


JOHN JAKES

THE ASYLUM WORLD

An electrifying novel of the future by
the master of the historical epic.





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SEAN CLOUD DIALED A HEADACHE PILL.
THE PILL TUBE FLASHED, "SORRY, OUT OF ORDER."

Sean had never been on Earth, for which he felt both a vague loyalty and a colonist's contempt. After all, Earth had made quite a mess of it in the late 1990s. But here he was, on the one in-shuttle Mars owned, going on behalf of the Martian colonies to request arms to defend the planet against the alien fleet sighted off Saturn.

But supposing the cheerful newstapes Earth sent the colonies were retouched? Suppose Westbloc hadn't any weapons, or needed them for its arms race with Eastbloc? Sean rubbed his aching head. No doubt about it, there'd be further headaches awaiting him in

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THE ASYLUM WORLD

By John Jakes



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To Mike Avallone,
who still finds time to keep those
cards and letters coming.


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I think for my part one-half of
the nation is mad—and the
other not very sound.

TOBIAS SMOLLETT

Three million miles out past Pluto, the old year turned, unmarked. A month of darkness passed, unreckoned. Then another. Sometime in the third, a brilliant moving light appeared.

Abruptly it reduced its velocity so that, even though traveling toward the nearest star at a rapid rate, it appeared to be, relatively speaking, standing still.

With velocity arrested, the light defined itself to a massive cone. Its base measured some fifty kilometers in circumference. It traveled point first, revealing an exterior unbroken and unflawed. A brilliant yellow nimbus surrounded it, seeming to spring from the cone's surface. By all rights the nimbus should have suggested warmth but suggested instead a chill perfection. Perhaps this was partly because the cone's unblemished surface radiated the light so uniformly.

No one saw its coming, of course. Nor heard. Not then.

In a complex tongue, voices shuttled meanings between the lonely cone and star-dotted emptiness far, far behind:

—*Scan.*

—*Scanning are. Nine bodies original scan confirm.*

—*As to operational intelligence evaluate—*

—*Scanning are. It sounded, within its own contexts, querulous.*

—*Ninth, draw.*

—*Eighth, draw.*

—*Seventh, draw.*

—*Sixth, draw.*

—*Fifth, draw.*

—*Fourth—*

—*Yes, yes?*

—*Both fourth and third operational intelligence exhibit. Shuttling, the voices were tinged with excitement. Combined resistance level negligible is.*

—*Probabilities extrap. Decision recommend—*

Within the lonely cone, vast eyes much resembling glass the shade of flame signaled amusement with multifoliate light, and shuttling voices from the scout went traveling triumphantly.

—*Proceed. Form. Accelerate, fourth and nearest first taking.*

So before the turn of the next dark, unreckoned month, the lonely cone lost itself among some two thousand similar ones which came hurtling in, dropped off in velocity and, together, began the penetration past the poison rock of Pluto. In the bleak ether a hissing that amounted to battle-chanting passed back and forth among the cones.

Neptune rolled astern.

Uranus.

A world girdled with gaseous rings swept out to meet them, hardly noticed. On displays that the vast eyes watched, squiggling darts of light showed the pulse of life on the planet to which all command systems were now locked. A planet fourth out, red-rusty in color.

The cones passed silently on through the silence, accelerating.

ONE

"Father and son," said Franconius for the sixth or seventh time. "Father and son. Thrilling." The old bananabrain, thought Sean Cloud.

Generally Sean believed that in any halfway rational society, the people made the right decisions. Often such decisions sprang from ignorance, fear, or emotion, and were right by pure luck or some plan that eluded him. Had he not thought this way he would have quit worrying long ago. But Dr. Harloe Franconius was the kind of warning which even the most guardedly optimistic man needed now and then.

Franconius, that stupid old hack of a pol, had been elected dome-wide as one of the three envoys. Thirty-three percent capacity for error was either pretty fair or pretty awful, depending on how you looked at it. At another time Sean might have considered Franconius a sort of backward validation of his views. Given the current extreme emergency, he regarded it as a near-catastrophe.

He knew the old windbag would keep repeating the catchphrase unless someone disposed of it. There was no one else in the dining salon of the M. S. *Giovanni Schiaparelli*, it being just before daybreak, body time, so:

"I beg your pardon, Harloe?" Sean had a voice as mellow as his light coffee skin.

"The display's symbolically thrilling, is it not?" said Franconius. He had a fat belly, numerous chins, and dots of eyes which Sean unkindly persisted in thinking of as two spills of blue oatmeal. "There you have the parent, there the child, the latter rushing to the assistance of the former. Damme, I *must* finish my synop in the fall and get it into the grammars by spring. We're so busy, busy all the damme time with roadways and other technological doodads! We fail to render Caesar his due. A course in dome colony history is a must at the grammar levels."

Having delivered himself of this, Franconius belched and attacked his synthograpefruit, holding it with both hands and sucking it noisily. Sean winced and lit a Safe-C Cig.

The thrilling sight to which Franconius had been referring

appeared on the pair of luggage-size screens built into one wall of the otherwise ill-equipped dining salon. The salon had all the spaciousness and charm of a closet. Of course, Sean knew, the crew quarters were worse. And Mars owned but one in-shuttle, the *Schiaparelli*. All the huge outbounders that had carried the colonists from Earth beginning twenty-seven years earlier in 2004 had been melted apart for the first structures. Not that Mars actually needed more than one shuttle. Every one of the half-million-odd residents, including infants born yesterday, had contracts to stay, signed by themselves or their parents. The only visitors who had returned to Earth since the first outbounder lifted had been Martian govt men on official business. For that, *Schiaparelli* was adequate.

Slurp-and-snort, Franconius mangled his grapefruit. No wonder the educational system in the domes was not as good as it could be. Franconius, a member of the roughly ten percent of the Martian population not born there, must have had excellent credentials and a semblance of sanity to have been put in charge of all education way back in the early days. Sean admitted that the old clamhead did have a certain bell-like oratorical charm, and a voice of splendid timbre. But the good doctor had long ago collapsed into blubber, varicose-veins, and scrambled maxims.

Well, the educational system was still good, along with most of the other public institutions erected by the govt of the domes. That had to be due to a squad of capable assistant supes quietly working to undo their leader's damage. The old pol had a mind like Swiss cheese.

To amuse himself, Sean went back over the remarks of a moment ago.

Thinking of himself as Caesar. Bad sign. Worse, however, was Franconius' bland supposition that he would indeed be able to develop his course plan for institution in the Martian spring of 2032. By next year, Sean believed, there was an even-odds chance no dome colonies would exist. On the long, chattering flight to Earth he awoke almost every night sweating a foul sweat and thinking about it. To fight boredom and his impatience to reach Earth and begin the tricky and absolutely vital negotiations, he frequently computed the interval since the last time he'd thought of the menace. The intervals grew shorter and shorter. He was less and less able to forget the presence of what appeared to be an alien fleet descending at incredible speed toward the only

home he'd ever known. Calculations showed that fleet should arrive off Mars in seven months.

"You—" *Pulp-sqwunch*. The synthograpefruit popped from the doctor's fingers. It sailed across the rickety table, narrowly missing Sean's shoulder. Without thought, Sean put his right hand over the left shoulder of his tunic, covering the simple, colorful patch whose central device was the numeral 4. Old Harloe's patch had come unsewed long ago. Threads hung. Gravy hid part of the 4.

"You don't have an opinion on my symbology, Sean my lad?" Franconius asked as he wiped hands on his tunic.

Sean's eyes, an odd combination of bits of cobalt embedded in two chunks of chocolate, switched to the screens again. On the left, Mars displayed discernible blotches of shadow even at this distance. *I made part of that*, he thought. *I helped build that, dome cities and dome towns and a fairly decent life for a considerable number of human beings.* The notion always warmed him.

But the image on the other screen, Earth, cloud-blanketed, cold gray with only a faint tinge of green to one side of the terminator, moved him not at all.

He had never been on Earth. Although he felt a vague loyalty, suspicion more than countered it. They'd made a mess in the late 1990s. He tended to agree with Lydia. How could any of the colonists, fed only newstapes by small drone outbounders every other month, be certain that the information in the tapes was valid, undoctored, accurate reportage?

Irritated by the old pol's insistent stare, Sean butted his safety smoke and waved his coff mug. "Earth the father, Mars the son. I get that all right, Harloe. But look at the screens. Mars, in point of fact, is rushing away from, not toward, big daddy."

Franconius blinked. "I was speaking allegorically."

"Oh?" Sean felt mean, needling so. But he refused to look humble. "Oh."

"I referred also to our positions. We, you, myself, Miss Veblen—"

Aha! thought Sean. He can hardly pronounce her name without growling. She has him platted too—a pol with a few old pol friends in dome society, hacks all. They refuse to give up and once in a while still get placed where they shouldn't. As here, aboard *Schiaparelli* on a mission that really needed the greatest skill because it was so urgent.

In the unfriendly silence Sean turned back from the

screens. He had an image of his mother: magnificent dancer's legs, brown eyes momentarily hiding familial warmth. *Sean Cloud, you will not be guilty of spreading unkindness. Others are doing the job more than adequately.*

"I'm sorry, Harloe," he said. "Mind wandering."

"You pay no attention to me, you and that—that concrete bitch."

Sean laughed, showing good, strong, white teeth, a flash in the tan face. He would have been angry but for the fact that, in other angry moments when Lydia frustrated his attentions with one of her little how-I-love-to-pop-all-the-balloons speeches about never marrying a black even though Martian mores made this the desired behavior, he'd thought of her in similar terms. Yet now his imp of boredom and worry and impatience with stupidity made him say:

"Actually, Harloe, you know very well that our chief transportation engineer doesn't deal in concrete but in a polymerized slurry which is much more satisfactory for construction of interdome travelways. She—"

"You listen to me and stop laughing!" Franconius leaped up. "Remember who's senior on this trip!"

Sean nodded, concealing emotion. "Of course, Harloe. You are."

"And who has veto over any group vote?"

"You do, Harloe." Blandly said, it concealed Sean's quick, cold determination: *And I'll lie, cheat, steal, God knows what else, you old heliumhead, if you veto the wrong way.*

Harloe Franconius picked synthograpefruit pulp off his chin. "You two, you and Miss Veblen, have made it clear by your unfriendly and I might even say snide behavior that you do not respect me. But don't you forget that I'm in charge. I will deal with the Westbloc govt. I will secure the shipments of weapons necessary to erect a defense against the armada our scanners detected. And I say to you confidently and without qualification, father Earth will receive the emissaries of its son, and will instantly grant our—ah, it's—their request."

Must I sit through this?

Harloe Franconius had one finger raised in the air. With sincerity yet! Sean slumped and listened to the atom engines, chattering mechanical conversation two rooms away.

"I only wish I shared your confidence about the outcome, Harloe," he said finally.

"Why don't you?"

"Because, like Lydia, I wonder whether Westbloc will go

for the idea of turning a colony into a new armed power. Also, I'm not absolutely convinced that the newstapes we're getting are accurate. How many times have govt parties from Mars returned to Earth in the last twenty-seven years? Three times? Four? Sure, everything looked sweet. But that can be staged. They really made a godawful mess before they launched the first outbounders—"

"Too much education," Franconius cried somberly. "That's your trouble."

"That's a fine remark from the number-one educator in the domes, Harloe. And do sit down. You look silly. This isn't an election platform."

Enraged, Franconius fingered his coloring nose. "Attitude, Cloud! That's your trouble."

"I thought it was education."

"Cloud, your attitude is rotten. You refuse to see the bright side—"

"Damme right, sir. And you refuse to admit that anything, ever, could be wrong! Our scanners picked up something like two thousand—two *thousand*—ships passing Saturn in April. Coming from where? We don't know! But there are lifeforms aboard, my old friend, and they are heading not for Earth, but for us, farthest out in the system. And they'll arrive in seven months. And much as I believe that we have a pretty fair world a-building in the domes, I damme well realize too that we have to sink back now and then to the old pol level"—Franconius failed to catch the thrust—"and lay up weapons so we don't get pulverized if they're unfriendly aboard those ships. Since we don't have anything in the domes in the way of firepower except minimal small arms for policing—good thing! I'm not arguing—we must get the arms where we can. From the people who sent us outbound. I'll do anything I can, repeat anything, to get what we need from Westbloc and make Mars secure."

Now Franconius almost looked apoplectic. "But where do we disagree?"

"In that you"—stab of a finger—"think all we have to do is ask and Westbloc will roll over and say yes. I say all we know about Westbloc these days is what the newstapes tell us, and those can be doctored, Doctor."

"But—but—!" Franconius lunged around the table, clutching for Sean as though the younger man had blasphemed. "—the last newstape!—clearly!—the arms race is on again but!—Pres Washbourne assured!—Westbloc is more than holding its own!"

Sean hooked his thumb at the screen displaying Earth. "They tell us. I prefer to see."

Under his breath, Franconius was garrumphing words like negativistic, unpatriotic, atheist. Sean turned his back.

He drained his coff. He touched his temples where a headache was beginning. He dialed a pill as Franconius vented further spleen incoherently. The pill tube flashed a *Sorry Out of Order*. Sean cursed. On his feet, he stood well over six feet. He was lean, with pleasantly irregular features and a blocky chin which he tended to thrust out too much. His hair was black, all tight curls. He was twenty-six.

A hand on his shoulder made him spin, think about punching. But he stopped in time. He pushed the hand aside. Franconius, eyes watering, gave him a whiff of bad breath as he exclaimed:

"What's the truth of it? I know what it is! You're listening to that young woman, every cynical word she says. It's she who doesn't believe we can succeed! She who spreads doubt about the very people who funded our splendid effort!"

"I happen to agree with Lydia's doubts—"

"Because you want to snuggle up to her and she, anti-social slut, wants only a white?"

"You dirty-mouthed old son of a—"

"What is there you dislike about me, Sean? What?" Franconius shouted.

"Everything!" Restraint was lost. "The old pol ways. Influence-peddling. Your universal solution for every problem—a stirring speech. We've weeded most of that out of the domes. Most, but not all. A little incompetence still—"

"Well," the doctor said with a wounded malice. "Now we are clear. Now we are perfectly—"

The iris dilated. Captain Phong, sag-shouldered but always cheerful, poked in.

"There is a splendid view of Earth on the viewbridge. I thought perhaps—uh, excuse *me*."

"I should be delighted to see," said Dr. Franconius, and marched past Sean and out.

Captain Phong stepped over the lower edge of the iris. "What did you do to the old boob?"

Unkindness, thought Sean, head aching. Aloud, he said:

"Made a tough situation tougher, in my incomparable style." He kicked the wall. "Equipment's no good on this lousy tub." It was, he realized, but some six minutes since he'd last thought of the fleet striking for Mars.

"Where's the doc, Phong? I need a pill, quick."

TWO

Rats, Sean thought, in the most literal sense, as he stared at the bright half of gray-green clouded Earth.

Three hours had passed since the unfortunate encounter with Harloe. The pol could be heard behind his cabin door practicing a speech at florid volume. On the way up here, Sean had paused long enough to catch *father and son* one more time, shuddered and hurried on. At least the doctor's bent for windbaggery had emptied the viewbridge. Sean watched from there now, solemn-eyed and more than a little annoyed with himself.

He leaned one elbow against the trans-laminate and his cheek too, pensive as he stared at the cloud-whipped ball dead ahead of the bow. Light etched half his features like a medal, as it did the growing Earth.

Explicitly: he had no business doubting at this stage. He was one of a trio elected to perform a critical mission with—naturally!—godlike perfection. (Mars hadn't changed human nature all that much. A pol, duly authorized by the franchised, assumed an unwanted god's mantle.)

Fruitless to try to keep up that image. He did doubt the outcome. He abruptly wondered whether doubt really made sense.

Shouldn't persuading Westbloc to arm its own colony for self-defense be nearly elementary? He'd had few doubts before they left the domes. A subtle change had been worked on him during the flight. He tried to dissect it as he watched the beautiful planet; tried to demolish it in sections. The going was hard. The more he stared at the pastel world a-looming, the more he saw supered images of bleeding rats biting each other.

Now. In order. Doubt from where?

First, Franconius had galled him with his simplistic certainty of success. Irrational to let *that* upset clear thinking.

So, second. He was overreacting to Lydia, who smashed another person's certainty as often as she could. Muddy, troubled but oddly exciting thoughts of Lydia temporarily interfered with his analysis. Where was she? Her long hair? Her remote eyes? Where was the whole maddening package,

including the colonial numeral patch that drove him crazy because it always seemed, affixed to her tunic just so, to ride a breast point?

Echoing his thoughts with the rest of him, he turned to discover Captain Phong gliding from shadow.

Phong displayed teeth. "Head better now?"

"Excellent, thanks. Sorry I blew. By the way—" Overly casual. "—Miss Veblen?"

"A late sleep, perhaps? I can't say. But she hasn't eaten. Ah. A splendid and inspiring sight, isn't it? I've seen it only twice myself, you know."

But Phong's tone belied his words. He was listening closely to the distant chatter of the driveplant he loved. "Excuse me, Sean, but we'll be receiving initial orbital approach data shortly. The bridge—" An explanatory gesture took him off into the shadows clustered at the end of the viewbridge. His teeth dimmed out last, like the Cheshire cat's.

Leaving Sean to face the huge Earth and imagine rats again, squealing, biting—

Was Lydia right? Could those people who had been his forebears never change? Or had conditions improved, and was Westbloc indeed as strong as the newstapes said, and did he merely tend to agree with Lydia's pessimism because his glands yelled *agree* while thumbing glandular noses at his brain? He recalled that he was getting nowhere with her, physically. Maybe he never would. Probably it was disloyalty even to try on a mission such as this.

But even his humid fantasies didn't quite erase the images of rats.

White rats. Tens. Hundreds. Crowded and crawling in cages which should have penned half that number. But hands kept thrusting more in, and more, until fangs were bared, and the rats turned on one another, driven wild by the proximity of all the others. A bite. A squeal. A scribble of blood on white fur. Another bite. A tail left hanging stringy red—

The Earth went away. It was replaced by a vision of an enormous cage where hundreds of thousands of rats writhed, belly to snout, mouth to anus, tail to pink, crazed eye, and none could move except in a vast panicked heaving toward room that wasn't there. The squealing grew worse. Ten rat bodies became smeared with the same blood as they whipped their heads around, bit out blindly, bit anything close, bit to relieve the terror, *bit and bit and bit*—

Sean said something aloud and shuddered. The rats vanished. But Earth remained to remind him.

The rat experiment had troubled him ever since he read about it in some forgotten microtext. It was a graphic representation of the way the terror had started way back in the late nineties, when the human rats in their urban cages first squealed aloud at the unchecked noise, at the stinking air, at the press of bodies always around them sweaty on the walkways (and who could escape a muggeroo when it took forty minutes to walk a block?) It all exacerbated the confrontation which had been coming for decades. One day the last palliative program quietly failed.

Which rat bit first, white or black, the texts prepared in the semichaos afterward never deduced. But all the North American continent and several nations on the south knew racial war for three sanguine years. Some thirty major metros were over seventy percent destroyed. There was butchery to pale the gas ovens a half century in the past. Finally there came an uneasy martial peace with tanks manned by handfuls of blacks and whites who had managed to talk to each other before going at each other with chromed radiators torn from burning vehicles.

In another couple of years after the outbreak, Westbloc patched itself together. It consisted of South America, the old U.S., Canada (Toronto, last to accept a flood of migratory American blacks, was most savagely gutted: ninety-nine percent gone), and the wreck of Europe thrown in. Russia came in late. So did roughly the western third of Africa, because the pols who crawled out of the debris dedicated themselves among other things to a renewed humanistic version of the old American melting-pot ideal.

As soon as Westbloc was formed, several thousand jetloads of black militants flew west or east, depending on the coast of departure. Eastbloc coalesced rather quickly into an economic-cum-political sphere dedicated to racial separation and, eventually, a jihad along the color line. Polarity revisited.

From the seeds of wisdom that managed to endure God knew how in Westbloc, there sprouted the dome colony idea. A new, better start. A hope. In 2004, the first out-bounder funded by Westbloc shot for Mars. Others quickly followed, to begin the world-building. Eastbloc kissed off the whole space idea, opting for no extraterrestrial colonies whatsoever. A strategic error, perhaps. But their pols preferred to spend a space budget on advanced weather-chang-

ing satellites which remodeled the Gobi among other dismal areas, and filled bellies with enough grain so that their owners could think straight about a beautiful, idealistically hateful war eventually.

Beyond that, Sean's knowledge of specifics of Westbloc history since '04 was sketchy. Physical plant rebuilt. Defenses strengthened. No major catastrophes, though the Eastbloc/Westbloc arms race was a continuing reality which even the newstapes admitted. Now and again dissidents defected from one side to the other, a two-way process. But those ever-optimistic tapes said all was tolerably well. The madness of the rat-biting had passed away—

And the first Martian dome had now expanded to a planetary network of around eight hundred of them, many almost luxurious, thank you, and covering hundreds of square miles. Sean and the preponderance of Mars-born colonials wore the 4 patch with justifiable pride.

Of course the first colonists had gone there knowing they had to do better. So-called Westciv had obviously botched things up royally. The very funding of the outbounders, the very willingness to commit Westbloc's scientific technology to the thrust, was a recognition and a reparation on the part of those who claimed power after the racial holocaust.

The colonists also knew that building a new world would be a tough, hard, angry business with occasional failures. For example: no society ever escapes its Harloes.

Nevertheless, the idea worked.

Sean's father, originally a teacher of manual and cultural arts in the Dubuque-St. Louis megabelt, had met his mother, a dancer in the ballet company of a mixed media musical mindblow, when the company was stranded by the civil disorder. In the middle of a lot of shooting they had been seeking shelter, trying not to get zapped by a member of their own race or the other. They stumbled on one another and hid out until disorder's end.

When things calmed down they continued to hide their mixed-color love that had been so curiously but firmly created in the midst of explosions, obscene shouts, and widespread fire. Even though a general mood of exhausted tolerance prevailed when the tanks patrolled the ashes, mixed-color weddings were still not precisely popular. *We slept*, Sean's mother told him when he was in his teens, *in a big costume trunk in the middle of a refugee camp right where*

the great St. Lou arch stood before looters took it apart. To keep warm at night we made love.

Oliver and Candice Cloud—marriage solemnized on the sly by a horse-hyped evangelist touring the refugee camps—were among the first in line when quotas were announced for the '04 colonial program. Under the program, a balance of colonists of both races was to be selected, numbers of blacks about matching numbers of whites. Couples were preferred. Young, child-eager couples. Each bachelor or unwed girl with enthusiasm to go plus a high-valued skill was matched with a mate, numerically if not physically. Sean's parents, both with the ability to teach, passed the psych screenings handily and were selected for the third flight. Candice had her son in her belly by the time she first saw Phobos and Deimos.

Things were not all high ideals and festival choruses to brotherhood during those first years of dome- and world-building. Candice Cloud's dark eyes told Sean that often afterward. A few psychopathic haters had managed to squirm aboard the outbounders. Quickly forming a cadre, they sought out the surprisingly large numbers of mixed-color couples who had taken the colonial contract as their only hope. The cadres struck often in the first three years. They blew up halfbuilt domes, committed atrocities and practiced assassination from behind clumps of Martian vegetation. Oliver Cloud, for example, with a party of men, fended off an attack of the guerrillas one night early in 2006. He was identified as a race-mixer by a shout from the darkness. Reprisal came three months later. Tired, he walked away at dusk from a work party building a primitive travelway. He strayed too far in the pink desert and was garroted.

But police units, organized from necessity as every social and industrial cell on the whole colony world was, eventually stamped out the cadres. Candice Cloud was at this moment fifty-five years of age, thriving as ballet mistress of the planetary opera house in the largest dome. And ever since the born-there generation had risen and begun asserting itself—on Mars, youth's verve was welcomed, not negated as it had been in the rat-biting time—mores had been changing. A mixed marriage was no longer the exception. It was preferred.

Amazing, thought Sean as he gazed at the growing Earth. We are tough. We can do it. The whole damme jimcrack jerrybuilt face-saving thing has, basically, worked.

But now there was other life under their same sun. Now

the domes needed arms in quantity. And he, a fast-rising professional pol, subadministrator of the Wheat Town Dome, was one of three elected to go to Earth to plead. Now, if any time, he needed confidence.

All he had was firmly implanted doubt.

What if Westbloc hadn't any weapons? Or what if all available weapons were required for the arms race with Eastbloc? *Whatifwhatifwhatif?*

Crowds had cheered off the rocket of the departing envoys. In Sean's own estimation, his mental readiness for negotiating with the topmost levels of Westbloc govt currently rated a salutation midway between dismay—"We voted for *him?*"—and an upraised third finger.

Couldn't blame his reaction completely on Harloe, either. Or his schoolboy wish to agree with Lydia's break-your-balloon brand of pessimism, at whatever the intellectual price. Couldn't blame anything but a concern with broad sweeps of history. Mars, freshly started, was succeeding. But Earth was an enigma. Part was a shrinking rind of hazy brightness, part dark-blown and nightswallowed out there ahead of the clattering spaceship. Earth was still Earth.

Were the rats biting again? Or still?

Sean left the viewbridge in a moody rush.

THREE

"Sloppy," remarked Lydia Veblen. "I suppose that's a harbinger."

Dr. Franconius took umbrage. "The lighter pilot, my dear?" "My dear" was rolled in his mouth as though it had lain in the sun eight days. "I found him quite courteous, quite—"

"Asleep. Hallucinated, I'd say. Did you notice the way he walked into the wall as he was leaving? Also, his shirt-tail was hanging out."

"Negative," Franconius seethed, "always negative." And retreated toward the screens. One was blank. The other, ostensibly to provide a view of Earth, revealed endless smog of bilious gray-green.

Lydia shrugged. The 4 patch on the point of her bosom shifted. Sean swallowed a lump as big as a fist.

She tended to pace. Her track, up and down the salon of the Westbloc suborbital lighter, reminded him of tapes showing predators. Both horrified and helplessly attentive, Sean sat with his boots on the table's edge, watching her slice away:

"Negative, Doctor? Not at all. Factual. That man is supposed to be in charge of this little tub of bolts, and ostensibly has the responsibility to bring us down from parking orbit safely. How can he possibly see the controls with pupils that big?"

"It's not my obligation to explain anything to you," Franconius shot back. "I am not one of your highway mechs, Miss Veblen. Besides, the computers will pilot us safely."

At that moment the lighter hull wobbled and whined. Lydia's splendid mouth curled. "That remains to be seen."

She availed herself of the only amenity the salon afforded, a boozealator screwed down on a rickety sideboard. She dialed a vermouth frost. The knob fell off in her hand. From inside the unit came a sound like a spring popping.

No cocktail glass was deposited in the aperture. A sticky mess of ice, syrup and wine drooled out the spout and down the drain. Lydia pulled half-specs from her tunic, inspected the unit's dataplate.

"Made just a year ago. God preserve us."

Smoking, Sean watched her. On one level of his mind he felt a bit like the victim mesmerized by the cobra. But it was a not unpleasant predicament. Damme, she was lovely, even in her steel moods.

Lydia was thirty-eight, with a long, angular face that aroused emotion despite being imperfect. She had remote blue-gray eyes and a mouth so red and full it occasionally made the rest of her face, in the wrong light, seem harsh. Her posture, always elegant, precise, merely accented the absolutely criminal lavishness of her figure. Most times, she seemed to regard her body as some kind of servo-mechanism. It didn't interest her except when it was called on to perform a necessary function.

Lydia—Sean knew the particulars by heart—had migrated to Mars at age eleven, only daughter of two white parents. Her father, dead now, had been a middle-aged materials handling engineer with excellent skill ratings. Sean had long ago decided that the man could not possibly have passed all the psych screenings with minimum-to-zero acceptability; during the last dozen years of his life in the domes, F. Bruce Veblen had achieved a remarkable dual record. He was the man who could hack plant downtime to nothing. He was also the nearest thing to an ironbound antisocial sonofabitch the planet had.

Once, irked because his super had refused to accept one of his m.h. flow-plans, F. Bruce had come close to dynamiting the entire freezegoods warehouse in question. His system, as it turned out, was both correct and necessary. The super was quietly shunted aside. But with cooperation the mode in the struggling colony, F. Bruce failed to win kudos.

Much of this iconoclasm had passed to his daughter. Perhaps it was accentuated because she was an only child, and had been transported to the domes near puberty, after basic behavior patterns had pretty well jelled. F. Bruce's policy of doing it right and telling all the others, loudly, when they were doing it wrong, had gotten him released from any number of top consultantships on Earth, so Lydia had said in one of her rare, unguarded moments. But her inherited weakness was also a kind of inherited strength, Sean thought, watching her on the sly while pretending to doze.

In profile Lydia peered at the smog scene on the screen. She looked disgusted. That reminded him of the first time he'd met her.

She had just been promoted to chief transportation en-

gineer. She'd rushed to the Wheat Town Dome after a major wreck shorted three main incoming ways. She investigated, told him it was due to the carelessness and incompetence of his personnel. A beautiful bitch, he decided. Then she proved her accusations on site. A smart, beautiful bitch, he amended. By the time she left, he decided he must see her again.

So he did, frequently. She kept quarters in a dome less than forty kilometers from Wheat Town. But she rebelled at the slightest suggestion of physical interest on his part. Companionship, yes. Touch the merchandise, no. By now, he knew why, and by now it was also too late to pull out. He was illogically, totally hooked.

Lydia paced back to the tacky table. One leg of it was propped up by a thin pile of microbooks whose titles Sean had examined earlier, with some surprise.

"You're quiet." She sat down, bringing with her the fresh scent of scrubbing.

"We'll have plenty of talking in another hour." The lighter wobbled; rockets belched. "Provided, as you noted, we're down in one piece."

Lydia sat forward. Sat back. Rubbed her hands together. Sean frowned.

"And you're edgy."

"Damme, Sean, everything on this hulk just confirms my suspicions! The pilot's hyped to the eyebrows, the booze unit is out of order, the lighter's library—" She kicked one of her high boots against the microbooks supporting the table. Her thigh reflected ceiling lights, smooth, strong. "—all porno. And look at that gorgeous view on the screen! Clouds of pollutants, miles high. And you say I'm negative and cynical because I question the veracity of those shipments of oatmeal they tape and send to us six times a year? I certainly do! I also question whether Westbloc will be willing to arm its own colony and thereby create a third world power."

Sean wagged a finger. "I didn't say you were negative and cynical. He said it."

Lydia turned to eye Franconius, who was spraying his palate with an aerosol.

"The incompetent beep," she said.

The remark was loud enough for the doctor to hear. He stiffened but did not glance their way. Lydia continued to look fierce.

Fierceness had made her career. Fierceness had helped

her climb quickly to an impressive position, a situation much discussed in the domes. Few men with whom she dealt in her official capacity liked her. She had succeeded in attaining her high post because of her capability, and because of the freedom of opportunity the young colony offered. She had also succeeded in spite of her tongue. Sean believed there was another Lydia somewhere underneath this one. He saw glimpses of her occasionally, or thought he did. Otherwise, he would have patted her in the face instead of remaining politely seated while she peered over her half-specs; there were highlights in her striped red and white hair. (The latest mode. Lydia's justification: "If I happen to like what they're doing, I'll do it too. I just don't like it often.")

"But you were thinking I'm negative and cynical, weren't you, Sean?"

"Well, we can't very well insult the people we're appealing to for arms. In this case you could think of something besides your intellectual honesty. Those ships out there? A few hundred thousand lives hanging on the outcome of our trip? Isn't that a little more important than proving how right you are?" He was growing acid with fatigue. "In your opinion the majority of the colonists are stupid. But they are people, yes?"

Lydia's eyes softened a second. Such moments gave Sean his hope. A murmur:

"I suppose."

"Thanks, my dear, even though it plainly makes you uncomfortable to say it." He laid his hand on hers. "I didn't see much of you on the trip."

She withdrew her hand, lit one of his anticarcino smokes. Her brief smile was knowing. "Ah. The opportunity for a little haytime, you thought." She echoed him, but mockingly. "Yes?"

"Damme, Lydia, sometimes you—"

"Sean, you're an intelligent man. I like you." Pat of his hand, cool, passionless. "But I stayed by myself inbound precisely because I knew you hoped the trip would offer you a romantic opportunity. I removed temptation from your path. Isn't that worthy of thanks? There's simply no point in your pursuing it because—" How level those eyes were; how merciless. Or were they masks? He wished to heaven he could learn for sure. "—as I've told you repeatedly, I will not marry a black man, ever. Nothing personal, nothing anthropological. I'm just my own girl."

"You decide what the hell laws you'll obey and what you won't," he grumped.

"Dome marriages between races aren't law-regulated, as you well know. It's just a silly custom."

"Silly custom! Lydia, sometimes I wonder whether you're obnoxious for the fun of it, or whether that old man of yours actually fed you some nasty ideas at cribside that—"

"I repeat, I have absolutely no emotional bias against a mixed marriage, Sean! You know perfectly—"

"I know you have no damme sound reason to be against it!"

"Yes, I do!" Ice and reserve, she sat tall in her chair. "I left the herd long ago."

On the point of cursing, he whipped his head around as the lighter pilot lurched through the iris.

"Sorry I didn't get here sooner, folks. We had a little malfunction. Strap in, please, strap in right away, we'll be down shortly."

The pilot's hair stood up like a frightwig. His motions were erratic. He turned, stumbled over the lower edge of the iris and had to be helped up. There was drool on his chin as he hurried off swallowing his thanks.

Dr. Franconius fumbled with straps with one hand, swallowed several troches from the other.

"What in God's name are you doing now?" Lydia wanted to know.

Franconius breathed deep, "I have prepared a few remarks for the ceremony." *Whiff, whiff* went the aerosol again, soothing tongue and tonsil. On the screen the smog continued to roll.

Landing was delayed because pilot or computer made a miscalculation and accidentally put down at the District of Bostone. The pilot rushed in to apologize, rushed out, took off and headed south. The landing, finally accomplished, was so rough that a piece of one of Sean's front teeth broke off.

Lydia smiled like a cream-filled cat.

FOUR

The Greater Megapolitan Spaceport East spread for a great many kilometers in every direction, uninvitingly. Through the lighter's viewport Sean glimpsed but one other vessel. Of medium size, it was lying in a repair cradle. It obviously needed work but no one was working on it. A few service buildings of a distasteful gray huddled to the right. There, a few men in coveralls performed some indecipherable task in next to slow motion. In the acclimatization lock, Lydia combed her hair and almost purred.

"I'm sure there's some mistake," cried Franconius. "A larger reception party was expected."

"By you," Lydia said sweetly.

"That is a hell of a turnout," said Sean.

The hatch undogged with a whine of overtaxed servomotors. The lock opened with a bang. The richer air burned Sean's lungs and made him cough. Chemicals. Loaded with chemicals, tangy and strange. A heavy touch of sulfur, he decided, momentarily dizzy and sweating.

Down there on the cement, a dozen people waited. Half of those were musicians in a variety of uniforms, no two of which matched. One obese middle-aged soldier struggled to hold up two flags at the same time: the banner of West-bloc with its hawk and W, and the Martian standard with its 4. The band struck up the Martian anthem, "Arise and Sing," out of tempo and out of tune.

Dr. Franconius was unable to conceal his dismay. "I don't see the Pres, I don't see the Pres!" He whispered from the side of his mouth. He lifted his boot to step out.

Sean jerked him back. "No stairs, Doctor!"

There was a fifteen-minute wait for a couple of slow-motion mechs to roll the stairs up. They came from kilometers away across the field, slowly, on a maze path around launchpits choked with gravel and sprouting weeds. Below, the men in morning tunics and traditional topper hats gestured and called apologies.

Finally the envoys were able to descend from the lighter. Behind the welcoming party Sean noticed a g.e.m. limo. It was at least ten years old.

A vismike was set next to an oil smear on the concrete. Its cable snaked away and disappeared under the limo. By craning down just slightly, Sean could tell that the cable was connected to no power source whatever. The red carpet had a huge hole right in the center.

Down the carpet marched Franconius, pomp recovered. With shoulders touching, Lydia and Sean walked right behind. Overhead the clouds pressed heavy and aromatic. One of the diplomats broke from the rest and rushed toward them.

His gait was agitated. His posture was tired. He was a small man anyway, quick like a ferret, and did not look strong. His fingers twitched. As he came closer, Sean noted that the man looked extremely nervous. He scratched the back of one hand with the other before shaking with Franconius beside the useless vismike.

There were no pressmen in evidence. Another diplomat took a small hand cam from his pocket and darted this way, then that way, making snapshots.

"Your excellencies," said the little diplomat in a husky voice. "Dr. Franconius, is it not? Subadministrator Cloud? Chief Engineer Veblen?" Sean wished the man wouldn't keep bobbing his head up and down. "On behalf of West-bloc and its govt may I welcome you to Earth in this auspicious hour and extend a most hearty welcome. I am, as you may have guessed, Secretary Hoog."

"Theodore," Lydia whispered. "Secretary of Space Affairs."

"Don't like him," Sean hissed back, smile unbroken. "Looks devious."

"On behalf of the free citizens of Mars," said Franconius, "we express our appreciation for your most cordial greeting and are sure that the vital negotiations which have brought us to our home planet will prove fruitful as well as—"

Scratch, Hoog raked fingernails down his chin as he interrupted, "Fine, fine, but let's get in the car. Frankly, the meds advised me you're liable to faint if you stand in this air too long. In addition to which, you can appreciate that it affects my sinuses. We'll be much more comfortable in the limo. It's conditioned. This way, please?" The way in which Hoog seized Franconius' arm shed new light on the little man. Strength there, Sean concluded. Hidden, and present in quantity.

"But isn't it traditional—?" Franconius began. "That is, I thought—a ceremony?"

