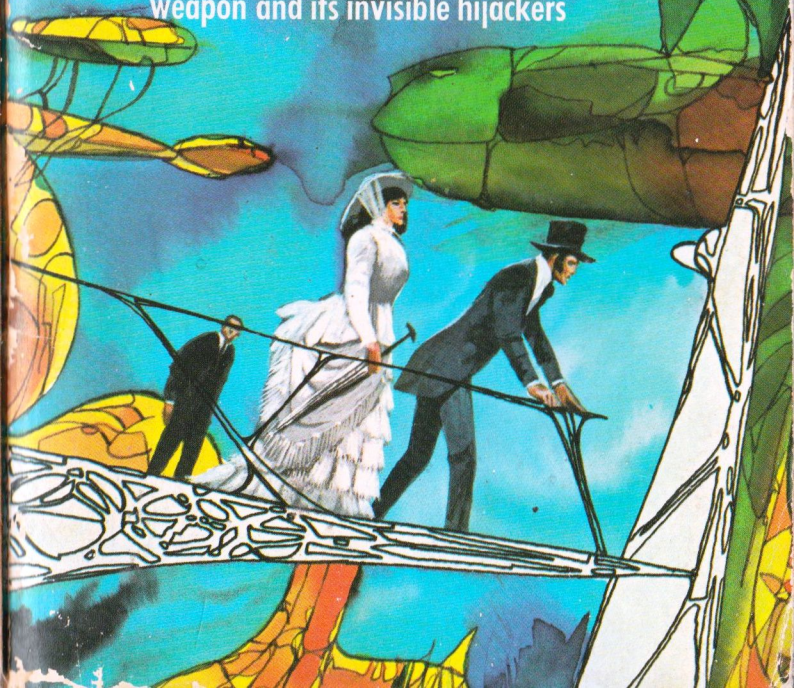


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by LOUIS TRIMBLE

THE NOBLEST EXPERIMENT IN THE GALAXY

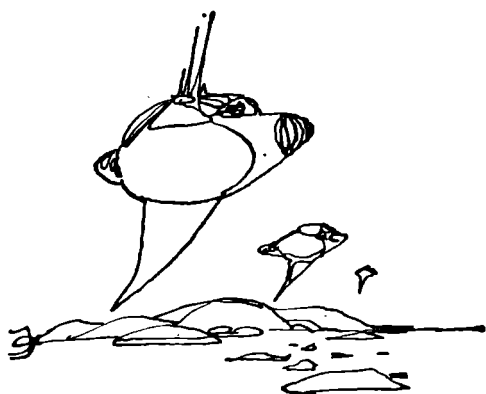
The problem of the invincible
weapon and its invisible hijackers



In the midst of his uneventful life, Zeno Zenobius awoke to find himself a gentried citizen of Wooten Dorset, England—a most unusual little town. A utopia of perfect, pleasant weather. A cornucopia of jasmine, eucalyptus and banana trees. He gave little thought to the amazing anachronisms amid the Victorian elegance: hovercrafts, electric lights, typewriters, and Zeno's very own computer.

But then a nagging worry just below the depths of his conscious finally burst out like an infected boil, and Zeno discovered there were two of him: Zeno Past and Zeno Present, Zeno I and Zeno II. And the purpose of Zeno I was to find out what Zeno II was doing in Wooten Dorset. . . .

Turn this book over for
second complete novel



THE NOBLEST EXPERIMENT IN THE GALAXY

by LOUIS TRIMBLE

ACE BOOKS

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PROLOGUE

i

REPORT: Pogany, Head, Special Investigations Division, Anthropol, to Chief, Anthropol.

Subject: *Defection of Eight Officers of the Galactic Military Forces of the Intra-Galactic Military Forces of The Intra-Galactic Federation.*

Background: Eight missing Gal-mil personnel (see Appendix A for names and ranks), assigned for disciplinary reasons to the recently discovered planet Bilduk, apparently defected from their posts at 17-30 hours, Sol 17, 2934 Post-Inundation (adjusted to Earth-based galactic time). Also missing are two Federation supply ships, one Anthropol study team ship, and one Galactic Military armed light cruiser, all in orbit around Bilduk at the time. Found dead at the Federation's Bilduk base camp were six members of an Anthropol study team and twelve nonranked members of the Gal-mil protective force. Missing are the three ranking Gal-mil officers. The dead were all apparently killed by an attack from a Bildukian tribe encamped near by. One Federation employee, a member of the Anthropol study team, survived. His account of the events is given below.

