate. "Records, I'd like headlines, News Services, recent battles for the past week. Yes, screen one will do."

He waved his hand as the screen lit, "You saw or read all this."

Words appeared on the screen, familiar words which Maynard realized instantly he had read about all his life.

GANG FIGHT ON WATERFRONT. BUSINESS MAN SHOT IN STREET—KILLER ESCAPES. FLYER EXPLODES ABOVE CITY.

Reed snapped the picture off. "One day—want the entire week? Every one of those headlines was a battle report. When a neutral reads about bank robbers, he thinks there are such things. He doesn't realize that the apparent attempt is a cover for something else. The stray shot which kills an innocent bystander was no stray and was meant to kill him. Nine out of ten accidents are not accidents at all but a skilful rubbing out, so are a vast number of sudden illnesses. We both employ very dubious methods indeed, we have to."

In actual training, Reed approached tyranny.

"Oh, for God's sake, man, too slow. I could have killed you twice. Don't jerk, slide, the trick is to draw and fire in one movement, *not* three."

Six weeks later, the storm broke but Maynard had it second hand from Reed. "Well, they certainly got their own back, they've just fished Pointer out of the river."

"Pointer?"

"One of our sector controllers. Apparently they got him and his three bodyguards. Not nice, his opposite number is Supoya."

"I don't quite follow."

"This is war, my friend. Sooner or later we must strike back or betray our weaknesses."

"Surely they'll know."

"Of course they'll know. In fact their usual method is to set up a come-into-my-parlour act with the sole intention of knocking off as many of us as they can. Usually they publicly announce some public function at which they will be present in order to draw us out."

"And does it?"

"Sometimes. Their numerical superiority is so great they tend to over-confidence or get in each other's way." He sighed. "When I think of all the devastating side-arms at our disposal, all the ingenious little devices, I weep because we can't use them. Technology is so precise now that it cancels itself out. No man living, friend or enemy, dare carry a blaster, every street in every city is crawling with detectors, ours and theirs, which would pin-point him within seconds. Before he could take twenty paces, he would be

picked up or gunned down. The same goes for ninety-five per cent of the devices at our disposal. Comes the time when both sides have to get by on plastic machine-pistols and plastic knives which fold so that they don't look like knives until needed for use."

"What is the procedure?" Maynard was beginning to have a permanent sinking feeling in his stomach.

"Primitive. Get close enough to the target by guile or diversion and then kill. Sometimes one gets away in the resulting confusion if one is lucky. The trouble is, of course, that they know most of our men and we only know a few of theirs. They can always draft in strong-arms from another city in another country if necessary. We cannot do this without weakening our overall defence."

He sighed. "Come on, we'd better have another workout."

Later in the showers, Maynard stared miserably at his reflection in the long mirror. What had he let himself in for and, dear God, with what blissful ignorance he had committed himself. He, like millions of soldiers and fighters before him, had been all for the cause until the fight drew near. Like the soldiers of a long past age, it had been fine when the flags had been flying, the crowds cheering and the girls 'patriotic'. Disillusion came when an allegedly cowardly enemy opened up with live ammunition and came charging at you with fixed bayonets. "The enemy doesn't like cold steel." Dear heaven, neither did you!

Maynard was admitting to himself without shame that he was afraid. How had he got into this thing and desperately, how did he get out of it?

Pity he couldn't turn into a baby or a doddering old man, too old to use. He dwelt morbidly on the subject, a doddering, shrivelled old man with bowed shoulders and rheumy red-rimmed eyes—they'd never seen *him*.

"Who the hell are you?" said a sharp, angry voice.

Maynard jumped visibly and turned. He found himself facing Sandling.

An odd expression of perplexity crossed the round genial face. "Oh, it's you, Maynard, sorry." He rubbed his eyes quickly and frowned. "The light must be funny in here or my eyes are playing tricks." He laughed quickly. "You may not believe this but when I walked in I was certain you were some old man I had never seen before in my life."

Reed took it almost calmly. He leaned against the wall and hung a cigarette from his lower lip. "It would be ridiculous to say 'I don't believe it'. I've seen you do it twice but it's still damn hard to swallow. How do you do it—if you know how you do it?"

"I think I project something." Maynard was acutely aware of embarrassing gaps in his education. "It only works on people, our recognition computers identified me immediately."

"Ah!" Reed nodded quickly. "Hypnotic, I'd better call Willis about—" He stopped. "Sorry, call. It will have to wait. See you when I come back, wonder what the chief wants this time?"

Maynard nodded and lit a cigarette. All operators had a micro-receiver embedded surgically in the ear. His own had been installed some ten days ago and still caused slight irritation. The device worked well enough here but outside was subject to uncertainty. In the first place, the enemy used them as well and, in the second, despite constant changes of wavelength, both combatants were highly skilled at jamming.

Reed was back in an hour, his face expressionless. "Well, old friend, this is it. Emmanuel Supoya is attending a garden party in park sixteen. A big 'do', marquees, side-shows, all the fun of the fair and four top bracket tri-di stars to draw the crowds. All in aid of charity and Supoya, our well-known city

business man, is donating four hundred thousand as a starter."

He hung the inevitable cigarette on his lower lip and laughed bitterly. "Four hundred thousand paid into 'Aid For The Aged', one of his own rackets. Twice a year the Enemy dresses up its most personable females in pretty white uniforms and they rattle collection boxes under people's noses. According to our figures he picks up nearly half a million a year on this racket alone. As he controls the tri-di he can ensure that the donors see that it is distributed fairly. The elderly and bed-ridden presented with gifts and taken on outings and so on."

He sighed and laid his hand wearily on the other's shoulder. "Generosity, pay yourself four hundred thousand then split the profits on all the side-shows with Mayor. Very nice, particularly as you're going to split all the donations as well."

He shrugged and dropped his hand to his side. "The trap has been laid. We're supposed to go in and take the bastard."

"You!"

"I, Saxon and Judith from section eight."

"When?"

"Day after tomorrow."

"Can I volunteer?"

"Sorry, the section heads would never wear it, not on a job like this. You have no experience."

The following day, Maynard caught him again. "Would you care to come down to the ground floor?"

"I'm a bit pressed for time."

"This is important."

"Very well but make it fast."

Once down to ground level, Maynard led the way to the nearest window. "The man looking in the store window is an Enemy operator."

"Why sure, that's Charlie, one of the regulars. They keep a twenty~four hour watch in shifts on this place besides all the instruments they have trained on us."

"The elderly woman with the parcel is another operator."

"Yes, that's Gentle, another reg—Hey! You haven't taken hypno-recognition yet. How do *you* know?"

Maynard shifted his weight from one foot to the other uncomfortably. "I can see them, they *look* different. I spent all yesterday afternoon's break, checking them with an identifying computer. I got fifteen out of fifteen correct."

Maynard paused and cleared his throat. "As you have discovered, I can project a change of appearance which seems to work up to a distance of say, four hundred paces, after which the illusion fades. Secondly, I can *recognize* the enemy, can you afford *not* to take me?"

Reed scowled at him. "What do you think this is—a game of patsy? Listen, Pete, without being

melodramatic or morbid, I don't expect to come back from this one.”

“I know, that's why I approached you.”

“Do you want to come?”

Briefly Maynard looked angry. “What do you think I am—stupid? I can add up percentages just as easily as you. Of course I don't *want* to come, I've got the shakes already.”

“Then why?”

“It has to be sometime, hasn't it? If this one flops, the next one will be twice as bad. Another thing, I have spent some spare time studying the records and have become distinctly unhappy. We're not only fighting a rearguard action but we have nowhere to retreat. Another twenty or thirty years and the Enemy will have ground us into the dirt, perhaps before. Now, are you going to speak to the section heads or shall I?”

Reed flushed, his face a curious mixture of irritation and affection. “I knew you were going to be a damn nuisance as soon as I set eyes on you. All right, I'll try and swing it but I think, for the moment, we'll keep quiet about your peculiarities. If the top brass got wind of those, they'd never let you go. After which, if I can swing it, the four of us had better have a little conference....”

The Enemy set their trap elaborately and skilfully. All roads leading to the park were literally crawling with operators, many of whom had been drafted in from distant cities and were, therefore, unknown.

On roof and windows there were portable recognition computers against which disguise, including ruthless surgery, was useless. The computer didn't check features, it checked mannerisms of movement, weight, the exact size of the head and many other features. The device was not content with that, it inspected the teeth, and certain internal functions which, it had been discovered, were as characteristic as finger prints.

In the park an ornate platform had been erected for the official opening. It was covered with a striped awning which, although resembling canvas, would stop a power-assisted missile released from a great height. Not that such a missile would ever arrive, the roofs of enemy strongholds were well furnished with knock-down and deflector devices.

Around the platform, skilfully dispersed, were barbecue pits, stalls, marquees, thrill machines, roundabouts and all the necessities of the ancient and modern fair. Without exception, however, every stallholder, cook and salesman was armed.

Supoya himself presided in the centre of the platform accompanied by the mayor and numerous civic dignitaries—all enemy personnel of various categories and all armed. Supoya could have made himself invulnerable by a force screen but this he realized was stupid. Security would never risk veteran operators on an impossible mission. There had to be an element of chance, the mice had to see and smell the cheese.

He smiled to himself, an elaborate set-up for small pickings—apart from the financial rake-off. The opposition would never risk more than four experts, possibly less, but four to them was equal to a thousand of his own. They were on their beam-ends, each year they lost more men and new entries became fewer.

Supoya nodded to himself, yes, it was worth it. Security could still sting, the Macklin business proved that.

He shifted in his comfortable chair and crossed his legs. A rotund man, in a white opalescent suit, the immaculate shirt front a mirror of whiteness and, of deliberation, a perfect target.

At a distance Supoya looked almost benign. He had a round, brown face and large, luminous-looking dark eyes. Closer inspection, however, was less favourable. His nose was slightly hooked and bent to the left. The mouth, a small, down-drawn slit and almost lipless. He looked like an overfed bird of prey which had gorged itself to the limit but still wanted more.

There were numerous tunnels and converted sewers leading from Security building to the streets. The Enemy knew some but not all of the exits.

The quartet reached the street at one minute intervals successfully but it was only a matter of minutes before the enemy picked them up.

An identity computer sweeping the surging crowds on the sidewalks began to track.

"Security agent Reed—" It beamed his position on a map-screen.

"Security agent Judith Chalmers—"

Maynard was last, the computer camera recognized him but lacked certain data. "Maynard, Peter. Wanted by the organization, took refuge with Security. Period of retirement suggests wanted man took training to become active operative."

The men in the room looked at one another. "Better check his pockets before we try and pick him up."

Another instrument was switched on and trained.

"Subject carries plastic cigarette case," said the instrument. "Case similar to those issued to Security which can be converted instantly into a weapon. Pen in breast pocket once removed from its container is a plastic throwing knife. Signet ring contains pressure spring holding poisoned barb."

"We can't pick that up, obviously he's green but we know he's quick. Tell Perry to knock him out with a narco-dart as he goes past."

Perry, leaning against a wall and apparently admiring the feminine beauty, said: "Describe him."

"Tall, wearing a light-grey summer suit. Dark hair, untidy, grey eyes. Should be level with you in about thirty seconds. Don't kill him, knock him out, we want him."

"Right, one quick swing—"

"One quick swing nothing! Use a narco-dart, he's armed and we think he's an operator."

"Okay, okay, how far now?"

"Nearly in your line of vision. At the moment he's wide open, arms at his sides."

A few seconds later, the voice said: "Get your back off that wall, Perry, he's not fifteen paces away."

"Can't see anyone of that description."

"Open your damned eyes, man, he's nearly level—Oh, for God's sake! Beside the woman in the blue dress!"

"I can see the woman in the blue dress but the guy nearest her has a droopy white moustache and looks about sixty-five—"

Behind the platform two operators were receiving reports.

"Security agents, Reed, Saxon and the girl Chalmers have taken up positions just inside the gates. The way they've staked themselves out, they're there to support an expected arrival or cover a getaway."

There was a brief pause. "The boys on Saracen Street are having trouble with this guy Maynard. Apparently, security has cooked up something new, he can be seen at a distance but slips right past the boys within touching distance. It's getting us worried."

One of the operators rose. "It's getting me worried, too." He stole forward on the platform and whispered quickly.

Supoya listened then waved it aside. "If the Security boys have cooked up a new refraction screen we can't detect, there must be limits to it. An invisible man may be adroit enough on his feet to avoid the crowds on a city street but he'll not be smart enough to hoist himself through the crowds out there. Even a neutral will start shouting when he's shouldered aside by an invisible man."

Maynard had reached the gate by now and he was close enough to communicate. Even the high-frequency Enemy jamming was nullified when they were this close.

He spoke, silent enunciation with the closed mouth was a trick he had taken a long time to learn.

None of them recognized him but they all heard. Reed with his casually folded newspaper, Saxon with his gun concealed in a bag of popcorn and Judith in the gay dress, picture hat and bright parasol.

Maynard said: "Every stall is held by the enemy. Watch the man by the ice-vending machine, he's there to cover you. Watch the two genial-looking cops with their thumbs in their belts. They are on the enemy payroll and are there for the same purpose. Oh, and yes, there's a sharp-shooter behind the oak tree."

It took Maynard nearly fifteen minutes to ease his way forward through the crowds without causing too much disturbance.

By the time he was close enough, the ceremony had begun. Supoya was posed, hand extended, cheque fluttering in the slight summer breeze. The news boys and the telemikes were lapping it up.

"It gives me great pleasure, Mr. Mayor, to present this contribution—"

It was then that Maynard pulled the trigger.

The machine pistol made no noise, it simply sputtered redly. The two fat neutral women between whom Maynard had finally taken up his position did not even hear it and their eyes were intent on the platform.

A line of black spots zig-zagged jaggedly across Supoya's immaculate white shirt. For a moment he stood there, the cheque fluttered away in the breeze and then he fell slowly forwards. Before he hit the ground, the mayor clutched at his chest and fell back into his chair. Three of the alleged dignitaries crumpled in a heap without having time to rise. A fourth, gun in hand, was knocked off the edge of the platform.

"What the hell's going on up there?" One of the men receiving reports ran quickly up the steps. He was hit half way up and fell back with a gurgling sort of scream.

The screams of the crowd were warning enough. Saxon shot the ice vendor before he could lift his fake cigar for action.

Reed cut down the first and second policemen.

It was at that moment, that Judith lifted the gay parasol and squeezed the handle. The oak tree shivered, leaves and twigs fell from it. Something on the other side of the thick trunk, screamed hoarsely and rolled over in the grass.

“Coming out as an hysterical middle-aged woman, blue dress with white spots, cover me.”

They waited until he arrived and then Saxon lobbed three blinder-bombs into an already hysterical crowd. No one within the immediate area would be able to see for five minutes.

Together they raced for the crowded street. Three of the Enemy who had been posted there, recognized three of the Security agents and tried to get them.

They were shot down by a red-faced middle-aged woman in a blue spotted dress.

“We did it!” Reed poured a huge glass of beer straight down his throat without drawing breath and grinned. “Let us be fair, Maynard did it.”

“I’ll say,” Saxon downed a whisky. “God, this time I’ve got the treble shakes, never thought we’d make it.” He paused in the act of pouring more whisky. “I say, when we have to make a report, what will we say?”

Reed shrugged. “We have no option but to tell the truth.”

Judith, who never drank, put down the tall glass of milk and looked at them thoughtfully. “This has done wonders for my morale, I was breaking up.”

“We were all living on our nerves.” Reed poured himself another glass of beer. “This must be our biggest victory—Maynard’s victory actually—in a hundred years. We knocked out Supoya—the equivalent of a general—and all his staff. They must be rather worried and, at the moment, demoralized until they get a new boss. Further, they’re all shivering in their shoes. In enemy reasoning, someone is responsible, someone is inefficient and someone will have to pay. There will be an enquiry and, literally, heads will roll. Entire control centres and operational units will be wiped clean, re-manned and reorganized. By the time the execution squads have done their rounds, the Enemy will be short of another three hundred men.”

He paused and looked at Maynard. “Thanks.”

“Don’t thank me, without your support I would never have had the nerve. I was sweating so much my feet were squelching in my shoes.”

“Yes.” Reed looked suddenly uneasy. “Pete, we’re your friends, genuine friends, you must understand that.” He hesitated then went on. “It would be unfair if we didn’t warn you, from here on, life is going to be rough and uncertain. From here on, you will never remain in one city for more than a month. You will be shuttled across ocean and continent and back again. You will be transmitted to the stars and returned. It is even possible that you will spend lonely years orbiting some barren rock far out beyond the Rim and light years from civilization.”

“I don’t quite understand.”

“We got Supoya, we had to. The Enemy work to the same rules and once their elimination squads have

put away their guns, the entire Organization will be after you. You are a marked man, they *have* to get you. Top executives will appoint their top assassins with typical orders. Ten million for success, execution if you fail. On a job like this they will stop at nothing. They will be quite capable of dropping a restricted nuclear device on this place just to get you. They would prefer it neat and precise but if things get desperate—" He sighed and did not finish the sentence.

FOUR

THERE were three men in the small room. First there was Sandling, unnaturally reserved, a leading psychiatrist introduced as Stebbing and a pale, thin man with alert eyes called Kingman. No one had mentioned Kingman's specialization but clearly he was an expert.

Behind them was a veritable bank of instruments clearly installed for this particular meeting.

Maynard faced them all with the uneasy feeling that he was on trial.

Stebbing flicked a switch with his little finger and his own voice, evidently a recording, began to speak.

"We have made a thorough study of subject's brain fluctuations and our findings are these. There are definite variations at dream levels leading us to suppose that a certain telepathic awareness occurs in this state. Unfortunately, this talent is unselective and uncertain, subject exercising no control over his communication faculties. Telepathic links with other functioning brains appearing to be a matter of chance rather than design. Subject's brain reacts to any wave in tune with it at the time of entering the dream state. Rather, to simplify, like an old-time radio receiver without a selector."

The voice clicked off and Kingman leaned forward.

"Mr. Maynard, you have performed yeoman services for Security but, for the moment, in order to obtain fully comprehensive readings from our instruments, we must treat you as a suspect."

He paused, as if searching for the right words. "We must treat you not as an ally but as an alien enemy from whom, by interrogation, we must extract the last ounce of information. Drugs cannot be used as they would cause fluctuations in our instrument readings. We must, therefore, grill you and, in order to reach conclusions, you must answer honestly—we shall know if you do not do so. Do you fully understand this?"

"Yes."

"Excellent—who is Lia?"

"I don't know."

"Yet you converse with her frequently in the dream state—all your dreams have been monitored."

"Yes."

"In the dream state, you are developing emotional attachments for her, is this not so?"

"I sometimes hope I shall dream about her, yes."

"What does she look like?"

"I don't know."

"Can you locate her?"

"No, but I think I could if I put my mind to it."

"With whom else do you communicate in the dream state?"

"No one."

"That is untrue, our records give other readings."

"I don't actually communicate, I just listen."

"And what do you hear?"

"Nothing that makes very much sense." He told them about the conversation in the darkness.

"And the remark 'the unconscious control of one's environment' makes no sense to you?"

"None whatever."