"We've had the ceremony. Step right this way, Doctor." Franconius waved notecards. "But I prepared a few additional remarks—!"

"Not necessary. Do father and son exchange ceremonial speeches?"

Hurried along, the doctor continued to burble, "I was under the impression—the Pres always—"

"Oh yes," said Hoog with jerky movements of his head. "Yes, he should have greeted you in person of course. Pres Washbourne is indisposed. He sends his profoundest apologies. Rest assured that there will be a suitable formal audience, probably within a week to ten days."

"A week to—!" Lydia gasped. "You're out of your mind! We want to see the Pres *today!*"

Secretary Theodore Hoog turned, almost gracefully, and Sean saw again the kernel within the shell.

"Chief Engineer Veblen?" It was a frigid acknowledgment.

"She speaks perhaps intemperately," said Franconius. "Still, the danger confronting us—"

"With ships that may be carrying hostile aliens, getting close to Mars by the hour," Sean broke in, "a week to ten days just to initiate the arms talks is frankly much too long, sir. Unless the Pres is on his deathbed, I respectfully suggest that we implement a new schedule."

Hoog's glance acknowledged Sean's strength. "Naturally, Subadministrator, Westbloc fully appreciates the gravity and urgency of your mission." The Secretary scratched the underside of his chin while his purse mouth registered disapproval. Brown eyes above the lumpy nose grew opaque. "However the protocols of Westbloc require—"

"Up your protocols," said Lydia. "What Subadministrator Cloud said is correct and to the point. We three are charged with the responsibility for arranging the defense of an entire planet. We desperately need help of Westbloc. And to be treated as though we've come here asking for something like indoor plumbing is unforgivable and wholly—"

"Engineer Veblen!" Franconius glowered. "You will refrain."

"I will *not* refrain while—"

"You will! I am in charge, don't forget! We know none of the circumstances which prompt the Secretary's remarks. We must do him the courtesy of a hearing."

"Provided the hearing comes pretty damme quick," Sean said loud and clear.

For a moment Lydia seemed ready to explode with further indictments of the shabby treatment. He laid a hand on her arm. She nearly snarled at it.

Harloe inflated to the limit. Sean, his anger cooling, pleaded with his eyes that, just once, it might be more prudent to bow.

At last Lydia cut her anger to a simmer.

If we must quarrel, Sean thought, let's let it be with Hoog. The time for intramural attacks is over.

Secretary Hoog scratched his eyebrows. He gestured again at the limo, from which a tubercular black chauffeur was just now climbing. The chauffeur held the tonneau door with a hand just shy of absolute palsy.

Sweetening the sour situation with mumbled homilies, Harloe Franconius gathered up his dress cape at the hem and wedged himself inside. Lydia went next. She and the Secretary exchanged wintry glares.

Sean paused long enough to give Hoog a straight look in the eye. He was rather surprised. Instead of anger, he detected what he thought was worry in the dark eyes.

"Mr. Secretary," he apologized, "the harsh words were out of order. But this is an emergency mission."

"Of course it is, of course." Yet Hoog sounded vague, unimpressed as he made a second measured calculation of the man who faced him.

Hoog's face bore the flush of indulgence in foods and drinks far too rich. A burden of the office Sean wondered. The Secretary kept staring longer than necessary, as though he were busy totaling sums. No doubt about it, the Secretary was nobody's peahead. Sean liked the little ferret in a backhand sort of way. Didn't trust him, though.

"Be assured that we'll discuss the full particulars of your planet's situation, in depth and with mutual understanding, Subadministrator Cloud," Hoog purred as Sean bent to enter the limo.

"I'm certain we will. Provided the govt can find the time, Secretary."

The Secretary's awareness of the sarcasm was implicit in the way he, personally, slammed the limo door. He brushed past the tottering chauffeur and hopped in the middle seat. Two other diplomats joined the party. Assistant secretaries. Sean didn't catch any names. He was distracted by a sudden and surprising sight through a left-hand window.

Near one of the dismal gray service buildings, two of the coveralled mechs had fallen to fighting. One kicked his

opponent's groin. The other responded by forking his thumb in his foe's left eyesocket. Lydia noticed it too. Franconius, beaming and blabbering at the assistant secretaries, did not.

Hoog snapped his fingers at the chauffeur. The man shook violently trying to get the limo's airjets operational. The Secretary shifted on his jump seat to block Lydia's view:

"Was your flight from the colony pleasant and without—?"

"He's bleeding!" Lydia exclaimed. "They're biting each other!"

Shockingly true. Sean was fascinated.

One of the combatants was chewing on the other's ankle like a mad dog. A supervisor of some sort appeared. He shoved the other listless mechs forward. The fight was broken up.

The man who'd gotten his eye forked had a palm covering it. Even in the fuzzy gray air, Sean couldn't miss the garish ooze of blood.

The supervisor thrust the combatants farther apart. One stumbled against the plasto wall of a building. Ports in the wall snapped up. Missile tubes popped out, bloomed flowers of smoke. The chauffeur shrieked as an antipersonnel projectile whizzed past the pitted chrome W ornamenting the hood.

Franconius couldn't miss it now. "In mercy's name, Secretary! What's happening?"

"Think nothing of it," said Hoog with a wave. But he scratched his neck in a hurry.

As if triggered automatically, other walls in other buildings sprouted missile tubes. Within a moment, Lydia was hunching against Sean as the blasts whined past the car.

A projectile caught one of the fighters, threw him down with an immense red hole in his belly. Without sense of pattern, all the walls of the nearby buildings began to belch rockets. Additional pits in the concrete yawned. Some kind of land mine in one such pit blew up two of the mechs who'd had no part at all in the struggle.

Appalled, Sean said to Hoog, "Those men are being slaughtered! Why are the buildings armed, Secretary?"

"We've been experiencing some fearful difficulties with espionage."

Lydia's humanity finally showed: "Difficulties! That's a regular war out there."

"Eastbloc agents!" Hoog rushed on. "Constantly trying

to penetrate our top-secret defense installations! Don't fret, they've got him now."

If this worthless-looking establishment is a top-secret defense installation, thought Sean, *I am a Talmudi leprechaun.* But he didn't say it. He was too appalled at the sudden bloodshed. Were Eastbloc spies customarily eliminated by blasting everyone in the vicinity?

The Secretary of Space Affairs jittered in his seat, talking nonstop:

"—don't wish to trouble your arrival any further. I'll be pleased to explain about the espionage problem at a later time. For your comfort and convenience, I suggest we all concern ourselves with reaching a more pleasant part of the city with all speed." He leaned across the back of the front seat to hit a dash stud labeled *Priv-A-See*. The wretched chauffeur whose black skin popped with sweat heard him say: "Get the airjets operational, Boris, instantly. *Instantly.*"

The limo windows began to fog and darken. Hoog settled back. He adjusted his ascot.

"Wily devils, these agents of the Eastbloc apparatus. Not all people of color, either. Oh no, they employ many non-yellow and non-blacks. Traitorous double agents. But enough. I shall be glad to explain later, as I mentioned. Just settle back right now and in a moment we won't be disturbed further."

Disturbed was hardly Sean's word for it. Overwhelmed, shocked, near to choking on the rich, rotten air pouring icecold from the dash grilles, he watched the windows grow darker and the confusion and corpses near the gray buildings blur out as in a receding nightmare. A few missile ports still belched. Some sort of protective security system built into the structures had obviously malfunctioned. Yet it made no sense for buildings to be boobytrapped against lone spies. Tired and dizzy, Sean didn't know which question to ask first. He took the least resistance path and asked none.

The limo lifted, picked up speed. A dull, befuddled silence settled over the riders. The cooled air smelled of metal and sulfur. The sweating chauffeur shook as he steered.

Red streaked suddenly across the purple-black windows. *Well,* thought Sean, *at least they fetched a blood wagon for the poor devils slaughtered by accident—*

Then he felt Lydia's hand, twinging cold on his own down by his knee.

They both saw the truth just before the windows blanked completely. They exchanged stunned looks.

Men had jumped from the red-beaconed truck, rushing every which way.

But to the buildings. Corpses and wounded were ignored. Instead of an ambulance, the emergency call had been for a repair truck.

FIVE

The official party of Martian envoys was deposited at the city's largest hotel, the Nixon-Hilton, without further explanation of Westbloc's espionage problems being provided.

The hotel impressed Sean as rather decrepit and oddly underpopulated, a condition he'd also observed on the streets in the area. A coat of dust decorated most of the furnishings in the lobby. The humanity on view consisted of one thyroid case manning the desk, one elderly couple glimpsed through an arch, only patrons of the massive gilt dining room, and two bellhops with skin blemishes. Twins, they were. It was impossible to tell which of the two acted more imbecilic. The clerk rang three times before either bellhop hopped.

On the other hand, the large suites reserved for each of the three proved to be tasteful, comfortable, and equipped with a blend of filtered air more nearly resembling the thinner dome mix on Mars. The view out Sean's window left a little something to be desired. Hardly anything in sight except govt buildings with boards nailed across all but their lowest windows.

While Sean relaxed in a mildly intoxicating stimulant shower, Lydia popped in to knock on the open bathroom door. "Weirdest thing," she called through vapor clouds.

He peeked out of the cubicle, grinned because he liked the picture: a goddess rising from mist.

"Have you tried the interhouse vis, Sean?"

He couldn't say that he had.

"It took me ten minutes to get the operator. I swear she was the same rickety grande dame who was eating in the dining room when we arrived."

He assured her that coincidence and fatigue had conspired against her.

"Even if I am imagining things, the service is loathsome. You try, please?"

With his middle wrapped in a throwaway papertowel, he rang and rang. Ultimately a motherly sort answered, but he couldn't be certain of the dining room resemblance.

"Yes, please?"

"Ice, please."

"Oh, I *am* sorry, sir. The ice machine is temporarily out of order."

He shrugged, disconnected as Lydia flounced to the door.

"Same story she gave me. Honestly, Sean, I have the distinct impression that this great megalop at the beating heart of Westbloc is closed for holiday or something. Guess I'll just have to drink without ice. They did have the courtesy to leave a bottle. Bye."

She disappeared into the hall, leaving Sean to find his own gifts from the management. The quart container of Ole Hockery Holler Sour Mash had been drained of all but three fingers. Some dahlias in a cracked vase were dead.

On the way to the spaceport, Theodore Hoog had informed them that an official reception in their honor would be held that evening at the Space Secretariat. The envoys foregathered in Dr. Franconius' suite just after sundown for a drink.

Lydia looked delightful in a maddening purple peekthru designed to appeal to prurient interest. Harloe had turned up a bottle of port somewhere, and from all signs had been sipping at it most of the afternoon. He welcomed Sean expansively and belched, adding new stains to those which already decorated the bosom of his white dress tunic.

"A fine welcome to Earth, what?" he exclaimed, slapping Sean on the back. "Oh, I admit we had a rough edge or three at the field. But due to our own lack of knowledge of Westbloc protocol more than anything."

"Since when does missilekill of three or four men to demolish one classify as protocol?" Lydia asked.

Franconius withered her, or tried. He failed. Back to Sean, confidentially: "Tonight I intend to sound Secretary Hoog out on the subject of our request."

"Good idea," Sean answered. He kept his voice bland on purpose.

He felt uneasy about being on Earth, uneasy about everything that had happened so far. It was as if he were watching a dramatic tape edited by a skilled amateur. Nothing was entirely wrong, but everything was slightly wrong.

Tonight, though, he had mentally pledged himself to be sweet reason personified. At least until he sniffed around a bit more. Perhaps a mores gap had sprung up unbeknownst to the colonists who were preoccupied with making the 4 patch stand for something.

At eight a gong announced their limo. Franconius led

them outside, humming "Arise and Sing" off key. The lobby, the streets were even emptier than before.

Down the boulevards a few pedestrians rode on the walks, but very few. The chemical effluvium had thickened, lowered. The glows which provided the city's illumination hung in neat rows all along each street, bright eyeballs minus pupils. Depressing. Yet it resulted in a nice side-effect. Lydia pressed a little nearer to him than she might have ordinarily.

The Space Secretariat was located on a main thoroughfare (explained the palsied black driver who was on duty again) two blocks from the former site of the United States Capitol. Like its sister govt structures, all its upper windows were planked over. Outside, a vendor hawked souvenir litho cards purporting to show the city's now-extinct cherry trees.

Inside and up a grand marble stair, they were met by an assistant secretary. He ushered them to the entrance of a vast and splendid blue and gold ballroom. At the far end, a fiddler and a pianist played listless airs in the center of a platform designed to hold a symphony.

Along one wall, cocktails and a buffet had been set out. In the chandeliered gloom, a thin crowd turned, as if on cue, to watch their arrival.

Hoog headed a three-person reception line: one other lower secretary and Hoog's own wife, a grande dame twice his size whom Sean would have sworn was asleep on her feet. Hoog eyed Lydia's bust while pumping her hand. Then he clutched Franconius' arm and Lydia's too, guiding them:

"Delighted to have you here, delighted. Please come refresh yourself before I perform introductions."

Sean followed, glum eye on the guests. In their uniforms, formal wear, or gowns, to a man and woman they looked ill at ease. And in this cavern their skimpy numbers were somehow just short of ghoulish.

He caught a goblet of champagne from a tray and went off on a tedious round of hand-shakings. He met various govt functionaries, their drab fraus, and assorted military aides. The music continued, brave and feeble. He found himself back at the buffet alongside Lydia.

Sotto voce: "Don't drink the champagne, my dear."

"I already did. Bllrf. Raw as diesel oil. It's cheap. Find anything worth eating?"

"Be serious," he replied with a smirk. "They lowered the lights because the spread is so skimpy."

"Avoid the synthosalmon. Not only isn't it syntho, it's acquired a beastly taint."

Sean got caught in a group that asked him tiresome questions about life in the dome colonies. He answered politely until he noticed that none of the guests really had much interest in what he had to say. So he drifted back to the table where the last scrawny synthoshrimps huddled in a vast bed of brown-edged lettuce. He sampled a liverish canapé and stuffed it into a potted plant after one bite.

The spoiled smell lingered in his nostrils. Almost the personification of it, a cadaverous young man with badly dyed yellow hair, a soupy moustache, and protruding teeth was watching him. The man, in formal attire, carried a goblet of hard stuff. He was weaving slightly.

"Didn't shake your hand before, Subadministrator. Felix Elwyn. Doctor."

"Pleasure's mine." Elwyn's grip was damp, flaccid. "You govt, are you?"

Elwyn drank. His breath reeked of it, and his speech was thick. "Righto. 'F you care to call it that. 'M in the National Institutes of Technology. Eye Street. We occupy two broom-closets and a johnny in what used to be a busy fourteen-story building. 'M in endocrinology. 'M all of the govt's endocrinology staff, in fact, right here, right before your very—"

"*Elwyn!*"

Out of the gloom like a troll popped Theodore Hoog. He scratched his chin and watching the thin man with great gloomy eyes.

"Come along, old chap. You're gill-up full."

Hoog's delicate fingers closed on Elwyn's arm in a most genteel way. But it sparked rebellion. The scientist actually managed to clench his splayed teeth:

"Hell I am, Hoog! Hell you say! Just getting ready to elucidate to our visitor the exact, emaciated state—"

"Won't you come this way, Subadministrator?" Somehow Hoog managed to wiggle himself between Sean and the seedy endocrinologist, and turn Sean's attention toward the parquet floor which, even in the oblique light, badly showed the need for a coating of wax. "My wife is most anxious to speak with you."

Sean felt like a prodded animal. He recalled his decision for the night. Sweet reason. He did, however, brace the Secretary on one point: "It really is a rather small crowd here."

"Be assured it reflects nothing unfavorable on the status of the colony, Subadministrator."

"Damme well hope not," he grumbled.

"Not at all, not at all! It's merely—well—this is a period of crisis in the govt, and the lamps are burning late all over town. Yes, all over town. I wish I could explain but security forbids. Eastbloc is pressing the arms race, I can tell you that much. Certain key developments in the last two days—ah, but only Pres Washbourne could mention those." The opaque brown eyes shifted away. The Secretary spotted his lugubrious wife, quickened his pace. "We were expecting well over fifteen hundred. But the lamps are burning late. Letitia? Your question on birth control practices—?"

So it went, tedious, hollow, and devastatingly discouraging for more than an hour.

Only Franconius seemed to be enjoying himself. He romped from group to group, drinking a lot and heartily raising his voice in praise of the warm, warm Westbloc welcome. Lydia drifted aimlessly.

Sean was trying to negotiate his way back to her when he found himself paired with another military attaché of some kind. Air, to judge from the sky-blue wing patches. The fellow smiled, which was a switch. He was a stocky, dark-haired, nut-skinned individual. Colonel Ohu. Representing, he said, the air marshal of Pacifica, an island confederation loosely allied with Westbloc.

"The Hawaiian chain, Tahiti, out that way?" Sean wanted to know.

"Oh, yes, quite." The colonel sipped champagne rather hastily.

Now Sean warmed: "The area fascinates me although I've never seen it. For my second university language I studied Polyneze. Took two cultural seminars, too. *Ohiki maui-tau walini ka?*"

Absolutely terrified, the colonel spilled his champagne. "What?"

Sean repeated. Colonel Ohu forced a smile, darted his eyes past Sean's shoulder, then nodded a sharp nod. "Yes, exactly, you're right, they're beautiful islands, every one. I'm being called, will you pardon me?" Off he lunged.

Moments later, Sean cornered Lydia.

"In elementary Polyneze, I asked him where his home was out there, and damme if he understood me. Babbled something about all the islands being beautiful and then bolted. An imposter, Lydia. Isn't that absurd? Why?"

Lydia's blue-gray eyes traveled past the clumps of dispirited guests. "Equally—where?"

Sean searched too. The fiddler hit a series of sour notes and mopped his glistening forehead. Nowhere did Sean see a trace of the representative of the air marshal of Pacifica. He began to wonder what in hell was going on here.

SIX

A short time later, Sean sighted Dr. Elwyn seated by himself in a conversation nook up near the bandstand. Careful to make sure that Theodore Hoog was engaged—with Harloe Franconius, it turned out—Sean charted a zigzag course for the scientist.

He arrived there in about five minutes. He wondered at his own circuitousness. Not like him at all. But he did have the distinct impression that the Secretary didn't want him to converse with the yellow-toothed young man.

Elwyn glanced up. "'M, 'Lo." The man was higher than high. He gave all his attention to yet another goblet of hard stuff, which he cradled tenderly in both hands between sips.

A waiter with arthritis passed. Sean selected what he presumed to be an anticarcino panatella deluxe from the waiter's humidor. He accepted a light from the shambling wreck, then choked as his lungs met a cloud of fire. No Safe-C leaf, that. And old! The weed crumbled in his fingers. It gave off a putrid smell till he stamped it out under his boot. Ash receivers and disposos, like decent food, drink and company, were in scant supply.

"Interesting comments you were making a while ago," Sean began.

Elwyn sipped, somnambulant.

"About your work on the Westbloc scientific team."

Elwyn gurgled significantly. "Oh. Thought I recognized you. Rotten light 'n here. Probably 'nother directive to cut costs." He grimaced, then turned sly and vindictive around the eyes: "Shouldn't go spoiling the rosy scene for a diplomatic guest, should I? But wothehell, 'm due for the sackeroo in the next cutback. Listen, wanna tell you something—"

Up he lurched. Sean's hand on Elwyn's chest prevented the latter from toppling all the way over.

"Don' let them feed you that gas about how great the Wes'bloc scientific community is. 's part of the routine. Try to impress outsiders. Well, to that I say—" He said it, obscenely, toasting Sean with an empty goblet.

"You joke about closet offices, cutbacks—what you're trying to tell me is that you don't think the govt places the

right emphasis on science? Once upon a time it did." As he said it, Sean thought briefly of rats biting one another; but that was unfair; excess emphasis on material technology was a root cause, but not the sole one. Elwyn batted his shoulder:

"Listen! No joke! No emphasis, either. No science." A rubber-lipped harrumph. "Let you in on somethin' else. Westbloc din' even know—din' even *know* about those crazy alien ships till you colonists sent your firs' beam and told 'em! Talk about broken-down resources!"

Sean was genuinely shocked. "What? You mean to say not a single Westbloc receptor station picked up sign of those ships?"

"I mean to tell you that," Elwyn responded, almost cheerfully. "Because there aren't any Westblock receptor stations left operating, or any radioelectronic telescopes, or—" He began to tick off fingers and in the process dropped his goblet. It smashed, loudly. Sean heard rushing footsteps, sibilant voices. The piano ceased in mid-phrase, but not Elwyn. "—even one lousy stinking competent astronomer left on the entire stinking govt payroll. Why, as for there even being anything like a scientific community, 'm here to tell you for a *fact*—"

Out of the gloom behind Sean came a familiar voice unfamiliarly cold: "Dr. Elwyn?"

The scientist fingered his elegantly drooping moustaches. "—after everybody went—"

"Dr. *Elwyn*."

Theodore Hoog darted past Sean, angrier than his physique suggested he could be. Hoog's tiny monkey hand seized Elwyn's wrist. His fingers bleached white. Elwyn turned snarly, tried to disentangle, kept talking to Sean:

"'M sacked for this. Wothehell. Matter of time. I jus' hate to see bunch of innocents taken—"

Suddenly half a dozen fairly tall, competent-looking and blank-faced young men surrounded the Secretary. All wore impeccable formalwear. But the clothes did little to conceal their strength. Hoog took a hasty backward step. Instantly two of the young men were positioned at Elwyn's side. Their chief went into one of his apologetic routines:

"Please forgive his behavior, Subadministrator Cloud. Dr. Elwyn's been experiencing some domestic difficulty of late. I'll be pleased to give you a complete explanation later, but it's obvious the poor man isn't quite right as a result." Ever unctuous, Hoog tried to guide Sean away. "My assistant

secretaries will see that he sleeps it off. We'll have to look into a tranquility leave. Yes, definitely. Well!"

By now they'd reached the middle of the floor. Dr. Elwyn was being escorted from the premises in what looked suspiciously like a genteel strongarm operation.

"Another champagne?" Hoog exclaimed. He snagged two from a tray floating by. He pressed one on Sean unwanted, sipped, couldn't quite conceal the hard edge in his voice. "By the way, what was he saying?"

For the first time that night Sean consciously practiced craft. He shrugged.

"Secretary, damme if I could untangle it. A lot of words about being underpaid—"

"Yes, yes. We do have an austerity budget, thanks to Eastbloc. Go on, go on."

"—and for the rest, I'm no endocrinologist. His technical jargon eluded me. You're right, he was totally tanked. Boorish fellow." *But interesting.*

Theodore Hoog might have been suspicious, but he was forced to accept Sean's explanation. The Secretary almost started to ask a question, then didn't. After an exchange of meaningless banter on the surprising lateness of the hour and utter excellence of the buffet—Sean was in high gear now, lying with ease—Hoog darted away. He made straight for Dr. Franconius down the ballroom.

Lydia's modishly coiffed red and white hair was a beacon in the moribund sea. Sean broke her away from two skinny matrons wearing synthodiamonds. Claspings her hand, he tugged her off to a little zone of privacy in the middle of everything. Strangely, Lydia didn't resist his hand, even though it was a contact more physical than she usually allowed. He discovered the reason when she bent close to seethe in his ear:

"Have you caught what old boltbrain is up to now?"

"Haven't been near enough to Harloe to get the drift. All I hear is, he's loud. I've been having a positively fascinating talk with a man—" Suddenly his mouth hardened.

Three of the tall young assistant secretaries arrived. They stationed themselves with drinks six paces off. Two more, relaxed and chatting, took a post a hundred and eighty degrees away from the first bunch. Sean's mind closed in response to warning relays. *Tell Lydia later.*

She wasn't so concerned, continuing, "I didn't overhear all of it. But Harloe did use the words 'veto power' twice.

He's a sly son of a one. Making sure the Secretary knows who among us has the clout."

Clearly Franconius had communicated the message. Secretary Hoog didn't come near them once more during the reception. The party ended without a bang somewhere around eleven. Sean helped Lydia into her wrap. Staring at her peekthru for extended periods only made him miserable. Departure brought relief.

"I've never felt so much a prisoner in my entire life," she whispered. "Once those adenoidal young men formed that circle around us, they never left."

Sean felt no need to comment. He'd long ago grasped the fact that he and Lydia had been politely but effectively surrounded. To prevent another Elwyn incident? Hoog and his wife wished them good night at the head of the staircase in a perfunctory way. The Secretary gave Sean one last tense, oblique stare before turning again to his spouse.

In the limo gliding through the thick, smelly night air, Lydia said, "Rotten party."

Franconius' face looked blotched as the glows flicked past overhead. "My dear, couldn't you just for once try to emphasize the more positive—?"

"She's right," Sean broke in. "It was insulting, dull, and completely phony. Didn't you sense anything wrong, Harloe? Not one thing?"

"Wrong? Wrong? Why, no! I had a perfectly wonderful time."

"Did you sound Hoog out about the govt's response to our request?" Lydia asked.

Up went the doctor's eyebrows. "Good heavens. I utterly forgot. But don't worry, don't fret, I shall, I shall. And the govt will accede, too. I can tell. Hoog and I get along famously."

And he went to sleep as the lights of the Nixon-Hilton came gliding out of the empty night.

SEVEN

A late-model cuckoo announced three in the morning. The device had to be a late model because the carved tots that rotated out of the intricately carved Fuller dome reflected the prevailing attitude of Westbloc: one tot was ebony, one tot white. Sean unhooked the clock from its hango, studied the label.

"Geneve," he remarked. "Formerly Switzerland, wasn't it? Westbloc Economic Union, it says here."

"Put the clock back and stop dodging," Lydia said. "Ten minutes ago at least, I asked you a question. You're inventing all sorts of excuses to keep from answering."

"That was two minutes ago," he replied, downing the last of the Scotch in his tumbler. The liquor came from Lydia's complimentary supply of Wee Hoos Gang the Heather brand which, according to fine and badly registered print on the label, was manufactured in some unfamiliar part of Westbloc called Oklabraska. In addition, tiny motes of suspicious origin floated in the depths of the booze.

Sean was getting used to such atrocities by now. The fourth belt didn't taste half bad. He wished Lydia would have so much as one. All angular, tense, flexing in the sunken pink talkpit of her suite, it was she who'd knocked on his door, pleading sleeplessness. The same condition had been affecting him. Franconius had long ago retired.

Now Sean leaned on the sideboard with his drink. He tried to disregard her body half revealed by the peekthru, and blearily finished the remark begun well over a minute before:

"If I had answers, dear, I would shower them forth. Putrid food. Dignitaries as rigid as stiffs. An air of secrecy and downright obsolescence about everything. Plus those tantalizing remarks of Elwyn's about the very idea of a scientific community in Westbloc being a farce. He can't have been making sense. Else who'd keep up Westbloc's part in the arms race?"

Lydia's remote eyes floated over the ceiling. "If it exists. Perhaps it doesn't. Perhaps this whole weird city is snipped out of paperboard. Including us?"

Sean allowed himself a leer. "I'm alive. Care for a demo?"

"Don't be tedious. The evening's been annoying enough already."

Her voice, so soft, managed to roll the little insult off in a sweet way that still left him feeling inadequate, idiotic, even unmanly. He wondered what would happen if one of these days he punched her, then assaulted her wildly. Hardly the Martian way. But damme, he was human too! If he could only break the glacial veneer surrounding what he believed to be the real Lydia—just once! Intentionally or not, old F. Bruce had built the carapace around his daughter well.

Sean felt sufficiently miffed to be caustic. "You're just ticked because you expected something wrong, and something is." He drank and gave an oblique smile through the alcohol in his glass. "But not what you expected, right?"

"Precisely, right. I expected Earth to be a hurly-burly. A noisy, gauche, overcrowded warren of people jammed jowl by shin in every available inch of space. Reveling in their jingoistic crusade against the yellows and blacks of Eastbloc. Flaunting their disposoclothes of the most vulgar colors. Making cheap jokes and looking fish-eyed when you told 'em your mother was a ballet mistress—"

"Chauvinistic Lydia," he cucked. "All the heart and culture are not solely on our planet, you know."

"Are you so sure of that? What do you see?"

"Not noise and pushers, for sure. Do you hear this hotel?"

They listened, for nothing. Emptiness fairly creaked. Lydia: "Not a murmur."

"The whole town's that way. Hoog explained it with another crisis. It's getting me down." Impulsively he snatched her hand. "Come on, what do you say, let's find a club and a little raucous fun. The louder, the more worthless, the better. I wish some of those old fellows you see in the encyclos were having a feast. You know who I mean. The men who pinched girls in the rear and wore red felt flower-pot hats. To hear a tin horn! Anything! Your wrap?"

Lydia unfolded her luxurious body. "I'll go. But not for reasons as physical as yours."

"Damme, woman, do you ever have fun?"

"No. It wastes time."

She avoided a touch of his fingers as he helped her with her things. As they went down the musty rococo hallway to the tube she said, "The quiet surprises me. It's at right angles to everything I anticipated. Yet even failing to fit the pattern of my preconceived ideas, all this somehow—"

well—*fits*.” A nervous brush of a lock of red-white hair; her forehead shone as they passed under the lights above the tube entrance. “Oh, I haven’t caught it all. But the feeling’s growing. It won’t be long till I know what’s out of place and why.”

Sean had trouble consulting the tube director plate because its bulbs had nearly all burned out. It informed him that the Nixon-Hilton’s rento facilities could be located on Sublevel C. They clacked along an arcade of boutiques and service shops with little merchandise in their windows, and that dusty, and roused an attendant from his cubicle. He accepted the chargecard Sean had been issued by the hotel on arrival. Shortly they were inside a teal sedan, leaning back on the cushions as the headlamps picked out a ramp up which they shot at accelerating speed.

The rento went left past the hotel marquee. No doorman, and only one elderly pedestrian. The glows above ran into the distance.

Sean programmed the console for a cruise circle around the hotel until he could get some information from the guidance system. An instruction pamphlet hung by a string from one of the console levers. He looked at the first page. Copyright showed the manual to be six years old. He found the section he wanted, read, then punched up the right buttons. A feeble shine behind a grid at console center showed that the guidance machinery was still operational.

“Your pleasure, passengers, your pleasure,” said a monotonous metal voice.

“A night spot,” Lydia told it.

A click, a rattling of little gears somewhere. “Especially recommended is You Squared, an intrapersonal cabaret on Are Street. Rating, four star. A selection of favorite legal beverages to please your palate. All recognized chargecards cheerfully accepted. Currently appearing is the popular participational polyphonic group, Chad Threnode and His Merrie Incendiaries—”

“Enough sell, thanks,” said Sean. “Any other choices?”

Glows passing overhead cast a lovely pattern of soft grays and pearls on Lydia’s cheekbones. Infuriatingly, he felt more crazy about her than ever. They were circling the hotel for the fourth time. Sean noticed the same sole elderly pedestrian. He seemed to be circling the hotel too. Lydia sat as close as formality permitted, as if she too sensed the biting and forlorn emptiness of the night streets.

“Did you hear me? I asked for some other clubs.”

The console clicked and pattered. "Especially recommended is You Squared, an intrapersonal—"

"You told us about that one already." He punched it up. "Another."

"Especially recommended is You Squared, an—"

He biffed it one. "I said another, wirebrain."

But no matter how he fiddled, fumed, or manhandled the levers of the tourist guidance device, it refused to offer them any attraction other than You Squared on Are Street. At length, frustrated by this latest apparent malfunction, he slapped the assent lever. The rento hauled left at an intersection and accelerated, encountering no traffic as it climbed to near ninety.

The vehicle's filtration system cleaned much of the pollutant aroma from the air putting around them. But the whiff of sulfur remained. Lydia's eyes were huge as an owl's as she marveled at the city's graveyard quality. At last, another vehicle passed them. A couple of minutes later Sean thought he saw some sort of airlift van squirting down gutters on a cross street. More turns. A blur in the distance became a transparent sphere suspended outside an undistinguished building in an area of blank-facade offices.

Inside the sphere bubbles of liquidy wax floated in a transparent medium. The bubbles bumped each other gently. Then they parted to reveal a ceramic eye located at the sphere's center. The eye blinked. Squirming yellow letters where the eyeball had been spelled out the name of the club. Another blink, the waxy floating bodies nudged together and the sequence began again. The sphere shed a smoky scarlet light on the walk below.

"Well, there's somebody," Lydia breathed as the rento slid into a slot behind one of several airlifts parked in the area. Sean discovered the rento had selflock protection mechanisms. The one on the street side jammed. They both climbed out the curb side and followed a couple that had just gone inside. Lydia clutched his arm. He felt her bosom's thrust. She felt him feel it:

"Don't get any ideas. Doesn't this look like the hole to end all holes?"

It did. The foyer was pitch-dark and smelled of sweat. An artificial voice told them they were being scanned and photographed for credit identification. Then an iris spiraled open. Sean's eye reacted to a sudden smear of flame. "The place is on fire—!"

"Come right *in*, thir," said a waiter. The functionary had

pasted-down hair. He flashed a fiber optics wand across their faces.

As gouts of flame crisscrossed Sean's vision he realized he was watching a dimensional projection against one wall: ancient fire-extinguishing vehicles, enameled scarlet with giant chrome-centered wheels, rushing one way, rushing the other, twenty feet high, intercut with panoramas of blazing buildings collapsing in flames and stereotapes of screams of pain and horror. Against this backdrop, musicians performed—writhed, more correctly—minus any clothes.

"You're just in time to catch the wrapup of the set," said the waiter, as he thrust through tables. Sean spotted a few spectators, phantoms, dull-eyed, red-lit. There were many more empty tables than full ones.

The waiter placed them one tier from the performers. The stereotapes howled louder. Sean punched up two drinks, watched Lydia's profile. The edge of her face was tinted red. Her eyes chased the frenzied movement of the naked men with revulsion.

"A sick sort of place," he heard her say in the din.

"Here's the finish, spiritualizers," wailed one of the entertainers, pouring some sharp-smelling fluid over a solid state glockenspiel. A match flared. Patrons shrieked. Two waiters rushed forward with foam tanks. After the instrument had burned brightly for a moment, they snuffed it out with heaps of pressurized lather. The stereotapes had unwound down to silence.

Sean rubbed his eyes. Had the racket and glare unhinged him, or—?"

The light level improved slightly. The entertainers were leaving the platform. The last, stocky, dark-haired, nut-skinned, met Sean's glance inadvertently. Sean grabbed Lydia's hand, spilling her drink. "That man—!"

"The one staring at us? The Polyneze? He is familiar. I can't place—"

"I can. He went by the name Colonel Ohu. Or his twin did. You! You there!"

No twin, Sean knew suddenly. No twin for certain. The musician's dark eyes enlarged with the shock of recognition. Sean tried to stand, nearly upset the tiny table. By that time Colonel Ohu was off the platform.

The Polyneze uttered a sibilant, chopped-off cry. Someone flung him a flossy purple dressing gown. He dived into it and wrapped it around himself and began to walk rapidly toward the exit.

The Polyneze cast a worried glance over his shoulder as Sean collided with the lispy horror from the main entrance.

"Thomething dithpleasthing, thir? Ith there anything the management can *pothibly* do?"

"That man—damme, let me by. I know that man!"

"Barney Cole? Of the Merrie Inthendiarieth? Old thchool-mates, perhapth?"

A struggle developed. The lisper proved unusually strong, or clumsy, or both. The Polyneze made rapid progress toward the front, while Sean made none.

"His name isn't Barney Cole or it wasn't earlier tonight. His name's Colonel Ohu, and I want to ask him—"

"*Pleath*, thir," hissed the functionary, "don't create a thpectacle!" The grip on Sean's wrist abruptly became vicious. Sean reacted, hurled back, put all the frustration of the visit thus far into a long, pummeling punch.

The lisper sidled out of the way, taking only a partial blow on the temple. But the action cleared the path. Sean went tearing to the exit, just as it closed and hid the alarmed red-lit face of the fleeing Polyneze.

EIGHT

Sean plunged toward the closing iris across the pitchy foyer. He mangled several of the iris blades getting through. Lydia cried his name in the hubbub behind.

The street. There was release from the maddening frustration in the excitement of chase. A masquerade that had no reason? Nonsensical, inexplicable? No, only to him. The reason for the masquerade at the Secretariat remained to be exposed. Would be! Without the slightest self-consciousness, he dropped into an exaggerated sinister crouch and scanned the street in both directions.

Glows muted by the chemical murk strung their brightness away to left and right. The night fluttered with the sound of a distant hovercraft. Sean's muscles enjoyed the tension; his lungs enjoyed being stretched again, even though the richer, rotten air was a lot to swallow. Lydia was swearing and hitting the tinny iris blades, trying to get out of the club. He searched, searched—

There. A flicker of the hem of a dressing gown down the next block. And, punctuating the stillness, heels *whick-whack, whick-whack*, very fast. Leaner and presumably swifter than the stocky Polyneze, Sean began to run.

Exertion in the foreign air drove with a sudden ache through his breathing passages. But the quarry was visible. The imposter's face turned briefly back toward Sean, a cocoa smear. Frightened man. Man with something to hide. Man who could explain why a musician would be—hired? persuaded? what?—to play another role in order to round out the guest list at a diplomatic function. Sean ran harder.

As Sean angled across the empty thoroughfare, the bogus Pacifican delegate tangled his feet trying to round a corner. Down he went in a shimmer of purple. Sean hit the curb full tilt, heard an unfamiliar clackety-hum, landed on a walk that hadn't been shut down like most of the others in the vicinity. The belt caught the bottom of his feet, dragged him away from the bogus air marshal until he jumped. He balanced on a parallel walk carrying him the way he wanted to go.

Behind him there was noise. A lispng cry of dismay.

Questions. Patrons spilled outside. Lydia's heels made a thinner, more precise clicking than the quarry's boots, but one just as fast. Sean started to run again, adding his forward motion to the walk's.

