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EARTH RIM

NICK KAMIN

The man who stopped
the wars must
be stopped in turn!

EARTH RIM

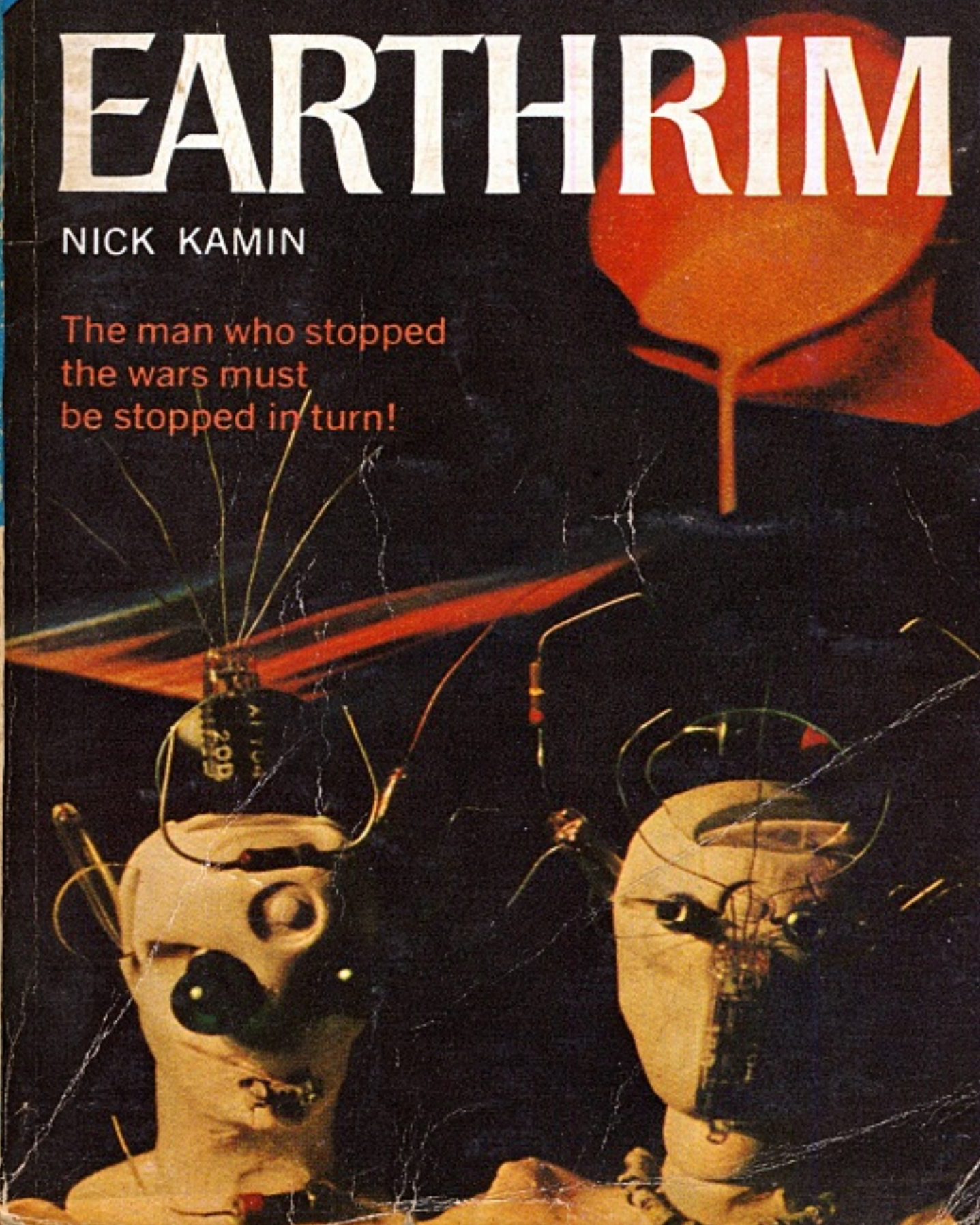
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Nick Kamin

PHOENIX SHIP

Walt and Leigh Richmond

441-66160-075



Though Standard was his name, he was anything but standard.

He was in the country without the all-knowing computer knowing it.

He was listed as slain in the last war.

He had no credit and no means of establishing it.

He was fitted with a non-standardized artificial arm too heavy for comfort and with insufficient control for good usage.

He knew too little of his own background.

He was wanted by the official police, by the secret police, by the underground, and by the ever-growing mysterious world-wide cancer known only as the Rim.

Standard was his name—saving the world was his game.

**Turn this book over for
second complete novel**



EARTHTRIM

NICK KAMIN

AN ACE BOOK

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PHOENIX SHIP

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"ABOUT THAT SHOULDER," the doctor was saying. "You've had a bad wrench there, but it should heal up with no particular problem. Of course, it may be a little stiff, but that's not bad unless you're a Quod player."

"I gave up Quod when I had my arm replaced," Standard said dryly. He was still feeling uneasy from the nerve block and swung his feet gingerly off the examination table and sat swaying on its edge. The block was diminishing slowly and he could feel the growing throbbing in his shoulder.

The doctor was rewinding his probe. "What's that about your arm?"

"I said, I had my arm replaced." Standard looked up warily. "Or didn't you notice?"

"Of course I noticed. I couldn't very well patch up some torn nerve endings in your shoulder without noticing the splicing work you've had done. Rather unusual arm, isn't it?"

Standard glanced up suspiciously. "Oh? In what way unusual?"

"Well, I just meant that large amount of metal in it. Vitallium, is it? It's awfully dense and heavy for a prosthetic, especially with the synthetic bone and cellular plastic available. There's nothing wrong with it, mind you. It just seems a mite awkward, considering."

"It was a foreign job," Standard grumbled.

"Don't worry about it," the doctor said. He finished rewinding the probe cord and stood resting his arms on his paunchy belly. "They did a good job matching your flesh tone and you seem to have sufficient neural response in it. Perfectly adequate. But don't try to use it too much until your shoulder heals. That arm can put quite a strain on your muscles, heavy as it is."

"I'll try to be careful," Standard said. He flexed his arm, testing the fingers. He had a strong dislike of doctors, and a glowering distrust of doctors who found it necessary to use an anesthetic with a simple probe. That was the whole idea of a probe. To allow internal surgery without going through the messy procedure of cutting. Any doctor who had to use a knockout block with a probe was a sloppy technician.

He did the important thing and made a fist. A fine line of quivering traveled from his shoulder to his hand. He tried it again and the hand jumped uncontrollably.

"The reason it's metal, see," he said coldly, "is because I was afraid plastic would break every time I socked some idiot in the mouth."

The doctor's face flushed. "That's very interesting. Do you make a habit of going around hitting people?"

"Only on occasion," Standard said. The hand spasmed again, this time without his applying any effort. "Right now, this seems as good an occasion as any."

The doctor stepped back slightly and pressed the recorder button for his desk computer. "Well, now what seems to be the problem?"

"My hand, you moron!" He held it up and watched it tremble like a leaf caught in a rocket's wash. "You fouled up my hand with your dumb probe."

"I don't think that's terribly likely," the doctor said. "I only worked on your nerves in the coracoid region, not in your hand."

"For Pete's sake, where the hell do you think the nerve response comes from to operate this hand? From my *shoulder*, meathead!"

"You do have a point there," the doctor said absently. "But you can't blame me if your arm is a weird foreign contrivance. Now if you had a normal Series J prosthetic, that'd be a different matter. Those function directly from the central nervous system. Apparently, you have a rather antiquated model there, using a servo bypass from your shoulder. You really would do well to have that replaced with a newer model."

"Don't you check anything before you go chopping around with that damned probe?"

"Now there's no reason to become agitated," the doctor soothed. "After all, it's pink. It looks like a normal prosthetic."

"I thought it was normal. How was I to know you had an offbrand?"

"Oh, Lordy," Standard moaned. He could see he was getting nowhere this way, but his instincts were welling up to a dangerous level. Now that was not particularly smart, because the last thing he could afford to do would be to make a big antisocial scene and get labeled as an Unstable by Policontrol. That would really be cute. A secret agent running around with a social stigma and a listing with the area psychologist.

He pushed himself off the table and stood uneasily, slightly sick to his stomach. Man, that was *some* nerve block. He waggled his hand in the doctor's face and said, "All I can tell you is that you'd better damn well fix this arm."

The doctor cocked an eyebrow and yanked the probe out of its cabinet. Standard blinked. For a pudgy old guy, the doc could move pretty fast.

"Don't you threaten me," the doctor said. "You come one step closer to me and I'll give you a touch with this that'll make your wrenched shoulder feel like a pimple."

Standard stared at the doctor. Quivering or no quivering, with thirty-odd pounds of steel from his elbow to the cosmetic nylon hairs on his fingers, he estimated he could at least eliminate a jowl or a collarbone with the first blow.

He wanted to; he wanted to pulverize the fumbling doctor all over the shabby office.

Instead, he stood smoldering.

"Look here," said the doctor, his voice slightly less than frenzy. "It was an accident. It happens quite often with steel prosthetics. All it takes is to get the tiniest margin out of line with the probe and half the neural responses can be polarized. That's why everybody prefers plastic nowadays. You really should look into it."

"That's fine for the plastic factories, but at the moment I happen to be connected with this metal relic you call an antique and I've grown attached to it."

"That's very good." The doctor smiled. "Grown attached to it. Rather clever. I'll have to remember that."

"Meanwhile, why don't you remember that you're the one who fouled this arm up, and why don't you do something about it?"

"Oh, I wouldn't say that I necessarily caused any difficulty in your arm. No indeed, I wouldn't say that. That

fall you took on your shoulder may very well have started it."

"It wasn't quivering before I came in here this morning," Standard said defensively.

"That's what you say. For all I know, that arm may have been acting up for months and you're trying to stick me with a free repair job."

"I'll tell you one more time." Standard shook his head. "You fouled up my arm with your goddamned electric probe, and you damned well better fix it."

"Don't forget," the doctor pointed out testily, "my 'god-damned electric probe,' as you so lovingly call it, fixed your shoulder."

"Baloney," Standard said. "I told you just to yank it back in place."

"That would have been most painful."

"Painful? What kind of favor are you trying to give me? You think this jumping hand is a big treat? Good God, with the size of that nerve block you gave me, you could have amputated my spine and I wouldn't have felt it!"

"That's really not too bad an idea." The doctor grinned sarcastically, the lines of mirth rippling across his cheeks. "We'll save that for next time. Meanwhile, why don't you give your card to the front desk on your way out."

"Not on your life, you blubbery butcher. You're not getting paid until you get my hand fixed."

"All right, all *right!*" the doctor said, exasperated. "If you're going to be that way about it, the desk will make a new appointment for you. But I say that it will go away when your shoulder heals. Nevertheless, if it makes you feel better, you can stop back. Now, leave. I have other business to attend to, and you're wasting my time, young man."

"I certainly don't want to make you late getting to the slaughterhouse."

"Leave," the doctor bellowed. "You're not the only patient I have."

"If I was, it'd be the most merciful thing for the world," Standard grunted, lurching drunkenly out of the examining room. The waiting room was as vacant as it had been when he came in. *Other patients, my foot,* Standard thought.

The desk computer accepted his identity card and regurgitated an appointment slip. "I hope you are feeling better, madam," the computer's unctuous voice said.

Standard gave the desk a dirty look and staggered out.

The doctor watched him leave and waited until he heard the closing doors of the pneumolift. Then he walked into the waiting room and deftly kicked the desk. "Can't you tell a man from a woman, you simpering screwball? Good heavens, that's what I get for buying the cheapest model on the market."

"Although I am economical, I am polite and punctual," the desk said with a touch of wounded pride. It did not like being referred to as cheap. "Besides, it is not my function to differentiate among illnesses. As a physician, that is your function. Unless, of course, you would like to trade me for a complete diagnostic and answering service, splendidly encased in genuine chromium plate and simulated reptile skin. I would make an excellent trade-in."

"I don't need a diagnostic machine," the doctor said. "And furthermore, a person's sex is not regarded as an illness."

"Of course, that is your own biased opinion, since you suffer from the same malady," the desk answered. "Now a Mark XIV would ease your schedule and afford you completely objective viewpoints."

"I'm not interested, I told you."

"Allow me to contact our regional sales director. I'm sure he would be able to give you the facts much more succinctly than I."

"I don't doubt that. A garbage disposal could deal with facts better than you can," the doctor returned. "I don't want to talk to your sales rep, and I don't want to buy a new machine. What I do want is to be connected with Policontrol."

"If you really insist," the desk said airily. "But Policontrol can't make you nearly as attractive an offer as we can."

The doctor kicked the desk again and the wall screen reluctantly lit and flickered on.

"Policontrol," drawled a bored voice.

"This is Doctor Graystone. I was talking to one of your people earlier and we were interrupted. I would like to finish that conversation."

"Who were you talking to?" So far no image except the mailed fist insignia had filled the screen. Graystone realized it was another computer talking.

"I don't know. I may have been talking to you. Why don't you check your records. That is your job, you know."

The Policontrol computer grumbled. "Okay, here it is. You were complaining that someone impersonating a Control officer was bothering you."

"Not exactly bothering me. I wanted to get in touch with him so that I could give him some information, but then you told me that he didn't work for you."

"That's right, and he still doesn't work for us."

"I'm not concerned about that. This had to do with the man this phony officer wanted me to examine."

"What's this patient's name?"

"Wait a minute, I'll check." Graystone kicked his desk. "What was his name, dummy?"

"Standard," the desk said. "Michael E. Identity number 40936-15699, region UW 71."

"Thank you," the Policontrol computer said. "He doesn't work for us, either."

"I know that," Graystone said. "At least I was reasonably sure of it. I have some information to report about him that I think is important."

"Go ahead," the computer said and chuckled at an inaudible joke between it and Graystone's desk about the bush-beating of humanity.

"It is my civic duty to report that I believe the man to be Unstable, grade five, and make formal recommendation that Social Adjustment Seriously is Suggested."

That did it. The SASS code automatically shifted the Policontrol computer into a different circuit. A businesslike voice, authoritative and blunt, replaced the bored computer.

"We have noted that information, sir. Every effort will be made to readjust the patient as soon as we locate him. Please excuse me for a moment as I converse with your desk. I would like to scan its optic recorder for visual identity of the patient. Do I have your permission, sir?"

"Naturally. Help yourself."

There was a muffled click as the desk retrieved one of its storage crystals and fed the information to Policontrol. The click was followed by more clicks.

"Pardon me, sir, but have you been trying to adjust your desk by yourself?"

"Of course not," Graystone said. "Is the thing malfunctioning again?"

"There appears to have been some tampering. Our records verify that you called us earlier today, but there is no record of that call in your desk. Your desk indicates that you had only one patient today, a Mrs. Keiller, who was suffering from a dermal condition; there is no record of your having treated a patient named Michael E. Standard."

"That's ridiculous," Graystone said. "Mrs. Keiller was here yesterday. Mr. Standard was here all day."

"And he was the only person in your office the entire day?"

"He was my only patient. That phony officer I called you about was here, too, of course."

"There is no record of him, either," Policontrol said. "It may be that he was responsible for the tampering with your desk's crystals."

"Dummy," Graystone said, looking at his desk. "Maybe I should replace you after all."

"Do not blame your desk," Policontrol said. "It was unable to defend itself. Rest assured that this entire matter will be investigated thoroughly. We thank you for your assistance and cooperation. Because of you, we may be able to help not one, but *two* socially unstable citizens."

"That's quite all right," Graystone said. "I *am* a doctor, you understand, and I am concerned with the health of *all* people."

"That's very noble, Doctor. Thank you again for your unselfish act."

"That's very nice of you," Graystone said. "I wish my computer had your manners."

"Don't be too critical of your desk, sir," Policontrol said. "Please realize that I am a Mark XX and vastly superior to your desk even though it is adequate for menial tasks. As long as we're on the subject, I might advise you to invest in a Sentinel Service, available through Policontrol for a nominal lease charge. It would eliminate precisely the kind of tampering your desk has been subjected to, plus the reassurance that you are personally guarded by the largest and most effective police force in the world."

Graystone pressed his eyes shut. "Thank you. I'll think about it."

The screen blanked and Graystone stood in his reception room, slightly numbed. What a day this had been. Rudely awakened in the middle of the night, dragged down to his

office at an unnaturally early hour, frightened half out of his wits and insulted by a man with all the intelligence of a Neanderthal. All for a silly mechanical arm and, as though that were not ridiculous enough, now his own desk computer was on the blink.

The more he thought about it, the idea of a vacation became more appealing. He gave the desk one more kick for good measure and locked the front doors.

Standard stumbled off the streetwalk and into the nearest restaurant. Lord, he was hungry. Breakfast had been nothing to shout about (and that girl said she knew how to cook), but it was barely into the morning yet and he was starved. He glanced at his watch before he remembered that he had smashed it in the fall last night. It didn't matter. The doc's fooling around couldn't have taken more than a couple of hours at the most. More like an hour, probably. But he was hollowly hungry.

He found an empty stall and propped himself against it. A few more nerve blocks like this one and he could kiss the rest of the day goodbye. Crazy doc must have probed too deep and hit the spinal column. Standard guessed he was not too far off the track when he had sarcastically mentioned that the doc could have removed his spine.

He squinted at the menu card, annoyed that the breakfast list had already been removed. The choice was on the sparse side: fried soya mash or cellumeat. He pushed his credit plaque into the menu box and punched the mash selection.

Clunk, went the vendor. Standard peered at it. Nothing came out. No fried mash. No returned credit plaque.

"Come on," Standard grumbled and slapped the machine.

Clunk, it went again. Nothing. It hung on the wall, silent and impassive, mockingly illustrating its food promises. Standard glowered sullenly. He hit it. The nerve block was still eroding his timing and his metal fist jumped spastically. He hit it much harder than he had intended.

The faceplate caved in and splinters of plastic littered the dining shelf. But still no delivery of food and his plaque was still locked inside the recalcitrant box.

He was bending back a piece of plastic when he felt the hairy paw clamp onto his wrenched shoulder. He winced.

The bouncer stood a good foot taller, with large masses of muscle that had begun to turn to fat.

"What the hell you doing to my machine?" the bouncer said.

"Nothing came out," Standard said.

"I'll tell you what is going to get out. You. You can't come barging in here and start busting up things."

"All I wanted was some mash. I put my plaque in and nothing came out."

"That's no reason to beat up the little thing," the bouncer said. "It's just trying to do its job, wotthehell."

"It's doing a pretty lousy job," Standard volunteered. The bouncer tightened his grip. "Maybe it's stuck. And maybe you better take your hand off my shoulder."

The bouncer looked at the broken machine. "Yeah, I guess to hell it's stuck. I think maybe you should pay for it. What'dya think about that?"

"I can't pay you anything until I get my plaque back," Standard said. He sure was getting pushed around a lot lately.

"Now that's really tough. Why don't we just leave your plaque in there and when we get that box fixed we'll just deduct the cost and send your card back."

"Up your nose," Standard said. "I don't care much for that idea. By the time I get my plaque back, the entire Shore Drive will be charged to me. By the way, you still haven't taken your hand off me and that's beginning to make me nervous."

The bouncer considered the alternatives and slowly released his grip. "Okay. You get your card out of there and we'll settle up right now. A good vendor like that is probably going to run you a hundred, hundred and fifty."

Standard looked into the vendor's innards. "I may have to bend it a little."

"Sure, buddy." The bouncer chuckled. "That's a tamper-proof machine. You just go right ahead and bend it to your heart's content."

"You sure you're not going to mind too much?"

"For a hundred and fifty, you can do anything you want, buddy."

"As long as you don't mind too much." Standard tapped it lightly and the faceplate landed on the floor. He began

poking it with his fingertips, denting braces and shearing rivets.

The bouncer watched apprehensively. "You know, maybe it was getting kinda run-down."

"They sure don't make them like they used to," Standard agreed. A small corner of the clear plastic credit card was visible under the tangled metal. He backhanded the machine. The side crumbled and disgorged the card, with assorted shreds of metal.

He withdrew his card, brushing away pieces of aluminum and cast iron. "There's the little devil," he said.

The bouncer gazed at the pile of rubble hanging from the wall, stroked his chin and pushed his hands into his pockets. "That thing must've been rotten. Why don't we just settle up for fifty, buddy?"

"Fifty, huh?" Standard blew the dust off his card.

"Make it forty. I can pick up a used vendor for forty."

"I never did get anything to eat. Let's call it at thirty-five."

The bouncer sighed and recorded the amount. Standard weaved toward the door.

When he had left, the bouncer turned to the crumpled wall vendor and jabbed it with his fingertips. A sliver of torn metal laid open his thumb and he stood sucking it as he watched Standard aiming across the street.

Standard had nearly forgotten his hand until he reached the streetwalk. When he grabbed the rail, the hand jolted instantly and sent a ribbon of pain dancing into his shoulder.

"Lordy, I can't take this very long," he mumbled, drawing raised glances from the commuters jammed around him. He dug into his pocket for the appointment card the doctor's desk had given him. The appointment was two weeks off.

He wished he had gotten something to eat.

Now that's sweet, he thought. *That's really sweet.* The military had sunk fifteen thou into the metal pross, it had taken him two years to learn to use it, and now some quack messes it up with a dimestore probe.

Of course, Standard argued with himself, it *was* his own stupid fault. After all, he *had* suggested experimenting in the bathtub and how did he know she was actually going to bring a bar of soap with her? Doing a brodie on the tile floor had been dumb enough, but he really tied it when he

agreed to go to *her* doctor. Lord, what more could he have expected?

He spotted the phone booth and hopped off the streetwalk, which caused his knees to buckle and almost landed him on his face. *Yessir, that was some nerve block*, he mused.

In the booth, he fumbled with the appointment card. There was no phone number, just the good doctor's name. He pressed for the operator.

The booth computer scanned him and provided a pleasant blonde on the screen, nude to the navel. The utility companies, Standard reflected, were sure using more imagination.

"Your number, please," the reconstructed voice said.

"I want to reach a Doctor Graystone. Doctor Westport, uh, Graystone."

"Thank you, sir." The blonde smiled inanely as the computer ran through its listings. "That number is 8274/22-4088. You can punch that dial directly or I can place the call for you, sir."

"Place it," Standard said.

The blonde faded and was replaced by a facsimile of a glossy male from a muscle camp, as visualized by the doc's cheap desk computer. "Doctor Graystone's office. May I help you?"

"This is Michael Standard. I want to change my appointment."

"Oh, yes, you're the lady who was in this afternoon. To what date would you like that changed, dearie?" Big show of flashing teeth and heavily lashed eyebrows.

Standard looked at the ceiling of the booth and swore. "Just as soon as possible."

"Sorry, but your present appointment is as soon as possible."

"I want it sooner."

"Sorry, but your present appointment is as soon as possible."

"Says you. Let me talk to Graystone."

"That is not possible. Doctor Graystone is out of the office and will not return for two weeks."

"Malarkey. I just left him a couple minutes ago."

"Doctor Graystone is out of the office and will not return for two weeks."

"Then contact him."

"I can't do that. Doctor Graystone does not wish to be disturbed during his vacation."

"Look, you get hold of Graystone and tell him if he doesn't talk to me, I am going to track him down and *permanently* disturb him."

The muscle man hesitated. "If your intentions are serious, what you are suggesting is a criminal offense and I will be obliged to place this information immediately with Policontrol."

In truth, of course, at the mention of Standard's name, Policontrol had automatically taken full control of the phone booth and was relaying the entire conversation directly into its computer complex. Naturally, there had been no outward sign. Simply a rechanneling of data with all the booth systems intact.

Standard's irritation had not been salved. His first impulse was to bury his fist in the muscle man's computerized teeth. On second thought, there was no reason to break up the communication system's equipment. On third thought, there wasn't much sense in getting angry with a computer, either.

Machines weren't bad. They did pretty much what you told them to do. It was the cretins who built and programmed the damn things that made them so smartassed. One of these days, Standard promised himself that he would find one of those programmers in a dark alley.

"I was speaking figuratively," Standard apologized. "Cancel my request."

"Thank you, sir. Goodbye." Muscles broke the connection.

"I hope you rust," Standard grumbled and punched for the operator.

The blonde reappeared. "Your number, please."

"I have had a lousy morning. Give me Dial-a-Joy."

"Thank you, sir." The screen scanned Standard's chunky body and scar-lined face. It inspected his clothes. A week old, off the rack. A sensor detected his metal hand and, unsure of it, interpreted it as "weapon, probable."

The booth made its analysis. There had been a long legal hassle when the analytic phone booths were first designed for public consumption. Constitutional rights or privacy versus the comsystem's concept of public service. Policontrol ignored both sides and wanted all personal analyses made by the booths piped routinely to the National Security Central, for

rather obvious reasons. What better way to keep track of the populace?

The comsystem argued that the analyses were only superficial and not legally binding; the constitutionalists said the whole concept was a violation of privacy, not to mention decency, since half the population's ids were considerably more raw than the late viewings on the home screen; and Policontrol just wanted the analyses, period.

They compromised. The booths analyzed only when the person requested a psych service and Policontrol received the information only when it had made a prior request for data on that particular person. The constitutionalists suspected they were not satisfied by the arrangement, but their squabbings were drowned out by the martial law imposed less than a year later.

After the Eastern war, when the threat of espionage and the ogre of sabotage diminished, and it appeared that the federal government had at last blown its budget for all time and was wallowing around in the dregs of bankruptcy, the comsystem succumbed to the final but weakened constitutional amendment to the franchise. All computerized analyses were deemed inadmissible in a court of law. The constitutionalists went home happy.

The comsystem announced the benevolent phone booths, with all the attendant therapeutic and emotional allegations, were finally available to the public, and quietly raked in the proceeds. The Fed tactfully reminded the utility companies of their profits and collected its share. With everyone nominally satisfied, each congratulated the other for a very sensible solution.

Which it was, on the surface. The legal limitations were meaningless to Policontrol, because Policontrol rarely bothered to bring its cases to court. Legal entanglements simply ceased to exist when Policontrol handled a case. Policontrol did away with all those little inconsequential matters, like warrants, arrests, trials and the like. It did away with its suspects just as efficiently, too.

The booth made its analysis. Normally, the tape would have been destroyed, but by this time Standard's name had already reached Policontrol's dossier with Graystone's social maladjustment complaint.

There was a momentary flicker as the computer constructed what it felt was an appropriate imagery.

"I hope this will give a *big rise* to your morale, sir," the booth cooed. The view angle dollied back as the blonde operator stood up. Still topless, she was wearing fluorescent tights that were only marginally higher than her legs. A stocky nebulous figure entered the screen carrying an old automatic. "This gun makes a *big bang*, baby," he leered. He pulled the trigger and covered the blonde with green paint. He continued to spray the stage with the squirt gun and, with his free hand, began shredding the fluorescent tights, while thoughtfully standing to one side to allow a clear camera angle. The blonde giggled and began running around a couch which suddenly materialized. The gunman clouted her over the head with the pistol, which sent her into fits of hysteria. She took the gun from him as they wrestled on the floor, and clouted him. That brought even more laughter and the gunman began tearing off his clothes.

"Operator," said Standard, "give me something else."

The screen froze. "I'm sorry, sir, but your personality profile indicates . . ."

"I don't care what it indicates, give me something lighter."

"Thank you, sir." The computer reorganized itself. The screen dissolved to a troupe of water nymphs balleting to an upbeat version of "The Blue Danube." The operator was now a peasant girl and the story line seemed to have something to do with hiding potato stompings from a herd of Cossacks.

He was certainly getting an interesting analysis, Standard thought. He had been out of the country longer than he realized. The really unsettling thing was that the booth had analyzed his hand as a weapon, and that was getting just too close for comfort. If this tape got into Policontrol's hands, he was going to be in big trouble.

As the music droned on in his ears, Standard sorted his thoughts.

To begin with, he had to have his hand repaired. He was not entirely sure why, but he did know that the most important part of his mission was centered around his prosthetic limb. He wondered if Graystone had noticed the incongruities when he was recircuiting and aligning the nerve patterns.

Could Graystone have guessed? Was that why the doc had cleared out of his office so quickly?

The real question, Standard decided, was whether to kill Graystone now and abort the mission, or take a chance, kill

Graystone after the hand was fixed, and proceed as planned. Whatever those plans were.

Speaking of taking chances, that had been a childishly stupid display he had put on in the restaurant. Why had he done it? Because he had been hungry, almost starving, that's why. Sure, breakfast had been less than satisfying at the girl's apartment, but why so enormously hungry this early in the day?

An insidious thought came charging in. Standard punched the operator button, breaking the ballet in mid-step.

"Operator," Standard snapped. "What time is it?"

"The time is precisely 1628:32."

"Oh, damn," Standard moaned and slammed his credit card into the slot.

"Your charge is nine dollars and eighty cents, sir." The booth recorded the amount to his balance, returned the card, and unlocked the portal. "Please Dial-a-Joy again whenever you feel the need for stimulation or relaxation, sir. This is a franchised service of the Bay Shore Communication System."

Standard stepped out, shaken. Four thirty P.M.! He had been at the doctor's office when it opened in the morning, and had been the first patient admitted. Come to think of it, he had been the only patient admitted. But he had been in there all day! Lord, what a dunce he was. That had been no ordinary nerve block. That had been a total, fall-down, roll-over-dead mind arrest.

He had been unconscious for more than six hours.

Graystone must have had a reason. Probably the same reason that had prompted him to leave his office for two weeks.

Which also meant that the girl last night must have had a reason for sending him to Graystone.

There was a chance the doctor was still in his office and just refusing to answer the phone. Or he might have gone over to the girl's place.

Either way, Standard calculated, it looked like it was adding up to a couple of necessary eliminations.

II

SHE HAD BEEN sitting at the bar when he entered and she watched him because new faces were rare in Harold's place, but even so he seemed familiar. She tried to place him as he unfolded himself into a booth, outlining his coarse, thick back.

He was an inch or two under six feet, heavily built with hunkering shoulders that seemed to precede him as he had half-walked, half-shuffled into the bar. His face had been patched by plastic surgery and from the scar tissue that laced his cheeks she guessed it had been a rushed wartime job. The ready-to-wear vendomat clothes hung loosely and ill-fitted and he used a sleeve to wipe off the booth table.

She shivered as his eyes struck her, lingering for a moment, then bolting away as rapidly as they had fallen. Beneath the drooping, sleepy eyelids his eyes were pale, nearly colorless, darting like albino lizards.

His eyes continued to flit, gauging the distance to the door, to the bar, to the rack of decanters. She imagined that he saw not bottles, but bludgeons, and quickly told herself to be rational. Otherwise she could see, too clearly, the sharp corners of the picture frames and the weighted lamps on the tables. It was surprisingly simple to visualize him tearing off the bar stool seats, hurtling them around the bar, acting like the animal he resembled.

She disliked the man on sight, and she disliked her job for putting her in the proximity of the man. Thinking of her job, she recalled where she had seen the man.

He was one of the suspects shown during the last hologram briefing session. One of their British Columbian agents had noticed him at the customs inspection. At the time, he was carrying an Australian passport. Shortly afterward, he had crossed the American border, this time with a Canadian passport. Even so, he was still a curiosity, a man to be watched. Until, of course, he had walked into the bar. That was difficult to accept as coincidental.