"Could it be, Mr. Maynard, that it made sense in your dream?"

"Yes, it seemed reasonable enough then."

"Ah!" Kingman folded his hands and smiled vaguely. "Mr. Maynard, yesterday, for the benefit of several experts, you demonstrated your new-found talent. You did, in fact, appear to change your appearance, on six different occasions. It is also known that in the recent successful engagement with the Enemy you changed your appearance on no less than nineteen occasions. Now we are fully aware, and our tests have proved, that this is purely hypnotic. How do you do it?"

"I don't know. I just think hard of what I want to look like and people see me like that."

"Quite so." He smiled again. "You have no name or mental description for this talent."

"No."

"No! We find that a little odd, Mr. Maynard, for we have all agreed that in degree, and, admittedly, in degree only, this odd talent could well be described as *the unconscious control of one's environment*."

A cold feeling seemed to occur suddenly in Maynard's stomach. This was no game! The passing reference to 'an alien enemy' had been deliberate.

In the bank of instruments behind his interrogators, something went *Toc! Toc! Toc!* imperatively.

Sandling rose and studied the dials. "Emotional overload," he said. "Subject is aware of our purpose now and is afraid."

Kingman smiled thinly but made no apologies. "If you are wise, Mr. Maynard, you will continue to answer our questions with the same frankness as before. If you do not, we shall be compelled to apply pressures which will force you to do so."

He paused and took a sip of water from a glass beside him. "What interests us now are the dreams you had *prior* to joining our ranks. You see, Mr. Maynard, we have thoroughly checked your background and there is nothing to suggest the abnormal. We can only conclude, therefore, that in one of your dreams, you made a contact."

"Contact?"

“Yes, a contact—don't look so blankly innocent, please—you established communication with an intelligence, or a group of intelligences, which were non-human.”

“What!” He was suddenly shocked to anger. “That's a damn lie.” He half rose, his face flushed. “You're guessing, fishing in the dark, you have absolutely no proof.”

“Sit down!” Some power within his chair forced him back into a sitting position and then, suddenly, they were all firing questions at him. Drawing closer, eyes staring, mouths barking words.

“I put it to you—you made a deal with an alien.”

“No, no—I—”

“What were you offered in exchange?”

“Nothing—”

“What do you mean—nothing? Isn't the ability to change your appearance something?”

“Do you remember all your dreams?”

“Of course not.”

“Then the deal could have been made and the memory erased—is that not true?”

“How the hell can I answer a question like that?”

“I suggest you are an agent for an alien intelligence.”

“It is not coincidence that you have penetrated this world's Intelligence Organization. You report back in the dream state.”

“The report on *Cisterine* and your successful sortie against the enemy was a matter of policy designed to place you in a position of trust and confidence.”

“No, damn you, no.”

“Don't keep saying no, Maynard, you have no evidence to the contrary.”

“And you have no blasted proof.”

“We have enough circumstantial evidence to mark you down as a suspect. Normal people do not dream dreams nor are they able, at convenient and convincing periods of crisis, to recognize the Enemy.”

“You are a spy—”

“Have you any evidence that you are still human?”

“Can you prove that you are human?”

“Talk, Maynard, talk now, before we resort to drugs and pressures which will make you babble truths with eagerness of an uninhibited infant. I suggest you start talking—”

The anger and sense of injustice which had been filling Maynard's head like a red mist seemed suddenly to disperse. He found himself, oddly weak but icily calm.

“Very well, I’ll talk—on conditions.”

“You are in no position to negotiate, Maynard.”

“Don’t bully me, Kingman. I was under the impression I was facing intelligent men—you have yet to hear the conditions.”

Kingman flushed angrily. “Of all the damn gall. Who the hell do you think we are?”

“We want results, don’t we?” It was Sandling’s voice with the snap of authority. “What is it, Maynard?”

“I would like Reed here. I would like him to know just what has been said and then, if you wish, for the interrogation to continue.”

Sandling’s eyes narrowed. “An odd condition. Could it be that you think Reed will come to your rescue? If so, forget it, one hint of this and he would cut you down the moment I gave the order.”

“In which case,” said Maynard in a reasonable voice, “you have no grounds for refusing.”

Sandling scowled at him uncertainly, then he nodded. “Very well, I am not happy about it but, at the moment, I can see no valid reason for refusing—”

Reed listened to the recording without expression, shrugged but made no comment. He carefully avoided looking directly at Maynard but leaned against the wall and stared steadily at the ceiling.

“Now you will talk.” They started again, but this time from a different angle. They had studied the instruments in the interval and seemed displeased at the readings.

“In the recent engagement, you succeeded because you could recognize the enemy—who pointed them out to you?”

“No one.”

“I put it to you, you had a telepathic warning from your alien collaborators.”

“No.”

“Then how did you recognize them?”

“They looked different.”

“That is obscure. In what way different?”

“They looked distorted, inhuman.”

“In what way inhuman?” The psychiatrist who had asked fewer questions than any of them, leaned forward quickly.

Maynard took a deep breath realizing that his life depended on the form of his answer. “Like animals.”

“That is still vague.”

“Then I’m sorry but I’ll have to illustrate.” He glowered briefly at Kingman. “It strikes me that your questions have been personal so I will take you.”

“You do that.” Kingman glowered back.

"I intend to."

"Watch it!" Sandling sensed personal antagonism.

"I will." Maynard's face remained grave. "You have broad, flat nostrils, your eye teeth are not only visible but press down your lower lip. Your nails are too long and there is coarse brown fur covering the backs of your hands."

"You saw all the Enemy like that?" The psychiatrist sounded deeply interested.

"No, they varied." He leaned back in his chair, disturbingly at ease. "Only Mr. Kingman looks like that, but then, among all present, only Mr. Kingman is an enemy agent."

"What the hell!" Kingman rose, his face flushed and angry. "Of all the utter—who the hell are you to accuse me, you damned—"

"Sit down." Reed's voice was soft and expressionless. "Sit down, I have a gun pointed at the middle of your back."

Kingman sat slowly, breathing quickly, a blue vein beating visibly in his left temple.

"I'm sorry, sir." Reed was addressing Sandling. "Maynard may be bluffing, maybe trying to talk his way out but we can't afford to take chances, can we?"

"No, no." Sandling, his face pale, made a quick, nervous gesture with his hand. "You were quite right, Reed, quite right." He looked angrily at Maynard. "Very smart—how do we prove it?"

The other shrugged. "Without being superior, it seems simple enough. All those instruments have been checking my answers and recording 'true' or 'false'. All he has to do is to deny it. One question, one answer."

Sandling shot him a quick look of positive malevolence. He should have been bright enough to have thought of that himself.

Kingman half rose. "I refuse. I refuse to be placed on trial by the accused. It is absolutely unprecedented, I have been a member of Security for years, I was re-screened and re-checked only two months ago."

Reed was suddenly behind him, pressing the gun into the back of his neck. "In which case, you have nothing to fear, have you?" he said softly.

The psychiatrist rose and made adjustments to one of the instruments. "A reasonable request, Mr. Kingman. All you have to do is to say yes or no. Now tell me, are you working for the Enemy, yes, or no?"

Kingman spluttered furiously. "No, no, no, and you know damn well, I'm not."

"Excellent." The psychiatrist's face was expressionless as he flicked a switch. "Now we shall see."

The machine spoke, the impersonal recorded voice seeming unnecessarily loud in the small room.

"The subject's response has been analysed," it said. "All denials were over-stressed, undertones of apprehension were recorded and indignation was insincere. The denial, therefore, must be recorded as false, subject was not speaking the truth or even the truth as he saw it. This was a defensive lie."

Sandling turned his back, his round face stoney and cold. "Get him out of here."

He waited until two men came and led Kingman out, then he turned to Maynard. "I'm sorry, this doesn't prove anything. It relieves us, of course, of a spy but it does not prove you innocent. On the contrary, it only proves that you have faculties which are not given to normal men and the question is, where did you get them."

He sighed and crossed to the machines. "The worrying part is that you were telling the truth which, again, proves nothing. As a reasonable man, you must see that, in the dream state, you could have entered into, been coerced into or even hypnotized into some deal with an alien intelligence, about which you have no conscious memory. You are not only a Security risk, Maynard, you are also getting too hot to handle. In the next few months, we shall risk and, no doubt lose, hundreds of good lives keeping you safe. To keep you in one piece will cost us literally millions in hard cash and all this for a man who may, quite innocently—and I am prepared to believe in your *conscious* innocence—be working for an alien intelligence Service."

He crossed the room and dropped heavily into the nearest chair. "I have always prided myself on being a fair man, honest with myself and those with whom I come in contact—have you any suggestions which you feel may help us and you?"

Maynard, aware of a hollow feeling of despair inside his stomach, said: "Only two. You could run the psychiatric tapes through the master computer and see if there are any more variants like me."

"Agreed."

"Two, give me a couple of days to scout round—mentally, I mean."

"Again, agreed. I must warn you, Maynard, that even if results prove positive, I shall need a great deal of proof. In the first place, the discovery of a thousand deviants such as yourself will prove nothing. I should not be unreasonable in concluding that I now had a thousand alien agents to deal with instead of one. Again, information acquired in your dream state *must* be suspect."

He paused and made an irritable gesture. "I shall be compelled to place you under restriction. From here on you are confined to your quarters."

He dreamed and in his dreams she called him but he could not see her.

"Poor Pete, things are hard now but it will not be long."

"Where are you, Lia?"

"I cannot say in words but I will show you the city from above—memorize it."

"Why will you not tell me?"

"They are listening, my dear, all your dreams are monitored but they cannot monitor a mental picture—"

Her voice faded and it seemed that he was lifted by unseen hands, and placed gently upright on his feet. A harsh wind blew steadily in his face and he could feel the sun burning his skin. There were smells in the wind, alien, yet oddly familiar. The smells of decaying vegetation, of—was it flowers? Occasionally the wind in his face veered slightly bringing a new smell, a familiar smell—iodine? He had smelt that as a small boy, seaweed on wet rocks, damp sands and pools of water left by the receding tide. The sea!

In his dream he opened his eyes and ceased to be Maynard. He was Hollis, Boyd Hollis and Boyd Hollis was a member of the organization. Once he had been a survey pilot but the opportunities for profitable smuggling had proved too tempting. Some of the worlds on to which his profession had taken him

abounded in valuable minerals and other treasure too profitable to leave behind.

After which the inevitable happened. There was only one contact to whom he could sell illicit goods and that was the Organization. The Organization did not care for independent operators and after a brief but painful initiation, took him under their wing.

Then the Survey Service found out and he was dismissed with ignominy.

Things got better. The Organization paid him more and provided a far better ship and a more varied occupation. He became a scavenger, a smuggler and a carrier of dubious drugs. Survey was only incidental, if he ran across a world or a drifting hunk of rock which had mineral possibilities, he told the Organization and they handled it. If it proved profitable, he got, besides his wages, a slice of the profits.

Hollis was used to working way out beyond the Rim and despised the matter-transmitters of the colonies. Here you had to do things the hard way, in a hyper-drag which possessed equipment which occasionally went wrong. Like now, for example, when a computer had malfunctioned and tossed up some wrong figures. As a result, they'd finished up about seven light years off course, and close to a system yet to be marked on the stellar atlases.

Years in Survey had taught Hollis to be darkly suspicious of E-type worlds. There were too many things which even the most refined instruments failed to mention. They could declare air breathable, bug and radiation counts negative but when you went down you could find things lumbering about as big as city blocks in a terrain that was all swamp, mist and overwhelming stink.

Then there was the type which looked all rosy until you discovered that the winds only blew at a steady one hundred and eighty on a quiet day. Rocks, sand, debris and apparently all the deserts which had ever existed went round with it, accompanied depressingly by half the oceans for luck.

This world, however, was a Jackpot, he could feel it in his bones. Even if it possessed no mineral wealth, it had colonization possibilities and the Organization would exploit it for all they were worth. In ten or so years, the Organization—or for neutral consumption—business enterprise, would turn it into a holiday resort on, of course, strictly clip-joint lines. Hotel prices low but meals prohibitive, it was an age-old racket. Only seven units a day in a luxury hotel on an alien planet! The suckers fell for it in droves, disillusion came when they paid almost as much for a cup of coffee.

Hollis hooked his thumbs into his belt and looked about him again. He stood on a high, flat rock and the light of blue-green sun bit hotly but not too unpleasantly at his face. Behind him, ungainly and out of place, the black bulk of the ship lay on a sun-baked area of clear rock. Directly in front of him was jungle but not the jungle of immense trees, swamp and tangled vine. This was a miniature jungle, almost level from his vantage point, and only standing twice as tall as the average man.

The jungle was not green but golden, pastel gold like the golden privet back on earth and it shimmered and danced in the heat haze almost blindingly. It was not all jungle, close to the assumed horizon, the trees stopped abruptly and out of them climbed the most impressive and awe-inspiring mountain range Hollis had ever seen.

Clearly the range was volcanic in origin but its formation was fantastic. Vast masses of rock piled one upon another at odd angles seemed to climb upwards like swiftly gathering storm clouds. Precipice upon precipice of brown scarred rock with here and there spurs jutting out into space as if someone had taken the spires of all the ancient cathedrals and stuck them into the naked cliffs like candles stuck into the side of a Christmas cake.

The wind shifted slightly and once again he caught the whiff of iodine. He turned to his right, bright silver

sand girdling a wide open bay and beyond the sea. A sea which was like no sea on earth and an unbelievable emerald green. It was, apparently, tideless, but it danced, shimmered and romped in the sun occasionally tossing tiny jets of jewelled spray high in the air. Looking at it—and Hollis was not an imaginative man—he could dream of mermaids and fairy ships sailing to some distant mystic shore.

There was only one screwy thing about the place, he thought, there were no large animals. There were little things with bright, ruby coloured eyes which ran over the rocks but there were no large animals. There were far flying distant things which might be birds but nothing like a tiger, a lion, a horse or a sheep. The largest things they had seen were brown, six-legged creatures about as big as a hare which had gone bounding away into the miniature jungle as soon as they approached.

Again, there was an odd thing with tattered black wings about as big as an eagle which occasionally rose above the trees. Usually it poised there, with an ungainly fluttering of wings, only just clear of the highest branches and then plunged out of sight.

Hollis frowned to himself, briefly. It was an odd thing, no animals. He and his five-man crew had made a quick survey with the radar-scan but they hadn't found a damn thing.

He shrugged, every world was different. There was no law, as far as he knew, which said that growth had to follow a definite pattern. This world was good, he wouldn't mind settling here in his declining years. The Organization would approve, they didn't mind a man retiring in an area they wholly controlled. It was when someone insisted on retiring in an area in which he might accidentally, or by design, spill pertinent information. The Organization seldom argued, they retired the recalcitrant permanently and abruptly.

Maynard was suddenly himself again and aware that he was still dreaming. This time, however, he saw nothing, heard nothing but *was aware*.

Even while dreaming it was an odd feeling. It was like knowing someone was behind you, being unable to see them, yet alive to their presence. It was knowledge, but, as far as he was aware, not an imparted knowledge but something within which had been there all the time and he knew—*knew!*

The dream faded abruptly and he awoke to consciousness with someone shaking his shoulder.

“Wake up, Sandling wants to see you.” It was Reed.

“Right, let me throw some clothes on.” He dressed quickly. “Ready.”

“Nice and quick.” Reed turned away and it was then that Maynard hit him. He hit hard, on the right nerve centre and just as his training had taught him to.

FIVE

“MR. REED walked in and Mr. Reed walked out.” The guard wore an expression of resentful perplexity.

“All right, all right, you may go.” Sandling scowled at his back as he left and said, bitterly: “Right under our noses. You know, Reed, this shows our weak spots, all those damn clever hypersensitive machines and not one of them adjusted to check people *going out*.”

“Who would have believed he'd be stupid enough to go out?” Reed rubbed a sore spot gingerly with the tips of his fingers. “God, he hung a heavy one on me.”

“Never mind, he left you a note of apology.” Sandling sounded as if he were about to explode. “He even

found time for that before he strolled out of the place."

"Yes—yes, he did." Reed crossed to the window and stared down into the street. "How long do you think he'll live down there?"

Sandling sobered and shook his head. "A normal man, maybe ten minutes but with his talents, perhaps three hours. Once they spot him, they'll throw a ring round the area ten kilometres deep."

"Perhaps, perhaps not. If he's running blind, I'll give him half an hour but maybe he's got somewhere to go."

Sandling frowned and then his eyes widened. "His dream girl, Lia—what was her name? Oh, yes, Sternway."

"You think she exists?"

"The fellow on Cisterine did, Matt Kern. I'm going to give the name to the main computers and let them find her. She must be in World Directory somewhere."

Maynard got out of the building unrecognized and unnoticed. The half-ape reading the newspaper barely gave him a glance—some seedy neutral off to his fifth-rate job.

Maynard knew exactly where he was going, his problem was getting there. The Enemy controlled transport and both taxis and flyers scanned the passenger as a matter of business. Once he entered one of those, the tele-eye would recognize him, lock the doors and raise the alarm. The same dangers applied to all public transport, subway stations and all terminals would be scanned by closed-circuit cameras which would blow their tops as soon as he appeared on their recognition tapes.

There was only one thing to do, he thought, bitterly, if you can't beat 'em, join 'em. Not that he actually intended joining, merely bending the law slightly.

He sauntered into an underground car park and looked about him. He had prudently chosen one beneath a well-known neutral store where there would be no tele-eyes. The store of course paid for protection but it remained neutral. It would, because it wished to stay that way, employ an ageing mobster as an attendant. This was part of the small graft which plagued the city. If one owned a car and were wise, one tipped the attendant generously before leaving it. The foolish, forgetting this necessary courtesy, found on their return, the car badly scratched or dented.

No one, of course, was responsible.

"I'm not here all the time, sir, have to have a meal sooner or later."

The foolish soon learned the hard way.

The attendant sidled over. Sometimes, if, he played his cards right, he collected twice.

This one he collected on a nerve centre and collapsed in a heap.

Maynard dragged the unconscious body from sight and selected a car. He had not been a tech for nothing. It took him exactly two and a half minutes to by-pass the alarm circuits, unfreeze the locked steering and open the door.

At the first touch of his finger on the starter plate, the vehicle rose obediently on its cushion of energy, ready for the first touch on the accelerator.

It was unfortunate that, as he swung into the main traffic stream, an automatic identity computer sweeping the crowds just nailed him. It only obtained one photoprint and fortunately, he had moved beyond its range before it could get another but that one was enough.

“Alert, wanted man, Maynard. Priority identification!” The Organization scowled at the picture. “Is that all it got, just that one?”

“That’s all. We know he’s in a ground car but the computer camera only got his face through the window. We don’t know the make or colour or, for that matter, which way he was headed.”

They were not despondent, however, there were routine procedures for events like these.

“Check the whereabouts of all known security vehicles—”

“Get recognition scanners out on all main highways—”

“Notifying surrounding cities—”

“I want every prowl we have combing every lane and by-road within this area, understand?”

“Check on stolen vehicles—”

“Get those flyer-men off their backsides, I want every flyer we have working on this—”

Maynard, thanks to his recent training, had a fairly clear picture of possible events and acted accordingly. He did not know they had his picture but it was a primary risk and he reacted as if it had occurred.