The fall at the corner had cost the ersatz Polyneze his advantage. Up and looking trapped in a circle of soft radiance from a glow, the man checked the position of his pursuer. Sean was only a block away. The imposter switched from a path carrying him out of sight around a corner to a dead run back across the open street.

Two rows of four lamps blazed in the man's face. An airlift delivery van braked furiously. The Polyneze darted past the lightports on its hood, a massive shadow. The van resumed speed, went past Sean with its pulsing phosphorescent letters aglow. *Declaration of Independence Dairy—Guaranteed Freshness Since 1776*. The van abruptly blocked Sean's view of the quarry.

The van driver noticed Sean all at once. As the vehicle glided on, the driver in silhouette talked into a hand-communication device.

Somehow the Polyneze had lost more ground. Sean was practically even with him, one man on one side of the street, one on the other. The Polyneze wanted the safety of a narrow service passage between buildings. Sweat turned his brown face slimy under the glows. Sean started across.

The Polyneze bobbed, snatched something, flung it. From the way the piece of refuse flew, Sean knew it was small, compact—and aimed right by skill or accident. He jumped back. His backbone hit the wall of the building. Machinery squealed.

Away to his left down the bland wall, gray square ports sprang open. White gas squirted out. Sean caught a whiff, doubled over gagging as tears ran.

Unbalanced, he stumbled across the moving walks. Pulled one way. Pulled the other. He jumped, hit the section between walks and curb. It shuddered, he noticed for the first time. Plasto? He'd come down hard. How hard he discovered the next instant.

An automatic maw opened in the wall not two paces from the tips of his boots. Up shot a missiletube. With a strangled yell he dived for the gutter. The missiletube went *chuff, chuff, chuff*.

Projectiles zipped upward. They exploded portions of a top floor of a building across the way. Debris showered down. Smoke blew.

"In the name of—" Sean began, cheek in the gutter. No name expressed his shock.

As if the three antipersonnel projectiles had triggered a major combat, the lower storys of the building which had been hit responded by springing their ports and disgorging gas and rockets. Some of the latter whined over right above Sean's scalp. He stayed belly down.

The gas curled up his nostrils. He stopped breathing. The noise quickly reached a din. For a block in either direction, sidewalks and buildings disgorged a frightening assortment of firing mechanisms, revolving spyeye tubes, even a scissors arm that flung gas grenades to the middle of the boulevard.

"Sean? *Sean!* I can't see for the smoke—"

That was Lydia. She was somewhere out of sight in the clouds of stuff.

He yelled to assure her he was alive, dug his elbows against the street, willed his hind end down, and began to shinny toward the safest zone, the exact center of the street. The smoke filled with a brilliant red light. Close behind the light came the ratchet of a mechanical howler.

Sean stopped crawling as a half dozen tiny heatseekers buzzed in a circle directly above him. One nosed down at his shoulder. He rolled wildly. The heatseekers couldn't change direction fast enough. The concussion sent him rolling six times further and, he observed later, left a crater right where he'd been.

By that time the sleek airodynamic vehicle with the howler and the red roof light pulled up and damped its airjets. Men sprang out. The red light glared from the lenses of their gas protection hoods. One man immediately took a small antipersonnel missile in the shin and went down wailing. The others dashed for the walks and buildings.

Too dazed to watch everything at once, Sean finally realized that the projectiles had pretty well stopped crisscrossing. It was safe to stand up. He did so, rising into the red light as Lydia ran at him from one direction, a black police officer with a square chin from the other.

Sean wiped sweat off his eyelids, fought nausea. The police officer carried some kind of prod at the ready. With a jolt Sean saw that the dark-skinned officer was in his eighties. Though he moved with fair vigor, his reedy voice couldn't sustain a bark:

"Carmody, if you please. Eighth Civil District. May I ask what's going on? A dairy driver sent for us. Said someone

was tampering with the devices." Rheum-wet eyes swept the area. "Don't see anyone else."

Sean didn't expect the officer would. The Polyneze would be long gone by now. He said:

"If you mean by devices those damme buildings that all at once began bombing me, yes, I guess I did set them off. But I wasn't tampering, I was chasing a man who—" Quick! Careful! Dissembling: "—stole something personal from my table in that club back there."

"What kind of a place is this?" Lydia demanded. "An infantry training field someone forgot to identify?"

"Perfectly normal city street, miss," Carmody returned. "Don't be so lippy. I—" The policeman's gaze fastened on Lydia's bosom. More precisely, on the decorative patch sewn with iridescent thread to one shoulder.

"Uh—gulp," went Carmody. "Colonists?"

Sean's teeth shone with hard pleasure as he unzipped his Hoog issued diplomatic pass.

Carmody nearly fell over himself. "Utmost apologies. Then you didn't realize—?"

"That the sidewalks were mine fields? I certainly didn't."

Like monsters from some child's dream, the technicians who had brought the whistling, blasting pandemonium under control gathered round to watch with their immense black-glass eyes. Two men in coveralls worked the buildings walls, one on each side of the street, shutting gas ports and checking them with lamps. The rest loitered, very quiet, faintly menacing in the drifting murk. Sean tried to express wounded dignity with a flick at his dirty sleeve. He explained that he'd jumped down hard on the regular sidewalk, causing the first eruption.

"That's a damme poor reception for visitors," he added.

"Just unfortunate, unfortunate all around." All smiles, Carmody talked so fast that his polydentures got a rhythm going. "Antiriot devices. Seldom used."

The officer's hand on Sean's elbow was a shade too insistent. Sean twisted loose as Carmody blathered on:

"Installed years ago, just after the racial turmoils, don't you know? It's very unusual for the devices to malfunction. Yes, very unusual. I can't remember a case—"

His pause signaled the glass-eyed watching to shake heads; they couldn't remember a case either. Sean could. If these were the same types of devices installed at the spaceport, there had been a case only yesterday. Making Carmody with his hurry-up explanations a liar.

A city with its buildings and walks armed? And the armaments malfunctioning with very little cause—a jar, a jolt? He grew more alarmed than he'd been since arriving on Earth. Something wrong, *wrong*—

“Your hotel, Subadministrator Cloud?” inquired Carmody. Sean told him.

“We'll rush you back with our utmost apologies.”

“We have a rento—” Lydia began.

“No, no, we insist. We'll pick up the rento for you. Just come this way.”

Carmody seized him. The genteel strongarm was on again. Sean was too exhausted to resist.

NINE

“Harloe?”

“Sean? My boy? I wasn’t expecting—damme, is the suite unlocked? I don’t recall—”

“When you didn’t answer the third hail, I decided to walk in. Thought something might be wr—”

Something was, though not what Sean had expected. To his credit, he masked his utter astonishment. The unexpectedness of the situation even damped his anger a little. (And angry he was, scorchingly, explodingly angry. It was another midmorning now, as dull and draggy as they had all become. On the motorized servocart that arrived every day to mindlessly provide his breakfast, he’d confronted two greasy-shiny eggs, one of which had a previously undetected blood spot. The single strip of bacon smelled rancid. That tore it.)

Afflicted by visions of the face of the first dome tech to discover the presence of the alien ships—he’d never forget that face, either; sick with astonishment, jerking in an unsuccessful attempt to smile it all away—he’d come storming down the corridor to Franconius’ door, and this.

“Ah, well, my boy—ah, have you met Miss Glamb? No, of course you haven’t, heh-ho. I only requested her—oh, ah—” During this, Franconius managed to recover from the compromising position in which Sean had discovered him, not to mention Miss Glamb. “—ah—she’s the govt. Govt girl. Yes. Sec services, don’t y’see?” Vised Secretary Hoog. Yesterday! Mentioned I wanted to jot down a memorandum on my position for the—the—”

Franconius breathed so hard his speech was interrupted for some seconds. All his numerous chins were a-jiggle. His blue dots of eyes hopped everywhere, hunting something. They located it. He lunged, dragging a secpad from its hiding place under the corner of a scatter rug. He shoved the pad into the hands of Miss Glamb.

“—ah, negotiations.” Franconius smoothed his hair, ordered his clothing, rose. His breathing began to decelerate. “We were just finishing dictation when you arrived.”

“Thoughtful of Hoog.” Enjoying himself, Sean relaxed.

“Nicer to have a real live breathing sec than one of those

impersonal built-in units." He pointed. "Like that one in the wall."

Franconius had difficulty focusing. That was when Sean managed to stop visually examining the sec—she was a feast of color and form—and notice that the doctor's eyeballs, in profile, protruded to an unnatural degree. His pupils, unusually undetectable except up close, looked like cross-sections of black marbles.

"Oh—yes? Is there one? By damme, there is. Well—"
Franconius looked stricken.

To the sec, Sean said with a wise smile, "We haven't met. Sean Cloud. The delegation."

Give the girl credit. She managed to shift her fabulous long legs with grace and stare right back at him. Her thin smile said, *I know you've caught me. But just see whether I'll blush for you. I've been this route dozens of times. You can't intimidate me, you beep-beep.*

After they'd exchanged stares a while, she bobbed her blue-spangled hairdo, shifted her breasts and hips inside the hipsy she wore. The garment consisted of strips of cloth, spectrum-hued, and a few insufficient-seeming knots. Ten times as merciless on a male as a peekthru. She said brightly:

"Pull up something. Make to home. I'm Donna Glamb. With a b."

He pulled up the nearest fluffy something and sat. "Space Secretariat?"

"But definitely the govt. I'm a pool girl. Uh, Senator—?"

"No, no, my dear!" Franconius cried. "It's Doctor, remember? We're quite finished."

"Okay. Enjoyed it. Bye." Away she went, wiggling deliciously.

Sean snapped his fingers. "You might want this." He held up the secpad which she'd dropped. This time he thought she'd curse. She didn't. Her legs glistened with some kind of phosphor paint as she vanished through the foyer. A pro item all the way. But the healthiest specimen of a woman he'd seen in Westbloc, he had to admit.

A noise behind him made him turn. On his knees, Harloe Franconius was rooting through the papepillos of the talk pit in the center of the room. Sean's sense of humor began to wane. He felt it compromised him to sit. He stood up.

"Here, this is what we need, Sean my boy." Franconius held out the plastopak. "Have one!"

"I never smoke cigars, Harloe. You know that."

"Special, my boy! Gift of the Secretary." He squinted

at the glittery band. "Maxomillions. Very expensive. Sure you won't—?"

Sean shook his head. Franconius finally sensed the other's anger. He took his time lighting up. He inhaled, shuddered, blew smoke through the room.

"Harloe," said Sean, "do you know what day it is?"

"Is that all you—? Tuesday? Wednesday!"

"Thursday," was the flat answer. "Eleven days after we arrived."

"*Eleven—?* Why, that can't—" Puff, puff. "Is it *really*. I'm astonished."

"The same way you were astonished that you forgot to dial your door shut last night? The same way you were astonished that I caught you with your hand in that bim's clothes?"

"Sir, you forget yourself!"

Whereupon Sean said a foul word that somehow sobered Franconius and made him livid.

"Sir!—sir, you—"

"You listen, Harloe. I mean it. It's eleven days and what have we accomplished?" He hit spread fingers with his other hand. "A poophead reception that would have started a war three centuries ago, it was that insulting. Sightseeing tours to moldy museums full of War Between the States cannon, whatever *they* are. Tours to sewage treatment plants. Three hours of staring at machinery and chemical sumps, for God's sweet life. And on and on, with one of those zombs from the Secretariat always at your ear, saying tomorrow, tomorrow, tomorrow."

"I take exception to your tone, Cloud."

"I take exception to your flibdibbing the damme time away when the domes need every day, every hour, every minute to get ready for"— a gesture too melodramatic; but he was fed up, out of control—"whatever *things* are in those alien ships! Now I ask you. When do we see the Pres of this pea-headed govt? Have you heard a single miserable word about when—?"

"As a matter of fact," interrupted Franconius, "I have."

"You have?"

"Pres Washbourne is still recuperating."

"From what? Rigor mort?"

Rising to battle, Franconius positively bellowed: "That is no way to speak of those who are helping us—"

"Oh, stuff that! Nothing's happened, nothing at all."

"To your way of thinking, perhaps. But matters are pro-

ceeding apace. Yes, definitely. I am kept informed daily."

Sean's chocolate-and-cobalt eyes looked downright dangerous. "By whom?"

"The Secretary himself. Does that satisfy your upstart temper?"

"No! I haven't been informed. Lydia hasn't heard one word."

"Is that a fact? Permit me to apologize for the oversight." Franconius' eyes were lidded with a mean pleasure as he peered at the end of his Maxomillion. "I thought that since I was in charge of this mission, it would be sufficient if the Secretary informed me of day-to-day affairs." The yeasty lids flickered. "I am in charge, you know."

Stunned, Sean clenched his teeth. "I won't stand for this. Lydia won't."

"Of course you will." Inhaling, Franconius suddenly was merrier and blander than Father Xmas, except for his eyes. They were glorying in the power to put down. "If you're disagreeable, Cloud—if you subvert my authority or attempt to circumvent it—I swear to God above that I'll arrange to have both you and that slu—Miss Veblen sent back to Mars while I complete the negotiations. I—am—in—charge."

"You miserable old hack! You arse-headed pol! You—"

"Up yours," said Harloe Franconius cheerily.

Fuming, Sean spun and slammed to the foyer. Franconius waved his stogie, creating whorls.

"Don't forget my warning, Sean my boy. The Secretary listens to me. I'll make it stick if I must. Run you right back up to Mars, right back up there, I swear I will! Tell Miss Veblen to put that in her encyclo and reference it."

Sounding as though he were going to giggle, Franconius collapsed in the papepillos. He vanished behind clouds of sweet smoke.

Angular shadows lay under Lydia's remote eyes. Were they real? Or was it only the dimness of the Nixon-Hilton's sole operating watering spot? Two other cocktailers on the premises had signs reading *Temporarily Out of Service*.

The impossibly bad lighting of the mauve room blurred reality. Sean punched the table. "It's true, Lydia. The Secretary is supplying him with bims."

"I believe you." She sighed. "Look, I saw one myself, after you told me this noon."

"Then you only saw fifty percent of the party. Another one showed up at three. I managed to find one of those cre-

tinous bellhops and bribe him. Apparently Harloe's been having visitors for five or six days. And we didn't see it!"

Lydia gave him an I-told-you glance. "Don't look so hurt. I've always said we couldn't completely escape the old politics in the domes."

She lifted the syntholive from her tini, examined the red stuffing—a chewable plastic, pimiento-flavored. Squeezed, the red glob disgorged half the carcass of a tiny beetle. She threw it over her shoulder, covered her lips with a napkin. Nobody minded the flung beetle. There was nobody else in the place. Even the bartender had vanished. A slippery, ponging kind of electromusic leaked through hidden speakers to underscore the tension.

"By the way, Sean. I took a short walk outside and caught up to what Harloe was smoking. Maxomillions are available in any shabby alley in which you can find a hawker. They're rolled, cut and marketed by Westbloc's little Latino partners down south. Very costly and strictly brainbending."

"Harloe's hallucinated? No wonder his eyes looked like pool balls. Supplied—?"

Lydia's shrug was almost merciless. "By Hoog, who else?"

"Jesus God," said Sean. "Lydia, they're running us. Controlling him and running us like gerbils in a maze. Why?"

"They don't want us to negotiate with Pres Washbourne."

A quick scowl. "Obviously. But beyond that—why not? If they're going to go negative on our request, why wait? Why not say no immediately? Why squeeze out blood drop by drop?" He sweated, cold in the loneliness of the bar. *Ping-pong-pang* went some dead composer's taped masterwork. Lydia lost her protective bitterness.

"That's theatrical, Sean. But I'm afraid it's apt."

The silence grew. He thought of speeded-up clocks, ships in the void—

"What's wrong?" he exploded. "I thought I'd know by now."

Her hand on his was almost companionable. "You don't have to play the martyr solo. I thought I would too because I'm smarter than you."

Casually and thoughtlessly said, it failed to anger him. They sat silent again, lost in the mean shadows of the bar where the stools bore films of dust. At length Lydia began again:

"Something is wrong, isn't it? My God it is. Not what we expected—what *I* expected. Something worse. Hidden, slippery. Bad food. False politeness. Phony tours. Mined

buildings—I don't know. Do we really want to find out?"

The fear gripped them both a second longer. Then, "Yes. But what's more important is finding a way to reach Washbourne, someone. Anyone who can give a responsible yes or no to the mission. I'll figure out something. Something. Something."

Over and over he said it, with fist banging for emphasis, till Lydia's touch and lifted brow—*That's a bit much, Sean*—calmed him.

Outwardly.

By the end of the day no solution had as yet arrived. Free tickets arrived, for a theatrical performance. To torture himself, Sean asked the vis whether any alternate attractions were available in town. Of course none was.

The show was at the New Booth. A govt-provided limo was at the curb to take them. The same govt-provided limo would be waiting after the curtain to return them to the hotel. He knew it without being told.

The show was a clangorous, light-splashed musical entertainment, an historical jape with songs called *Howdy, Mister Texas!* There were comical characters called Lyndy and Birdy and Bobby Mac. Since Sean didn't know his Earth history all that well, none of it made much sense. He sat through all the numbers trying to unravel the enigma. Without success.

Back at the hotel he had a long session with Lydia. He got drunk in her room.

Too tired even to fondle her experimentally, he went to his own suite near dawn. He drank some more and paced till he fell over. He didn't waken until the beating started on the door.

He stumbled up to morning grayness, ran, dialed. He literally jumped back at the sight of Lydia. There was blood on her cheeks and her blue-gray eyes were wild.

"What happened?"

TEN

"I nearly got raped, that's what happened."

The stark look of her weariness made him stammer, "In—
in *daylight*?"

"In daylight. At a main intersection. Will you let me the
hell in and get me a coff, please?"

He guided her to the talkpit. She didn't resent his hands
on her arms because she apparently failed to be aware of
them at all. Against the tips of his fingers he felt the subtle
trembling of shock's aftereffects.

As he hurried to the vis he noticed several rents in her
clothing. There was dirt on her skin. And now rage was
building in her eyes.

She couldn't sit more than ten seconds. She jumped up
and out of the pit, striding back and forth on the once-
elegant carpet. A heavily worn spot caught the toe of her
morning boot. She nearly fell.

She stamped and swore and raked the rug with her toe
half a dozen times. Destroying something. Hating it. Sean
knew why. She'd probably never come close to physical
assault before. To her, everything could be settled, arranged,
structured with a combination of reason and caustic au-
thority. Thus it was a new Lydia revealed to him. A Lydia
afraid, stripped of protective layers. The sight was touching
and awesome. When the vis operator finally answered, Sean
barked with special nastiness for coff service.

At last he talked her to a seat again. He transferred a
Saf-C to her fingers. They shook less after a couple of in-
hales. The servocart arrived with unusual promptness. Lydia
drank long, shivered, then proceeded to answer all the ques-
tions he'd shot at her in fragments during the past moments.

"You weren't up, Sean. I decided I wanted a new glitter
scarf. Simple enough, yes?"

"Find a departmentstore," he nodded. "You went shop-
ping?"

"It sounds so elegantly easy to say. Yes, I went out. Do
you know how many large fully stocked departmentstores
this thriving metro offers? In the directories, six. In fact,
two. Four, I gather, went out of business after the last

directory was taped. But why not update the directory with a ten-second edit? No one willing to take the trouble? No one available? Puzzles in puzzles, like conjurer's boxes."

A sigh, a puff, a gulp. The slurrupy noise of her hunger after the coff made her fragile, warmer. But in her eyes there were still bonfires:

"As usual, the streets had all the charm and bustle of a cremato just before an ashing. A couple of shoppers here, a couple of tradesmen there. And parenthetically"—stab of her Saf-C, a sudden twisting of smoke in the flat toneless light of the metro day—"Where *is* everybody? I'm well aware that Westbloc went pill-happy because of the population problem in the Eighties and Nineties. But damme if I thought b.c. practice was that universal or successful. Anyway, I found the store. Top two storys had their lights out. The lifts were barred with chains. Four floors were operating, if you can call it that. Merchandise? A joke. Show-bubbles and counters a tenth full. And then—well, do you remember the chorus people in that claptrap we saw last night? Two wispy male dancers who did the only amusing bit in the whole dreary affair? The rodeo pantomime, when Bobby Mac got thrown?"

"No, I don't remember Bobby Mac being thrown. Or the dancers."

"Well, I saw them both. Yes. Clerking in the department-store."

His turn for puzzlement. "What's unusual there? Showfolk need extra jobs. They always have."

Feline now, her visible trembling gone, Lydia pounced. "Granted! Then I remembered your Polyneze from Pacifica who doubled and was reluctant to admit it. I asked one of the lads about the show. He denied he was a dancer. He found something to keep him occupied in another section, very quickly. He tried to signal his pal, that I definitely saw. I beat him to it. The second one denied being in the show too. But his faggoty little eyes gave him quite away. Sean, those two, like that air marshal, were playing extra parts. Playing parts for *us*." She slumped back against the papepillos. "I'm beginning to sound a mite on the paranoid side, wouldn't you say?"

"I would." He reached for more coff. His eyes shadowed. "Maybe with some reason. I'm missing the connection, though. An attempted rape by a pair of unmasculine masqueraders?"

Her hair was a tangle of red and white as she shook her

head. "A prelude, is all. The pattern repeating. Emptiness, empty streets, empty stores, the same person playing multiple roles. Naturally, as a footnote, no glitterscarves were for sale. I headed back to the hotel. I'd gone three blocks, possibly four. I came to an intersection. All at once, bango, just that quick—" The way she gave a little turn to her coffee mug told Sean how the memory still terrified her. "I was surrounded. A dozen, fifteen, eighteen of them. Not all one age, either. I saw an octo in the pack, and some pimple-cheeks. There were both men and women. And they weren't even dressed alike, as a bunch of muggeros from the same stew would be. One of the cretins wore the most respectable business clothes you can imagine. Two of the women were plain hausfraus. A mob, but the strangest mob I ever saw. Crazy giggly eyes. They were laughing and nudging each other while they closed their ring around me. One little twelve-year-old had a mongoloid head and drool on his chin. I tried to play it politely. Excused myself. No one moved. I looked for help. A man and woman were passing on the other corner. They saw and went right on. Then the octo, I'm sure it was the octo, took off his little steel half-specs and said something filthy. The next thing I knew, two women were holding me. Hard, Sean. Here."

She thrust up her sleeves. The fingermarks were livid.

"Then men began to pull my things, rip them—"

"A sexual assault in midmorning? I can't begin to believe it, Lydia."

"Well, dear, you'd better. It happened. Just as they pushed me down, I had a quick impression of one word. The sole suitable word for them. Lunatics. They were lunatics, Sean, a mixed-class, mixed-race, mixed-age, mixed-sex gaggle of utter lunatics. One of them fingered me here." She touched herself. "I saw it then, like light. What I've been trying to define about this downbeat Hatter's party ever since we arrived. I think we're in the middle of a metro inhabited by a great many people who aren't sane. Some are pretending to be. Some can't, like the ones in that filthy pack on the corner. The moment I felt the hands—the hands—"

Pause for a noisy drink. Her eyes were averted. At last she went on:

"That's when I yelled. Oh, did I yell."

Uncertain about how to inquire about clinical detail, he began, "Did they—? That is—"

"No, fortunately, they didn't. One of those police prowlers arrived. It was followed immediately by an unmarked airlift

van twice the size. Of course the officers were all balm and apology. I'm beginning to think that whole bit is scripted. Into the prowler I went. I saw officers rounding up the little mob. All of them were fairly docile enough, except three. A squirt of gas handled them. The whole bunch was put in the unmarked van and driven away, God knows where. The police fawned and wrung their hands all the way back here. I tell you I'm so sick of not understanding this crazy-house atmosphere I could gag. But I'm even sicker of that finger-on-the-elbow, step-this-way-please muck. Sean"—her hand was tight on his wrist—"I'm convinced they're hiding something."

"Yes." His voice was low and hard. "And we're damme soon going to find out what."

Before noon he placed three messages with central reception at the Space Secretariat. Each time he called, he was politely informed that Theodore Hoog was in conference, in seminar, incommunicado, or in something. Each time his demands for a prompt reply grew angrier, to no avail.

He thought briefly about rousing Franconius. He decided against it. It would be wasted effort.

He managed to talk Lydia out of the hotel for lunch. A four-block stroll in the sulfurous grayness produced no further signs of a mob of the peculiar type she'd encountered. When they returned to the Nixon-Hilton, Hoog had left not one return message but three. Sean leaped to the vis to reply.

"I'm sorry, sir," droned the receiving machine. "Secretary Hoog is closeted with the Satellite Budget Review Subcommittee. However, he is most anxious to speak with you, Subadministrator Cloud. He assures you he will contact you the moment he's free."

"Tell him to do that. I'll be right here, at this vis, all afternoon."

By twilight, long after Lydia had crept off wearily to nap, Sean hadn't gotten a single buzz back.

He ran down to the lobby for smokes. He felt pent up again. He wanted physical movement. Wanted to hit but didn't know where. There was a message light winking when he got back to the suite.

"Of course," he said aloud, without thought, and punched up the tape.

Yes, Hoog had replied. If Subadministrator Cloud would merely stand by, the Secretary would call again as soon as his schedule would permit—

Sean told the tape where to spool and broke off. Then he did a mental take. Why had he said, *Of course?*

The answer came promptly. It curdled him. It spoke leer-ingly of paranoia.

It also demanded proof.

After dark he left the Nixon-Hilton by a side entrance. He prowled close to the walls of the armed buildings, keeping to the fixed portions of the walks for three blocks until, unmistakably, he heard the chatterchutter in the night.

Sean leaned back. He shielded his eyes. Detecting it up there past the misty rows of glows was impossible. But he heard it slow down. He began to walk.

He crossed an empty intersection. The timbre changed; a faster, slightly higher chatterchutter now. What did they have on him, nighteyes? Surely; or some similar device. And they were equipped with heavy-duty soundmuffles, because occasionally, when a vehicle passed, he lost the aural traces of their passage completely.

His neck ran with a dribble of sweat that turned cold the minute it left his hair and hit the night air. Another intersection coming up. He paused as if bent on crossing, then rushed left instead. The chatterchutter changed again.

For the next ten minutes he executed a series of evasive actions, up one alleyway, through another, right, left. He made sudden mid-block crosses and double-backs. He felt mad, reckless.

The chatterchutter followed unerringly.

When at last he paused, out of breath, he realized with a dismal slump that in the very proving of his suspicions, he had let them know he was aware of them.

Well, what did it matter? He didn't care what happened as long as he got to the bottom of the lies and the double-talking; the smiles to mask emptiness; the depleted resources; the actors with double, triple, quadruple roles in a theater that was at one and the same time also supposed to be a thriving city—

And messages; smile-masked messages which, fortuitously for Hoog, never arrived except when he wasn't available to take them. What a simpleminded ploy. Seem to cooperate, but make certain there was never any communication. That way, no real questions need be asked. Net result—standoff.

He really couldn't make any sense of it. He knew he and Lydia were being managed. The chatterchutter that followed him all the way back to the hotel merely reconfirmed

it. They were being managed in a way different from that employed to keep hamheaded Harloe under control. But the result was identical—

Absolutely no forward motion in the desperate cause of securing the arms for Mars.

Why? To what purpose? There was the dead end.

He wakened Lydia. He described the events of the last hour. She looked pale and rather frail by the single foyer pinlight she'd dialed when admitting him in. They'd gone no further than the foyer, Sean telling her in a rush what had happened, then warning her—rather definitely, for effect—of listeners.

"You're certain?" she asked. "There couldn't be any doubt?"

"I never saw it. But I heard it. We're probably on tape this instant. I don't care any more. I hope they hear. Maybe they'll explain why it's necessary to have an envoy from Mars watched and followed by a hovercraft. They've probably been watching and following, with people and with machines, ever since we landed. Pickups in their stinking breakfast eggs. Tape ducts in the toilets! I was rescued pretty fast the other night when the walls went off. Oh, I know. I thought I saw a tradesman buzz for an assist. But that could be part of the trappings. Rehearsed. Staged. Like everything else in this damme bogus place. And this morning, Lyd—fast police service for you. It's news management gone one better. It's people management."

Out beyond the ivory of her pinlit face, out where the foyer dark lay, he sensed an enemy. He put his arm around her, pulled her tight to his body. This time she made no objection. With a degree of rawness in his voice that hadn't been there before, he addressed the dark more than Lydia:

"It's all contrived because they don't want us to—I don't know what. Get the arms for the domes? If that's it, why the hell won't they tell us and have done?"

ELEVEN

A day became two. Memory of the ships coasting in from the system's rim seldom left his mind for more than four or five minutes. In between, he chewed and nagged the situation from every conceivable angle.

Had the utmost urgency of this voyage to the parent planet sapped his judgment? Was he rushing things?

In the acid milieu of the mid-twentieth, for example (those years when the rats first showed signs of claustrophobic madness and few saw, fewer cared, fewer still had the clout or conscience to head off the debacle of the nineties, there had been innumerable brush wars in tiny, meaningless countries whose names eluded him. He did vividly recall one particular historical nugget from the period, though. Being youthful, he had been impressed: in memory he turned to Professor Thologous.

Thologous was an excellent instructor. He taught the accelerated soc/stud course Sean had taken when he was ten or eleven and living with his mother in the Boone Dome. Old blue-faced Thologous; Sean could still see him, with a beam of the thin Martian spring light athwart his Levantine nose. Outlining a half-forgotten struggle, the teacher noted with disdain that the forerunners of the West-bloc govt and their warring counterparts—Asians, were they?—had once debated with all seriousness for literally months on the shape of a conference table. Square? Oval? Round? Prestige, prestige, prestige. Daily the tallyboards toted up dead on the warfield, wherever it was. Daily the envoys struggled to save face. Insane, said Doctor Thologous' mystical Mediterranean eyes. Sean got the message. But Thologous admitted that, unreasonably, diplomatic negotiations of the greatest import sometimes took next to forever. Exactly that kind of delay was eating him alive.

Tinging him with paranoia too? Lydia as well? Structuring conspiracy out of coincidence?

No. No. The evidence was overwhelming the other way.

The sky is full of ships unmistakably heading for the planet of the 4 patch where hundreds of thousands are quietly struggling to build something worth having, armed

only with the minimum weapons of civil peace. Arms—Christ—arms soon, or if those ships prove hostile—

Thinking of it always popped sweat on his forehead.

Franconius would be absolutely no help. He was all but permanently hid behind his suite doors in a nest of giggling secs and sweet smells. Coppered out. That created extra tension. That made Sean see colors in a kaleidoscope that wasn't there.

Or was it?

Through the day following the near-rape, and then through the day after, Sean played the tedious game of message-countermessage with Secretary Hoog. Never once did the men come in vis contact. He got halfway to the Secretariat in a public airtaxi before he countermanded the directions. He couldn't risk upsetting the negotiations. No, not yet. He hadn't been pushed that far. Not that far, quite. A knife-edge still separated him from seize-the-horns fury. But if there was one more push—

Some relief could be found in watching the watchers. He bought a shabby nightcape at one of the department-stores Lydia had mentioned and prowled the empty boulevards at night.

He quickly learned to detect the soft but ubiquitous sound of the hovercraft, even though it was masked sometimes by the sibilance of an occasional night vehicle. He enjoyed making fast changes in the direction of his night journeys. The hovercraft always had to chatter harder to catch up.

Not once, though, did he catch sight of it above the glows. Pro pilots. Govt, doubtless.

On his first night out, walking in the not-quite-mist, his anger demanded outlet. He kicked a wall. A whiff of gas nearly flattened him. He didn't return to the Nixon-Hilton till well after four, after having made another discovery. He found that half the walls and walks on both sides of virtually every block were booby-trapped. This district—perhaps the entire Eastern Megapolitan area all the way up to old Canada—was an architectural arsenal. He trod more gingerly. Lydia received the news at breakfast with a jaded shrug that said she wasn't surprised.

“No wonder half the population acts half baked,” Sean said. “You'd be a bunnybrain too, waiting for some broken-down shopfront to blast you every time you ran to the superette.”

"Turn on the vis," she said. "Maybe we'll get a surprise. Namely information."

There were no surprises.

They had monitored the public and govt channels long before this. The same blandly authoritarian commentators popped up every couple of hours between incomprehensible stunt and contest attractions. The commentators reported on an endless parade of rumors, reliable statements, and tips from informed sources on various phases of the East-bloc confrontation:

A nest of espionage agents unearthed in a Butte (where was that?) CBW factory. A rally for increased production at a halftrack sensor works was symbolized by a listless color tape of eighteen people around a visual control board in a glaringly lit anywhere-faceless room. So on. Truth? Conspiracy? Sean vacillated like the literary Dane. It didn't help to remember that he was, after all, in turmoil in order to help the domes.

On his second night of prowling, a caterpillar-chain of red beacons passing a distant intersection attracted his attention. He ran, using a walk to accelerate his progress. His weight fired a starshell from a wall beside a boutique. A woman nearby shrieked. He hurried on. He'd never seen so many airlift vehicles together at once since his arrival. Ten, fourteen, twenty-six—he counted thirty by the time he located a niche of shadow half a block from the corner.

Thirty-one vans. Thirty-eight vans. Forty. They formed a long snake hissing through the night.

Some of the oversized vehicles had grille sides. Behind these grilles, men and women of assorted colors and ages and costumes and sex watched their world pass by. In one van, a skinny black girl hung crucifix-fashion to the inside of the grille and wailed. None of her fellow riders paid much attention. Another van, without a grille, shuddered from the noise of fists hammering the side panels. The muddy, desperate sound chilled Sean clear through.

The last van went by. Its grille was jammed with lively faces. Then Sean looked again. In place of liveliness he recognized bright idiocy, and the glitter of slobbered chins. The van hissed and was gone. A lone officer bringing up the tail on a unijet went the same way.

He wondered about it all the way back to the hotel. Unmarked vans speeding away. Half a hundred, almost. He knew, intuitively, that the vans carried the same kind

of people who had molested Lydia. But a night convoy?
For secrecy?

And the numbers! Dozens, hundreds of rapists, madmen and other assorted criminals hauled off en masse? Not a hint of it had been on the public or govt 'casts.

On his way to Lydia's suite to describe the latest puzzlement, he hauled up short. The tiny guest light beside the entrance to his rooms glowed amber. He sucked in his breath, put his slotted plasto keycard in the orifice, and jumped into the foyer with a cry, prepared to devastate the invader.

"Phobos and Deimos! How'd you get in here, Lydia?"

"Are you on Maxomillions yourself? We swapped card patterns for convenience the first day."

"Oh yes. Sorry."

Perspiring, he dialed the iris behind him. Through his haze of adrenaline excitement he noted the sharp, almost angry cast of her face. A new tension transformed her to the old, superchromed Lydia as she rushed at him.

She seized his upper arms, grinning a wild, indecipherable smile.

"Not another gang-rape—?" he began.

"Sean, Sean, I've been waiting and waiting to tell you since seven! Harloe came up out of the swamp long enough to pass the message along. An appointment with Pres Washbourne! Yes, God yes, would I make jokes over *that*? Hoog vised Franconius personally. Nine sharp, Sean. Tomorrow!"

TWELVE

"You state your case eloquently, Doctor," said Theodore Hoog.

The Secretary brushed invisible insects from his lumpy nose. He crossed and uncrossed his legs. He raked nails, *scraatch*, twice over the point of his chin. He was seated in a deep wing chair, expensively finished in authentic old nauga. His pause had been unusually pregnant.

Sean stood with arms folded across his best dress outfit. He didn't like the Secretary's pursy-mouth hesitation. *Scraatch*.

The first sunlight Sean could remember for days, thin-nish yellow but somehow comforting, fell moted from high windows of the Fruitwood Study in the Exec Manse. The sunbeams lit a portion of the old and very valuable Warhol carpet. The soupcan pattern fairly sparkled.

Scraatch.

The room had a cathedral air. It smelled of lemon oil. It was alive with real wood finishes whose sheen begged to be touched by new fingers accustomed to plasto. Solemnity reigned in an atmosphere befitting pronouncements, which was perhaps why Hoog's stage wait became so lengthy. Finally:

"Yes, a succinct and moving plea for assistance. Your concern—loyalty—for your home world—" the Secretary was winding up and refusing to stare any of the envoys in the eye. "Unquestioned!"

"Um, shlup," said Pres Washbourne.

Even smaller than Hoog, he perched in an outsize chair behind his historic birch desk. His tunic, devoid of ornamentation, was the dullest shade of noncontroversial gray. His shrunken features, emaciated hands, and lackluster gaze exacerbated the feeling of horror which Sean had experienced on first being ushered into the presence of the chief executive of Westbloc.

"I beg your pardon, sir?" Hoog perched forward in his chair. "You commented—?"

"Alz shlarf." Pres Washbourne smiled in an ingenuous

way, wheeled his chair half around and proceeded to adjust his dentures.

Sean slid his eyes to Lydia. She looked near to fainting or hysterical guffaws or both. He shifted position so that he could see behind the birch desk. The worst was true. The little old man's feet hanging down from the chair missed the soupcan-patterned rug by the width of a hand. Oh, Jesus, he thought, with more religious fervor than he'd experienced in years. *Belching bleeding boils of Buddha, this is rank.* But no one was laughing, least of all Sean.

"I merely said," the Pres articulated at last, "unquestioned. Agreeing, Secretary."

"Unquestioned," repeated Hoog in the dust-speckled silence. On a street far away, a howler went by. The Pres started visibly.

Harloe Franconius massaged his multiple chins. He belched softly, then stared into the sunbeams with a thoroughly hallucinated and silly grin. His eyes still looked enlarged. He patted his bosom beneath the pocket where he'd slid away a rattly paper.