The eight missing Gal-mil personnel were temporarily demoted in rank and assigned to the garrison on Bilduk following an abortive attempt on their part to infiltrate the policy-making echelon of Gal-mil Command. Their purpose in this infiltration was, by their own

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statements, to return the military to its former policy of using immediate and total force to solve galactic problems. Bilduk was chosen as their disciplinary post as it is a newly discovered planet inhabited by nomadic, warlike people, and it is isolated from the main-streams of galactic traffic. It was claimed by the Gal-mil Discipline Board that such isolation under virtual battle conditions would make the dissidents realize that force was not always the most satisfactory solution.

Investigation and Results: The personal account of the surviving Anthropol study team member is as follows: "The shuttle from the Federation supply ship landed at 17-12 hours. As it was unloading, eight Gal-mil personnel of officer rank appeared from their quarters and took charge of a large crate. Opening the crate, they removed a weapon I could not see clearly as I was stationed at the other end of the encampment. Also immediately, the Gal-mil building disappeared and the roof collapsed, pinning me beneath the wreckage. I lay under a protective layer of rubble listening to a charge from the Bildukians camped near by. It was at this time my fellow Anthropol team members and the nonranked Gal-mil personnel guarding them were killed. (I learned this only after the rescue ship came and released me.)"

Under questioning, the survivor insisted that his use of the word "disappeared" was correct. To quote: "One moment the Gal-mil building, containing the three ranking officers, was there; the next, it was gone. I believe that I felt a surge of heat, but I cannot be certain as I was stationed well over a hundred meters away." From this, it appears that the dissidents were able to destroy their fellow officers and the buildings through the use of an unknown weapon. A check of Anthropol files indicates that weapons with similar abilities were outlawed some three centuries ago and all existing models

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as well as the prototype were outlawed and destroyed. Since no such weapon was presumed to exist none of the missing ships had defenses against it.

How this weapon came into existence and how it reached the dissidents are matters under Priority I investigation.

The route taken by the dissidents and their current whereabouts are also under Priority Investigation.

Conclusions: It is apparent that someone still high in Gal-mil interceded for the dissidents in having them placed on Bilduk rather than having them sent to a detention planet. There is no other way to explain why eight officers with such aggressive attitudes would be assigned to a highly sensitive area. An examination of the records show that all eight were recommended for treatment of Frissart's Syndrome—that is, the Hitler-Khan complex. This aberration was noted to be particularly strong in the six officers with rank of major or above. It is recommended that these facts be placed before the appropriate committee of the Intra-Galactic Federated Worlds Council.

It is further recommended that this investigation be given the highest priority. The possible existence of even one outlawed weapon with such destructive powers poses a threat not only to the Federation but to the stability of the entire galaxy.

ii

Memo: Pogany, Head, Special Investigations Division, Anthropol, to Chief, Anthropol.

Subject: Audio-video Tape Received in Space by Message Pod.

Background: While I was between exit from By-pass and orbit around Bilduk, a message pod was drawn to

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my ship by homing in on the frequency of my propulsion unit. My probes picked up no indication of a nearby vessel, nor did the pod or its contents contain any clue as to its origin.

Comments: The enclosed audio-video tape contains information possibly pertinent to my investigation of the eight missing Gal-mil officers.

Conclusions: I suspect that the tape—and pod—are gifts from Chloe Helos of Jondee. I further suspect from part of the contents of the tape that we are being told that this is one of those rare situations when Jondee wants to cooperate with Anthropol—as usual, for its own protection.

iii

REPORT: Chief, Anthropol, to “File on Dissident Gal-mil personnel.”

Subject: *Contents of Audio-video Tape Received in Space by Pogany.*

Background: The attached memorandum provides our total knowledge as to the donor of the tape.

The following introductory and concluding remarks attached to the tape are audio only and are obviously a computerized voice; therefore, no identification is possible. The contents of the tape itself are included without deletion.

Introductory Comments: The following tape was made by the sender “tuning in” on a meeting held on a small ship stationed at the very edge of the galaxy. This ship was obviously a rendezvous point for eleven smaller ships magneto-attached to its hull. The sender picked up the destination on an audio scan and followed the eleven ships through a little used By-pass. Further background information is not necessary.