Once clear of the suburbs, he put the vehicle into the fast lane, pressed the ‘express’ stud and put his toe down. It was an expensive vehicle, almost new and very fast. Before he decided he had had it long enough, she was crowding six hundred and looked good for another fifty. The stabilizer beams built into the surface of every major highway, had erected a cone of force around her which would prevent wind buffeting or collision with another high-speed vehicle.

Ten minutes later he drove into the car park of a neutral road house, parked it well at the back and vanished.

He did not vanish literally, this was what once had been called countryside but now, like all open land, was called a nature reserve. Here the ground was unlandscaped, the soil poor and, unsupervised, nature had joyfully run amok. Stunted trees grew in unsightly tangles, grass and thicket were waist deep and humming with insects.

It was a tribute to the Organization’s efficiency that they found the abandoned car fifteen minutes after he had left it.

“Well that’s simple, he’s gone to earth.”

“Simple to deduce, not simple to dig out. Look at that tangle, it will block any instrument we possess.”

“He has to come out, doesn’t he?”

“True, but this waste area reaches almost to Norristown and Granton. He might be heading for either and six hours steady walking could get him to one or the other.”

“We’ll flush him out before then.”

"We can't drag equipment through this jungle and we can't spot him from above. We'll need a hell of a lot of men."

They got them. Within an hour, flyers were dropping armed men into every open space. The area consisted of a rough triangle and soon men were moving in from all sides.

Away from the city, they were no longer restricted to machine pistols and they carried some of the most devastating side-arms known to man. They also carried some other things which had their origin on other planets but could kill just as horribly on Earth.

Steadily but with caution, they began to converge. Maynard had training, therefore he was dangerous; further, he bore arms and knew how to use them.

They were also aware that their quarry could change his appearance hypnotically. This proved unfortunate in several cases.

There was an amateur naturalist studying tree plants and the burst of energy from a Zieker gun cut him almost in half.

They looked down at the distorted face without regret.

"Well, that's not Maynard, come on."

A derelict, reeking of liquor, was found sleeping under a tree. He suffered the same fate.

"Why take chances?"

By this time, they had already knocked out seven of their own men by mistake but they were not disturbed. The ring was closing and Maynard must be in the middle of it.

He was, but things didn't go as they'd planned.

"Hey, here's Koyle."

"Dead?"

"Not dead, but roughed up, looks as if he was jumped."

"Then he's around some—" The speaker stopped in mid-sentence and pitched forward on his face.

The group of five was found minutes later by another party.

"Narco-darts, they're not dead."

"They're not going to help us either, not for a couple of days anyway."

"He's around close." One of the hunters unslung a canvas sack from his shoulder and produced an oval greenish object. "If he's among those trees over there, this should shift him for good."

He raised his arm and then clutched at his wrist.

"Don't drop it!"

The shouted warning came too late and because the single shot had shattered the bone, was impossible to obey.

The green oval fell and struck the ground. A kind of greenish fog swirled outwards and vanished almost as soon as it had appeared.

Grass vanished from the soil, surrounding trees crumpled like melting candles and vanished into the bare earth. There remained a barren hole in the wilderness which looked as if a large fire had been started there and left to burn out.

As soon as the ovoid started falling, the others had started to run but none got clear. Before they had taken twenty paces, their skins and clothing turned bright green. In fractions of a second, the green turned to a thick mould which enveloped them completely. They fell, floundering like fish, crumpled and dripped to dust. Their bones remained, belt buckles, pens, and still functioning watches, but that was all.

Maynard re-pocketed his machine pistol and went on, feeling slightly sick. He had heard of spore-bombs but had never seen one in use.

The mould came from one of the colonies, Lugos II, to be precise. In certain conditions it could be rendered inert, encased and used as a bomb. Once released, it devoured, sub-divided and devoured again at such an appalling speed that everything organic within the immediate area was completely consumed. Then, for reasons yet to be explained by science, the cycle of sub-division suddenly ran out. The spore ceased to reproduce itself and died within seconds. On its planet of origin apparently, it had, fortunately, natural enemies which kept it in check.

At Enemy operational centres, adverse reports began to come in.

“Unit Two reporting. Maynard is giving us a lot of trouble, we've lost thirty men—”

“Unit Seven here. We've had sixteen knocked out, eight you can use again—narco-darts—but they're no damn help like that.”

As the ring drew tighter, things worsened rather than improved and morale began to deteriorate rapidly.

“He's *behind* us!”

“He can't be, a mouse couldn't get between us.”

“Come and look at Joe, here, he's got a narco-dart right between his shoulder blades.”

Another thought occurred to them. “If this Maynard can look like anyone, he can look like *anything*. He could be that stump over there, a tree, a shadow, nothing—Unwittingly they had stumbled upon the truth but had no idea what to do about it. Four more of their own men were cut down, then six, then twelve, panic set in and, with it, a tacit and hasty withdrawal. Eighteen more perished coming out...

“We said three hours,” said Sandling. “It is now three days and he got clean away from us and the Enemy.” He grinned faintly. “His Nibbs must be a bit ragged at the edges. Seventy-six dead, forty-three knocked cold and that doesn't take in the odd hundred or so who will be rubbed out for incompetence.”

He scowled suddenly. “So much for that damn computer, eight hundred and ninety-three people named Sternway on this planet and not one called Lia. I re-programmed verbally to females only and cut it down to two hundred and thirty-three. Still no Lia. You know, Reed, ever since I first clapped eyes on Maynard, I have had the odd feeling that everything is off-beam.

“Listen to this, I received this less than an hour ago. You remember the dream Maynard had about that wonderful planet? It exists, the co-ordinates were correct. We sent a ship to find out or, more correctly, Survey did. It was too late, of course. The planet had been legally claimed by an Enemy Corporation

calling itself Planetary Development Limited.

“That, however, is not the point. When our ship went in and, incidentally, found the bay and the mountains described, a rather curious discrepancy cropped up. These Survey men, as you probably know, give an official report and, then, a personal description which is quite unrestrained. It is, I understand, later studied by psychiatrists who, presumably, draw all sorts of profound conclusions from it.

“This is the personal report, listen to it.” He touched a switch:

“I am now standing in the exact spot recently occupied by Hollis. It puzzles me what he found to rave about. As far as I am concerned, he can have and keep it. This place gives me the creeps—plus.

“His geographical descriptions are exact but the feeling is all wrong. The mountains are as huge as described but, to me, oppressive and in some vague way ominous.

“It is true that the jungle is golden but it has an unpleasant oily sheen and bits fly off those tattered flying things as if they were rotting in mid-air.

“The creatures with ruby eyes are, or seem to be, semi-liquid and make me feel sick.

“The stink, both from the jungle and the sea, is incredible and so revolting that one tries not to inhale too deeply.

“The colour of the ocean is correct but looks downright stagnant. Wisps and swirls of vapour cling to its surface as far as the eye can see and periodically a huge oily bubble appears on the surface and breaks with a dull plopping sound. Maybe Hollis can see jewels in one of these but I'm damned if I can—”

Sandling snapped it off. “What can you make of that?” Reed frowned, pulling at his ear. “One thing does occur to me. When Maynard dreamed, he was seeing things through Hollis's eyes.”

“What does that prove?”

“I'm not claiming that it proves anything but I have the thought often that the Enemy must see things differently and feel things differently.”

“What gave you that idea?”

“Surely it's obvious? Could you kill men, women and children in cold blood? Could you practice extortion by threat and violence without feeling a pang of remorse?”

Sandling thought about it, frowning: “They look like human beings, certainly, but their thought processes must be different, must *lack* something.”

He shook his head irritably. “Damn you, you're getting me thinking—not that it helps to prove anything—but when one stops to consider—These men take courses in hypno-education, they employ elocution tutors but to me they always sound semi-articulate. Mentally, they still spell culture with a ‘K’ and claw desperately at nothing for what they call ‘class’. They think opulence is good taste, gold cutlery aesthetic and brazen vulgarity, confidence. Once, centuries ago, I'm told, the criminal had redeeming features, but not any more.” He stopped, scowling in front of him. “This is pure supposition.” He changed the subject abruptly. “It's not finding Maynard, is it? I suppose I'd better give the computer the directories of every damn planet in the Empire.”

“In which case, Maynard isn't running anywhere,” said Reed quietly. “He would—” He stopped

suddenly, frowning. "I have just thought who wouldn't be in the directory, sir. I wouldn't, you wouldn't, not under our own names, we're classified, technically we don't exist."

"You mean to say she might be one of us!" Sandling's cheeks appeared to swell slightly. Then, slightly shocked, "It could be, couldn't it? I'll check." He touched a switch. "Authorization 6D, delete directory search for Lia Sternway and check classification lists for the same name."

The reply came so quickly, it was almost insulting. "*Lia Steinway alias Dorothy Vilo. Radiologist, Technical Institute. White, female, aged twenty-seven years, six months, four days—*"

They waited impatiently for the address and, as soon as they got it, Sanding said: "How long will it take you to get there?"

Reed shrugged. "Normally it would take two hours, but to throw off anyone who might recognize me and follow, say eight. What's the procedure?"

"The powers-that-be want him alive."

Reed laughed bitterly. "Oh, I can pick him up alive. Can you guarantee I'll get him back in the same condition?"

When Reed finally arrived, the obvious course seemed to seek admission. Lia Sternway lived in a small but select and, incidentally, Security-checked, neutral apartment block not far from the Institute.

With his hand casually in his pocket, he pressed the caller stud. If he could get a gun on her, probably Maynard would cave in. They were not tactics he approved of, savouring too much of Enemy methods but it was preferable to shooting it out. Narco-darts were no match for a machine pistol.

"Don't turn around, old friend," said a familiar voice behind him. "Lift your hands very slowly and very carefully above your head and walk over here."

Reed, realizing he had no choice, obliged.

"Thank you, the gun. The ring on the floor, please—yes, and the pen. Better turn everything out of your pockets—thank you."

Maynard indicated a chair. "Do sit down. Don't mind if I use your restraint cuffs, do you? I feel more comfortable with you fixed to the chair." He grinned. "That's better, just one hand out of commission—drink?"

"Whisky." Reed looked sour. "That was quick."

"Not really, we just switched apartments to the opposite sides of the corridor but the caller stud rings in here."

"Smart." Reed accepted the drink ungraciously.

A woman came into the room and Maynard said: "We have a visitor, darling, uninvited." He introduced them.

She nodded, half smiled but did not speak.

Red looked at her curiously. So this was the dream girl. For this, presumably, Maynard had run the gauntlet through the enemy. He was not impressed, the eyes were fine and dark, the mouth sensitive and beautiful but she was no tri-di star. She was rounded but inclined to be dumpy.

He said: "What do you intend to do with me?"

"Nothing, save hold you for a short while."

"You hope to get away? You'd never make it in a city." Maynard shrugged.

"Perhaps by then it will not be necessary."

Reed frowned, suddenly uneasy. "I found you. The Enemy can put two and two together."

"We know but we are together now." Maynard took the woman's hand and something happened.

It seemed to Reed that a light came on but it was not a light, it was—mental words failed him. He had seen women's faces lit from within by love before but not virtually transformed. In that brief instant she was no longer dumpy, she was slender and incredibly beautiful and something almost palpable seemed to link them.

The impression vanished almost as soon as it occurred but it left Reed shaken and uncertain. Here was something not quite human and, in some odd way, it had changed him.

It was as if something dormant had been awakened inside him and he was not altogether pleased by it. There was fear as well as an elation which for inexplicable reasons he was trying to suppress.

He said, hoarsely, "I don't suppose you'll answer but are our assumptions true? Did you make a deal with an alien or are you yourself an outworlder?"

Maynard looked at him gravely. "I made no deals and I am human."

"You seem to have more than your share of supernormal powers."

"No, mine and, for your information, Lia's, have just developed a little sooner."

"I wish I knew what you were talking about." Reed was disturbed and, at the same time, in danger of losing his temper.

"I'm sorry, I can't tell you more but this is something which, in due course, you must find out for yourself. I'm sorry but it's necessary, when your turn comes, you will be just as reticent with those less advanced than yourself."

"Most informative." Reed extracted a cigarette from his pocket with his free hand and hung it on his lower lip. "I suppose it's asking too much for a clue."

Maynard thought about it. "Yes, but rather a remote one. You accept without question metamorphosis in lower life-forms. The wonderful transition from caterpillar to butterfly is a glaring example. Do you imagine that the race of man—a far more complex and advanced creature than a caterpillar—goes on just growing like a plant indefinitely? Soon or later comes a change."

"Evolution," began Reed, dimly aware that his voice was hectoring, "is a process well known to science and—"

"Sorry to interrupt but this is something more than purely physical change."

"Then it had better be damn quick, for, believe me, it will not be long before the enemy finds us all and digs us out..."

In another city, the digging process was being put into operation. The heads of the organization had met and arrived at a decision.

They called Brinker. "You may have all the men you want, all the equipment and arms. You will have, within reason, an open cheque but you will find and get Maynard, is that understood? If you get him within a week, you will get half a million and a control chair in the Syndicate—clear? We give you fourteen days, no more."

Contact was cut abruptly and Brinker leaned slowly back in his padded chair. He was fat, oddly pear-shaped, with sparse hair, a jutting lower lip and little eyes almost lost in the fat face.

He did not ask what would happen at the end of fourteen days—he knew.

Brinker had the advantage of looking obtuse but was frighteningly astute and single minded.

The Organization were almost certain that Maynard was in Granton, therefore they would go through Granton with a fine-tooth comb. Door to door, apartment by apartment, sewer by sewer if necessary.

He touched a switch. "Computer information, subject census." He waited briefly. "Ah, population of city of Granton."

"Seven million, eight hundred and sixty-three thousand nine hundred and ten permanent residents."

"How many men would I require to visit every residential building and every apartment therein within forty-eight hours?"

"Insufficient data. The term 'visit' implies a time period. Further, for the purposes of the query, the time involved in passing from one apartment to another must be taken into consideration—"

"Hold it, I'll get my programmer. Walsh, link with main computer. It will tell you what I wanted."

"Parkins!"

"Sir?" One of his body-guard/butlers appeared almost immediately.

"Ah, call all the bosses, Parkins, within a thousand miles; tell the lot I want half their men on their way here within an hour."

SIX

BRINKER waited until the task was complete, then looked about him.

"You trying to make some extra on the side? Look at these roses, all the damn petals on the desk—well?"

"They were delivered less than an hour ago, sir—here's the timed receipt. They were flown in from—"

"Never mind where they came from, have a go at that florist, you've been taken, boy, taken."

It was typical of Brinker that his rose bowl was filigreed in genuine gold leaf and was big enough to sit in.

He was confident that size and expense were cornerstones of good taste. Expensive etiquette tapes told him otherwise but he remained unconvinced.

Fat lot of good that bowl was now, chock full of thorns. Funny that roses never seemed to last now. He

scowled. They'd better last in future, no one was going to take him for four hundred a day for a bowl of thorns.

His thoughts were interrupted by a call. "A hundred thousand, eh? More than double that number are on their way. Use them, I want that town sewn up so tight that he won't be able to approach a window without us spotting him. Don't wait, start working with the boys you have. Seal off a postal area and start combing."

He broke contact and turned his attention to the business of the day. "Hmm—yes—" He had a habit of muttering to himself when working. "What the hell's this?" He stabbed the caller. "Get me, Vernon—Ah! That you, Vernon? What's this about procedure four?"

"Sorry, boss, no choice. I've been through my three routines and my potential client still doesn't want to know."

"Doesn't want to know!" Brinker's neck reddened and seemed to swell visibly. "This creep runs an auto-restaurant on highway 44. Who does he think he is?"

"That I can't answer, boss, but he's had three fights on the premises. He also had two fires, four power failures and the side of the building knocked out by a faulty auto-truck."

"Okay, okay, I'll send Kindermere to deal with it—"

Kindermere had a thin, sour face and slits of eyes made narrower by his habit of exploiting this facial characteristic. He narrowed them, a habit which made him squint slightly but increased his appearance of reptilian coldness. Many had lost their nerve by just looking at him.

The young man with flaming red hair and freckled arms seemed unimpressed, however.

"Get lost," he said.

Kindermere remained expressionless. "Mr. Walsh, this is a business proposition—"

"Business, hell! It's a protection racket and I'm sick to death of it. Sick of paying through the nose to park my car safely in a free park. Sick of paying treble for this and that because the manufacturer has to pay protection to construct and the salesman must pay protection to sell."

"Now look, friend, you've had a run of bad luck. Insurance would have covered you." He paused and placed a cigarette between his lips. "Understand you've had fights on the premises. My colleague, here, Mr. Karnuck, takes care of things like that. He looks in periodically, part of the service, the roughs soon get to know and go elsewhere to make trouble."

Walsh looked Mr. Karnuck up and down insultingly. The scarred, heavy face, the barrel body.

"You mean strong-arm, don't you?"

"Friend," Karnuck had an absurdly high and wheezy voice, "you have a wife and kids—uh—you wouldn't want anything—uh—to happen to them, eh?"

The routine threat/question appeared to trigger something. Spots of bright red appeared on Walsh's cheekbones. "Are you threatening my family?"

He came forward, pushing Kindermere roughly to one side. "Well?"

Karnuck looked at him feeling an inner satisfaction. He had been hoping for this and the mug was asking

for it.

“Yeah,” he said. “Yeah, if that's the way you want it. What are you—uh—going to do about it?”

“This!” Walsh swung his fist.

Karnuck boasted he could take a full-time haymaker from a professional heavyweight and he was quite prepared for this one. He simply hardened his stomach muscles and braced himself.

Kindermere, watching, smiled inwardly. Walsh looked reasonably strong but the very way he swung the blow showed his lack of skill. Karnuck usually took several like that without moving, until stamina and confidence were equally undermined.

He stiffened abruptly, the slits of eyes widening unnaturally.

The large freckled fist had sunk almost to the wrist in Karnuck's iron-hard stomach and Karnuck was hurt. He was folding forward, eyes bulging, making a whistling noise.

As his head came forward, another unskilled but heavy blow knocked it back again and his knees sagged visibly.

Walsh swung a left and a right hook that left him wide open but the blows were so heavy and well timed that Karnuck's head seemed literally to bounce from the impact. He made a curious grunting noise, then his knees gave way and he collapsed in a heap.

Kindermere came abruptly to life, aware of his own danger and reached desperately for his gun. Before he could touch the butt, he was grasped, spun round and flung sprawling. Breathless and shaken, he rolled over, still trying to reach his shoulder holster.

It was then that Walsh leapt high in the air and came down on him with both feet.

As Kindermere had already noticed, Walsh lacked experience but had quite unconsciously adopted a killer technique. He was not to know that a heavy man coming from such a height on both heels would drive a sharpened stake six feet into the ground.

Kindermere knew, he had seen it done before and made frantic efforts to protect himself. He folded his arms about his body and tried to roll out of the way.

He was too late. There was a thud, Kindermere exhaled a brief scarlet mist and went limp.