"Thank you, gentlemen. Yes—ah. Heartfelt, you sensed that? I prepared the remarks—well, it's the ancient Churchillian sentence for clarity—precision—" Belch. "Glad I was able to explicitly communicate—"

Slap went Lydia's palm against her trimly clad, white dacro thigh. Hoog studied the thigh, licked his lips as she said:

"Forgive me, please, but I submit that this is not an oratorical contest. Ships of unknown origin are heading for the planet we call home. Lifeforms are aboard, the detectors have revealed that much. Potentially hostile lifeforms, perhaps. We've already dribbled far too much time away waiting for this appointment—"

Fire's up, Sean thought joyously. *Go to it, Chief Engineer. That isn't Pres Washbourne. That's some bureau boy of yours who, being only perfect to the ninety-ninth percentile, bollixed the signal programming on a travelway. Roast him!*

She continued to do so, unawed and formidable in her half-specs: "We want an answer, gentlemen. A concrete answer, not statements about our patriotism. Damme, why do you think we're here at all?"

Franconius wallowed in his chair, made breathy noises. "Intemperate remarks—" he began with a warning tone.

"But she's right, Doctor," said Sean. "Let's not curtsy to the issue and then walk away. Do we get arms funded

by Westbloc or don't we? Dr. Franconius left out part of his statement—"

"I did?"

"You did. The part mentioning that we're empowered to negotiate to the limit of the colony's extendable credit. No charity is being requested. Just a simple yes or no is what's needed now. No baffle-gab, no more ceremony." His voice picked up; he enjoyed assaulting the dim, lemon-fragrant old room with a little genuine emotion. "Tell us, gentlemen. And tell us now."

Franconius tried to rise. Sean had thrust deep. But the fat man's anger seemed muffled, undirected. "To violate courtesy—protocol—Cloud, I, I—" Great wheezing gasps seized him. He collapsed in the chair, one leg of which cracked.

The educator focused on a sunbeam in a cross-eyed way. Rubbery, his face shifted. He giggled.

Lydia's gasp sliced the silence. Sean whipped his head around. In her eyes he saw a mirror of the punishment his gut was taking. Theodore Hoog had reached deeper than deep, and hop-headed Franconius into complete irresponsibility. Sean felt ill and cold, furious. The incipient lunacy reached even here. Muhammad, even here!

Lydia pointed to the doctor. "*He* may not want straight answers. I do."

Perspiring Theodore Hoog popped to his feet. "Chief Engineer Veblen! You must—"

"Smile? Understand? Sympathize? No! Shut up with your fake friendliness, Mr. Secretary, and just spit it out straight. Can we or can't we make a deal for buying arms on time?"

Hoog's ferret eyes got that seldom-seen dangerous glint again. He pursed. His tongue crept out like a lizard's, licked wrinkled lips. Lydia's breathing grew louder. Franconius giggled.

Sean fought to maintain his calm. He'd promised himself last night he would do it, at least until the outcome of this interview was known. He couldn't. Memories of the domes, of his comfortable cubby overjammed with three or four dozen backlogged cassettes—each not a problem but a challenge to be met so a damme good world might run better—whited out his mind. He stormed over between Hoog and the birch desk.

"Tell us."

"Bleed us!" Lydia cried. "Mortgage our great-grandchild-

dren! But tell us whether we can expect the weapons we need!"

Franconius' cheeks suffused with crimson. Washbourne's dentalware clicked. Suddenly, overriding the last echoes of Lydia's near scream, there was a metallic whack-*bang*.

Heads snapped around. An entire false bookcase descended into the floor. Behind, harsh and functional, a communications console went wild with rippling lights.

A bell clanged. A ratchet sound filled the Fruitwood Study. An amber signal disk flashed. A hidden drum ground out perfed tape.

"Can't!" exclaimed the Pres. He hopped and ran to the tape. Soon there was eight feet of it around his spindly ankles and more spewing by the second. "Can't, can't—this is why—" His shaking fingers unreeled stretches of the tape a foot in front of his eyes. "Oh, mercy. Oh, my. Oh, oh, oh. Missile submarines." He waved the tape like party streamers by way of explanation while his eyes watered. "Eastbloc submarines! Reconned half an hour ago. Surprise maneuvers! Oh, those—*ooo!*" he added, sounding more coherent than at any time previously.

The Pres discovered yet another crisis in the next tape section. He shouted above the ringing bells, "Two fleets! Two! One detected off the Palmiami District. This one—other coast. Oh, mercy. In range of the Gleasonville Retirement Haven. One of the eight million people there is my aunt Helen! Those—*ooo!*"

Theodore Hoog sounded positively deadly. "Hostilities, sir?"

"N-n-n-none yet."

"Shall I dial for the Supreme Defense Cabinet, sir?"

Pres Washbourne tottered away from the console. The racket was diminishing. Fewer lights quick-stepped across the rows. "It—it's still only Phase Amber."

"Then what about instructions for mobilization, sir? Anything special?"

Small and miserable, Washbourne shook his head. "The big brains will take care of all that."

Hoog's eyes lingered on the communication board half a minute more. Stunned by the flurry of calamitous signals, Sean was a mite slow in arriving at a truth he knew half of already. Washbourne was an incompetent geriatric, but Hoog was neither.

The Secretary was surveying the displays as if to make

sure the Pres hadn't bungled. Satisfied, he appeared to calm down a little, even though he kept scratching.

"This"—Hoog lifted one hand—"is at once an untimely interruption and a graphic answer to your question. I believe I know what Pres Washbourne wishes to make clear. Every emotional, genealogical, and political tie that binds Westbloc closely to the proud planet which is your home makes the govt cry out with the desire to be of assistance. But the arms race at this time is too critical. Newsbreaks of the type you've just witnessed are not unusual. Eastbloc is a wily foe. Constantly maneuvering. To strike today? We can never be certain. That's why defense places maximum strain on resources."

Very quietly, Lydia began, "In other words—"

"In other words, Chief Engineer Veblen, you force us to state—sooner, perhaps, than tact and natural camaraderie might otherwise have dictated—that the answer to your request must be no."

Strands of tape fell from Washbourne's limp hands. "Must be no," he said.

"You're joking!" Sean almost choked on fury. "You—you're *joking* with us."

"Our resources are strained beyond—"

"You need every last weapon against Eastbloc?" Lydia demanded. "And we get to shift for ourselves?"

Hoog said, "Historical circumstances force us—"

"People may die on Mars," Sean countered. "You realize that."

"P-p-people may die in Westbloc if we find ourselves unprepared," Washbourne offered. Then, apparently exhausted by the remark, he shuffled back to his executive throne and brooded.

Lydia's slashing stride carried her next to the Secretary. "I simply cannot believe what I'm hearing. You absolutely refuse to negotiate in any way to help us defend—?"

"Regrettably," Hoog interrupted. "You must always add, regrettably."

"Then if you can't spare the arms themselves," Sean cried, "at least give us tooling!"

"Machine tools are also in critical supply due to the emergency. Every last n.c. operates around the clock on a priority basis, providing the defense hardware which—"

"Oh, *crap!*" Sean yelled, so loudly an ornamental pen on Washbourne's desk fell out of its holder and left a black glob on the soupcan rug.

Hoog was ice. "Sir?"

"I said that's a lot of illogical imbecilic crap!" Somewhere Franconius interjected. Sean ignored it, bellowing, "You act as though we're poormouth cousins, to be ushered out the side door to freeze to death while you go tsk-tsk. What do your planners have to say? Your *real* planners. Your *real* thinkers?" For a moment the Secretary hated him visibly. "Don't they understand that Earth—Westbloc—has a stake in the defense of the domes? What if the vessels do prove hostile? What if we're overwhelmed? Who's next? The only other inhabited planet! How do you feel about that?"

In the moted gloom came Washbourne's feeble voice. "T-t-terrified."

"Then do something!" Lydia exclaimed. "Sit down with us! Give us anything, no matter how meager—"

"Impossible," replied Hoog with convincing sorrow. "It's a matter of options. Believe me, Subadministrator Cloud, we evaluated all the options long, long before your vessel parked in orbit. We began evaluation the moment we learned of your mission. The power balance on Earth is too delicate—Eastbloc too powerful—our resources strained to the critical point and beyond—" The sentence trailed off. Hoog shrugged with a pensive eloquence that said, *That's it.*

The next accusation came rattling up from Sean's throat. He never uttered it. Memories hit him like thunderblows. *Resources strained to the critical point and beyond—*

Spies.

Emptiness.

Spoilage.

Dissembling.

Oh, he thought. What if he's right?

Dr. Harloe Franconius rose. He spread his hands. He studied the air with a wistful smile.

"Well," he sighed, "I guess there's nothing to be done. Sean? Lydia? Shall we be going?"

"*Noth—*" Lydia completely strangled on that one.

Sean too was absolutely speechless with this latest fullscale atrocity. He'd only toyed with despair, with giving up. Franconius had done it.

Hoog seized the moment to march to a position commanding everyone's attention. He spoke flatly, rapidly: "Dr. Franconius is in a somewhat better position than either of you to evaluate the govt's decision, and to realize the immutability of it. Since he is in charge of your delegation"—the rebuke, gently slipped in among the other words,

still had a whiplash—"I have taken the liberty of briefing him in somewhat greater depth on the international crisis we confront here on the planet which is mother and father to us all. I am sure he will be glad to explain—"

I'll be, thought Sean. He's at it again. Coming attractions: the whole truth. The truth which, somehow, no one ever heard. He had an urge to utter gibbering sounds.

"Naturally, naturally," Franconius put in as he trundled his bulk toward the high, lustrous doors leading to the quaint old Max foyer. "I'll be delighted to brief you both."

"How can you brief anyone, you old tirehead?" Lydia said with hate and pain. "How can you brief anyone when you've been drugged and seduced into—"

Warning! Something in Sean said quite loudly. His spare but unmistakable handslash caught Lydia's attention. Made her hesitate. Made her plead at him with her blue-gray eyes tormented.

"It's true, Sean!" She burst out. "Franconius has been made incapable of—"

"Another time," he said. More firmly: "Another time."

All at once she truly saw his eyes, and their message—*the crazyhouse does not stop at the front gates with the great hawk and W medallion hanging on them. The crazyhouse extends here, and till we know why—careful.*

She said no more.

Depression enfolded Sean and Lydia as they waited in the oval drive under the portico. The govt limo arrived. Franconius, pleading kidneys, had excused himself. He arrived shortly, almost gay. Once the limo was through the gates, Sean turned on him.

"You incredible bungler. You incompetent old hack. To give up that way—"

"My boy, my boy! Let the wisdom of age prevail! The govt has no alternative."

"They want you to believe that," Lydia said. "It's all a filthy, wretched con job. Something's wrong—sick—desperately out of joint in Westbloc and they're hiding it at every step. This was just the latest proof. Open your eyes, for God's sake."

"I see nothing wrong," Franconius replied from the heights. He grew sly. "I do wish that driver would speed up. I've a sec waiting. Must jot down a memorandum on the session just concluded." Then he seemed to slump a little. "It is rather too bad that we couldn't pull it off. Did have

such high hopes. Need the arms desperately, all right. We'll just have to think of something in the domes. Civil guard units. Drills. Every man-jack—" He waved his hand. The hand fell forward, and so did his head, lolling.

"Yeh, sure," Sean said. "We'll think of something. We'll throw footwear at the aliens. Delphinium blooms. Excrement."

A finger tapped him. He turned. Lydia—unbelievable! There were tears on the sides of her nose. They streaked her glowpowder, melting the tiny high-fashion sequin flakes. She pointed to Franconius as he uttered an unperturbed snore.

"It's just no use, Sean. And don't you have the uncanny feeling we've played this scene before? Smell his breath."

Sean did. Pungent-sweet. "I'll bet Hoog gave him another sniff by way of payoff in the men's."

She said nothing. They rolled on through the empty city with cold terror for company.

THIRTEEN

"Subadministrator Cloud!" cried Hoog while a sec dithered at the iris. "How did you get in here?"

"I pushed your private dolly out of the way, and half a dozen other stooges too."

"But, but—" The Secretary's ferret movements became even more rapid as he rounded his desk to mask and defend the sheaves of EYEBALLS ONLY! documents piled there. Hoog's office was large, harshly lit, plainly furnished. The only sign of the inhabitator's personality was a small holo of Letitia sitting crookedly on a dull olive credenza among more reams of Westbloc secrets.

"—you had no appointment, Subadministrator! That is, I don't believe—" A feint toward the desk.

"Of course I didn't and you know it." Sean's voice was gratey with the residue of a sleepless night. "If I'd vised for one, I would have missed you. Then you'd have vised me back. Knowing, of course, that I'd gone away from the vis a moment. You know that, don't you, Hoog? Not to mention all my movements. Oh, I'm aware of your game."

Theodore Hoog seemed to grow smaller, yet more formidable. "Subadministrator, I believe firmly in diplomatic courtesy. But you tax patience. You tax good manners. You—"

"Stow that patter, will you?" The cobalt flakes in Sean's chocolate eyes were positively luminous. "Miss Veblen and I have had it with your round-the-dome routine. Westbloc has refused the colony's request for the thinnest, most putridly unreasonable reasons I've ever heard. As a Martian citizen, I demand—"

"The armament question is closed," Hoog interrupted. His eyebrows signaled a question to someone over Sean's left shoulder.

There were shufflings. Hissings. Quizzical gasps. A whole press gang of toadies had probably assembled at the entrance now. Well, he'd take them all on, every last one.

He had no chance. Hoog winced-grimaced rapidly twice. The furor subsided.

"There is simply no point in haranguing, Subadministra-

tor," Hoog told him. "Pres Washbourne settled the matter yesterday."

"Pres Washbourne is a mummy who couldn't settle anything." More gasps behind his back. "What I'm demanding is an explanation of a lot of other things, all of which total up to a Limburg stench in the state of Westbloc." Slap, he began to hit his fingers. "Hovercraft watching me. Vanloads of antisocial morons being freighted out of the city. Walls and walks loaded with missiles that break down without warning. People who play dual rôles like actors. And a plot—yes, Secretary, blanch all you want, I mean it. Plot. A deliberate plot to keep Harloe Franconius completely zonko with girls and mindbenders so he'll simper and practically apologize when you turn us down. Now you tell me, sir, what all that adds up to. You tell me the honest, outright reason Westbloc has refused the plea of the domes.

Explain what you're hiding!"

There was a long silence. Hoog's composure was eerie. Then:

"Why, that I can't do."

"Can't? Won't, you mean?"

"No, can't. Everything you say is utterly ridiculous. Feverish, if I may use that term. Insulting in view of our hospitality." Hoog scuttled behind his desk, snapped a lever. A small solid shell rose from the desktop. "Ready to dictate, please."

"What—what the hell are you doing now?"

"Preparing to memo-ize all concerned that the envoy vessel *Schiaparelli* must leave Westbloc orbit in 120 hours. I would reduce that by a quarter but I prefer not to provoke an outright incident with our very own, if obstreperous, colony." Small brown eyes peered upward from under frail lids. Hoog behaved like a goaded viper, and Sean's confidence was shaken. "Further interruptions of this kind, Subadministrator—further disruptions, I might better say—further infringements on the hospitality of Westbloc simply can't be brooked in view of the extremely grave and continuing crisis."

"Which I doubt even exists, Mr. Secretary. How do you like that?"

A shrug. A basilisk stare. "I have no particular reaction one way or another, Subadministrator. You left the realm of rational discourse several moments ago. Doubt my word! Hoot your appallingly incoherent charges! At will, at will! The moment you leave this office you are under prescription.

You will be on your way home to the domes 121 hours from now. That I can make stick, be assured."

He released the lever, tented his fingertips thoughtfully. His little smile rocked Sean's certainty anew.

"Force won't be required," Hoog mused. "Dr. Franconius is a man of eminent good sense. He'll see the wisdom of my decision and will withdraw gracefully. You *are* under his direction, I believe."

Sean's forehead popped with sweat. "You devious little worm." A sec behind him shrieked and fainted.

There were coarse growls, oaths. Hoog raised a saintly hand, silenced the wrath. He gazed at Sean squarely.

"Your imbecilic slurs don't touch me, Subadministrator. All meaningful communication between us has been blocked and terminated."

Have I gone cauliflowerhead? Sean thought wildly. Turned melonskull without knowing? The foundation of his determination was gone; he was piercingly aware of his own mortality.

He also saw an extremely bright mental roadsign. It read, *Turn right to Fail Mars.* Or words to that effect. He faked a look of wrath he didn't feel.

"Now please—" Hoog stopped. It was a dismissal.

"I've forced your hand, haven't I? You're running."

"Totally incorrect." Hoog fingered his other hand, *scraatch*. "I am establishing a time limit to your visit for the sake of Westbloc security."

"Rubbish."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I don't really know what you're hiding, Mr. Secretary, but I know you're hiding something, and by the damme double moons I mean to find out."

Twitching, ashen, Hoog said, "I warn you. I warn you—don't. A culture unfamiliar—mores you don't understand—political and economic implications that are none of your affair all dictate—"

"None of my affair? When the planet my parents came from is acting so half boiled I hardly recognize it? When everything's gone crazy with booby-trapped cities breaking down and the same people impersonating six different citizens?"

"Not that tedious gaggle of charges again!" Hoog pressed his temples. "It's giving me migraine."

"If Westbloc is in difficulty, Secretary, *tell* the colony! It's your duty!"

The Secretary arose as if to bugles that he alone could hear. "My duty—yours, I might add—is to Mother West-bloc." The treacle began to ooze for fair then. "To me, the homeland and its protection come first. But Mother West-bloc's blood also flows in you, young man. Only that prevents me from thrashing you on the spot. In God's name—" How desperate and sincere he sounded suddenly. "—where is your patriotism? Your sense of family? I say this, Sean Cloud. For the good of this homeland of us all, troubled as she is—ah, may have been—you mustn't inquire further." And he touched Sean's shoulder. "Please?"

Sean couldn't help saying, "Pfui."

Hoog withered. He retired to his chair and spoke so softly as to barely be heard. "Then good day. And fair warning."

Forehead flaming, Sean left.

FOURTEEN

Dusk.

They walked in Beagle Park, many blocks from the hotel. Their wandering had led them to this small, serene oval quite by accident. No chutterchutter tracked them in the grayness overhead. Evidently hovercrafts were reserved for nocturnal observation. Sean still suspected they were being watched. He couldn't figure out how.

He didn't dwell on the problem, though. He didn't even generate much concern over the shadows beginning to drift near one of the buildings across the street on the park's far side. The shadows lengthened in the feeble shine of the first glows of evening. A band of eight or ten people had gathered over there. To wait. To watch.

An executive's portmanteau flashed light from its plasto sides. A youth juggled a stickerknife. The ill-assorted wolves, he thought, recognizing the potential threat in an abstract way while he talked.

"—and he almost had me believing that I was the feeb, Lydia."

She held his arm, but lightly. No one else was in the park. "Almost?"

"Until he started the jingo routine. Love thy Westbloc."

Sean kicked the plasto walk with his toe. No armament slots or orifices here, at least. He picked up a fallen leaf from one of the trees. The leaf was surprisingly green and perfect. When he pressured it with his thumbnail it gave a brittle crack. He threw it away. It was plasto too.

"He meant those remarks, Lydia. It dawned on me that, of all he'd said, the part about protecting Westbloc was genuine. He was afraid for Westbloc, you see? And that pulled me back from the abyss. If he's afraid, then there must be a reason or reasons. Things are wrong. We may have only five days left to enjoy the civilized marvels of Earth, but that's still time for a bit of investigating."

They paused before a tarnished life-sized bronze of four long-haired young men with spectral expressions. The statue's descriptive plaque had been defaced long ago.

—“Do you think the Secretary will enforce the edict?” Lydia asked.

“Enforcement won’t be necessary. Harloe’s his lapdog. Harloe’ll agree that departure is for the best.”

“So you plan to circumvent Harloe.”

“Damme right. I want some answers.”

Tired as she seemed, Lydia managed a smile. “Know something, Sean?”

“Yes. Either Westbloc is bugheaded or I am. Time we discovered which.”

“That’s not what I meant. You’ve changed. Yes, it’s true, no need to look startled. You can’t see it but I can, from the outside. You’ve changed just in the short time we’ve been here. You’ve lost that soft, little-boy look you had when we left the domes.” Her other hand, gently applied to his forearm, stilled an irritated retort. “You look tougher, Sean. Wary. Cynical. A little nasty around the eyes.” Did he imagine that she pressed a bit closer? “I like it.”

They circled the statue. The band of cocoos still drifted over yonder past the fake trees. The group had swelled to a dozen. Lydia spoke again:

“Specifically—you say investigate. How?”

He frowned. “It sounds like bad melo to say it, but stealth’s the only way. I’ll try to shake off the watchers. Get out of this district if I can. I’d like to take a look up the coast. At Newyork, for instance. See whether things are as phony there as they are here. Or whether the stage ends—as I suspect—right at the district line.”

“All this, I presume, by yourself.”

He sounded apologetic. “It’ll be easier to try it solo than—”

“Oh, that’s fine, Sean dear. I’m all for it.” She released his arm, sat on a plasto bench and stared up at the spinach-colored bronzes. “I plan to do a spot of detective work myself. You try your way, I’ll try mine. Maybe we’ll have a double success.”

“I don’t like the sound of that, Lydia. What’s your way?”

Her blue-gray eyes stared at him and then through him. “Why, Hoog,” she smiled.

“Hoog?” Automatically he refused to countenance the tingle in his gut; his gut already sensed, suspected, understood the oblique cold purpose in her eyes and the mirthless humor of her mouth as she thought about it. “Mind telling me what you mean?”

“It’s very simple, dear. I think a little cold-blooded se-

duction will weaken the Secretary enough to make him give me some answers."

"*Seduction!* Are you dippy too?"

"Don't be nasty with me, please. Save that for Westbloc. I'm perfectly serious. That very first night, at the reception, the Secretary was watching me with his slithery little eyes whenever that old horror, Letitia, turned the other way. You were too busy to notice, as you've been too busy every other time we've been together with the Secretary."

"No, I noticed it once. With Washbourne, I think."

"Well, the spark is present, I assure you. I'll vis him first. Sound very concerned. Even contrite. Tell him I'm desperately worried about you. That I think you've gone off your chump. Naturally I'll play the stiff-upper, good-loser, come-to-her-senses-at-last role. I'll seem quite willing to depart on schedule because of—ah—security reasons, wasn't it? But in the meantime—I'll have a perfect pretext for a private meeting with the Secretary. Your welfare. Why, if he's under half the strain we suspect he is, he can't be acting logically every single minute. A little blessed relief from fatigue in the form of a willing female body should really throw him. It won't take much. I have more than enough."

As if to demonstrate, she sat a little more erect. He studied the profile of her bosom. Then he exploded.

"That's an idiotic idea. It'll never work. We made him angry. You made him angry as much as I did."

Lydia's red and white hair glinted with a toss. "Silly, that makes no difference. I can get any man I choose. I'm a lot smarter than any of them," she concluded with a perfectly sincere and straight face. Somewhere a hundred thousand balloons all popped at once.

"I—damme, Lydia—I won't let you."

"Why are you turning purple, Sean?"

"Because I refuse to let you—prostitute yourself, turn yourself into a common—"

"Sean, sweet." She rose to him, stroking his arm in a way that was not affectionate but placating, a pacifier for a truculent child. "This decision is entirely mine. In no way connected with you except in the general matter of objectives. You can't put chains on me."

"But—" He didn't want to boil over, but he couldn't stop. "Damme, Lydia—I love you!"

"What did you say?" She sounded slightly offended.

"I said I love you. Damme, hasn't that been apparent for weeks? Months?"

"Well, dear, *forget* it. You know my attitude on mixed marriages. I wouldn't have you, or any other man of your color."

"That's not the real Lydia talking!" he yelled. "That's the phony Lydia. Yeh—!" His flamboyant gestures stoked her anger; he didn't care. "That's the phony, bogus, three-dollar-credit Lydia. Smash everything in sight! Never do anything, *anything*, because somebody else might happen to be doing it and *that* would be herdsmanship. Well, beep that!"

"For a man who says he loves me," she seethed, "you're unusually vulgar, dear. Toadlike."

"*Toad*—! Now wait one minute, Lydia. You just listen—"

"You do your investigating, Sean, I'll do mine." And she switched her tightly sheathed hips at him all the way out of the park.

Stunned, he watched her go. The drifting shadows drifted into the street, heading in her general direction. He picked up a handful of stones and ran at them, yahooping at the top of his lungs while he threw the rocks. That seemed sufficient. They melted away, leaving him alone under the glows in the advancing night.

He called, "Lydia?"

Dia-dia-dia-dia, it echoed, then died away. He bled a lot internally in the next few seconds.

Why couldn't he hate her? He couldn't, that was all. He was hooked. But why couldn't he crack the Outer Lydia and find the Inner one? He was convinced the Inner existed, as certainly as an explanation existed for the bizarre behavior of Westbloc. He thrust his hands morosely in his trousers pockets and left Beatle Park, kicking shiny-green ersatz leaves.

As he crossed the curb a constricted brilliance needled the corner of his eye. He raised his head in time to catch a second silvery flash. It wasn't repeated again, there on the fourth story of the building where some boards had come awry. He was sure it had been a lens; a lens randomly reflecting the glows.

The watchers hadn't abandoned him altogether. That, at least, was reassuring.

FIFTEEN

On the twin racks of insomnia and jealousy Sean spent an exceedingly miserable night.

All of his vis calls to Lydia's suite went unanswered. As he placed the first five, fifteen minutes apart, he rehearsed and re-hearsed the angry lecture he intended to deliver in person. It would end, he resolved, with a spot of man-handling. Show her he meant business!

By the sixth call, the emptiness of his rooms, the uncanny silence of the hotel boiled his rage into contrition. He concluded that yelling at Chief Engineer Veblen was the wrong strategy. *Swallow your red face. Talk her out of her wigbrain scheme.* This change of attitude, he felt with almost superstitious certainty, would change his luck. At half past eleven he tried the sixth connection.

That call got no answer either.

He rang and rang for operator. After a long wait the small screen wiped from shiny gray to an image with distinct contrasts. Looking dazed, the crone with a headset hanging crookedly on her bun put her hand to her mouth. Sean saw an oversize gelcap. The crone swallowed ferociously.

The operator burped. "You rang, sir?"

"Consistently," he snarled. "Connect me with Miss Lydia Veblen's suite, if you please."

The operator attempted a pass at some plugs or connections out of sight. Her depth perception had gone out of whack. She noticed something else near her hands, bobbed forward, squinted.

"Oh but I am terribly sorry, sir. That suite has posted the non-disturb for the night."

Chills tickled the small hairs of his neck. "Since when?"

"Since approximately ten, sir. Is there any other--?"

"There is," he said, sounding strangled. He ordered a jug of what he presumed would be the vilest and therefore the most powerful liquor available, plus a small plate of syntho-lemon wedges and a shaker of salt. He rang off and headed for the corridor. That he was sneaking like the pettiest of jealous lovers troubled him next to not at all.

He prowled through the dimness to her door. Even before he reached it he saw the ghastly evidence. A servocart, forlorn with the remains of the hotel's equivalent of a full-course meal.

"Prophets and patriarchs," he cursed. "For two. She's done it already."

The guest light, glowing pink for non-disturb, tended to confirm it. She couldn't do it, could she? But she was, she was! An ear shamelessly pressed to the panel nailed it down.

He heard faint electronic music, all sitars and harps. The bloop-bleeping underrhythms suggested—my God—seduction.

He slunk back to his own doorway. Another servocart waited, dumb and whirring. He directed it inside, turned off all lights but one, unstoppered the jug of Viva Zapata Brand Tequila (mfr'd. in the District of Milwau) and spent one of the worst nights of his life, boiled out of his mind but fully aware through every minute.

Next morning's breakfast, fortunately, didn't raise his gorge. Only the toast was bad. It showed a few moldspots. A bracing nutrient shower worked its therapy.

He'd gone to the bottom, found himself incapable of making any headway there, and climbed out again of necessity. He managed to push Lydia and her night visitor to the status of an annoying incisor ache. The servocart no longer mocked him outside her door, though it still hurt to stare at the pink guest light. *Hell with her*, he thought. He had other responsibilities. Priority ones.

He established an eight-block cruise circle in a paisley rento. The time was a little after nine. The streets were empty. The officeworking horde—if any!—had presumably passed by earlier. He started to interrogate the guidance system, noticed another of those trains of unmarked airlift vans passing in the distance. Counted sixteen vans this time. Hm. He punched up buttons.

"Your pleasure, passenger, your pleasure."

"A little sightseeing, please. I had in mind—oh, maybe the District of Newyork."

Gears gnashed. "District of Newyork. Current estimable population fourteen point five million. Here are located the cultural, financial and communications centers of the Eastern Megapolitan complex, together with such noted tourist attractions as the Mailer Obelisk, as well as Streisand Catafalque at the ever-popular Wax Museum of the Performing

Arts. The area abounds in charming ethnic dining spots where excellent meals may be obtained at moderate prices beginning at seventy credits. Recommended are Soulfood Heaven, Nedick's Flaming Filet, Mother's Hot Chicken Soupe Eatateria. Definitely in order is a visit to the National Communications Museum where the visitor may see, among other cultural artifacts, tapes of messages on behalf of now-proscribed non-Saf-C cigs, and a lifesize bronze rendering of the original tattooed cowboy electronically programmed to sing "You get alot to like" at the press of a button. Also—"

"Enough, already," Sean said, his finger on override. "Can we get there?"

"Travel time is thirty-two minutes by highspeed freeway."

"And you can take me to the district? Right now?"

"Merely depress the assent lever and I will program—"

He interrupted the console in mid-spiel, depressed the lever. The rento jerked out of its cruise pattern at a traffic circle. Soon the vehicle was bearing him through unfamiliar streets toward an architecturally monstrous complex of ramps and interchanges looming above the roofs in the distance.

Sean leaned back, played games with his eyes. He detected signs of armaments hidden in the walls and walks of nearly every block. The rento braked at an intersection. A six-van train of airlifts slid across. Only one vehicle had a grille. Inside this he saw the by-now familiar collection of slack, pitiful faces. Evidently the maniac roundup was a round-the-clock business.

The sad train passed on. The rento accelerated toward the end of the street which fed directly into a ramp. The ramp widened about three storys up, forming six lanes.

The rento climbed, spiraling around and around concrete piers. Sean squinted from the rear window. No telltale indication of a hovercraft in the polluted sky. Nor did he notice any vehicles on his tail. Was the rento bugged? A possibility. But it didn't seem to be having much of a deterrent effect. The spiraling ramp branched again. The rento flashed onto a straightaway beneath a lane-wide directional sign of flaking white on moldering green.

NEWYORK DIST FRWY.

Calm claimed him briefly. Up here, tooling flat out at slightly under 110 kph, there was a pleasant sensation of being cut off from the lunacies of the city below. He stared lazily at a glistening river winding in the near distance. He

was riding at least eight stories in the air, with six or seven parallel lane levels below him, two above.

One branched suddenly and diminished into the left-hand distance. There, kilometer after kilometer of dreary buildings at last blended into haze. A few vehicles moved down there. Not many. Then the other lane above vanished, angling down to the right. His rento was on top under the heavy clouds. It raced toward a gray smog rampart in the north.

A transpo with three decks rushed out of the north. Each deck was jammed with khaki-painted vehicles sprouting missile muzzles. The transpo went by, roaring wind. Sean counted twelve vehicles on one level. Each was marked with a long serial. Westbloc materiel for the arms race?

The rento passed a couple of slower passenger vehicles. Their zombie-like drivers never so much as glanced around. In aircooled silence, and alone, Sean sped north.

All at once a beacon ripped the cloud rampart ahead. The rento's airjets squealed. Sharp deceleration pushed Sean against the cushions. The beacon, brilliant yellow, slashed across his eyes. It was rotating atop a shantylike structure that blocked the entire width of the northbound freeway.

The rento was decelerating too slowly. Sean yelled, "Watch—!"

"Unexpected obstruction, unexpected obstruction, head down, head down!" cried the console. Before Sean could brace, the rento's chute popped astern. The vehicle slewed crazily.

Faces, helmets, waving arms, a candystriped barrier pole washed together in a surrealistic blue. The rento slammed to a stop. Sean's head connected hard with the dash.

He sat up, swearing. A couple of colorful stars went nova. He blinked them away. The rento had skidded out of the lane barred by the candystripe pole. It had ended up a tall man's height away from the sleazy plasto wall of the structure itself. Sean noticed a jerryrigged generator for the roof-beacon and cables snaking away across the highway.

Four men, two blacks, two whites, in lacquered helmets and drab uniforms rushed to the window on his side. There were expressions of consternation on their faces. All had their sidearms out.

"The govt's profoundest apologies, sir," said the youngest black soldier. He wore hash marks in addition to the hawk-and-W patch on his shoulder. "We've been trying to get a warning-to-stop blinker posted five kilometers back but the

requisition keeps getting lost at headquarters. Are you all right?"

"Physically? I think so. Mentally—well. What is this?"

"Regret the inconvenience, sir," came the smooth reply. "Ident, please?"

He flung the diplomatic pass into the dark palm. The noncom scrutinized it, handed it back with a crisp nod. The other soldiers were now staring blankly at the endless clouds.

"You destination, Subadministrator?" the noncom asked. "District of Newyork. Right up the road, according to the sign. A little sightseeing—"

"Very sorry, sir. I'll have to request that you turn back."

The little blade of suspicion turned in Sean's middle. "What?"

"Yes, sir. This is the perimeter, sir. Newyork District is a critical defense-work zone. Classified factories, installations—" A hopeful smile. "I hope you understand, sir. It's nothing personal. Only authorized personnel are permitted to go beyond this point. Due to the emergency, sir."

No response from Sean being forthcoming, except a glower, the noncom added, "The emergency, sir? With East-bloc?"

"Yeh, yeh."

Sean rubbed the egg forming above the bridge of his nose. He studied the structure that blocked the northbound highway. In several places the plasto fasteners hadn't been locked securely. The shanty's corners showed gaps where the walls didn't quite meet.

Sean put on a lying smile. "Didn't realize the emergency was that serious, soldier. How long has this roadblock been up?"

A film seemed to hide the depths of the man's dark eyes. "Several months, sir."

Or would several hours be nearer the truth? He didn't say it. He grunted, spoke wearily to the rento's console, instructing it to back up. The soldier pointed a khaki glove south.

"You'll find a crossover half a kilometer that way, sir. Thank you for your cooperation."

"Don't mention it." He snapped the window up in the soldier's face and slumped in his seat.

The rento's air cushion inflated. The vehicle backed, proceeded south in the northbound lane and negotiated the crossover. Sean punched up the guidance system.

"Well, machine? Your next recommendation, please. I do want some sightseeing."

It suggested the historicopatriotic shrines in the Philly District. Sean agreed. The rento sailed along speedily down a westbound lane for about three kilometers. Sean spotted the first glint of a yellow beacon in the murk and programmed the vehicle in time to prevent another chute-popping, neck-snapping skid.

By a similar structure with a similar barrier pole, similar soldiers, courteous but firm, informed him that Philly District also contained sites of critical defense work. Sorry.

Next they tried the lanes to the Richmon Dist. No go. They followed a much wider feeder heading away south to the Carolinas Dist. Barricades again. As they pulled away from this last one, a train of unmarked vans going south was permitted to proceed past the candy pole.

"Critical defense factories with mobs of criminals to operate the machines?" Sean asked the humming dash.

"Your pardon, sir?" inquired the guidance system.

Sean's chocolate eyes glowed more blue. "Nothing. It seems every roadway leading out of the capital is closed to sightseers, doesn't it? If the blocks have been up for months, why didn't you know it?"

Gurgling; rattling; clicking. The metallic voice sounded hoarse. "I have been at the refurbishing depot for several weeks, sir. Out of service. Periodically Drive-U Rento returns all vehicles for preventive maintenance to provide for the comfort and safety of our pass—"

"Yeh," Sean said, "sure." He hit a lever to shut the contraption up.

Over the rooftops the Nixon-Hilton loomed in the gray. He flirted with the notion of paranoia again. Rejected it. Couldn't countenance it at all. There was something outside the confines of this district that the govt didn't wish him to see, and they were going to an inordinate amount of trouble to make certain he didn't. Well, he didn't intend to be stopped that easily. By the time the paisley rento reached the hotel he'd worked out a new plan.

SIXTEEN

All that afternoon he worked in his suite, preparing his clothes.

Off with the official patches, *rrrip*. Add a tear here, a tear there. Roll up the tunic and stomp on it. Shove the cape in a corner where less than efficient servomaids had overlooked accumulated dust. A couple of hours before a saffron-tinged twilight settled in, he inspected himself in a mirror and decided that he looked properly scruffy.

He practiced drooling, sticking out his tongue, rolling his eyes. Not bad! Hair riffled down over his eyebrows that way, he looked positively troglodytic. Hunch the shoulders a touch more—perfect! He locked all valuables and cards of identity in the suite's small personal safe, then rang Lydia's suite the second time that night, mostly out of tired loyalty.

As before, no one answered. Earlier, her guest light had shown that she'd gone out.

At the window he watched and waited for the appropriate degree of darkness. His glandular upset vis-à-vis the beautiful Miss Veblen had an unaffecting remoteness tonight. The scent of the hunt choked his nose, filled him with mingled excitement and dread. He was very definitely no swash-buckler. The 4-patch colony had long ago deemphasized that sort of thing. And he'd be taking a considerable risk if what he planned succeeded.

They'd driven him to desperation, whoever *they* were. The hope of finding an answer, any answer, fed him with its own outpouring of adrenaline and masked worry about the risk, if not completely eliminating it.

Just as the dark came on, his vantage point showed him more red beacons crawling along some faraway thoroughfare near that twisting river. Since those vans seemed to be the only vehicles permitted to pass the freeway barriers, he meant to get aboard. The time was now.