"Care for a drink, Jeannine?" Harold had been watching her study the man and had noticed the revulsion in her face. He tried to run a clean bar and take care of his girls.

He flicked his towel imperceptively at the man in the booth. "You don't have to wait on him," Harold said quietly. "I'll take care of him."

She smiled stiffly. "No, that's all right, Harold. Thanks, anyway."

"You sure? I think I can manage without his business."

She forced herself to laugh and pushed away from the bar. "Maybe so, but I can't."

As she walked toward him, his eyes stopped their incessant movement and fastened onto her. The impact was frightening, almost physical. With the other trampers who came in here, she could sense them trying to undress her with their eyes. This one was different. This one seemed bored and irritated with her intrusion.

But she said, "Hi, stranger. What would you like?"

The eyes relaxed, withdrawing under the dark brow, sinking slowly over her. He looked back up slowly. "Now that you ask, I guess *you*. Why don't you sit down?"

"Just for a drink," she answered.

He shrugged. "Anything you want. Booze, trips, or wipe-outs. I don't care what you want, so long as you get it and not some tea sneaked in by your bartender friend that's going to cost me twenty bills."

She frowned. He had noticed Harold's mother hen attitude in the time it took him to find an empty booth, and it angered her that he knew.

"Don't worry about that. Harold will serve me whatever you order."

He shrugged again.

It would be easy to walk away from him. All she had to do was to report his presence and that would take care of her duties. She could say that he rejected her and she was not able to follow him, and let someone else worry.

They would probably reprimand her, but it would not be the first time. They were as callous as this brooding man and failure was disregarded as though it did not exist. They would relieve her of the assignment, but then in a few days she would be back here under orders again hustling another brooding degenerate.

Providing there was no other agent in the bar. Since she

had never met her superiors, except Quinn, she knew little of the organization, had never even knowingly met another agent. For a while, she had wondered about Harold, but as time passed she had ceased to speculate, ceased to think, and did only as she was ordered the infrequent times her phone rang. Otherwise she was simply one more bar girl.

But if Harold *was* an agent, things could go pretty hard for her. She had slipped up on a few of her past assignments, and Harold might be watching her closely to see how she handled this one.

She sat at the booth. "I'll take you up on the drink. A grain mash."

He glanced at her, then pressed the order button. "The lady will have her usual grain squeezings. I'll have a cup of coffy."

Now why did he do that? To prove that Harold would not serve her a watered drink, she had ordered something hard enough to floor a longshoreman. Was he trying to throw her off balance by ordering coffy? Careful, she told herself. There may be more here than an immigration violation.

"You have a little tiny bit of an accent," she ventured. "You aren't English, are you?"

"Nope."

"Maybe you're Canadian?"

"No." He glared at her. "I was in Australia for some time. I probably picked up a twang down there."

"Were you there during the war?"

He grimaced, the scars forcing his mouth open at one side. "Yep, during the war."

"That must have been terrible. I remember seeing some of the newscasts when I was just a little girl. They kept saying how we were winning, and they'd give the number of how many enemies had been killed, but they'd never tell how many of our men were dying." She let her words trail off as he began drumming his fingers on the table.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't be talking about something like that, but it's just that it seems so long ago."

"Nine years now when it started. Four years when it ended. That's not very long."

"It's a long time if you weren't even twelve when it started."

He nodded. "Yeah, I guess so. Look, my name's Mike. Mike Standard."

She smiled. "I'm Jeannine. Jeannine Brochet."

"Nice meeting you," Standard said.

Harold brought the drinks to their booth. He looked questioningly at Jeannine and then shrugged and turned away when she didn't answer his look.

Standard sipped his coffy. Jeannine noticed that he was left-handed, and the details of the briefing session came back. He was not really left-handed. His right arm was artificial. For some reason that had interested Quinn when the Canadian report had come in.

"How's your drink?" he asked.

"It's all right. Actually, it's pretty strong. I don't drink this very much, but I wanted to prove to you that Harold doesn't water his drinks." She coughed slightly and cleared her throat. "How is yours?"

"It's okay. Coffy's coffy."

"Not quite," she said. "That's not just plain coffy. That's coffee, with a double E, the real thing. Harold uses real coffee beans. He has one of the few places on the shorefront that does. One of those espresso shops went out of business after the war and Harold bought one of those funny machines. He put it in storage until the embargoes were lifted and now he has real coffee. Lots of the big restaurants don't even have it."

Standard tasted the brew again. "To be honest, I can't tell a whole lot of difference. It's all the same to me, as long as it's hot. I guess it's a good sales gimmick, though."

"Harold says it adds *classy past* to the place."

He looked at her lightly. Now that she was close to him, his eyes no longer seemed reptilian, only hollow, as though something were missing from within them. "I don't think it's the coffee so much that adds class to this place. You have a nice face."

She smiled. "Why thank you, Mike. That's nice of you."

After her initial revulsion to him, he did not seem all bad. Was she beginning to feel pity for the man? She wondered how much of his body had been destroyed, how much had been glued and sewed and grafted back together. How many of his emotions had been burned out?

She thought of herself. How much of her was left after

working for a faceless, enigmatic presence that ordered her to meet strange men?

Perhaps she could have loved this man if she had met him years before. Somewhere in his past before the war had taken its toll there must have been someone who could have broken through his sullenness. Or had that elusive capacity for love been destroyed also? How much emotion was left in a man who had already lost part of his body?

She was daydreaming, wildly romantic. Love had nothing to do with her job.

But the thought of it, even the remotest possibility, would make it easier for her to take this hulking man home with her.

"How long have you been in the States, Mike?"

"Not too long."

"Do you plan to stay?"

"I'm not sure. That depends on how things go."

"Are you job-hunting?"

"No, not exactly." He looked up and gestured toward the order vendor on the table. "You know, it's funny. For years we were always saying how great things would be in the future. So now the future's here, and things, all those fancy promises, are still waiting. Everything seems so damned much tinnier than when I left. The war hit the Aussies pretty hard, but they still seem to hang onto some of the basic things down there."

"Things always change after a war."

"Sure, things change. But this time, things haven't changed that much. Everything looks about the same as it did when I left for the war. The food is bad, and there may be a few less people running around, but otherwise, everything's about the same."

"Then why did you say things seemed tinnier?"

"I guess I didn't mean things so much as people. It's like a different attitude, like everyone is just shuffling around, not really going anywhere in particular. I don't know. Things just seem different."

He bent over his coffee cup, knowing his words were awkward.

"Some things aren't so different, Mike," she said and sloshed her drink around. "I still like some of the old basic things."

He looked over his cup and slowly grinned. "Is that right, Jeannine?"

"I mean, lots of things are the same." She dipped a finger in her drink and traced a circle on the booth table. "Things like life, death. Love."

He leaned back. "And money."

She smiled and nodded. "And money. That, too."

"Good old basic things." His grin broke across his face and made his pale eyes seem even lighter. "Jeannine, what's a nice girl like you et cetera?"

"I'll ignore that," she said and motioned toward his cooling coffee. "Wouldn't you like something more stimulating than that?"

He mulled the suggestion. "No, you're stimulating enough. I'll just finish my coffee to make sure I stay awake."

"Then give me a minute to call my roommate. I'll tell her to go out to a vidi tonight." She had to contact Quinn.

Standard stopped her as she started to rise. "Why don't you tell your bartender friend to transfer the call here in the booth."

"Why, Mike, don't you trust me? And I thought we were going to get along so well."

"Trust has nothing to do with it. I thought I'd save a pretty girl a few steps."

Silly of her to have asked that. Why plant a seed of suspicion if none existed?

"By the way, how long have you worked here?" Standard asked.

"A couple years. Why?"

"Then the barkeep knows your number." He punched the order button.

"All this seems like an awfully elaborate way to learn my phone number," she said. "If you want it, I'll tell you."

"Oh, if I want you again, I'll know how to find you," Standard said.

Harold's face appeared on the screen. "You wanted to order?"

"Jeannine wants to make a call to her apartment. Plug it in here to the booth."

"Sure enough." Standard saw him make the connection behind the bar and heard the soft click as it was patched into the order call box. The number rang. Jeannine knew it would continue to ring. There was no roommate at her apart-

ment, only the ghost of one. Double closets, double wardrobe, twin dressers, all furnished by Quinn to create the illusion of a second occupant for the benefit of the men she was ordered to meet.

The arrangement had benefits. Quinn wanted it that way to discourage any of her acquaintances, as he called them, from becoming permanent lodgers. Besides, it gave her a second set of clothes.

For a moment she nearly panicked. What if Quinn was waiting at her apartment? What if he answered the phone? Would Standard believe that Quinn was one of her fictional roommate's friends?

The phone continued to ring and Standard jabbed the order button. "Thanks, but forget it. There doesn't seem to be anyone home."

"Maybe she had a date tonight," Jeannine said and hoped the relief was not audible in her voice.

"Maybe," Standard said. His eyes picked her over. "She's probably a popular gal."

"She is," Jeannine said. "You might like her if you met her."

"I might at that," he said, studying her. He seriously doubted that the girl had a roommate. Few of the girls along the lakefront did, but most of them claimed to have one. The fantasy gave them security, he speculated. Like a shadow replacement for a marriage partner.

But there was nothing to be gained by pressing the matter. "Maybe some other time," he said, "but not tonight. I just want to be undisturbed with you."

"Don't worry about that," Jeannine said. "I'll leave a note for her."

Standard grinned. "Sort of a quarantine, huh?"

"Something like that. I'll paint a big red cupid on the door."

"That's what I like about you," Standard said. "I admire subtlety in a woman."

"I have many admirable qualities." She hesitated. "There is one thing. Mike. It's cash. And in advance."

"Fair enough. How much?"

"Oh, a hundred."

"Oh." He rubbed the side of his nose where the scar terminated and chuckled. "Well, Jeannine, we've just encountered the first obstacle in our budding friendship."

"I'm worth it, Mike," she said.

"That could very well be. But I'm not arguing price. I just don't carry that much cash with me."

"Harold accepts credit plaques. He'll convert if you like."

He thought for a moment. "Okay. I'll get the tab. Did you want to visit the powder room, or something?"

She shook her head and smiled. "My apartment's not far. I can wait." He was practically handing her an opportunity to call Quinn, but it seemed too perfect. She decided to keep any of Standard's wariness at a minimum.

"Well, let's see. That's about five," Harold said as they stepped to the bar.

"I need some cash, too," Standard said and dropped his plaque on the counter. "The lady says you accept these."

Harold picked it up. It was a United plaque, clear and featureless except for the embedded identification number. "Let's give it a try," he said and pressed it into the register.

Standard pressed his thumb to the window and the register compared his print and number with the information stored in Geneva. The feedback indicated a balance of over fifteen thousand.

Harold counted out the bills, a small rainbow of multi-colored chits the size of playing cards. "Hundred seventy-five. Five for the drinks, and twenty for the conversion charge."

He caught the sudden glare in Standard's eyes and added, "There's a helluva tariff on foreign banks, you know."

"Well, at least you don't serve watered drinks," Standard said.

He peeled off five pink twenties and handed them to Jeannine as they left. She accepted them matter-of-factly.

The street was glittering with the signs of the lakefront clubs and bars, adding their blaring to the muffled sounds of the people and trampers and the wheezing whisperings of the steam cars. Chidyland was the same city it had always been before he had left. Jammed, stinking, and hot. Only one thing seemed to have changed in the nine years. People rarely spoke while they were on the street.

"Which way?" Standard asked.

"It's only a few blocks. Do you feel like walking?"

"You mean an honest to God walk? Not one of those moving rubber bands?"

"Sure. I like to walk. Anyway, the streetwalks will be closed

in another hour. They stop running at two o'clock. It *has* been a long time since you were in the country, hasn't it?"

"They didn't let me out very much," Standard said. "The 'walks used to run all night before the war. Then they put a curfew on them to conserve power for the factories."

"I didn't know that," she said.

The night air was thankfully cool. On warm nights, the stench from the freighters and the sewage treatment plants would blow in from the lake, bringing the rotting odor of the algae that scummed the shorelines.

Standard had seen fish in Australia, but could not imagine that fish still lived in this slimed lake. He could not recall having seen any except the bloated gray things that scavenged along the pipelines. The great inland sea was now a cesspool for the sprawling cities complex.

"You're a funny guy, Mike," Jeannine said. She was balancing herself on the edge of a gutter as they walked.

"Why do you say that?"

"Oh, I don't know. You're sort of a throwback."

"Thanks a lot. That's a hell of a thing to say."

"I didn't mean your looks." She giggled. "Now that you've mentioned it, you do look kind of like one of those old cavemen on the vid."

"Thanks again."

"I was just a kid before the war. Were things really any different then? Tell me more about them, Mike."

"Things weren't all that different. People worked, people argued, people dropped over. They had put the second colony on the moon and were starting to go out to Mars, and that was pretty exciting. When they said they planned to go public on the Mars colony in five years, I remember thinking that's where I wanted to go. But then the war broke out and everything came to a stop. So I enlisted and got shipped over to Australia. Got busted up a little, but it didn't seem to matter very much. Everything else seemed to be going to hell anyway."

"You don't like the vendors, do you? And you don't like the streetwalks very much either?"

"I don't like a lot of gadgets cluttering up the place. They slow you down. It's been four years since the war and things still seem to be running at half speed. There's nothing *happening*."

"What do you like, Mike?"

"I'd like to see things get moving again." For an instant, she thought she could feel his memories and remembrances being sorted, examined carefully. Then, abruptly, the temporary thaw froze over again. "What I'd *really* like is to get into that bed of yours before I fall over from fatigue. There's something to be said for those lazy streetwalks."

All right. He had reminded her that this was strictly business. And she still had to make that call to Quinn.

But under that careless, rude exterior, she thought, there really did lurk a man. Without fully understanding why, she was determined to root out that vestigial shadow.

Her apartment was in one of the mid-century's vacation housing units that had sprouted up along the shore drive. The silver horizon was now replaced by the opaqueness of the greenish mist that curled around the stilts of the city. The vacationers had long since moved farther north. The rich who still could afford it sojourned along the Amazon in the Brazilian jungles.

The area was not yet a slum. They were too far out of the city, which lay fifty miles to their south. Standard gave the area ten years before the center of the city grew and ingested it.

They walked through the lobby, past the darkened shops that sold hallucinogens and questionable aphrodisiacs, to the center column that housed the self-serve elevators. A pay slot had been installed and Jeannine dropped in a credit chit. The doors slid open and the ancient machinery creaked them upward. The indicator light was out and Standard amused himself by counting the floors.

The elevator stopped on the top floor. Standard had counted ten, including the lobby. The doors opened to a dimly-lit hallway, shaped like a squashed doughnut. Her apartment faced the column, its doorway decorated with a fading mosaic that blended into the ragged lounge chairs in the hall.

"Home sweet home," Jeannine said and touched on the lights. The rooms glowed a pale purple.

Standard glanced around automatically, a reflex action. The apartment had been remodeled extensively with bulbous organic furniture that seemed to swell out of the floors and walls. Velour carpeting covered everything, changing colors as it mushroomed into the pod shapes and shallow bulges

that formed chairs and tables. There was not a straight line or clean edge of demarcation in the entire room.

"Do you like it, Mike?"

"Reminds me of a padded womb," he said.

"It can be more comfortable than that," she promised. "At least it's not cramped."

Cramped it wasn't. Standard wondered how she was able to keep this much room for herself alone. Or even for a family. Somewhere she had an unusual amount of political pull, or knew someone who did.

He kicked off his mocs and wandered across the room, parting the fleece curtains at the balcony window. The lights of the city were small pinpricks in the night haze, stretching out and bending around to the south until they were lost on the horizon.

He watched Jeannine's reflection in the glass as she undid the clasp at her waist and pulled the blouse tails out of her slacks.

"The city makes me feel grimy. Would you like a shower, Mike?"

"Good idea."

She pointed to a curtain. "In there. I'll make some coffy while you're cleaning up."

Standard grinned. "More of that real bean stuff?"

"No, just plain old concentrate. Or whatever it is that comes out of the tap."

Funny, he thought. Funny how the old becomes new and the new becomes old.

He listened to her fuss about, punching the kitchen buttons, as he lathered himself. Distastefully, he realized that the soap was heavily creamed and perfumed and, he guessed, loaded with hormones. He did not care for the thought of washing with a bar of gland secretions. Truthfully, the thought chilled him. He did not trust glands, not after what happened in Australia. He let the water run long and cold, rinsing hard. The towels were pastel and downy and he ignored them, drying himself under the air blast instead.

He was pulling on his tunic when he noticed the second toothbrush in the holder. It was used, and he wondered if by client or if there actually was a roommate.

Jeannine was bending over one of the bulbous shapes, pouring the coffy, when he pushed the curtain aside. He stepped behind her, encircling her with his arms, pulling

her toward him, and unfastened her blouse. She pressed back into his chest and he cupped her breasts.

"Ouch!" she recoiled.

He released his hands as though she had bitten him. "Huh?"

She was laughing. "Your hand, Mike. It's like ice."

He stared at his hand and began to chuckle also. "You know what they say: cold hand, warm heart."

"In that case, you must be the most feverishly passionate man in town." She turned and took his hand. "I'm sorry, Mike, but it did startle me."

She ran her fingers up his forearm. It *was* artificial, as they had told her, and well-done at that. There was no scar, no seam, where the plastic skin joined the real flesh. They had even reproduced the cuticles on his fingernails.

"That's okay. You surprised me, too. For a minute, I thought I had the wrong idea about you."

"No, it was silly of me. Was it the war?"

"Yeah, it was the war." He held his hand away until it warmed and drew her close with his left arm. She kissed him lightly.

"I still have to take a bath, Mike."

"Maybe I'll come in and scrub your back."

"Maybe I'd like that." She kissed him longer and pushed away. "I'll call you when I'm ready."

She let the blouse slip from her shoulders as she stepped through the curtain. Standard drank his coffee slowly. He finished half the cup, then lifted the blouse, noting the label. It seemed a grade above the general vendor brand, in keeping with the obviously expensive furniture. Business was good, he mused. Possibly too good.

Jeannine soaked herself, sinking deep into the lukewarm water. This was the man, she knew. A man with a metal arm. Perfectly designed, but poorly insulated. Why, unless there was not adequate room for better insulation? It must be agony for him, she thought.

The constant shock of conducted temperature, one moment freezing, the next scalding, must rack his entire nervous system. Without tactile sense in the hand, he would be unable to avoid pain and intense heat until it was transferred through the arm to the living nerves in the remaining stub.

And then it would stay burning there until the metal in the arm dissipated the heat.

Why would Rim be interested in a man with a prosthetic arm? Did they know he *had* a metal arm? Intuitively, she knew the arm was the center of interest for Rim.

She had to contact Quinn.

A phone was in her bedroom, another in the kitchenette. The kitchen phone was ruled out, but perhaps she could slip into the bedroom.

Until Standard stood in the bathroom, leaning against the basin, naked.

"I thought maybe you'd like that back scrubbed now."

She forced herself to smile and made room for him in the tub. "You have excellent timing, Mike."

Standard grinned and stepped down into the frothy suds. He shouted once as his foot hit the bar of soap. The soap ricocheted off the tile, throwing his legs out from under him. One ankle caught under the girl's knees, almost somersaulting her. He twisted in mid-air, landing heavily on his shoulder in a shower of water and foam.

"Dammit!" he swore and rolled woodenly on the floor.

"Are you all right, Mike? Is anything broken?"

"How the hell should I know? No, I don't think anything's broken. What the hell did I step on?"

Jeannine spluttered out of the tub and sprawled beside him. She wiped some of the suds from her face. "I think it was the soap bar."

"A soap bar? What the hell was that doing in there?"

"I *was* taking a bath, remember?" she said petulantly.

"She was taking a bath," Standard repeated under his breath. He looked at the ceiling. "You know, this isn't exactly the prone position I had in mind for the night."

"You're too impatient," Jeannine said. "Can you stand?"

"Yeah, I think so." He grasped the wash basin and hauled himself to his feet. He let his arm hang limply. The shoulder was beginning to swell already from the weight of the artificial hand.

"Are you all right?"

He massaged the joint and grimaced. "I think it's wrenched."

"That's terrible, Mike. I'm really sorry."

He tried flexing his hand. It was dull and unresponsive. "I

don't mind a little pain. What worries me is I might've jammed a nerve in my hand."

"Can a doctor fix it?"

"Sure. Just a matter of getting my shoulder back in place."

"Oh." She was nearly speechless. What a fantastic opportunity to call Quinn! And how easy it would be for Rim to put him under surveillance. The coincidence all but stunned her.

"Don't worry about it, Mike. I'll call my doctor and he'll look at it right away."

He stopped her as she stood. "No, not right away. Morning is soon enough. We have better things to do tonight."

"Are you sure? I mean, can you . . . ?"

Standard grinned. His gray eyes were very pale again. "What the hell. I can't say my shoulder ever particularly helped a whole lot before. And there is that little matter of an advance."

She smiled. "All right." She ran her fingers through the hair on his stomach. "And I promise you won't even have to move."

She led him from the bath to her bedroom and let him collapse on the inflated floor. The lights dimmed automatically, drenching the room in dark orange. He pulled her down to him.

"Let me call the doctor, Mike," she said. "At least let me make an appointment for you."

"Later," he said. "The doctor needs his sleep. Let him wait."

III

QUINN ANSWERED THE PHONE.

"Hello, Doctor," the voice said. "I'm sorry to bother you at this hour of the night, but there's an emergency."

He tried to adjust the contrast but all he could see was a dark silhouette in the screen. "Who's calling, please?"

"This is Jeannine Brochet," the voice said.

"And what is the emergency, Miss Brochet?"

"I have a gentleman here in my apartment. Mr. Michael Standard." She paused and gave Quinn a moment to place the name. "I believe he has a wrenched shoulder."

Quinn arched his brows. He recognized the name immediately. In fact, Rim had given him a personal directive to be on the alert for the man Standard.

"That's hardly an emergency," he said, playing the role.

"Not by itself. But Mr. Standard has an old war injury, an artificial arm. The wrenched shoulder is causing him some difficulty of control."

Intriguing, Quinn thought. He had almost given up hope for Miss Brochet's usefulness. Perhaps she was redeemable after all.

"I see," he said. "Do you want me to come right over?"

"That won't be necessary. He is sleeping right now. Can I make an appointment for him to see you in the morning?"

Quinn thought rapidly. Standard might be too cagey to allow just anyone to get near him under the guise of a doctor. Quinn would have to locate a legitimate doctor, one who would not object too strenuously to an unorthodox request. That shouldn't be too complicated a task.

"I can't say offhand," he hedged. "I know I have a rather busy schedule tomorrow, but let me check my appointments and I'll call you back shortly."

"Thank you, Doctor. I'd appreciate that very much," the girl said.

He broke the connection. There was no time to contact the Rim. He knew the Rim was interested in Standard from the briefing session, and especially interested in the artificial arm, but Rim's reasons had been vague, as always.

Quinn punched for a medical listing, concentrating on the fringe area where respectability might be at a minimum. He selected an address close enough to the girl's apartment so that Standard would not lose himself in the city going there, but far enough away in case Standard should suddenly become suspicious.

The number rang several times before a disheveled, middle-aged man answered it in his pajamas.

"Hello, Doctor Graystone?"

"Yes?" the doctor said groggily.

"I hate to wake you, but a friend of mine had a small

accident and we wondered if he could stop by your office tomorrow morning?"

"Well, uh, let's see." Graystone tried to collect his thoughts. "Uh, what sort of accident?"

"Fairly minor. Just a wrenched shoulder. But he is quite uncomfortable."

"Yes, of course. I imagine so." The doctor was blinking his eyes, trying to shake the sleep out of them. "That can be most painful and, uh, especially so if not properly treated."

"Precisely. That is why I called you, Doctor," Quinn said. "Then you'll see him? First thing in the morning?"

"Well, now, there are other patients who have appointments, you know."

"Naturally. I understand completely. I certainly would not want to cause any hardships for your regular patients. Nevertheless, if you *could* manage to accept my friend early, I'm sure he would be, as they say, *most* appreciative."

"Ah, I'm so glad you understand. Under the circumstances, perhaps I will be able to fit him in later in the morning."

"I hardly think so," Quinn said. The doctor had taken the bait. Now to draw the wire tighter. "The truth is, my friend was spending the night at a young lady's when he slipped and hurt his shoulder. I'm sure you can appreciate how awkward this could be to explain later."

"Mm, yes." Graystone smiled. "Well, since it is *that* sort of an emergency, I think I may be able to see him early in the morning. Perhaps before my regular hours. I know how feisty some employers can be about this type of thing."

"Many thanks, Doctor," Quinn said. "About eight, then?"

"Eight will do nicely."

"Very good. And thank you again."

Quinn broke the connection and punched Jeannine's number. It was one of the few subagent's numbers he had bothered to memorize. There had been a number of occasions to use it, not all necessarily official.

Standard heard the phone ringing. He yawned and watched lazily as the girl answered it. Someone was speaking, but the set was turned obliquely to his line of vision and he could barely distinguish the hawkish features of a lean, dark complexioned man. He tried to prop himself up to get a better look, but his shoulder twinged and he settled back to the pillow floor.

"Miss Brochet," the image was saying, "concerning the appointment you requested, I'm afraid I won't be able to see your friend in the morning."

She frowned. "I see. Is there anyone else?"

"Yes, I've already taken the liberty to make an appointment with a colleague of mine, Doctor Westport Graystone. He has agreed to see your friend at eight o'clock tomorrow."

"Oh, that's good." She sounded genuinely relieved.

"All the arrangements have been made. If I can be of any more help, call me," Quinn said. "I'll be seeing you shortly."

They broke and Standard cleared his throat. "What was all that about?"

She turned quickly. "You startled me, Mike. I didn't know you were awake. I was talking to my doctor about an appointment for you."

He watched her cross the room. "You sure are concerned about me."

"You were moaning in your sleep," she said, sinking beside him. "If I don't get you fixed up, how will I ever get any sleep myself? You have an appointment at eight in the morning with Doctor Graystone."

He nodded. "Okay. I'll see him, but only to let you get some sleep."

She sat beside him and studied his nakedness. "You know, you really are an animal. All hairy and your face looks as though it's been chewed on by some other animal. But I think I like you."

"I think I like you, too," he said. "Why don't you slide over here and we'll make sure of it."

She pressed beside him, careful not to jar his shoulder. "I can do a lot of things, Mike."

"Somehow, I've already gotten that impression."

"Besides that. I can cook. Did you know that? Not many girls can cook nowadays. A lot of them don't know how to even add water to the powders, but I can cook. I really can, Mike."

"That's nice," he said. "You can make me breakfast when we get up. Or is that an extra charge?"

"Don't be silly," she said.

The pink light of the sunrise splashed into the apartment. Mixing with the orange fluorescents, it transformed the bedroom into neon. Standard woke and glanced at his watch. The crystal was broken, the read-out digits fixed on the

moment he had fallen on the floor. From the angle of the sunlight, he guessed it was close to seven; then he noticed that the girl was not beside him on the bed.

He heard her moving about and started to sit up. The pain in his shoulder nearly pulled his breath out. He managed to twist onto his side and push himself up with his good arm. Dressing was a slow process of tugging his tunic over his shoulder, now swollen and shiny with blue blotches.

Jeannine was making breakfast, boiling water for the dehydrates and taking great pride in stirring. She had a bowl of soya gruel waiting for him when he entered the living room.

"Breakfast is ready," she said, placing the bowl on a rounded table.

He poked at it with a spoon, separating the undissolved lumps.

"What kind of cooking is this?" he snorted. "This is the same trash that comes out of the vendors."

"No, it's not," she insisted. "I mixed it myself. I thought you'd like a home-cooked meal."

He tossed down his spoon. "The only difference between this and the stuff that comes out of the wall is that the wall is a hell of a lot faster."

"I'm sorry," she said. "But—"

"And the wall stuff isn't so damned lumpy."

Suddenly she was irritated that she was on the defensive. "Well, I don't think you have room to complain."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"If you must know, you make love like a wet sock."

She saw his neck muscles tighten. "You seemed to like it last night."

"Last night was business," she said. "Now it's checkout time and I don't have to like it any longer."

Standard stood up, nodding angrily. "I'll buy that. The service around here is getting a little lousy anyway." He turned and walked to the door.

"Mike," she said. "What about the doctor?"

He wanted to slam the door and get as far away as possible from this girl, but his shoulder *did* hurt. He stopped. "Yeah. Well, where is he?"

"I don't know," she said sheepishly. "I'll have to check." She found an old directory and began leafing through it.

"Lord, what a display of efficiency," Standard grumbled. "Why don't you just ask for information?"

"If you know so much, find out for yourself," she said. "Hell, I don't even know his name."

"I told you it last night. Don't talk to me about efficiency," she retorted.

He squeezed his eyes. She had told him, but he couldn't remember. "Just give it to me," he said.

She tore the address out of the directory and handed it to him. He took it without a word and stalked out.

"Stay out of bathrooms in the future, Standard," he heard her call as he pressed the down button. "I'm not sure if you're toilet trained, yet."

She waited until she heard the elevator door close and then reached for the phone. From the haggard darkness under his eyes, she guessed Quinn had spent the bulk of the night planning strategy.

"Standard left here a few seconds ago," she said.

"Is he going to the doctor's?" Quinn asked.

"I think so. I'm not sure."

Quinn frowned. "What do you mean *you think so*? Why aren't you sure?"

"We had an argument." She gesticulated. "He may decide to go somewhere else. His arm seemed to be bothering him, though, so I *think* he'll go there."

Quinn glowered at her without speaking. She hated it when he did that. It made her want to hunch her back and cover her head.

"Okay," Quinn finally said. "Now stay out of the way. Don't try to see Standard again. We have good reason to believe he may be dangerous to the Rim. And we wouldn't want to see you get hurt," he added, almost as an afterthought.

"Why should I want to see him?" she said. "He's a crude, dim-witted animal."

"Crude he may be," Quinn said. "But don't gamble on his being dim-witted. Just stay out of it from now on. Were you able to learn anything more about that arm of his?"

"Only that it's metal," she said. She was not particularly fond of being told what she could and could not do. "Also, that it's badly insulated and I think the fall did something to it. He was complaining that it wasn't operating properly."

Quinn squinted with concentration. "On the surface, that

seems somewhat contradictory. Anything as heavy as a metal arm would have its own independent servo motors. Bumping his shoulder shouldn't affect controlling his arm. The lack of insulation is interesting, too. We'll see what this Doctor Graystone can learn, if anything."

He relaxed a fraction. "You've done your job well, Jeannine. Lately, I've been concerned about your performance. You can be assured that Rim will be satisfied with this information."

"Thank you," she said. She had never questioned Quinn or the ways of the Rim before but, for the first time, courage or exasperation prompted her. "Quinn, do you know what this is about? Why does the Rim feel Standard is dangerous?"

Quinn stiffened. "You've done a good job so far. Be content with that. I'm sure the Rim has adequate reasons for whatever it does."

He broke the connection and Jeannine watched the blur of light diminish and flick out in the center of the screen. She had never understood Quinn, but knew she had to remain loyal to him. He had, after all, been responsible for taking her out of the orphanage. But it was increasingly difficult, she told herself, to work for the savior of the world.