Brinker received the news two hours later and was more shocked than angry. Kindermere killed in a rough house! It wasn't possible. Karnuck's condition was even less acceptable. It was hard to imagine the iron man in a hospital bed. He tried to digest the hospital report—double fracture of the lower jaw, secondary concussion, internal injuries involving severe haemorrhage which had now been brought under control.

Once he had absorbed the information, Brinker wrote Karnuck off. Oh, yes, in due course, Karnuck would recover. Physical damage was repairable but demoralization wasn't. Karnuck's pin-head mentality couldn't take a beating like that. In the next showdown his confidence would be gone, he'd be covering himself before he was hit or strike himself before it was politically desirable to do so. As an enforcement strong-arm, Karnuck's period of usefulness was over and he lacked the brains for any other occupation.

Brinker thought, without regret, that he'd have to dispose of him. As a tribute to his long service, the boys could show him a good time for a couple of days and then an unfortunate accident would have to be

arranged.

He turned his attention to Walsh—he had already studied his file—the man was downright plebian. A fifth-rate neutral, barely worth the few coins they had intended to squeeze out his miserable café.

He frowned, suddenly conscious that the whole affair was highly improbable. Kindermere and Karnuck were—had been—professionals in mayhem and they knew every trick in the book. How had a nonentity like Walsh managed to beat hell out of both of them?

He went through the file again and the incident took a hint of the bizarre. When it came to a fight, Walsh was greener than grass. The file confirmed he was powerfully built but he had never boxed, wrestled or indulged even in amateur athletics. Kindermere alone should have been able to take him apart with finger and thumb.

Brinker pushed the file angrily to one side. Maybe there was more to this thing than he knew. His first impulse had been to put the man through a wringer as an example. His mutilated body would cause everyone who knew him to pay double to the Organization from sheer terror. Now, however, it was a different story and the sensible thing to do was to play it legit.

The Organization would pull strings and Walsh would be arrested. The News Services would make a big play on the subject to arouse public interest. He could see the headlines:

CAFÉ OWNER RUNS AMOK

BUSINESS MAN BRUTALLY MURDERED

Maybe something vital would come out in the trial and, in the meantime, it was excellent publicity. It assured the neutrals that the police were on their toes and raised the prestige of politically appointed mayor and Chief of Police.

A thought struck him. How many sales resistants like Walsh were on their books at the moment? He was shocked to discover that there were thirty-six.

How many defaulters?

The answer staggered him. Ninety-six! Ninety-six people were behind with their kick-ins, had failed to pay their dues.

The number was unprecedented and frightening. It was lucky everyone was occupied with Maynard, a thing like that could get a man tossed in the river in pieces.

On impulse he called another area. There was a great deal of stalling, throat clearing and chit chat.

At length Brinker pinned him down. "Exact numbers or else, Muldoon."

Finally Muldoon said: "One hundred and five." In a voice so faint it was almost inaudible.

"Clear it up before Monday." Brinker broke contact and scowled in front of him. Somewhere something was damn wrong. Everything was off-beam, Maynard, Walsh—maybe he was getting old. More likely overworked, could do with a holiday, he'd like a spell on that new world they'd just discovered. It looked good, real good.

He jerked his mind back to business. Better put through a call to Granton, keep everyone on their toes.

The hunters were not without subtlety, although they passed from door to door like an army of salesmen,

they were preceded by stealthy men with snooping devices. Instruments which listened at doorways, recorded conversations within and compared those voices with the voice of the quarry.

"This building." The snooper operator was panting. "Room thirty-seven, sixteenth floor."

"Come on, we'll go and get them."

"Wait, there's Maynard, some woman I don't know and a Security operator."

"Security operator! Which one?"

"According to this, someone called Reed."

"Oh, I know Reed, tough boy. Trueman, get into the apartment directly above Maynard's and, as soon as you're in it, wave something. Smeen, round up everyone and occupy the opposite building. As soon as you see Trueman, wave, concentrate on the window directly below. Lenski, sound out a general call, say we have Maynard boxed and give the address—oh, yes, better let Brinker know."

Reed woke from an uneasy sleep with a start, tried to roll out of bed and found that one hand was chained to it.

"Maynard!—Pete!—Wake up!" He struggled furiously to free his wrist. "*Wake up!*"

"What's up?" Maynard put a tousled head round the door.

"We're surrounded." He tried again to free his wrist. "You're not going to leave me like this?"

"Calm down. How do you know?"

"*I know.*" Reed felt suddenly cold. "I—I dreamed it." Urgency seized him again. "They've got guns trained on the window, we're trapped."

Maynard nodded sympathetically. "I know—one moment." He freed the other's wrist. "This isn't necessary but it's hardly fair to make you sweat it out."

"My gun—"

"There's no time to get it, sorry, four of them are just approaching the door."

He walked quickly through to the next room and to Reed's amazement simply took the woman's hand. They did not speak, they simply stood hand in hand like lovers. Briefly they looked at each other and, once again, they seemed to change, once again the room seemed to light briefly.

"What are you going to do, just stand there?" He was, at that moment, too tense to be impressed.

Outside the door, the four approached cautiously but without alarm, Vivalci, the leader, slightly ahead.

Some distance from the door, he opened a small but heavy box and removed a thin-barrelled weapon. Too bad, if any instrument picked this up now. Not that Security would dare do anything now, even they knew he had a 'fryer'.

Vivalci had a flat, dead mind which never felt much and seldom exerted itself to reason. Sometimes he derived mild satisfaction from a particularly brutal or successful killing but he never reasoned about it. He was employed to kill, he knew he was good at it and, for his services, he was well paid. Killing was in the natural order of things, people respected him for it but he never considered his profession beyond that

point.

He tested the balance of the weapon in his hand, smiled inwardly and, with quick motions of his hand, posted the others to vantage points around the door.

Everything was in their favour, almost it was too easy, they had the advantage of complete surprise.

An uneasy thought suddenly crossed his mind. Suppose this was no surprise, suppose Maynard knew. A man who could make himself look like anyone might have other aces up his sleeve. Who was to say he had not made a barricade of furniture and was crouching behind it waiting for the door to burst open.

Perhaps the 'fryer' was not after all such a sensible choice. There was a fractional delay between squeezing the trigger and the resultant blue-white gout of energy. A machine pistol was faster. Maynard could put six shots in him before he was incinerated which was no consolation whatever.

Perhaps it would be wiser to fire through the door—what was the door made of? If it was woodplast, okay, but if it was pressed metaplate such an action could prove dangerous.

At such close range there would be a certain amount of flash-back and a swirling cloud of white-hot sparks.

One of his assistants approached him. "Should I get more help?" Evidently uncertainty was afflicting him, too.

"Yeah—yes, you do that. Get Saunders and Goss up here. I want that door blasted in, tell 'em to bring the pills up."

When Goss arrived a few minutes later, he seemed reluctant to co-operate.

"Tricky sort of place for a pill."

"You're a blast-man, aren't you?"

"Sure I am. That's why I say it's tricky, funny sort of corridor, blast could do nasty things here, bring the whole roof down on the top of us." He pointed. "Gravity shaft booster unit. If that gets knocked out when we're half way down we'll drop like stones."

Vivalci's thin lips drew back exposing his teeth. "Do I have to spell it out for you, Goss? Time the damn thing and put it by the door."

"As you say, you're the boss, but I don't like it, I'm telling you that."

"And I'm telling you to get started. We haven't all day."

"Right." Goss opened his small black bag, extracted a micro-monocle and screwed it carefully into his eye. His next tool was a screwdriver with an almost invisible head. "You have to set this kind, no twist pin, just set the timing pin. You have to be damn careful—"

Clearly Goss was talking to himself and Vivalci was shocked to notice that his hands shivered as he held the screwdriver.

"Take it easy, there's no rush."

Sweat broke out on Goss's forehead. "*Quiet!* Can't you see—Oh, God, where did it go? I dropped it." Colour drained suddenly from his face. "I set it for ten minutes, where did it roll?"

No one answered, there was a panic rush for safety. No one was going to search for a black object only slightly larger than a pea with a ten minute time-setting.

Goss ran his hands desperately through the thick pile of the corridor carpet, knowing his search was futile. Could be anywhere, got to get out of here.

He picked up his bag and ran. He should just about make it.

He reached the street barely a minute after the others, panting for breath.

"You blundering moron!" There was spittle at the corner of Vivalci's thin mouth. "I've a good mind to blast you down here and now."

"*No—no!*" Goss's voice was shrill. "It's there, it's in the corridor somewhere, it'll do the job, I swear."

"It had better." Vivalci looked upwards to the sixteenth floor. "For your sake, it had better, friend."

"It will, it will, just be patient." He glanced quickly and shakily at his watch. "Only ninety seconds to go, you'll see."

"I hope I do." Vivalci was aware of an unfamiliar fluttering in his stomach.

"Sixty seconds!" Goss's announcement was almost a supplication. "Fifty-five seconds!" Others were crowding around, staring upwards or glancing at their watches.

It's got to work, he told himself or they'll kill me, any damn one of them and hell, there must be at least a hundred or more. Twenty-five seconds, twenty-four, twenty-three.

It did work.

The searing sheet of sullen red flame washed the street clean of people for nearly the length of the block and left a shallow, sullenly glowing crater. Of the crowd of men, nothing remained and as enemy units, it would be doubtful if anyone would ever mourn them.

There would be no one to investigate and to arrive at the obvious conclusion. Goss, in unnatural anxiety, had dropped the live pill bomb in his own bag and carried it out to the street with him. In the bag, besides the tools of his trade, were three more bombs.

The effect on those occupying the surrounding buildings was immense and immediate. They had been unaccountably on edge for several hours, then an incomprehensible day had frayed their nerves further. Now this! Morale collapsed completely.

There was no panic, they simply withdrew, in ones and twos, without explanation or excuse. It was a kind of tacit withdrawal, each understanding that the other was getting out from under as quickly as possible.

There were a few die-hard commanders who tried to get them back. Some of the men stepped over their bodies as they left, others were less considerate.

Once clear of the buildings they spread their own version and interpretation of the incident.

"Maynard's got a super weapon, must have knocked out a hundred and fifty of the boys—"

"Just a gout of flame and pouf, nothing left at all—"

“Me? I’m pulling out. The Organization can’t do worse than what happened back there. From what I’ve heard, bodies are head deep. I’m off before Maynard comes out to take care of the rest of us.”

The exodus from Granton began slowly but finally developed into a rout. Pitched battles developed in the suburbs as hard-core killers drafted in ran head on into groups of demoralized units pulling out.

Savage duels were fought for possession of available transport and there were some spectacular pile-ups as panic-stricken carloads tried to gun their way ahead of other panic-stricken drivers.

In his office, Brinker dabbed at his face with a huge and highly scented handkerchief. He was still trying to make sense of the thousand and one conflicting reports which had flooded his reception boards for the last two hours.

Three things, however, were clearly apparent. One, Maynard had some sort of super weapon and had used it. Two, the boys were pulling out in droves and without authority. Three, this was Maynard’s round and he had won it hands down. The report of thousands dead was probably wild exaggeration but the ever-mounting, confirmed, casualty figures were too disquieting to be ignored. Already they topped the hundred and fifty mark.

Brinker ran the handkerchief round and round his neck several times. This was it. With a hundred and fifty dead and Maynard still at large, the Organization was not going to give him fourteen days. He’d be damn lucky if he got fourteen hours.

It *would* happen when, otherwise, things were going well. Two more Jackpot worlds had been discovered and, but for this, he would have submitted a tender for a directorship on one of them. Had he succeeded in rubbing out Maynard, no doubt he would have got it.

He stared miserably at the second batch of roses in the opulent and vulgar bowl. Already the petals were dropping, less than an hour after purchase.

The Organization would not stage one of their plush public funerals for him. Dying would be protracted and what remained of him would be swept carelessly down the nearest disposal slot.

He ran his handkerchief round his neck again. If only there was an escape route to run to but there was nowhere to hide. Running now would prolong his existence by perhaps three days. Three days of tension which would nearly snap him in half before they finally caught up with him.

His eyes fell on the co-ordinates of one of the Jackpot worlds and the beginnings of a plan began to dawn in his mind. It was, at first, a plan without hope, but as the idea began to develop, some of his terror began to evaporate. It was going to be no joke and possibly rough but he would *be alive*. It would take them a hell of a time to find him—if they ever did—and it was quite possible, without the appalling burden of threat and responsibility, he might live a good deal longer than here.

Got to act fast. Having made a decision, you had to act by it, right or wrong. He had not reached the position of a District Boss by hesitancy but by decision.

He pressed a switch. “Credit balance, please.” No use fiddling around with investments, hadn’t time to realize on them. What he wanted were his assets in cold cash.

“Five hundred and ninety-six thousand, seven hundred and eighty-four, point two-eight,” he was informed.

Sweat beaded his thick neck again. Not enough, not for what he wanted to do. An idea occurred to him suddenly which frightened him not so much by its temerity but by its beautiful simplicity. *Why not take the*

Organization for it?

There had been a time when treble signatures had been needed for all withdrawals but not now. Now, when the Organization could put the finger on a man, almost within hours, absconding with vast sums in cash was not worth the effort. The embezzler was picked up and knocked off before he had time to enjoy it.

He pressed the switch again. "Fund assets."

"Branch?"

"Seven million, four hundred and twenty-four thousand, nine hundred and twelve. Negotiable bonds—"

He snapped off. He had been given an open cheque and there was almost enough in the kitty to buy what he wanted. Not that he was going to, he was going to buy men and, for a limited time, their silence. With a sum like that you could buy almost anything and he was going to buy it long enough to get clear.

Unknown to anyone outside the Organization, in a remote part of the Southern Americas was a ship. It was used principally for smuggling and occasionally for the transport of Organization Chiefs who wished to pass from one world to another without using the Security-vetted matter-transmitters. He, Brinker, was not only going to take the Organization for a packet, he was going to take an interstellar vessel costing two hundred million as well.

SEVEN

IN the hotel, Reed sat tensely on the edge of a chair and tried to reason out the events of the last few hours.

He had seen the explosion. He had tuned in to police and Security reports and from the numerous, if slightly garbled accounts, he had a rough picture of what had occurred. What troubled him, was *why*.

He did not respect the Enemy but he had no illusions as to their ruthless efficiency. Ninety per cent of those who had surrounded them were such efficient and cold-blooded killers that they were close to organic robots. Warrior robots without conscience or reservation. When someone said 'kill' they killed. It was not a considered action, it was the response of a mindless puppet, the reaction of a machine.

Now, for no explicable reason, these same mindless killers had lost their nerve and run in panic.

He looked at the woman Lia—God she was beautiful wasn't she? Funny how, when they had first met, he had thought of her as ordinary.

"You did it, you and Pete. How? I've got to know."

She smiled at him gently—was it with just a touch of the maternal?—and said, "I can tell you a little—you are already becoming aware yourself. When the men came, we filled their minds with uncertainty. We project, you see—we think it is hypnotic. The men were assured, arrogantly confident but we stimulated their minds into considering *alternatives*. Once the process had begun, they became uneasy and lost their decision. It was only a question of time before uneasiness turned to anxiety and anxiety to neurosis. The explosion was fortuitous, not engineered although something of the sort was bound to happen sooner or later."

He shivered slightly. "Why didn't it affect me?"

"You!" She laughed softly and musically. "How could it? You are one of us."

He stopped a scowl without too much effort. It was difficult to scowl at a woman who looked so beautiful and yet so warm. Am I in love with her? he thought and knew instantly that he wasn't. Her beauty was a responsive loveliness, one reacted to it because it was beauty just as one responded to exquisite music or the rural loveliness of some of the larger nature reserves.

He said, "I wish I knew what you're talking about."

She looked at him with her wonderful dark eyes and he found himself responding again to her inner serenity and assurance. "You will, but it must come from within. It cannot be imparted verbally."

He nodded, still not understanding, but now less concerned.

Maynard emerged from the electra-shower cubicle and grinned at him.

"Feel like a walk? It's safe to go out now."

Reed shifted his feet uncomfortably. "I'm supposed to be taking you in."

"No time limit, is there?" The question was so ingenious that the other was forced to face it honestly.

"Well, no—no, I haven't been given a time limit."

"Good, then there's no harm done, is there?"

"I'm compromising, you know." Reed was searching frantically in his mind for logical reasons and was shocked to discover he couldn't find any. The urgency was gone somehow, there was so much to learn, so much to find out—he thought, with sudden chagrin that he hadn't a clue what he wanted to find out. It was just *afeeling*, there was no logical basis for it.

Outside in the street, intent machines moved busily about their tasks of removing the scars of the previous night. They washed, swept and sucked up debris. Recovery units shuttled to and fro towing wrecked ground cars behind them. Few police were in evidence but mecho-wardens were active, controlling the thin flow of traffic and warning pedestrians of subsidences in the sidewalks and other minor hazards.

The two men walked slowly down the street but Reed's slowness was forced. It was no sinecure taking a morning stroll with a man who, he knew, was now hotter figuratively speaking than the inside of the sun.

No doubt, by now, the Enemy had raised their 'dead or alive' inducements to a fantastic sum. Five million now would be a conservative estimate for the lucky killer.

There *must* be recognition computers still operating, sweeping the streets from high windows. There had to be a few hard-core or cash-dazed killers who stayed behind in the faint hope of getting a shot at Maynard. One lucky shot and they would have enough money to buy themselves a small city or a major continent on one of the newly discovered planets.

Reed walked slowly from sheer will-power but, inside his jacket, his hand was closed tight round the butt of his machine pistol.

They came to a large square, dominated by a tall and imposing building.

"City medical centre." Maynard shook his head sadly. "I'm afraid they had their hands full last night."

As he spoke, two men came down the steps. One limped painfully, the other had a permaplast pad decorating his left temple.

Reed knew with sudden shock awareness that they were enemy agents. Worse, he knew *how* he knew.

The men, despite their obvious injuries, were well groomed and perfectly tailored but about them was the unmistakable stamp of *beasts*.

Reed couldn't define it, he couldn't really see it. Yet, had he been asked to put it into words, he could have done so. They were like animals *disguised* as men and very thinly disguised at that. They were not *specific* animals, they were not lions or tigers or jackals, it was an essence, a composite *beast-image*. There was an impression of talons, of fangs and of lashing tails so intense that one could almost smell them.

Without perceptible movement he began to slide his gun out of the holster.

"Don't." Maynard's hand was firm on his elbow.

"But they're—" He struggled desperately to free himself without attracting too much attention.

"I said don't. I know who they are just as well as you, perhaps better—watch." Very deliberately he turned and walked up the wide steps to meet them.

Reed swore obscenely. Maynard was blocking the target, if anything started—One of the men looked up and came to an abrupt stop.

It was clear that he recognized Maynard instantly but he made no attempt to reach for a weapon. Instead, he raised his hands from his sides as if to assure the other that he had no malicious intent. The other man's reaction was almost the same and the colour drained from both their faces.

Reed had a brief and rather frightening impression of slinking curs, bellies close to the ground, longing to snap but too terrified to do so.

"I am Maynard." The words reached Reed clearly.

"You are—fancy! How are you, Mr. Maynard—glad to know you." The words had a shaky and ingratiating pseudo-friendliness.

"You are looking for me, I understand."