He avoided the Nixon-Hilton's lobby, descending instead to the dusty cavern of boutiques and skimpily furnished shops on Sublevel C. He meant to sneak past the rento office, then dart out the vehicle ramp. His boots made too

much racket to suit him as he hurried past the shops. Luckily most of them were closed. He'd turned his cape collar high and was keeping his chin lowered, which accounted for his failing to see the shapely girl in the provocative peekthru.

She emerged in a hurry from the doorway of Guatama Fashiones Ltd., just as the shopowner rolled down water-blotched bamboo-stick blinds. Crash-collide.

Sean jerked his head up. Smelled heavy scent. Caught a glitter of amber-spangle hair as the girl's parcels spilled. They both exclaimed at once:

"Watch where—" (Him.) "You dreadfully clumsy—" (Her.)

Fearing that her irritation might provoke a scene, he swallowed his temper, jumped to retrieve various small fist-size, gift-wrapped boxes. As he pressed these into her cradled arms he saw her face straight on. Again there was a shock of recognition.

This time, though, it was muddied to uncertainty by heavy makeup. Also, her rubber-faced exasperation kept her features from settling down. She snatched a last little ribboned box, snorted an impoliteness, turned to tick-tacking away into the gloom from which Sean had emerged.

He watched her firm behind, struggling to remember. He became aware of a weight in his hand. He glanced down.

"Miss? Oh, miss! You forgot this—"

The lights went off inside Guatama Fashiones Ltd., plunging him into thicker shadow. The dark accentuated the abrupt blue-phosphor glow of the ribbons. They destructed to ash.

Fastenings at the box-corners released the parcel's ornamental wrap which revealed it as a careful camouflage job. He snatched hold of a small rolled message sheet as the various sides of the box fell, hit the floor and fumed with a reek and a flashpowder glare.

He unrolled the sheet. It was electrotyped in a conventional business face, all capitals.

IF YOU WISH TO LEARN SOMETHING OF VITAL INTEREST TO THE MARTIAN COLONIES, COME TO THE STATUE OF THE THREE KENNEDYS AT NINE-THIRTY TONIGHT. ESSENTIAL THAT THIS MEETING BE KEPT SECRET. COME ALONE AND IF NO ONE IS THERE TO MEET YOU WAIT AT LEAST HALF AN HOUR. REPEAT—SECRECY MUST BE MAINTAINED AT ALL COSTS. TELL NO ONE, BUT DO NOT BE AFRAID FOR YOUR PERSONAL SAFETY. THE DOMES WILL BENEFIT IN A SIGNIFICANT WAY. THIS SELF-BURN(R) BRAND PAPER WILL

AUTOMATICALLY IMMOLAT—

It did, with a whoosh that stung his palm. He stared into the after-glare, stunned.

The elderly female shopkeeper tottered out of Guatama Fashiones Ltd. She give him an antisocial look, sniffed at the litter of acrid ash around his boots and hurried away. Sean hurried too, sneaking past the rento cubicle and running silently up the ramp into the sulfur-tanged night air. He found a wall and leaned gingerly against it to reflect.

Much of the message eluded his memory. But the key details didn't. Nine-thirty tonight. For something of "vital interest."

A trap? What kind? Surely Theodore Hoog couldn't be that desperate yet. Wasn't the Secretary's departure edict enough? Wasn't blocking all of his attempts to exit the district more than enough? The more he thought about it, the less menacing the bit of intrigue seemed, even with its excess of melodramatics. He decided to go.

He asked directions of a streetwasher driver just after nine. The Statue of the Three Kennedys wasn't far. He walked briskly, head down, curiosity and a heady mixture of fear inside him at nearly the same time. That girl was one.

Blurred though she remained, he still had a distinct impression that she looked remarkably like the first sec he'd discovered in Harloe's suite. Let's see, what was her name? Flamb? Pramb? Glamb. With-a-b. A govt girl.

But that was impossible, unless there were spies or some kind of underground within the govt. Perhaps bad light and the confusion of the moment had tricked him. Donna Glamb's hairdo had been sparkly blue. His mysterious lady of the boutique had worn an amber-glittery do. He grew less and less certain.

On the second point, though, he had no uncertainty whatsoever. Tonight there was no chutterchutter tracking him out of sight there. Tonight, if there were watchers, they had abandoned their hovercraft.

He slunk on beside booby-trapped walls, just one shadow among many.

SEVENTEEN

Six radials converged at the circular plaza whose centerpiece was an imposing marble monument and fountain. Sean arrived about an hour early.

He slipped along one of the half dozen boulevards to the corner where the walk ended. Across the way. The massive monument blocked out lights in the distance. The heroic figures of the three legendary brothers thrust their immortalized heads from a soupy swim of night air. Glows reflected from far-seeing marble eyes, the cocky crests of wind-tossed marble hair. All three massive figures suggested a certain melancholy, staring as they did at the blank and boarded upper stories of the banking houses which predominated in the district.

Well, the marble threesome had reason to be melancholy, Sean thought, indulging in a conceit to while the time and soothe his tightening nerves. In their immobilized state they could do just as much about the disoriented condition of Westbloc as he could.

He flicked his eyes around the plaza. Do you suppose that heavy hokum in the message signaled a tidal change? He thought so, or he wouldn't have come to this forlorn and depressing place. Sounds were more than normally muted. The loudest was the gurgle of a feeble stream from one of eight spigots around the base of the statue. The remaining spigots weren't operating. Occasionally he caught a whiff of the water standing in the fountain basin. It reminded him of algae and mackerel.

At thirty-five minutes past the hour of nine, footsteps clacked on the far side of the fountain. He straightened, swallowed. His shoulderbone accidentally hit the building a sharp, skidding blow. He leaped a couple of feet down the walk, prepared to dodge whistling missiles.

The wall remained quiet. He wiped sweat off his nose, sought shadow again. Two figures rounded the fountain. A man and girl, arms wrapped around waists, and heads together. They passed within several feet of him. He smelled the sweetness of drugs.

The girl began to skip and pirouette. Laughing, the swain

chased her into the silence of one of the boulevards. Sean's nerves reacted. Letdown, then renewed tension. He scrubbed more perspiration from his eyes, rechecked the time. Quarter of.

At six before the hour, he tugged his cape collar higher against the damp and decided that it had all been some sleazy charade. This generated new worries. Had he been lured away from the Nixon-Hilton because of some plot to menace Lydia. He started away from the boulevard corner, his eyes doing a last flashpan across the fountain area. It was empty—

There he was.

One man. Slouching and lounging. Unusually tall in silhouette, with a beret on his head and an extremely long black plasto nightcoat whose shiny surface glittered.

The man had arrived by stealth, with utter silence, unobserved. That made Sean's gut twist. The man sat on the fountain rim, left boot on the walk and right one dangling and swinging, swinging. Smoke descended around his head like ectoplasm.

At two minutes until ten the man stood upright. He glanced both ways. His posture indicated that he was ready to leave if no one showed. Sean broke cover.

He crossed the street with his heartbeat noisy as his feet. The man turned, saw him. Backlit and featureless, the man waited.

Sean stopped just this side of the curbing. After a pause the man said, "Subadministrator?"

Sean tried to speak, managed a nod, ventured another step. A cluster of small orange lights expanded near the man's face, revealing the source of the smoke to be an antiquated pipe. Orange shone on night-damp skin on either side of a large, hatchetlike nose. The man smiled a tight, extremely white smile. His color was several shades darker than Sean's.

"Wulf, man." The stranger extended a paw full of muscle. His voice was a mellow rumble as he spelled the name, broke the clasp, leaned back on the rim. "You took the special delivery, then. Fine, fine. Must say I wasn't told you were my color."

"Half and half," Sean told him as he eyed the vicinity for other lurkers. He saw none.

"My brew's a little heavier on the cocoa side. Seventy-five twenty-five as nearly as I can estimate. But you didn't come all the way over here to hear me chat about my relatives,

now did you? You came over here because the domes are in a fix, the govt's refused to help, and so the 4-patch colony's bought kingsize trouble without wanting to. That a fair précis, Cloud?"

Sean was busy cataloguing his companion. Physically strong. Tough too. No contest as to who would win if they were forced to tangle. Size of shoulders and length of arms said the stranger would demolish nearly all comers on a one-to-one basis. Fortunately Wulf, though he didn't sound overly friendly, didn't sound menacing either.

"Before I tell you whether it's fair, Wulf, you'd better tell me who you are."

"But I did! I even spelled my name, man. Would you do me one favor, please? Don't keep hopping from toe to toe that way. This is the safest possible place for a private conversation. No three-layer walls with nice little airspaces for electro-ears. If somebody wanted to bug the boys—" he knocked the marble fountain rim —"they'd need explosive drills for openers. There are no goony squads waiting in the alleys, either. At least not of my employ. I'm hired and sent here by friends of the colony. These friends know the govt's turned down the arms request—"

"How'd you come by that information?"

"Maybe that'll be explained later, maybe it won't. Not part of my job to do it. Now do you want to quiz me all night, or do you want to hear the offer?"

Sean relaxed a little then. Wulf's easy, clipped voice began to reassure him. He hoped he wasn't being lulled off guard, but he decided to take one more chance:

"Right. The offer."

"The domes are in a hellofa bind. Those funny ships from someplace will target in—when? Six months?"

"Seven."

"Too soon for comfort. All right, here's the proposition. Arms. All you'll need for a minimum firstclass counterblow in case the ships prove to be loaded with nasties. Weapons in the permanent installation category, heavy down through medium to light-range. Plus portables. Plus enough hand lasers, gas-lobbers, that sort of one-man thing to equip a few divisions of home guard in the time remaining. The arms'll be smuggled up to Mars aboard private vessels that won't be detected by Westbloc. You'll get engineering assistance too, if you need it. Maybe a dozen weapons experts if they can be scraped up and bought, that part is a trifle

iffy. But the offer's genuine, man. And unconditional. Well? Don't you have anything to say?"

Hope had made him so near-delirious that he was instantly wary as soon as the first intoxication passed. "I don't believe what you're telling me, Wulf."

A wry chuckle. "Right. Didn't expect you would. That's why I'm a go-between. That's why you have to meet the higher-ups to get the convincer and to pin down the details. All I need to know tonight is, are you interested, man?"

"Am I int—listen! If you know how the govt's treated our mission, you're making a joke." He turned so his face was half in light, and Wulf could glimpse of the seriousness of his eyes. "But I'm not completely interested until I know a little more about the source of all this unexpected largesse. Where's it coming from?"

"For a begger, you're mighty choo—" Wulf began. He shrugged it off. "Private source."

"Keep going."

Wulf's pipe lit his face. Blue smokeflowers bloomed against the high glows. "Guess you could properly call it a cabal if you wanted. A small group of public-minded private citizens right here in Westbloc. All with plenty of creditary assets, if it's necessary to say that. Bunch of churchmice couldn't finance this kind of deal. These—gentlemen's a nice, safe term—happen to have discovered the govt's reaction to the plea by the colony. Happen to feel the colony, being an offshoot of Westbloc after all, deserves help. Happen to have the clout to be able to arrange it on the sly. No one member of the bunch wants to be identified, so the code name of the group's Firebolt."

Firebolt. A shiver wriggled across both of Sean's palms. He was ashamed and annoyed by it. In some distance a service vehicle hissed and was gone. The fountain spigot dribbled. The fish-carcass smell hung thick.

"A code name?" he said. "That's pretty melodramatic. Just like secret messages and this kind of rendezvous. Is it all necessary?"

"But absolutely," replied Wulf with firmness. "You know Westbloc policy about arming the domes. I mean, you genuinely know it, don't you? Till it hurts?"

Sean nodded. "We know it. The pretext is the arms race with Eastbloc. Factories at peak capacity. Everything funneled into defenses. No arms to spare—"

"Don't believe everything they p.r. you with, Subadministrator," Wulf grinned, puffing.

"I don't. But are you trying to say the govt *could* spare the arms if it wanted?"

Wulf shifted so that his left boot dangled and swung. "Not my job to talk about that, Subadministrator. Oh, sure, the plant's taxed, all right. Four shifts daily grinding out the bang-bang goodies. But I'll venture this much. Eastbloc-Westbloc is mostly a handy excuse. Firebolt suspects, with good reason but no evidence, that the govt's secretly afraid that if the domes are armed, one of two things will happen. One, the colony'll revolt and become a third power. Right now it's tied to the West. Loosely. But tied. A third fist on the table would complicate things. The other possibility—the third fist opens up and links hands with Eastbloc. That'd even be worse."

"Damme fools," Sean seethed. "Alien ships out there—alien ships that could ultimately destroy this planet if they're hostile and get past Mars, and the govt is so nailbrained that—"

"Sure, man." Wulf's pipestem touched his forearm. "But how many times in history have govts picked the obviously right option? Usually they pick wrong. Human beings, man. Get scared. Soft up here." Pipestem pointed to the ear. "That's why Firebolt. Every one of the members loyal to Westbloc, absolutely! But convinced the govt is wrong. Willing to take a sizable risk for their convictions, too. How many men've you met like that lately?"

Images of Harloe, Washbourne, Hoog prompted Sean's swift reply of, "Damme few."

"You want the help of Firebolt, man?"

He hesitated at the precipice hardly at all. "I want it; the colonies want it."

"Right. Then here's what happens next. You'll be put in contact with the top honcho. You won't get to see his face, for reasons I hope I've already elucidated, but otherwise, you'll be meeting the man who seals the deal. He goes by a code name too. It's Midas." Once more that white and easy flash of teeth belied the tall man's toughness. "I think that's kind of nice."

"When is all this going to happen?" Sean wanted to know. "As of now, in something like four days the official Martian envoy party will be booted up to orbit and sent home."

Wulf scowled. "Four days left on Earth? When'd that happen?"

Sean explained.

"Well, that's complexing things, all right. But we can

handle it. Speed up the program. It will take at least forty-eight of those hours to arrange the session with Midas—" Wulf was thinking aloud as he paced up and down. He articulated words in a blurred way around the pipe bit between his teeth. He spun. "One extra point, Subadministrator. Do you speak personally here? Or can I carry back to Firebolt the word that your decision is the unanimous one of the delegation?"

"I speak for two-thirds of the envoy party," he answered with familiar anger. "The head of the party, Dr. Franconius, seems to be bending any way the govt wind blows. Chief Engineer Lydia Veblen and I don't have the final say in dealings with the govt. But we have the popular support in the domes, I guarantee. Since this whole business is illegal at this end, I'm perfectly willing to have our end illegal as well. I'll have to worry about the consequences back on Mars. In view of the alien ships and the govt's attitude, I don't believe there'll be many."

"That's all I need to know tonight," Wulf nodded. "Like the way you think, Subadministrator."

Sean spread his hands. "What happens next?"

"Firebolt needs two days. By then Midas ought to be able to hand you a fairly detailed inventory of how much war materiel you can expect, when it'll be smuggled up, what you'll have to do at your end to bogey the detection logs and falsify loadings—the whole matter's under control, you understand. But there are logistical angles. Better to wait and solve it at one long sitting than risk several meetings."

"Yes," Sean said, doubtfully, thinking of Hoog's flat deadline. "I guess so."

"Besides, man. You might change your mind. There's risk at your end. Retaliation by the Westbloc govt is probably certain, to an extent nobody can foresee."

"I won't change my mind."

"Okay then." Wulf whipped a scrap from under his slick-glittering nightcoat. "Take a look at this till you've memorized it."

Sean twisted the scrap into the light, saw a long digit sequence. He barely heard Wulf add, "And maybe you'd better hurry up as much as you can."

Sean memorized, then reversed the card. He ran through the numbers silently. Then he checked himself. He found he'd transposed two pairs of digits. He started over. At the edge of his mind, registered but not identified because he was thinking so hard, there were slight sounds. A wettish

gurgles; a light rush of footfalls. He raised his head, sure of the numbers at last.

As he passed the card back to Wulf, he saw a dozen ill-assorted figures moving toward them across the street behind the tall brown man's back. Wulf had put up his pipe. He used both hands to rip the slip and drop the bits into the brackish basin, talking low and quickly:

"Standing around in the open keeps us safe from the govt but not from the nutpacks. We've bought ourselves a mite of trouble, I'm afraid. One last thing now. Vis that number in forty-eight hours and ask for Wally the plumber, got that? Wally the plumber. We'll do the re—" Up came his head, the fierce nose jutting as he cried, "*Behind you, Cloud!*"

EIGHTEEN

"Genmuns," drooled an adolescent with phosphorglow dragons on his filthy tunic, moles all over his chin and cheeks, and fried eyes. "Genmuns wif pretty-pretty—"

"Whachew think, Zombi?" asked an old fat grandmother in harlot's rags and paint.

Zombi proved to be a dry, spare, elderly gent with powdered cheeks, ribboned specs, and an oversize suit from whose pockets he busily distributed snap-open knives, sharp shards of plasto, and even some kind of rotting vegetable studded with luminum nails with their heads embedded.

"Rob or maim, maim or rob," remarked Zombi in such a lighthearted way that Sean's belly curdled. "What's the diversion tonight? Decisions, always executive decisions. Here, Baby Maudy, look what I saved for you. A bit of antique chain. Treat it with care now, with care!"

Wulf, more the master of the situation than Sean, had overcome his initial surprise at being surrounded all too suddenly by two groups of about a dozen people each. One group had come stealing from either direction to half-ring the men, close off escape routes, back them against the fountain's rim. Sean wondered that he could be terrified by such a mongoloid assortment of men and women, some young, some old, some shabby, some, like Zombi, almost respectable in attire and demeanor. But he was, he was.

The feet shuffled closer. Spit-wet teeth glistened.

"Les robum," offered young fried-eyes. "Betcha they've pretty-pretty all overum."

"Oh, that's so basic," said a woman who might have been a youthful, attractive wife except for the glass eye askew in its socket and the carcass of a large roach entwined in her long hair. "I vote for the cultural orientation. Throw them down and we'll have a couple of instant sopranos instantly." She flashed her Zombi-given blade. "How about it, girls?"

Several other women giggled agreement.

"Better fastframe it, whatever we do," offered a scruffy wretch with a yellow-dyed beard.

"Eisenstein has a point," nodded Zombi. "I did spot one

of those filthy prowlers a block or two back. Well, democracy! All those in favor of lifting their baubles.”

A scatter of hands. Sean felt his eyeballs standing out ludicrously. He simply couldn't countenance being in such a predicament, completely surrounded by impatient, slither-lipped morons who might—more than might!—make him hash in the next moment or so. Wulf, however, had a degree of calm that wiped out the worst of Sean's antiheroics. He heard the big brown man whisper against his shoulder:

“When I go, you go. Fountain. Follow me over, then split. Better chance if we—”

The rest was lost as Zombi exclaimed, “All those in favor of castrato!”

A disheartening majority of hands shot into the air. Fried-eyes burst into tears. Baby Maudy, three hundred pounds of quivering juvenalia, bonked him with the chain. When he fell, she ground her cycle boot in his face. Some applauded. Zombi clucked a mild reproof, then said:

“Since you're so energetic this evening, Maudy, you win first honors. But all join in, all join in! *Pour le sport*, you know.”

“Buddha's boils,” said Sean with chattering teeth. Baby Maudy simpered and heaved her bulk forward.

Her smile changed to a deathgod's mask. The chain gripped in both hands clanked high over her head in preparation for a devastating downstroke. Wulf let out a wordless shout, very loudly, and ran in under the chain.

Baby Maudy couldn't stop her swing. Wulf caught the chain's blow in both palms. His thick brown fingers closed as he absorbed the pain with barely a shudder and grunt. He jerked tug-o-war style and Baby Maudy was undone. She wobbled like a dipsy elephant.

Sean saw his chance in a flash. It boiled his brains free of fear. He caught Baby Maudy's smelly collar as she stumbled past him. With a shove and a tug he changed her direction but not her momentum. She hit and scattered eight or ten of the manic mob. Wulf yelled, “Cut out!”

Lithe and fast, he jumped up to the fountain rim and down into the water. Sean followed. The stink gagged him. The spray they kicked up blinded him. He blundered the wrong way. One of the spigots jabbed his eye. He sailed back, off balance. Wulf laughed in a flat, tired way and kept him from keeling over all the way.

Oaths, howls, teeth-gnashings and the first splatter of pursuing feet through the fountain sounded behind them.

Wulf and Sean ran around the marble, jumped off the other rim and kept running with all their strength down the nearest boulevard.

Halfway down the first block Wulf puffed, "Split here. Less for each to handle. Wally the plumber. Remember the number. 'Bye, man." A black wraith swallowed by a blacker service passage they were passing, he was gone.

Sean ran. The sulfur air burrowed inside his head cavities and lungs. Too rich for this sort of exertion, too rich—oh, beep that. He had a whole troop ravening a square behind.

He twisted his head around. Amend it to half a troop. But it still included the major menaces of Zombi and Baby Maudy, as well as fried-eyes, who was hilarious again.

His toe caught in one of the openings between walk panels. He spilled over on his nose. That cost him half a block's margin.

He lurched up, capering like a drunk. He felt a moving walk beneath him. Relieved, he sucked more air than he should have. He yelled as he woke up. The walk was the wrong walk. It was bearing him back to Baby Maudy's obese embrace.

For all her bulk, she led the hunters. There was stark obscene lunacy in her eyes. She wept as she lumbered toward him. Her eyeblack ran down over her cheeks like fissures appearing in a corpse badly preserved.

Terrified, Sean jumped to the forward walk. It wasn't moving fast enough. He plunged into the empty street, ran across. Buildings flashed before his eyes. He remembered. He hurled himself up over the curb, stamping like a peasant dancer on the plasto panels.

Nothing happened.

No port popped smoke or squirted missiles. Becoming a maniac himself as the growl of the pack grew ever louder, he flung himself at the wall where he'd detected more of the outlets for hidden weaponry. He beat on the walls, one fist, both fists. Beat and stamped. A walk panel cracked in half under him. He dropped down to his waist in tangling machinery.

Leg caught, he couldn't wiggle free. Baby Maudy's chain whirled over her head as she led the crowd across the street. For a second, he was all wild rage—

Every other time, every damme other time, a whisper, a glance, a belch—everything erupts. And here tonight they don't!

His hands were bleeding from the pounding the silent antipersonnel installations. Baby Maudy loomed, uttering some crazed cry like, "Scrag, scrag, scrag!" The too-rich air fuddled his mind. He knew he couldn't lift himself out of the walk before they reached him. All at once the blood on his hands grew brighter, more lustrous. He gazed at it helplessly a moment. Then he realized. That was light. Brilliant scarlet light enhancing the color. Light from—?

Turning his head, he presented a target for Baby Maudy. She whacked him one with the chain. He groaned and pitched over half-conscious as the police prowler bayed its horn, tearing up the boulevard and braking with a yowl of suddenly sealed airvents.

NINETEEN

Still caught with his lower half below the level of the walk, Sean struggled against a painful euphoria. It smeared his perceptions, disoriented his time-sense. Officers leaping from the prowler appeared to float, balletlike, while Baby Maudy's boot smashing down traveled at triple normal speed. Sean snatched his fingers back.

A crushing impact and pain demonstrated that he'd only thought he'd snatched his fingers back. Baby Maudy squealed with delight. She positioned herself to pulp him across the frontal lobes with the chain. But the pain was a perverse tonic. Sean's eyes sharpened all at once.

"Spread out and whiff them," cried an officer somewhere in the flush of red light.

"Scrag, scrag!" Baby Maudy shrieked, chain overhead, face delirious with sweat. Sean closed his fingers around her calf.

She yelled. He dug his hands into the lard of her, shifted his balance and tipped her over. Blasphemies and spit flew.

An officer darted in behind her. He snagged the flipping end of the chain and dragged hard. Baby Maudy's collapse shook the street and sidewalk panels too.

"This is one of the nastiest bunches yet," panted the first officer. "They're tearing each other up."

"Stand back," barked his companion. "I'll whiff them."

Before Sean could protest that he didn't classify as a candidate for whiffing, the officer fingered the end of the short rod in his hand. A squirt of gas stopped Baby Maudy's thrashing and produced instantaneous snores. The rod's end swung to Sean. He raised both hands, started to shout. The officer whiffed him.

Sean pulled his head aside, too late. Odorless, the gas mangled his senses again. His belly pumped up and down, and the scene on the street—legs, arms, torso, heads of officers and lunatics alike popping up from clouds of gas viewed through a port smeared with raspberry jam—phased in and out with nauseating regularity.

Once more he tried to tell the representatives of the law that he should be spared this indignity. Once more his throat

undid him, producing a sound like a retch. Hands seized his forearms. He was dragged from the opening in the walk, then released and allowed to fall.

Got to get out, he thought as he lay cheek in the gutter.
Got to get—

No good. He was helpless as a flopping fish too far from the surf. Baby Maudy snored. The officers crisscrossed the scarlet smoke, their irritable voices muffled behind protective mouthpieces.

“Anybody call for a train? Is there one available?”

“Just caught one outbound via Bee Street. They’re picking up an extra van and swinging by.”

“Good thing. If we had to keep these lice around barracks all night I’d be tempted to kick their beep-beep heads in.”

Somewhere the old gent, Zombi, uttered a protest, to which an officer replied with a blow that sounded pulpy-hard. A shiver rattled Sean’s teeth. He fought to stay awake. Every once in a while the gutter under him tended to begin a slow tilt, followed by a swift whirlpool revolve with him at the center. Fragmented thoughts winged in his head like fieldbirds ahead of a fire:

—*You wanted aboard the vans.*

—*Yes but now there’s help for the domes so it’s not important.*

—*Don’t you still want to find out what it’s really like beyond those barriers?*

—*Yes. I mean no.*

—*Make up your mind.*

—*Don’t need to, question’s academic, Baby Maudy, the gas decided it—*

As he brought the vertigo under control again the manic messages of his mind diminished in volume, leaving him exhausted and waiting for what would happen next. It was a sound: sibilance denoting the arrival of the airlift van train. An officer bawled, “Last van, last van, let’s load ’em up! We already got another call at the Adult Film Theater, twenty or thirty of ’em on a rampage and molesting the cashier and everyone in sight. Come on, you, get going! Pass them by the med officer on the way in. If they fuss, clout them.”

So Sean found himself lifted, hauled, then prodded into an ill-formed queue leading down through the waves of red light past eleven vans to the final one, which had grilles in its sides. He vaguely saw faces, eyeballs, tongues, discolored teeth behind grilles in the other units. Most of the inmates

of the train remained sunk in apathy. A few, however, hooted, jeered, or made spitting sounds while sticking out their tongues at the new arrivals.

Ahead, the fanned-back doors of the last van came in view. The scarlet vortex returned, picking up speed and him with it. He made for the doors as a damaged ship to harbor. He was hauled up by his collar:

“Hold it, scummy. Stick out your hands for the nice man.”

A stick whacked his elbow to help him get the idea. He stretched his bleeding fingers out straight. A bored man in a soiled gray tunic squirted each hand with mist from a brace of aerosols. The first spray stung. The second cooled and numbed. Through it all the truculent officer kept complaining about something called the Supreme Judiciary which had decreed humane handling of cuckoos. A boot in the tailbone drove Sean up the folding stairs and onto his face on the van floor.

Shortly two officers climbed inside and proceeded to arrange the inmates on low, uncomfortable benches. Sean awoke from one of his periods of delirium to find himself jammed against the left side of the van, directly up against the grille. Zombi was on his right. The youth with the yellow-dyed beard was wedged at his feet. Somebody else crowded against his gluteus. The officers triggered the stairs, which whined and folded shut.

Commands were shouted up the line. Beacons began to revolve at faster speed, streaking the buildings with wound-color. The train levitated, then crawled forward.

At the grille Sean caught all the noise of the hissing air-jets, as well as currents of damp night air against his face. The air helped clear up some of the effects of the partial gassing. But he was careful to feign a complete daze. As long as he'd been trapped into following his original plan, he might as well wait and see whatever lay outside the boundaries of the district. He had, after all, forty-eight hours until the time for contacting Firebolt.

The van train proceeded at slow speed around the Statue of the Three Kennedys. Then it began to accelerate. Soon the floor angled up sharply. Dim streets strung with glows fell away. The wind smelled less fetid on the elevated freeway.

He had no idea about which branch of the system they might be taking. Whichever it was, it had its own shanty-and-barrier-pole frontier. Soldiers waved the train on through

with barely a slowdown. Beyond the freeway rails, the number of lights down below thinned out.

"I say—" A phlegmy cough to his right. "Can't you give a chap a bit more room?"

Without thinking, Sean turned. "There isn't any mor—" For a moment he was caught staring into Zombi's one crazed eye. The other was hidden behind the starred right lens of the gentleman's ribbon glasses.

Zombi covered his lips to suppress a belch or worse. He blinked. Sean turned hastily back to the grille. Zombi seized Sean's arm. By the feeble light of a hemispherical glow embedded in the ceiling at each end of the van, Sean saw the old lunatic's hand. A veined and nightmarish thing, it was blotchy where sweat had streaked powder.

"I say!" Zombi nudged with his toe. "Eisenstein? Anyone—?"

"Take your hand off me, you old bastard," Sean growled. That was a useless ploy, he decided instantly. How could a threat, founded in an appeal to the self-preserving instinct, work on an old batbrain like this? Zombi was gleeful, spiteful, and nearly incoherent as he seized Eisenstein's yellow beard and yanked.

"Wake up, wake up, dear boy! We've an interloper! They've put this lad in among us by mistake! He's not one of our merry band. Baby Maudy? Where have you got to? We needn't have a dull, depressing trip after all. We have this fine gentleman to worry about!"

Sean's hands wept cold claminess all over again as Zombi prodded, shoved and vocalized to alert the van riders that their intended victim was still among them. Most of the cuckoos remained immobile but not all. There was a sinister shuffling and rearranging of bodies as Zombi recruited a few sport fans, chuckling and clucking and clapping his hands softly to rouse them.

Repeatedly kicked, Eisenstein in fact did at last wake up. He heard the message and sank his teeth into Sean's leg. By then Sean had decided on the only sensible strategy. He yelled blue murder.

"That's nasty and unfair," Zombi cried, attempting to poke Sean's eyeballs with two fingers. Sean kept right on baying while Eisenstein kept on biting. After a few eternities, a panel popped open in the fore wall.

A stern face glowered. A rod treated the inmates to a good long general whiff. Sean had been praying for some

such reaction by their captors. He hid his head between his knees and pinched his nose.

Despite the wind fanning through the grilles, the gas worked. Zombi keeled off his bench onto Eisenstein. The latter, already fast asleep, supported him without protest. Several minutes later Sean raised his head.

Outside, beyond the freeway, nearly complete darkness prevailed. Only here and there, at vast intervals, did a solitary light signal the existence of humanity in the countryside. He developed a chill. He sat with his hands locked together and his teeth rattling. He'd passed through the latest crisis unharmed. But in its own way this wakefulness—albeit shot with occasional periods of nausea—was much worse.

For as the van train hissed along, he thought again of caged rats biting. His metaphor had turned all too real? Didn't he know? He was in the cage.

He slept a little, on and off. The inmates didn't bother him again. He woke at false dawn to discover that the train had descended from the freeway and was proceeding down a four-lane road between untilled pastures where sere trees shook in the chilly wind. A huge, rambling, factorylike structure loomed on the left. It was surrounded by vast empty spaces for vehicle parking. An immense signboard passed on the shoulder. One of its pillars was rotted away. Sean read the cocked block lettering with difficulty.

THERMAL MUNITIONS, INC., Harris-Reading Works. Skills Registrar Located Adjacent to Gate 11.

The sign was gone, replaced by more emptiness for worker transportation. In the last wing that the train passed, he thought he detected a few lights gleaming, will-o-the-wispy. Maybe it was just a gaseous side-effect.

The daylight increased. The train proceeded through rolling countryside devoid of so much as one single Family Farm of the kind you read about in nostalgic memoirs concerning Earth. Two more deserted factories of great size rolled up on the horizon and then rolled away behind. One had all of its gates standing open. Three airlift coupes were parked in the dreary acres of empty paving. The other factory distinctly showed a light or two, though its gates were chained shut.

Defense factories, he thought. *Simply no doubt, to judge from the names.*

But if these were the sites of all that critical defense work from which he had been barred at the barrier poles, where

was it being conducted? Underground? He began to suspect the critical work was but one more of those inexplicable masquerades. Trouble was, if the masquerades had any kind of pattern, he hadn't figured it out.

One of the riders, he of the fried eyes and facial moles, woke up briefly. He yawned, scratched his facial moles, and went back to sleep. A last little wave of nausea washed over Sean and receded, leaving him sharper-witted than he'd been all night. He *was* beyond the barrier poles, closer than he'd been to one of Westbloc's innumerable masks since planetfall. Could he lay hands on the mask, now? Tear it off and, at last, satisfy his maddening urge for answers? Very possibly, because—yes! His senses now made orderly what his butt and heels had hinted:

The train was slowing down.

Through the right grille he saw the lead van, red beacon off, making a right turn off the highway toward open gates in a tall electrofence. Over the gates a peeling signboard announced the site: VIGGERS-DREADNOUGHT COMPANY, *Aero-destruct Devices*.

Inside the gate they passed along a three-story wall half a kilometer long. The train turned into a wide, paved area concealed from the highway by the front buildings. Off in the dawn a songbird trilled.

A door in a building opened. Half a dozen nondescript men, some white, some black, some in coveralls, some in hip-length uniform coats, stepped into the breeze. The heaviest of the men carried objects suspiciously like restraining jackets, while a couple of others had several sets of manacles clipped to their belts.

A young black man with fatigued eyes, one of those in the hip-length outfits, walked forward to meet the officer climbing down from the first van.

"Another load?" demanded the young black. "That's the fourth this week. I informed those bureauasses we were at capacity. I notified them we couldn't take one single additional—"

"I just bring the buggies where I'm told, Doc." The officer thrust out a manifest. "Put your sig down, hey, so we can head back?"

With a sad, sick look, the young black gazed along the train of vans. He signed, then swung to his associates and waved.

"All right. Unload them."

He sounded close to weeping.

TWENTY

The guards—Sean supposed you could call them that, if not because of their nondescript outfits then because of their coarse faces—headed in the general direction of the rear of his van. Last in the train, first to be unloaded. More men emerged from the puzzling building to form a kind of double human fence. It stretched loosely from the group approaching the van to the building entrance. Through slitted eyes Sean observed that these worthies too carried manacles at their waists. Kept their hands comfortably close to them, too.

The van doors unlocked with a motor whir. The steps unfolded. Distastefully, the young black shielded his eyes and held his nose without actually touching it. "Mother of Mary, why do they always stink so?" Over his shoulder:

"Those that can walk, let them. Those that can't, a touch of the drug prod."

Silverish wands appeared in the fists of a couple of the more thuggish specimens. To his surprise, Sean discovered that he wasn't the only one aboard possuming. Fried-eyes leaped to his feet and seized the grille:

"Don' gimmeno drugs, puleez, puleez! Welfare Cenner tol' me I was lergic, lergic!"

A stocky guard silenced him in mid-scream with a spinal jab from a long needle that popped suddenly from the wand's end. Sean got a look at the guard's eyes. Toilet-yellow, fat-lidded, amused.

The man manhandled fried-eyes unnecessarily while dragging him out. The guard also managed to kick or gouge several of the other van inmates. He flung fried-eyes to the ground and jumped after him. The guard would have come down on the molefaced wailer with both feet if the young man in the hip-length coat hadn't thrown him violently off balance.

"Control your goddam sadistic impulses, Templeton, and try to remember that this is officially listed as a humanitarian institution, despite what your brain tells you. If it's equipped to tell you anything."

He spun away from the guard's venomous glare; they

began a curious monologue of loud badgering and soft, bitterish complaints:

"All right, the rest of you in there, no fakery, now—a touch of the needle and you'll ache for eight hours—don't make us use it—damme inadequate budget—criminal, that's what it is—let's hurry it up, let's roust them out, we have all the rest of the vans to process—restraining jackets and manacles, inhuman. Bedlam, that's what it is—come on, Leo, help that old woman up, for God's sake!"

Virtually all of the riders wakened under the impact of shouts, shoves, and tugs. Even Zombi alerted with a yawn. He didn't seem to recognize Sean any longer. His cracked lens flashed as he turned away. He peered at the men in coveralls swarming through the van. Apparently he did recognize his surroundings. His teeth began to click.

"Is this a motoresort?" whined a wispy white-haired woman, just being disarmed of three snapknives hidden in her tatting. "I thought they said we were going to a motoresort."

The young black gave her a pitying glance. "No, madam, it isn't, but we'll try to make you as comfortable as we can." He took her elbow, helped her down the steps. She passed on between the two widely separated rows of men, stumbling through the poor dawn light in a bewildered way. The young black's face congealed again, professionally hard. He gave Sean, who was descending, a light whack on the elbow.

"You look wide awake, you can move faster than that."

With an odd, quiet panic, Sean walked through the flanking files of unfriendly faces. All at once he recalled a fax of ancient, primitive food production facilities here on Earth but far to the west. Living animals were jammed through chuteruns into entrances that led to slaughtering rooms. Fried-eyes, the first to reach the building's door, all at once erupted into motion.

"Lergic, lergic!" he shrieked, attacking the nearest guard.

Two fell on him, one with a restraining type coat. Arms pulled all the way behind him, the young lunatic was roused toward the doorway. Sean's belly curdled. The lips of fried-eyes tilted up into the first rosy beams of the morning. The sun illuminated bubbles of foam. Then a kick in the tailbone drove fried-eyes into the dark.

The young black, if he saw, pretended otherwise. He busied himself organizing his helpers to unload the second van. Sean kept walking.