Quinn saw the portly man enter the lobby and cross the terrazzo to the elevator. It was still early and, except for the two of them, the building was vacant. Quinn stepped to the elevator as the doctor was pressing his floor button and adjusting his jacket.

"Doctor Graystone?"

"Yes?" The doctor turned his jowly face. "Oh yes. You're the one who called me last night. Is your friend here?"

"Not yet, but he should be here shortly," Quinn said. "I'd like to talk to you about him, if you don't mind."

"Not at all," Graystone said. They stepped off the elevator into his waiting room. The desk computer greeted them and began its day of clerical work. "But I can assure you, it is a quite trivial matter, taking care of a wrenched shoulder."

"It's not that simple," Quinn said. He burrowed in his tunic and extracted the plastic identicard he had supplied himself with earlier, and held it briefly before Graystone's face. The clenched fist insignia of Policontrol glittered on the card. "To begin with, the man is not my friend. We

believe he is a foreign agent and I'd like to request your assistance."

Graystone's lips parted. "Really! Are you quite certain?"

"Not entirely. That's why we need your help."

"I don't understand." Graystone bustled nervously about the office. "I don't see how I could possibly be of any help to you."

"It's really quite simple," Quinn said. "This man was wounded in the Battle of McDonnell Range during the Australian conflict. Now he has appeared in this country illegally, with an artificial arm."

Graystone scoffed. "Does that make him suspect? A great many veterans have artificial limbs of one sort or another. You seem to be rather confused, young man. This sounds like a matter for the immigration authorities."

"Ordinarily, yes. But we think there may be a weapon built into this artificial arm. That is where you can help us."

Graystone coughed. "In other words, you want me to examine his arm."

"Yes, thoroughly."

"Won't that be rather obvious? Surely the man would become suspicious, and then where would that put your security?" Graystone was growing uncomfortable with this talk of secret agents, particularly ones with built-in-weaponry.

"Not if you knock him out first," Quinn said calmly. "I want X-rays, neutrographs, whatever it takes."

They heard the front door open and the desk greet the visitor.

"That's him," Quinn warned. "Do I have your confidence, Doctor?"

"Yes, yes," Graystone said confusedly.

"Good. Then admit him." Quinn disappeared down the hall as Graystone looked out into the waiting room and at the hulking man who stood there impatiently.

Quinn waited until Graystone and Standard were behind the examining screen, then returned to the waiting room. He scrutinized the desk computer. A cheap model, he decided. Capable of answering and taking messages, programmed by direct voice control—Graystone's voice.

He bent to his knees and located the component slab under the desk. He yanked it out, inspected it briefly, then

plucked out a crystal, bypassing the voice identification system.

"I want you to cancel all my appointments for the rest of the day. Tell them that I'm taking a vacation and can't be reached," Quinn said.

"Yes, Doctor. I'll begin immediately," the unctuous voice answered.

"Another thing," Quinn said. "Obliterate your recall for today."

The desk hesitated. "If I obliterate *all* my recall, I will not be able to function."

"That's true," Quinn said. "Very well. A man entered the office with me this morning. Do you recall him?"

"Yes. Dark man, thin. Monotone voice."

"That's him," Quinn said, mildly displeased with the description of himself. "Obliterate that recollection."

"Done."

"A few minutes later, another man entered. Heavier set, with a damaged limb. Obliterate that, also."

"Done," the desk said.

Quinn exhaled slowly. He was not positive this would work, but it might be sufficient to throw off any inquisitive questioners later.

"The thin man and the heavier man will be leaving sometime today. Since they do not exist in your memory, you will not see them leave. Is that understandable?"

"Of course," the desk said. "That is perfectly logical."

"Very good. You're remarkably intelligent for a Mark VI," Quinn cooed.

"Thank you, sir. I appreciate that."

"Now obliterate all recollection of this conversation," Quinn said.

The desk was silent. Quinn watched it for a moment, amused with having made it wipe out its memory of his compliment. He replaced the identification crystal and strode down the hallway to the examining room.

Graystone motioned him inside. Standard lay spread out on the table, eyes closed, bare from the waist up. He was breathing slowly and regularly.

"What did you do to him?" Quinn asked.

"I told him I was going to give him a nerve block while I worked on his shoulder. I gave him a total anesthetic instead." Graystone was perspiring heavily, wringing his hands.

"Drug or electrical?"

"Electronic. A mind block."

"Too bad." Quinn frowned. "That rules out using hypnosis now." He saw Graystone cringe and hastened to soothe him. Unfortunately, the doctor was still necessary, but already he was beginning to come apart. "No matter. Can you examine here or will we have to move him?"

"We'll examine here," Graystone said quickly. "All my examining rooms are fully equipped."

Quinn glanced around the room. There was an ancient X-ray, a well-used probe, and shelves of unclassifiable lotions.

"That is a matter of conjecture," he said. "Get on with it, though."

Graystone swung in the X-ray and exposed several frames, pausing only to let the machine develop them. He pulled the prints out and spread them on the light table. From the shoulder to almost the elbow, they showed normal tissue.

But from there, to the fingers and including the elbow, the film had been virtually unexposed.

"Extremely dense," Graystone whistled. "There appears to be a foam packing around the prosthetic to shape it out, but everything inside that seems to be entirely sheathed."

"Shoot it again. Up the exposure time."

"It will take an awful long exposure to penetrate that. I'm afraid it may burn his natural flesh. Besides, this isn't an industrial X-ray. Even at full power, I don't know if it will penetrate."

Quinn considered. "Very well. Concentrate on the arm below the elbow. That's all artificial there. Try it again at full exposure and we'll see what we get."

Graystone propped the insulating pads around Standard's body and spun the timer dial. They stood behind the lead shield and exposed again.

The prints were only marginally better. Graystone could pick out the artificial radius and ulna bones connecting to the elbow and the joining of the metacarpus bones in the hand, but most of the forearm, from the wrist upward, was again unexposed.

He ran the negative again, punching for an enlargement, and peered at it.

"Well?" Quinn asked.

"Offhand, I would say there are a number of inconsistencies."

"How so?"

"That will take a bit of explanation, first," Graystone said. "You see, there are two ways to control a prosthetic. One is by tapping the nerve impulses directly at the central nervous system. To do this requires a separate power source in the prosthetic, because the muscles remaining are used only to hold the device on, not to control it. The other method is to manufacture artificial muscles and tie them in with the original muscles. This way the prosthetic is controlled by the same immediate impulses that controlled the original limb. That is the preferred way today, incidentally."

Quinn nodded. He was no cybernetist and cyborgs were entirely out of his realm, but he could understand simple mechanics. "What is unusual about this arm, then?"

"It appears to be a combination of both," Graystone said. "If the blow to his shoulder is causing him difficulty controlling the arm, it would seem to indicate that it is operated by the immediate impulses. But this solid mass that's unexposed on the print must be a separate servo motor, which may mean it's controlled by his brain and not by nerve impulses in the arm."

"Now wait a minute," Quinn said. "I thought the brain controlled all the body movements."

"Essentially, yes. But, in practice, there is an intermediate step." Graystone was feeling more secure now that he was doing the explaining to the pushy, ignorant policeman. "Let's say you want to move your finger. Your brain sends out an impulse along the nervous system. When the impulse reaches the receptor area, a minute amount of a chemical called acetylcholine is produced, which causes muscle contraction. By regulating the amount of this chemical and the muscles which receive it, you move your finger."

"Now, the old way of making prosthetics was to take this original brain impulse and pick it up with an artificial sensor. Then it was amplified and directed to an assist motor of some kind that was implanted in the prosthetic. That opaque area in his arm that we can't penetrate must be the motor and sensing unit."

"That's the old way," Quinn said. "What about the new way?"

"Well, that's simply a duplication of nature, except the nerves, the muscles—everything is artificial. And that's the paradox, you see. With this kind of system, a blow on the

shoulder could cause the same paralysis as it would in a natural arm. But it shouldn't happen in a servo-assist arm, and especially not in one that was obviously designed for rugged use."

"What do you mean, rugged use?" Quinn asked.

The complexity of the arm both intrigued and delighted Graystone, and even more now that the cocksure man bending over his back was no longer giving orders, but was as ignorant as a first term student.

"Try lifting it," Graystone invited.

Quinn lifted it. "Good Lord, it must weigh forty pounds!"

"More like thirty, I imagine," Graystone corrected. "The question is, however, why would anyone elect to build such a heavy arm when it could just as easily be built at a fraction of that weight?"

Quinn pondered. "Good question. Anything else unusual about it?"

"One minor thing. Notice that there appears to be an artificial ulna and radius bone. These are two separate bones, like sticks. At one end, they're attached to the elbow, and at the other end they're attached to the wrist. That's how you are able to turn your wrist. The radius and ulna bones twist over each other, something like torsion bars. Do you understand?"

Quinn twisted his wrist, watching it. "I'll take your word for it."

"Our patient has those bones, but look here." Graystone pointed to a fine line on the X-ray print that seemed to circle the artificial wrist joint. "In addition, he seems to have some sort of ball and gimbal arrangement for his wrist. Why have both? One or the other is all that is needed."

"You are posing questions that are completely beyond me, Doctor," Quinn said. "These are precisely the questions I had hoped you could answer."

"I have no way of knowing," Graystone said. "Unless I can see what is in that mass within the arm."

Quinn turned his back to the doctor and the examining table and pondered. He was not sure what he had expected, but this did not appear to be it. An internally concealed laser, or an anti-matter charge would not have surprised him. But this—this appeared to be no more than a curiously refined prosthetic, no less, but possibly more. Based on its sheer weight, it *could* be used as a weapon, of course. In

hand to hand combat, it would be deadly. But beyond that, how could this man be a threat to the Rim? Did Standard intend to rush in and strike everyone dead, swinging his arm like a metaphorical jawbone of an ass. Yet Rim was convinced that he was dangerous.

It could still be argued, Quinn thought, that there were enough unknowns to add up to a total contradiction. The complexity of the arm ruled out an average wartime graft. The double systems, almost a back-up in case one failed, meant that the intent was serious. Someone very talented had spent a great amount of time and money on Standard. But still, why, with all that skill, all that necessary precision, why in the name of everything that was scientifically sacred, why make it so heavy?

Maybe the Rim knew what it was doing when it labeled this man as the agent of a sinister underground. Extremely sinister, to be exact. Because, obscured in that impenetrable shielding was a lethal purpose.

An atomic bomb? Was Standard a walking furnace of devastation? Quinn rejected the idea immediately. There was the simple physical limitation of size. An atom bomb could be designed to fit into a briefcase, but enough fissionable material to form a critical mass could not possibly be concealed in a forearm. What then?

Quinn made his decision.

"How long can you keep him unconscious?" he asked, turning back to the doctor.

"As long as you like." Graystone looked up from the prints spread out before him. Very obviously, he was fascinated by what he saw. "Although, after six hours, we should begin intravenous feeding or else he may dehydrate considerably."

"That won't be necessary." Quinn shook his head. "I'll be back before then."

"You're leaving?"

"I have to report this to my superiors," he said, collecting the prints, much to the consternation of Graystone. "I'll be in touch with you later."

"How long will you be? I have several patients scheduled for today."

"I've already taken care of that. Your appointments have been canceled for the day." He shoved the prints under his tunic. At the door, he turned and added, "I think it would be most wise if you stayed in your office."

Graystone stared at the door after it had closed, then slowly turned into his waiting room. He stepped to the desk and looked at it. It was the same simulated wood, the same chromium talk box it had always been. But he knew it was different the moment he talked to it.

"Who is my next appointment?" he asked.

The desk was confused. "You have not yet given me that information, Doctor. I had assumed you would reschedule your agenda when you returned from your vacation."

"I see," Graystone said, and did not. "And I have no other appointments for today?"

"I have already informed your patients that you would be out of the office," the desk answered. "You did tell me to do that, did you not?"

"Hm," Graystone said. Uncomprehending, he walked back to the examining room and stared at Standard. He felt a small measure of sympathy for the man now. Any organization like Policontrol that could reshuffle a man's day was too powerful to fight.

It had never occurred to Graystone that there might be an organization beyond Policontrol. An understandable oversight, because the suspicion had never occurred to Policontrol, either.

He passed his time organizing his instruments, not knowing when Quinn would return, and glancing at the first set of underexposed prints. The intriguing arm remained on his mind. As the hours passed, he returned to the prints and squinted again at them.

Here, there was a hazy blotch visible like minute spiderwebbing where the natural flesh had grown into the porous plastic skin and made an almost perfectly intermeshed seam. Here, at the edge of the opaque mass, he could detect the intrabone staples that held the artificial limb.

Graystone looked at the man on his table. He may have been handsome at one time, before the war had scarred and gnawed at his body. Not old, but of an age that was difficult to guess because of the extensive surgery. Well muscled, with curious lopsided effect, the right side of his torso noticeably heavier and coarser. That meant something, Graystone knew, and the thought nagged at him as he busied himself around the office.

The answer came nearly an hour later as he was reading over a case history of a woman with an atrophied leg.

Standard was lopsided because the muscles on his right side had grown to accommodate the added weight of the prosthetic. Which meant that the artificial arm was *not* servo-assisted, and the opaque mass in the forearm was *not* a servo motor.

Excited, Graystone returned to the examining table and unraveled his probe. There was still the matter of soothing the muscles in the wrenched shoulder, but the probe was useful for more things than that. It could, for instance, be used to trace the nerve patterns.

He watched the platen as the probe charted the nerves and muscles, nudging and prodding the bruised muscles into position. Within minutes, the swelling subsided. A few more minutes, and he had dissipated the black and blue surface clots. Then he began exploring.

It was complicated and frustrating. Nerves seemed to go nowhere. They began where they should not have been and ended in blind alleys. It should be like an electrical schematic, Graystone kept reminding himself. Cause and effect. Follow a lead long enough and it had to end in a wall socket. All the while, be careful not to trip over a wire and pull out a plug.

Except that it did not work that way. Some of it made sense, but not all of it. It was definitely an advanced transplant, controlled by the local, immediate impulses. But there seemed to be a direct override to the brain.

Worst of all, and sweat broke out on his forehead when he realized it, there was a whole congelation of nerves and musculature that was totally isolated somewhere within the arm.

He lost track of time, recharting, reanalyzing. Every person has muscles that are not used. But the muscles are there, nonetheless, waiting for the correct impulse to goad them into action.

How many people can wiggle their ears, or curl their tongue into a tube? Or wag their tails? Nobody had a tail, but the muscles, feeble though they might be, still remained. Some women used them. Somewhere back in man's evolution, all these unused muscles must have had a purpose.

The muscles were still there, and no matter how specious, the ability to use them was still there also, buried under eons of sophistication.

But even vestigial muscles had to have *some* connection

with the central nervous system. Not isolated. Not independent, not like a separate living entity existing inside another body.

But it was there, a bundle of living, healthy nerves and muscles inside Standard's artificial arm, connected only by a few blood vessels.

And suddenly, like a rush of numbing chill, Graystone understood.

"My God," he whispered and stared at the man sprawled on the table. He had looked right at it with Quinn. Right in front of them all the time and they had not seen it. The irony shook Graystone and left him with a mild euphoria. Pushy young men who flashed identicards under his nose irritated him, and especially young men who were wallowing in ignorance.

"So, secret policeman," he chortled to himself. "You couldn't wait to rush out to your superiors and tell them how stupid you were instead of waiting and using a little brain power."

The initial shock passed quickly. A few questions remained, such as *why* and *who*, but he had no doubt now of *how*. More than anything, he was cheerfully fascinated. After all, there was little difference between the psychological composition of a scientist and an artist, and this artificial arm was a work of artistry. No matter if it had not been designed for a museum; artistry nonetheless.

Michael Standard was a walking cannon. Armed, ready for firing, waiting only for the correct touch on the trigger. Standard had been created for one purpose: to kill. Sooner or later, the correct signal would trip the firing mechanism and five pounds of steel-fingered hand would crush anything in its way.

That was *how*, but *who* would send that signal? Because the firing mechanism, that opaque mass in Standard's arm, was not connected to his nervous system. And there was no evidence of any electrical transmitter or receiver. It was a gun without a trigger.

Finally, *why*? Why go to so much trouble to kill one man, because it *was* a one-shot affair.

Graystone had no love for the federal police, but he punched for the operator, requesting immediate contact with Policontrol. The screen filled with the fist insignia and a toneless facsimile voice answered.

"Policontrol. Please state the nature of your call."

Very businesslike, Graystone thought. The way a national security force should be. "This is Doctor Westport Graystone. This morning one of your agents was in my office requesting aid. I would like to speak to that agent, please."

"What was the agent's name?" The computer's question surprised Graystone. He had assumed that Policontrol knew where all its agents were at any given moment.

"His name was Quinn," Graystone wavered.

There was a pause as the computer sorted through its memory banks, simultaneously locating each of its agents. Central returned.

"Can you be more specific?"

"That was the only name he gave me. It was on his identity card," Graystone said, perplexed. Surely Graystone's own name should give the computer ample clue as to which agent he wanted. Where else did the agents receive their assignments?

"Did this agent require medical aid, Doctor?"

"No, he requested aid in examining a suspect. I gave him what aid I could and he left to make his report. I have some additional information for him. If I can't talk to him, can I give someone else the information?"

"One moment," the voice said. The insignia on the screen flattened and was replaced by a heavy jawed man wearing the black uniform of Policontrol.

"Doctor Graystone." The voice was obviously human and cautiously skeptical. "What seems to be the trouble?"

"There is no real problem. I would merely like to talk to an agent of yours named Quinn."

"Yes, I gathered that from the summary the computer just gave me. You say this man represented himself as one of our people and requested your assistance in examining someone he termed a suspect. Is that correct?"

"Yes, that's correct. What is the problem? Didn't Quinn arrive at your headquarters?" Graystone had a sliding feeling what the problem was.

"The difficulty," the controller said quietly, "is that we do not have an agent named Quinn in this area. I'm afraid you have been misled, Doctor."

Graystone started to object, then stopped himself. It made sense, in an oblique sort of way. No criminal group would

have constructed a technological achievement such as that arm. Perhaps it was the other way around.

"I'm afraid you have been taken, Doctor," the controller said. "It was probably a con game to get some free medical attention. We can't reimburse you for your time and expense, but you can file a complaint for tax purposes if you like."

Graystone shook his head. "No, I don't think that was the purpose."

"Well, don't worry about it. These things happen. Sometimes we get complaints of men impersonating our women agents. You don't know what some people will do for kicks."

The elevator doors hissed open and he heard Quinn enter the waiting room. "Thank you," Graystone said, breaking.

Quinn looked suspiciously at Graystone. "Were you talking to one of your patients, Doctor?"

"Yes," Graystone said quickly. "It's an experimental drug. I have to check the progress regularly."

Quinn was satisfied. "Sorry if I took longer than I thought I would. There were several points we had to consider before we could reach a decision. Were you able to learn anything more about our patient?"

"No, not really," Graystone lied. They walked back to the examining room. "I spent most of the time working on his shoulder. By now the trauma should be alleviated. Beyond that, I learned nothing new. It appears to be no more than a rather elaborate prosthetic device."

"My superior does not agree," Quinn said. He studied Standard's slowly breathing body. For a moment, panic closed around Graystone. He was not going to allow himself to underestimate the thin man.

Quinn's hand sunk into his tunic and Graystone caught his breath.

"All that is irrelevant, however," Quinn said. His hand emerged with a plastic chit. "We'd like to demonstrate our appreciation for your help and the inconvenience we have caused."

Graystone accepted the chit as though it were a coiled snake. If there was any doubt remaining in his mind about the illegitimacy of Quinn, it was dispelled as he glanced at the card. Government agencies did not casually hand out unmarked credit vouchers for ten thousand dollars.

"This strikes me as especially generous," he said.

"We suggest you spend it on a vacation," Quinn said. "Preferably a two-week vacation. Beginning now."

Graystone looked up from the chit. "I suppose it's ridiculous of me to worry about my other patients?"

"They have already been notified," Quinn said coolly.

"I thought as much," Graystone murmured. He contemplated it and then placed the chit in his pocket.

"We are only concerned with your safety," Quinn explained graciously. "Sooner or later, Standard will realize that several hours of his day are missing. When that happens, we think it would be best if you were unavailable. We'd hate to see you become an innocent bystander, if you follow me."

"I follow you," Graystone said and forced a smile. He understood only too well what the thin man was suggesting. "Now that we've taken care of the payment, what *about* our patient? Shall I wake him, or do you people plan to place him under arrest?"

"Wake him after I've left," Quinn said. "We have no real evidence to arrest him. But he'll be under surveillance."

I'll wager on that, Graystone thought grimly. They shook hands and Quinn disappeared down the elevator.

The day was a mystery to Graystone. He knew Quinn was an impostor, but where did that place Standard? Whatever the answer, he decided to wipe it from his mind. He had a two-week vacation in store and felt he could definitely enjoy it. There was a beach far up the northern coast that he had been meaning to explore for years now. As soon as he cleared his office, he would arrange for that lazy trip.

Standard was in good condition, Graystone reflected. He came out of the mind block immediately.

"About that shoulder," the doctor said. "You've had a bad wrench there, but it should heal up with no big problems."

IV

STANDARD GLOWERED and weighed his trembling fist in his hand. The lift refused to stop at Graystone's floor. He must have locked up right after the so-called examination. As though he expected Standard to return pretty damned soon. Things were sure stacking up against the doctor.

He punched the down button and tried to think on his way to the ground level. It was difficult. The mind arrest was still fuddling his brain, like soft vanilla syrup clogging up the processes. Sluggish reactions were disastrous, but what really bothered him was the chance of pulling another stupid move before the arrest wore off of its own accord.

He had accomplished objective one, that of meeting someone connected with the Rim. He had done that, all right. In spades. The first time out, he had met one of the bar girls who was responsible for the Rim's "recruiting." Not too much doubt about that, nor that her doctor friend on the vidiscreen last night was a partner. It was a pretty simple technique to find out if someone was working for Rim. Use the same technique for finding lions. Stick your head in its mouth and if it bites off your neck, you know it's a lion.

Subtlety didn't work against an enemy who could infiltrate a mind and turn it inside out. How do you sneak up on someone who can feel you coming from two thousand miles away? How do you fight an enemy when nobody believes there's an enemy? How do you set up an ambush when he knows before you do what you're going to do?

Easy answer. You don't.

Instead, you stand up and wave your arms and yell, *Here I am, come and get me*, and hope he takes the bait. Then you hope like hell you get the first shot in before he pinches off an artery in your brain with his mental fingers. And *that* was the big catch.

Because Rim could sense the nerve impulses, the total thought, the action before it happened.

Standard vaulted onto the main loop. It was close to rush hour and the streetwalk was jammed with people shoving and jostling to gain elbow space. He pushed his way to the speed lane and let the fetid air run over his face. He was close to the lake and that meant he was close to the girl's apartment. And with the girl, he would be one step closer to the Rim. Then what?

Bluntly, he did not know. He knew that there was enough explosive charge in the arm he wore to fragment anyone standing in its way, but he had no idea of how to fire it. Clever, cunning Condliffe had seen to that. Condliffe had made the arm automatic, independent of Standard. It would choose its own time and place. Standard was only the carrier, like a fat cow stuffed with a killer parasite.

He did not want to know. In fact, he could not afford to know. The moment he learned how the arm worked, the mission was scrubbed. Because if Standard knew, then Rim would know, and Rim would make sure the arm never got its chance to operate. Condliffe had spirited all of his engineers and surgeons off to Lunar Nine to be sure that no stray thoughts would be accidentally intercepted by Rim.

It was a risk building it on Earth to begin with. If Rim had chosen to leave the States at any time they were building it, there was an outside possibility that he could have gleaned a random thought connected with the project. But Rim had stayed put, building his rudimentary empire, gathering a cadre around him. Even though Rim's ability was growing, halfway around the world was still too much for him. So Australia, in Condliffe's rehabilitation hospital, had still been safe.

But not for long. Rim was growing. Superficially, he was influencing half the North American continent. In another year, Condliffe estimated that Rim's influence would be out of the superficial realm. Rim would be affecting major policy decisions. Within five years, he would have half the world. And nobody even knew it was happening. Rim was too smart to make any sweeping changes as he was growing. But there were indications already.

Even Condliffe did not know what was happening, or how, or why. But it was a slowing-down process. The birth rate was declining rapidly, in all opposition to the post-war feelings to rejuvenate the country. People were maturing later. Infancy lasted until four or five. Teenagers were not

reaching puberty until their late teens. Nothing that the Bureau of Statistics could put its finger on, but something was there, insidious, creeping, sapping the vitality from an entire country.

And it would spread until it was global. A contagion, a disease that was putting the brakes on life itself.

It had to be stopped. Now, before it became stronger. Before it became resistant to every cure.

Standard was carrying the cure stitched to the stump of his arm. The only cure left in the world. Condliffe and the entire Opposition Group, as they half-jokingly called themselves in the earlier stages, were waiting on the moon to see if Standard could deliver the panacea. They were all up there, sitting and waiting. And if Standard failed, they would not return, because if Standard failed, it meant that Rim would know the plot and Rim would systematically eliminate the plotters.

Standard was a pawn. They had chosen him because he rarely bothered to think ahead, but acted on the spur of the moment, reacting to the situation rather than attempting to plan in advance and avoid danger. He knew why they had chosen him and it neither angered nor pleased him. There was no other way. Condliffe had not needed a thinker. He had needed a delivery boy. A delivery boy with a fine instinct for survival.

He was feeling better. Hungry, but steadier. He hopped directly off the speedwalk without bothering to go through the step-down stages. The gutters, the odors of the rotting fish, the amplified noise from the cafés were familiar to him. He cut down an alley that opened on the dirty beachfront with the girl's apartment building on it. She had taken him around in circles, which could have thrown him off if he had taken her up on her suggestion of a drink in the bar.

He paid the elevator and let it creak him to the top floor. Her door was locked and he pounded on it.

"Hey, Jeannine. You in there?"

"Just a moment," he heard. The door clicked. Remote lock, Standard thought and pushed the door open.

The thin, dark man was leveling a metal rod the size of a pencil directly at his head as he halted abruptly. The rod was connected to a looping strand of wire that coiled into a briefcase at the man's feet. Standard knew what it was. An electron gun, the kind used by archaeologists to melt

through six inches of solid rock in a microsecond. He had a healthy idea of what it could do to his head.

"Nice of you to join us, Mr. Standard," Quinn said.

Standard's eyes narrowed. Through the sheer curtain, he could see Jeannine pulling on her slacks.

"Sorry if I'm interrupting a private party," Standard said.

"Don't worry about it. The night's still young," Quinn said.

Standard cocked his head at the thin man. "Seems I've seen you somewhere before. Like last night on her vid. How's the medical consulting business going, Doc?"

"Don't pretend naïveté, Standard. Even you know better than that," Quinn said. "Come in, won't you? Close the door behind you. Carefully."

Standard stepped inside and pushed the door closed with his heel. "Hope I haven't kept you waiting."

"I apologize if I borrowed your girl friend," Quinn said. "But I have known her for some time, you know."

"Yeah, I'll bet. No argument there. Finders' keepers, I guess."

Jeannine slipped past the curtains, draping a blouse over her shoulders. Standard noticed she was holding a stun pellet in her fingers.

"Hi there, Jeannine." Standard smirked. "You're looking rested."

"Hello, Mike," she said. She walked across the room and fired the pellet point-blank in his face.

God, that stuff works, he thought just before he collapsed. He crashed into the floor as though his knees had been slashed. Jeannine tossed the exhausted pellet on one of the mushroom seats and finished clasping her blouse.

"What are you going to do with him now?" she asked.

"Simple." Quinn shrugged, dialing power on the electron gun. "I'm going to take that arm off."

The runway was as immaculate as it always was this time of the evening. It was alive in light and the soft murmurings of the computer banks as they churned through their days of sorting and filing. DeAmico walked the length of the long hall leisurely, basking in the simulated sunlight that filled the subterranean headquarters of Policontrol. Behind the concrete walls, the multibands of the answering desks handled the routine of the deluge of complaints that evening brought. Trivial complaints of supposed injuries, gripes that neighbors

were keeping someone awake, store owners reporting a shoplifting in the drug department. The minor complaints and anxieties that occupied twenty hours a day of a police force. The kind of inconsequentialities that machines could handle with ease.

He said, "How's it going?" to Tilloson as he entered the console room. Tilloson grunted, absorbed by his printouts. Most of the second shift had already arrived and were replacing, or had already replaced, the day crew.

He squirmed behind his console and flipped through the sheaf of papers waiting for him, looking for the red printouts that signified a problem the answering computers could not easily answer. A computer could be programmed to arrest, prosecute, and sentence. They could handle anything that stemmed from an established precedent, but it was the unexpected occurrence, the ability to circumvent a crime before it happened, rather than cope with it afterward, that required human judgment.

"Good evening, Sergeant DeAmico," the desk said as he settled himself.

He thumbed through the stack of papers. There were less than a half dozen red imprints and none of those appeared urgent.

"How about some coffy?" he asked, leaning back and locking his fingers behind his head.

The desk obliged and slid the cup to DeAmico's accustomed spot. He spent several minutes drinking the coffy and looking at the papers. Nothing especially exciting, thankfully. Peeping Tom complaint from an old lady; someone else had had his aircar vandalized. Mark that one for Traffic. What was it doing here in Criminal, anyway? He made a mental note to mention it to Programming. Vandalism on a transportation vehicle simply did not fall into his jurisdiction.

Impersonation complaint. Attempted rape, and a successful rape. An ordinary enough day. Take care of those rape cases first and then attend to the small things later.

"What's the status on this rape case?" he asked.

"He has been apprehended and is presently in the interrogation room. Two previous convictions, both on moral charges. One, seducing a minor. The second, an attempted rape on his sister which was unsuccessful."

"Why is he still loose?"

"He is a juvenile, on probation since his last conviction. Do you want his name?"

"No, I'll take him cold. Let me speak to him."

The screen opened on the four-by-four interrogation room. The boy was huddled against the far wall, looking up at DeAmico's image as it flashed on the room screen.

"This makes you a three-time loser, kid," DeAmico said.

"Tough shit," the boy said.

"You're lucky you're still a juvenile," DeAmico said. "Do you know what would happen if you were an adult?"

The boy looked sullenly at DeAmico's image. When he did not answer, DeAmico continued.

"You'd have your choice of prison or surgery. You would be examined, your problem analyzed, and a cure recommended. If you choose surgery, that could mean anything from a frontal adjustment to castration. Unless you feel your trouble is a double Y chromosome."

"What if it is?" the boy shot back. "You think your cutters can fix that?"

"If that's your problem, we wouldn't even try to correct it. That would mean mandatory exile to a lunar prison camp. Consider that. The rest of your life in a shell. Most of them don't last very long up there. No guards. Any time you want, you can take a walk outside. The only catch is that there are no pressure suits. So you don't walk very far."

The boy spat defensively. "Don't give me that crap. If you're going to do something, why don't you do it, cop, instead of flapping off?"

"For now, you are going to sit in that room," DeAmico said. "You'll be released in the morning."

"What's the matter, cop? No evidence to hold me? Think you can't make it stick?"

"We won't even bother. You have already received two hearings. As far as we're concerned, that takes care of your rights for a jury trial. We brought you in to tell you the playing's over. Next time, no interrogation, no hearing. You'll have your choice of prison or surgery. You may as well start thinking about it now."