"Oh, *no—no*." The denials carried too much force. "You are quite mistaken, quite." Both were now backing away and running their fingers round the inside of their collars as if they found some difficulty in breathing.

"If you think we had anything to do with that business last night, you are quite mistaken. As a matter of fact, we were all for you, we are all for you." They were now taking short but visible steps backwards and occasionally stumbling.

"It's the truth, Mr. Maynard, we mean you no harm at all. Here, as a mark of goodwill—" They laid their guns carefully on the steps and retreated from them, protesting. "Rest assured, we are your friends—if you need—anything—just call—on us—any time—" They turned suddenly and ran.

Maynard turned and walked unhurriedly back.

"You see, a gun was not necessary."

"All right, all right, you projected something." Reed was suddenly on edge again.

“On the contrary, I merely approached them.”

“As you wish. No doubt I shall have some sort of revelation in due course—if I can hang on to my sanity that long.”

Maynard grinned sympathetically. Then he said, “It seems to me you're not doing too badly. You, too, can now recognize the Enemy.”

The remark had a sobering effect.

“I'm sorry, that did shake me and they do look like beasts.”

“Yes.” The other nodded slowly then changed the subject. “I'm afraid I played you along a little suggesting this walk. I was deliberately working for delay, buying time. That's why we made you a temporary prisoner, to gain time. Frankly, it is your duty to take me in but now I don't think you will.”

“I won't!” Reed was suddenly aggressive. “Why?”

Maynard smiled. “You said yourself there was no time limit and there is so much to learn, isn't there? A week or so and you won't care. Sandling won't care, no one will care because everyone will know...”

Brinker liked the world as soon as he stepped on it. There was a rich earthy smell and the breeze was fresh, easing the heat of the sun.

He watched the men unload a mountain of stores with satisfaction. He was not going to lack for anything for he had chosen his site carefully.

Behind, immense black cliffs rose sheer and in front long, bluish grass sloped downwards to a small sparkling stream.

A few hundred paces beyond the stream, the first trees climbed upwards from the long forest which stretched to the horizon. A beautiful forest, hazed with heat, but despite this, bluish leaves dancing and swaying in the sunlight.

More stores were unloaded, tools, weapons, work robots and various warning devices. On top of these was enough food, preserves and delicacies to keep him in luxury even if he exceeded his natural life expectation by twenty years.

He grinned inwardly. The Organization would froth at the mouth—they had paid for it all. Their work robots would bore into the solid rock, carving comfortable, safe, light and, in due course, air-conditioned rooms. They would suck chemicals from the soil from which they would weave carpets and tapestries. He was going to live like a king. Oh yes, it would be lonely, but this was not something he wanted to share and alone he was safe. There would be no one here to guard against, argue with or to threaten exposure.

“Everything unloaded, boss.”

“Good, good—here.” He pressed a wad of notes into the man's hand. “A bonus for you, ten thousand, help you to forget even better, eh?”

“Why thanks, Mr. Brinker, thanks—good luck, sir.”

Seconds later the door slid shut and the repeller plates began to hum softly. A cushion of repellent energy began to build up between the ground and the vessel, forcing them apart. The reaction tubes took over

and the vessel began to lift swiftly.

Brinker sat down on a crate and watched it go up, dwindling in size as it went. He was smiling, a bland, all-knowing, self-satisfied smile. Inwardly he was mimicking the man's last words, 'Why thanks, Mr. Brinker, thanks'. The creep, the unctuous ingratiating creep, lucky he knew men and trusted no one, very lucky. The fool had taken him for two million and accepted another ten thousand as if it were a minor tip. No doubt, now he was preparing a story, a story convincing enough to fool the Organization. He and his crew had been forced to do the job at gunpoint. The crew would back him, their necks were in danger, too, and besides they would get a share of the immense bribe. Further, they had his destination, and his exact landing point, enough to add conviction to the story.

Still smiling, Brinker watched the vessel shrink to the size of a human hand, then a finger and finally a minute black speck.

It was then that Brinker pressed a small device in his pocket.

The black speck ceased to be a speck. It became a red spark which suddenly billowed outwards in crimson and left wisps of dark cloud in the high green sky.

In Security Building Sandling was suffering from what he himself termed an Irish aberration. He was worried because he was not worried. In the midst of the most disturbing and conflicting news in centuries, he was serenely calm.

He should have been worrying about Maynard and Reed but he wasn't and he knew he should be.

He should have been triumphant about the Enemy's overwhelming route in Granton but his best response was mild satisfaction. The ebb and flow of conflict was now incidental, there were far more important things to consider—trouble was he couldn't think what they were. It was as if he were waiting for the important things to consider and that made no sense at all.

He had the uneasy feeling that the world was changing, that he, himself, was changing but he was unable to see where.

Oddly, in many ways, the Enemy could have told him or, at least, if not the causes, the effects. It could have been summed up in one word: Revolt.

It was not a mass uprising, it was not a mob surging through the streets intent on destruction. This was the revolt of individuals against exploitation and the terrifying aspect was that it was succeeding.

People who had paid meekly for years became suddenly aggressive and refused to contribute more.

When strong-arms were sent to deal with them, they ran into unexpected opposition. Either arms were produced or the rebels had formed resistance cells with their immediate neighbours and the punitives found themselves outnumbered. A large number were roughly handled and suffered varying degrees of injury.

Within one week, collections dropped by eighteen per cent and area bosses sat up in alarm.

"Gotta teach them a lesson they won't forget."

The lesson resulted in three mutilations and a particularly brutal murder. The executioners lost seven times that number, people seemed to know when they were coming or recognized them before they entered. Worse, the rebels seemed singularly well informed.

“That goes for you two rats and the crooked cop who keeps watch for you.”

Scrawled notices began to appear on public buildings

THE MAYOR IS A CROOK

THE CHIEF OF POLICE ACCEPTS BRIBES

were among the most common.

Slowly it was becoming apparent that a large section of the neutrals had at last become aware of the true situation.

It was at this period that organized crime ran into the first of what it code-named guardedly as an ‘inexplicable’.

Lombard was a quiet man of forty who ran a small and exclusive dining-room which specialized in exquisite cuisine. Patrons paid high prices for Lombard's gastronomical wizardry but considered it well worth it and came again.

For years the Organization had taken their cut of seventy per cent of the profits. For years Lombard had paid up with weary resignation, his face growing more lined with every passing year.

One day, however, in common with many more, he revolted.

“Get out and stay out.”

He got the routine work-over. Fights occurred on the premises, there were two small fires, a stink bomb and something was tossed into the kitchen, contaminating the food.

Lombard dug his heels in and still refused to pay. Unfortunately he had no dependents on whom to bring pressure so he had to be intimidated personally.

In view of the many insurrections, the area boss sent three unpleasant men—subsequently deleted—to persuade him.

In the event of failure, he was to be rubbed out and his mutilated body made evident to the public as a warning to the rest.

As they entered Lombard looked up, his face calm and composed.

Jerome, the leader, was struck by this. He was used to dawning apprehension, the darting looks for a way of escape and, finally, the agonized despair.

Lombard just looked without anger or fear, just looked. If there was anything in his eyes, it was distaste and, remotely, pity.

“It would appear that you prefer to learn the hard way.” Jerome cracked his knuckles unpleasantly but, at the same time, was aware of a sneaking unease at the back of his mind.

“It is you who must learn.” Lombard's voice was surprisingly soft.

It was then that Jerome began to have difficulty getting breath and terror welled up inside him.

Suddenly there was an appalling unspoken threat in the steady gaze and Jerome found himself backing

away. Not only was it becoming more difficult to breathe but he was terrified.

The idea of using his gun never occurred to him. All he could think of was warding off the unimaginable horror with which, he was sure, he was threatened.

He had to placate, to persuade, to try and stall—anything.

“Look, Mr. Lombard,” his voice shook uncontrollably, “I guess there's been a mistake—wrong address—not my fault.”

He wanted to shout: “For God's sake stop looking at me like that,” but the words wouldn't come. “I'm very sorry, very sorry indeed.” He was already taking quick steps backwards and he could feel sweat crawling down his temples. “It won't occur again.” His voice rose absurdly. “I promise you, it won't occur again—”

He turned and ran. There was a *mêlée* in the doorway as the three reached it together and fought each other savagely in an effort to escape.

Then they were free. They ran in different directions, desperately, completely obsessed by terror.

Sandling had yet to learn of this and like events which, soon, were to become commonplace.

He took the secret route home—he lived in another part of the city under another name—and went up to his apartment.

“Come and look.” She kissed him.

“What's the excitement?”

“You won't believe it.” She took his hand and led him into the next room. “There!”

He looked, then he looked closer. “They're real—well I'll be damned. What did you do?”

She shook her head. “Nothing, they just came.”

He stared unbelievably at the profusion of colour. For years, in the heavily fortified apartment, his wife had struggled with a window box. It had been a heart-breaking task, the few green shoots had either failed to develop or fell prey to marauding pigeons.

Now, he shook his head slowly, now the entire box was full of dancing flowers and their perfume was carried sweetly into the room by the breeze.

He was not to know that elsewhere there was another side to the story.

The exodus to the stars had eased the population problem and left vast areas clear for development. The new robber barons—the Area Bosses—had taken advantage of this and built themselves vast and opulent estates. Lakes, waterfalls, swimming pools and magnificent green lawns abounded, but in these last few weeks something had begun to happen to these estates.

Despite prodigious efforts by vast armies of experts, the green lawns slowly turned brown. The willows drooped closer to the water than before and began to shed their leaves.

Overnight, whole beds of flowers shed their blossoms and, where there were roses, the stems twisted, one with another, and curved thorns grew to the length of the human finger.

Sandling would know in time but not yet. He had barely finished his evening meal when he received a coded message.

It was a copy of a hypergram and had been dispatched by Survey. It said:

Urgent. Recently discovered planets now being developed by Enemy Combines are dangerous.

Careful tests undertaken over a period of two weeks prove beyond doubt a high degree of radiation originating in solar body.

Note. Radiation occurs in cycles, due possibly, to varying conditions in the parent sun.

A single test, therefore, undertaken at an inactive period, could well give a negative reading and the radio-activity occurring some days later, would pass unnoticed.

Activity not lethal over a short period but could have profoundly disturbing effects on the human body—and subsequent generations—if exposure is prolonged.

Sandling scowled. His first thought was, 'Serve the bastards right', but he knew he couldn't leave it there.

Authority would have to ban the planets until they became safe—if they ever did. Not only to prevent the Enemy returning dangerously 'active' but also to protect any neutrals who might go there for their holidays.

One cheerful thought, however, it had already cost the Enemy a packet. Information to hand suggested that two complete prefabricated hotels had already been shipped out to the first of the newly discovered worlds.

On top of that, several hundred executives, technical constructors and so on would spend a long time in a nuclear clinic undergoing prolonged de-activation treatment.

Sandling retired that night with a mild feeling of satisfaction. He had the certain, although unfounded, feeling that, at last, the tides were turning.

He fell asleep almost at once and almost instantly began to dream. He knew it was a dream and, in the oddly floating state of the dream, he said to himself, 'I'm dreaming this'.

Perhaps it was the information concerning the newly discovered worlds which set him dreaming about space. It seemed he floated in space and unfamiliar constellations wheeled and turned about him. He was carried far beyond them, to a far blackness and then to stars beyond. Then it seemed movement stopped and he floated, waiting.

In the dream, he knew he was waiting for a purpose and then a curious flicker caught his eye and he turned towards it.

Flick!—nothing!—flick!—something!

He knew instantly what it was, a ship crossing space. So many timed seconds in hyper-drive, so many timed reorientation minutes in normal drive.

Flick—in—flick—out.

Yes, that was it, a ship in a hyper-drive, only he soon saw it wasn't just a ship. It was lines and lines and rows and rows of ships, a fleet—no, an armada.

They were not ships built by man, these were like nothing he had ever seen before. They were oddly shaped, each identical to the next but shaped—his mind sought similes—yes, like mushrooms. They were shaped like mushrooms.

He was filled with a sense of urgency for he knew suddenly exactly where they were going.

EIGHT

“AND what's the point of this?” Reed looked uneasily about him. This was a nature reserve, not only one of the least pleasant but Maynard appeared to have chosen the worst part of it. Here were only a few stunted half-dead trees and a tangle of brambles. A few blades of limp grass had managed to thrust themselves through the rocky soil.

He looked back at the flyer and shrugged. He supposed the two knew what they were doing.

“You don't like it?” Lia smiled.

“No, I don't...”

Maynard nodded. “I agree, it's horrible—tell me, have you ever heard of green fingers?”

“Green—? Oh, you mean the power some people are supposed to have over plant growth. My mother seemed to have a bent that way, things always grew well if she planted them. I don't see what that has to do with this jungle, however. It's clear that this particular spot once held a building, nothing will ever grow here.”

“You don't think so? We've been here less than ten minutes and you have been intent on our conversation. Take a look around you.”

Reed looked, he made no comment but he had the feeling that a cold wind was blowing steadily at the back of his neck.

New green leaves had grown on the stunted trees, bees fussed among the white blossoms of the blackberry brambles and there was a thin covering of green grass stretching about him.

“No, don't ask me, think about it later.” Maynard grinned faintly. “Just call it, for the time being—green fingers. Let's go take a look at something else.”

Thirty minutes later he said, “Recognize the lay-out below?”

“Of course, it's Geed's country estate. He's a syndicate boss—I don't advise you to fly over it by the way. His boys are touchy about his private air space and they have enough arms down there to make sure it stays private.”

“Never mind about that, the magnifier should give you enough—look.”

Reed was not an insensitive man and had often mentally raised his hat to the landscape gardeners employed by the Enemy syndicate boss.

He drew in his breath sharply finding it difficult to believe what he saw. The rolling, green lawns were brown and dead. The trees naked and broken like a war-torn forest. The acres and acres of flower beds barren as a desert.

He turned away, his eyes wide with disbelief and then came the first stirrings of comprehension.

“Are you trying to show me that a man's inner self has begun to effect his material surroundings?”

Maynard did not answer directly. “Keep looking, keep thinking, you may arrive at a great deal more...”

“They must be mad.” The commander of the survey ship increased magnification, frowning. “They're pouring in by thousands, ship after ship.”

“I suppose they received the warning, sir.”

“Of course they received the warning.” The Commander was a little abrupt. “Hell, Johnson, they broadcast our findings over their own newscasts, they must know.”

He frowned, drumming his fingers on the computer box. “They've raked up every damn ship they can find, they're running a veritable shuttle service. Every thirty minutes a ship lands and every thirty minutes one takes off. They're not content with that, here, take a look-over there to the left of the bay—see those two latticed towers. I'll lay a million to one—not that I shall ever have that kind of money—that those are transmitter towers. The Enemy can't get out here quick enough.”

“But these planets are radioactive, sir—what are these people, lemmings or something?”

“I wouldn't know.” The commander frowned. Odd tales were about, some said organized crime was on the run, others that the neutrals had revolted. Neither story accounted for this mass exodus to unsafe planets. Could Johnson be right, could the scum of humanity be afflicted with some dreadful urge to self-destruction?

He made adjustments to the viewing screen. Two thirty-storey hotels were apparently complete and four more were in the process of construction.

Already an immense esplanade stretched to the full limits of the bay and a variety of robots were busily engaged on the road surface.

What the devil for? No one but a madman would ever come here and yet it looked as if they had come to stay. Another question—why. It was a stinking miasmal sort of place with minimum temperature of 25 degrees centigrade in the cool season. There was a little reasonably dry land—the Enemy had settled in about a quarter of it. What remained were vast mountains of volcanic rock interspersed with swamp and jungle. Earth must have looked very much like this when the dinosaur was king.

Sandling looked up from his desk with mild surprise.

“So you decided to come back?”

“Well, yes, we had a bit of trouble one way and another.” Reed was acutely conscious that the excuse was lame and unconvincing.

Sandling seemed untroubled by it. “Got Maynard?”

“Yes, he and the girl. They're waiting in the ante-room.”

“Send them in, I'd like a word with them.”

“Just a word? I thought they were under arrest.”

“They would have been ten days ago. The world is changing. Reed, you are changing, I am changing or didn't you know?”

"I know well enough, sir. What troubles me is how and why."

"Ah, the key question, which is why I want Maynard."

"Then you no longer entertain the idea that he made a deal with an alien."

"If he did, we both did—send them in, please."

Reed obliged a little dazedly and took a chair at the back of the room.

When they were comfortable, Sandling opened the conversation.

"The world is changing, I think you have most of the answers and, to be quite frank, I'd like a few."

Maynard smiled faintly. "So would my friend Reed, he's been working very hard to the same purpose."

"In brief, your answer is no."

"It is. Realization must come from within and that applies to both of you."

"You can't give a clue?"

"Oh, yes, I can give you a clue. The same clues I gave earlier. You accept without question the marvellous transition from caterpillar to butterfly but you are content to believe that a higher life-form—ourselves—must evolve, cabbage-like, over countless millions of years. You accept, because science assures you that it is so, that life originated in such and such a way but science could be wrong you know. Let us return to the butterfly, which has reached the peak of its development. It mates, lays its eggs according to order and dies."

He stopped as if awaiting a question.

Finally Sandling asked it. "What do you mean by 'according to order'?"

"Call it, for want of a better word, natural law, to which all things must conform. If, for example, you jump out of the window, natural law, the law of gravity, will pull very unpleasantly down to the ground. The butterfly obeys natural law—some call it instinct—by depositing her eggs where food for the grubs is available. Natural law, or if you are religiously inclined, Divine law, ensures that when we, too, reach a period of change, all is ready for that change."

Sandling leaned forward quickly. "Then the world *is* changing."

"No." Maynard shook his head quickly. "We are changing, the world remains the same."

Sandling waited for him to enlarge on the subject but the other remained silent.

"Most informative. All I have managed to squeeze out of you is the admission of change which I already knew." He frowned. "I hope we live long enough for it to do us some good. Company is coming."

It was Reed who asked the obvious question. "What company—what do you mean?"

Sandling became slightly embarrassed. "All right, all right, so I had a dream, a prophetic dream, trouble is, I know it's right." He swallowed audibly and tried to make his announcement sound casual. "There's a bunch of outworlders on their way and they're not coming on a peace mission."

Reed paled slightly. "How soon?"

"They were a long way away but they were pushing their hyper-jumps, say a couple of months."

"Thank you," said Reed, bitterly. "Isn't fate kind? Our traditional enemy is folding up left, right and centre so we're going to be landed with another, this one a good deal worse..."

On another world, Brinker, the ex-Organization Boss, squatted on the ground and beamed at the stream. He liked the stream, he liked the way it chattered over the pebbles and made little whirlpools round the larger rocks.

He, too, was aware of change, changes in himself and changes in values. What the hell had possessed him to devote half his life grubbing for cash? Why had he accepted, without question, the varying tyrannies of that life, the rat-race for power, the constant fear of elimination?

This was the good life, the real life and he had it made. In the first few days the hyper-radio to which he had then listened frequently had brought dire warnings of radioactivity. It was clearly a scientific error of the first order, this was a good world, a safe world, you could feel it.

Although he mused as he watched the stream, he was wholly unaware of changes in himself, primarily because excuses for them seemed to him quite rational.