The door loomed larger and darker. Guard eyes floated

by. Cruel eyes. Illiterate eyes. Or was he inventing menaces not present? In any case, like a bit of water becoming ice, he repeated a reassuring thought. *I'll tell them very soon now. I want to see a little more—I can stand seeing a little more—but I am going to tell them. Soon.*

“Keep moving, keep moving.” A bully-boy on a stool just inside the door whacked each arrival across the buttocks to maintain momentum. There was no doubt about which route to take—straight ahead down a corridor walled-in block on the left, in ancient flaky-rusty metal on the right. Windows in the metal afforded a curious view of activity in a huge room adjoining the corridor. Several stories high, the room was jammed with what Sean recognized as n/c tools of an outmoded design. A few listless men manned a few of the machines. One toothless octo pushed a rollerbin past the window with a dull, hateful stare at the procession on the other side. In the bottom of the rollerbin a few badly machined castings gleamed with oil.

His mind wrestled, struggled, tossed up incredible answers. Sham workmen. Sham work. *Why a front? A front for what? Even here, outside the barrier.—masquerading?*

By now Sean had seen enough to recognize the sum of the individual parts for what it was. But out of stubbornness, or disbelief, or clogging terror, he refused to name it.

Fried-eyes was still leading the unhappy procession down the hall that smelled of human waste. Fried-eyes reached thick, unpainted plasto doors. *Plasto for strength where strength was needed?* Sean shunted the naming of the truth again.

A peephole snapped open in the plasto, shut. A red indicator flashed above. The doors rolled back to reveal a dim, high room with curtained booths all around the walls. Several long, dim corridors led off to similar chambers, faraway mirror-images. A tough, older woman in a soiled white dress sat at a table just inside the plasto doors. Behind her stood two more of the bullyboys. They had wands and were looking for trouble.

Sean watched over shoulders in the line ahead of him. The woman spent a moment inspecting each arrival. She asked for no names, but wrote something on a tally sheet, presumably a brief physical description. No automatic equipment served her, further indicating the borderline financial condition of this—*get back in there! stay there!* place.

Then she pointed to the curtains and said the word “Doctor,” together with a name. Those who could stumble to the

indicated booth, did. Those who couldn't were assisted by one of the guards and his wand.

Just as Sean reached the woman, a loudspeaker barked, "Dr. Ahmad, Dr. Ahmad, please. A disturbance in Ward Are, a disturbance in Ward Are—" The voice, sexless at first, became more and more feminine with each amplified bleat. "Dr. Ahmad—*pah-lease—!*"

The young black rushed by, disappeared down one of the halls in the distance. From that direction issued noises of metal being wrenched, clanged, and thrown about, plus a steadily rising chorus of maniacal screaming.

Flashes of images: bogus workmen; a pretense at machines; lying signboards; manacles—*I'm in a madhouse. A genuine but for some damme reason subrosa madhouse.*

Instantly Sean's brain began to clickety-click a new, urgent message. *Tell them soon, you'd better tell them soon, you'd better, you'd better—*

Gimlet-eyed, the woman thumbed at the wall. "Dr. Rhebozo. Next."

Sean shuffled toward the curtains. They parted at the assigned place to reveal a small cubicle featuring an old-fashioned treatment cabinet, a stool, a chair, and a thin, nervous man, middling-thirties, with large dark eyes, untrimmed sideburns, and a manner suggesting a bitch kitty whose litter is confronted by a dog.

Sean entered the cubicle. He sat where the man pointed. Sounds outside diminished when the man pressed a button on the treatment cabinet. Aural curtains. Not a completely obsolete asylum, then. The light level increased. Dr. Rhebozo put his palms on his knees, stared at Sean, tried to smile, gave up. He flicked the lever of a pocketcorder protruding from the bosom of his hip-length coat and said:

"My name's Rhebozo. Manual Rhebozo. I'm the neuro-psych permanently assigned to your case. The first thing I want, please, is your credit reference number."

Sean licked his lips. Dry, flaky-feeling. "Don't you want my name?"

"I want the most important thing you were born with. Credit reference number."

"There—" Dr. Rhebozo's eyes went defensive as Sean got that much out. "There's been a mistake. I got trapped in that crowd by accident. I don't belong here."

"Of course you don't," Rhebozo agreed. "You look as wild as the rest of them, you look as dirty as the rest of them, but just like the rest of them, all seventy-eight or

seventy-nine percent of the entire Westbloc population already committed to all the places hidden away in all these crummy old factories, you don't belong here. You're someone special, right?"

Sean could only goggle.

An awful tiredness shone out of Rhebozo's eyes. It made his mouth drip nastiness. "Care to tell me who you are? Huntington Kennedy? Bess Pelf's offscreen lover? Someone more historical? Dr. Crippen? Schickelgruber? Madame Curie? You tell me now, it's our little secret."

What did I hear? How many percent? COMMITTED? Dual-tracked, his mind and reality careened apart and ran and ran until he clenched his hands between his kneecaps.

"It—it really is the truth," he said at last. "My name is Sean Cloud. Subadministrator. From the dome colonies. From Mars. I came to Earth on a diplomatic mission. I'm staying at the Nixon-Hilton. Ring there, you'll see."

But progress was blocked by Rhebozo's weary-angry eyes. Sean leaned forward. His voice began to rattle and rasp:

"It's the gospel truth! Sean Cloud! Call the Nixon-Hilton!"

Dr. Rhebozo spoke to a pocketcorder. "That's a new one, isn't it? Says he's from the colonies. I'd write that up for pub. If there were any pubs left. Or time to write." Rhebozo's head came up. His dead level voice revealed his brink condition: "Listen, *listen*, you lying, mealymouthed s.o.b., I'm supposed to treat you in a humanitarian way. But there are fifty more waiting behind you, and fifty more probably coming tonight, and fifty more tomorrow, and I'm fresh out of humanity and patience. So open up before I say forget it and have you programmed for the Gasser."

"The—*Gasser*?"

"Antiquated therapy. Violent. For extreme cases." Deadly warning eyes. "You'd hate it."

"But—my name is Sean Cloud."

Rhebozo hesitated. "All right, then, kindly skip the superfluous crap and show me your ident."

A long silence.

"Well?"

"I haven't any. I left it at the hotel. But—"

"Give me your credit reference number, you misbegotten s.o.b., or I'll program you for the Gasser this very instant, I swear I will." Leaning forward. "Give it to me!" Jumping up, maybe exhausted but sumomning fury from somewhere, "Give it to me!"

All out of perspective, a gigantic sideburned older god, Dr. Rhebozo towered. Sean's mind snapped a couple of vital belts. Around and around it went inside him, *78 percent committed, 78 percent committed, 78 percent commi—*

He shot off the stool and bashed Dr. Rhebozo aside the head.

He dived for the curtain. Except for the slight tingling of the aural shield it offered no resistance. He popped into the reception area headfirst, glared around like a wild thing, yelled as the neuropsych seized him at the waist from behind. With a lunge he tore free, running ahead, blindly, head down, while from the booth Rhebozo bellowed:

“Guards! Guards! Guards! Guards!”

TWENTY-ONE

The admitting matron swung with a glower, arose like a rampart with her arms wide-flung to bar Sean's way. One of the bullyboys had gone to escort another admittee to a booth. The other could hardly conceal his joy as he bowled the woman aside and lunged at Sean with the hypo tip of his silver wand extended.

Sean sidestepped with speed. Too many years of ballet lessons—suffered only because Candice Cloud insisted—plus Martian colony insistence that its public servants under sixty remain in top physical shape saved him a ripped belly. The gurgling guard was hurled forward beyond a target that wasn't there.

Sean pivoted and kicked him in the crotch.

Over went the guard, conveniently upsetting the matron. Sean crouched, snarling rather like an animal again. This time he didn't enjoy it. This was too tight, too desperate. Innumerable corridors presenting themselves, mazelike. *Which?*

He started down one as the queued-up maniacs released a lusty cheer in his favor. Six steps along the hall and he knew it was a bad decision. There was a hideous racket of beaten tinware and screaming, touched off, perhaps by the equal clamor behind him. The noise unleashed torrents of guards from the very walls ahead of him. Some of them responded to the matron's bellows by charging him.

Backtrack. Pivoting fast. *Slipping*—a blurred view of the reception area as he fought to right himself.

Caught a wall. Slapped palms against it, buttocks and spine against it too. Slid along it to the opening of the next corridor. Spitting mad, Dr. Rhebozo was ransacking a large cabinet for some sort of device. He found it, gray metal, vaguely pistol-shaped. Watching Sean over his shoulder and yelling for the guards again, the sideburned neuropsych dropped half a dozen small chromy cylinders before he finally forced one down into the chamber of the pistol-shaped device.

Sean's lungs had turned raw. He understood in a peripheral way as he crabbed along down the wall why physical con-

flict wasn't exhilarating him. Too real, this. Too near the edge of that pit into which you peered, heard human lip-smackings, saw heaving, moist red meat. No, wrong—this was the pit itself—and did this wall run forever and a day?

The suffusion of rich air pumping in and out of his lungs dizzied him. His retinas coruscated like a lightshow. Six steps to the next corridor. Five—

The matron bleated, trying to rise. The lunatics couldn't be all bad. Through sweat darkly, he saw three of them sitting on her. Two others brained the remaining guard for the third or fourth time with parts of the reception table.

A hammer of feet, from many directions. Whistles. Clapping. Vocal encouragement from the queued maniacs. Three steps to the next corridor. Dr. Rhebozo leaped around Sean's table-wielding allies. Two steps. Sean broke from his back-to-the-wall position and ran, long legs stretching while the heady air smoked his throat and bronchial passages.

He turned down the corridor, laughed. No guards coming to meet him! He drove back the pain lapping up from his chest, extended his legs, ran—

Rhebozo shot him in the back, *kachoff*, with some type of stinging dart.

Instantly everything went damp, pink, slippery. He bounced from the left wall to the right and back again, billiard-ball style. This went on until his legs became a slithering tangle of incomprehensibly knotted elastic bands below his trunk. He fell.

He groaned in defeat and rage. He had a low-angle view of Rhebozo's half-boots marching toward him. He passed out.

After the effects of the drugdart, the darkness proved surprisingly refreshing. The seat supporting his back and tailbone was thickly padded, comfortable. Pleasure quickly dwindled, however.

Dim machinery lamps glimmered on the face of complex equipment that comprised one wall. The lamps showed him the surroundings and his nerves finally got their messages through to his dulled head.

Wrists strapped.

Ankles strapped.

Waist belted tight to the seat.

He sat in something round that could be a horizontal, open-topped centrifuge, a funhouse ride, or the guts of an antique laundry appliance. Looking positively sinister in the

colorful cross-lighting, Dr. Rhebozo was poised at levers on the machine-wall. Close by, armed with a truncheon just in case, was another guard.

"You troublemaking s.o.b." Rhebozo still sounded out of breath. "I warned you we didn't have time for mollycoddling. Enjoy the Gasser. It'll either cure you or make you a vegetable." *Whack*, he dragged a lever down. *Whack*, another. *Whack, whack, whack*. The machinery lights were suddenly dazzling.

"Wait!" Sean cried, unheard above the startup of motors. The padded cup in which he was confined began to revolve.

Rhebozo's face went by once per revolution, choked with disgust. The tiny lights on his machinery began to blue, began to change to continuous horizontal streaks. Sean's temples thundered as his head was crushed back against a headrest.

He opened his mouth to yell. No sound came out. Another motor went into operation. A dome closed down over the top of the cup and hid the lights, hid everything.

It was awful.

His belly and bones felt the revolutions. But in the dark his senses were disconnected. Strange, nasty things crawled inside his head—

He smelled appleblossoms.

Gas, it's only gas. The cup stopped with a braking force that almost snapped him in half. The smell became that of some petrol-based lubricant. The cup accelerated.

Images appeared on the inside of the dome, surrounding him with twinklyness. Beautiful women. *Brake*. The unspeakable smell of vomit. *Accelerate*. Women became open graves full of bodies. His head boiled with woodsmoke's tang. *Brake*.

The corpses turned to beatific Byzantine saints in lappingly projected mosaics of light. Round and round and *stop*. Round and round and *stop*—

Bass fiddles planked. Mortar bursts exploded. *Brake, accelerate, brake, whirl*—

He smelled a girl's hair and it was the stench of skunk. *Brake, brake, SWOOOSH*—

Before long, his mind and body gave up. Some small, dim soul of him somewhere watched his entire personality fragment like so many links of chain thrown in a furnace—

It ended, the speed, the noise, the agglomerated odors, the multiflashing projections, and did not commence again.

He remembered nothing prior to that.

He sat in position, devoid of response to various awarenesses impinging: a series of quick pneumatic hissings; a flapple of gasketing separated; a motor. The dome lifted away. He saw weird, distorted faces around the cup. Mahogany cheeks. Red and white windblown strands. A lumpy nose that sniffed. Meaningless. He sat turniplike while the queer antics went on without a soundtrack. Finally:

“—forgivable, Dr. Rhebozo. Absolutely and completely unforgivable.”

“Oh for the—Dr. Ahmad, he *attacked* me!”

“That’s no justification for cruel and inhuman punishment. For God’s sake, Doctor, if we turn into mad dogs too, who’ll be left to treat the rest of them?”

“He also—” That voice was oddly familiar; it came from behind a lumpy proboscis whose tip was stained yellow and vermilion by the few machine lights left burning now that the Gasser was at rest. “—he also, I suggest, *Doctor*—”

“Don’t you use that tone with me, don’t you dare, you liverfaced beep-beep little bureau—”

A sound of scuffling. A roiling of shadows. Mahogany cheeks intervened and shouted. Lumpy nose outshouted:

“I suggest, Doctor—and we’ll see how long you continue to bear *that* title—I suggest this man presented you with verbal idents, as I understand it, sufficiently unusual and unique—”

“They’re fruitcakes!” Rhebozo shrieked. “All with fruitcake stories! The whole of Westbloc—!”

“I suggest that you could have checked!”

Whispering conferences. Sean bobbed his head at the pleasantly relaxing pattern of lights and intervening human shadows. Oddly familiar, all right, those. Oh, pfui. Why bother? He began to experience vague anger. At last he began to fasten on the cause, as:

“How long have you been on duty, Dr. Rhebozo?” That was mahogany cheeks again.

“Chrysnake. I don’t know. Seventy-two hours I think. Yes.”

“How much sleep in that time?”

“Three, four hours. Dunno.” All the steam whistled out of Rhebozo’s tone. “Dunno any more.”

“It’s exactly as I’ve been saying in all the memo-izing that’s never answered, Mr. Secretary—” Mahogany spoke swift and low, but it didn’t interest Sean much. The pretty-pretty lights reminded him of Dona Ysabella O’Coen’s teach-

ing tights. *Toe on the barre, Sean, toe, toe, and never mind daydreaming about the museum's holos of old mustachioed futballe players roughing each other.* “—exactly as I’ve been telling everyone who’ll listen, and no one will. Overtaxed! Underfinanced! Incapable for much longer—”

“I don’t make the geopolitical conditions, Dr. Ahmad. Nor is the Secretariat of which I’m in charge responsible for public facilities such as these. But I am responsible to Pres Washbourne for any by God diplomatic incidents arising from this, and I’m making *you* responsible for Subadministrator Cloud’s sanity. You’d better get him out of there and make it snappy.”

Ahmad cracked orders. Sean thought briefly of other, equally old holos of blue men with bright sabers arriving in the fortuitous nick while bugles blew. But only briefly.

A cool tense hand gripped his. That registered. Also a face. He fought to focus. Eyes. Blue-gray. Just tinged with water in the gloom. Water? Not quite correct. Tears, didn’t they call them?

“Sean? It’s me, Lydia.”

“*Mother,*” he roared, bolt upright, “*I won’t stay in this sissy dancing class one day longer.*”

Whereupon he fainted.

He was injected—afterward he was told—by a battery of needles bearing restricted-use compounds that could, fortunately, offset the Gasser’s effects on a normal system in fairly short order and with fairly little stress. He awoke on a couch in a spartan office in the madhouse an hour later. Lydia was beside him. He didn’t feel half bad except for the hysteria that took a while to go away.

TWENTY-TWO

In an adjoining office Secretary Hoog and Dr. Ahmad conducted a discussion.

No words were detectable, just loudness, frequent interruptions by one or the other, and fists rapping for emphasis when it grew particularly heated. It made the inside of Sean's head twang like a tuning fork.

He'd already downed a whole carafe of stale water. Now he was thirsty for more. But there were plenty of subjects to draw his attention away from himself, chief among them Lydia's curious state.

"Stop that walking up and down," he barked. To his surprise, she did.

He'd never seen her facade so full of cracks. It was more than the disarray of her peekthru, or the untidy state of her striped hair, or the unfamiliar halfcircles of shadow underneath her blue-gray eyes. As he tilted the carafe to guzzle the last drops he thought he heard her snuffle.

"What's the matter with you, Lyd?"

She compressed her lips as long as she could. "Are you really all right?"

"I'll make it. This is a new Chief Engineer Veblen I'm seeing."

"Well, well—" She spun so he only saw her back, its smoothness elegantly revealed here and there by the peekthru. "I am a human being, after all."

Something had given her a really profound shock. Astonishing. A perverse imp forked his vocal chords: "Would F. Bruce really want his darling daughter to make that admission?"

"Oooo, *nasty*," she retorted, whirling back at him. "Nasty, Sean."

He had to admit it. He palmed his forehead to still the latest vibrations of the tuning fork between his temples. "Sorry, Lyd. I'm still wound up. You don't come three aces from being turned to a turnip every day. Forgive me, okay?"

"Yes." But she said it uncertainly. "Even if you don't altogether mean it. Well, I can't help how *you* feel. I was worried about you. Worried."

"You sound pretty damme mad about it," he said, forcing a grin.

The grin failed. It angered her. Probos and Deimos! She was in a rage. *Concerned*. That concern started all kinds of unexpected tender juices flowing inside him at precisely the wrong and most awkward time. The carafe in his fingers reminded him of the surroundings, the situation. He cleared his throat to signal a new, more important topic:

"Do you realize that this place is an asylum, Lydia?"

She stared at a hanging litho of some last-century neuro-psych named Berne. "So it seems."

"A *secret* one. Govt supported and operated. Apparently there are dozens, maybe hundreds hidden away in old factories. They're carting the Westbloc population here in droves."

He gave her a quick summary of how he'd fallen among unhinged companions and wound up in the Gasser. Here and there she nodded; perhaps to signify that Dr. Ahmad had already revealed those details. Other bits brought that amazingly treachy expression back to her eyes. Not knowing the number of bugs which might be hiding in the cheerless room, Sean avoided all mention of Wulf, Midas, and Firebolt, concluding, "By accident, I think, we've stumbled onto part of the reason why things are so bogus and empty back in town. As to *why* it's happening—" His mouth went hard. He hooked a thumb at the wall separating them from the contentious interview next door. "Only Hoog can answer. He will."

"You really have changed, Sean. Your eyes are positively vile."

"Damme, Lydia, answers are overdue!" He gave her the clincher, in the form of the taunting statement by Rhebozo that 78 or 79 percent of Westbloc's entire population was either committed or in the process of being. She seemed dully unimpressed. Or stunned?

"The Secretary," she said, "hinted at that in an opaque sort of way on the hovercraft ride out. We flew over several of these dismal places. I thought his remarks were curious at the time. They didn't make any sense till now."

He walked to her, stood very close. She didn't pull back. "But why, Lyd? Why?"

"That, he didn't say. Aren't you being rhetorical? You said you'd make him tell."

"I will. Meantime there's one thing you have to tell me. You two rushed in at the very moment I was about to go

gaga. That's a pretty long coincidence. How'd it happen?"

To cover what appeared to be nervousness, she rummaged for a Saf-C Cig and lit up. He was conscious of how she stood, three-quarters turned away, and once more the imp that wouldn't shut up chuckled. Cracks and crevices all over the place! In all this mess one fine side-effect was showing up. He hoped.

In rapid, breathy phrases she explained, "Maybe our arrival at that very sec was lucky chance, Sean. But not our arrival here—" All at once she snorted, angry-eyed. "I might as well say here that this isn't going to be easy for me, Sean. You'd better not crack one silly smile or I'll clobber you, Gasser or no Gasser." He didn't understand. He remained immobile. She calmed down, continued:

"When you didn't show up last night, Hoog took to the vis. He instituted a search outside the district. It included places like these. He found out that only three van trains of—patients—left the district last night. Each was headed for a different—ah—reception center, was Hoog's euphemism. He dragged me into a hovercraft that landed on the roof of the hotel. He vised your description all over the place while we flew. Finally some flunky here reported that a man with your description had just been routed into"—a shudder—"processing. That was that. The Secretary was furious with you, of course. On the other hand, he didn't want anything serious to happen to you. There are still some diplomatic perqs."

Sean scratched his head. "Okay, all right. But there's a hole. Hoog started searching for me outside the district right off. Why didn't he search the city first? How did he know where to look outside?"

Miserably: "I told him."

Sean's jawbone dropped and simply hung there.

"Well, I didn't *mean* to! But you told me you meant to break out of the district if you could—you *did* say that when we had that nasty—scene, Sean. I had it stored up in my head. He forced it out of me with a short-time truth drug. He slipped me the needle—here, you can still see the mark." He could: a red period above her right elbow. "When I woke up he was already on the vis and the damage was done. In this case I'm glad it was, or we'd never have got here at all. You'd be—you'd be—" She hid her face again.

"Wait a minute, wait a minute!" Sean waved, fighting a nearly uncontrollable urge to giggle. "Do you mean to say that your little plan to seduce Hoog *backfired*?"

"If you laugh, Sean Cloud—!"

The giggle-urge died away when he saw how it hurt her. She'd obviously been outfoxed for perhaps the first time in her entire balloon-popping life. He could only listen in awe:

"I *thought* it was working. He came right over last night. Low lights, obscene music—I was sure I had him. Don't think I'm a complete ninny, either. He does find me very attractive. He told me as much in the hovercraft. But first things first. On the flight here he told me that he'd been anticipating some rash action by one of us. Most probably you. That hurt. In any case, just as I was ready to wheedle him into a compromising position I felt this insect sting on my arm. You know the rest. He wouldn't have accepted the invitation except that it gave him a possible chance to learn whether we were up to something. He shot me full of drug, I blabbed, I'm sorry for that, but it did save your life." She touched Sean's hand. "He's far more clever than he pretends."

Sean searched those delicious blue-gray eyes so strangely sad. He wanted to kiss her. He didn't quite dare, saying instead, "I've guessed that about him all along."

"I guess that makes you infinitely superior." She sniffed and turned away.

Cascading questions, each begging to be spoken, filled his mind and made silent chaos of the next few seconds. Reality rushed back with the dialing noise of the iris, a sharp voice:

"All right, all right, you two. The hovercraft's waiting. We're leaving."

Sean met the Secretary's mud-colored eyes. "Not without several hours of explanation we're not."

"You prying fool!" Hoog cried. "You've already caused me no end of trouble. There won't be more. You're alive, you're sane, what more do you want? Just shut up and come along!"

"The hell I will! I want to know what's happening on this planet, Hoog. And what's happening in Westbloc to cause this." His wave swept in the disguised funnyhouse plus all the rest of a hemisphere full of quandaries, contradictions, and puzzlements. He stood quite tall, felt composed, looked mean.

Theodore Hoog, by contrast, looked worse than ever. His ferret face was blotched with patches of pink rash. On his hands he wore white cotton gloves. This didn't prevent

him from scratching the backs of the hands more furiously than ever, and rasping the gloved fingertips over his face in between.

"I have no comment, Subadministrator Cloud!" he barked back.

"No comment! When the major part of your population is locked up?"

Purse went the mouth. "Shall I order you to ask no questions? Or beg you?"

"Neither will do any damme good, Mr. Secretary."

"No appeal to your patriotism? Your pride? Your sense of familial tradition, Earth and Mars—?"

"Balls on that!" Sean cried, barely able to keep himself from manhandling the man. "I want answers!"

Hoog the comic opera minister melted away. Hoog the desperate man met Sean eye to eye. One of the white cotton gloves furiously worked a blotch on one side of the lumpy nose.

"The diplomatic party will leave orbit and return to the colonies as scheduled, Cloud. I won't—I can't say any more." A flash of pleading in his eyes; the realities Hoog saw on Sean's face drove it quickly away. "The Eastbloc threat is real, Cloud. The Eastbloc espionage apparatus is real. No matter what you see, or think you see, or both, the govt confronts a crisis of incredible magnitude—and I'm not speaking of those ships menacing your planet, either. We're just men, Cloud, doing all we can and choosing options. You'd better be grateful for my help this morning and stop asking your questions."

"Just answer me this, Hoog. Is most of the Westbloc population confined to asylums like this one or is it not?"

Sean's harsh words faded into a rather threatening silence. Unseen, the corridor iris had opened. Sean grew aware of the presence of a small squad of those tough, blank-faced young men he remembered from the diplomatic reception. This time the assistant secretaries carried sidearms they didn't bother to conceal.

Secretary Theodore Hoog said, "The hovercraft's waiting." He walked out, furiously scratching his red left ear.

TWENTY-THREE

So they were flown back to the district. To the tangles of deserted freeway cloverleaves, the shiny winding river, the kilometers and kilometers of empty boulevards. To the subtly sulfurous air of the rooftop pad and the tired odors of the Nixon-Hilton's corridors and carpets. To inevitable tiredness, followed by terror signified by an overdose of quick drinks, followed by confrontation of the fact that their own dark night of the soul had arrived at half-past noon.

They'd ridden the tube to this high floor. There the hotel provided a railed promenade for its guests. No guests were enjoying the facilities. All the gravbrellas were folded in their pods and chained down. One of the disposatubes was clogged to overflowing with butts from some forgotten meeting. Up here the wind moved, but without freshness. The monotonous roofs stretched away in each direction to die in a blurred murk at the horizon.

"Dismal," Lydia shivered, pulling her cape tighter. "But as you said, it's probably the least likely to be bugged." For further insurance they leaned on the outermost rail.

"Lydia," announced Sean, "this is a crisis."

"That's a melodramatic way to put it, dear. Unfortunately you're right."

And how right. Before leaving the rooftop pad, the Secretary had informed them that for their own personal safety and comfort, the envoys from the 4-patch colony were confined to the hotel until their shuttle departed for the parking orbit. To insure compliance with this policy Hoog assigned two assistant secretaries to patrol the hall outside their suites. He would, he stated, secure his edict by assigning a third and fourth young hardface to accompany them wherever they went, solo or duo, on the premises. Their shadow of the moment had ridden up here with them in the same tube, offering to show them a holo of his children. But he'd had the tact to post himself at the hallway entrance to the promenade. The man was unseen when Sean squinted casually over his shoulder. But he felt the man's presence for all that.

The assistant secretaries had all put their sidearms away.

In the same pocket with long ranging conversational detectors? If so, he and Lydia were dead. He had to gamble.

And it was just the two of them now. A two-minute courtesy call on Harloe Franconius had shown him why the mission chief needed no assistant secretaries at his door. The doctor was so high that he didn't even recognize them. Thought them members of the hotel staff. They went away disheartened while Franconius amused himself with a set of colorful plasto hoops from a magician's kit that bore the dusty decal of the Nixon-Hilton's novelty shop. Thus to the promenade, the wind, and memories temporarily forgotten in the chaos at the Viggers-Dreadnought Company. The ships were coasting in. The hours were running out.

"It almost breathes a mad, rotten smell," Lydia said, indicating the dreary roofs. "Has the whole bloc lost its collective mind, Sean? What could have caused it? When?"

He shook his head. "There are two roads, Lyd. They both branch off the same junction. What you just said is one. I'd like the answer as much as you. I thought about it a lot on the ride back. I decided we haven't time to go that way. We have to take the other route. Even if Harloe's out of it, we have a responsibility to the domes. I guess I lost sight of that in all that happened. But it is the main responsibility, the one that brought us down here. In the time left we'd better concentrate on the weapons."

Puzzled, she countered, "But we aren't going to get arms from the govt."

He drew breath. Squinted conspiratorially. Prayed against bugs. And told her about Firebolt.

The revelation generated more questions than he could answer. But it all boiled down to:

"Tomorrow night I have to be free, out of this hotel, and in a position to contact Wulf."

"It's risky," she said. "Do you realize you don't know whom you're dealing with? What if it isn't a cabal at all? What if it's another pack of soapbrains with a more sophisticated degree of lunacy?"

"A possibility, sure. But Wulf didn't behave like a cuckoo. He convinced me. I'll admit it's a big risk. I think we have to accept it. Actually"—his stare was direct, brooking no quarrel—"it's a risk I've already decided to accept. The question is, will you help me?"

It didn't take her long to answer, "Tell me how."

"Those four strongarmers are the main problem. I might be able to take one out of action hand to hand. Maybe even two. But not all four. We need the Archimedean lever. Long and strong enough to pry them back out of the way and make sure they stay there, taking no action, long enough for me to dodge out of this rattrap tomorrow night. If there were someone whose safety the assistant secretaries wouldn't dare disregard—well, the lever I have in mind is Secretary Hoog."

The wind sounded flatulent in the silence. "You cannot for a moment possibly be serious, Sean."

"Dead," he said. "I want you to vis him. Use every lie, trick, and wile at your considerable disposal. But get him into your suite for supper again tomorrow after the sun goes down."

"Sean, that's silly. Don't glower, it is. It won't work."

"We'll make it work. You said he still feels the lech, didn't you?"

She turned her angular face to the horizon as if seeking divine help. "It's ridiculous. He'll just pop me with another palmed needle and we're back at the starting line."

"Tomorrow night there'll be an important difference. I'll be there. Hiding. With me to watch for the needles, we can make it work. Lyd—" Fingers on her wrist, he felt softness and bone. "Lyd, there's so much hanging on it. We can make it work, I promise."

"My God," she said as she gazed at him across the upper rims of her half-specs. "I look at you, all those new lines around your eyes, and I nearly believe you. You're cynical. Whispering like a desperado. I wish I weren't wallowing in all this gluey worry about what happens to you."

Treading into territory that was new and passing strange, he said, "You're saying you won't?"

Damme if she didn't look as pouty as an adolescent seconds before a first kiss. "I'm saying I don't much care for continually passing my body around."

"You didn't worry about that the first time."

"That was the first time." The remark was inexplicable, female, a blank wall.

"All of a sudden, Lyd, I have the oddest feeling that you're me and I'm you."

To confound him even further she knuckled her left eye. He saw the little sparkle of moisture. Unbelievable! She glared.

"Damme you, Sean Cloud, stop staring at me as though I'm some kind of freakish exhibit. I don't know what's happened to me. Maybe this idiotic, maniacal place has affected my hormone balance. Maybe I'm turning as flapdoodle as the rest of them."

"Maybe you're forgetting all the dumb lessons F. Bruce taught you in the hope he could protect you. Maybe you're turning into a woman."

"That's insulting. I feel for the domes, I always have."

"But never allowed yourself to show it. Or anything else."

Bemused and alarmed, he searched her blue-gray eyes again. He discovered that she seemed as baffled over the sea-change as he. Sean grabbed her arms. There were no squeals, no rages. He kissed her. For a spell he got as much response as he would have puckering up to the wall of an atomic boiler. But the hour was late for them both; he just abandoned everything and hugged her fiercely. That's when she broke and cried.

"Oh—(snuffle)—damme—(snuffle)—what's—(snuffle, sniff)—wrong with me?"

"Lydia. Lydia." He was lost in her hair, not about to distract her with answers. "Lydia."

"I—(snuffle)—saw you in that horrible hospital and went—completely to pieces."

"Lydia." Her throat beneath his lips smelled heavenly.

"Sean—the idea—the very idea of marrying a black—it's unthinkable—"

"Sometimes common pleasures are common because a lot of people really like them. Relax. Enjoy—"

"Well—" She was near to wailing. "—was unthinkable—what a miserable *mess* I am!" she exclaimed and gave him her mouth out of fright, or too much complexity that reason couldn't sort out, or love, he didn't particularly care which right then. The ensuing scene was long, cliché-ridden, and totally rhapsodic.

When a measure of control returned to them both, Sean reluctantly withdrew a decent distance. They had larger things to worry about. But he couldn't help saying, "I'm not the only one changed."

Blue-gray eyes flashed her vulnerability. "You're repulsive when you're so frank."

"Now I understand why you didn't want to have another go at the Secretary. I'm delighted you feel that way, I might add."

"If you make one more personal remark, I'll smack you."

"I'm afraid we have to go through with it anyway."

"Yes—" She caught his hand. This time it was love of home in her eyes. "I guess we do."

The strange and utterly surprising turn of events lent a sad charm to the rest of the gray forlorn day. They took their evening meal together in Lydia's suite. After several pops from a globe of liquor Sean began to fancy himself the gallant grenadier bidding good-bye to his ladylove while the candles streamed and the last waltz lent false joy to the night before Austerlitz. Or was it Waterloo? He chalked an imaginary flunk mark in the air while regarding his beautiful Lydia across the papepillios in the pit. She looked simply marvelous.

Her hair was undone and backlit.

Her body was more desirable than ever. He thought briefly of trying to make love to her. Unfortunately he didn't feel like it. He was physically spent from his sojourn at the secret asylum, not to mention their day-long plottings and explorations of what might lie behind Firebolt. Besides, he'd had such unexpected good luck thus far, he didn't want to push her to the point where she'd bolt herself back into a new armorial suit and re-think him into a balloon.

With a tender kiss he bid her good night around eleven. He tottered out of her rooms carrying the synthochicken-salad sandwiches which he'd ordered for the assistant secretaries with a sly drunken hope that it would lull them. He'd forgotten to proffer the sandwiches earlier. So he did now. They were received without visible emotion. Nervous again, he hurried on to troubled sleep.

In his dreams he saw massive timepieces that ticked off the scant hours left. Not the domes' time this time, he realized in one of his many periods of wakefulness. His time; Lydia's. As she herself had remarked once during the evening, unless their little amusement (private bug-foiling code word) succeeded tomorrow night, the question of her psychic response to a mixed marriage would probably remain academic.

To further confound their watchers next morning, Sean ordered up breakfast drinks and a set of dimensional dominos from the hotel arcade. He grew nervous as the agreed-on moment approached. Lydia insisted on being alone when she made the contact. He waited thirty minutes in his rooms.

She burst in, shaking her head. "I can't believe it, Sean. I got right through. He's coming."

At that instant an unbidden voice began to unnerve him all over again with its piping cry of, *Too easy! Too easy! Why? Why?*

TWENTY-FOUR

Perspiring, Sean bellied up to the synthonylon carpet underneath Lydia's bed for three-quarters of an hour. He sweltered because he'd already put on his shabbied-up cape in preparation for a run through the streets.

He dared alter his position by not so much as an inch. He'd discovered during the early minutes of hiding that raising his head brought it in contact with several of the rocker arms which operated the oval bed's massago. They squeaked micelike from a lack of lubricant, right between Lydia's, "Good evening, Secretary Hoog," and his, "Chief Engineer Veblen, you certainly look fetching tonight."

Now the dialogue from the adjoining room suggested that all was proceeding better than well. Lydia sounded a shade shaky, nervous. But the Secretary, as far as Sean could tell, wasn't noticing. Was, in fact, pouring himself jolts of synthochampagne at a speedy rate.

Sean sneaked a finger under the bed skirt and raised it a fraction. He could see nothing except Hoog's small feet extended from a lounger in an artful dapple of low lights. Lydia had found the proper music; a lustful heavy-beat combination of electroflute, two hand drums, and a scattling soprano. Sean withdrew his finger. The curtain fell. He awaited the codephrase that would galvanize him to action.

On reflection, in the sweat and dark with the rocker arms jabbing his scalp when he inhaled too deeply, the whole plan smacked of idiocy and failure.

Why, for example, had Secretary Hoog accepted the invite? If the Eastbloc crisis demanded so much of his energy, how could he allow himself an interlude for the sake of his glands? Sean simply didn't believe Hoog was that human. Yet the Secretary was indeed out there in Lydia's suite, awaiting the arrival of dinner on a servocart. He'd even brought her a bunch of expensive nonsynthetic posies. His voice drifted under the bed skirt, weary:

"—the Subadministrator has retired to his suite, you say?"

Lydia sighed. Sean winced. Such overacting. "Besotted, Mr. Secretary—or may I—?"

"Of course, my dear, naturally. It's Theodore this evening."

"He retired early, Theodore. With alcohol. He's been under an incredible strain."

Hoog clucked sympathetically. "Yes, yes, definitely. Such an unpleasant twist of events, that excursion to the asy—factory. I don't frankly blame young Cloud for his reactions. These are trying times, trying. It's probably beneficial that he sleep." For just a second Hoog's rather rambling and muzzy delivery cleared up, revealing the old watchdog. "Come to think of it, one of my lads out in the corridor mentioned he hadn't seen the Subadministrator since well past noon."

That's because I've been hiding in here since then, Sean thought irritably.

He'd made the dash to cover in a short interval when the hall was empty because both the assistant secretaries were away at the lav. How many were on duty out there now? he wondered. Two regulars plus the other pair assigned to follow them? Even with the Secretary as a lever, Sean didn't relish the coming encounter.

A muted chime. Sounds of movement, or trolley wheels. Ritual exclamations from the Secretary on how hungry he was. Sean tensed to the squirm out from under. He and Lydia had programmed the approximate timing carefully. His heart went *whop, whop* in his chest. He kept reminding himself that all this melo was necessary for the sake of the domes.

"—shall we dine, Theodore? Or would you prefer another glass?" Damme! Did she have to simper so?