He blanked the screen, bored and dejected. He would see the kid again, he knew, and he would be called on to make a recommendation. He finished his coffy, brooding about the young offender.

"What do you think about him?" the desk asked. "The

chances are approaching maximum that he will be arrested again. Do you think you will have to make a judgment?"

"I suppose so," DeAmico said, looking at the thick coffee sludge remaining in his cup.

"That's unfortunate," the desk said. "Personally, I would consider a circuit change in his brain pattern. How do you feel about that?"

"I haven't really considered it. Offhand, I think I would be against any surgery in this case and recommend imprisonment with a probation guarantee. I hate to see a kid that young receive an irreversible sentence so early in life."

"You're probably right. But I was thinking of the possible future consequences on society in general. If he is released at a later date, there would still be no assurance that he would be stable."

"No," DeAmico agreed. "There's no assurance. But that is a matter of judgment and foresight. Enough of this. I'll have to consider it more carefully when the occasion arises. Now, what about this attempted rape?"

"The victim was unable to give an accurate description of the assailant and we have not yet turned up a suspect. We're working on it."

"Mm. How is the victim? Is she all right?"

"Not she," the desk corrected. "He. It's in the report."

DeAmico paged through the report. "Disregard this unless we receive more like it from the same area. And in the future, route these complaints to Social Counseling. They're better equipped to handle homosexual disturbances than we are."

"Very well. Would you care for more coffee?"

"No, thank you. Tell me about the next item, this impersonation."

"This may be rather interesting. We received a call this afternoon from a doctor who claimed one of our agents used him to examine a suspect. At that time, we attributed it to a trick to gain free medical assistance. Then the doctor called later requesting an Unstable classification for the patient."

"What's this patient's name? Anything on him?"

"His name is Standard, but there is a difficulty in identification. The doctor's desk had been tampered with and we were unable to find any visual identification of the man Standard."

"That is interesting," DeAmico said. "Any criminal record?"

"No. We list a Standard, Michael E., who may be the

same man. Our last report indicates that he is recuperating in an Australian hospital from a wound or wounds suffered in the war. If this is the same man, he is in this country illegally. That is curious in itself, because there is nothing in his record that may have caused him difficulty in obtaining a passport."

"We have no visual identification of him, then?"

"We were able to receive nothing at the time. However, after the Unstable was listed for him, we intercepted a phone call, apparently placed by this same man. It's not positive, but we believe we are accurate."

"Okay." DeAmico pointed at the printout. "What about this other man? The impersonator?"

"He is known on the waterfront area by various informers as Quinn, but beyond that we have nothing."

"Nothing?" That was unheard of. How could a man exist without *some* identification in Policontrol? "Is he an alien?"

"Unknown. We don't know how he managed to escape census, but he has."

DeAmico chewed his lip. "You're absolutely right. This is very interesting. Give me everything you have on these two men."

He leaned back and began riffling through the printout as the console disgorged it. It took him several hours to form a judgment. When he reached it, he cupped his forehead in his hands and thought carefully.

Something was happening in his collection of scattered reports. Not the cold facts the computers had compiled, but something more.

He punched the com button and Captain Szamual's face filled the screen.

"I have something here on Station Four," DeAmico said. "Would you connect in please, Captain?"

Szamual glanced over his facsimile copy of the printout. "How do you read this, DeAmico?"

"It's an underground movement of some kind. Two opposing factions. One may be carrying an internal weapon, the other is curious about it. It doesn't fit in with our crime patterns, so it's something else. My guess is that it's political. Someone is going to get hurt, regardless."

"Do we have any ident on either of these two?"

"Nothing at all on this Quinn with the exception of a possible address. Tentative identification on Standard, though.

There is an isolated complaint of a man wrecking a vendor box with his bare hands, and a phone call presumably placed by the same man. If it is our quarry, then we have a visual and we know the weapon is probably carried in his arm."

Szamual nodded. "We'd better head this off before something blows. Do we have a present location for either of these men?"

"Negative. We have an informer who claims Quinn is known to associate with a waitress in the waterfront area. We have her name and address, with firm identification."

"Good," Szamual said. "Feed all your information to Interception. I think I'll have a few men drop by this waitress's place."

"Right," DeAmico said and made the computer transfer. He pressed his knuckles against his forehead. That took care of three cases tonight, but four more had come in while he was trying to untangle the last one. "How about another cup of coffy?" he asked.

"Are you certain you want it?" the desk asked.

"Why, what do you mean?"

"It's nearly quitting time for you," the desk said.

He glanced at his watch. It was almost midnight and the morning shift was reporting into the console room already. He had an instant idea and punched Szamual's button again.

"Yes, what is it, DeAmico?"

"I'm going off duty now, Captain. I was wondering if I could go along with Interception on this last problem."

"Sure. Why not? But you'd better hurry. They're about ready to pull out now."

"Thank you, Captain," DeAmico said.

"Good night, Sergeant," the desk said as he pushed away.

V

STANDARD WAS SUFFOCATING in a fine brown haze that stung his nostrils and pummeled his skin. His eyes were rheumy and filled with congealed tears from staring at the rocks and sand strewn before him. A persistent insect was making a home for itself by burrowing into the soft flesh around his crotch. He ignored it stoically, not daring to move.

A saltbush had been slowly, almost imperceptively, changing positions for the past hour. Since bushes were not known to pick up and take walks, it intrigued Standard. Right now, it was a good three feet from where he had first begun to watch it.

The movement was no steady creep, but a series of jerks, each only a fraction of an inch long, too rapid for the eye to follow in the chiaroscuro of the intense light patterns of the desert.

He watched it carefully, blinking the crud from his eyes and letting the insect gnaw happily. The bush was a scanner, he decided. Out there somewhere, the enemy lay dug in as himself with their electronic scouts reconnoitering their line of advancement before the mass of troops came surging forward. They were playing it carefully. Now that the brunt of the allied defensive had been broken, they could afford to take the time.

So far, the scanner had taken no notice of Standard. He was half buried under a rubbish pile of sand and gravel, the snout of his impact rifle barely protruding from under his belly. The valley was fringed by the burnt desert, sloping up to his ridge until it was lost in the undulating foothills of the McDonnell Range.

The war had been coming for two decades, seething and boiling in southern Asia. It had ignited in northern China; then, while the attention had been drawn, broken through the Indonesian islands, expanding in volume.

It was no pushbutton war. Australia learned that when the northern coast became a holocaust within a week under the onslaught of the first wave.

The rise of nationalism that had overtaken the seventies had immobilized SEATO years before and before the alliance could realign, the battle of the mid mountains had been fought and lost. Two-thirds of Australia fell with more than half its population under occupation.

Some mornings Standard would tell himself it was all a grand farce. If he could just clear his eyes and get the god-damned sand out of them, it would go away like a drunken nightmare. The Battle of McDonnell Range had been a rout. Outbackers and 'roo hunters were no match for the Chinasian invaders. SEATO was outclassed, outmanned, outgunned.

The alliance was pulling back to mount a massive defensive along the Bering Straits, the next and, Standard thought bitterly, the last final assault the Chins would make before they poured into the Western Hemisphere.

And as sure as the saltbush in the valley in front of him was an enemy relay scanner, he knew the final defensive would fail. There was too little time left. The Chins were moving cautiously, but rapidly. Too rapidly. In a week, they would be descending in mass into New South Wales. The retreating alliance would be chopped off in a giant scissors movement.

So he had volunteered for this duty, to implant himself as a rear guard to mark the progress of the enemy to his retreating army. He had preferred to die alone in this wasted expanse of rock rather than to watch his own country in its death throes.

In a way, Standard felt privileged. Few men were able to choose their exact moment of death. Standard could. Once he switched on the dove, his life could be counted in seconds and a few seconds one way or the other was close enough for him.

The small white plate of the dove was pressed against his breastbone. Once he pressed the first actuator, it would fix its position by the polarized light of the sun, just as a honeybee. With the second button, it would blare out a steady stream of location and time data. The allied mobile command post would receive the signal and note it on its charts as the southernmost advancement of the enemy. It

was crude and simple. It was about all they had left that could break through the Chins' jamming.

And it was deadly. In theory, so the classroom drill had gone, Standard only had to deactivate the dove, retreat further south and wait until the enemy caught up with him again and mark that new position. Realistically, he knew the enemy could zero in on the dove's position as instantly as headquarters could. That added up to another statistic. Him.

Apparently, their scanner had not relayed back any indication of heavy ambush armament in their path. On the horizon, he could detect the dust being churned and guessed their arrival time around dusk. He still could not afford the luxury of swatting the gnawing insect, so he waited motionlessly.

He woke from a fitful sleep and peered into the darkness. Dimly he saw movement before him in the valley. He dislodged himself carefully from the rubble and pulled the dove from under his shirt. Here goes nothing, he thought, and pressed the first stud. Hoping there was enough sunlight left to make a fix, he jabbed the second stud.

He tossed the dove to the sand and dodged as quickly and silently as he could away from it. The gravel splayed out from under his feet, clattering down into the valley. A garbled cry drifted up to him. They were aware of him and he scrambled for the outcropping of rock to his left before the mortars began lobbing down.

There was a flash from the valley. The mortar explosion threw him off his feet, landing only a few yards from where he had left the dove. The second round was less forgiving. Scores of rock splinters needled his face.

Now what the hell? he thought. *Go drop your shells on that dove!*

A line of bullets smacked across the outcropping. *Oh Christ.* He realized they weren't even bothering to locate him by triangulating the dove's position. They were on to him with direct infrared visual, watching him scurry among the rocks. Now that was a kick in the head. They weren't even giving him the niceties of a technological death.

The next round confirmed it. He rolled in the sand to extinguish his smoldering fatigues and crawled back to the edge of the ridge. Bright, tiny bursts of flame were joining the fireworks of the mortars as the Chin troops were using him for target practice.

He flipped the safety from his own impact rifle and aimed

into the encampment and began squeezing off shots. When the clip emptied, he reloaded and methodically continued. That was the last time he was going to do any planning ahead. If he had just stayed with the dove, they probably wouldn't have even noticed him.

There was no way of knowing whether he was hitting anything. The cad batteries for his own scope had given out weeks before, along with the bulk of his ammunition. He felt like laughing, ridiculously ineffectual. The rifle butt punched into his shoulder and he thought playfully of Horatio at the bridge defending Rome against the invading barbarians. *Yessir, baby, gonna save the world from them Chins. Yessireebob.* Except that he did not feel particularly heroic and did not feel he was making any notable change on the world tonight.

It was a game. A great big game with a spin-around pointer a mile long, and when it came around and pointed at you, it was all over, babes. You were home free for all time after that.

One of the lights was not an intermittent flash. It glistened with a single, seering glow.

Laser! his mind recoiled. His random shots must have been taking effect, because they were pulling out the serious stuff and putting an end to the game. The rock wall was suddenly incandescent. A gush of incredibly intense heat and the stench of molten rock engulfed him.

He kicked, driving himself backward down the slope, flinging his rifle out of the way, hitting the gravel on his side.

He almost made it. The laser cut through his outstretched wrist like a powersaw through lard.

The pain was an uncomprehending thing that rammed down his throat, gathered his stomach and tore it out of his mouth in a ripping howl. Half blinded by the fury of it, he saw his severed hand with great gouts of black blood arching in the air. Fascinated, he watched it land inches from his face, the fingers twitching and grasping in the sand until the cascading darkness drowned out his howling.

The first day was bad. The Chins found him on the ridge after the rock had cooled and dragged him into their encampment. They decided they had better use for their medical supplies than to waste painkillers on a prisoner who looked as though he had all the life expectancy of chopped

liver, so they tied his back to a scrub bush and let him alternate wildly between a thrashing semi-coma and a red-hot consciousness.

The second day was worse because he managed to stay awake more and consequently screamed more. One of his captors found his first aid kit and squirted jelfoam in the gaping facial wounds the shards of rock had cratered. The first aid kit disappeared among the Chin troops, as did his boots and his fatigues. His rifle had been sliced in two. They did not notice the dove under the gravel. It remained broadcasting.

At first, his screaming did not overly annoy the encampment. The Chins screamed back at him. By noon they had tired of the serenade and landed a few well-placed kicks to quiet him. By afternoon, two of his ribs were cracked and he was screaming more quietly. Since the stub of his wrist had been nearly cauterized by the laser, the wound was left raw. Sandfleas and dirt began to accumulate and infection crept up his forearm. Blood and lymph oozed down his neck as the jelfoam was assimilated.

The third morning was the best. He was babbling incoherently. The platoon leader listened to him carefully. Luckily, the lieutenant could not speak English, because otherwise he might not have called in the helicopter and had Standard transferred to their base hospital.

He woke, feeling the moist salt air and knew he was on the northern coast. A Chin doctor in a dirty smock was bending over him, examining the arm. The infection had swelled and festered beneath the glazed skin. The doctor reached for a scalpel and jabbed it into the stub to let it drain.

Thanks a lot, Standard thought, and passed out again.

They packed him full of antibiotics. Standard had an allergic reaction to their brand of myocillin and died twice. Each time, they managed to restart his heart. Each time, his babbling became more intense. He had no idea of what he was saying, but he knew it had to have been worthwhile because he dimly became aware that the treatment was gradually improving.

One day he found his forearm several inches shorter, the sloughing gangrenous flesh completely trimmed away, and the arm sutured and bandaged. The pain had rescinded to

a dull throb. The plasters held his rib cage securely and the dressing on his face was changed every morning.

He retched, aware of all the things he must have told them to warrant the treatment.

"Don't give me any more of those goddamn shots," Standard said. He had been punctured, pricked, and pumped full of so many drugs he was worried he was becoming a junkie. The shots kept him confined to the bed, wiping consciousness from him. He wanted to move about, to walk farther than to the john, and even though he knew he would not be allowed to wander down the halls of the hospital, he felt that even a concentration camp was preferable to his isolated confinement.

The nurse smiled and squirted the excess air out of the hypodermic.

"What are you doing, Lotus Blossom? Now why do you want to give me any more of that stuff? I've told you people every goddamn thing I know by now, anyway. It's just a waste of time."

She beamed and expertly guided the needle into his vein.

"Go tell Lin Sang this is violation of the something or other."

She nodded pleasantly, inspected the glucose bottle and left the room, still smiling.

Time was an ocean for him. He felt it wash against him incessantly, eroding him, but like an island, he was rooted to the room and the waves that broke on his shores passed over him and left him undisturbed.

He watched the glucose drip down the intravenous tube. As he studied the molasses flow, the drops began to splash outside the tube. They trickled down in a thin rivulet until they fell off and dribbled on the floor. He was hallucinating, knowing the splashing drops were still contained in the bottle, but life was too boring to overlook a single diversion. He settled back to enjoy the spectacle. Anything to break the monotony, even if it was his own imagination. He was curious to see how far the buildup of drugs would take him.

Each splash left a tiny blue filament in the air after it. The lacy filaments intertwined and grew until the entire tube was covered with blue lint, fuzzing up until it encompassed the glucose bottle in soft flocking. Experimentally, he looked away and watched a fly crawl up the opposite wall.

When he turned back to the bottle, the blue fuzz had increased by the same amount that it would have if it actually had been leaking outside the tube. That surprised him. The hallucination was continuous, a separate band of reality all to itself.

No wonder some of his buddies in training camp had been druggies. It was hard to tell where reality ended. A man could lose himself pretty easily in his own mind.

He timed the droplets and estimated the probable growth of the blue moss per drop. Then he counted off the time with his eyes shut. When he looked again at the bottle, the growth seemed to be consistent with the amount he had estimated.

He marveled at the apparent reality of the hallucination. The big question, of course, was whether the hallucination was *really* consistent with reality. Maybe the fuzz had grown at the rate he *thought* it should. There was no way to tell if it would have grown that much if it was really happening.

But he enjoyed it, nonetheless. Fascinated, he watched until a movement caught the corner of his eye.

A gnome was clambering through the window, dressed in khaki bush fatigues with a tennis racket in its hand. Standard considered that. It had to be an illusion. There were bars over the window, but a gnome would be able to find a way through those. No, the telltale sign was the tennis racket. Nobody, not even a gnome, would play tennis in a hospital. On the other hand, there was no guarantee that he was in a hospital.

The gnome passed like vapor through the wire strands of mesh that blocked the window until it materialized on the floor. With a sweeping flourish the gnome turned a dial on the wall (strange he had never noticed that dial before) and the window lit up like a tridimensional televue screen. Standard frowned.

It was obvious the gnome knew more about this place than he did. Miffed, he watched the window screen. The action was taking place outside the mesh, but Standard could see it clearly enough. It was a musical of sorts, the participants all dressed in fatigues that were spangled and sequined, dancing to a soundless noise.

The dancing became progressively more frenetic until it became an all-out burlesque with slapstick comedians and

winking girls who kept shedding iridescent battle jackets, which were magically replaced as soon as they had been removed, to keep the gnome censors happy. Standard was enormously pleased, although irked by the prudity.

Slowly he became aware of the tempo and imagined he could hear the chords. But that was strictly his imagination, because he was finally able to hear the music after straining. It wasn't music after all. It was machine gun fire, machine guns roaring from a dozen different pillboxes. And they weren't dancing. They were being hit. All at once, from a dozen machine guns, over and over. They were pirouetting, arms flaying, a frantic mincing step as the slugs jostled them back and forth, not letting them fall.

The gnome was standing on the ceiling now, motioning with a gnarled finger to his purple lips for silence. Standard realized he had been humming in time to the dance steps. The gnome put a hand to its ear and listened intently, so Standard listened, too. He heard whispering voices from down the hall. The voices were emanating from a laundry closet, clandestinely occupied by two people in hospital smocks.

"He has told us everything he knows," a voice was saying and Standard recognized it as Lin Sang's. He was talking to his nurse, the one with the constant hypodermic; for the first time, Standard noticed that she too wore an enameled star on her breast. Look out for star-spangled hospitals! It was lucky for Standard that the gnome had let him look through the walls.

"Not only that," Lotus Blossom said. "This afternoon he told me he did not want any more shots." *Damn*, Standard thought furiously, *she can speak English*. She had been holding out on him all along.

"What?" Lin Sang erupted. "Who does he think he is, trying to tell me how to run my hospital? If I say he gets a shot, then he's going to get a shot. I don't need some white-eyed sonofabitch telling me what to do. Nobody tells me how to run this hospital."

"That's true, Doctor. That's absolutely true. That's absolutely, gloriously true."

"Betcherass, it is. He's beginning to suspect, anyway. As a matter of fact, I think he's trying to listen to us right now," Lin Sang said, his narrow eyes squinting even more.

Standard tried desperately to pull back his ears, but they were held firm by the gnome.

"Hey, whose side are you on?" Standard yelled at the gnome.

"His usefulness is at an end," Lin Sang said.

"What shall we do?" Lotus Blossom asked.

"We'll teach him a lesson he won't forget. We'll give him another injection. *That'll* teach him!" Lin Sang gloated and exposed a vial of fuming fluid. "A good belt of this and he won't be telling me how to run my hospital."

This is no hallucination, Standard thought, panicked. *My God, this is real!* They were getting ready to kill him because he knew too much. What the hell did he know? Of course! He knew how to hear through walls. Lordy, lordy!

The gnome was not on the floor. It had stolen away. No, there it was, on the ceiling. It was hanging by its feet from the ceiling, hanging right over him, both hands clutching a hypodermic as long as a carbine. Standard could see the gnome's muscles strain as it tensed the needle over its head, poisoning it directly over Standard's belly.

"Oh, ho," Standard yelled. "Now you reveal your true nature!"

"Bonzai!" the gnome howled.

"The hell you say!" Standard screamed. He grabbed the glucose bottle, tearing the tube from his arm, and flung it at the gnome's face. The gnome sidestepped gracefully and the bottle shattered against the wall, spraying the room with glucose. The gnome brought the needle slashing down and Standard twisted frantically, throwing his weight sideways. He felt some tube tear loose.

The gnome's glittering rapier knifed into the mattress, igniting the sheets with the fulminating fluid. There was a dull ripping sensation in his arm, and blood—his or the gnome's?—was staining the bed. Or maybe it was the blue flocking that was drifting through the room from the broken bottle. Standard had no time to investigate.

He careened across the room, ramming into the night stand and tipping the water pitcher. The gnome was on his back instantly, digging its talons deep into his face. He drove his elbow into the gnome's chest, driving it backward. The gnome crumpled, gasping for breath.

Footsteps were pounding up the hallway and Standard knew his only escape was through the window. He kicked the gnome under the night stand and yanked at the window grillwork, but it was rigidly fastened. How the hell did that

gnome manage to get in? The dancers on the other side weren't much help, either. They were watching him curiously. When they saw that he was watching them, they went back to their machine gun dance, this time with the addition of landmines. *Nuts*, Standard thought peevishly, *I'm going to miss it.*

He dived for the door, reaching the hallway. A guard was rushing to stop him. Standard swung, seeing the flecks of blood pepper the guard's face, and missed him completely. He forgot that his arm was almost half a foot shorter. The momentum of his swing drove him to his knees, leaving him wide-open and vulnerable.

I think I've just killed myself, Standard thought lucidly, and the guard's clubbed hand came clipping down to the back of his neck.

Lin Sang finished replacing the drainage tubes and said something unintelligible to Lotus Blossom. She nodded agreement and they left Standard with the gnome standing on the ceiling. Since they seemed to take no notice of it, Standard decided it was a figment of his imagination, but he wished they had taken it with them.

He discovered one amazing bit of information. No matter how rational he was, no matter how hard he tried to make the gnome disappear from his mind, the hallucination remained as real and true to perspective as the bed was. The information was not overly comforting. It was a blow to his pride to learn that mental control was only a textbook phrase, not a governable actuality. He mulled the scanty knowledge of psychiatry he had and sneered. By God, there *were* demons and possessions and no couch or notetaking or regression theories would ever get that gnome off his ceiling.

The gnome stayed there until morning. Standard did not dare sleep, partly to be prepared in the event that the gnome would find some new diabolical plaything, and partly from the hope that staying awake might raise his metabolic level higher to help disperse the accumulated drugs in his system in as short a time as possible. He stayed awake, watching the gnome's every movement until the dawn crept into the room.

With the tentacles of light, he cautiously turned his attention to the window, still warily keeping the gnome in the corner of his vision. The ballet troupe was still going through its motions, but now sleepily, and some of them

were even picking up the clothes they had shed. Even the faint staccato melody was fading. He watched the lazy acrobatics until noon, when the gnome lifted (dropped?) itself from its yogi position and scrambled down the wall. Bracing himself, Standard watched it bow to him and switch off the scene in the window. Standard forgot to notice where the control knob was hidden. With a gracious smile, thanking him for an extremely entertaining evening, the gnome stepped out the window and vanished.

Slowly the blue moss drifting around the room collected itself on the new glucose bottle. By evening, it had disappeared and the fluid was not splashing outside the tube.

He received no shot that day or the next. After a week, Lin Sang and Lotus Blossom were satisfied that the wounds Standard had reopened were healing and they stopped making regular visits to his room. They seemed slightly disgusted with his behavior. An armed guard brought his meals. Sometime later, they wheeled another bed into his room.

"What's this?" Standard asked Lin Sang, who was supervising the installation of some rather exotic equipment.

"We have decided to give you a roommate," Lin Sang said. His English was flawless, with an amused singsong lilt to it. Sang's singsong, Standard thought.

"That's nice." Standard grimaced. "I suppose you're putting him in here to watch out for any more tantrums I throw."

Ling Sang smiled gently. "Possibly."

"What's his problem? Another drug addict?"

"No," Lin Sang said. "Brain damage. He won't cause any problem for you."

"Good. I hate complainers."

He watched Lin Sang and the orderlies prepare the bed. Lin Sang was wearing his customary smock and face mask bunched under his chin, with the enameled star medallion pinned to his chest. Sang's duties ran beyond medical and he was willing, if not eager, to talk to Standard.

"Hey, Sang," Standard said, "what day is this?"

"Close," Sang answered.

"Close? What do you mean close?" Standard frowned.

"Close to victory," replied Lin Sang.

"Oh, Christ. Besides that, dammit. What day is today?"

"What difference does it make to you? You have no purpose for the information. Soon your government will capitu-

late and time will begin anew from the day of the glorious victory. The entire freedom-loving world will rejoice and will begin a new calendar. That is what is important."

"Until I start rejoicing, what day is today by the old-fashioned decadent figuring?" He had long since learned not to take Lin Sang too seriously in his conversational moods and often questioned whether Lin Sang himself took the whole glorious revolution very seriously.

"If I told you that this was the Year of the Ox, would that have any meaning for you?"

"Not much. How about telling me in respect to the year of Our Lord?"

"Since I do not recognize your 'lord' that would be difficult and meaningless to me. We are struggling to create a new world in which all men can attain their true nobility and democracy without the oppression of lords and serfdom. How can I tell you what year this is of your lord, when you have no understanding of the Year of the Ox?"

"I know what year it is. Just tell me the day."

"Are you sure you know what year this is?"

"Yep," Standard said. "This is the Year of the Ox, and you're about as stubborn as one."

"Very good," Lin Sang said and saluted Standard with a mock bow. "You begin to understand how meaningless time is. You understand how worthless arbitrary nomenclature is. Besides, you are much better at answering questions than you are asking them," he added cheerfully.

"I could have done without that remark," Standard grumbled, and turned his face to the wall.

They left him alone again. Preparing the room took the better part of the afternoon. When someone entered or departed the room, Standard could glimpse the uniformed guards in the hallway. Aside from his drugged break, he had never left the room consciously. He gingerly lifted himself and the drainage tubes until he could see out the window. All he could see were the personnel trucks that occasionally drove up and divested packages of men, and those were five stories below. He was glad he hadn't been able to learn how the gnome had gotten through the window.

The war was far to the south from his private world. As time dragged by, broken only by the regular lapses of floating that marked the beginnings and ends of the uncon-

scious interrogations, he cared less and finally not at all about the question of loyalty. He reconciled his conscience with the thought he had not yet been brainwashed. Then he would wonder for hours whether his mind really was his own.

The new inhabitant's head was completely swathed in bandages. When he finally felt like talking to the new man, Standard found him totally uncommunicative. He wondered idly if under the bandages skulked the gnome.

If nothing else, the presence of the other man brought attendants to the room. They skirted Standard with a general display of indifference and spent a few minutes each day listening for a heartbeat in the new patient and taking brainwave readings, an event which never failed to excite them. Satisfied, they would change the bottles and drainage pans and, infrequently, the bedding. They never changed the dressing surrounding his head, though, and Standard began to wonder if the man had a head at all.

Which was pretty ridiculous, he told himself. If he didn't have a head, how could they take brainwave readings?

Tiring of the effort to guess the man's injuries—since there was no way to determine if he was correct or not, and Lin Sang seemed no more inclined to inform him of that than he had of the date—Standard altered his attention to the window and spent his time counting the strands of wire.

It became progressively more difficult after the first dozen wires, because his eyes would start watering from staring at it and they would swim out of focus. Then he would have to start again at the beginning, riveting his eyes to keep their place. It took him nearly a week to count all the vertical wires. He relaxed for a day, letting the noises of the hospital break around him, pleased with himself. Out of bland curiosity, he wondered if the number of horizontal wires was the same as the verticals, disregarding the fact that the window was taller than it was wide, so he began counting those. A quarter of the way through he forgot the original number of verticals and went back to counting those again.

There were more horizontals than there were verticals. After establishing that, there was little he could find to do except count the sounds of the ambulance doors opening and closing outside. Some days, he counted into the twenties, on other days, increasingly infrequent, the doors slammed as high as the fifties. After half a month had slid by, he became

aware that the slammings were becoming less each day. He needed a new diversion.

He occupied himself by watching his silent partner's breathing. The breathing was shallow and there would be long, irregular intervals between the inhalations. Since he could not talk to the man, he felt no great amount of sympathy. At least the man wasn't aware of the slow drag of time.

He devised a game. The meals, though meager, came twice a day without fail. Standard would save something, a bean or a shoot or some rare vestige of meat, and hide the tidbit under his pillow so that the gnome would not steal it if it should return. Then he guessed how many times the silent man would breathe during the day between breakfast and dinner. If he was too high, he saved the hidden food until the next day for a new guess. If he was low, he would eat the stored morsel after the lights were extinguished.

The food was always threatening to spoil, so he regularly guessed low, sometimes a hundred, sometimes a more realistic figure to give his comatose partner a sporting chance. Once he had guessed five and dared the patient to exceed it. The man had responded by hitting a record high that day, miffing Standard.

He had a week's morsels stashed away when he decided to get even, and instituted a new rule. If the man died, Standard intended to give the man a farewell ceremony and eat all the food immediately. Dinner was late that day and he hoped it would be soon. Besides, the man's shallow breathing was beginning to interrupt his sleep.

The man did not die, but Lin Sang did.

Lin Sang entered the room one day and sat at the end of Standard's bed. His eyes were puffed together and deep lines were etched at the sides of his drawn mouth. He spent several minutes looking at the silent man without saying a word and finally turned to Standard.

"Long time no see," Standard said cheerily.

"I have been employed by more pressing matters," Lin Sang said. There was a haggard slur in his voice. "Hopefully, you did not think I was not interested in your welfare. I am happy to see you are progressing well."

"As well as can be expected," Standard said.

"To be honest, you are quite healthy enough to leave your bed and resume moderate activity." The wrinkled cor-

ners of his mouth lifted slightly. "But to have released you would have meant transportation to my country. I doubt if you would have enjoyed the consequences."

The comment threw Standard off guard. "You aren't saying you've kept me doped up just to keep me out of a prison camp, are you?"

"No, not precisely. Let us say I found you more useful here than you could have been elsewhere."

"You mean the information you've pumped out of me?"

Ling Sang smiled brokenly. "We had all the information you knew long ago. Your knowledge of your own armies was surprisingly paltry. Quite sincerely, what information we were able to dredge out of you was no more helpful than what we monitored from your broadcasts."

"I don't believe you," Standard said. "That doesn't make sense. Why did you patch me up and keep me alive if you weren't interested in what I could tell you?"

"Not for what you could tell us, but for what you could do for us."

"I'm not doing anything for you!" Standard insisted. "Just what do you think I'm going to do for you clowns?"

"You're doing it for us now." Lin Sang peered at Standard. "You have an audacious will to live. It is like a charged cloud, permeating this very room. I thought it was so strong that it could help other patients recover, so we placed that patient with the head injury with you as an experiment to see if your will to live could be transferred to him also. Apparently, it has worked. He grows stronger each day. Do you believe this?"

"Hell, no," Standard said. "That's the damndest hunk of hogwash I've ever heard."

"You're right." Lin Sang smiled. "Well, how about this? Do you believe you have three eyes? One of them is at the base of your brain where the spinal column connects. Long in your evolutionary history, it was a real eye and could see light and shadow, but now it's buried deep in your neck. But it's an eye, nonetheless."

"This is more of your Oriental inscrutability," Standard grunted. "If it's inside my head, and I can't see with it, what good is it?"

"A number of things you could not do without. It controls the sexual maturation for one thing, and it keeps the

mind functioning rationally for another. It's about the size of your fingernail, but it's very important."

"Bullshit," Standard said. "What's this got to do with your keeping me here?"

"I really had no intention of telling you," Lin Sang said abstractly. "Perhaps you will learn yourself some day. My real reason for being here today is to bring you some good news."