Behind him the entrance to his new home—a cave—vanished into the cliff face. The work robots could have completed his rock mansion in a matter of days, the trouble was that they were so damn *noisy*.

Six robots made enough noise to waken the dead and, after an hour, he had cut his work force down to one. Came a time when the noise of one seemed too damn much and he couldn't be bothered to switch it on.

The six robots were now postured about the cave entrance, their metallic joints showing bright patches of rust. Grass was already pushing its way through the lower slopes of his mountain of stores.

Brinker had worn nothing but a pair of shorts for the last fourteen days. He was on a permanent holiday, wasn't he? Who was there to dress up for?

At first, exposure had brought on painful sunburn but he had adjusted quickly. He had now, he assured himself, an excellent and healthy tan. The fact that his 'tan' was markedly scaly struck him as of no consequence. He put it down to the after-effects of sunburn, the skin cracked, it was quite natural. Natural, too, that it should turn a little grey and, in exposed places, thicken as an additional protection.

He never washed now but frequently he lay in the shallow stream and let the water wash pleasantly over his naked body.

It was odd that his beard did not grow and for some extraordinary reason, the matt of hair which had once covered his chest had completely disappeared.

Brinker did not know it but curious effects were beginning to become apparent on another newly discovered planet.

Two huge hotels reared upwards towards the green sky.

They were complete but deserted; inert robots dotted the far ends of the great esplanade which was now nearly complete. No one had bothered to switch them on recently.

New arrivals in batches of twenty were still pouring through the matter transmitters every six minutes. Fortunately, every so often, a skilled technician was included in one or two of the batches.

“Who the hell is attending this end! Look at those dials, two points more and we'd have ended up here as jelly, I'd better take over—”

A ship was still putting down every thirty minutes, discharging its cargo of a thousand humans and equipment and pulling out again. Each landing, however, was more difficult. Ground control was amateur and only semi-efficient. Turn round was taking longer, fewer and fewer robots were arriving for unloading and disembarkation. Those which managed to get there were poorly programmed or had no idea what they were supposed to do when they arrived.

The new arrivals were shocked by the indifference of the early pioneers. They didn't *care*. They were dirty, evil smelling and rapidly turning their backs on the necessities of civilized living.

Forty of the original pioneers had unaccountably disappeared. Rumour had it that they had strolled casually into the jungle and failed to return.

Even the newcomers made no attempt to find them. Their natural psychology did not lend itself to rescue attempts. What the hell! They had their own lives to lead.

Some new arrivals, however, were struck by the general apathy and sheer indifference of those numbered among the early settlers.

Men who had been smart, with sharp, decisive minds, careful both of their speech and appearance, now wandered around in filthy shorts. When spoken to, they seemed to have some difficulty in putting words together.

“Oh—ah—Dodson—uh—yeah—remember you now. How's things—uh—with you?”

“Fine, fine, and you, Mr. Arthruti?”

“Arthruti?—Oh, yeah, that's me, isn't it? Funny how easy it is to—uh—forget your own name.”

The Dodsons of the new planets looked uneasily at the Arthrutis and wondered just what had gone wrong. Of course the guy was filthy but had his nostrils always been that broad and his eyes so small and deeply sunken? Never realized either that he was so hairy, more like fur really.

The women were just as bad, half or wholly naked, filthy, hair all over the place, not caring.

Drunken parties at night kept one awake, the shouts, the screams and when there was a fight, well, it wasn't a fight any more. Men didn't go for guns or knives or stand up and swing their fists. They leapt, clawing and snarling like animals, using their nails and their teeth.

It worried the newcomers at first until, they too, became less careful of their appearances, omitted to wash and took to lying on the beach and dreaming. At first they liked to think but after a time the effort of consecutive thinking became too much of an effort.

Lovely day—should look over that robot control unit, really—get around to it tomorrow, perhaps—nice, warm, peaceful—good world—where was his girl—what was her name? She'd be around soon, maybe—should know her name—didn't matter did it?

The early settlers were becoming weary of the beach.

They sat for long periods looking into the jungle with peculiar and unnatural concentration.

Each day the watching periods became longer and then, in one's and two's they began to sidle into it.

Once they had had names but it was difficult to recall names now without considerable effort.

There was Linkman. Linkman had once been a Syndicate lawyer and a very astute man. It was all like a dream now which he only half remembered.

The true reality now was the trees. Linkman was fascinated by them, the roundness of the branches, the way they rose one upon another at different angles.

He wanted to put his hands on them just to see what they *felt* like.

Finally the desire to do so became too much, he rose and put his hand on a thick branch close to the trunk. It felt good, he pulled, finding sudden delight in the response of his muscles.

On a sudden impulse, he pulled with both hands, swinging his body towards the trunk. His body seemed to respond of itself, his naked feet finding natural purchase.

He was no longer capable of putting feelings into words but he felt suddenly *right*, this was where he belonged, what he had been waiting for.

He reached out and swung naturally to the nearest tree with a deep grunt of satisfaction.

Jassine had been attractive once, she had lived in luxury with a Syndicate chief and men had called her a 'dish'. Not any more, her straw-coloured hair was not only filthy but alive. She scratched her head and her naked, scaly body frequently.

Her interest was not in the trees, however, but in something else, something she could smell. Her once delicate nostrils, twitched excitedly, as the wind bore the smell in her direction.

Came a time when she could bear it no longer. She rose and began to thread her way among the trees.

It was not long before the trees became stunted and intertwined. The grass grew longer, the ground softer underfoot and inclined to squelch. Then there were no more trees, only the sun on still water, clumps of long grass and more water. Turgid stagnant water, humming with insects and cloaked in mist. Swampland, dreadful swampland but to Jassine it was home. She waded forward through slime and weed until she found the pool she sought, then she sat down. The water rose up to her neck but she was content.

The pool abounded with small creatures, some as big as rats. When they brushed against her body, she caught them and pushed them into her mouth. She no longer itched, there was no need to leave, all she ever wanted was here.

As the jungle-watchers left they were replaced by others. Willard who was young and lithe and wanted to bound and sprint and run. Simkiss who just wanted to hide.

Lander, Trimble, Mays, Parker and four girls all rose together as if by mutual consent and virtually melted into the jungle like a pack of jackals or wolves.

There was Dixon who had to get to the mountains, Todd who found it easy to wriggle and wanted to curl up somewhere and Coppins who wanted to hunt something alone.

In that one week, three thousand vanished into the jungle and did not return. At the end of the month, that figure had climbed to four hundred and ninety-six thousand.

Occasionally, fewer and fewer ships brought more settlers and, sometimes, a few technicians were

included. These got the transmitters functioning for a few days, adding perhaps a few odd thousands to the dwindling settlement but the colony was dying. Moss and fungus were already growing in the luxury suites of the great hotels, small animals scuttled through the kitchens. On the great esplanade, yellow grass was growing from gutter and crevice. In the rough half-completed car parks, ground car, flyer and robot rusted slowly together and around the girders of half-finished buildings, vines crept upwards.

There was still the occasional ship containing not settlers but refugees.

“Security have got some sort of weapon we can't handle. You can't breath when they come near and, what is worse, there's some sort of psychological gimmick which no one can take—”

Some of the occasional ships were monsters carrying as many as twelve thousand lives but approach was hazardous in the extreme. Ground control had broken down and no one could be bothered to repair it.

Another factor was the pilots and crews. They were willing enough to come but far less anxious to return. Earth and its empire frightened them and they were resentful of their own position.

“By the time we get the right to settle down here, there won't be room for a mouse. In any case, by that time, we'll be too damned old to care.”

Finally a vessel bringing ten thousand settlers was sabotaged and never lifted again. So did the next and the next. The fourth, caught in a blinding electrical storm and unaided by ground control, hit the mountains at maximum air-speed.

The noise was lost in the storm but the flash lit the sky from horizon to horizon.

More vessels came and did not lift again and soon there were no more ships.

Back on Earth and on the colonies of her empire, the remnants of the Enemy who had failed to escape were segregated by their own wish.

It was odd that they should build their own concentration camps not to imprison themselves but to keep the rest of humanity out. Close to a normal human, they developed an anxiety neurosis which they were unable to control. Robots took care of their needs and delivered food but contact was impossible.

In the safety of their great camps, the Enemy swore vengeance and made grandiose battle plans which never came to anything. Inwardly the Enemy knew it was so much talk because no one had the nerve to leave, let alone attempt a show-down but planning kept them occupied.

Occasionally one of their few remaining scientists came up with something which, he assured, everyone, would counter any psychological weapon possible.

Such devices never worked.

Drugs were tried, psychological and hypnotic drugs, which rendered the user wholly immune to fear—until he met a normal human, then he ran like a rabbit. The Enemy was as terrified as ever, doped to the ears, or otherwise.

While the Enemy made plans, humanity waited. Most of them knew now, knew inwardly, and those who did not know had been told by others.

When darkness came, millions of eyes glanced uneasily up at the stars. Somewhere out there, the Invader was coming!

Much on Earth had changed, beside humanity and in humanity itself wisdom had grown. They knew the forces they were beginning to control but instead of abandoning their technology, they had improved upon it....

The aliens were unaware that their approach was known but it would not have disturbed them if they had. They were confident in their own abilities, their perfected technologies and their engines of destruction.

Their psychology was harder to understand for they were not ravaging beasts nor were they ruthless conquerors. They were highly civilized beings with strict codes of conduct and rigid self-discipline. They had, however, an inexplicable blind spot, they were wholly incapable of recognizing an intelligence beyond their own. Any alien life was not life in the true sense because it was not their own.

The Gurth, as they called themselves, regarded all alien life and all alien intelligence as non-Gurth and, as such, incomplete. Briefly, it was a kind of built-in, master-race complex without the conscious arrogance which usually accompanied the delusion.

The Gurth did not conquer for the sake of conquest, territorial gain or personal prestige, their conquests were of necessity.

In the first place they had an overwhelming population problem which, in the end, they might have overcome but there were other considerations. In their Empire—ten times as large as Earth's—the galaxy was falling apart at the seams.

The sun which had once warmed their home world was nearing its appointed end and hung like a red ember in the darkening sky. Ice was spreading from the poles and, save near the equator, the seas were thick with ice. Science was fighting magnificently but slowly being driven back.

Within the Empire itself, two suns were clearly going nova and when they blew the galaxy would be wiped clean of life.

The Gurth took no pleasure in killing and adversely they felt no regret. Their mental attitude was that of a man who removes weeds from the soil in order to plant vegetables. They would concede frankly the courage or ingenuity of an opponent even, in a reserved way, salute it. It was, however, non-Gurth and as such, its removal, was a necessity.

The ships themselves were unique, being fighting units in themselves and fully capable of engaging in battle with their entire crews dead.

It was the ships who gave the first warning:

“Changing course, enemy detector web directly ahead—”

NINE

ALKINE, the Supreme Commander, noticed the change without concern. He was not rushing blindly at an enemy whose technology and potential were complete blanks. The Gurth had had the entire system under close observation for nearly five hundred cycles. By now, they could have found their way through any Earth city without map or guide book.

Alkine was heading for Earth primarily because he had common sense and was a skilled strategist. Earth was the administrative centre of the Empire, the stellar colonies were dependent upon her in one way or another. Once he held Earth, he could deal with the colonies at his leisure.

“Class three alert,” said the ship. “Sealing independent bulkheads.”

Alkine said, “Causes for class three alert?”

The receptors recognized his voice and answered instantly. “Four unidentified objects at extreme range of detection, Commander.”

“Keep me advised.”

“Yes, sir.”

Alkine rose from his chair, crossed the command room and studied the screen. The presumed shadows were so far away that they were mere pinpoints of light and could well have been the normal cosmic debris of deep space.

As Alkine stood there, staring into the screen, hands locked behind his back, he could well have been mistaken for a human being. When he turned away, however, and his face became visible, the illusion vanished. He had the sharp contemptuous face of a featherless parrot. Tiny, beady blue eyes, were set close above—not on either side—of the huge fleshy nose. Beneath, the nose and almost hidden in its shadow, was a small circular lipless mouth. There was no chin, pink flesh, expanding and contracting like that of a toad, fell in loose folds to the thorax.

In brief, Alkine had an oddly bedraggled appearance yet a kind of provocative challenge like a bird of prey which had been in several tough fights but was quite prepared to take on another.

“Class two alert. Subsidiary technical ratings and Ship Safety Personnel at battle stations.” It paused and said directly to Alkine. “Five unidentified objects at extreme range of detection, this time on the opposite flank of our advance. It is clear that the enemy is aware of our presence and shadowing the fleet.”

“Can you account for that? The detector web was avoided.”

“There are various logical explanations, the most likely, that we were observed by one of their vessels on routine patrol or we were picked up by one of their smaller monitoring devices. We are, as you have observed, approaching the outermost planets of Earth's own sun system—”

The secondary speaker cut in abruptly. “Attention, class one alert. All bulkheads sealed, repeller screens in operation.”

“Not an attack ?”

“Unidentified objects, bearing seven stroke four. There are a great number of objects of varying sizes, commander, we must assume them to be missiles until able to prove otherwise.”

The secondary speaker: “Number of unidentified objects thirty-three thousand eight hundred and five confirmed. Objects pursuing collision course, bearing—”

Alkine studied the approaching objects with some interest, the attack—if it was an attack—did not fit the alien psychology charts. While being inclined to mass bombardment, it was unlikely that they would employ it at this stage.

“Revert two alert, objects meteoric in origin—this is a meteor shower. Change of course is not necessary, deflector screens on.”

There was a brief silence then. “Revert! Revert! Class one emergency. Repeat, class one.”

“Explain!” Alkine was giving orders now, not listening.

“Objects definitely meteors, commander. No internal drive mechanism and no warhead. They are, however, increasing speed and changing course.”

“Acceleration figures.”

“Speed at time of detection, twelve *ergs* per time fraction rising thirteen one, fourteen one—speed trebling per time fraction, sir.”

By the time the meteor shower was in deflector range they were travelling at thirty *ergs* per time fraction or in human terms, forty miles a second.

The fleet was not perturbed, the deflector screens would handle it.

The deflector screens did exactly what the name suggested—they deflected. A missile, even with a self-correcting bearing would, on contact with the screen, be deflected at right angles to its original course. Its self-correcting device would bring it back into line again whereupon the screen promptly kicked it out again. This was not a game. A non-corrective missile would be bounced away from the target. A self-corrective missile being constantly deflected from its target was easily handled by one of the ship's anti-missile devices.

The meteors seemed a simple problem and the screens deflected them. Hunks of rock, jagged and sharp—some were as big as a twenty-storey building—hit the screens at forty miles a second and were deflected in a spectacular discharge of energy. Fragments careened away from the point of impact at right angles, turned in a tight circle and came back, their speed increased by a further five miles a second. This time, however, it was no shower, the meteorites were in tight formation, forming a vast cone which came at the fleet point first.

“Missile away,” announced the ship in detached voice.

Alkine nodded, fully in agreement with its decision. They could bounce back the meteors indefinitely, the best thing to do was to knock them out now they were grouped together.

Before the missile was half way to its target, the cone dispersed.

Seconds later there was a livid flash.

“Compelled to destroy,” announced the ship. Was there a trace of unease in the recorded voice?
“Missile wedged between two large meteorites and about-turned.”

“Meteor shower breaking away,” announced the secondary. “Following curved trajectory which, if pursued, will take them into orbit round the outermost planet of the system.” Let's see, what did the aliens call it, ah, yes, Pluto.

He turned to the master control. “Comprehensive summary.”

The summary was routine. The technical section of computer ship control gave a brief résumé of events: “It was clear that the meteor shower was remotely controlled but attempts to define the control were unsuccessful. An analysis of control bands failed to register a response, jamming or interference was therefore impossible.”

Alkine referred to the psychological data banks. “The enemy launched a heavy and unusual attack but clearly without hope of success. Apart from nuisance value we could have held off the assault

indefinitely."

"What conclusions do you draw from this?"

"The purpose of this assault, in reference to alien psychology, seems on analysis, a twofold warning. One, they have informed you that they have methods of remote control unfamiliar to our technology and, two, they intend to fight."

"The second conclusion is superfluous, we knew they would fight. At the last technical reconnaissance, however—only ten cycles ago—their technology was six hundred cycles behind our own."

"It is possible," observed the psychological section, "for this culture to make vast strides in a short period. Such uncharacteristic progress, however, usually occurs under the spur of necessity such as a war or similar upheaval."

Alkine said, "We may assume, therefore, that the alien under some sort of impetus made certain advances in some sections of his technology. Wars are not won by a limited number of super weapons but by overall superiority, experience and application. We will, therefore, proceed according to plan, occupying the strategic sites already selected."

Alkine was a skilful strategist and highly familiar with axioms of war. He was fully aware of the fact that you couldn't conquer a planet from space. You could knock out the forces defending it but, unless you were prepared to cinder its entire surface, you couldn't conquer it. The Gurth did not want their newly acquired living space cindered, they wanted it intact. The only way to conquer it, therefore, was to go down and occupy it.

Alkine had an enormous fleet at his command but only a section of it was poised for invasion. A skilled fighter did not fling himself at an enemy with his flanks unguarded. Huge patrols cruised through Earth's empire, ready to intercept any individual or combined support attempt on the part of the colonies. Within them, hyperphone devices monitored subspace for any attempt to 'jump' beyond them.

The rest of the journey through the alien system passed without incident. One or two monitoring devices were detected and destroyed but there was no opposition.

At a point well beyond the orbit of the fifth planet, Alkine released his reconnaissance/decoy devices. These mock-up shells so closely resembled a ship that defensive or evasive action on the part of a waiting enemy was almost inevitable.

Nothing happened. The ships went into their programmed orbit and remained there.

Alkine was becoming uneasy. Not only was the lack of reaction unprecedented but the aliens' failure to destroy the decoy ships denied him vital information. The instruments would have told him the range, nature, position and concentration of ground defences but he was denied both.

Nonetheless, he went in as planned and, heavily screened, began his approach of the selected sites.

He never reached them. "Alert, alert! Area heavily mined."

He realized instantly that the enemy had prior information. This was going to be a fight.

"Transfer here." A desert area sufficient for a sizeable beach-head.

This time it went like a charm. Within a single daylight period he gained control of the entire area. An umbrella of deflector screens, beside sections of his covering fleet ensured his protection from the air. His

weapons dominated the entire continent and three oceans. By his complete occupation of the Sahara, Alkine controlled the entire African continent, dominated the Mediterranean and huge sections of Europe beyond it. The area still had to be subdued but in terms of weapon control, a fly couldn't move from one side of the path to the other unless Alkine said so. Some of his specialist weapons could pinpoint a single bee in a swarm of hundreds and turn it into a puff of smoke without injuring the rest of the swarm.

Alkine was now more content but still uneasy. How had the aliens known in advance of the selected landing sites and why didn't they react?

The aliens near and far were still going about their business as if they were blissfully unaware of thousands of vessels now unloading supplies in the middle of their major desert.

Normal reaction was mobilization, attack disposition, the movements of armour, armies and fleets. There was no rain of missiles, no long-range beams, nothing.

Even their communications bands now tapped in full by his forces continued as before without a single reference to invasion.