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Tape: The video reveals a long, narrow room well filled by a table. Ten men are at the table, four seated on one side, five across from them. The tenth man stands at the head of the table, in front of a drawn curtain. He is speaking.

"... the chance that anyone will discover us here is virtually impossible, thanks to our screens. Therefore, you may speak freely. As chairman of this conference, allow me to first review our position.

"We represent the ten largest and most powerful companies in the metals fields. Our products are vital to the continued operation of the galaxy and to its prosperity. The Federation shows its gratitude by imposing heavy tax burdens and heavier operating restrictions upon us. Our taxes support those very activities designed to keep us from making our legitimate profits, from operating in the free competitive manner we see fit. In other terms, we are paying for our own ultimate destruction.

"For it is axiomatic that we cannot live unless we expand. However, the rate of expansion permitted us under the so-called mutual protection code of the Federation is too limiting. It allows the development of competitive organizations; it denies us the right to form mutually advantageous combines; it refuses to allow us to rid ourselves of unwanted competition. The entire concept of free enterprise is thus threatened. Today, we are met here to end such threats to our survival."

Number 2, on the chairman's left, rises. "Central Galactic Mining and Milling here. Please be more explicit. All of our efforts to modify the Federation's restrictions have met with failure. Our lobbyists are ignored. Our *sub-rosa* policing forces are discovered and disbanded."

Number 4, right, stands up. "I represent Pan-Galactic Refining. I concur with Central. Counting our *sub-*

rosa subsidiaries in nonaligned and anti-Federation systems, we control many planets politically and financially. We are the economic lifeblood of millions—billions, perhaps—of people and humanate aliens. There is not one Freebooter system, not one anti-Federation Corporation system that does not depend on us in great measure for our raw materials and processed metals. Yet with all this power we have been unable to gain concessions from the Federation.”

Number 3, right, stands. “Federated Mining and Milling here. I take exception to Pan-Galactic. There is one Freebooter system we do not control, nor can we expect support from them. I refer to Jondee.”

Number 1, left, rises quickly. “Universal Metals Processing here. I agree. We dare not take Jondee lightly. Although on the surface it appears to be a tenuous union of seven planets scattered in five systems, it has the highest level of technology in the galaxy. It has shown its cleverness by doing what we cannot do: outwit the Federation. Its leaders, the Baron and his so-called girl Friday, Chloe Helos, are undoubtedly the most able and daring of those who refuse to abide by the rules of the Federation. I wish to say that despite its anti-Federation bent, Jondee would take the attitude that a threat to the Federation is a threat to it.”

Number 5, left, gets up. “I wish to correct the terminology of Federated Mining and Milling. Jondee does not regard itself as a Freebooter system. Its members consider themselves Privateers, licensed—to quote the Baron—by the right of freedom to plague the Federation. However, I wish to agree also. Without the Federation, Jondee would have no group strong enough to play its game of gadfly against. If we were in control, it would turn on us. I suggest that any plans made

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for the Federation's destruction include the destruction of Jondée as well."

The chairman holds up a hand. "Your doubts will be answered by one who has come the width of the galaxy to address us. I give you Ralon Gloque, Director of the Galactic Institute for Sociological Perfection."

The curtain behind the chairman parts. A small, brisk man steps forward. He smiles and a tangible warmth emanates from him. He looks around with eyes that seem to be constructed for seeing in any degree of light. He bows, showing an amazing flexibility of bodily muscles. He speaks in a clear, pleasant voice with no trace of any discernible accent.

"Thank you for your attention. You are all aware, I am sure, that for the past two years and a bit more, each of your organizations has contributed financially to the Institute I represent. I shall refer to it for convenience as Gal-Soc. I wish to inform you that no further financial contributions are necessary at this time. I do request, however, your cooperation. In exchange I offer you freedom from bondage.

"The purpose of Gal-Soc, as you all know, is to study social structures under controlled conditions in an effort to determine which cultural factors create the most harmonic and productive environments for humans and humanate aliens to live and work within. To that purpose, I have set up a number of small experimental cultures throughout the galaxy—with Federation approval and, I might add, supervision. Lately, the Federation has been less insistent on direct supervision, having accepted my Institute at face value.

"Now that the Federation is less concerned with me, I have one more experiment to perform. From your point of view, this may well become known at some future date as the Noblest Experiment in the Galaxy.

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For, gentlemen, it will not only free you from the Federation's restrictions, it will put you in the position that the Federation is now: rulers of much of the inhabited galaxy!