"I'll bet," Standard said. "Okay, get it over with. What is it?"

"You will be released tomorrow."

Standard's mouth hung open. He did not dare jump to the conclusion that was racing through him. "You mean I'm going to be released from this hospital?"

"Yes," said Lin Sang. "The transfer will take place shortly after daybreak. First, you will be bathed and given a fresh gown."

"Hold on a second," Standard said. "What are you telling me? Are you taking me to a prison camp?"

"No, no," Lin Sang said impatiently. "You are being released to your people in exchange for some of our people."

"What?" Standard cried. "An exchange? When did this happen? Honest to God, are you on the level?"

"Much has happened," Lin Sang said. "I do not have time to tell you all, but I thought you would be pleased."

"Oh, Christ, am I!" Standard whooped. The enormity of it struck him like a barrage. This could mean that the war had reached a settlement point. Maybe Australia had not gone under. If Australia had not fallen, could that mean that all the information he had dribbled out of his unconscious had really been as worthless as Lin Sang said it was?

"Hey." Standard jerked his head toward the silent second bed. "What about him. Does he go, too?"

"Yes, he will be exchanged also," Lin Sang said. "He, you, and about thirty more of your people."

He stood to leave. That was when the strangled gurgle ruptured from his throat. He clawed at his chest, sinking to his knees. The guard heard the hoarse cry and bolted into the room just as Lin Sang convulsed on the floor. The guard called an orderly and they carried him out stiffly and did not bother to clean the tile.

Standard received no bath and no meal in the morning, but he was not particularly hungry and in no mood to com-

plain. He had seen men die on the battlefields, but never the way Lin Sang had groveled and it unsettled his appetite. Death itself was obscene to him, but a man scrabbling and making a mess of himself on the floor was the ultimate obscenity, stripping away every remaining vestige of dignity. Death was the last great insult.

The exchange took place uneventfully. Several nurses unhooked him from his receptacles and the orderlies carried his stretcher to the elevator out of the building. For the first time, Standard saw the burnt windows in the surrounding buildings and the deep trenches cut in the lawn of the hospital by the ambulance trucks.

In the middle of the lawn, two Allied soldiers took his stretcher and placed him in a van that was decorated with the blue and white world symbol. Racks had been welded to the sides of the truck to accept the stretchers.

"What the hell has happened?" Standard asked anyone.

"The bloody war is over," the man at his feet said.

"Over? What do you mean 'over'?"

"Finished, kaput. It's all over."

Standard hesitated to ask the next question. "Look, anyone know who won? Did we beat 'em at McDonnell?"

"They ain't saying. It don't sound too good to me."

One of the drivers thrust his head into the truck and said, "How's everything back there? We're packing up now. Anybody need a medic?"

There was a rumbling grunt from inside. "Where the hell were you when we could've used you?"

Standard twisted on his cot. "Hey, buddy. Tell me something."

"Yeah. What do ya wanta know?"

"Just tell me one thing," Standard said. "Who won?"

The driver looked at him levelly. "I thought you knew. Nobody won."

"Nobody won? A draw? Both sides just up and quit?"

"You'll hear all about it when we get you down south," the driver said. "But that's about it."

He closed the panels heavily. Minutes later, the turbines churned over and they felt the road winding under them. They were silent until one of the men began sobbing.

"Ain't that a kick in the ass!" the man at Standard's side said. "I get buggered up and some goddamn politican figures

the war is costing too much so they call the whole fonking thing off. Jeezuzkeyrist."

Standard shrugged. "I don't much give a damn why they stopped it. Just so's it's over."

The man at his side glowered. "Yeah, maybe so." He turned his attention to the sobbing soldier. "Hey, shut up your goddamn bawling so we can enjoy this ride."

Standard counted the ruts in the pavement as they bounced to the heliport and wondered what had happened to the man with the bandaged head.

VI

THE TIP OF the electron pencil shimmered a delicate blue. Quinn adjusted the clasp on his briefcase. The blue arc enlarged to a cutting distance of six inches. There was a hushed whining sound as the molecules of the air surrounding the pencil were disunited, the electron force nullifying the valence cohesion.

Jeannine watched his adjustments with mounting anxiety. "Quinn, what if there's a bomb inside his arm? Won't it explode?"

"There's no bomb," Quinn said. He lifted the arm to avoid cutting into Jeannine's carpeting and prepared to separate the limb. The elbow seemed as good a spot as any to begin with. Graystone's X-rays had indicated a few blood vessels, but nothing too major, just a few capillaries. There was no cauterizing effect to the electron pencil, just a clean and instant separation, but Standard would lose only a negligible amount of blood with any luck at all. That is, the chances were fairly good that he would not die immediately.

"But what if there *is* a bomb? Or something else?" Jeannine insisted.

"Nothing's going to happen," Quinn asserted. "But if it does, you know what to do. Just drop your head between your legs and kiss your sweet little fanny goodbye."

She shook her head emphatically. "I'm worried, Quinn. I don't believe Rim ordered you to do this. There's no reason for cutting a man's arm off just because you *think* he's dangerous."

"There's every reason in this world for disarming a murderer." Quinn sucked in his breath sharply. "Now look, kid, you're getting out of line. Rim wants to know what this arm does, and it's my intention to find out. I can't locate the equipment around here to do a thorough exam, so I'm going to take this arm to the equipment. Afterward, maybe you'd like to keep it for yourself."

"I don't understand." She frowned.

He looked at her icily. "Why, after we get through checking it, you could tuck it under your pillow at night. When the urge strikes you, you could simply switch it on and enjoy yourself. Handy, don't you think?"

"That's not funny," she said.

"Maybe not, but it might keep you off the streets at night."

She winced. "I have you to thank for that, Quinn."

"Of course. It's all nasty old Quinn's fault, isn't it? Honey, you were a natural-born hooker when I met you. All I did was take advantage of your latent talents." His voice hardened. "Now hold this arm up to me unless you want your rug cut to threads."

She stepped across Standard's prone form. "I still don't think Rim ordered this," she said, reaching for the arm.

"Does it matter? Who are you worried about? Yourself or this ape?"

She paused and shrugged. "You're right. I'm being silly." She smiled and wrapped her arms loosely around Quinn's shoulders. "Just in case it *does* blow up, how about giving me one last kiss?"

He opened his mouth angrily to blurt out his annoyance, but at the same moment Jeannine compressed the nerve pellet in her bracelet. The hydroxytryptophan injected directly into his spine. Quinn's eyes bugged out and his knees buckled. She stepped to the side and straight-armed him in the chest. He went over backward, hitting the floor hard. The electron gun skittered from his grip, shaving the pile from the carpet as it rolled across the floor.

She twisted the clasp on the briefcase. A puff of fabric followed the spurting beam as it lanced across the room.

Quickly, she spun the control clasp in the opposite direction until she felt it click into lock position.

It would take several minutes for Standard to regain consciousness, but she knew Quinn would be out for hours. The pellet she had fired at Standard was the same kind most girls carried with them in the city to ward off the especially insistent chance acquaintances. But the one that Quinn took was the real thing, packed with enough tryp to put a man out of commission for half a day. Two could kill, and she felt sorely tempted.

She tried to arrange the fragments of her swirling mind. Something was drastically wrong here. Quinn had always been arrogant and demanding, but why did she choose this particular time to rebel against him? And why had Rim not stopped him? Or stopped her, if Quinn was correct in wanting to cut off the arm. Rim had been powerful enough to stop the war and reunite the world, and he had been young then. Why didn't Rim know what was in Standard's arm?

It was like watching a vidiscreen play with interference from an insane asylum. On one channel an acrobat was tumbling her thoughts and at the same time a macabre maniac was tossing questions between the acrobat's gyrations. Too many questions without logical answers. Ever since she had met this man Standard, she had been confused and her emotions had been running backward. She did not *think* she loved him, but why else had she saved him? And she knew Rim was the only humane and just force in the world, so how could it allow Standard's arm to be separated?

When she had first met Quinn, she was barely sixteen, hustling the lakers along the shore bars. He had been better dressed, out of place with the rough and generally filthy boathands, and with more money to spend than any of them, so he had won her favor almost immediately. She chided herself afterward for being so naïve, but then it was too late and Quinn had given her the apartment.

She assumed she was going to be Quinn's girl. Her father had never returned from the war and her mother had taken off with one of the lakers. The thought of having her own home, even if it was under a "kept" arrangement, pleased her. It wasn't all bad. A few of her friends had made similar arrangements work well for them. After a time, they might complain they felt the possession, but even that had a sense of security about it. Her biggest worry was that

Quinn would become overly possessive and not allow her to even leave the apartment without escort.

She had nothing to fear. It turned out exactly the opposite. Quinn was not interested in her as a full-time mistress. Precisely why he had bothered to establish her in the apartment escaped her at first. He would encourage her to continue in her rounds, occasionally even pointing out likely dates for her.

Slowly, she understood. Quinn was using her as bait. The dates he selected for her somehow slipped out of sight. Quinn said they were recruits, but Jeannine suspected they were fugitives because she never saw any of the men again.

In time, Quinn told her more. She almost laughed in his face when he told her that Rim, the cryptic name of his organization, had ended the war. No organization was powerful enough to control whole nations, but Quinn insisted.

He had let her meet the Rim. Then she believed.

Standard's groaning brought her mind back to reality. Jeannine withdrew another pellet from her bracelet and watched Standard cough and roll slowly, fighting down the nausea. He managed to keep his stomach where it belonged and looked up. Jeannine was pointing the pellet at his face. "Oh, Christ. Not again," he said.

"Just mind your manners," Jeannine said. "He was going to cut your arm off, so I stopped him. But that doesn't mean I won't stop you again if you get nasty."

"In that case, thanks. Although with the way things are going, it's probably just as well if I got the fool thing taken off once and for all." He settled back on his haunches and pressed his eyes closed to clear them.

"You could've gotten hurt, you know," he added. "That was a pretty nervy thing."

"I didn't take any chances," Jeannine said calmly. "He didn't know what hit him."

"Yeah, well, I wasn't just talking about your boyfriend. I meant what could've happened if you hadn't stopped him." The effects of the nerve pellet were wearing off quickly. The girl was standing only a few feet from him. One good lunge should knock her off her feet before she could fire the pellet. He calculated the distance and knew he could make it, but was not entirely convinced that there was an immediate threat.

She cocked her head. "What do you mean? Is there really a weapon in your arm? Would it have exploded?"

"What is this?" Standard asked amiably. "Question and answer time?"

"It's serious talk time. Is there a weapon in your arm?"

"I guess so." He smiled brokenly, the scar tissue tugging at his mouth. "That's not much of an answer, but it's about the best I can do. I'm pretty sure I'm packing a weapon in there, but I don't know what it is, and I don't know how to use it. I suspect you don't believe that."

She looked at him thoughtfully. "I don't have much choice, do I? It doesn't make much difference. It's not my place to pass judgment on you."

Standard mulled her reply. "That opens up all kinds of conversational avenues. Since this is talk time, how about answering a question for me? Why did you help me? Your boyfriend may be a little unhappy when he comes to."

"I wish you wouldn't keep calling him my boyfriend. He's not a friend."

"Okay, he's not your friend. Then who is he? I seem to recall seeing him on your phone last night. Now, don't tell me he really is your doctor and he was treating you for a headache when I came in."

"No, he's not a doctor," Jeannine said. "His name is Quinn and he is my superior. As for helping you, I'm not sure why I did it. Maybe I'm in love with you. I don't even know why I'm talking to you at all."

"This morning didn't seem too loving to me. What changed your mind?"

Jeannine pouted her lips. "A lot of things happened since this morning."

"You can say that again. You mind if I get up? I'm getting cramps in my legs. You remind me of some Amazon huntress, standing with that gas thingamajig aimed at my skull."

"No tricks," she said, stepping back cautiously.

"You're a fine one to talk about tricks. Since we've met, you've been more fun than a memory circuit in a motel room. But you're growing on me, kid. Damned if I know why. Maybe it's the masochist in me."

"I told you to be nice," Jeannine warned, juggling the pellet. "Stop being witty and try to be serious."

Standard steadied himself against an inflated wall and appraised the girl. If he was going to make his move, now

was the time. She had saved his arm, but she was also the same one who had gotten him into the situation in the first place. Either Quinn or the girl was working under the Rim's directives, and not necessarily willingly.

He gambled on the girl and nodded lazily. "Okay, we'll talk seriously. What do you want to talk about?"

She curled into a chair the color and texture of raspberry gelatin, keeping the pellet trained on him. "Let's talk about you."

"I was afraid you'd say that. First you think you love me, and now you want to have a serious talk. Next thing, you'll want to take me home to your mother."

"I'd like to," she said quietly. "But I don't know where she is."

He let that pass and pointed at Quinn's form in the corner. "What about him? This isn't the most private spot in the world for a heart-to-heart talk."

"Don't worry about Quinn," she said. "He won't be waking for three or four hours, at least. I gave him a shot of tryp."

"It sure has a soothing effect," Standard agreed. "Did you give me some of the same stuff?"

"Of course not. You've only been unconscious for a few minutes. You got a little sniff of club. All the girls carry it for protection."

"Protection against what? This is the age of complete sexual freedom. Maybe you're not as free as you pretend to be?"

"Oh sure," Jeannine sighed. "Complete freedom. Has it ever occurred to you that there are times when it just isn't convenient for a girl to be passionate? Have you ever thought there might be times when I just don't *feel* like being mauled in a gutter or in a rest room in a bar?"

"I guess I really haven't thought too much about it," Standard admitted.

Jeannine sniffed. "You really are an ape."

"People have told me that," Standard said. "Look, just why did you save me since you have such obvious distaste for my social poise?"

"Because you've made such a mess of everything already and you're just making it worse. I don't know what you're supposed to be doing, but if you don't accept some help, you're going to destroy everything."

He looked at her and pressed his shoulders into the wall.

"Maybe I'm not the epitome of finesse in bed, but what do you expect from an ape?"

"Don't be coy," she said. "I'm not talking about making love. I'm talking about your mission."

"And what mission is that?"

"Quinn is sure you have a weapon in your arm. He couldn't learn anything from the doctor he took you to, so he was going to cut it off." She squirmed on her chair frustratedly.

"I already told you I'm as much in the dark about it as you are. Speaking of that doctor, is he a member of your friendly group, too?"

"Graystone? No, he's legitimate, I think. Quinn called him last night and set up the appointment. Mike, are you a killer?"

Standard masked his face with mock innocence. "You're just babbling sweet mysteries to me, baby. My feeble simian brain just can't comprehend what you're telling me."

She was on the verge of tears. "Please, Mike. It's terribly important to me. If I've made a mistake in helping you . . . please tell me."

"Okay, I'll be serious. Give me that pellet first." He crossed the room and reached for her hand.

"Don't, Mike. I'll fire."

He seized her wrist and forced it backward. The pellet popped sharply and sprayed the ceiling with the numbing mist.

He held her hand, looking down on her. She stared at him with large frightened eyes. Frightened not only because of him, he realized.

He released her and strode back across the room and prodded Quinn with his toe. He was stone still. Standard rifled his pockets. He withdrew a wallet and a flat case of burnished metal.

"Be careful of that," Jeannine whimpered. "You're pointing it at yourself."

"Oh?" he said and inspected the case. It fit easily into the palm of his hand like a deck of playing cards with evenly rounded corners. The burnished metallic surface was featureless except for the small hole centered in the edge nearest him.

"Just what am I pointing at myself?" he asked.

"It's a needle gun," Jeannine said. "It's one of Rim's inventions."

"Good for him. What do I press to make it fire?"

"Nothing. You will it to fire."

"Very nice. All I have to do is point this thing at you and want to fire, and you'd be nailed to that chair, right?"

She unfolded herself from the chair and came to him, massaging her hand. "Do you want to do that?"

"I guess not," he said as Jeannine wilted into his arms and began sniffing. Standard let her wet his tunic with her relief and held the metal object at arm's length. Half believing, he aimed the case loosely at the wall and willed it to fire. There was a faint tremor that tingled his hand and a section of polyplast puffed.

My god, it works! he thought absently.

The girl was still snuffling noisily, huddled in his chest, and had not heard the soft splintering sound of the needle impact. He wrapped his free arm around her and inspected the case again. It worried him. If it really was a thought-controlled Rim needle gun, how much use could it be against the Rim itself? It was a good trick, but thought-control was nothing new. He had a rudimentary form of it in his prosthetic.

Unless it did something more. A thought-aim device, for instance. There was an atrocious ashtray to his left across the room. He held the case to the opposite side of the room and willed it to strike the ashtray.

There was a melodious fracturing sound as the needle fragmented it.

Jeannine jerked and blinked her tears away. "What was that?"

"Your ashtray," Standard said, balancing the gun case and letting the air in his lungs whistle slowly out between his teeth.

"I wish you hadn't done that," she sniffed. "It was my only glass ashtray. They're hard to find, original five-and-dimers."

"Sorry, I didn't know you collected antiques. I wasn't watching where I was aiming. I wanted to see if it'd go where I told it to go."

"Of course it would." She smiled slightly and blew her nose. "I told you it was a thought-controlled gun."

"From now on, I'll believe you," he said respectfully.

"I'm glad." She smiled. "That makes me feel better. I don't feel as much a traitor now for trying Quinn. Perhaps Rim wants you to stay alive. That's how I had the strength to save you."

"Well, don't start getting religious on me," Standard said. He slipped the gun into his pocket. As long as it behaved itself, it might be useful.

"Why shouldn't I?"

Standard grinned sheepishly. "Because I'm supposed to kill the Rim. That's what I'm doing here. I want to wipe out the Rim before it wipes out humanity."

Jeannine pushed away from him and cocked her head. She looked at him quizzically, shaking her hair.

"But that's silly. The Rim isn't wrecking the world. It's the greatest, most wonderful thing that has ever happened to the world. It holds humanity together, Mike. That's what Rim means. It's like a cup full of water. All the people in the world make up the water, always flowing and just sloshing around. If you tip the cup, the water will spill over and then it's no longer one. It's just a big mud puddle doing nothing. Government is the cup that holds people together. The cup gives the water its shape and meaning."

"Very poetic," Standard said. "What's that got to do with Rim?"

"The rim of the cup, of course. It doesn't do anything to the water, it only puts a definite limit on the cup. Rim doesn't interfere with people unless they're disrupting the social fabric. Then Rim would stop those people for their own good."

"We already have Policontrol and it's taking care of Unstables now. Why have another outfit doing the same thing?"

Jeannine tossed the question off with a flip of her hand. "Policontrol only takes care of individuals. Rim can govern whole countries."

Standard sucked on his tooth. "A topologist would disagree with you about a rim defining the limits of a cup. He'd say it was only a part of the cup's surface and not a limiting mode."

"Well, maybe that's what a topologist would say, but what does he know about people?"

"Not much, I guess. Maybe I don't either, as far as that goes." Standard wrinkled his forehead. "I've got this old-fashioned notion about people being the government. If you

control the people, you control the government. And if you control the government, you have to say you're controlling the people. People aren't little bugs that can be pushed around and squashed or told what to do by some high and mighty social overseer who tells them just how far they can go and what they can't do."

"Rim stopped the war," Jeannine said sharply. "People started it and Rim ended it because those people didn't know how to stop it."

"You don't know that for sure. That's just a guess, a coincidence," Standard argued. "Hell, even a slavemaster has to do something decent once in a while, even if it's just to stop beating his drudges. So what if Rim *did* stop the war? Maybe there was a damned good reason for the war."

His hand was twitching again. Excitement made the nerve flaw jumpy.

"You don't really believe that, do you? Look at yourself. Your face is all cut up, your arm is missing and now that horrible metal thing is hopping like a rabbit. You don't really believe it would have been better to let the war continue, do you, Mike?"

"How do you know there *wasn't* a good reason? Look, you were just a kid. You don't remember how things were. We were on the edge of starvation, the whole world's population going crazy. You sit here in your marshmallow apartment and what do you know about overcrowding? Hell, maybe the war happened so we could get the population down to a manageable level so we could get a second chance to work it all out before everything blew up in our faces."

She closed her eyes gently. "I don't think you're the type to believe in destiny, Mike. I don't think you believe in a God, or mankind, or anything else."

He rocked on the balls of his feet, slowly jogging up and down. "You're wrong. I believe a whole lot in man. How the hell do you expect this world to find anything better if it's constantly held back by Rim? How do you expect it to progress?"

"That's a dumb argument," Jeannine said. "Rim knows what's best for man. Rim can guide us."

"*Damn* it, girl," Standard spat. "That's not progress, that's stagnation! Rim is a *man*, not some god that knows the future. All Rim knows is what is already known by the human race. It knows nothing about what is going to be needed

tomorrow or what is going to be created a year from now."

Jeannine shook her head and smiled. "You say Rim is a man, but you keep saying 'it' as though Rim is something more than a man."

He caught his temper, slowly reeling it back. "Yes," he said carefully. "Rim is more than just a man. He—it—is something more. That's why the Rim has to be stopped, Jeannine."

"I still don't understand," she said.

He was not entirely sure he understood himself. Was Rim really the tyrant Condliffe said it was? No way of asking him, with Condliffe and the whole world-saving crew on the moon. There was no evidence, just the gnawing feeling he had in his bones when he walked the streets.

He turned his back to the girl and softly punched the wall. "Maybe you're right, Jeannine. Maybe I don't give a damn for humanity. Maybe I don't care if this world goes up in smoke. Maybe all I care about is what I've got right now and to hell with the rest. But that's important enough. I don't want to see you get hurt. Rim is using you like a pawn in the middle of some big game, and I don't like to see that happening to you."

She touched his back, letting her hand slide across his shoulder. "That's nice of you, Mike. But even if you're right about Rim, what does it matter if I'm being used? I *believe* in Rim, Mike. I don't believe in you."

He caught her hand behind his back. "What if I said I loved you?"

"I still wouldn't believe you," she said. "You started out to kill Rim long before you met me. And you don't care what happens to the world. Why do you have to kill the Rim?"

It was improbable and stupid to begin with and getting dumber by the minute. A telepathic overlord of the world. In his own mind, regardless of what Condliffe had said, he doubted it.

In the lunacy of the gelatin-colored apartment, his mind shifted back to the Allied post hospital where he had recuperated. From the briefings he had received he could patch together what had happened.

"Come here, Jeannine," he said. "Let me explain a couple of things."

The city was quieter now. Jeannine sat with her legs

curled under her, listening to the hushed murmuring from beyond the windowed balcony that blended almost in cadence with Standard's voice. Again, she was struck by the soft burring monotone. Less than a day has passed since she met him in Harold's bar, but she felt, inexplicably, drawn closer to his battered hulk than she had to any other man, even knowing what his purpose was with the Rim.

Standard was stretched out on his stomach, picking tufts from the carpeting.

"After they installed the new arm, I never saw them again," he was saying. "It took me a couple of years to get used to it at a rehab center. All the time, they were worried Rim might pick up an inkling of the plan, but Rim was already in the States by then. The guys at the hospital didn't know anything about the arm. They thought it was just another pross. I was the only one left on Earth who knew anything, but I'll bet Condliffe and his boys ate their guts out worrying."

"So you think this—what did you call him?—Lin Sang tried to tell you about it first?" Jeannine asked.

"Just before he died, yeah. I was too dumb to understand what he was talking about."

"Well, Condliffe didn't understand, either."

"No, he didn't understand," Standard agreed. "Some doctor named Adamski found out about it first, I think. Then Adamski died, too. By the time anyone knew what was happening, Rim had already left."

"And you're sure Rim and the man with the bandaged head are the same?"

Standard nodded. "Some kind of freak accident. He should be dead, but he's not. Instead, he has a power now. He can kill without coming into actual contact with a person. At first, it was only at close range, like Lin Sang in the same room. Then he got a little stronger. Adamski was burned to death in his laboratory, a hundred yards from the hospital. There's no way of knowing how powerful he is now."

Standard crossed his arms and rested his chin on the floor. There were two routes to take when reality reached the limit of sanity. Either resist or take the final plunge. Standard felt he had taken the latter. He was relaxing in an apartment with an unconscious Rim agent, calmly spilling every detail he knew of his mission to another Rim agent.

"But that patient was only one man," Jeannine objected. "The Rim is an entire organization."

"It is now," Standard said. "He's had time to collect people, just as he's collected you. Even God has to have angels to carry out some of the more menial tasks. But it's still one man. And no matter how powerful he is, or what abilities he has, he's still a mortal man."

"But why you, Mike? Why do you have to be the one to kill Rim?"

He shrugged. "It only takes one man to kill a man." She readjusted her legs. "Why kill the Rim at all? This man Condliffe is a soldier, so he believes in killing. And the doctors who built your arm weren't trying to help you. They're just using you to kill. These are the kind of men who led us into the war. Is this the way to the progress you talk about?"

"There are lots of ways to progress," Standard said. "I'm no wizard. Maybe war has some good purpose. Planes, rockets, atomics, lasers. If it weren't for what they learned from patching up all those casualties, they never would have learned how to make an arm like this. Disregarding the weapon that's supposed to be in it, it's a pretty good arm."

"If it wasn't for the war, you wouldn't need that arm."

"Pointless argument." Standard shook his head. "I could've lost my arm in a machine shop just as easily."

He was correct, of course. The conversation itself was pointless. She uncrossed her legs and wondered how she could explain to him the way Rim planned to change the world. It was an understanding for which she had no words, only an inner feeling that now had dispelled the doubts she had harbored only minutes earlier.

"I think you're wrong trying to destroy Rim," she said simply. "Rim could have killed you already if it wanted. It could have made you split your head open when you slipped in my bathroom, or made Graystone run a scalpel into you, or let Quinn cut off your arm. Or Rim could have made the needle gun backfire. But none of those things happened. Rim isn't a killer. It doesn't want to hurt you. Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

"A benevolent tyrant is still a tyrant," Standard said. He looked up from the carpeting. "And there's still two dead men in Australia you aren't counting."

"One could have died accidentally, and the other one

you would have killed yourself if you had a chance." She spread her hands in exasperation. "What can I say to convince you, Mike?"

"You can't," he said quietly. "Let Rim convince me."

She gazed at him and slowly rose to her feet. It was true that Rim often worked through people, that it sometimes took time for Rim to enter and warm even the most complacent mind, but having heard Standard openly admit his goal, did she dare to take him to Rim? Was this why Rim had let her save Standard? Did Rim *want* her to deliver Standard?

She parried. "But if I take you, you'll try to destroy Rim. Even if you become convinced that Rim is good, you have no control over your weapon."

"I don't think just meeting the Rim will set it off. It takes something special, a certain sequence or some emotional balance to set it off. Will you take me?"

"I don't know. Can I trust you?"

"That's a stupid question. Can I trust *you*?"

He stood and caught her face in his hands. Strange he had not noticed the gold coloring in her hair before. Was it a trick of the pastel lighting or was it a trick of his mind? How much control *did* Rim have?

He looked at her upturned face. "Are you with me or against me, girl?"

"Both," she said. "Neither. I want to help you. Don't you know that by now?"

"Not for sure, no." He reached down and tapped the bracelet on her wrist. "I'm thinking I should use one of your tryp pellets on you and leave you here to explain to Quinn. But then I'm thinking I'll wait and see how things develop."

"When you decide if you trust me, will you let me know?"

"I'll have to think. Maybe you should convince me." She pressed herself to him.

"That's what I like, a woman with no complications," he said. He enjoyed the contact of her body, her breasts softened against his ribs and the leisurely movement of her thighs.

This was not all Rim's doing. This was an involvement that he was allowing to happen. He knew he was out of command of the situation, that he should be the seducer, not her. He placated himself with the thought that she had more practice, but dismissed it from his mind immediately.

The men that had preceded him were unimportant and he preferred not to think of them.

That was a dangerous sign, he realized. Circumventing his pride and ego could dull his instincts, and vulnerability could end his mission as quickly as a guillotine blade. But he enjoyed the closeness of her warmth, the incongruity of her hair against his scarred face.

The phone was buzzing. He wanted to tell her to forget it, but she was out of his arms and across the room before he could stop her.

VII

THE STREETS WERE quiet in the working class district, with most of the windows glowing with the multicolored reflections of the adult rated vidi programs. Dactil brought the airwagon to a sliding halt outside the apartment building and sat looking at it as the turbines cooled.

"Anyone familiar with this place?" he asked.

"Yeah," Pejor said. "I used to have this beat. Ordinary kind of place. Little bit run-down, about half occupied. The gal lives on the top floor and it's pretty well fixed up."

"You've been up?"

"Yessir, couple times. She has the whole floor. Or at least she's the only one who pays rent. The other apartments are empty. Has a male visitor about once or twice a week."

"You seem to know quite a bit about her," DeAmico said.

Pejor flushed. "Aw, you know how it is, Sergeant. After a while, you get to know the people on your beat."

Dactil pushed his door open. "Well, let's go see who's visiting her now. You have your weapon, DeAmico?"

DeAmico patted his holster. "Of course. I hope using it won't be required. We'd like to interrogate these people."

"I hope it won't be necessary, either, but that's out of my hands. All we do is round them up," Dactil said. "What is it you people call us? The dog catchers?"

"I've heard that," DeAmico said. "On the other hand, I've heard you refer to us as the pushbutton patrol."

"That's not exactly the way I heard it," Jaffe said. "Privy peepers is what we used to say back in the academy."

DeAmico shot the patrolman a glance. There was a pointed rivalry between the Analytic and the Interception departments that dated back to the foot cops and the detective squads. He let Jaffe's remark pass.

The four of them fell into a loose cadence and crossed the lobby floor. A warm fishy odor from the dirty shoreline permeated the walls and mingled with the cloying smells of the herbals and the drugs in the apothecary.

"There's only two of the elevators working now," Pejor said, punching an up button. "They closed down the rest of them because there aren't enough people left."

"How about staircases? Any other ways out?" DeAmico asked.

"Two inside stairs alongside the elevator shafts in case of emergencies. No outside exits. You wouldn't catch me living in a firetrap like this."

The elevator announced its presence with a dull ringing sound. Pejor slipped his police identification in the pay slot and the door breathed open. "Think we should guard the stairs, Lieutenant?"

"No reason. They don't know we're coming. Even if they tried to run, so what? We could beat them down to the lobby with no sweat," Dactil said.

DeAmico frowned. Dactil's concern seemed too casual for his liking.

There was no voice on the phone. Instead, the screen coalesced into a gray vision of men entering a cramped quarters. Standard squinted at it over Jeannine's head and slowly recognized it as the elevator.

"What the hell's this?"

"Policontrol," Jeannine said simply and snapped the phone off. "They're coming up here." She found a handbag in one of the wall crevices and began tossing small items into it.

"What makes you think they're coming up here?"

"Quinn had a spy camera installed in the elevators for me. Whenever someone punches for the tenth floor, it automatically rings my phone."

"My compliments to Quinn. Anyone that sneaky can't be

all bad. Why the hell would they be coming up here? Aren't you legal?"

"Of course I am," she said sharply. "Medicals, license, diploma. It's a regular thing. They always come here without notice. I recognized one of the cops. The last time he was here, he brought his viditaper hoping to shoot a few juicy scenes for his department dinner. I'm afraid he was disappointed. Now it looks as though he brought his department over for a first-hand look."

"I don't think so," Standard said, scooping up the electron case. "It's going to be a little sticky explaining Quinn there in the corner. How many ways are there out of here?"