Alkine was not deceived, the alien was not stupid, he was playing a very subtle game and sooner or later he would have to reveal it.

He revealed it that night.

"Temperature five degrees below normal night temperature," said the ship. "Heavy cloud cover forming."

Alkine felt relief. So that was it, the alien was using weather control as a counter weapon. It was an original but by no means a decisive weapon.

He went outside and looked up at the dark, heavy sky. Earth's atmosphere was richer in oxygen content than his own and it made him feel oddly buoyant. Yes, an original line of attack but if the alien thought he could freeze him out, he was in for a nasty shock. On his home world, with its dying sun, normal temperature was similar to that of Earth's polar caps. The Gurth were used to and equipped for extremes of intense cold which these aliens couldn't imagine.

Something fluttered from the night sky and brushed against his face. Snow! Well that was familiar, too. It was a pity he couldn't pull his deflector screen down below cloud level but that would minimize its effectiveness. In any case the aliens would get tired of the snow and the cold long before the Gurth and when they did, counter measures in the realm of salutary warning could be instigated.

"Temperature still falling, rate of snow-fall increasing."

He switched on the screen and watched the steady fall of flakes without concern. It was an ingenious angle but when dawn came, it would be difficult to hold cloud together, let alone snow cloud in a tropical zone.

Dawn came greyly with no suggestion of a tropical sun. There was no need for the ship to inform him that snowfall was increasing. Visibility extended to the length of his outstretched arm and no more. Worse, communication was erratic and uncertain.

It was clear that transformers must be re-adjusted and the entire area criss-crossed with heat beams. He gave the necessary orders, realizing he had been a little too unconcerned. All communication devices were coated with ice, personnel and robotic technicians had been compelled to follow fixed lines on their errands. As a result trenches had to be forced through the snow which was now so deep that their heads no longer appeared above it.

"Heat beams activated."

Alkine gave quick orders, there had been no direct assault but reprisals were clearly called for. These creatures must be made to understand the superiority of the invader. They must be provoked into direct action or suffer the consequences.

Seconds later, three four-crew ground assault ships were exhaled from the carriers and started on their journey.

Ship One had orders for the immediate area, selected targets in Cairo and Alexandria.

Ship Two would travel to the tip of the continent and knock a few holes in Capetown and other large cities. Having done so, it would arc to the Northern Americas and make a round of the state capitals.

Ship Three would travel the length and breadth of Europe via the Italian peninsular.

Alkine was a realist, the ships and crews were expendable. Sooner or later, the least pleasant of their selected weapons would provoke the defenders to counter measures. He had no illusions about the counter measures, Earth had some nasty weapons, wasteful but nasty and quite capable of knocking out small unshielded ships like these. While they did so, however, they would betray their positions, defensive aircraft could be tracked to their bases and the general pattern of defence revealed.

"Temperature approaching normal for the area."

Alkine glanced at the screen and mentally inflicted suffering upon himself. There was a visually impenetrable blanket of fog, below it, the snow trenches were full and the water had risen above them. It was raining in torrents.

He gave quick orders to the robotic work force. Channels must be cut to the perimeter and area drained.

Beyond the snow cloud and the umbrella limits of the deflector screen, the three assault ships nosed slowly into sunlight.

The vessels were specially designed for the atmosphere and consisted of a single black wing without body. They were capable of reaching three miles a second in the atmosphere as well as withstanding the near-solar heat of such speeds. Their orders were, however, to fly low at moderate speed unless attacked by enemy vessels.

Vessel One was piloted by a veteran alien named Sadru and Sadru, skirting the limits of the cloud bank and incidentally the last fringes of the Sahara, ran into trouble before he had time to co-ordinate his bearings.

Close to the horizon a funnel of blackness lifted suddenly from the desert and spun towards him. He was unworried, sandstorms and whirlwinds were not unusual phenomena. He curved away skilfully and was compelled to pull up abruptly, another had risen in front of him.

The gravity compensators whined protestingly and then suddenly he was in darkness.

Sadru had no need to reason out the obvious. He was under attack, a unique and highly dangerous form of attack, a controlled tornado. He had no option but to spin with it but he was completely cut off from base.

He applied power and the ship juddered protestingly, no use trying to force his way out to the extremities. He slid the other way, the vortex should be calm. It was, save that periodically outsize rocks

spun out far above and dropped like missiles. Get in again? No, there must be rocks in there.

There was an impact and the vessel tipped alarmingly, he fought desperately for control and was struck again. He veered, the extremities of the vessel touched the swirling wall of sand. Another heavy impact and he lost control. This time he went into the funnel again, the wind caught the vessel, twisted it round, turned it over. Rocks pounded at it, ground it between them, minute perforations began to occur, fine sand entered, filming everything, working its way into the micro-engineering of the control consoles.

A compensator cut suddenly and the vessel turned sideways out of control.

Six minutes later the tornado died almost as quickly as it had been born. Fragments rained on the ground, rocks, tree trunks, pebbles, boulders and a crumpled metal thing which had once been Ship One.

Ship Two cleared base without incident but shortly after departure began to have communication trouble. The vessel's speed was reduced and the technical engineer released a micro-tele device to examine the exterior communication plate. Its visual report showed a thin film of something coating the entire vessel; magnified pictures showed that they were insects.

The pilot took a quick zoom well into the ultra-sonic and burned them off. When he descended again through light cloud, there was another cloud for which he was unprepared. When he cleared it, what had been a film, was now a coating. The second cloud had been a locust swarm. The insects striking the still hot surface of the vessel, congealed and stuck firmly.

The crew studied the unpleasantly sticky surfaces and made alien rueful gestures. They supposed they'd have to go up again.

The vessel's response to the order was slow and a number of warning instruments came into operation.

The tele-device was released again and the pictures it beamed back were disturbing. Coating on the under-side was treble that of the upper surfaces, this one would have to be a strato-jump.

The pilot, now inwardly uneasy, gave the vessel full boost. On his home world, insects were virtually non-existent and the presence of so many disturbed him. Again, why so many flying things? Pre-invasion adaptation and recognition courses had familiarized him with the existence of terran birds but not their behaviour. Why, when they slowed for examination, had they swooped and circled in hundreds? He knew they were non-intelligent and his alert instruments informed him that not one among the swooping hundreds contained an ingenious mechanism or warhead.

He realized suddenly that although the drive-unit was delivering full boost, performance was only one half of output.

Rate of ascent was decreasing and the warning instruments were verging on the hysterical.

It was then that the armaments technician drew his attention to the visible upper surfaces of the vessel and he was startled at the change in colour. It was only when he looked closely that he realized the colour was due to growth. The upper surfaces had a thin coating of vegetation!

He forced himself to reason. Not enough to cut performance in half in which case, what was on the lower surfaces?

The tele-device was sent out to take a look.

The ratio of output to performance had now deteriorated to one quarter and upward ascent was verging on the pedestrian.

The tele-device finally beamed back a picture. It had taken some little time for, in human terms, it had to descend seven metres below the ship to get a clear view. The lower surfaces of the vessel were trailing that length of weed and vine.

The pilot, because he was intelligent, did not reject the picture but he suspected some distortion in the lens.

It was only when his attention was again drawn to the upper surfaces that he accepted it completely. Growth was visible, they could *watch* it grow.

Ascent was now a literal crawl and so laboured as to be imperceptible to anything save the ascent instruments.

The pilot considered the situation. He had a choice of a power-dive, an accelerated plunge earthwards in the hope of burning off the trailing vegetation or a calculated but speedy descent to the ground.

He decided on the latter course. At the limited height he had attained he was not sure if he could hit the ultrasonic long enough to burn off the clinging vegetation. One miscalculation and he could never pull out again.

He told the crew of his decision. He would descend at an angle, at a fast but carefully controlled speed until he reached the ground. They would worry about alien troops when they got there. Once on the planet's surface, they could clean up the vessel with heat projectors and take off again.

The pilot knew his limitations, there came a time when duty demanded that he become a passenger. He programmed the robotic pilot in a few terse words and switched control. He was not incompetent, he was experienced. He knew the ship could handle the situation far better than he could. The ship could calculate weight, stress, wind pressure and many other factors in the time it took to glance at a single instrument.

There was a faint click and the vessel began to descend. The pilot, now free of the control console, watched the upper surfaces which, as far as the vegetation was concerned, was in continuous movement. Green tendrils rose, curled over, twined round each other and thickened as he watched.

As the speed of descent increased, the tendrils were lifted by the wind and, still growing, trailed outwards.

It seemed to him that he was staring through an ever-thickening green net which was quickly obscuring the limited view. The ground seemed still, depressingly far below.

There was another faint click.

"Warning," said the robotic pilot. "Safe descent in relation to measured increase in weight, dubious."

"We must eject!"

"Eject tubes clogged by vegetation. Your only resource is to don battle suits and stand by for impact."

No one on Earth saw what happened but one of the orbiting fleet had the vessel in a monitor beam.

The wing had climbed into cloud looking like a wing, save for trailing vegetation beneath.

When it began to descend, it no longer looked like a wing, it looked like a huge clod of earth trailing long streams of vine and feathery vegetation.

It made the first low clouds, steadily, but expanding in size and weight. Then it began to wobble, it dropped suddenly, corrected, slowed, zig-zagged and dropped again. Leaves, grasses and fragments of vine fell away from it as, once again, it endeavoured to correct.

Briefly it seemed to bounce in mid-air then black smoke jetted from it and it suddenly plunged earthwards.

TEN

SHIP THREE passing over the Mediterranean discovered that she was being shadowed by a human vessel and went into pursuit aware of the necessity of impressing the natives. Superiority must be demonstrated.

The alien vessel, however, although markedly slow, flew close to the surface of the ocean and was bewilderingly manoeuvrable.

The Gurth had little experience of air-to-air combat and the automatic hair-trigger weapons were not sighted for limited range. They were designed to knock out approaching hostiles before they became visible to the eye.

Knocking out the human vessel therefore required them to come down to sea level and out-think their opponents.

They were in ultra-sonics and coming round in a tight circle of shattering sonic explosions when a huge volume of water rose suddenly in front of them and they flew straight into it.

The wave, which rose unnaturally from comparatively smooth water, towered two hundred metres high for just long enough then sank slowly back without unduly disturbing the steady procession of normal waves.

Somewhere beneath these waves, a crumpled thing sank, slowly trailing bubbles.

The loss of his vessels only added weight to Alkine's mounting burdens. He was having troubles of his own.

In the place of snow he had rain, the fog grew thicker and as floods rose, his vessels began to sink into the sand.

He was compelled to use his anti-gravity motors to stop them sinking out of sight.

Under cover of fog, the area had become alive with insects, most having poisonous stings which they used on every possible occasion.

The air hummed with the things and for some obscure reason birds flew in and out of the fog.

Too late he realized that they had been carrying seeds—apparently guided seeds which had two targets.

The first target was the joints or lubrication nipples of his work robots.

The seeds grew at terrifying speed and work slowed accordingly. Robots, their lubrication channels clogged, seized up and came to a full stop. If lubrication did not stop, growth developed in vital control sections with the same result.

The second target was his own troops. Unless complete protective suits were worn, trouble developed.

Seeds worked their way inside the collars or up the sleeves. Seconds later the unfortunate wearer, green sprouting from his collar, was ripping off the suit in a frenzy.

Weapons had to be cleared at frequent intervals. Green mould attacked the working or electrical parts, rendering them inoperable.

Alkine, in the midst of his troubles, was acutely aware that the enemy was dictating tactics and winning battles without even participating in the action.

He had no option but to submit all available data to the master computers and proceed from there.

The computers were not optimistic: "Comparison with collected data prior to assault indicates wide discrepancies. Although not in possession of alien mechanisms or instruments of war, vast and unorthodox strides have obviously been made.

"Acting on data supplied, the conclusions are that the enemy have discovered some method of controlling the forces of nature. The means by which this is accomplished remains obscure. A comprehensive and unique weather control system could account for immediate conditions. Directed control over lesser life-forms such as birds and insects and the accelerated growth of plant life extends beyond any known technology however.

"It must therefore be placed on record that the percentages of successful conquest and ultimate occupation must now be reviewed and accordingly reduced by twenty-five per cent."

Alkine scowled at it. "Tactical procedure?"

"Must follow computerized variation. The alien Intelligence and/or computerized prediction codes are so far in advance of our own that a planned operation could well be disastrous. It is suggested, therefore, that Operations Command, Combined Strategy and the normal tactical computers, all submit operational plans. Once the best has been decided upon, however, delay should be kept to a minimum. Our armed forces must strike before the enemy can predict the strategy and objective."

The Commander agreed in principle but he was depressed. Whatever was decided upon, battle efficiency was down by thirty per cent. His troops, who had not fired a shot, were becoming exhausted in their efforts to maintain the beach-head. The nuisance value of stinging insects and weird plants was considerable and exhausting. On top of this was constant weapon maintenance and the morale-sapping feeling that the enemy was playing games.

Whatever the plan, it was clear that a break-out was essential. Break-out! He wasn't even surrounded, yet the enemy was making his position untenable.

It was no longer a question of occupation alone and a few salutary victories. This enemy was not going under because he was tactically whipped, he had to be knocked out the hard way. Great cities would have to be smeared, troop concentrations erased, populations terrorized to panic and the whole mechanism of defence disrupted. After which the inevitable and, Alkine prided himself, one of the most unique and compassionate ways of ridding a world of its native inhabitants ever conceived. Nothing would be done to the survivors, young or old, they would be granted every possible material and medical aid necessary. Included in their diet and water supply would be certain substances rendering them incapable of reproduction. In the course of a few local cycles, the race of man would cease to exist because no children would be born to them.

It was, he thought, a logical and painless solution to an overwhelmingly difficult problem. Better still, none felt guilty, there were no mass executions, no terrorization, it was all most moral and very gentle...

Sandling lifted his feet from his desk and dropped them to the floor.

"I think we've played patsy enough, the creature is becoming self-righteous."

There was a general murmur of assent and he smiled faintly. It was good, not only to be in agreement with one's fellows, but to *know* they were in agreement with you. There was no telepathy in the new state which had come to pass but there was awareness. One did not know what a man was thinking but one knew what he was feeling. One knew if he agreed or disagreed, was troubled or untroubled and one knew his goals.

Sandling went to the window and stared down into the street remembering. A year ago, the street had had a slick and sleazy opulence, a garish fairground vulgarity. It was still the same street, the same stores operating under different names. The most obtrusive and glaring advertisements—all ex-Enemy—had gone, however. So had the sleek men walking in groups, the watchers, the cowed and the exploited.

There was still heavy traffic in the streets but no longer the garish, brightly painted flag-flying ground yachts of the Enemy top brass. The new models, like the new architecture, was following artistic lines.

One could walk out of the building now without a gun, without taking one's life in one's hands. The street felt good, smelled good, climbing plants covered the towering buildings in blossoms, bees fussed around, the air was clear. It was like a nature reserve only sweeter.

He thought briefly again of the ex-Enemy. The Lords of the great estates who, in the last months, had seen the lawns turn brown and the flowers and trees die about them. They must have suspected some enemy had poisoned the soil and perhaps heads had rolled in consequence. Perhaps they never knew or even suspected that it was their own inner state reflected outwardly. That the sickness and, yes, insane urge to destruction and power, had reacted on growing things about them.

Hell, he should have seen it before, shouldn't he? Historians should have seen it, psychiatrists, the lot. Why, he himself had observed that once centuries ago the criminal had had redeeming features, but not any more. Came a time when the normal and the abnormal couldn't stand each other. When the aura of normal living and normal thinking was so repellent to the Enemy that it had physical repercussions. Proximity, close proximity had psychosomatic reaction, there was a feeling of breathlessness and neurotic terror.

The Enemy thought that Security had cooked up a psychological weapon, which was quite untrue. The reaction was as normal as the experiments performed to illustrate positive and negative electricity. The race was dividing, sloughing off the worthless and climbing upwards. The repellent force, mistaken by the Enemy for a new weapon was part of it.

Someone said, "Well?" and he jerked his mind quickly back to the present.

"If he plans a knock-out punch, we must punch first. We are agreed on the methods? Right—"

Beyond Alkine's perimeter, it was raining steadily. Water ran through cracks and gullies which had not known moisture for centuries.

All night and all day the water fell and as the moisture content rose, the soil turned green with new growth.

Alkine had a variety of weapons, many of which were already target programmed. One hour more and they would have been released but the hour was snatched from him.

The weapon which struck him equalled and outclassed any he possessed.

All the forces of nature hit him at once, the sand subsided beneath his base and, at the same time twisters—frightening horizontal twisters—raced through the site disrupting everything. There was a violent electrical storm, which, by coincidence or design, put out of action a great deal of delicate equipment.

Vessels began to report compartment failures. "Number three gravity unit, losing power."

"Attention, attention, delivery failure."

Alkine, in his command room, felt the vessel tilt, there was a bump, the lights flickered, there was a heavy crumpling sound and then the lights failed completely.

He had to feel his way out of the ship, twice he tripped over non-functioning robotic repair units and once over a dead body.

At a corridor intersection, he met a sub-commander and three ratings. The sub-commander had a handlight.

"No way out that way, sir. Port below sand level."

"Then we must try this way. What damage have we suffered?"

"I checked with the compartment computer, Commander, but it could only record that seventy-five per cent of the ship's units are no longer functioning. It was unable to state reasons."

They came to another port but there was no power supply. The sub-commander said, "We must try and open this manually. You three ratings, this lever here."

After a long time, the door came open. There was bright sunlight and sand. The sand was high, it flooded over the edge of the port and rose up to waist level before it stopped.

He found himself facing a high dune and he climbed up it and stood staring, knowing the first battle had been lost.

Perhaps it was also the last.

The desert was the same as the day he had landed, the rolling dunes, shimmering in heat, the blue empty sky.

Here and there parts of a mushroom-shaped ship protruded like a black rock but nothing else. The hot wind blew steadily in his face but the rich oxygen content no longer made him feel buoyant. Eight hundred vessels, one quarter of his entire fleet had been wiped out. With them was all their flyers, repair facilities, four thousand warrior robots, five thousand repair robots and half a million trained troops.

Behind him, he sensed, others were crawling from the open port but what could they do?

Again, up there, was an orbiting force larger than the one he had lost but to call them down was to invite a double disaster.

He became aware of something descending from the sky and prepared himself for destruction.

Nothing happened, the vessel landed and thin projections, clearly weapons, traversed meaningfully but did not fire.

He looked at it almost indifferently. It was a silver thing, slightly smaller than his own aircraft but less

advanced technically.

An opening occurred in the side and a human stepped out.

He had seen humans before in the pre-invasion pictures and this one seemed no different from the pictures.

There was a squat black weapon in his hand and a small box strapped to his chest.

The human pointed to the box on his chest, his mouth moved and the box said, "Translation device—do you understand me?"

"I understand."

"Excellent." He was joined by two other humans before he said: "My name is Sandling, I represent a section of Earth's defence force. My Government has instructed me to enter into talks with you."

"You have come to deliver an ultimatum."

"Your conclusion. I did not say that."

"Then what have you come to discuss?"

"The position obviously and, being what it is, what would *you* do in our place?"