"I confess my hunger is overriding other considerations, my dear." He practically went tee-hee. More rustlings. Soft clicks, clangs, as someone adjusted the servocart's built-on serving leaves. "You can't know what a relief and comfort I find this evening, Miss Veb—Lydia? Thank you. I've come pure-hearted, sans drug needles. We have finally, if not happily, reached an understanding, an impasse, your side and mine. We needn't be uncivil any longer. You've no idea how I appreciate that. Not to mention your pledge that tonight we wouldn't talk politics or the unfortunate outcome of the negotiations." Hoog's voice wheezed down a note or two toward the end. Sean itched with jealousy. What was he doing, the lustful old coot? "I accepted your invitation, Lydia my dear, because moments like this, moments when the burden is lifted, are too, too rare. And you, as I've remarked on a previous occasion, are an extremely attractive woman."

That must be rotten hack dialogue we wrote, Sean thought, because the old lecher's feeding her the cue lines almost exactly. He squinched closer to the skirt at the side of the bed. Lydia indulged in a breathy pause, said:

"Of course, Theodore, you already know that I find *you* a stimulating, attractive ma—"

Sean rolled from under the bed, nearly tearing his scalp open on one of the rocker arms. Dishware crashed in the outer room. Secretary Hoog yelped. Sean jumped to his feet and charged through the iris.

Hoog, in obvious surprise and emotional disarray, had been caught from behind by Lydia. If not stronger, she was at least taller. Her plan, she'd ordered soy filet for her meal. The serrated silver-handled meat knife winked stars of light in Sean's eyes.

Lydia was behind the Secretary, left arm awkwardly crooked around his rash-red neck. Her right hand poised the little blade.

Hoog plucked ineffectually at the confining elbow with white gloves. He looked genuinely goggly at the sight of Sean scowling in front of him. "Stop struggling or she'll slit your neck," Sean said. "That's a promise."

Hoog's facial rash darkened. "A filthy, deceitful—"

"Shut up," Sean said.

If Hoog chose to call the bluff they were finished. But for the moment he looked sufficiently thunderstruck. Sean figured they could keep rolling successfully at least for a while. He stalked toward the iris leading to the corridor.

"This can do your cause absolutely no good, Subadministrator! What do you possibly think you can accomplish by this type of physical—?"

Iris dialed open, Sean stuck his head out. Three assistant secretaries were on duty, two lounging together. Sean gestured. "Get your tails in here. I want to show you something." They exchanged baffled glances. But they came.

Sean extended his arm to the iris. The assistant secretaries had a straight view across the suite. They saw the bug-eyed Secretary caught in Lydia's embrace. One of the assistants dropped his fingers to the slash pocket of his tunic. A companion grabbed his wrist. Sean's knees wobbled. He managed to keep his voice authoritarian:

"Now get this, you three. I'm leaving the hotel. This door is going to be programmed shut and locked for one hour. You keep your stations here in the corridor. If you try to come after me and I spot you—or if you try to break in on

Miss Veblen, Miss Veblen is going to stick that knife in your boss's windpipe. I'm serious about the shadowing part too. One sign that you and your damme spy hovercrafts are on my tail in the next sixty minutes and I guarantee I'll make it to the nearest vis, ring Miss Veblen and tell her to skewer away."

The assistant secretaries exhibited rage, then growing consternation. Sean decided that his speech had carried by virtue of delivery and timing. The logical holes (drop a missile on him from a hovercraft and how could he vis Miss Veblen?) went ignored in the tension and confusion. These hard specimens were govcrats, order-takers, unoriginal. Their eye-blinkings and nose-rubbings showed it. He felt slightly giddy.

"Have I made it all clear?" he asked. "Stay in the hall for one hour."

The tallest assistant secretary flicked a nervous glance in at Hoog. The Secretary's white cotton gloves wiggled like albino spiders, just itching to get at his rash. The scene held for an instant. Then Hoog blurped out, "I think they mean it, boys. Hold your places exactly sixty minutes. Cloud—I warn you one last time. You're not going to get away—" A violent jerk of Lydia's elbow made him go *rrawk*.

Lydia flashed Sean a quick, loving, desperate smile across the dapple of seductive pinspot lighting. For the first time on Earth—the first time in his life, practically!—he experienced a Darien of physical and mental joy in derring-do. He didn't indulge the feeling long. With a last poignant look at his lady he elbowed the assistant secretaries aside. He jabbed the studs to program the entrance according to specifications, then cut and ran for the tube. Incredible luck! Or an incredibly brilliant and daring plan which had totally demolished potential opposition because of its directness? No matter. It was working, marvelously well. Sean reached new peaks of hope as he rushed away from the Nixon-Hilton and after several blocks darted inside a public vis kiosk. The wan rays of glows filtered down through the kiosk's milky roof. The light blurred his hand like a skipping film as he punched up the memorized digits.

The screen stayed pearly for a long, long time. His belly began to do flips. His alarm reached nadir. A blowzy young woman with her hair encased in a melonlike drying apparatus blurred into place to inquire whatthebeep he wanted at this hour?

"I—I—" He fought to rein his runaway nerves. "I'm calling Wally the plumber."

"Who?"

He repeated it.

The young creature's hyperthyroid eyes regarded him unresponsively for some moments. She fished around in her ratty peekthru, pulled a scrap from between her bosoms.

"Yeh, I god it here. Wally, is it? Okay, be down by the sludge in about an hour an' a half. Admiral Nemo's Lobster Valhall, but not upstairs, the joint's closed, downstairs, I mean by the pilings. Wally the plumber'll pick you up. Goodn—"

"Wait, wait!" Frantically he tried to recall all she'd said. "The sludge?"

"The Pot, baby. The riv. You know. Bye now." She departed in a blizzard of phosphordots. He sneaked from the kiosk and hurried along a narrow side street.

Putting the woman's verbal cryptograms together, he figured that the Pot had to be the historic winding river he'd seen a time or two from heights. Called the Potomac long ago, if memory served. It took him nearly an hour of running, pausing, and doubling back after wrong turns to reach it. He spent another twenty minutes or so picking his way through the grounds of abandoned shoreside structures. Finally he arrived at the long-abandoned restaurant which did indeed sit up in the air on pilings.

Admiral Nemo's had originally been constructed of a smoldering pink plasto in the shape of a lobster, the main entrance being through the open jaws of a claw that bent down to touch a weedy parking lot. The other claw waved frozen in the air. It had strips of long-gone windows along either side and a ruined BAR sign on top. The whole lobster-shaped building was speckled with smashed-out windows. Immense globular eyes that might once have been illuminated were broken too. Around the restaurant's supports the Pot gurgled like glue.

Sean's nose told him why the female on the vis had referred him first to the sludge. The river appeared to be about to solidify under a slowly heaving crust. By the light of glows in a park across the empty river road, Sean saw bits of fish skeleton and scraps of packages within the crust. The Pot reeked of chemicals and corruption. Farther out it belched up a bubble and a cloud of ghostly green gas occasionally. The polluted air lay so thick on the night that the few lights on the opposite shore were dim balls. Their sources were unrecognizable.

Sean slipped and skidded over scummy rocks to get down among the pilings. Concealed in safe dark, he waited.

He was upset all over again by the worry that something would go wrong. The contact wouldn't materialize. He'd be left standing all night with only a case of gastrointestinal distress to remind him of the rotting river. He kept watching for signs of pursuit on the road, in the park, the murky sky. Nothing. Presently, off to his right, a pattering began. It grew louder.

He strained forward. Moments later an unmarked hydro-skimmer nosed into sight among the outermost pilings.

A cockpit light brightened. A tall figure raised, waved. Sean recognized a beret and long, gleaming plasto night-coat. He jumped into water and ooze and waded out. Seesawing, he lost his fear and soared up to a conviction of success as Wulf helped him aboard:

"Hi, man. Glad to see you split safe from the ratpack. There are straps on the bucket if you want 'em. I'm a shade late so we're going to highball."

Wulf fired up his pipe, braced his feet wide in the cockpit, peered into a rearvision mirror, and revved the engines. He used the mirror to back the skimmer recklessly from the pilings, then throttled ahead full. The skimmer's prow burst an ascending cloud of green gas.

Acceleration hurled Sean's spine against the back of the right-hand passenger bucket. Wulf took the craft straight out into mid-river with dashing disregard of the slop flying up over both gunwales. Before long at all he kicked the skimmer into a sharp turn to port. He brought her neatly broadside to the stern of a very large airfloat yacht that loomed with alarming suddenness. The yacht was completely blacked out except for tiny running lights fore and aft.

"Firebolt's sort of short of amenities like ladders," Wulf grinned, all white teeth in the darkness. "We go up the anchor chain. Follow me?" He led the way, strong and fast, and Sean went after him.

TWENTY-FIVE

Sean didn't much care to smell himself. It was unavoidable.

His skin, hair, clothing had picked up the putrid stink of the Pot during the short ride. The cabin to which Wulf led him, a cabin directly off the port gangway forward, had bad circulation. It was cramped, dim, and almost airless. It took the aromas and flung them back in his nose. He wanted to retch but decided that wouldn't be appropriate to such a critical meeting.

Wulf retired to semidarkness. He leaned against the wall, puffing blue smoke. Sean remained standing in the approximate center of the metal room, trying to figure things out.

"Just sit down, man," Wulf said finally with a chuckle. "There, in front of that window. They'll be with you right quick."

The window to which Wulf referred occupied about half of one wall. It looked black, contrasting with the pitted frame of silvery metal in which it was set. The bottom of the frame extended on down aways, then jutted into the room at a right angle to form a thick countertop. This countertop had a closed trap in its center, rather like the spring-open drawers on both sides of automated banking windows. What held Sean's eyes were the hands.

Skeletal, shining, and slim, they lay at rest, one on each side of the closed drawer. The articulated wrists connected to long rods ending in two sockets in the wall below the window. A macabre touch of melo to say the least. He dragged a rigid, uncomfortable-looking chair in front of the counter. Presumably the servohands were controlled beyond the wall. He wondered again whether all this trumpery was absolutely necessary. Oh well. If the Firebolt crowd felt they needed these trappings, he wouldn't open his mouth.

Another wave of anticipating success improved his mood during the next six or eight minutes. He was beginning to feel that the game was altogether won when a voice barked out of the wall:

"Good evening, Subadministrator Cloud."

"Uh, good evening."

He squinted for a telltale sign of someone beyond the

oneway window. By the light of a few small hooded cells spaced around the baseboards he saw only his distorted reflection, cheeks slop-spattered. What had sounded like barking, he quickly decided, was only the natural tone of a human voice coming through a scrambler and concealed speakers. A voice sexless, slow, growly, and totally beyond identification.

"We do express our regret at the surroundings, Subadministrator. The lack of amenities. However, those of us who have banded together under the name Firebolt have done so at extreme personal risk. The govt would not take lightly our intent to defy their colonial arms policy. So surroundings like this become necessary. I wish we could speak face to face, but I imagine you can forego that in the interest of protecting your home against the potential alien threat?"

"I can," Sean agreed.

"Excellent, excellent. I, by the way, am Midas. I am fully empowered to conclude the negotiations tonight."

Sean listened keenly to the voice. Each word was uniformly emphasized, tending to blend with the one preceding and the one after in a continuous sonovox blur. He heard something else behind the voice. A second sound or set of them, barely picked up by the scrambling amplifier. He began to itch and shift on the chair, tense for no good reason.

The silence seemed to demand an answer. He gestured. "We're more than agreeable to receiving Firebolt's help. By all means let's get down to specifics." While he spoke, his ear kept picking up something his mind couldn't classify. Deep down in the dark subconscious cells, that little noise that wasn't there threw the whole scene out of kilter.

Off behind him, Wulf pulled smoke and a little goo through his pipestem. Midas resumed his/her/its tin discourse:

"First, you will doubtless wish to look over a manifest of the armaments which we believe we can arrange to ship to the Martian colony." A whirr in the thick counter. Something was loaded into the hidden drawer on the other side, then trolleyed through to his side. The trap top sprang up. With squeaks and clicks the servohands came eerily to life.

One dipped down in the drawer, lifted a much-folded computer printout form. With a few false tries the other hand caught the last fold of the form and opened

the paper accordion-fashion in the air. The trap shut. The metal hands laid the form flat on the counter, smoothed it. The left hand deactivated, dead.

The right hand skated up to rest its index finger on the top line. "For easy reading, please note that this first column carries the standard universal military inventory number of the item. In this column the item's named. Next there's the caliber, velocity, virulence, or megatonnage. Lastly you see the approximate quantity of the item we believe can be made available—how and from where are subjects I trust we needn't go into. In some cases our group opted for offering smaller quantities than we might actually be able to—ah—obtain. That's because of the staggering logistics problems involved in getting more."

Sean only half heard. He was running his eye greedily down the descriptive column: hot damme! This would make the whole miserable trip to Earth worth it!

He saw air mines. Spore bombs. Modified directional lasers. A veritable small arsenal of the devices of Armageddon. He drove his mind back to the monotonous voice with effort:

"—the entire manifest, by the way, has been preplanned for just six vessels. Very shortly we'll discuss the most critical phase, namely making arrangements to deliver these weapons to the domes without govt detection of our launches."

"Yes." Sean bobbed his head inanely. He felt wildly hilarious, crazy with glee as he went over the list again. This was it, this would protect every last dome, this was, at last, victory out of defeat. He began to speak rapidly. "Yes, this couldn't be better, this is precisely what—"

In the quick silence of a pause, a microsecond after his eyeballs lit on the right servohand which had also gone dead, he truly heard the sound; the sound that slipped though the hidden speaker underneath the talking; the sound that had been there all the time.

Scraatch.

He stared at the servohands. All at once they activated, whipping the paper into the air, smoothing it, ticking fingers here, there, everywhere on it. Sean's belly ached.

The misdirection was too blatant. Even the hurry-up-make-noise confusion coming through the concealed speaker couldn't be wholly masked by the scrambler: "Ah, oh, Sub-administrator—may I direct your attention—here, here's a point we ought to—Subadministrator, your atten—*Sub—!*"

Sean jumped up from the chair. He glared at the black

glass, grabbed the servohands, turned both his wrists outward. Connectors in the servohands twanged. The printout ripped in half. On the other side of the wall Midas cried, "Ow!"

Sean twisted harder. The long rods linking the hands to the wall bowed. He kept twisting. The yelling continued. He shoved his nose up against the glass. "Turn on the lights in there! Turn on the lights so I can see your damme face!"

Somewhere Wulf exclaimed in astonishment. Simultaneously, the servohands went dead. Sean released them. They clacked on the counter, bent into hideous arthritic curves. Still hidden, Midas cried, "No, no, nothing's happened, I'm perfectly all right, don't turn on those lights, *I tell you, don't—*"

But someone did. In a similar room beyond the soft lampblack cloudiness of the window he saw a tall, hard-faced young man. Wearing dirty gray trousers and pullover but unable to conceal the govt style. The young man was in the background. Just inside the window, on his feet and looking absolutely frantic, Midas waved his white gloves madly. He behaved like an impotent god trying to bring the fall of night with mystic passes and spells that no longer worked.

Long past a hideous sense of failure, Sean reached rage: "This is an interesting turn, Mr. Secretary. Since you're Midas, I suppose that means Firebolt is another extension of the govt which can't be explained until a later time, due to the Eastbloc crisis?"

Beyond the window Hoog literally dithered. The amplifier carried the incoherent gobble. Wulf remarked breathily, "Man, this is a development which I surely didn't expect. But it's one I guess I better take advantage of." Footsteps came up behind Sean rapidly as he slammed his fist on the two-way glass. The glass whined.

"Hoog, you sneaky, unprincipled, lying son of a bitch, I demand to know what's going on."

Theodore Hoog raked his blotched nose, waved his hands, seemingly terrified of something in the room with Sean. Some kind of muzzle rammed Sean's backbone. He turned with a snarl. It died when he saw Wulf's tense and calculating smile.

"That's a pocket laser you feel, Cloud. Let's split fast with no fuss, what?"

"Don't—don't—you work for him—Hoog?"

"I did, but it just became time to take you home to the

folks who really pay my wage. I was trained eight years and planted for a minute just like this, but between you and me I never thought I'd see it. You and this doubledealing bunch of militarists will be the propaganda hit of the day back in Eastbloc." No longer friendly but vicious as a snake, the tall, powerful brown man collared Sean with one hand, showed him as well as the watchers in the other room a finely machined muzzle with the other. To Sean, hissed: "Blow your head off in a big red flash if you so much as stumble." To the listeners, roared: "You chase after me and I'll turn this fella into a diplomatic mess of several hundred parts, I kid you not, you bunch of beep-beeping Westbloc warmongers."

The shine of jihad in his eyes, Wulf backed up. He dragged Sean to the deck while Hoog and the assistant secretary pantomimed helpless, hopeless panic beyond the glass.

TWENTY-SIX

Wulf was supple as an athlete. He gripped Sean's arm with one hand. Planted his feet on the metal decking. Twisted at the waist. Fired his pocket laser. A lightbeam shot for the cabin door.

Like a seamstress Wulf laid the beam nearly all around the oval shape. The lightbeam sewed door and bulkhead together into a smoking, bubbling wall without seams. Wulf cackled under his breath. The rough, edgy noise belied his tension.

He booted Sean aft. Wulf's brown face was sweaty from something besides night dampness. And he wasn't breathing like an athlete. He swallowed air in honking gulps. Back in the cabin there arose horrendous noises of expensive one-way windows shattering, fists pummeling to arouse someone, voices yammering.

"You—you—" Sean puffed as he was shoved along, "—you're a double agent—?"

"Nah, man, I'm Pres Washbourne's ole mammy's antiquarian and servile bootblack." Wulf ran up next to the rail, whipped up his open palm so that Sean ran into it.

The impact nearly knocked Sean's head off. He sprawled on the deck, stupor and stupefaction giving way to rage. He tried to organize his mind so that the instinct for self-preservation would hide out until the opportune moment. Unfortunately his head, incisors, genitals, and arches hurt too fiercely. Wulf had no difficulty in scooping him up like a meal sack.

"You Westbloc cockers are all alike. Estupido. Of course I'm a d.a., but I tell you, man"—all this while folding Sean over the rail so that his head hung down toward the Pot—"I really didn't know who I was really working for till two minutes ago. I didn't dig the significance of Westbloc's whole ofay scheme till then." Wulf grappled with Sean's breech and waist, forcing him to grab the only handholds between him and the gurgling sewage: the anchor chain. In the dank river air the frenzy of halloos and beating fists increased. Wulf's tone all at once reflected urgency: "Now you drag it down that chain and into the skimmer and don't try to

fall off and drown yourself, man. If you do I'll lase the top of your head before you sink."

The double agent released Sean's ankles. The world turned turtle. He jammed his toes in one of the chain links. It nearly snapped his foot in half but arrested his fall. With alacrity and no attempts at drowning he climbed down to the hydroskimmer, panting all the way. His brain was panting too. *Jump him, jump him, jump him!*

Wulf landed on both feet in the skimmer's cockpit. He flipped switches. The cockpit lit. Up on deck two murky figures had arrived outside the entrance Wulf had sealed shut. For the moment their assistance consisted of beating the wall to indicate the presence of succor. *Whaaam*, the skimmer powerplant kicked on and Sean stumbled into the bucket with his shoulder folded under his jaw and his tail in the air.

In this humiliating position he came to understand the last few seconds as viewed objectively. A total rout, with himself as the brutalized buffoon on the receiving end. It did no good to fleetingly think as he unfolded himself that utter mindbooming surprise over Midas' identity had temporarily undone him. Excuses didn't change the fact that he was in a deadly tight spot; one from which only action of the type usually called heroic could extricate him. *Jump him, jump him, jump him!*

Oh shut up he said to himself as Wulf one-handedly backed the skimmer away from the yacht with maniacal speed. The double agent had his pipe in his teeth, was holding it with clenched jaws while he screwed the bole off. The halves separated. Wulf spat out the bit as the skimmer tore to center channel in reverse. Great waves of muck and slop plopped all over the cockpit. Wulf hurled the bole in a long arc and ducked. A concussion of light and heat nearly capsized the craft. Finally the worst noise and rocking passed. Wulf slapped levers. The skimmer careened into a tight U and headed upriver.

The rigor mortis smile on Wulf's dimly illuminated features told Sean that any comicality in the situation was entirely in his own confused mind. "That'll hold the cockers a sec or so. Not long, though. There's a patrol station a kilometer downriver. We've got to make waves." He poured on the speed. The planes lifted the bow till the river goo flew in high, nearly horizontal walls alongside both gunwales.

The skimmer flashed past the yacht, which now had an immense hole in its port bow. Into this opening flowed an

oleaginous tide that gurgled merrily. The yacht already showed about a thirty-degree list.

Sean finally turned himself from a pretzel to a human shape. He squeegeed his toes inside his boots. River rot oozed and sucked. He smelled of it, in his hair, his ears, everywhere. The stench heightened his sense of desperation.

He had to attack Wulf. But at least he could put the odds in his favor. He huddled in the bucket and feigned craven defeat (not difficult) while awaiting the opportune or otherwise final moment.

Wulf looked more formidable every second. The cockpit lights turned his face into a ferocious mask. In the man's purple-pricked eyes Sean discovered on gut terms the hate that Eastbloc harbored for its power rival. That kind of hate could stoke fantastic furnaces of energy, as now. Wulf stood spraddle-footed and flat-soled and square up in the wind, taking the murky spray in his eyes with hardly a blink as he hurled the hydro ever faster up the foul, twisty river.

Over the audible shiver-sound of the wracked hull and the boom of the engines, Sean shouted, "You were as surprised back there as I was?"

"Man, that's the understatement of anytime. I've been doing courier for this Firebolt crowd a few weeks now. Never had an inkling of the types behind it. I thought—" *Squeeeal* went the wheel, to avoid some drifting fertilizer drums. The skimmer heeled, righted, screamed ahead. "I thought those Firebolters were just some old sonofabitching philanthropic secret cabal-type daddies, just the way I told you. That's how they laid it out for me when they pulled me out of the WIA with a credit offer, that just had to buy my resignation. And how do you like that, by the way, Subadministrator? Eight and a half years in the WIA without so much as a sniff by those flagellators that I was on the other side's payroll? You're damn right this took me by surprise. But it's working out. Yes." A chuckle. His sidelong smile grew contemptuous when he noted Sean's sodden, sloppy posture of defeat. "Yes, why shouldn't it work out? That's what the motherland trains us for, man. All those years—just waiting for the split sec when there's something we can use. And can we use you! Oh baby!"

"Where are we going, Wulf?"

"Immediately? The first safe-looking pier. I know one about three kiloms up. Next stop is Biff's Bikini Bar, that's a little boutique in the Georgeville section. Run by a bunch of camarados. From here to there it'll be a run for it. Once

we're at Biff's though, we're on our equivalent of the old U.S. runaway slave railroad. It's home free from there to Eastbloc. I know they'll show you off in a parade in Jakarta. Hell, they may even exhibit you in Mecca itself."

"But what good's that?" Sean yelled back.

Wulf guffawed, executing an S-maneuver around an upside-down, out-of-commission buoy. "Are you 4-patchers that dumb? I didn't get that impression first time I met you. Live and learn, huh? Look at it this way, man. Eastbloc's got no colonies. So what is it when the Westbloc militarists say publicly they won't arm you people up there, then get set up to do it in secret? It's trying to tip the power balance all the way. Man, it's provocative!"

Fishing for possible escape hatches: "But listen, Wulf. There's still no real proof that Firebolt and the govt are one and the sam—"

"Owl turds!" screamed the agent, madder than Sean had ever seen him. "You saw the honking face of that Midas, didn't you? Govt! Govt through and through! What secretary's going to risk his toke in some hairheaded plot unless the govt's behind him? No secretary, that's what secretary! It's a govt plot! Kept in the dark so we wouldn't find out! I'm taking you all the way home behind the Incense Curtain and they'll fill you so full of cooperation gas, you'll give a forty-minute speech about how the govt offered you secret arms even when you're sitting on the johnny. With prop-think like that circulating, man, it's gonna be a war."

Avenging god, thought Sean wretchedly as he stared up at Wulf through gummed eyelids. *Avenging damme secret agent god. He wants a blowup and damme if I don't think he'll get it if they hype me into telling what I saw tonight.* Sean's try at disassociating Hoog and the govt from Firebolt had been feeble at best. He didn't believe it even while he said it. Hoog, the govt, *were* Firebolt, maybe for the reasons Wulf stated, or others, or both. It explained much.

Unfortunately, driving flat out down the Pot with a super-human adrenalinized oversized spy determined to make a coup, it explained much too late.

Behind, downriver, Sean heard insects buzzing. He perched on his knees in the bucket seat, squinted as Wulf slapped the rear mirror for a better line of sight. Against halated lights on the bank of a riverbend a squadron of shapes ran low to the water, coming on fast. *Saved!*

With a sleazy grin Wulf said, "You dreamer. Rather than

see me get back to Eastbloc with what I've got inside my head, they'll dump you like a bag of mealy Idahos."

About to insist that of course that wouldn't happen, Sean was prevented by the whine of a missile lobbed by the leader of the pursuit squadron. The missile lit in mid-Pot half a kilometer ahead of the skimmer's prow. An immense flower of fire grew from the river and boomed. In another second Wulf was vainly trying to divert them from a crash course with the inferno.

TWENTY-SEVEN

Pink-tinged phosphor light erected itself into a skyhigh rampart dead ahead. The glare bleached them both to white men. The noise had reached such a level that Wulf's cursing—screaming? no way to tell—was hideous dumbshow.

The double agent wrenched the controls so wildly that he resembled an entertainer whose image came sliding crazily into Sean's mind from long ago; from a novelty hour, it was; on one of the commercial channels, as capsuled and shot up to Mars to amuse the infants in the early days. Mr. Contorto, Esq.; a man of chickenbones left too long in waterglass; a man of the spangled gymsuit and solidified grin, twisting himself into impossible postures. So Wulf was now as a second missile scorched into the holocaust left by the first and doubled the lumens that raped Sean's eyes.

The hydroskimmer roared on, failing to respond. A Mr. Contorto adazzle with pink lights, Wulf gripped the reluctant lever between his knees. His boot soles smashed and mangled other dash instruments as he tried to move the frozen control.

Clouds of gobbets of river slop flashed around Sean's head, each gobbet a pink firefly, each cloud a pink firework. The bright metal wand of the bow sensor drooped at the tip, then melted together. Wulf's throat convulsed muscular action. "—foilfins—locked on m—rudders too—" He recognized Sean with outraged eyes. "It's your life, man! Pull with me!"

Whistlewhine, whistlewhine. Boom, boom. Sean crawled through the muck sloshing in the cockpit as the latest missiles came over. They spat on through the fiery holocaust to start a second one farther upriver. What Wulf said was true. The pursuers indeed wanted the double agent dead more than they wanted him alive. He leaped and slid his sticky fingers down over Wulf's on the shuddering lever and pulled until his shoulders were all pain.

One shoulder popped. The pain grew even worse. Wulf was quite close and smelled rank, of fear. Sean pulled like a maniac.

The skimmer was a quarter of a kilometer from the fire-

wall blocking the river at midchannel. The lever broke off in their hands.

The captainless craft hurtled on, climbing onto its port side, tipping, tilting, adding the disorientation of a sick angle to the other lights, noises, horrors racketing and dazzling all around them. Sean collapsed in the cockpit's side. Wulf oofed underneath him.

The skimmer heeled higher. Sean felt a lascivious kiss of heat as she sailed past the perimeter of the firewall with no room to spare. He shut his eyes against the glow.

Then they were out in the dark wind again. The buzzing of the pursuers was once more a separate, identifiable sound. The skimmer still rode high. She showed no sign of settling one way or the other, as if she were a stone caught between water and sky by some mysterious flux and destined to skip that way forever.

But it had to end, had to. Either he'd smackcrash down on her keel, to spring leaks and drown them or she'd flip over and dump them headfirst into the Pot, with the upside-down bucket seats and pitted chrome rails racing by overhead, guillotines—

All these were microsecond images, fragments; harbingers of his death, he was sure. A second missile-fueled firewall erupted upriver. Still carried by her momentum, the high-standing skimmer was curving to port. To port there was no fire at all, aha, wasn't that great, no fir—

Land waited instead. The shore. To receive them with an impact to make them jelly.

"Man, man—" Wulf croaked. It had been but a few heartbeats since Sean came sailing down on top of him in the messy port gunwale. He writhed. "—your knee, my—"

Sure enough, Sean had landed with his kneecap in the double agent's windpipe. They recognized each other again by the phosphor light that the splattered cockpit screen split into strange, soft rays. Up shot Wulf's hands. Disadvantaged, on the bottom, he still had killing strength. He'd seen the telltale recognition in Sean's eyes.

Enemy! Last chance! Inner Sean screamed. Outer Sean forgot about courage, pro or con. He beat both his fists to block Wulf's fingers at his throat.

"You murdering, warmongering cocker—" Wulf's hands sneaked through to rip at flesh. Sean heard little of the rest of it. There was too much noise.

Wulf's lips streamed foam. He wrenched his head, torso, wrists from side to side, trying to take Sean's neck along.

Sean had strength, and last do-or-die chemicals rushing in his blood. He fought as he'd never fought in his life, with knee and nail and fists made into mallets.

Wulf choked him harder. Somehow Sean got past the double agent's wrists, attacked the big brown head. He battered it, one-two-one-two, without letup. Wild triplescreen visions of rats biting one another flipflopped through his consciousness. He was one of the rats.

Blood spattered the visions. He saw blood on the pounding edges of his fists; blood turned black by the glare of the river firewalls.

The skimmer settled a little beneath him. It was to be the neckpopping keelsmack after all. He climbed the air trying to grab one of the buckets and lift himself away from Wulf who was giving him a very peculiar, startled, twisty-necked stare while dying.

Down came the keel, *crashwham*. Sean did an involuntary somersault. The skimmer pancaked along, caught him as he descended. There went a cartilage, kneebone, or worse.

He banged his forehead attempting to reach the remaining active controls as the skimmer seemed to accelerate and leap to wreck itself on the shore.

Or perhaps he was only dying faster than his flying bier?

Kersmack, the skimmer landed again. A lever still intact almost rammed his eyeball. Most of the little holiday-colored display dials strewn over the dashface had blacked out. Several squirted smoke through shattered lenses. Two drooled black lubricant to add to the befoulment through which Sean crawled as gracefully, dexterously, as any man who'd been stomped.

By now he was almost delirious. Another pancake landing made by the highflying craft smacked his cheek against the faces of the broken instruments. As he fell away from them the skin on his temple ripped open; a jutting lens shard. Blood slathered down, robbed him of the use of one eye. They must be close to shore now. The keel was beginning to rampage and shudder and grind. Then all pancaking stopped as the skimmer tore in over unyielding rock. Sean felt absurd, diddling and twiddling and poking his fingers in the remains of hot control-rod apertures in the hope that something, miracle or otherwise, would stop the cannon-ball ride.

The keel of the skimmer began to burst, rend, split with the quick *whang* of plasto stressed too hard. He seemed to see his mother's face up there beneath the worklight on the

stage of the planetary opera house. She seemed—*was*—damme, she became infernally nagging and busy sometimes. A mother's prerogative, he supposed. Unfailing as the old Earth rains. But tiresome. She was currently demanding a suitable personal epitaph from him on the occasion of his rocketing ride to the Pot shore and instantaneous death.

All bloody and sick with pain, he was for one instant suspended in the hellsound of the skimmer gunning in over a refuse-piled bottom. He was proud of himself for having met the Wulf test and survived it. He thought, *How damme inane*, even as he cried:

"I tried hard, folks, I real—"

My *God*. He jumped overboard an instant before the skimmer hit the rocky shore, rode up, ignited at its stern, and blew in half.

He sailed straight down. He landed headfirst in the gluey Pot. Even while he fought to right himself he was bemused by the novel bin in which the Reaper tossed his cuttings. A veritable sludgy sea smelling of synthotomato soup and offal. Rather warm. Comfortable, though. Nice to simply drift—

With a squeal he came to his senses. He kicked up through the crust. Air hit him, racket hit him—pursuit boats arriving—and pain hit him. He wanted to wave, hadn't the strength. He wanted to bleat, hadn't the voice. Probelamps on the bows and sterns of the govt launches began laying down tictactoe grids on the so-called water.

Finding himself located in one of the totally black squares reserved for either an X or an O, Sean managed a bleat. It went unheard. Launch personnel, lean and quick-moving against the phosphor cyclorama of the midriver fire, were too busy contacting one another on echoing talkhorns. God-like voices boomed up and down the Pot:

"See anything, Gridley? Any sign of the spy?"

"Must've pulped him good, sir. Can't spot a thing except the debris up by the fire on the shore."

A fire. Behind him. Crackling where the skimmer wreckage burned. In trying to turn, Sean made noise, *slosh-slosh*. Those on the launches blessedly heard him.

The probelamps hurt his eyes. He loved it, bathing his red-running face in it as he fought a dozy battle to keep from sinking. A couple of chrome hooks on poles were extended from boats jockeying on either side of him. One hook snagged his clothing, tore loose. One snagged his

shoulder—"Oooops"—and didn't. Heavenly sensation despite the way it hurt.

He became the object of speculation.

"Blood, muck—yuck, what a sight!"

"It's him! It's the spy!"

"Naw, look closer. He's way lighter."

Someone thundered on the talkhorn again: "Sir? Was the spy the light one or the dark one?"

"Light one. You've got him? I'm coming right over."

The official fell in the river while transferring from craft to craft. There was only one snigger. Pain and all, Sean was content to drift with the fierce iron hook in his flesh. Time passed. More. He felt comfortably warm. He could practically already feel the soothing tubes, nodes, nozzles, sprays of the medical complex that would restore him to health in short order. He let his eyelids rest shut against the dazzle.

"Who sniggered?"

No answer. The official in charge cleared his throat.

"Hellofa note. With one gone it's impossible to tell which was light and which was dark. Hellofa note."

"Sir?"

"What?"

"I think I heard the Secretary say the spy wore a shiny nightcoat." Others, their memories prodded, barked assent.

Once more the official cleared his throat. "Then this one's the colonial, right?"

"Can't tell for absolutely certain until we scrape some of the crud away, sir."

Scrape it away, scrape it away! Sean thought drowsily. The official ordered more maneuvering with the hooks. Sean was scraped, inspected, then dropped back into the sludge.

Dropped back?

Why no immediate lift to rescue? The fearworm began eating a new meal as if it hadn't had enough already. Munch, munch, MUNCH, MUNCH—

"The colonial, all right. Alive, too. Guess he'll have to be shot. Hellofa note."

TWENTY-EIGHT

The agony, then, was to continue.

Sean tried to open his eyes. He lacked the strength to break the encrustations of goo that sealed them shut. He watched the inside of his lids as patterns of probelamps bobbed up and down and sideways. He uttered another bleat to call attention to himself. After all, he was still hanging by a hooked shoulder with his jaws lifted out of the gurgly river by sheer concentration. All at once the pain intensified. That plus debate on his status made him feel sicker and more frightened than he'd ever imagined possible.

He began seeing Lydia on the curved screen of his inner lids. She waved at him, multiple-imaged. He knew he was delirious. He probably wouldn't be awake long enough to feel the last lasering. Small consolation. But all he had. And the lasering was surely coming:

"Uh, Gridley."

"Sir?"

"You step over here to this launch, will you?"

"All due respects, sir, I—uh, decline, sir."

"Gridley, I'm issuing a direct order! Take this laser and blow that man to pieces."

"I can't, sir, I—" Gridley gulped and bubbled. "Sir, don't ask—"

"Hellofa note, it certainly is," grumphed the chief. "You all heard Secretary Hoog, didn't you? He said distinctly, *This secret is too dangerous to live*. Some crap like that, anyway. Well—" More muttering. "All right, you insubordinate sods. Put some more lamps on him and I'll do it."

On Sean's inner lids, psychotic butterflies—some with Wulf's foam-tongued face, some with Hoog's behind cracked oneway glass—had replaced Lydia. His lids flamed white. The images were obliterated. Zow, he hurt. But it wouldn't be long now, would it? Ray!

"Hold those flaggraping lights steady, you incompetents!" yelled the chief. "I can't aim if—"

"Launch coming!" someone interrupted. "Slow job, sir. But she's bearing govt pennons."

"Oh, then I guess I can't shoot him yet." The official nearly expired of relief.

Sean was simply expiring. Yet he couldn't manage to bring the black curtain down of his own will. He was forced to live through additional seconds of infernal agony as the launch arrived, *putter-glug, putter-glug*. A crisp male voice identified itself as belonging to Ferdinand B. O'Dea, assistant secretary and personal emissary of Secretary Hoog. The official nearly cackled:

"We were just about to laser him, but now you're here. Seniority. You do it."

"Oh, no, that's not my responsibility," cried O'Dea.

Someone on another boat did an obscenely biting parody of the yelp. Sean would have enjoyed a laugh at the expense of the sniveling govtcrat except that he was busy wishing for the departure of his soul from his ears and nose in a puff of gas, or whatever similar metaphysical event signaled somebody conking off.

Secretary O'Dea blathered a few more excuses. The official interrupted, obviously suspicious of the credit being passed back:

"But that man's got to be killed. He knows too much. My orders were—"

"I know your orders! Of course he's got to be killed. He will be killed. But that's not my decision, no, sir, not by a kilom. That is the Secretary's personal decision. I—" Inspiration! "Let's take him to shore and the nearest hosp so Hoog can decide."

Somedammebody please decide, Sean screamed. But of course it only emerged as *glag, smawrf*.

"Gridley, a couple of you—haul him aboard. Better put another hook in him. You realize there isn't a medkit on one of these boats, O'Dea. What if he dies on the way?"

"That," came the withering reply, "is your responsibility."

Another hook zapped Sean's other shoulder. The latest metal thrust into his muscles added a piquant flute of agony to the already symphonic assemblage of pain: violins of pain sawing away in his retinas; tympani of pain booming in his knee; frenchhorns of pain winding in his dislocated and gored other shoulder. It became a crescendo as they swung him against the side of a launch. He simply couldn't take the torture one second longer. He gave a ferocious wrench.