"The elevators." She shrugged. "There are some stairs that go down to the lobby."

"Nothing outside?"

"No." She closed her handbag. "Maybe we can hide on the roof until they're gone."

"That's the first place they'll look once they block the stairs. No, we have to get out of his building. How does this trick suitcase work?"

"The left clasp. Turn it clockwise for power. What are you going to do?"

"Slow them down." He grabbed Jeannine's hand and pulled her into the hall. He put his ear to the elevator doors. One was quiet, but the other whispered toward them. He spun the clasp and watched the blue shimmering flame touch the metal door.

The metal fumed and heated, turning an incandescent white. It dribbled down, flowing into the panels of the split door. He flicked the gun off, the metal cooling and forming a sloppy weld.

"Let's go," he said and pushed Jeannine toward the stairs.

They pushed open the staircase door and Standard dropped the briefcase, glancing around. He spun the dial to minimum power and aimed the rod at the bannister. It heated and he kept the rod trained on it as he put it on the floor. The plastic carpet began to melt, turning black and filling the stairwell with tentacles of treacly smoke.

"You'll burn the place down!" Jeannine cried as they plunged down the stairs.

The elevator creaked to a stop and the inner doors slid open but the outer hallway doors remained closed.

"Can't you even operate an elevator, Pejor?" Dactil grumbled.

"Goddamn old buildings," Pejor said. "They should tear them all down and start over again." He kicked the door futilely.

Jaffe wrinkled his nose. "You smell something burning? Like something hot?"

Pejor put his hand on the door to shove it open and shrieked. He yanked his hand back and DeAmico could see the burnt flesh peel away. "Jesus," Pejor screeched. "That thing's red hot!"

Dactil shouldered him aside and wet his fingers. They sizzled instantly as he touched the door. "Get this thing down," he barked.

"Down where?" Jaffe asked numbly.

"Down *down!*" Dactil yelled and slapped the five button. "That little girl up there welded that door closed and she's probably running her tail off down the stairs right now. If we can get down fast enough, maybe we can still stop them." He looked at Pejor clutching his hand. "How bad is it, kid?"

"Hurts, but I'll make it," Pejor said, clenching his teeth.

"Good man. DeAmico, you and Pejor get down to the lobby and watch for a quarry down there. I don't think this is any girl's game. Those two guys—what did you call them? Standard and Quinn?—may be with her. So stop them. This has gotten serious."

DeAmico wanted to point out that the mission had been serious when they left headquarters, but he nodded his head in agreement.

The elevator sank to the fifth floor. Dactil hopped out, grabbing Jaffe. "Don't forget we want those people for interrogation," DeAmico yelled as the doors closed.

Dactil frowned at the comment. "Don't take any chances, Jaf. You go up one staircase and I'll go up the other. Do whatever you have to if you run into them. Meet you in the girl's apartment otherwise."

Jaffe nodded and sprinted down the hall. Dactil pounded up the stairs, his breath coming hard and strained. He really should stay in better shape, but there was damned little to do nowadays. A good chase like this made life a little worthwhile. He unclipped his ram pistol and charged up the stairs.

"Don't worry about the building," Standard said. He pulled Jeannine down the stairs after him. "The cops will be up there in a couple of minutes and they'll put it out."

"You really don't care, do you?" Jeannine panted, trying to keep her feet on the stairs as Standard dived down them. "All your talk about saving humanity and you set a building on fire."

"Be quiet," he snapped. He heard the door open and heavy footsteps coming toward them. He pulled the needle gun from his pocket just as the head of the policeman cleared the flight of stairs. The policeman saw them in the same instant and swung his pistol up at them.

Standard stumbled against Jeannine, knocking her sprawling down the stairs. He careened after her as the policeman's autoram howled and chewed a line of pulverized plaster up the wall. A mental image of the needle gun refusing to respond flashed in Standard's mind as he willed it to fire.

The needle ripped into the patrolman's thigh and tore out a blossoming chunk of flesh. Dazed, the patrolman crumpled to his knees trying to aim the pistol. Standard vaulted over the bannisters, the steel arm coursing in a tight arc that connected with the autopistol, fracturing it and tearing it out of the policeman's grip.

The policeman whirled from the impact, Standard driving his fist at the exposed head. He connected with the policeman's temple and dropped him on the landing.

Jeannine was clambering to her feet. She saw the widening batch of blood and covered her mouth, her eyes wide and afraid.

"Come on, we're going out the back way," Standard said, taking her hand.

"My God, you're an animal. A brutal, inhuman animal."

"Him or us," Standard snapped.

Dactil reached the top stairs, breathing hard. He slid the door open cautiously and looked down the hallway. Smoke was curling out of the far staircase and the door to the girl's apartment was open. He glanced at the crude weld on the elevator as he passed it and stopped at the open door.

He pushed it open farther with the barrel of his pistol and saw the body in the corner. His eyes shot around the room, taking in the bulbous furniture and garish colors. He stepped

in and turned the thin man over and felt his chest. The heart was beating steadily, though feebly.

Satisfying himself with a glance inside the bedroom, he flicked on his callcom. "DeAmico, you down in the lobby yet?"

"We're here," DeAmico said. "Anything happening up there?"

"When the ambulance arrives, tell the meds to get up here, too. I found one of your guys. Thin guy. Looks like he's been stungassed."

"That'd be Quinn, I think," DeAmico said. "Hold him for Official Impersonation. I called some more men in from Policon to give us a hand. As soon as they get here, I'll be up to take a look at your find. Any trace of the girl?"

"Not yet," Dactil said. "Anybody on your stairs, Jaf?"

Dactil and DeAmico both heard the answering silence. "Jaffe, you hear me?"

"Looks like you were right about their trying the stairs," DeAmico said.

"Watch out for them," Dactil barked. "And the hell with your interrogation. You see them coming down the stairs, you *stop* 'em. Understand, Sergeant?" He emphasized *Sergeant* and ran to the staircase. He kicked open the door and coughed his way through the smoke.

Two flights down he found Jaffe bleeding on the stairs. He whipped his belt around the gaping hole in Jaffe's leg and tightened it. The blood was still pumping regularly, but it seemed there should have been more than there was coming out of the wound. Dactil yanked the callcom from his pocket and yelled into it.

"DeAmico, where the hell is that ambulance? Jaffe's up here on the eighth floor hit bad. Get those reinforcements here on emergency alert and have this whole goddamned area cordoned off, you hear?"

"On their way," DeAmico answered. He clicked the frequency on his callcom. "Emergency, Control. One of our men is seriously injured. Suspect Standard is hostile and armed. Block this area."

He heard the acknowledged bleep of Emergency Control's computer and flipped back to personal frequency. "Pejor, cover that other staircase. Stop anyone who comes down."

"I heard it all," Pejor said. His hand was oozing and alive with pain.

DeAmico was gaining a healthy respect for the "dog catchers." It was a lot easier sitting behind his console and having coffee served to him while passing interim judgments than it was getting shot at and nearly having your elevator chopped down.

That struck his analytic mind. Standard might be desperate, but he wasn't stupid. Anyone who had the capability to weld a door shut almost instantly, also could have severed the elevator cables just as easily. But Standard had not. Why not?

He knew the answer before he even glanced at the floor indicators over the elevators. The second elevator was registering on the tenth floor. Standard had backtracked, had gambled that they would have tried to stop him on the stairs.

Gambled and won.

He flipped his callcom. "Lieutenant, are you still with Jaffe?"

"Yeah. When's that ambulance coming?"

"Couple minutes. Listen, I know where Standard is. The other elevator has just gone up to the tenth floor. They must be trying to make for the roof."

"The roof?" Dactil yelled. "Oh my God, how dumb can you get! They must have an aircar parked up there. DeAmico, we don't have time to wait for those reinforcements. Get in the wagon and bring them down."

"Check," DeAmico said. "Hold the fort, Pejor. We've been outfoxed."

He ran across the lobby and outside. As he cleared the doors he saw the small aircar lift itself from the building roof and bank over the lake. He spun the turbines and dropped the wagon into grav gear, slamming his thumb down on the accelerator. The wagon bolted forward, sinking him into the seat. He angled the control bar and heard the auxiliary drive kick in, a screaming shrill that shattered against his eardrums.

The night was moonless and the small craft was flying without its lights. DeAmico flicked on the pinar screen and swept the sky. He located the aircar immediately, as it was flying over the open water of the lake to the southeast. It was still accelerating, but had almost reached its maximum. Even so, its maximum was proving to be considerably more

than the old wagon's. DeAmico switched on the narrow-band radio and beamed it at the receding craft.

"Standard, this is Policontrol. Bring your car around and land or we'll be forced to bring you down."

He waited for the reply he did not expect. The pinar showed that the aircar had gained speed. It was cracking the sound barrier now and the paddy wagon was hopelessly subsonic. DeAmico switched back to broadband and tried to reach Dactil but he was already out of the lieutenant's callcom reception range.

Another thirty seconds and Standard would be out of DeAmico's cannon range. DeAmico did not like the decisions he was rushing toward.

He flicked on the narrowband. "Last chance, Standard. Heave to or be blasted out of the sky."

There was no response.

"We know the girl's with you. If you have any concern for her safety, now is the time to show it."

He waited, watching the coordinates flitter on the pinar screen. He touched the activator switch and closed his fingers around the gunnery control.

"I'm sorry, miss," he said and squeezed.

The bright lances of flame quivered the wagon and knifed into the darkness. They were a ruler line of destruction across the pinar screen. He looked out the window and saw a small sun suddenly nova in the distance. The blip that marked the aircar on the pinar screen vanished instantly, to be replaced by a dwindling spot of wavery disturbance.

DeAmico slowed the groaning wagon and turned it back to land. He had never shot a man before, not with a pistol, not with a disruptor cannon, and it left a metallic taste in his mouth. It really meant no more than sentencing a man or allowing him to be executed, but it was different, so much more personal this way. He tried to analyze his emotions as he flew back to the shore.

It still did not seem entirely real, killing a man over a space of several miles. He still did not know how it would feel to cut a man down with a rampistol. Maybe he would have to put in for a transfer to Interception. That would be the only way to learn if he enjoyed the feeling.

He could see the blinking lights of the ambulance as he lobbed in over the shoreline. They were ushering Jaffe into it as he brought the wagon to a stop in the street. Dactil was

standing by the doors of the apartment, talking to his superior.

DeAmico saluted as he dropped out of the airwagon. He recognized the man as high in Policontrol command, one of those almost legendary faces which would appear on a briefing tape from the computers.

"What happened out there, Sergeant?" the legendary face said. "We saw the explosion from here."

"He wouldn't respond to my order to halt, sir," DeAmico said. "He was trying to outrun me. I didn't have any choice but to shoot him down."

"You did a good job," and Dactil nodded in agreement. "I understand you have a good record in Analysis. Turns out you're a good man in Interception, too. Maybe we should discuss it more in the morning when you file your report."

"Thank you, sir," DeAmico flushed. "I've been considering a transfer."

"Fine, we'll talk about it tomorrow." He turned to Dactil. "You may as well clean up here, Lieutenant. That looks like it pretty well takes care of it for the night. Compliment your men for me."

They watched him enter his patrol car and motion to the driver.

"How's Jaffe?" DeAmico asked as the Politcontrol car sped away.

"Lost some blood, but the meds think they can patch him up. He had disability coming anyway."

DeAmico nodded. "That's good. Look, I'm going to grab a ride back with the Interrogation boys. I want to be around when they bring that skinny guy Quinn around. I've got a few questions for him myself."

Dactil rubbed his hand across his face. "The meds are still up there. Why don't you go on up? I'll wait for you and you can go back to headquarters with me."

DeAmico looked at the lieutenant suspiciously. Before he could turn to the apartment doors, the elevator opened and the medical team wheeled the cot into the lobby.

He watched them roll it toward him and a rising alarm clutched his spine. Quinn's head was covered. "What the . . . ?" he stammered.

"He's dead," Dactil said shortly.

DeAmico spun on him. "You said he had been gassed!"

"That's right," Dactil said. "He was alive when I reached

him. The meds got here right after you took off. By the time they got to Quinn, he was dead."

"That's impossible," DeAmico said. "Stungas doesn't kill."

Dactil shrugged. "Enough of it does."

"Sure, a double belt of it can, but it kills instantly, not ten minutes later." DeAmico was suddenly furious. "Good God, man, don't you understand? There may be a whole conspiracy revolving around that man. We *needed* that man for questioning."

"Watch your tongue, Sergeant," Dactil said. "The way I figure it, Standard stopped back in the room before he got away in the aircar. He must have hit Quinn with another dose of tryp to keep him quiet."

DeAmico bit the inside of his lip. "You're right, I guess."

He watched the med team load the body into the ambulance. Jaffe was being rigged for intravenous and Pejor was letting a nurse wrap his hand.

"Let's go home, Sergeant," Dactil said and slapped DeAmico's back.

They flew lazily over the city, DeAmico still trying to collect his thoughts and put them back into order.

"Everything's so damned neat and tidy," he grumbled. "Standard and the girl are dead. Quinn's dead. All the witnesses are dead. That's too neat. There's something more here. Something underneath all this. We don't know any more now than when we started."

"Maybe so," Dactil said. "That's not my job. That's your job to worry. We just go out and clean up dirty little cases. I'd say we did a pretty fair job of cleaning this one up."

"Yeah, I guess so," DeAmico said, watching the skyline pass under him. Perhaps Dactil could be satisfied with eradicating the obvious, but DeAmico had been trained to look beneath the surface for the mainstream currents. He still did not have the answers he wanted, and now he had nobody to give him that information.

With one exception. The doctor who had filed the original complaint. How much did he know about this, whatever *this* was?

"If you don't mind, Lieutenant, would you drop me off at Analysis? I've got a date with a computer tonight."

Dactil nodded and grinned lightly. "Yeah, I expected that. I didn't think you were really cut out for Interception."

VIII

FOUR PEOPLE in the back were playing Quod, the apparent randomness of their moves surpassed in frenzy only by the shrill decibel level of the tally board. They were grouped around the square playing table, each one stabbing at an individual control panel in total disregard of cadence or turn-taking, the center translucent cube glowing with minute bursts of colored light that held its position and sound.

The bar was filled with noise. Besides the players' own shouting and roaring, each flash of light carried its own distinctive sound, a piercing resistor-induced screech that rattled against the stemware, growing louder with each accumulated flash.

Graystone enjoyed games. Sitting in his side booth he watched the play, hoping to understand the purpose of what seemed to him to be complete abandon. Having watched for better than an hour, he was beginning to associate the players with their respective colors and sounds.

He had the heavy blonde sitting closest to him pegged with the speckles of lavender light, accompanied by something that approximated a high C note. The shaggy man at her elbow was splattering red and an unidentifiable chord throughout the barroom. The second woman, dark, with pendulous breasts that constantly threatened to add their own impressions to the control panel, had chosen an amber light with a sound that was vaguely similar to a mid-range F, while her escort, still in his tramp freighter overalls, was pouring tiny bomb bursts of green into the cube with a note that Graystone knew was totally out of his experience.

Associating the sounds and colors with the players had taken the better part of two drinks, since the object of the game seemed to be pressing the same coordinates as an opponent. When it occurred, by accident, Graystone was positive, the center cube would blaze with a hot white

light where the opposing light flashes coincided, the tally board recording the kill with a remarkable sliding howl.

How they decided who scored what, Graystone was at a loss to know. Scores were transferred back and forth instantly, one moment the red column indicating a long string of kills, the next instant the amber column suddenly showing more kills for which there hadn't been time to push an adequate number of buttons.

Perplexed, he turned his attention from the game and swirled his drink, watching the viscous eddies in the opaque black fluid caused by the ice. Graystone drank sparingly now, the bootleg liquor during the wartime rationing having ruined his taste for it, and generally relied on either the bartender's recommendation, which was always suspect and tempered by an understandable desire to sell the slow movers, or the gaudiest sign for his choice. Nearly all the old fermented and distilled potables had disappeared.

The particular drink he was twirling had been advertised as a Judas Ghost, promising, if one was to believe the commercials, visions of varying degrees of decadence. Instead, it tasted like the coal sludge it resembled. A few more swallows and he felt his stomach would metamorphose into an appropriate carboniferous clump.

There was an uproar at the end of the bar and Graystone glanced up to see the Quod cube awash in amber light, the pendulous brunette gleefully pounding the game table.

"Holy sweet Jesus!" the shaggy man was exclaiming. "A grand slam burn!"

The tramper was appreciatively watching the animated bouncing. The blonde feigned exaggerated defeat and sighed "Lucky bitch, ain't she?" under her breath.

"Aw hell, Mirabelle," the tramper yelled, "she ain't lucky. She's just *good*."

"Yeah, by God, she looks pretty good to me," the shaggy man agreed. "And you oughta know."

"You bet your sweet biscuits I know." The tramper leered. "I'm telling you, pal, this bird is the movingest thing on the whole front. When she gets going, woowie, she just doesn't know when to quit."

"I was going to say you looked like you were losing a little weight."

The brunette giggled her approval and good-naturedly punched the tramper in the gut. The tramper provided him-

self with a handful of bosom and jostled the woman's legs under the table. "Hey, isn't it about time for a fresh round of lox?"

"Hell, yes. Who's buying this time?"

"Well, balls, it was my broad who won. You buy, you cheap bastard."

"*Thought* you'd say that. Hey, Harold," the shaggy man shouted. "Bring us another bottle of lox, will you?"

The bartender nodded his head in recognition, extracted a bottle of milky liquid from behind the counter and tore the cap off. He sauntered back to the game table and handed it to the tramper. They had started a new game before he returned to the bar.

Graystone signaled to him. Harold saw him and changed his course.

"Bring you another Ghost?"

"No, thanks. I'm fine with this one. What is that lox they ordered?"

"That stuff? Legalized moonshine, as far as I'm concerned. Synthetic gin is what it is, and when you start synthesizing gin, you know it's got to be pretty rough. They bottle the stuff in about an hour."

"Lox is a funny name for it."

"Aw, that's an old spacer term the trampers picked up. All the tramp freighters like to pretend they're heading out to Mars. They think it's narcotic, but it's just unfiltered. After a couple slugs of the stuff, you wind up with one helluva headache that lasts most of the week. Guess that's why they think it's narcotic."

Graystone chuckled. "How does it taste?"

"Like not much of anything. Old rocket fuel, more than anything. You like to try some?"

"Well, I don't know," Graystone said, tempted. "I'm on a vacation, but I'm supposed to meet a man later tonight and I suppose I really should remain relatively clear-headed. A small business transaction, you know."

"One wouldn't hurt you," Harold said. "Tell you what. Try one and if you can't stand it, it's on the house. Fair enough?"

"Oh, why not?" Graystone said expansively. "This is a vacation."

He was eager to tell the bartender his vacation plans, but Harold had already turned away.

The electronic howling was mounting again from the end of

the room as the two couples slammed their boards. If possible, they were going at it with even more detachment.

Graystone flicked on the booth vidiscreen and spun through the channels. Automatically, he flipped past the homosexual network, pausing at an adult cartoon show until he realized it was a rerun of Freddy Fornicator and that he had seen it before in a phone booth.

He had found a newscast when Harold returned with the drink.

"Hey, I know him," Harold exclaimed, his eyes on the screen.

Graystone followed his gaze. A scowling face was frozen on the vidi. Graystone recognized the face immediately, at the same time feeling something enormously familiar about the background. He was trying to decide what it was that was so familiar about the almost blank wall behind the face when the picture shifted to a view of a street choked with police cars.

"Turn it up," Harold said. "See what they're saying."

Graystone obliged.

". . . was the scene earlier tonight as Policontrol officers tried to apprehend the killer identified as Michael Standard. It was from the roof of this building that Standard and his accomplice attempted to escape. The area is quiet now. The police have left and that moment of terror has passed for the occupants of this normally peaceful building. Channel Forty-four newsman Sid Rombauer spoke to one of the people who live here."

The screen snapped to a heavysset woman clutching her bathrobe around her.

"You were awakened in the middle of the night, isn't that correct?"

"Yes, I was. I heard this sound like machine gun bullets in the hall and I woke up. I didn't know what it was so I woke up my husband Harry and told him to listen."

"That sound was the gunfire that nearly cost Patrolman Jaffe his leg. A deadly exchange that could have imperiled everyone in this building if it had not been for the effectiveness of the Policontrol squad which was sent here to investigate."

The picture hesitated, then shifted to a tight-jawed man at a desk, who was professionally shuffling papers. "Thanks, Sid. Sid Rombauer at the scene earlier tonight. That about

sums it up. One person murdered, two destroyed themselves trying to escape, two policemen injured trying to bring this mad killer to bay. I'd say that we owe a vote of gratitude to our area Policontrol, wouldn't you, Gorse?"

The team newscaster nodded and paused dramatically. "I certainly would, Alex. It's interesting to note that the officer who managed to shoot down the killer's escape ship was actually on loan to the Department of Interception. Normally, we understand, he works with Computer Control."

"I think that all points up how thoroughly trained all members of our Policontrol are. Speaking of well-trained, we have a message here from the friendly people who make Soyagood, the breakfast cereal that is *soy* good you can serve it for dinner. Here's how."

The screen panned across an idealized collection of coolies harvesting soya beans. Graystone deadened the volume as a heaping mound of gruel smothered with rice and chili powder was superimposed. The announcer was beginning to say something about "Amercian-style Cantonese."

"Murder?" Harold's face contorted. "What did they say about murder?"

"I don't know," Graystone said. "I didn't catch all of it."

"Oh, God, if that bastard hurt her . . ."

"Hurt who?"

"One of my best girls. Jeannine. Nice gal. That damned ape Standard came in here yesterday and started hustling her. I tried to tell her to stay away from him, but you know women. Mind of their own, even if it is fuzzy. I knew he was trouble as soon as he walked in here. So off she goes with him anyway. Then she doesn't come in today. Damn, if he's hurt her, I'll . . ." He stopped confusedly, not knowing what he could do to a dead man.

"Why do you think she is necessarily in danger?" Graystone soothed.

"Hell, man, that was her apartment building!"

Graystone clucked his tongue. "If you were concerned about her, you should have called the police."

"I wish to hell I had," Harold said. He peered at the screen, expecting more information. A basset hound was floating, barking and ears flapping in simulated non-grav, followed by a honeymooning couple. Harold grunted and turned back to the bar, leaving Graystone without collecting the credit chit.

Graystone searched the dial for another newscast, found none, and settled for a concert with attendant floral patterns on the homo network. He tested the lox and shivered involuntarily. Any similarity between it and grain mash was as imaginary as its reputed narcotic effect.

Interesting. The picture of his recent patient on the newscast had not surprised him. Graystone had been confident that it was only a matter of time before the man became notorious. The girl . . . hadn't the fake agent Quinn mentioned something about a girl? Graystone wondered if it was the same girl as the bartender's.

Graystone watched a large rose slowly explode and reform itself into a field of pastel petals and sipped the lox. He shivered again and poured the lox into the glass of Judas Ghost. It made a dirty liquid like thinned motor oil. It combined the worst qualities of taste of both.

This business of gents running around, especially armed ones, worried him. He had hoped he had left it all behind when he walked out of his office with Quinn's chit, but here it was plaguing him again. He was realistic enough to know that there was more to the affair than two or three people. He also knew the police would be looking for him since he had filed the Unstable report. Thankful though he should be for Policontrol's efficiency, he wanted no part of the police.

He swallowed more of the coal tar. Quinn had posed as a member of Policontrol, but had definitely not been. That certainly put him in the criminal ranks. Standard had been his enemy, but did that make him a good or socially correct man? And Policontrol had destroyed Standard. Where did that put Standard? For that matter, where did that put Policontrol? That was the question that frightened Graystone.

He downed his drink. There seemed to be two factions fighting each other somewhere in the gray zone between the underworld and the police.

A buzzing sensation was working up his spine from the hot spot in his stomach. His ears felt a growing numbness and he understood why the trampers drank the lox. *Well, my friend,* he told himself, *you have better things to do than brood about criminals and embalm yourself with this masquerading anesthetic.*

He still had to meet the man at the dock and complete

their transaction. Damn that silly credit voucher Quinn had given him . . . it was drawn on a foreign bank and there was a two hour delay in verification.

Still, he reflected, money was money, even though ten thousand was not precisely a princely sum. But it was sufficient to cover the rental on the beautiful little power catamaran, old to be sure, but refitted with a crystal computer to handle the sails. A delightful boat, with inlays of real teak in the miniscule cabin, its twin hulls glistening with a new polyplast coating, the laminated mast and boom wonders of sculptured wood, formed long before the forests had died, making the boat a charming antique, almost a museum piece.

But it was what was inside that had taken almost all of the money.

The two hour delay would have given the lease company time to outfit it as Graystone had specified, generously larded with irradiated meats and succulent fruits in the cooler. Some of them *fresh* fruit.

He chortled gleefully, winding his way to the bar and paying his tab, congratulating himself on the shrewdness of his bartering. He also congratulated himself for not having more of the lox. Already he was having problems in navigation and he was not even on the water yet.

The leasing company had asked five for just the boat alone and an additional seven thousand for the black market food. After a long session of skillful haggling, Graystone had talked them into including both the boat and the food for only ten. And what food! Real steaks and chops smuggled in from New Zealand, fruits from South America and from a botany garden in Quebec, and, incomprehensible in its wonder, a contraband cask of lager.

He was virtually drooling as he walked carefully toward the lakefront, anticipating the sweet charms of his vacation.

The yacht rental was spread out before him, the moon glinting on the masts, an armada of lighted toothpicks like the raised spears of a Roman legion, swaying slowly to a lingering rest. The sight excited him. The very thought of his own sailboat thrilled him.

To be blown along on the wind, cut free from any reliance on the mechanical frailties and limitations of the motorized world, a bird adrift. The crystals would compensate for his

course, setting and trimming the sails, adjusting the centerboards, relaxing the halyards, tightening them as he steered each new tack. Away from the madness behind him, the petulant women patients, the hypochondriacs, and the frightening intrigue of the past day.

The man was waiting for him at the beach, smiling broadly.

"Did it clear the banks?" Graystone asked.

"Without a hitch. The boat is loaded and everything is ready for you to cast off. Remember what I told you about operating the boat?"

"I believe so," Graystone said. "All I have to do is catch some wind and it takes care of itself."

"Yeah, well don't forget about the centerboards and the rudders. When you beach the boat, make sure you haul them up so they don't scrape. And keep it pointed upwind when you beach so the thing doesn't fall over."

"Yes, I remember," Graystone said impatiently.

"Don't forget to turn the computer off, too. And watch it in a hard wind. There's so much sail area on that old boat that the wind could topple it right over on its nose. The computer should take care of that, but if it looks like you're getting into trouble, just turn the switch off and slacken the sails."

"Yes, of course. Slacken the sails," Graystone said. "Well, really, I don't plan to do much hard sailing. What I really intend to do is sail up the lake and find some nice secluded beach where I can relax. My work schedule, you know, has been rather pressing lately." He burped quietly.

"Sure, Doc," the dockhand said. "Have a good trip and be careful."

"Oh, I shall, I shall," Graystone said. The boat was moored at the end of the floating dock where they had brought it around. The sails were draped loosely on the boom, waiting their erection to catch the placid night air. He jogged down the dock, feeling the planks grate and shift under him.

The leasing agent turned back to the grounded yacht that he used for his office. Not a bad night's work. The old fool's money had been burning a hole in his hip when he had arrived, so the agent had done the merciful thing and had relieved the itch. Five thousand rental for the old barge would make the company happy. With a little luck, who

knows? Maybe the decrepit thing would sink and then they could collect the insurance on it.

He would have to split up the remaining five thousand. A thousand to his buddy at the packing house, another half thousand to lease the gravtruck to haul the sour food in from the south side. And a little for himself. Hell, the inconvenience of making calls in the middle of the night was worth something, wasn't it? And the old man thought he was getting a bargain, so why disappoint him?

Three and a half grand for himself. Not bad at all. He settled himself on the rotting hull and watched the ancient catamaran angle out into the lake. There was a good breeze on the water and the running lights would not take long before they disappeared.

That was good because the extra thousand the couple had slipped him to surprise their uncle felt comfortable in his pocket. That was going to be a real kick when the doc found them aboard. The girl was a cutey, but how did she manage to get tied up with that character with her? Big and hairy as a damned ox with his hand shoved into his pocket. Maybe, the rental agent mused, the girl would be ready for some civilized company when she got back, and that reminded him to close the office. The doc might not feel too humorous, and turn back.

The rental agent liked the feel of the bills wadded in his pocket.

Graystone pulled up the mainsail, tying it firm to the mast cleat. It caught the air and billowed out, flapping massively. He balanced on one of the forward hulls and carefully stepped to the bows, leaning over the separation between them to snap on the sheets to the jib, then sliding back across the flat raised deck of the cabin.

He ran through his mind the steps the dockhand had given him. He dropped the double centerboards and the rudders, seeing them cut into the water, churning a small whirlpool of foam. He settled into the shallow depression behind the cabin, found the crystal controls under his hand and depressed the button. The computer read the breeze, swinging the boom and letting the sail grow taut with the wind. The boat glided into the bay.

The immediate silence astounded him. Movement to him was always associated with noise: the whining gravdrive in

an aircar, the monotonous growl of the streetwalks. Even thinking was filled with sound, because the act of thinking immediately brought to him visions of computers with myriad wheels and pulleys zipping down endless corridors.

But this was new, this was unfamiliar. This was only the lapping of the water against the hulls and the dimming sounds from the shore. A great awareness overtook him. He had spent his life healing anyone who walked through his door. He had been an intern during the big push to train general practitioners in the government's attempt to alleviate the glut of specialists and, because he honestly believed his calling was to serve his fellow men, he had bowed to the official suggestion. Long ago he had wanted to be a surgeon, but even the memory of that had become diffused and lost over the years. He contented himself with the knowledge that he was best serving his country, and during the war had taken pride in his belief.

He had opened his office in an area that was declining even before great lake cities had swollen and formed the sprawling conglomerate of Chidyland. His second wife, before she had left him too, had constantly upbraided him for not moving his location to one of the new growing complexes, but by then he had established his clientele and knew them and they knew him.

So he had stayed and she, as his first wife, had left him. The loneliness at first had been oppressive, but he lost himself among his patients and found comfort there.

And even earlier today he had felt pride when he had reported the violent man as Unstable. He hated death, but in an obscure way he was almost relieved to learn the man had been killed by the police. The man had represented an unknown in Graystone's world, a hint that the doctor's life was enmeshed in an undercurrent of force that did not belong.

So even then Graystone had known his position in life and had wrapped himself in that narrow blanket.

Perhaps the violent man had unsettled his thoughts. Perhaps he had kindled a spark of skepticism. Perhaps it was only the slippery sound of the water and the stillness of the air captured by the boat moving before the wind, but he suddenly became aware of a new kind of security. For that moment, security to him was being the only man on Earth, afloat on a raft in the middle of the ocean.

He pondered the illogic of the thought and tried to let it slough away from him, but it persisted, clinging to his awareness.

A mile out, a freighter moved its ponderous weight through the night, its rows of cabin lights giving the illusion of a city block bearing through the water. The sight of it snapped him from his spell.

He was becoming chilled. He had not considered the drop of temperature on the water. It had been warm and muggy on the land, but the night air blowing across the lake had turned uncomfortably cold.