Alkine felt a sudden unease. He was being asked to condemn himself out of his own mouth, or in a conveniently roundabout way, concede defeat and plead for mercy.

He said, "Having won such a decisive victory as you have, I would exploit and finalize it."

"Assume for one moment that we have. Assume that your orbiting fleet is now in the process of destruction."

"Then there is nothing left to say."

"On the contrary—but you are losing the point of the question. We asked *you* what you would do in our position."

Alkine straightened. "The position is now abundantly clear. You are asking me to stand in judgment on myself."

"You misunderstand. The moral issues are matters for your own conscience. We wish to know what *action* you would take."

"Very well, I would execute the senior officers and imprison the troops until I had beaten the Empire responsible decisively."

"Thank you. We can delete the decisive victory, your race have learned their lesson. We do not seek conquest, revenge or territorial gains."

He paused. "We observe that the heat is causing you distress. We will continue this discussion in our vessel. I suggest you order your men to shade."

In the small vessel, he was invited to a low chair and offered water which he refused.

"Now, Supreme Commander Alkine—yes, we know your name and rank—you refused the water on

race grounds. Accepting water, which you need, other than that provided while under arrest, places you under an obligation. Your sense of superiority cannot easily accept favours from an inferior life form."

Alkine was stung. The superiority of the Gurth was certain but to reveal the fact was singular bad taste.

"I had no intention of implying that."

"There was little need to imply, commander. However, we have heard what you would do in our position. Now we will tell you what we propose to do. There are nearly half a million of your troops trapped in the ships beneath the sand. Our job is to get them out before they suffocate."

One of the other humans said, "Perhaps the Supreme Commander will refuse. It is, after all, a favour from an inferior life form. Worse, it displays higher ethical considerations. After all, in our position, he would have executed the officers and imprisoned the survivors."

Alkine rose, angrily. "You are brainwashing, you are endeavouring to undermine my morale."

"Your morale is a matter of utter indifference to my race. On the other hand we confess to pity—the rigidity of your arrogance must be a crippling impediment to true progress."

The human nodded to his companions and they rose. "We must rescue all possible. We have prepared for casualties."

He looked at, and through, Alkine. "Will you deign to advise the troops of the position or must our rescue workers be shot down on errands of mercy to your 'superior' injured?"

"I will give instructions on my personal caller." Alkine was breathing heavily and noisily with suppressed fury. "You humans make much of victory, do you not? You must gloat over the captured."

"We are not triumphant, only distressed at your inability to concede one superior characteristic to another life-form. As for victory, it was a foregone conclusion and, before you say it, that is not boasting. Before you reject that, I suggest you watch the rescue work. Also, if you have a fully equipped hospital ship, I suggest you call it down."

They went out into the sun again and stood looking across the sand dunes, the scorching wind blowing in their faces.

One of the humans said, "Alkine, compassion, ethical considerations although demonstrable, leave you unimpressed. What does impress you—a show of force? You think you are the Lords of Creation because you never ran up against anything bigger or better. You are hot, perhaps?"

Alkine did not answer. In the first place, their logic was beginning to penetrate and, in the second, the question seemed unnecessary and irrelevant.

"Have it cool."

He felt the temperature drop as he stood there and scorching wind turn to a cool breeze.

"It will be easier for you to watch now."

It seemed to him that far away there was a whistling noise and dust devils began to dance over the dunes. Dust devils which became funnels of blackness, twisters which just stood there, screaming and sucking up the sand.

His fleet began to appear, strewn around carelessly. Not the perfect double defensive circle with which

he had begun, but broken, heaped together, spread over.

As the sand receded, ports began to open, and survivors began to make their way out.

Alkine stared at the wreckage, the broken work robots, and the still figures lying half buried in the sand and felt a brief disbelief.

All that, the shattered spearhead of invasion and not a single conventional weapon employed.

He was suddenly embarrassed, remembering the human's words, 'What does impress you—a show of force?' It did, of course, but how did they do it? It was his duty to discover the answer, perhaps, one day, the secret might get back to his own race.

He stood there, watching the great medical ships descend from orbit with a resigned despair. He forced himself to swallow a pill of even greater bitterness. He had been defeated by an alien who had demonstrated beyond doubt that he was master in spheres which you always imagined you were supreme.

"It's a disease one grows out of," said one of the humans who appeared to be reading his thoughts. "When we had nations, each one thought itself better, freer and more impartial, nobler, more advanced technically and ethically than all the rest. It was not true, of course, but the nations believed it. They believed it until the change began."

"Change?" Alkine thought he could smell the beginnings of a technical explanation.

"Division began. We did not recognize it for what it was for nearly six hundred years, then one part of our race went one way and we the other. In the division we found ourselves possessed of certain powers which had been limited to what we call adepts—on the rare occasions when they were believed—which was not often."

He paused and smiled gently. "We do not exactly control the forces of nature but we are in tune with them and they respond to us. So creatures of the wild do our bidding and the wind and the seas and the magnetic and electrical forces of our planet. Tell me, Commander, do you accept our claims? Never mind, we see you don't. You see all this in the realms of a technology which you would sell your fleet to discover. In fairness, you are psychologically incapable of believing us and, since for many generations yet you will be unable to use the information, there is no harm in revealing it to you."

Alkine looked at him dubiously but said nothing. The Gurth had photographic memories with a ninety-seven per cent recall but maybe the human didn't know that.

"You will accept water now?"

"Thank you."

"Perhaps you would care to send for food. After you have eaten we will tell you the secret of our control...."

"This is Maynard, our expert."

The tall human nodded and sat down. "You have objections to hypnosis?"

Alkine hesitated. "It would be impossible to extract information from my mind by this means, I have been through a resistance course."

"My aim is instructional."

"Then I have no objections."

"Excellent, but first—" He gave a brief outline of the life cycles of a terran butterfly. "Bear this illustration in mind, please, and all I am about to tell you."

He cleared his throat quickly then went on. "Our scientists and, I believe yours, hold to the theory that a great deal which happens in the universe is accidental, such as the inception of life. All things, however, occur according to order and certain fixed laws. When a sun novas from the eruption a new galaxy is formed, every star within that galaxy falls into its own order. The active ones which we call suns draw certain bodies about them which become planets and these, too, in order, perform functions. Some are sterile, some gas giants, some hunks of airless rock but all form or undertake a purpose in the scheme of things. If one studies a complicated mechanism, there seem a great number of parts which have no useful purpose. A technician, however, could quickly explain that without certain apparently inert objects, the whole mechanism would jar to a stop. The airless rock and the gas giant may seem useless but they perform vital tasks in the functioning of the universe.

"Some of the planets a sun draws about itself perform an obvious purpose—they are culture trays. They take a prescribed orbit from the sun because their atomic construction guides them or fixes them in that orbit—a solar system is formed according to order, remember.

"The 'culture tray planets' are of chemical/atomic order designed to respond to the sun's radiation in that particular orbit. Sooner or later, the culture tray planet, being what it is, must respond to order and produce single cell life.

"The birth planet of intelligent life is still unknown. You think it is your planet and, until recently, we thought it was ours but such is not the case. Again, we think we are free. You, the Gurth, think you are free and we, the human race, thought we were free. We are, up to a point, but both of us must obey order, we too, are mechanisms in the scheme of things."

He paused and looked at the other directly. "You have followed me?"

"I have followed you but I will not say I agree in full."

"That is of no consequence now, you must verify it for yourself. Go back in time, our time, our history. You are a criminal called Kavin."

"I, a criminal!" Alkine tried to rise indignantly but a curious heaviness seemed to overtake him. He was sleepy, so sleepy...

ELEVEN

ALKINE knew he was Alkine, he was an observer, a passenger in another mind, the functioning of which was perfectly clear.

He could hear the snarl of the motor, the shriek of the wind and, far behind, the undulating shriek of police sirens.

"You gotta get me to a doctor." Hogan was doubled up in the back, hands pressed to the hole in his stomach. "You gotta stop, you hear, the blood's spurting between my fingers, I'm bleeding to death."

Alkine/Kavin ignored him. If Hogan wanted to get caught, treated and made well for subsequent trial and execution that was his business.

He rounded a bend with screeching tyres and Hogan whimpered.

Kavin's knuckles were white as he gripped the wheel but it was not all the strain of being hunted, some of it was fury—fury against life and against fate.

He, Kavin, was not a killer, he hated killing but he'd been forced into it. Who would have guessed that stupid bespectacled little bank clerk would suddenly produce a gun and not only produce it but fire it accurately?

As Hogan had folded over, holding his stomach, he, Kavin, had had to use his own in self-defence. It wasn't fair, he had been forced into killing by fate.

Now Hogan was dying in the back seat, the police were catching up and the net gain was a bullet.

The car slithered suddenly and began to bounce, sliding from side to side.

He fought desperately to keep it in a straight line. Rear near-side tyre! Never heard the shot but clearly they'd got a lucky one home.

He looked quickly about him and spun the sliding car skilfully into a side road, completely blocking it. Fortunately he knew this city inside out, fifty yards down there was a narrow, winding alley between warehouses. If he could get through it, he could make Saxon Street and lose himself in the crowds.

He put his hand on the door of the convertible and jumped. He was already running as he landed but he heard a screech of tyres before he had taken twenty steps.

Shouts, running feet and a sharp report. Something slapped into the wall beside his head spraying mortar and brick dust.

He began to weave. He'd make it, he was going to make it.

Then he shouted hoarsely. "Get out of the way, *get out.*" A little girl with a dolly in her arms was standing slap in the entrance of the alley.

"Get out the way!" He raised the gun but couldn't bring himself to pull the trigger. He couldn't knock her brutally to one side. He slowed, trying to jump but as his muscles tensed, something seemed to punch him heavily in the back.

He tottered, keeled sideways, finding the wall against his shoulder. Somehow he turned, show 'em, take one with him. There was a heavy impact in the middle of his chest and then the world ceased to exist.

"Then, even the most degraded criminals had some redeeming features, but with the passing of centuries—"

His name was Deneman and he walked lightly and easily with a half-smile on his lips as if he found the world a good place to live in. He was tall, good looking, and expensively if rather flashily dressed. He was well groomed, manicured and hypno-courses had insured a high educational level.

Alkine, crouched in his mind, was shocked at the emotional bankruptcy within the man. He didn't feel anything beyond the physical demands of his body. Words such as pity, friendship, mercy or love were abstracts about which he was not even mildly curious. They added nothing to his physical pleasures and produced no financial advantages. They were abstracts favoured by the neutrals who had little else.

Deneman had a job to do, a routine job and he had nearly reached his destination.

When he finally reached the apartment, he pressed the caller stud and waited.

A man opened the door. "Yes?"

"Mr. Cole?"

"Yes, I am Mr. Cole."

"I see." Deneman shot him. Then he stepped over the body and went inside.

When he came out, he had fired his machine-pistol four times and an entire family had ceased to exist. He felt nothing, there had been no dramatics and he was not even mildly curious as to the reasons. The boss had said, 'Go and take care of the Cole family', so he had taken care of things, it was as simple as that. Maybe they had seen too much, knew too much or hadn't paid their dues, but that was none of his business. He'd done his job, he didn't want to know why. At a thousand a head, who the hell cared.

"As you have observed, here are no redeeming features, there is nothing left in this creature to set it apart as a human being."

She was old, frail, gentle and resigned. She stared through the unbreakable glass of the window knowing she would never see anything beyond that window as long as she lived.

Once she had lived in luxury. She had been the daughter of Oswald Kanttening, the neutral plastics magnate. When her father died, she had inherited his fortune and the wolves had moved in. The chief wolf had been handsome, charming and, to all intents and purposes, as wealthy as she.

There was, of course, no one to tell her that she had been set up by the Organization. This was a planned operation by their notorious 'con' division.

She married the charming, wealthy suitor, and the 'con' division, playing it strictly legal, took her for her entire fortune of twenty-seven and a half million. She signed a large number of legal documents she didn't understand while, at the same time, one of the Organization women underwent plastic surgery and emerged her exact double. The double went around town, behaving eccentrically and drinking to excess, particularly near news cameras and Enemy gossip columnists.

It was not long before the presumed millionairess had acquired an Empire-wide reputation. From there, with bought experts and skilled Organization lawyers, it was a short step to 'lack of responsibility' and final 'commitment' to an institution.

Magda Kanttening—she had repudiated her married name—stared into an alleyway which ran between two of the Institution's hospital blocks. The alleyway was about four paces wide and directly facing her was a blank wall which went up and up and up. She had given up trying to see the sky but she never stopped looking out. Sometimes rain fell and she could tell by the changing light whether it was a dull or sunny day but that was all.

On the blank wall directly facing her, were damp patches with a suggestion of green and years ago, she had hoped the green might turn to moss but it never had.

Again, there were small cracks in the path, perhaps a weed or a blade of grass might one day appear but she had waited in vain.

She had kept her sanity and her alertness of mind by constant mental exercises. It had taken but a week for her to realize that unless she did something she would become as mindless as a cabbage.

Perhaps, despite all her efforts, that was coming now. She saw no one but the robot who brought her food and cleaned the cell and, lately, she had been having strange dreams.

The one last night had been the strangest of all but she did not dwell on it. She went through her hour-long mental exercise of adding, subtracting, recalling and reciting from memory, which kept her mind reasonably clear and active.

When she had finished she went to the window and was delighted and amazed to see a green shoot in the crack in the path.

She loved green things and it was the first plant life she had seen in thirty years.

If only she could get out and touch it.

It was then that strange things seemed to happen. A sparrow came down and perched by the window, looking at her with bright, beady eyes. Then there was another and another.

She was amazed to see another blade of green appear beside the first, then three more. The crack in the path widened and split.

She was not slow in learning and she learned quicker than most that something had happened. She was not a magician, she did not control nature but she had established an affinity with it. Man had suddenly matured enough to work in conjunction with his world and was wise enough not to abuse it.

Two days later, the window fell out and she stepped to freedom.

When she reached the exercise yard, four robotic orderlies tried to stop her but only a short distance away, came to an abrupt stop. Then they formed a docile line behind her and followed her out of the main gate. She was the first person to discover that mechanical intelligences were likewise responsive to the new order.

“Everywhere the world was changing, the nature of man, his inner nature was being reflected outwardly. This was not new, it had always been so. In the ugliness or beauty of architectural line, in the spoiling or improving of the countryside. The sleazy rat-ridden tenement and the breathtaking lines of a great cathedral, both expressed outwardly man's inner nature. But, whereas both tenement and cathedral were manually constructed, now things, material things, occurred without manual construction.

“Further, man was enlightened, insofar that in many ways it had always been so. The great earthquakes, tempests and so on, once monstrous injustices were now clearly seen as man's own handiwork. The great earthquake was the outward reflection of war-hatred two thousand miles away. Man's inner nature had been reflected outwardly then.

“Then came division or metamorphosis and the butterfly emerged. This was the new mature man, the super man.

“Over a period of many generations, the same race began to split in two and both from choice.

“No one said to a particular man or woman: ‘You are going to be crooked or you are going to be honest.’ These men and women made their own decisions. With each generation, however, the gap widened, the degeneration or increasing maturity became more complete.

“What we refer to as degeneration, however, also, had purpose. Remember, in the order of things, a butterfly lays eggs close to its grub's natural food.

“Mankind had climbed high enough to fulfil its destiny and natural food was ready. Go back to Deneman, the killer—”

Deneman was no longer a man. With the others he had come to the newly discovered planets and found them good. With the others he had undergone the same processes of degeneration and with them he sat and stared hungrily at the jungle.

He had been a handsome man once but the subtle radiation to which he was constantly exposed had already wrought physical changes to his appearance. Healthy tan had turned to a thick pigmentation of grey scales. His reflexes had been affected together with his motor nerves. He had lost his sense of balance and was unable to stand upright. The best he could manage was a semi-upright kneeling position.

He could no longer think, there were no memories and no points of reference.

He sat in a swamp and devoured live things which brushed against him.

Occasionally he made an odd trumpeting noise. He did not know why, save that he liked doing it so he did it.

Then faintly in the distance came an answering sound almost similar to his own. He knew then why he did it, not from reason but from responses in his body, a mate. He rose and began to lumber through the mud and weeds towards the sound.

He was not to know that radiation had already played hell with his genes.

He was not to know that his offspring would be monsters or that perhaps, a million years from now, his descendants would be Lords of Creation—the dinosaurs.

Here on this world were Once-Men who swung from tree to tree. Once-Men who roved in hunting packs or who bounded agile near high cliffs.

In a few generations, apes would swing through the trees, and hunting animals scour the jungle.

Perhaps, ten million years from now, the first ape-thing would take to a cave and make its first crude club.

Time would come when there would be villages, towns, wars and the birth of a true technology. Only a few thousand years after that, the metamorphosis would begin all over again.

Alkine returned to his normal surroundings with deep feelings of unease. Not so much from what he had learned, as the unpleasant parallels it called to mind.

The Gurth had never had an outstanding crime problem but they had always had the *Githru*, a Junta with far-reaching powers.

Of late, the *Githru* had been extending its tentacles into the life of the people. Taxes trebled, personal freedom was reduced to invisible levels and the secret police increased tenfold.

There were tales of dreadful excesses within the ranks of the *Githru*. Tales of mass executions, sadistic tortures and wanton disregard for justice.

He avoided meeting Maynard's eyes. “Are you quite sure our own change is generations away?”

“Why do you ask?”

“There are so many unpleasant parallels.” He told Maynard about the *Githru*. He went on, “There are reports that habitable worlds have been found, primitive like those you mentioned, but habitable. Yet we, the armed forces, were sent forth to take your Empire. I find it significant that we were all, our entire force, volunteers. I find it even more significant that no *Githru* party men or agents accompanied us. Further, our personal females and their offspring are following in a smaller fleet. We have already received messages from them so we know they have departed. It appears to me that the *Githru* wishes the equivalent of your neutrals out of the way. They wish to enjoy these newfound worlds on their own.” He paused and said, “You have not answered my question—are you sure our own change is so far away?”

“For you, personally, not now. You have lost an arrogance which might have held you back for many generations.”

“I see your point but what of the others?”

Maynard rose and crossed to the small circular window of the vessel. “Your troops are reasoning intelligences and under your orders they are working side by side with my own people. Side by side, they are rescuing the injured of your race. Our ambulances take them away to our hospitals where your surgeons are given a free hand and every help. Forgive the thought, but many of them must be thinking by now, no doubt with misgivings but nonetheless thinking, ‘these creatures have ethics, justices, and compassions which, in their position, we might have not exercised.’ Sooner or later they will have to face the truth and this kind of truth is infectious.”

“What will happen now? This is nowhere for us to go.”

Maynard laughed softly. “The universe is immense and, as I have said, we are all subject to order. I should not be surprised if, in the course of the next few days, someone will have a dream—you will develop faculties now. Like the butterfly, you will enter new dimensions. You will know where to go, there will be a world waiting for you.”

Alkine said, musingly, “In our culture we once held the belief that a day would come when the good were separated from the bad. The bad would go to a place of darkness and the good—” He did not finish the sentence. “It gives one food for thought.”

“Yes,” Maynard smiled faintly, “it does, perhaps there is racial memory or perhaps—”

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