One hook slipped out. Alarmed cries, threats, instantly supplied excuses—"You let him go!" "You let him go!"

“Symingson stumbled against me, he made me let him go!”—welled into a cathedral chorus that blended with the symphony in a vast finale. Sean sank peacefully under the surface as cymbals went *crash!*

Unfortunately he recovered in a fiendishly pure-looking room.

The room was bright. It had no windows. He didn't feel half bad. He cursed the advanced state of the medical art.

He was lying buck-naked in a bath of something that stirred like mineral oil, smelled like cold cream, and was heated to roughly 80°F. A small, tarnished plaque on one of the walls announced, *This facility donated to the Gen. Oatley Poindexter Army Teaching Hosp by his beloved Wife Sophie and the Educational Cultural Foundation of the Oatley Bacillus Co. 1989.*

Tiny brown-red eddies in the fluid bathing him indicated all was not completely well yet. He thought keenly of Lydia Veblen all at once. He wanted to live. God did he. The Secretary said distinctly, *This secret is too dangerous to live.* He began to thrash and slosh in the bath. He was so feeble, he made few waves.

A face slid into sight from the left. A hideous face, bursting with red sores under a slick glaze of ointment. Theodore Hoog's hands too were blistered and shiny, the gloves gone. Life had never been so stupidly, piercingly dear, nor his guts so jellylike.

“Uh, hello, Hoog.”

The Secretary continued to stare at him with all the warmth of the ritual executioner.

TWENTY-NINE

Hoog said, "I must speak to you both. Candidly, now I've botched things."

A little shift in the direction of Hoog's gaze, out past Sean's right side and back again, told him someone else was present. He started to turn his head. Lydia's voice:

"I'm sitting back here, Sean. You needn't move. I can see you. Besides, I think the Secretary wants to talk to you more than he wants to talk to me." He ignored her concern. Gripping the bath's rim, he sloshed and slipped around far enough so that there was a slightly elongated, out-of-focus image of her in the corner of his eye: a suggestion of brightly candycane hair; slender hands folded in repose in the lap of her peekthru. Her face failed to come clear. An ache bored up his backbone to the base of his head. He forced himself to relax again. A bit of his fear vanished as he played like a happy kid with the newtoy sound of her voice. Weary. Tender.

No, not all tender. Not simply exhausted, either. But submissive. The folded hands. Sad in a way, that. Sad. God he loved her.

Secretary Hoog activated a visitor's stool with an offwhite egg-shaped seat. It hissed to within reach and he lowered himself onto it. It was hard to tell whether the sigh came from him or the seat as it adjusted to his shape.

Hoog's hands made Sean nervous. Independent of the man, they seemed to strain and twitch toward one another. He kept them apart by will. His manner suggested that he wanted to rip and tear at the blistering eruptions.

"Chief Engineer Veblen is correct in a backward kind of way, Cloud," Hoog said. "Ever since you arrived at the port—well, a half hour after; since then—I knew Dr. Franconius was the man to whom I did *not* want to talk. You deduced, correctly, as you did many other things, that I supplied him with drugs and girls in order to prevent him from botching my plans. What an imbecilic old pol he is. A dungbrain. I must admit it cheers me a little to discover that even in the domes a few hack pols linger and peddle their clout. I've thought for a long time that Earth was the

only human habitat where the animals wallowed in their own incompetence. Well, let's see. Candid conversation. It becomes more pressing by the hour. You surely haven't lost mental sight of those alien vessels. I haven't either."

"A time here or there," Sean admitted. "But not for long."

The Secretary gave a quite-so kind of nod. "It's up to me, you see, to try to clean up my own mess. A group of us at cabinet and advisory level met. I was put in charge of the secret negotiations. I wanted to bring you three envoys into our confidence at once. I modified that to two envoys soon after you landed, as I mentioned. Principle's the same, though. I was outvoted, not without justification. Among my many dishonesties there have been a few truthful kernels. The security problem in Westbloc is critical. There are Eastbloc agents everywhere. Even in our dummy cabal, as I discovered." He allowed himself no more than a twitch of rue. "I did do my best, but I failed. As a matter of fact, I rather believed after my early encounters with you that I would fail. That's flattery, by the way. There's one consolation left. Wulf won't return to Eastbloc to spread the story of how the govt refused to arm Mars in public, then proceeded with a melodramatic—but necessary!—bit of mummery to achieve the same objective in secret. The agent—"

Lydia was up, moving, within range. Sean couldn't read her blue-gray eyes by the glare light. The lenses of her half-specs flashed like small mirrors.

"—died in the wreckage of the skimmer, I presume."

"He died before that. He attacked me just before the crash. I killed him."

Lydia removed her half-specs. She studied him like a specimen. One of her favorite specimens, but still a specimen. And went out of sight again.

"Exactly, exactly." Hoog's head bobbed up and down. "Just what I said. Our first conversations convinced me you were much more dangerous than you imagined yourself to be. Whether it's you personally or the result of stress placed on you by these vessels I can't say. The end's the same. I knew you wouldn't let the civilizing influence of the colony stop you from acting when the time came." A bitterness passed through his voice with that sentence; a resentment directed at some hateful superior. He concealed it quickly.

"We shouldn't have tried the trumpery, Cloud. I was too risky. Look what nearly happened. Eastbloc getting wind—"

why, we could have been at war next week. I continue to marvel at you, Cloud. Men never see themselves true. They're able to see others that way but never themselves." The respect, though grudging, was genuine.

With a tingling in his belly Sean asked, "Are you going to kill me?" Then he saw that Hoog's face was not sinister but merely locked by exhaustion.

"No."

"You told your govt hooligans I was a secret too dangerous to live."

"I meant Wulf principally. It was true! In the confusion you got included. Merciful God, man, Westbloc needs you desperately. Need the domes, that is to say. We want you to have those weapons!"

"Then why," Lydia asked from out of sight, "didn't the govt simply give them to us?"

Hoog's hand, all glittery with salve, waved. "For that I must go back. To the racial wars. To before the racial wars." Suddenly there was dread in the tidy room, and visions of rats with red teeth. Said the Secretary:

"More factors than most scholars can name converged in these three dreadful years. The process of deindividuation began years before, of course. Dissolving the family. Grinding the individual into the menacing anonymity of city life, which should, historically, have been a pleasure but turned out not to be. Our version, at any rate. Then there was the widening diffusion of individual responsibility for social acts—so many things led to the black and white confrontation. It had to happen—once intense, highly emotional behavior such as shooting your neighbor in the head over a slur lost its power to faze. I recall seeing an old newstape in which some whey-faced caster read copy referring to a multiple vehicle accident that produced seven deaths. The copywriter had used the standard jargon of the day. Another highway mishap. A mishap." He shrugged. "When the wars began, it had root feelings in race hate. But it also seems clear that people of both colors had been pushed to the intolerable limit by more than their color. When they destroyed one another, they were symbolically destroying much else, including the whole rotten, corruptive process by which qualitative life was itself destroyed. Fouled streams and putrid air. Sardine living and traveling. The collapse of institutions. The professor and the parson forced to teach and preach with sidearms strapped to their hips for fear some group of hopheads would appear to throw them off the lab roof or

drown them in the baptistry. Our misbegotten, blighted lives had been like that far too long, and it reached flashpoint. We shouldn't have been surprised. But perhaps, as children of the domes—even you classify, Chief Engineer Veblen, despite not having been born there. It shows in the way you both wear the 4 patch. A certain pride. You're better than we are, you think. And except in irrational moments when we jealously hate the very thing we began—we, Westbloc—we know and hope you are. Where was I? Yes. Being dome-raised, you can't be aware of the real outcome of those three years." A gentle, sorrowing little purse of his mouth. "Especially as we have gone to great lengths to conceal that outcome from you." He looked at Sean. "Unsuccessfully."

Hints and glimmers began to suggest themselves. He said nothing. Lydia put in:

"The Mars colony was the new start, wasn't it? A tangible hope for a better ending?"

"Yes, yes, naturally. That wasn't my point, however."

"What was it?" Sean wanted to know.

"Perhaps you don't know the immediate result of the wars. The trauma."

Sean said no, he didn't, though privately he was beginning to. Hoog explained:

"After the wars there was a gradual awakening to precisely what had happened. At first the recognition was on a narrow scale, as I'll try to suggest in a moment. Then it spread. I mean the realization that all the generations of effort in behalf of a peaceful, sane, ordered existence—society—effort by all too few, but effort nonetheless—had utterly failed. Gone down the sewer. Were wasted. We looked around and saw the rubble and that was the shock of shocks. Conscientious if inadequate attempts to deal with traffic congestion, urban sprawl, social crisis"—*glitter* went the backs of his hands—"all undone in three years. Westciv—and in particular Westbloc, had reached a dead ending after centuries. And someone had put up a sign on that wall reading, *Ha ha, you've failed*. A mind—or a society—can only stand so much of that sort of hard staring at the truth. At least that's so here in the West. Sometimes the cryptic personalities of our armed rivals elude me. Westciv man has always tended to carry a big pack of guilt on his back. After the war the pack grew too heavy. Realized we'd let the old politics, the old ways, hold sway a little too long. Hadn't done enough, soon enough.

“At the time the wars ended I was twenty-seven years old. I was doing quite well, career-wise, in the govt. I was district chief of the Newyork office of the Consumer Protection Bureau. When the fighting ended, my home in the Borough of Poughkeepsie—northern edge of the district in case the geography’s unfamiliar—was still standing. But I had lost my wife in what came to be called the Bronxville Skirmishes—forgive all this personal allusion. I want you to understand how I came to realize what had happened. I was grieving and single. There was a tremendous shortage of personnel to run the govt, which was frantically trying to put things back together. Thus I was transferred down here. In the weeks and months right after the last battles, it became apparent that something dreadful—a side-effect—was happening as a result of our seeing, at last, that we in the West had just plain botched it up. Everyone was working overtime. I’ve never believed that hard, worthwhile work led to serious problems—(even at my advanced age I lug my sack of Puritanism on my back, don’t I?)—but then, here and there in the govt, people began to collapse. Mental breakdowns. It became so widespread and excessive throughout the govt that a secret crash program became necessary if the govt was to continue to function at all. Free psycho-aid to govt staffers of a certain job classification and above. My job rank was one below the first class to be given treatment. My wife—my present wife—was in a privileged classification. I married Letitia after a courtship of twelve days.” That was said in Lydia’s direction; it was almost apologetic.

“I suppose that’s why I’m a secretary rather than an inmate somewhere. It’s certainly the reason I was able to cling to relative sanity while many others couldn’t. It wasn’t pleasant to see it happen.

“The collapse of those in the govt—usually perceptive, sensitive souls—were the first telldales. Quickly it became evident to a few of the wiser heads that Westciv, collectively, might well have received a psychic blow from which it couldn’t soon recover. Now bear in mind, this awareness was restricted at first to a few, some within the govt, some in ancillary occupations where preoccupations like this came easy. The handful of state U’s left standing, for example. They helped staff the first govt task force after the colony idea germinated. Outside, the great masses of survivors were still in an utter daze, too busy trying to find their alarm clocks in the ruins, so to speak, to worry about the meaning

of the wars. When they had resettled their lives, an analysis of the wars grew widespread—well, that in a moment, a moment.

“In the govt, as I told you, there was a growing fear that our high order of failure would breed chaos. As you’ve seen, it did. A task force was hastily arranged to do something about it. The Mars colony was founded in a belief that it might offer a fresh hope. So off you went—or rather your parents—while we stayed here and mucked along, less and less able every day to keep secret the exact nature of what had happened—bankruptcy of the whole system, ending in murder in the streets. When ordinary people found their alarm clocks, then stopped to listen to the few remaining pundits, they too understood. They heard the dire warnings about what this could mean to the West, and perhaps in what happened there is a certain element of self-fulfilling prophecy. Yet I believe you can’t explain it away altogether in those terms. No. By no means.”

Sean stirred, his mind like a dripping sponge still under the tap. He managed to say, “Explain what?”

“The simple fact that when the populace realized what had happened—realized it with finality and on an irretrievably broad scale—it drove them crazy. Literally. The loony phenomenon jumped from within the govt to everywhere outside. You’ve observed the results. All these years, Westbloc has continued to decay. The domes have been fed lies by our newstapes. All right, Chief Engineer Veblen, you may smirk a little if you wish! But let me remind you”—a touch of anger stirred the eyes just above the greasy comedian’s nose—“the lies were benevolent! Planned for the express purpose of giving you colonists a chance! We didn’t want you to become entangled—poisoned—by what was happening on Earth. We did want you to make a brave new start, and you may jeer at the sentimentality, but it was sincerely motivated.”

Said Sean: “Nobody’s jeering, Secretary.”

Said Lydia: “You’re telling us that after the colony got off, people here lost their minds?”

Said Hoog: “Weekly. Daily. Hourly. And it’s continued into the second generation, as you, Cloud, inadvertently discovered at one of the secret asylums. Secret to you, I hasten to add. It’s no secret in Westbloc that a majority of our people are incarcerated for their own good. Of course we try to hide the exact percentage because it’s so—alarmingly high. We have been reasonably successful at that. Eastbloc

agents haven't thus far, to my knowledge, discovered the absolutely horrifying extent of our suffering. But as you saw, we're still sweeping the new loonies off the street day and night. For the first time, a society has been confronted with a psychomedical crisis of a new order. Epidemic lunacy. All the psychic drugs in the world can't attack that, not given the root causes, nor the fact that most of the pharmafactories had to be converted to arms work years ago, then reconverted, lately into asylums."

"Of the kind I saw," Sean said.

"That's only a fraction of it, my boy! A fraction of it! Hardly any semi-sane people remain to run the cities and the skeleton govt. Those few—again as you and Chief Engineer Veblen discovered—are on occasion forced to play a multiplicity of roles just to convince visitors such as yourself—not to mention Eastbloc espionage agents!—that Westbloc society, if not exactly well and strong, is still not decimated, and therefore cannot be regarded as a ripe target for attack by the East." Hoog fingered his nose, uncontrollably. Then he drew out a large papehank and attempted to wipe away grease that had gotten onto his collar. With fervence he added, "If they knew. Ah, my God, if they knew! We're trying to make sure they don't."

Old images flicked and ticked in Sean's mind. The Pacifican delegate who alternated as a musician. Or, more likely, the musician who alternated as a Pacifican delegate. Dept store clerks who also performed in theaters. One show running, not several. One club to which a rento car could take sightseers because no others were operating. He recalled the girl who'd passed him the initial message from Firebolt. There was no longer doubt in his mind that she had indeed been the same Gamb girl whom Hoog had dumped on Franconius to silence him. A govt employee.

"All right," he said, "but why the Firebolt mummery?"

Before the Secretary could answer, there was a new arrival. A small, undistinguished man in a plain, rather shabby tunic. A man of shrunken features, lackluster eyes, age, and apologetic step: "*Um, slurp. Ah—?*"

"No, I haven't asked them." Hoog sounded irritated. "I'm coming to it. Just sit down." A whisper then, for Sean's ears only: "You see how widespread it is? There's been a deal of talk lately about whether we ought to file commitment papers on him, too."

With meek eyes and hopeful smile, Pres Washbourne found another stool and sat. In a corner.

THIRTY

"Very well," Hoog said. "Firebolt. The nub of it." He was on guard again; subtle, the battler.

"Clear up one or two matters first, will you please?" Sean asked as he stretched his formerly dislocated knee to make it more comfortable in the soupy liquid. He did this without thought, the same way he noted his nudity, and Lydia's presence, and refused to worry about it.

Secretary Hoog was beginning to look a little deadly around the eyes. *I haven't asked them. I'm coming to it.* Sean'd have to beware that whammy, whatever it was. He said:

"You really smoothed the way wherever possible. You didn't want me poking outside of the tight little area you stage-managed because you didn't want us to catch on to all the mass insanity business and so forth. But you did want me in touch with Firebolt, which was just the govt in disguise, for reasons not quite clear yet. You called off the hovercraft following me the first night I met Wulf?" A nod. Sean mentioned how the ubiquitous malfunctioning riot defense devices had refused to fire in the area near the Three Kennedys Fountain: "Could it be that Wulf shut them off completely so the district'd be secure for that secret confab?" A nod. "Well, damme if he didn't make a mistake on that one. Obviously a lot of what Wulf told me that first night was window-dressing, even though he did believe he was working for a cabal, not the govt." A nod. "And at the hotel—Lydia's second meeting—you knew that was transparent as anything." A nod. "You practically let me escape from the Nixon-Hilton because you wanted me to reach Firebolt." A nod.

"The minute the hour was up," Lydia said, "he told the assistant secretaries they weren't to even think about chasing you. He rushed down the hall to Harloe's suite to use the vis, without even one threat about arrest. Without even one scowl. I thought it was very queer at the time."

"I had more pressing affairs," Hoog commented. "Had to reach the yacht ahead of Cloud here."

"And we didn't fool you one bit?"

"No."

"Well, that's damme comforting." After a minute Sean added. "This makes sense out of all sorts of things. Your behavior, for one."

"My behavior?"

"Hostile one time—such as when you threw me out of your office—and worried as anything about my welfare the next. At the asylum, for instance. I trust the hostility was the faked part and the concern that I'd stay alive and sane long enough to reach Firebolt was real?"

"Uh—largely."

"All right, go on. Firebolt."

"Circumstances and diminishing options made it necessary, Cloud. Let me review. I told you the Eastbloc threat was genuine. That many Eastbloc spies were in the area. You believed neither claim, I think, true as they were, and are. Other things which I've explained, or you've guessed or unearthed by accident are also true. The scientific resources of Westbloc are next to bankrupt. That's why I found it necessary to muzzle that scientist, Elwyn, at the reception. He was exposing a nasty truth. Most of our top technologic thinkers have gone completely crackers and are now locked up. As I also hinted, weapons production is down to nil due to the necessity of committing funds so heavily to caring for our lunatic population. Weapons inventories are thinner than thin. That manifest which I showed you as Midas—precious, every item. We have not our finger but our whole head in the dike. The lamps do burn late, Cloud. We are trying minute by minute to stave off the hour when Eastbloc—far stronger than we are now—will discover our plight, and attack."

His voice went lower, depressive: "From the beginning the govt has been steadfast in favor of arming the domes. But because Eastbloc would consider the aid, if provided openly, provocative, we had to construct an alternate method. Firebolt. You were followed and protected so carefully simply because—as you now know—it was mandatory for you to encounter Midas.

"You see, it's either a case of using the weapons ourselves or giving them to you. As I said, we have precious few left in the tactical class—and hardly any to spare. Nor do we actually have the skilled manpower it takes these days to operate complex weapons systems of the order we're discussing. Our only real defenses are a joke—those antiquated anti-riot devices built into the cities after the wars. And

they're broken down half the time, aren't they? Dr. Elwyn was wrong on only one score. We did know about the fleet entering the system. A very few at the top knew it, before you arrived. We silenced the man who actually discovered the fleet's presence in our system, for fear the knowledge would spread panic. The poor fellow's languishing at a converted bayonet facility up in Old Manitobe. Sedated around the clock. You do see the govt's predicament, though? We fear Eastbloc and we fear that fleet equally. That forces another choice of options. Where will the remaining stocks of arms do the 'most good? We take the calculated risk. We opt to arm Mars. That puts the burden of defense entirely on a young and vigorous colony—"

At last the hook struck. Sean began to wriggle and rage silently; he saw what was up there at the end of the line. All he could think was, *Unfair!*

"—you'll have to meet the alien threat if threat it proves to be. Should Eastbloc grow truculent, from your position in space you'll have to act in our behalf and threaten retaliation. Eastbloc, if things can be properly arranged, won't know the truth—won't know that only Mars is really fully armed for war—perhaps for years." His eyes held a kind of restrained messianic madness as he concluded: "I kept Franconius drugged because I have no intention of letting that wretched old pol be privy to all this. I'm certain he'll accept credit for the success of the mission. He's that type. No doubt he'll claim he was confident of the outcome all the time. But it really rests with you, Chief Engineer Veblen, and you, Cloud. Westbloc may endure. May even recover a measure of sanity. Perhaps even a scrap of the good life that went under in the wars along with so much that was bad. I doubt I'll see it in my lifetime. But it's possible. Provided Eastbloc doesn't inundate us. Provided"—he lifted his head—"you two can keep a secret."

For just one tart moment Sean felt sympathy. There were no govts here. There was only a young, strong, foolishly exuberant and inexperienced childman confronting a parent who had soiled himself because growing senility weakened the bladder valves—

The moment soon passed. It was replaced by an awareness of the nature of the secret and the decision. That struck him hard. Lydia spoke:

"It's filthy."

Hoog glanced at her. "What is, my dear?"

"Absolutely filthy! Moral blackmail!"

"I wouldn't deny it. It happens in the best families."

"What if the fleet proves hostile and things go wrong in spite of kept secrets and Eastbloc decides to attack at the same damme time?" Sean exclaimed.

"We'll never be free of all risks," Hoog admitted, "and that's certainly one."

"But the domes would go under!" Lydia protested.

"With a more vigorous fight than we're capable of waging, I'm sure," Hoog agreed.

Sean exhaled. "You bastard."

"Swear if it makes you feel better, Subadministrator. None of us in Westbloc relishes what we've been forced to do." He rose, ferret-quick again, and said all in a breathy rush with sticky fingers waving under Sean's nose, "You really don't have any choice, you know. You really have to defend us. You owe it to us."

"Why?" Sean fairly thundered, causing the early pink healing on his shoulder to throb and twitch. Lydia was right on top of him with her own "Why?"

Hoog gave it to him between the eyes. "Would you really turn your back on an invalid parent?"

Things spun, whined, whistled and buzzed. *Yes! yes! yes! when the parent has made a mess—a botch—a cosmological fugup of everything—*

Somehow he was speechless.

"Come, come," Hoog said. "I must have your answer."

Sean looked at Lydia. She looked at him. They tossed horror between them like a ball.

"*Oh, shlerf, eh—!*"

Three heads turned. In the corner Pres Washbourne was weeping and touching himself because there was a stain growing and darkening on his front below his waist.

THIRTY-ONE

"Home. Home is the wanderer," said Franconius for the eighth or ninth time. "Thrilling."

Sean leaned his whole weight on the viewbridge rail. He kept his head turned toward the trans-laminate so he didn't have to confront Harloe's jiggling chins or enlarged blue-oatmeal eyes. The *M. S. Giovanni Schiaparelli* rattled and groaned with comforting familiarity. Looming, Mars reddened the dark outside.

Lydia was beside Sean, thigh touching thigh. At the old pol's repetition of his latest wheeze Sean sensed her muscular tension, prelude to some rebuke. He moved his hand, which was much thinner now. He covered Lydia's.

He sensed resistance in the tightness of her fingers beneath his. At length she relaxed. In silent agreement, he presumed. It would do no good to flay the old bananabrain now. The two of them continued to stare at the rusty planet without so much as exchanging a glance.

"I, ah, can't precisely recall how soon we'll be stepping once more onto the soil of our beloved homeland," Franconius mused. "A thrilling moment. I must prepare—"

"Right you are," Sean said. "A little more than three days, body time."

"Don't you have a few remarks you want to rehearse?" Lydia asked.

"I've been rehearsing them, my dear, been rehearsing them!" Franconius belched. He fell against the wall, righted himself with apologies. "But it's never too early for polishing up the syntax, what? Are you two ignoring me? I have the queer feeling that you're ignoring me."

"Why, no, Harloe," Sean said rather tiredly. "What gave you that notion?"

"You never look my way these days. Disconcerting. A man in my position is entitled—"

"Of course you are," soothed Lydia. "You brought the mission home successfully."

Franconius stifled a burp. "That's right! I did! We will be provided with armaments. Shiploads of armaments, very soon now."

A Sean that was reflected on the inner layers of the trans-laminate looked bleak as statuary. "We will indeed."

"But I'm not crystal clear on the details." Franconius wiggled his fingers fuzzily before his face, as though driving away invisible insects.

"I wasn't present for the final negotiations. I never got to hear the clever Secretary Hoog explain the details of the troublesome details, Harloe," Lydia said without turning.

"That's right," Sean picked up. "Don't you remember me explaining?" He hadn't, but Franconius, still drugged, wouldn't know the difference. His muttered assent proved it. "You remember that the Westbloc govt had to decline our requests with regrets, because of the continuing arms race with Eastbloc. Well, I came in contact with a group of private citizens with the wherewithal and private resources to arrange the necessary shiploads to be sent to the domes."

How easily the lies came. How childishly weak they sounded. He would have some greater difficulty making the story convincing to the unhallucinated residents of the dome colony. Still in all, he was convinced that he could. The presence of an invisible clock tick-tocking off the increments until the arrival in Martian space of those vessels from—someplace—would make the colonists accept the story without much question, he believed. They would be much more interested in accepting the cargoes of arms that would be on the way within a fortnight. He could tailor the telling, too. Leave out certain pieces. All the truthful parts, for instance. That way, no one on Mars would know that the existence of a group like Firebolt was impossible. He'd be as banal and cheery as the regular newstapes—Eastbloc situation tense but private citizens leap to our aid—and they'd believe him, as long as he and Lydia shut up about the asylums and the rest.

"Oh yes," Franconius gargled. "Now I recall something to that effect."

"You really should go along and practice," Lydia said.

"I will, definitely. You know, Chief Engineer Veblen—" About to fall again, Franconius saved himself by seizing the rail. He tried to focus on her profile. He was too zapped. He spoke to Sean's knee. "—I find I misjudged you. You are a most reasonable person. I can't for the life of me remember why I disliked you." He wigwagged a perky finger. "I plan to recommend you for a commemorative medal. You too, Cloud. Yes! Both of you. It's not right that they strike

just one medal for me in return for leading this mission successfully. I'll insist they strike three, that's a promise."

The doctor got up. He lurched in a circle until he oriented himself, then went stumbling away to his quarter. A cheery hum drifted after him, interspersed with snippets of his private monologue: "—doubtless I'll have to prepare a special address for the medal ceremonies as well. Incorporate some of the remarks I plan to make when we land. Expansion's called for. The grandiloquent phrase. The classical (*belch*) image—" Talking and making music, he disappeared into the dark at the end of the viewbridge.

"You never told me in so many words," Lydia said, "why you finally said yes to the Secretary."

"Isn't it obvious? There was no other choice." He sighed. "I'm glad Hoog managed to slip a healthy extra ration of the stuff in Harloe's valise before we took off. It'll keep him humming and bubbling till we land."

"He'll have to taper off sometime. In the aftershock, he might remember—"

Sean shook his head. "Hoog's sending a hamper of drugs on the first arms flight. And on every delivery thereafter. A lifetime supply, practically."

Her blue-gray eyes rounded. "Do you mean the two of you conspired to keep that poor old simpleton addicted for life? You're absolutely vile."

"Do you think I enjoy everything we've had to do, Lyd? Do you think I'm having a smashing wonderful time telling lie after lie and habituating an old feeble sotbrain to the point of uselessness? I hate it. It makes me feel old. Tired. Like the young kid who has to go to work for a living before he's ready. They say everybody has to grow up sometime. The joker is, they never can tell you when it'll happen or how it'll feel."

Lydia tried to smile. "Ole devil responsibility."

Sean found nothing funny. "It stinks."

She sighed. "Yes. I haven't been able to sleep at all lately."

In an arch tone he said, "I'm sure I couldn't comment about *that*."

"Look, dear, I told you—I need time to work it out in my mind. The thought of—well, you know how I've felt for ever so long—"

"I sure do." He studied her eyes with apprehension. "A sea-change only temporary?"

"Are you making fun of me? With the two of us privy to—all that? It practically forces me into your bed, I'm afraid."

She smiled again, then. Hesitantly. But genuinely. "I don't think I'll mind awfully once I make up my mind to it. Just give me a while."

The tension between them passed. They held hands. He said a few banal but heartfelt things about Lydia's change of heart being all, at base, that gave him fortitude to keep playing the miserable unethical game in which he found himself. She allowed him some kisses, which made him feel somewhat better. They could work it out, provided forty dozen complicating factors didn't abort their plans.

He thought resentfully of Earth somewhere behind them, thrusting all its burdens on the domes. He thought of the vessels slipping in somewhere out there past the growing red ball. The whole mess had no clear-cut definitions, no sense of rightness/wrongness anywhere. He despised that most.

He stared in a fixed, unhappy way at home filling the black of space, inexorably larger with every mortal second that went by. He certainly wished there were a reasonable way to avoid landing there, but he'd abandoned any solid hope of finding one. So they simply held hands in the red-denying light and waited.

Captain Phong glided from shadow. He announced with mandarin sibilance that the evening's meal would shortly await them on the table. He spoke three times before they heard.

Two thousand shining cones wove through the asteroids, their formal traveling pattern disrupted, and then reformed once the jagged tumbling bits fell astern. The vast eyes shaded the color of flame concentrated on the displays where squiggling lightdarts brightened steadily. The hissing that amounted to battlechanting passed back and forth among the cones with joyful new volume. All systems remained locked on the red-rusty sphere.

In complex tongue the voices shuttled their expectancy back and forth:

—*Arrange.*

—*Arranging are.*

—*Interception factor now estimated is. Within the fourth period—*

As the cones widened their spacing until they resembled a moving plane of lights, the initial period went by.

Then the second.

The third.

A series of voices like soprano chiming signaled the fourth

period. The hissing grew. The cones formed a wall, and the wall spanned a vast sector of space, tilting from its baseline as though to fall on top of the red-rusty world. On high-resolution displays, circular gray smears began to appear, denoting the sections of the planet on which the displays locked.

All heard the cracklerasp, the queer gabble which fed directly to analytical engines within the cones and back out again in meanings the brains behind the vast eyes might understand:

WE HAVE DETECTED YOU, WE HAVE DETECTED YOU, OUR HABITATIONS ARE DEFENSIVELY ARMED, BUT WE WELCOME YOU IF YOU COME PEACEABLY—

The hissing shunted from cone to cone, loud as the caramel seas so many distances behind.

WE HAVE DETECTED YOU, WILL YOU IDENTIFY, WILL YOU INDICATE WHETHER YOU COME PEACEABLY—

Multifoliate light signaled amusement in vast eyes. In space the wall of neatly patterned lights tilted perfectly forward, a precision maneuver—

—WILL YOU PLEASE INDICATE WHETHER—
And continued to fall, accelerating.

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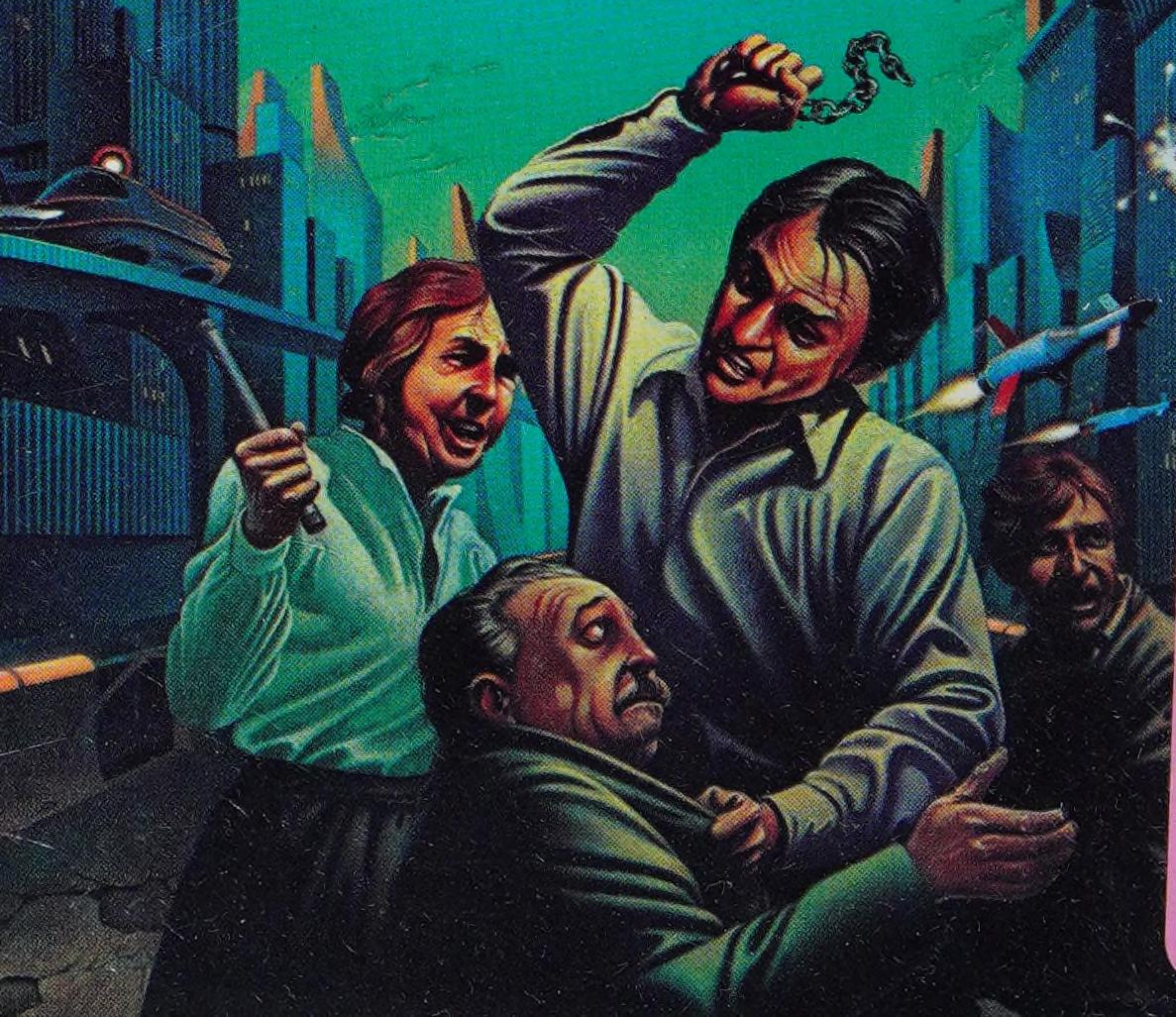
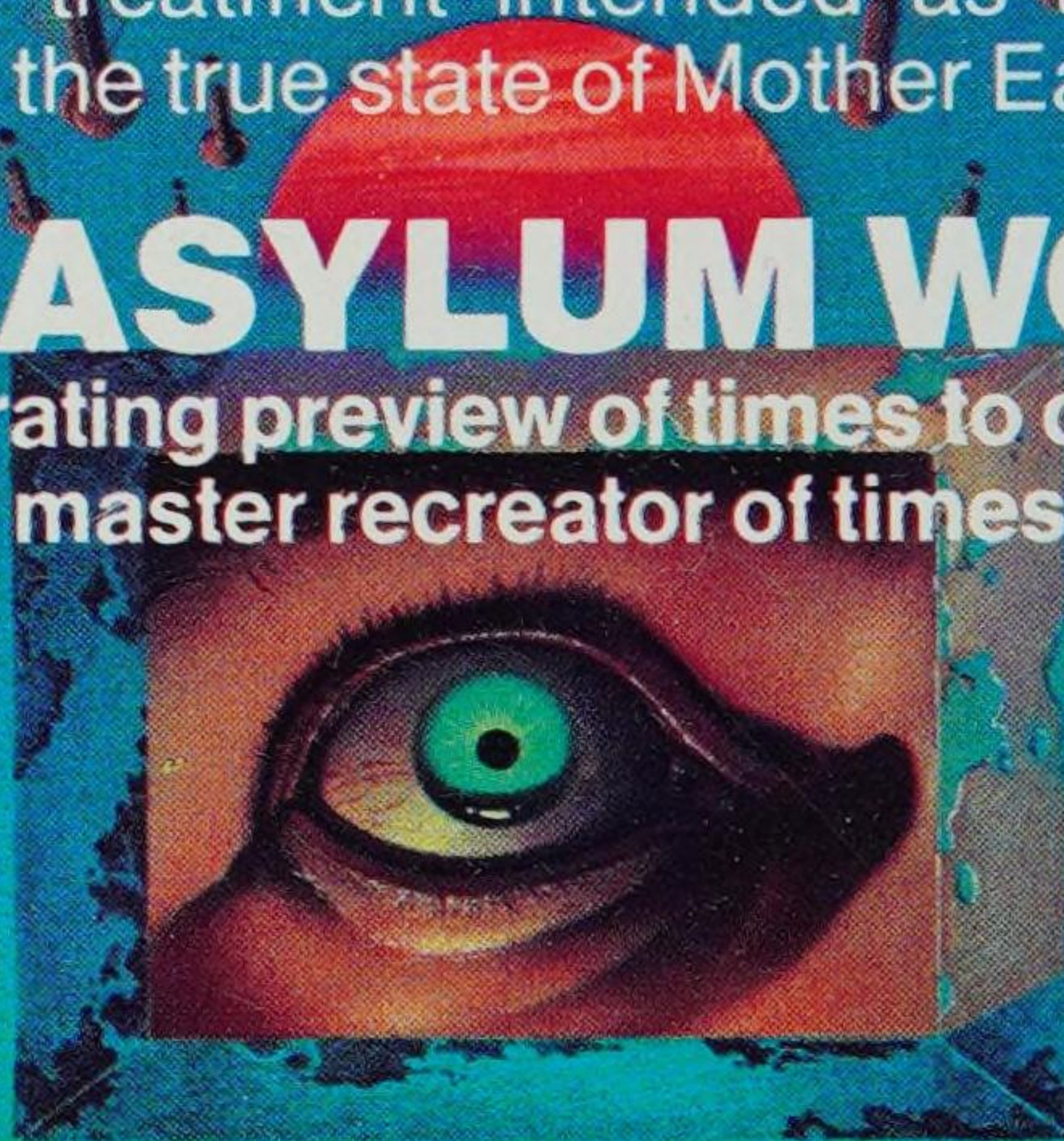
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