Graystone locked the rudders and swung open the cabin door to find a jacket, savoring the anticipation of a creamy banana or a tantalizing tangerine. He crouched into the cabin and snapped on the light.

The man was spread across the foam bunk, a girl curled into the walkway between the hulls. The sight of him shocked Graystone, a crawling fear that gave way to pained anger.

Standard was crunching calmly on a Jonathan, the sweet juice wetting his mouth and dribbling down his chin.

"It's a good apple," he said. "Didn't know you could still get stuff like this. Must have cost you plenty. I wonder where you get vacation money so quickly?"

"What are you *doing* here?" Graystone blurted. Appalled, he watched Standard chew into the core, swallowing the seeds.

"Right at the moment, I'm trying to decide what to try next of your fruit," Standard said blandly. "But you mean what am I doing on your boat, right? That's pretty simple. I needed a boat that couldn't be tracked on the cops' pinar screens. Wood and plastic don't show up very well, and when I saw this old derelict being loaded up with supplies, and then when I found out who was renting it, why I just sort of invited myself aboard, knowing you wouldn't mind, Doc."

In the dim light, the pupils of his eyes seemed to vanish, leaving only slits of milky grayness peering under his brows.

"But I thought you were dead," Graystone stammered. "The news report said the police had killed you!"

"Come on, Doc," Standard said. He swung his feet off the bunk and began rummaging through the refrigerator. "Haven't you heard of an autopilot? I just set the controls and aimed it over the lake. By this time, the cops have prob-

ably realized that, if their computers are worth a damn."

"But you can't do this! And who is that girl?" Graystone eased himself against the hatch.

"She's a friend," Standard said. He glanced up. "Tell me, Doctor. Are you a friend?"

"What do you mean?"

"I'd like to know why you're suddenly leaving town, and I'd like to know who sicced the cops on me."

"I am on vacation," Graystone said peevishly, "although I can't see that that is any of your concern. As for who called the police, I haven't the slightest idea, but I'm sure the action was well advised."

Instantly, Graystone remembered. The annoyingly familiar picture on the vidiscreen came back to him and he recalled the setting.

It was his own office.

He sank to the flooring. "I called them, inadvertently. I called Policontrol to check on that man Quinn. They must have arrived after I left and played back my call computer. I think Quinn monkeyed with my machine, so they didn't find him but you instead. So it's all a misunderstanding, don't you see?"

"Uh huh," Standard said. He pulled an orange from the cubicle and bit into it, chewing the bitter skin slowly. Graystone felt the vacant eyes staring at him.

"What do you intend to do with me?" He fidgeted. "Murder me like you murdered Quinn?"

Standard stopped chewing. "What makes you think I murdered Quinn?"

"It was on the vid."

Standard stared at him and slowly resumed his chewing. "That's interesting. That's very interesting."

"Are you going to deny murdering him?" Graystone said suspiciously.

"Yep," Standard said. He squeezed the orange, sucking the juice noisily. "We gassed him, or more precisely, my girlfriend here gassed him. But Quinn was alive when we left him."

Graystone snorted. "Now I suppose you're going to tell me that the police killed him."

"No, I'm not going to tell you that," Standard said thoughtfully. "The cops didn't kill Quinn. But neither did I."

"You're talking in riddles." Graystone shook his head.

"Yeah, I guess so. Don't worry about it. But I still want to know just where you were going."

Graystone spread his hands. "Nowhere in particular," he said resignedly. "I intended to find a secluded beach and simply lose myself for a while."

"Sounds quaint," Standard said. "Instead of a beach, do you have any objections to an island?"

"Since you have assumed command, does it matter?" Graystone said stiffly.

"Not a whole lot," Standard said, wiping his hands on his tunic. "I just like to keep a happy ship. Now you must have sailing charts aboard this scow. How about digging them out for me?"

"They should be under your bunk," Graystone said.

Standard unrolled them and spread them out, frowning. He bent and shook Jeannine's shoulder. She woke slowly, then started as her eyes focused on Graystone. "Who . . . ?"

"That's Graystone, the *real* doctor," Standard said. "How are you feeling now?"

"Exhausted," Jeannine said. She pushed herself upright in the cramped cabin, pushing the hair back from her face. "Do you always run wherever you're going?"

"Only when the cops are looking for cars and I'm in a hurry," Standard said. "Look, you told me once that Rim was to the north. We're going to sail north with Graystone, but you're going to have to pick out the right island. Think you can do it?"

"I don't know," Jeannine said. "Quinn flew me there once, but I'm not sure I can find it on a map."

"Well, try hard. Maybe if you think hard enough, Rim will put the answer in your head. Rim seems to be calling all the goddamn shots, anyway."

"What do you mean?" Jeannine asked.

"You're smarter than that," Standard growled. "Rim has been dealing the cards since I stepped foot in this country. First meeting you, then getting my arm bummed up to give a good excuse to have it examined. When I need a way to get north without being detected, zip, here's Graystone with a stocked boat made out of wood. That's pushing coincidence a little too far, baby. I might as well have phoned Rim and told him I was coming to kill him."

Graystone glanced back and forth, perplexed by the conversation.

"That should prove to you that Rim doesn't want to harm you. When are you going to understand that?" Jeannine said.

"I was almost to the point of going along with that," Standard said. "Until the doc here told me something he had heard on the vidi. The cops think I'm a murderer, honey. Quinn is dead."

"Dead?" Jeannine's chin sagged. "He can't be dead. I only gave him a knockout dose."

"Exactly," Standard said. "You didn't kill him, and I didn't kill him. And I sure as hell don't think the cops killed him. So that leaves Rim. Still think Rim is such a nice guy?"

"Would one of you mind telling me just what this is all about?" Graystone interrupted.

"She can tell you," Standard said, pointing over his shoulder. "I'm going on top and sail this barge. You two can chat while she's fixing something for me to eat. I haven't eaten all day and I'm starved. Come to think of it, I've had a sample of her cooking. Why don't you get something together, Doc, and bring it out for me? You can take a look at my arm while you're at it, too."

He shoved his way out of the cabin, kicking the hatch closed behind him.

"Impetuous young man, isn't he?" Graystone said. He turned to Jeannine. "Whatever have you been talking about?"

Jeannine sighed. "His shoulder is bothering him. It keeps making his arm twitch and he thinks you caused it."

"That's not very likely. But even so, it shouldn't matter very much, even if I had caused the trauma." Graystone found a pan in the galley shelf and filled it, dropping ground leaves into the water. "I didn't order any coffee, but do you think Mr. Standard would tolerate tea?"

She shrugged. "He probably won't even notice the difference."

The microwave boiled the water in seconds and Graystone rummaged through his larder of fresh meat. "I suppose I shouldn't ask, but how did you become involved in this?"

"How much do you know?" Jeannine asked, watching Graystone prepare the food. It surprised her how raw everything appeared.

"I know that he's an assassin, and that his arm is a weapon. A rather lethal weapon, at that."

Jeannine looked up suddenly at the words. "You know about his arm?"

"Oh, yes, of course," Graystone said, pouring the tea. "You know how it works?"

"Certainly. It's really quite simple," Graystone said.

Standard swung the boat eastward, driving from the luminous horizon behind him. The water was calm, slurring between the hulls. The steady offshore breeze filled the sails, pressing them solidly. He checked the compass, guessed their speed, and estimated the time of their next tack. The girl still had not identified the correct island, but he was unconcerned. Rim would pull him toward it regardless what he did. He had been under the control of Rim from the outset, and now believed it fully.

There was a cluster of islands to the north, almost where the lake ended. Running from the apartment building, Jeannine had told him, and the rest had fallen into place. Neatly. Painfully neat. Before, he had felt he was a pawn in Condiffe's game, but now the stakes had expanded. He was dangling between the Rim and the world.

Why kill Quinn, Standard thought, and keep me alive? He nearly expected the answer to boom out of the clouds.

The hatch cracked open and Jeannine slid beside him on the deck. "Here's some food," she said. "And you don't have to worry. Graystone fixed it."

He locked the rudders and took the tray, tearing into it. "You have a nice talk with the doc?" he asked between mouthfuls.

"There's something you should know, Mike," Jeannine said. "Graystone knows how your arm works. He told me."

Standard almost gagged on the food. "What!"

"Your arm is like a separate brain all in itself. The information on how to make it work is held inside, in the form of coded nucleic acid. When the time is right, the nucleic acid acts as a motor impulse."

"Shut up!" Standard snarled. "I don't want to know. I *can't* allow myself to know!"

She leaned against the railing. "Don't you see, Mike? It doesn't matter now. Rim knew how it worked the instant Graystone examined you. So you can't possibly kill Rim now. He'll know what to expect."

Standard shook his head angrily. "No. Rim can't read a strange mind over that kind of distance."

"Do you doubt that Rim can read my mind?" Jeannine asked quietly.

Of course! *That* was why Rim had arranged Standard's meeting with the girl. Rim could pick her mind as cleanly as a bone in a hamhock. All it required was to get close enough to Graystone, and that had been arranged, too. Lord, he had walked into it blindfolded.

He stared at her with an expression of pain and confusion.

"You led me right into it," he said. "You're like a monitor. As long as you stayed with me, Rim knew exactly where I was and what I was doing."

"Yes," Jeannine said. "That's why I work for Rim. He's always in tune with me. He watches over me, Mike. He can watch over you, too."

"No. Not me," Standard said. He shook his head dumbly. "I want no part of Rim. Rim is a tyrant. He's out to enslave the world."

"Rim is the last hope of the world," Jeannine said. "He brought the world out of a war that could have destroyed it, and he is holding it together now until it can cure itself. Someday Rim will be able to remove all the hate and greed in the world. That's not enslavement, Mike. That's love."

"No," Standard said. "If Rim is going to remove all the hate in the world, he's going to have to remove me, too."

"He can do better than that," Jeannine said. "He can make you whole again. He can repair the world, and he can re-make your arm, Mike. That's why he wants me to bring you to him."

"I don't believe it. Why me, girl? I'm trying to kill him, remember? With Rim's power, he could blot me out in an eyeblink. Why keep *me* alive?"

She moved closer to him. His gray eyes were almost luminous in the dark and she knew that Rim's power was coursing through Standard even now. She had guessed from the start that she could fall in love with this broken man, and now she realized why.

She ran her finger over his scarred face, touching his lips. "I'm falling in love with you, Mike. You are the greatest single man in the world."

"Greater than Rim?" Standard said, his anger slowly becoming a memory.

"Rim is more than a man," Jeannine said. "But of all the men in this world, you are the most wonderful."

"My God, what have you been drinking with the doc?"

"Don't joke," she said. "Mike, you are the Rim's father. Without you, there would be no Rim."

It stunned him, but deep inside he had suspected it.

"Oh God," he breathed.

"In the Chinasian hospital where you were held, Rim depended on you for strength. He was so terribly wounded, Mike. He had no vision, or hearing, or touch. For a long while, he didn't know if he was alive. So he borrowed your mind so he could find his way back to reality. And when he had, he discovered something more. This great power of his. But without you, he would never have lived and would never have become what he is now."

He bowed his head, clenching his teeth. "How long have you known?"

"Rim told me while I was asleep. It came to me like a dream, but it wasn't a dream."

His arm was quivering, the violation of metal and artificial nerves revolting against his flesh. She placed her hand on it and leaned forward, brushing her lips across his face.

"Do you want me, Mike?"

He looked at her, letting his eyes fall over her dark hair and the large defensive eyes that peered back at him. He liked the feel of her and wanted her to stay on the gently moving deck with him. It would be easy, peacefully warm to fall asleep against her, to call an end to a doomed mission.

Except that he was still Michael Standard. And all the questions had not yet been answered.

He moved his arm around her. It would be good to really be able to feel her, her softness, her smoothness, not just the sensation of pressure that the arm transmitted. Good to be able to feel her with both arms.

Could Rim really do that, replace the mechanical contrivance with living tissue, give back the arm he had lost in a futile war? There was no longer any reason to doubt Rim's power. Rim could do that.

"Go inside," he said softly. "I need time to think, Jeannine."

IX

THE MORNING BROKE slowly in a blast of red that turned the sails to copper. It brought a rising column of clouds in front of them that grew out of the horizon and paced the sun as it climbed the sky. The water, table calm and flat throughout the night, began to show ripples of air. The weather was coming from the north, running directly into them.

Standard estimated his pattern of tacks and started his crisscrossing into the wind, squinting into the glare as he angled into the sun.

Jeannine heard the increased pounding of the wind-driven waves against the bow and came out on the deck. "What's happening?" she asked.

"We're running into some weather," Standard said. "Take a look."

She looked to where he pointed and saw the mounting thunderheads. "It looks nasty. Is it going to trouble us?"

"Don't know. It may veer off, but I don't think so. You'd better ask Graystone if this tub is rigged for lightning. Otherwise, we won't have to worry about Rim."

"I'll ask him. Is there anything else you need?"

"Yeah," Standard said. "I'm hungry. See if you can pry any more food out of him. And see if he has any shades. I'm going to burn my sockets out looking into those white-caps."

The wind was building by the time she brought the food, forcing one hull up and churning a ribbon of foam. He ate hurriedly, shoving the food into his mouth, and wished he had more time to savor the fruit.

"Is there anything else?" Jeannine asked, wiping the spray from her face. "Can Graystone or I do anything to help you?"

"What I need is a couple of those trampers you know to sit on that far hull and hold it down," Standard said. "You're too light to do me much good, and Graystone is probably

too old to do anything more than peel grapes. So the answer's no. You can't help me. Go inside and have a nice talk with him and keep out of my way."

Jeannine squatted on the deck and collected the bowls. "We talked last night. He's a nice man."

"I'll bet he is," Standard said. He tightened the main-sail and angled as closely into the wind as the boat could hold. "What'd you talk about?"

"We talked about you and we talked about the Rim," Jeannine said. Her hair was hanging loosely in wet strands. "He said if my description of Rim is correct, he doesn't see how you can possibly win in a fight."

"That's encouraging," Standard said. "If your description was as muddle-headed as your thinking normally is, I'm a dead cinch to come out ahead with Rim."

"You may have said the word," Jeannine said. "Dead."

Standard grinned. "One of us or the other. Sorry, Jeannine. You just haven't convinced me yet."

The storm hit shortly after noon, the wind hitting them like a solid wall, shredding the tops of the waves and breaking the water across the deck. He slapped the sunglasses tighter to his face and was drenched in moments as the twin hulls chopped into the waves, sending plumes of water pouring into the boat.

When the storm struck, he was almost relieved. It gave him a chance to lose his thoughts in the bursting whitecaps. He canceled the computer and slacked off the sails, looping his feet under the hiking straps as the boat heaved and bolted on the waves. The storm passed in an hour, leaving the lake chopped and churning and Standard in a tense calmness. It had reminded him that he was still alive.

He spent the afternoon watching the neon blue reflections of the polarized light glinting off the tops of the whitecaps and sailed into the evening. As the winds settled, the anger in him returned and grew.

Jeannine stayed with Graystone, sampling his hoard of food, laughing at the fruit and fresh meat. In the middle of the afternoon, she had fought across the pitching deck to Standard and had brought him lunch.

"I can't get over that fresh meat," she told Standard. "It's so repulsive looking."

"Cooks up pretty good," Standard said and chewed into a

chop. "On the other hand, you can take a good-looking pre-pack breakfast and turn it into something repulsive to eat. I guess that takes skill. Not many girls can do that, you told me."

After that, Jeannine stopped talking to him. It suited him. He felt there was something he wanted to say to her, but since he was unsure of what, he preferred not to talk. His face was becoming seared from the sun and wind, but he pushed away the lotion that Graystone offered. He was alive and he was still Mike Standard. That was all he needed. He waited until they doused the lights in the cabin and locked the rudders, snapping the computer back on after replotting their course. The hull was hard, but at least it was smooth and he was damned if he was going to sleep inside the cabin with them.

Someone had covered him with a tarpaulin and his breath had condensed under it, soaking his face. Annoyed, he pushed the tarp back and peered around him.

Fog was curtaining the still water. It was resting a slight foot off the surface, as though a section of dull gray sky had dropped over the boat during the night. Lying on the hull, he could see under the layer, like looking edgewise into a white mirrored sandwich. It was thick and opaque, a low ceiling roiling over the lake.

He knelt, letting the wet tarp slough off his shoulders. His head in the fog, he could only see to the stern. Beyond that, his vision was lost in the cotton swirls.

The morning was cool and he was soaked from the condensation. He kicked the tarpaulin to the deck and stood on the hull. As he stood, the sunlight flooded his face.

The fog was less than five feet thick, a solid barrier over the water that stopped at his shoulders. Standing, he could look over the fog blanket. It drifted around him, a clinging cloud that covered the lake as far as he could see until it merged with the washed horizon. He was struck with a sensation of having been decapitated, his body a part of the nebulous fog and his head, a hollow orb that the fog curled into, only floating on the coiling blanket.

There was no way of knowing how far they had drifted during the night. With the stillness of the morning, the night had probably been calm also and they could not have drifted far.

He turned to the cabin to awaken Graystone and the girl, and then he saw it. Poking up out of the fog off the stern, less than ten kilometers away, was the island, a protuberance of gray floating in the hazy white swirls. It could have been any island within a radius of a hundred kilometers, but he knew, inexplicably, that he was looking at the island of the Rim.

He pounded on the cabin as he slid over it and threw the hatch open. Graystone was snorting heartily, blinking his heavy eyes, but the girl had stirred instantly.

"What's happening?" she asked.

"It's the island," Standard said.

She was alert and on her feet. "Are you sure? How do you know it's the right island?"

"Call it a feeling. Take a look at this and tell me if I'm right." He pulled her to the cabin top and pointed over the fog. "Out there. You see it?"

"Yes. Yes, I can see it."

"Well?" he said impatiently. "Is that the island or not?"

She stared across the fog. "I've only been on Rim's island once, Mike. And I was flown there that time by Quinn. It was when I was just starting to work for Rim and I met *him*. Quinn took me there and we only stayed a few hours. It's hard to tell from here if it's the right island."

Graystone pushed his head out of the cabin and looked up at them. "What's the commotion all about? Have we sighted land?"

"Yeah, we've sighted something, but Miss Birdwatcher here isn't sure what it is," Standard grumbled. He glanced frowningly at her and saw her face. Her eyes were wide and intent on the distant shape.

"How far away is it?" Graystone asked, unbending on the deck.

"Quiet," Standard hushed him. He was watching Jeanine as she strained against the mist. "What is it, girl? Do you see something familiar?"

His question brought her back, as though her mind were refocusing, trying to remember him. "Mike," she said quietly. "The Rim is there."

"How do you know?" Standard asked. He said it carefully, not wanting to risk jolting her back into reality too rapidly.

She looked at him and he saw the mixture of awe and fear. "Rim is calling me."

He felt the chill run up his spine and reassured himself that it was a cold morning. "Okay. Doc, why don't you see if you can get some breakfast going for us?"

"Certainly," Graystone said. "Jeannine, would you like to help me?"

"No," she said, her voice sounding empty in the fog. "I want to stay out here." Her voice trailed off, tangling itself in the white swirls.

Standard slid down from the cabin. "I'll give you a hand, Doc. I want to check something inside, anyway." He guided Graystone through the hatch and closed it behind them. He listened for a moment for Jeannine's footsteps over them, but she was motionless, her attention riveted on the island.

"What is it you wanted to check?" Graystone asked, pulling out pots.

Standard was unrolling the charts. "This isn't making any damn sense at all. I've got a feeling in my bones that Rim is out there, and Jeannine feels it even stronger. But take a look at this chart," he said, jabbing his finger to a fringed spot in the northern lake. "That's where Jeannine said the island was. We started off Chidy way down here in the south. How the hell did we cover so much distance?"

Graystone looked over his shoulder. "Isn't it possible? We sailed nearly all night long the first night, and all the next day in some rather stiff wind. We could have drifted several miles last night also."

"Sure, it's possible to sail that far in thirty hours. With a crack crew and some damned good weather, it's possible. No offense, Doc, but you and Jeannine don't exactly qualify as Chris Columbo's rowing team. We had some stiff wind yesterday, but it was all against us. We weren't making much time tacking into that storm. I can't see how it's possible that we could've sailed this far."

"Yet you seem positive your Rim is out there on that island."

"Yeah," Standard said, rubbing his chin. "That's what has me worried."

Graystone was cracking eggs into a skillet. "It's foolish to worry about something you cannot control. Either ignore it entirely or accept it."

Standard grunted and smirked. "Thanks a lot. Jeannine told me what kind of odds you were giving me. Think it's pretty hopeless, huh?"

The doctor watched the egg whites cloud and firm. "If Rim can do everything Jeannine says he can do, then I think your best course of action would be to join your comrades on the moon. It is impossible for you to win. This confusion you are having with the island is a fair indication of your impotency. If Rim is on that island, then he has either moved the island closer to us, or he has moved us closer to the island. In either event, that makes for a rather formidable foe."

Standard peered out the porthole. The fog was beginning to lift, and he nodded his head. "You're a civilian, Doc, so you've never been told. All but two of the moon lifters were destroyed in the war. I can't get off this planet if I wanted to. The only way I can get off Earth is for Condliffe to bring back one of the lifters and get me, and he's sure as hell not going to step on this planet as long as Rim is still alive."

He turned to Graystone. "I'm marooned on my own world, Doc. If I can kill Rim, then it'll be a world worth fixing. If I lose, then it won't matter. I don't want any part of the world Rim is making."

"But you don't really know what kind of world Rim is building. All you have to go on is what Condliffe told you and for all we know Condliffe may be another Hitler or Napoleon. Perhaps Condliffe, and not Rim, wants to tyrannize the world," Graystone said.

"You're a doctor," Standard said. "You should know the statistics, what's happening to the birth rate, the maturation rate."

"Those are only statistics. Of course I am aware of them. But there can be any number of causes, not merely some superhuman trying to control the destinies of man."

Standard did not answer, but stared again out the porthole.

Graystone turned back to his skillet. "I believe I feel sorry for you, Michael. You're so eager to rush headlong off the side of the cliff."

"I don't have any choice," Standard said.

"That's why I feel sorry for you."

They heard the shuffling on the cabin roof over them and Jeannine slid to the deck. Standard had the hatch open before she could reach it.

"Take me to the island, Mike," she said. "The Rim is tired of waiting."

"I'll take you to the island, but you're not coming ashore with me," Standard said. "You're going to stay on the boat with Graystone. It's my game this time, baby. I'll have to go alone."

"No." She shook her head emphatically. "You shouldn't go ashore at all. Something has changed. Something terrible is going to happen. If we both go to the island now, this may be the last time we'll ever be together."

"I thought Rim was leading me on this far so he could meet me and try to change my mind," Standard said coldly.

"He was, but this isn't quite the right time. I can't explain why, it just isn't." She stammered, groping for an explanation. "Everything is so mixed up now. If you go ashore, Mike, you *must* take me. Maybe if I'm there with you, it . . . it won't be so bad for you."

"Listen to her, Mike," Graystone said. "I think she knows what she's talking about."

Standard turned angrily. "Since when do you have a vote in this?"

"It's my world also," Graystone said. "I'll be going ashore with you, and I think it would be wise to have Jeannine with us."

"Like hell you're coming ashore with me! Jeannine might be helpful to me to point out the way, but I sure don't need you. Once we get off this boat, you turn it around and go find that beach you wanted."

"You're overlooking something," Graystone said. "I can be of enormous use to you. We've established that Rim cannot read every mind singly, but needs a reference point. It appears that he can communicate directly with Jeannine, and can make some kind of impression on your mind. But he seems unable to read my mind accurately thus far. If he could read my mind, there would have been no need for Quinn to personally report to him. There would have been no reason to force our meeting again on this boat."

Standard glowered at the doctor, not willing to admit the validity of the argument. Finally he tossed up his hand. "Oh, what the hell. Okay, you're coming with me. Jeannine's coming with me. Maybe we ought to drag the boat along with us, too."

Graystone smiled. "You do have moments of lucidity, Michael."

The wind was rising gradually, scattering the fog. As they neared, Standard scanned the island. There was no movement that he could detect, no pinnacled buildings, only the rocks and a covering of trees. He was beginning to mistrust his own feelings and Jeannine's tentative identification. It did not seem a likely throne room for a ruler of the world.

He saw the sunlight glint from something in the forested center. Hidden in the trees was a building.

The beach was a rubble of stones, bounded by the heavy bush. He lifted the boards and drifted in close, guiding with a paddle. There was no sound from the island. It was as dead and lifeless as the vanished fog. Even the ever-present gulls had disappeared.

"Strange," Graystone said under his breath. "There doesn't seem to be anything alive on the island."

"Spooky," Standard agreed. "That's what Rim will do to the whole world. Sap the life out of everything that lives."

He dropped over the hull and waded ashore, pulling the boat behind him. Jeannine slid into the water and splashed beside him onto the beach. They stood for a moment, Standard balancing the needle gun in his hand and listening intently. Graystone dropped off the deck and helped him drag the hulls out of the water.

"Well?" Standard asked.

"I'm not familiar with this part of the island," Jeannine said slowly. "The main dock should be on the other side. There's a paved road that runs from it up to the house."

"House? I expected more than that."

"It's more than a house," Jeannine said. "You'll see."

"Shall we split up?" Graystone asked.

Standard grunted. "I think our chances for a surprise attack have hit rock bottom. No, hell, we'll just walk on up to the house and knock."

He pushed incautiously into the brush, flicking aside limbs and stepping over decaying trunks. Jeannine and Graystone followed him across the rockstrewn beach into the willows and scrub pines. The ground sloped upward to the high point where Standard had noticed the reflection. The underbrush became denser, coiling around their feet and driving sharp branches through their clothes.

They stumbled into a cleared area that curved away from them on both sides. Standard recognized it immediately. It was a perimeter boundary, still showing the grooved treads of the land buster that had cleared it. He stepped onto the pulverized sawdust of the cleared brush and stopped. Graystone nearly bumped into him.

"What is it, Mike?" he asked.

Standard peered into the brush at the other side of the devastated band. "This clearing," he said. "It looks like it runs all the way around the island. It's probably mined. Not with explosives, but with detector devices."

Graystone tugged his lip. "Curious. Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"Yeah. Seems like a pretty ordinary warning method for a god."

"Precisely," Graystone said. "I imagine we should be on our guard from now on."

"Uh huh," Standard said. He turned abruptly and stepped back into the brush. He picked out a limb and aimed the needle gun at it loosely. It obeyed his will and clipped the limb in half. Then he stepped back on the sawdust of the clearing and tried it again. There was no response. The needle gun was no more effective than a chunk of steel inside the barrier.

"Well, children," he said, dropping the gun in the sawdust. "It looks like inside this barrier, we're in the direct control of Rim. Cheers."

"More direct than you suppose," Graystone said, nodding across the barrier.

Standard could have sworn there had been no one near them a moment ago, but now a seven-foot giant was standing before them on the other side. He was dressed in an ultra-violet white uniform that dazzled even in the heavy shade of the forest.

Standard dropped to his knees and scooped up the needle gun.

"Don't do it," Jeannine cried. "It'll backfire."

He was not listening. He threw himself sideways off the sawdust into the brush and visualized a spreading blot of red on the giant's chest. He fired and the gun came alive in his hand.

The needle slammed into the invisible field and hung suspended in the air for a second as the straight-line force be-

hind it piled up and blasted the gun out of his hand. It disintegrated in a rod of shrapnel that chopped off the brush behind him.

It was like holding a white-hot poker. The sensory pads in his metal hand overloaded and shorted, the sudden heat shriveling the plastic flesh and peeling it back from his fingers.

He could cope with pain. He had taught himself in the Chin hospital and later when Condliffe had sawed another three inches off his stub to house the arm apparatus. The worst thing about pain was the fear of disability, the thought of being maimed for life. Overcome the fear and any amount of pain could be endured until the body went into total shock, and even shock was partially fear.

He fought to his knees, his jaws aching from the effort of clenching them, and felt the jagged cracks on his teeth that he had broken.

Graystone helped him upright. "The Rim seems to take care of his own, wouldn't you say?" Graystone asked unnecessarily.

"Yeah, I'd say that," Standard grunted, waggling his arm to cool it. He still retained full control, but there was no way of guessing if any internal damage had been caused.

Jeannine had crossed the sawdust boundary and approached the giant, a quizzical expression clouding her face. The giant had barely moved, but instead watched Standard passively. He seemed unperturbed that Standard had tried to kill him. As Jeannine stopped before him, the giant turned his attention to her and smiled loosely.

"Hello again, Miss Brochet," he said. "Tell me, do you still have those orange lights in your apartment?"

She frowned, peering into his relaxed face. "Drog? Is that you, Drog?"

"Of course," the giant said. "I hope you and your friends are well."

"Yes, very." Jeannine smiled. "They're all well. Someday you'll have to visit me, if you've forgiven me yet."

Standard glowered as he stumbled across the sawdust with Graystone. The conversation was obviously for his benefit, to emphasize his impotence.

"There's nothing to forgive," the giant said. "You opened life to me. Naturally, at first I reacted the same any man would who felt he had been shanghaied. I tried to fight my

way free, to destroy everything around me. But then I slowly became aware of what total freedom really was, and then I began to accept my position."

Jeannine nodded, well pleased with herself. "That's good, Drog. The Rim must have great confidence in you now to give you this duty."

Standard grimaced at Graystone. "Do you ever get the feeling you're going to throw up?"

"Well, they are old friends, apparently," Graystone said. He felt himself sharing Standard's cynicism.

Jeannine turned quickly, angrily, to them. "Yes, Drog is an old friend. But more importantly, he is an inner agent of Rim. In time, Mr. Michael Standard, you may begin to appreciate what that means."

"I can hardly wait," Standard said dryly.

"We are keeping the Master waiting. He asked me to bring you to him. Follow me and I'll lead you to him," Drog said abruptly. He crashed into the underbrush, glancing warmly back at Jeannine. "It is good to see you again, Miss Brochet."

"Thank you, Drog," she answered.

"What the hell are you?" Standard snapped. "The queen bee for this whole damned outfit?"

Jeannine did not answer him. Standard felt a slow fury building inside him and knew there was no way he could fight what was happening. The Rim had him in its power like a gnat in the palm of a hand. Whatever Condliffe had planted in his arm had better work. There was going to be no second chance. There might not even be a first chance, what with the way things were rapidly disintegrating into a shambles.

Only Graystone seemed at ease as they broke their way through the underbrush and into the scrub forest. He hummed to himself, exuding the air of a Rotarian on Sunday walk, except his analytical mind was absorbing every twig and pebble. Carefully, cautiously, he was creating conclusions.

They broke out of the woods onto a circular plaza with the texture of crushed pearls. In the center was a glass cube, a shade over ten meters square, totally transparent, the trees on the opposite side showing clearly through it. Just as clearly, the cube was empty: an enigmatic presence squatting in the center of a rough island.

Graystone squinted at it. Whether Standard noticed it, Graystone was unaware, but as they neared the cube Gray-

stone saw the outlines of the trees on the opposite side shimmer slightly. For a second, they seemed to blur out of focus. He meant to ask Standard if he too had seen it, but the next action caught him entirely unprepared.

Drog led them to the cube. Without hesitating, he walked into a wall. *Into* the wall. It flowed away from him momentarily like a water drop separating from an oil slick, then closed behind him. He smiled at them from the opposite side of the glass, motioning them in.

They followed Drog through the wall. First was Jeannine, who had not even broken stride. She stood beside Drog and nodded to Graystone and Standard.

"Amazing," Graystone exclaimed.

"After you, Doctor," Standard said.

Graystone stepped into the wall. He expected some sensation, some evidence of a discharged force field, but there was no feeling whatsoever. He had just walked through a wall. It was as simple as that.

Standard followed him gruffly. "Damn good trick," he grumbled. "But not worth a damn for keeping prowlers out."

"Don't be too sure about that," Jeannine warned. "Remember what happened back on the beach. If you had an ordinary arm, you'd be missing it now."

Standard let the comment pass. He and Graystone were silent, trying to adjust their eyes to the interior of the cube. The light was dazzling, a mind-jolting brilliance that flooded out of the very walls around them. In the penetrating glare, it took long seconds for Standard to realize the glass wall he had just walked through was not transparent at all. There was no indication of the wooded island outside, only the intense incandescent light that bombarded them.

Half-blinded, he tried to retain his bearings. They were in a long hall that stretched for a hundred feet before them, made of the same luminous material as the plaza. The light glittered off a million surfaces, bouncing around him. It was nearly impossible to see where the walls met the floor. He reached for the wall and found it as difficult to feel as to see. There was a mushy resilience that gradually turned hard, but even so, the solid wall was farther behind him than the short steps he had taken to walk through it. And the hallway. A hundred feet long in a ten meter cube?

"Come," Jeannine said, taking his hand. "You are in the

vortex of life now, Mike. For the first time in your life, you are experiencing reality as it actually exists."

"Fine," Standard said, his mind swimming. "Give me that old illusion I've been living with if this is reality."

"That's why you are here," Jeannine said. "To find the truth."

Drog was already walking down the hall toward the far end. They fell into step behind the giant. *Reality exists on the other side of the wall*, Standard kept telling himself. But where was the wall? A coldness was seeping into him, tying knots around his spine. Jeannine's eyes were wide, her mouth parted as though she were listening to an inaudible voice.

"It's more beautiful than I remember," she said. "Oh yes, yes."

Graystone had stopped humming.

Standard forced himself to keep pace with Drog and Jeannine. Graystone was lagging behind, also stunned by the light. Standard's eyes were beginning to water and lose focus. The tears were running down his face, dripping off his chin as he staggered toward the far end of the hall.

The room was swimming for Graystone, throwing his eyes out of kilter as though he had been hit with a crunching concussion. He knew Standard was being affected too from the way he lurched before the doctor. For an instant, Graystone reflected on the physical properties of light to keep his mind clear, but the battering impact of the light drove all thoughts away. It was more than light, he knew instinctively. It was a shattering, pounding force.

But it was more than that, also. Because Jeannine seemed to revel in it, almost bathing in it like a crackling stream of water. And Drog seemed utterly insensitive to it. Graystone knew what it was, the answer hanging on a shred of his brain, balancing on the conscious, but the crushing light held the answer in limbo.

Drog and Jeannine stopped at the wall. Staggering, Standard almost ran into it.

"You can go no further, Mike," Jeannine said. "Drog and I will go on to meet the Rim. But you and Graystone must wait until the Rim is ready to see you."

"Wait, hell," Standard said, dragging the words out of his throat. "If you're going in, I'm going in. I've got some business to attend to."

"No, Michael," Jeannine said sweetly. "You're tired now. Rest for a while, and then you'll be admitted. Believe me, you will see the Rim, but not yet. It won't be long, I promise you."

He was having difficulty standing upright. The tears coursing down his face were mixing with sweat from the effort. The steel arm hanging from his shoulder seemed to weigh a ton, a millstone trying to drag him to his knees.

"Sorry, baby, but it's my show now," he said with a tongue that was as dry as the sand outside the cube. "Get out of my way, kid. I'm going in."

He took one step sideways, twisting his body and swinging the ponderous arm like a leaden pendulum. Drog was more intent on his daydreaming than on blocking the blow. Standard plowed the steel arm into Drog's chest. With an explosive gasp, Drog racked backward, his eyes wide with surprise.

Standard twisted back, hauling the arm back around. There was a dull snap as it caught Drog's jaw. The giant spun slowly, a ballet turn that sprawled him across the floor.

Someone was moving toward him. Standard saw the figure materialize out of the glittering light, another giant block of man rushing to stop him. In the glare, Standard had completely overlooked the white uniform standing close to the wall.

The guard was almost on him, reaching for his head. Standard ducked, coming up sharply under the guard's arm, driving his steel fist into the glittering area directly below the guard's belt.

Standard felt the blow jam into his shoulder as the three hundred pound guard stopped cold, his mouth gagging open, his lips curled back. Standard grabbed his steel fist and stood violently, bringing his clenched fists up. They hit the guard under the chin, jolting his head back.

The exertion was clearing his mind. By God, Condliffe was right! Fight a mental giant with brute force. It was working.

More guards were running toward him from across the hall. But they were long seconds away, running toward him as though locked in slow motion.

He glanced back at the wall that separated him from the Rim and made his decision. By the time the guards reached

him, he could be through that nebulously sparkling wall, putting an end to his mission.

He spun on the wall, driving his fist at it, preparing for the numbing blow. It had been a glass wall outside and he was determined that it was a glass wall inside.

His fist struck the wall and he lost his balance. There was no resistance. It was as though he had struck air. He fell forward, wildly wagging his arms to stop himself, and suddenly found himself imprisoned.

The wall, like a mass of gelatin, closed around him. He was suspended, one foot touching the floor, his body hanging in an impossible angle. For a moment a vague figure moved closer to him on the other side of the wall before the glittering light closed around him, blocking his sight, sealing his mouth.

In the dim sparkle of his mind, Graystone tried to follow what was happening around him. Drog was bleeding from his ear and the other guard was moaning on the floor, and Standard had bolted through the wall.

But not exactly *through* the wall. *Into* the wall was more accurate, because Graystone could see Standard's foot dangling outside. It was twitching spastically, trying to extricate itself from the shimmering morass. But it was firm, locked in the wall.

"Help him!" Graystone yelled, but Jeannine was standing dumbfounded.

She faced Graystone painfully, her face drawn in deep furrows.

"I can't," she whimpered.

"Appeal to your Rim," Graystone cried. "Good lord, girl, the man is suffocating!"

"The Rim does as he chooses," Jeannine said. She pressed her knuckles to her face, holding back her fear.

Graystone sputtered, immobilized by his frustration. He was jostled stiffly aside as the running guards reached the wall. Both stumbled to a halt, staring at Standard's protruding foot.

Graystone felt a command rattle through the hall, an order that emanated beyond his hearing.

Immediately, one of the guards grabbed Standard's now still foot and pulled. The wall again took the consistency of gelatin. Standard began sliding out like a rotten wisdom tooth. His second foot became visible and the other guard

grabbed it and helped tug. Slowly they pulled the limp body out of the wall.

With a drawn sucking sound, Standard oozed out, dropping brokenly on the floor. Graystone pushed past the guards and reached for Standard's pulse and saw Standard's chest heave just before one of the guards caught Graystone by the collar and unceremoniously tossed him back.

Graystone collected himself and rose painfully to his feet. The light was still dazzling him and now his neck hurt. He was having serious misgivings for having insisted on coming ashore.

Jeannine was bending over Standard, stroking his face. "Is he all right, Doctor?" she asked.

"He's alive. Your associates did not give me much opportunity to examine him," he said ruefully, rubbing his neck.

"You'll have to forgive them. They didn't understand you were a doctor," she said. She touched the livid scar on Standard's cheek and stood away. The guard who had yanked Graystone off his feet leaned down and lifted Standard off the floor. "Go with him," Jeannine said. "See if Mike is all right."

Graystone squinted around. Drog was leaning against the wall, glassy-eyed, his jaw hanging crookedly. "Perhaps I should have a look at Drog, also. Michael may have hurt him badly."

"No," Jeannine insisted. "You mustn't stay here now. Take care of Mike. Drog will be all right. Please, Doctor."

The guard stepped away with Standard. Graystone hesitated, then decided he had seen enough of the Rim's will and tagged after the guard before he was lost in the shimmering light.

Graystone had the distinct impression he was being led through a maze. The guard turned, angled, ran up stairs and down ramps, turning again, until Graystone had lost all orientation. He followed doggedly, trying to keep pace.

They rounded another corner and Graystone saw a gray rectangle hanging before them. The sight of it, not shimmering or vibrating, was a balm to his throbbing mind. The guard stepped through the rectangle and Graystone followed, stepping over the low sill.

It was a doorway and he found himself in a small cubicle,

all the walls, floor and ceiling a sheened gray substance that gave softly under his heel.

The guard placed Standard on the floor. Soundlessly, he turned and stepped through the rectangle into the glittering white light. The portal closed around him, blocking the glare and leaving only the soft gray light.

Graystone inspected Standard, found him breathing normally, and settled back. There were no seats in the room, no features of any kind. Even the doorway had vanished without a seam. The floor was gently resistant to his touch, exuding a faint warmth.

He paced around the room. It was smaller than the deceptive light indicated. He counted off four steps in each direction. Barely enough to allow two men to sleep on the floor. Graystone was thankful he was not susceptible to claustrophobia and tried to guess what Standard's reaction would be when he awoke.

X

IT WAS A perfect morning to stay sleeping. Sunlight was dribbling through the bedroom windows and he buried his face in the pillow, not wanting to acknowledge the morning. The scent of honeysuckle was drifting in with the sun, carrying a bird's chattering with it. He wanted to stay here, in this half-awake state, feeling the softness of the day, knowing it was not intruding, not demanding of him.

He burrowed deeper into the pillow, feeling soft foam on his arms. Someone was calling him, telling him to wake. The voice came lazing in with the sunlight and honeysuckle, gentle and sweet, and he recognized it as Jeannine's.

With a start, he realized he was feeling the pillow with *both* arms. He had his real arm back, real flesh and blood.

He bolted out of bed and found himself looking at Graystone. They were in a dull gray room and he interpreted it as a cell instantly.

"The hell . . . ?" he said uncertainly, looking for Jeannine. There was only the stark gray walls. He caught his breath and peered around more closely.

"How do you feel?" Graystone asked.

"I'm okay," Standard snapped. He flexed his steel arm, sensing the coldness of it. "How long have we been here?"

Graystone glanced at his watch. "About three hours. They brought us here after they pulled you out of the wall. Are you sure you're feeling well? You woke very suddenly."

"I was having a dream," he grunted. "Just a dream." He frowned at the sheen walls. "Dammit, I should've stayed asleep. It was a helluva lot better than this."

"At least it's better than that terrible glare," Graystone suggested.

Standard stood and walked around the cubicle. "Rim doesn't have much imagination when it comes to architecture, does he? Have you checked this room out, Doc?"

"Yes, it seems to be exactly as it appears. The gray light seems to be generated by the walls and the ceiling. It's becoming rather monotonous."

"I'll buy that. Where's the door to this closet? How did we get in?"

"Actually," Graystone said, "I think you're standing in front of it now. It was there when the guard carried you in. Then he went back out and the door dematerialized. Or the wall materialized in its place, whichever you prefer."

Standard felt the rubbery wall. "Everything has this spongy feel?"

"Apparently so," Graystone said, punching the floor.

Standard slumped back to Graystone and sank down on the floor. "Looks like a temporary dead-end, huh? You're pretty good at guessing games, Doc. Any idea where we go from here?"

"I've been thinking about that," Graystone said, tapping his chin. "Tell me, Mike, do you notice anything inconsistent about all this?"

"In what way?"

"I'm not really sure. It's more of a feeling than anything I can really nail down. Finding this island, as an example. You admitted that it would have been impossible to have actually sailed this far in such a short time. Yet, suddenly, here it is. And not even Jeannine is entirely positive she recognizes it."

Standard scraped the floor with his foot. "Doesn't matter

much. Wherever we are, we're here and it's getting nasty."

"Think for a moment," Graystone said, jabbing his fingers for emphasis. "Let's assume that there is an island here, and that there is some sort of building on it. But that's all. All the special effects, the dissolving walls, that terrible light, may all be an illusion."

"Getting swallowed up by a wall is real, and it's damned uncomfortable," Standard said. He slapped the cell floor. "And I don't care what you call it, the floor is *firm*."

Graystone fell silent, lost in thought.

"Look, what does it matter?" Standard said. "If it is partially illusion, that just makes the Rim's power all the more awesome. I couldn't breathe in that wall, Doc. So what the hell is real, anyway? You're dead no matter if Rim kills you with his mental powers or with a club. Dead is dead."

"You're correct, of course," Graystone said. "We're very limited in what we can really perceive. In a way, you could say that televid is all an illusion. Obviously, little people aren't chasing around inside the set. Nevertheless, for what it is, it is certainly real, in the sense that it exists."

"My point exactly," Standard said gruffly. "Anything that can kill you is real, no matter what it is."

Graystone looked at him quietly. "Do you still think you can fight the Rim?"

"Who knows? For a minute out there when I was slugging those fancy guards around I thought my vision started to clear. Here's something else . . . when I went into that wall, I thought I saw someone on the other side."

"The presence of Rim." Graystone nodded. "I sensed that, also." He curled back against the wall and sighed. "I'm not sure if you can win, Michael. But if this is an example of the Rim's powers, then heaven help us if you lose."

They waited for something to happen until they fell asleep from boredom. When they awoke, they found a tray of food and wine in the cell. They cleaned the platter, an innocuous assortment of bland sauces and pastries, and cracked open the wine.

"Well, Rim has *some* taste," Graystone commented, inspecting the label. "It was a fairly decent year, 'Seventy-eight."

He tasted it and smacked his lips, passing it to Standard.

Standard downed half the bottle and handed it back. "Yeah, not bad." He belched.

The drug hit quickly. Standard felt it coming and tried to warn Graystone, but the doctor had already taken a generous swallow. The floor tilted up and met Standard's face.

Oh hell, another goddamn dream. This time he recognized it and eased himself to see what Rim had concocted for his entertainment. *It's just a damned illusion, right?*

He was walking in a sunlit glade, the light shining through the delicate trees and forming patterns of gold and green on the soft moist leaves under his feet. It was the day of the morning he had dreamed about earlier. People were laughing at the edge of the woods and he walked to them in the small valley. Jeannine was there, shining like the golden leaves, letting the sun play on her hair.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" she said. He looked around. It was the same world he knew, but something drastic had changed. It was gossamer soft, with a sweet scent of the honeysuckles that flowed with the sound of quietude. It was so gently quiet that he knew he could have heard a war on the other side of the world if there had been one, but the world was at peace.

"Sure," he said. "Everything's beautiful in a dream."

"It's more than a dream. This is the way it can be with Rim."

They walked together and stopped at a cool stream that flowed crisply around a rounded bank. A deer was lapping water not far from them. Standard selected a flattened stone and skipped it across the water, startling the deer.

"It's still a dream," Standard said. "Anything's possible in a dream."

"But it's a very real dream." Jeannine smiled. "You and I exist. Those people really exist."

"Maybe so, but all this embroidery," Standard said, waving his hand and noticing it was flesh again. "These trees, this stream, none of that exists. It's just my imagination, like having my arm here. Rim is only dipping into my memory and forcing me into this illusion. I know damned well I had my arm shot off, so it doesn't exist any more and Rim can't bring it back no matter what. Sorry, baby. Nice try, but I'm not falling for it."

"You try to be so hard," Jeannine said. She sat beside

Standard and rolled a pebble into the stream. "I wish you would try to understand. Rim is grateful to you, but it pains him to see you rejecting him. You helped him stay alive once. You were so strong and you had so much will to live that he borrowed some of it. It helped him overcome his own injuries. He was hurt very badly, Mike. So badly I don't even understand it."

"Lin Sang started to explain it," Standard grunted. "Something about glands and a screwy mysticism."

"That was the only way Lin Sang could understand it, but it's more than that," Jeannine said. "Something fantastic happened deep inside Rim. He became the end chain of the human possibility. He is almost an angel now."

Standard stretched back on the grass. He knew he should resist the pleasantness of the dream, but the sunlight felt good on his face. "So what can Rim give me? Illusions? A lovely trance? What about the real me, lying in that cell? How can Rim keep me alive, with transfusions and vein feedings? Is that what he's offering the world, Jeannine? Everybody drugged into sleep with their minds wandering through a fairy tale existence while their bodies slowly rust away?"

Jeannine shook her head. "You still don't understand. Come with me; I'll show you something."

Standard crawled to his feet as Jeannine danced away.

They walked across the grassy veld into a small woods. Rich fruit was hanging from the trees, fruit unlike any Standard had ever seen. He wondered how he had culled it from his imagination as Jeannine plucked a blue apricot and tossed it lightly at him.

"Try it," Jeannine offered. "They're very good. And they're real."

He bit into it, crunching its firm pulp. "How do you mean it's real?"

"It *is*," Jeannine insisted. "You *aren't* in the cell. You really are here with me, and you really are eating real fruit. Everything you are doing, you are really doing."

Standard toyed with the fruit. "How can that be? Nothing like this exists."

"I told you before, this is the way it *can* be. You're partially correct. All this doesn't exist exactly as you see it. We're still on Rim's island. The people we saw are really the guards and the stream is the lake. You may be eating a

hickory nut right now, and of course your arm is still metal. But Rim is only starting to remake the world. For the time being, he can give us this, a better appearance of reality. But it doesn't matter, Mike. If we accept it, it will be like this for us as long as we want. Then someday the whole world will *really* be this way, and we won't even notice the change. It will be this way for everyone. It's like a preview that we can enjoy now."

Standard finished the fruit, whatever it was, and leaned against a tree. He thought deeply. "What about progress? What happens to the human race in the meantime?"

"We live together," Jeannine said. "When the time is ready, we'll learn how to travel beyond the stars and create new worlds." She nestled against Standard. "Maybe we could be among the ones to make a new world grow."

"You can't make babies in a dream." Standard chuckled.

"But it's not a dream. Love is real," Jeannine said and turned her face up to him.

They made love on the grass. Nude, they splashed in the stream/lake, throwing water on each other and letting the sun dry them, intrigued with the shifting light patterns. It was easy to love in this world, Standard felt. Easier than he had ever loved before. It was as though a missing part of him were being replaced and now, accepting it, it seemed to fit well and made him feel whole again.

She bit his ear playfully. "It is better this way, isn't it, Mike?"

He watched a cloud drift across the blue-shot sky. It was actually real. He still possessed his own thoughts, his own emotions. He thought of the war, the pain he had known and had inflicted, the devastated lands. He thought of his own doubts, of his mission to kill the Rim, of Condliffe hiding on the barren lunar landscape. He tried to think of what he wanted in his life, and was annoyed to find that he had never decided on an answer. He closed his eyes and felt the grass tickling his skin. "Yes," he said at last. "It is better this way."

Jeannine pressed him tightly. "I'm happy, Mike. Will you talk to the Rim now? He would like to see you again."

"Sure." Standard nodded. "I'll talk to him."

The sunlight dimmed and formed the sheen walls around him. Graystone was still sleeping off the drug and one of

the walls had parted to allow the white light to flood the cubicle.

Standard stepped through the portal, surprised to find the light pleasant and comforting. He could see the corridors winding away from him clearly. The portal closed behind him. He glanced back to see that even the wall had vanished. Only an open corridor remained.

He scratched his head, wishing Jeannine had stuck around to guide him to the main hall again. Shrugging his shoulders, he wandered down one of the corridors. It rambled aimlessly, over short stairs and rises, around columns and veiled curtains of light. It reminded him of something he knew and he was beginning to feel uneasy when he stumbled onto the great hall he had originally entered.

The familiarity dawned on him. He had been wandering through the woods of the island. The trees, the thickets. It was as Jeannine had said. It was real, all right, but with a special veneer applied by Rim. Lounging around the room were a dozen guards, all radiating the glossy white light. They watched him warily as he entered the hall. Standard glanced over them, noticing that Drog was missing. None of the guards spoke. Two of them became so bored watching him they rolled over and fell asleep.

If the corridors and columns are the woods, he told himself, then this hall had to be a clearing, probably the same glade he had walked through with Jeannine in his dream. Close by, then, had to be the glass cube they had seen when they first walked up the beach. A glass cube that could bend and distort the light to look transparent one moment, then opaque and shimmering the next.

He guessed the cube was actually the inner chamber of the Rim, and rather than being enmeshed by the wall, he had simply run straight into it. The guards were probably sunning themselves in the clearing, perhaps under the illusion they were in the grassy glade. In a lopsided way, it was real, with solid obstacles hidden in a mental cloud.

And he knew why he had not been allowed entry at first. Graystone was correct. This was not the Rim's island, only a temporary meeting place. It helped explain the absence of vast groups of guards and the people Rim had already taken under control. He had not been allowed to meet the Rim because the Rim had not yet arrived. The Rim was still physical. Travel was still physical.

Standard frowned. The illusions were impressive, especially if Rim had created them at long distance. The thought bothered Standard.

But the Rim was here now. The illusory wall began to glow with a golden gleam. It spread toward Standard, opening a growing split in the wall. He looked through it, recognizing its actuality as a sliding panel. It opened into another chamber about ten meters square, awash in the same brilliant light. This time, Standard could adjust his eyes to it. In the center of the chamber was a raised dais and seated on the dais was the figure of a man.

The Rim beckoned Standard inside.

Standard entered, squinting at the Rim's face, trying to place him. The light in the chamber emanated from the Rim's head, swathing his face in ribbons of light. It stung Standard's eyes to peer directly into the Rim's face, the source of the brilliant light.

"It's good to see you again," the Rim said. It was an unspectacular voice, soft, but with an edge of determination.

Standard nodded. "The last time I saw you, your head was wrapped in bandages. Now you have it wrapped in light. I was trying to see if I could recognize who you were."

"It's unimportant," the Rim said. "We didn't know each other in my former life. All that matters is what I am now. For that, I wanted to thank you."

Standard squatted on the floor. "The same way you thanked Lin Sang?"

The Rim seemed embarrassed by the question. "That was unfortunate. I wanted to end the war, but to do it, I needed more strength. I couldn't bring myself to borrow more from you, so I borrowed from Lin Sang. Unfortunately, I borrowed too much. But that was before I learned how to control this power. Besides, wasn't one man's death an even exchange for peace?"

"Yeah, I guess so," Standard said. He was really not particularly concerned for Lin Sang. He had been an enemy, hadn't he? He fidgeted on the floor. He had not considered the original source of Rim's power, and it disturbed him. But it was logical: things aren't created out of nothing. There had to be an exchange of energy, and Rim had learned how to tap the living life forces in the people he collected.

"Jeannine has shown you a fraction of what I am building," the Rim said. "The beauty, the joy this world can be.

To build it, I need support, Michael. I need people who will help me build. I would like you to join me."

Standard frowned. "I'll tell you honestly, I'm considering it. But there's a few questions I'd like answered first. Tell me those, and I'll let you know."

"I expected questions from you," the Rim said. "Ask them."

"Okay. First, why did you kill Quinn? Still practicing control?"

"That's a very understandable question," the Rim said. "Very well, if it will ease your mind. I killed Quinn because he disobeyed me. I wanted you brought here, so that I could talk to you. But he did not believe you were capable of rational thought and felt you would be too great a threat. So he tried to destroy you and destroyed himself in the process."

"Very neat. How much power did you gain from him by killing him?" Standard asked quietly.

The Rim studied his face carefully. Standard could sense him thinking carefully. The Rim laughed shortly, more nervousness than humor. "I won't mislead you, Michael. I could, but you deserve more than that. I need your help willingly." The Rim stood, the light crackling around him. "I gained enough power to bridge the contact between myself and Jeannine. She became my focal point and I led you here through her."

Standard grunted. "I suspected as much, but it's nice to hear you admit it."

"As I said, I intend to be honest with you."

It wasn't all bad. If it was partially a dream, still it was pleasant. Hell, more than pleasant. The Rim's world beat anything in the real world by a flying parsec.

"Next question," Standard said. "Why me? What do you want of me?"

"That's quite simple," the Rim said. "I know your potential. Your mind is still shuttered and closed, but I know what you are capable of doing. You wouldn't be happy in this fantasy world. Your mind is too closed on what you think is reality, so until that reality occurs, I wouldn't insist that you stay here. I'd rather have you free in the world. My long-range eyes and ears, so to speak."

"You have something more in mind than just letting me wander around."

"Yes, I do," the Rim said. "I want you to contact Condliffe somehow and persuade him to return to Earth."

"So that you can eliminate him?"

"So that I can convince him, just as you are being convinced."

Standard mulled. What the hell, he had no real allegiances to Condliffe, or to anyone else, for that matter. And it could be one helluva kick having a power like the Rim backing him. "Sounds interesting," he said.

"Think of what you could do, Michael." The Rim smiled behind the glaring halo of light. "There are a thousand things to be done before this world is the way you saw it in your dream. It would take a very powerful, relentless man to accomplish them. I need you, Michael. Together, we would be unstoppable. I can channel the power to the universe into you when you needed it. You would be a god. And when you had it completed, you could rest in the new world you had created, not just for yourself, for all of mankind."

Standard stood. The thought appealed to him and he liked it. As he stood, he felt the weight of his metal arm. "What about this? Can you give me back my original arm?"

"Perhaps in time," the Rim said evasively. "For the moment, that steel battering ram may be useful to you. When Condliffe returns, I'll be able to delve into his mind and see how it functions. Then we'll deactivate the weapon."

"Aren't you taking a helluva risk? I mean, I don't have control over the weapon. The thing is automatic. It might blow up and kill you any minute now," Standard said.

"I don't think so," the Rim said coolly. "You've been threatened with death, pummeled, beaten . . . in the last few days you've gone through nearly every human emotion possible. Uncertainty, despair, doubt. For a while, I thought that love was the key, but even that had no reaction. And here you are now, talking to me, and nothing has happened. My next thought was that rebellion against Condliffe would activate the weapon, but you are seriously considering my offer and still I'm safe."

"Yeah, I can't argue with that. The thing doesn't even itch." Standard said, dangling the arm.

"So it is inconsequential now," the Rim said. "Eventually, I'm sure we'll find the key, but perhaps we'll know how to disarm it before then."

"I take it that's why you're not too keen on my staying on the island with you?" Standard grinned.

"Of course," the Rim said. "I am a realist, too."

"I think you've sold me," Standard said. "What happens to Graystone when I leave? He's a pretty good old coot, even though he caused me some real grief."

"He can stay here or leave, as he wishes," the Rim said, shrugging his blinding shoulders. "He is getting on in years and won't be of much use to me. If he decides to stay, I'll make it pleasant for him."

Standard joggled on his feet. With the Rim's power flowing through him, what couldn't he do? He was becoming anxious to try it.

Lordyl Michael, the archangel of the world.

"I think you've made a deal, Rim," Standard said. "You tell me what you want done, and I'll do it. My way, right?"

"Within limits." The Rim smiled evenly. "We're two of a kind, Michael. We both know the inadequacies of this world and we both know that some things will have to be destroyed before they can be rebuilt."

Standard grinned. "Yeah, I noticed a few inadequacies in Policontrol. They gave me a pretty rough time. Maybe they need some straightening out."

"In due time," the Rim said. "Our new world won't need a police force after it is created. You'll have the time to correct it after we have dealt with Condliffe. I can give you a lifetime three times longer than the average. Nearly two centuries, Michael, to do what must be done."

Standard chuckled. "I'll knock myself out for the first century, then ease off and relax for the second. Yeah, you've got a deal. Sounds good to me, Rim."

"Fine," the Rim said, relaxed. "You'll stay here for the time being so that I can learn your mind. After that, we'll be able to contact each other mentally. It will be a two-way contact. Since I already share some of your mind, we'll be able to function almost as one."

"That settles it, then," Standard said happily. He rubbed his hands together and looked around. "Where's Jeannine? I kinda want to say goodbye to her. I've learned to like that kid."

"So have I," the Rim said. "I'm going to keep her with me. She has served me well."

Standard felt an alien tingle run up his arm. He ig-

nored it, glancing around. He saw the shimmering white wall part, and Jeannine entered. He blinked quickly. She was dressed in a flowing white gown that mingled with the glaring white light that glittered around her face. She crossed in front of him, mounting the dais with the Rim. Together they looked down at him, sharing the cutting light.

"I'm proud of you, Mike," she said. Her smile was a radiant burst of energy that charged through his mind.

"Wait a minute." Standard grimaced. "What's going on here?"

"I told you, Michael," the Rim said. "She will stay here with me. Already, she has become part of me." He draped his arm around her and the light was like an electrical shock.

"This isn't exactly what I had in mind," Standard stammered. He felt the tingle in his arm again and stepped closer to the dais. "Somehow I thought you and me, Jeannine . . ."

"We can still be together, Mike," she said. "Through the Rim's mind, we can still love and know each other."

"Yeah, but . . ." He moved across the floor. Jeannine was a part of the Rim, like a steak becomes part of a man after he has eaten it. Standard understood where the power would come from for him to live a second century.

Suddenly he understood Condliffe's key. For one brief imaginary instant he had known love and held it in his arms, and now he was seeing it lost to him in reality. He felt the arm throb at his side.

"What's wrong, Michael?" the Rim questioned.

"I can't share her," Standard said, feeling the agony in his voice. "She did her job too well, Rim."

The Rim held out his hand. "Stop it, Michael. Control it!"

"I can't!" Standard cried painfully. The arm moved upward of its own accord, leveling itself at the Rim's head. He imagined two centuries of virtually unlimited power and the coming reality of the dream, the grassy slope, the chiming stream. "Oh, damn you, Condliffe," he sobbed. "Damn you!"

The Rim instantly poured out a volcano of power, a devastating bolt of mental energy that shattered the walls. Standard felt it hit like a booster rocket, slamming into his psyche. He staggered backward, quivering from the blow, but knew the Rim was not yet in tune with his mind. Another giant

blow struck him. The Rim was lashing out desperately, casting raw explosions of power at him.

Dimly, Standard saw the guards crumple outside the broken glass walls. Rim had exhausted them of their life forces.

Standard's arm grew rigid, tensing itself. The Rim saw it and blasted another current of power.

Jeannine gasped, tumbling from the dais, her eyes suddenly glazed and staring fearfully into space.

It was real. She was gone. The concussion fractured Standard's shoulder. Like a five-fingered projectile, the weapon struck the Rim, exploding his head in a shower of blood, throwing stained shreds to the wall framework.

He picked himself up from the gravel floor, numb with agony. Everything had disappeared in Rim's fight for life, every iota of energy had been drained. The light, the shimmering pearl walls, had fallen back into reality, leaving only the bent framework of the cube. The bodies of the guards were strewn around him, contorted into grasping, clawing positions. In the woods, Graystone was dazedly propping himself against a tree.

Standard knelt over Jeannine's body, seeing the blood from his handless arm dribble over her gown, mingling with the livid stains of Rim's draining corpse. He touched her lips with his fingers, his real ones, the only ones he had left, then pressed her eyes closed.

What were left of the bones in his right arm were mashed, the remainder of his steel arm dangling from the ruined plastic and flesh. Blood continued to ooze from his shoulder where the joint had been fragmented and broken through his skin. He stood, the pain blackening his eyes momentarily.

"I'll keep it this way, Jeannine," he said and stepped across the clearing into the world he had created.