"Before I go into detail, I wish to explain that the apparent complexity of the experiment I am about to discuss is to insure the Federation's acceptance. Their watchdogs must be sufficiently intrigued to the point where they will send undercover agents to make certain they are not being hoodwinked. The agents will become so involved with obviously safe—from their point of view—minutiae that I will be able to fulfill the true purpose of the experiment under their very noses, as it were. By the time they realize they have been turned into a maze, it will be too late. Our position will be consolidated; our success will be assured.

"You are now going to witness demonstrations of new mind-programming techniques, of new audio-video projective techniques, and of the inner workings of the plan itself in sufficient detail for you to realize that within a few months the Federation will be nothing more than history. The galaxy will be yours!"

The audio-video ends in a wild cacophony of jamming sounds and eye-shattering lines and colors.

Concluding Remarks: At this point the screens on the meeting ship apparently adjusted sufficiently to react to the monitoring probes. In light of the contents of the tape, it is suggested that Anthropol study carefully the words of Ralon Gloque and then ask its computers to attempt to relate them to the missing Gal-mil officers.

MEMO: Chief, Anthropol, to Pogany, Head, Special Investigations Division, Anthropol.

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Subject: Audio-video Tape Received by You in Space.

Comments: I do not agree that the tape comes from Chloe Helos of Jondee. Despite your occasional working relationship with the young lady, I cannot imagine the Baron turning aside from a chance to wait out a galaxy-wide battle so that he can step in and pick up the pieces. Further, if Chloe Helos had found the tape, I'm of the opinion that she and the Baron would have used it to blackmail us into giving them amnesty for the "crimes" we have recorded against them.

Conclusion: The source of the tape is immaterial. Action will be taken based upon its contents.

MEMO: Pogany, Head, Special Investigations Division, to Chief, Anthropol.

Subject: Your Last Memo.

With all due respect, you don't know Chloe! I'll bet my next vacation—double or nothing—that she sent the tape. Who else in the galaxy but Jondee is capable of not only stealing Federation technology but making it sophisticated enough to get through a screen such as that meeting ship must have put up? I'll bet *your* next vacation that right now she is trying to get herself personally involved in Gloque's experiment.

On the assumption that she will succeed, I suggest that we send as many top agents as we can spare.

MEMO: Chief, Anthropol, to Pogany, Head, Special Investigations Division.

Subject: Chloe Helos of Jondee Succeeding in Infiltrating the Experiment.

Comment: Caveat Gloquel

I

The door bore the impressive title of Head Programmer, Data Analysis Section, Field Agent Department. Beneath the lettering was a drawing of an eye with three pupils: the symbol of Intra-Galactic Investigations, Incorporated—or Eye-3 as it was commonly known.

Behind the door was a three by five meter office that somehow managed to find space for a desk among wall to wall electronic equipment. Standing in front of the desk and glaring down at its comfortably neat surface was Zeno Zenobius.

This was Zeno's office and he had come to work at ten hundred hours expecting to spend a happy five hours in it, working with some knotty problems left over from yesterday. "That," he said broodingly aloud to the mini-computer within reach of his desk chair, "is my job. Problems." Because the computer was, in his view, a friend, Zeno opened its oral circuits and repeated his statement.

The computer muttered a moment and then said metallically, "Specifically, your responsibilities are to see that the data fed into headquarters by the field agents are properly programmed and fed into computers to be synthesized, analyzed, collated, digested, and regurgitated so that you might examine the results to eliminate dross and find hidden relationships, if any."

Zeno glared at the lighted eye on the computer's face. "Why remind me?" He picked up the sheet of

green flimsy that threatened to spoil his day. It was the only thing on the desk top.

He read to the computer, " 'You will report to the Top immediately.' There is no signature. The color of the paper is green. What is the likelihood of this summons coming from Londres?"

The computer thought through the problem. "A probability of point nine-oh," it said. There was a pause, while Zeno waited hopefully. Then it added, "Londres is a *shtik tinif*."

Zeno was pleased. He wished that someday Londres would come down from his eyrie and give his name to the computer; he might be surprised at the things Zeno had taught it to call him.

Zeno disliked Londres. Among the employees scattered in the 237 levels that stretched from his office just below the Spire to the buried computer section Zeno inhabited, Londres was known as the Eyelash—the man who protected the big boss himself, Samuel Marlowe, the Big Eye. It was Londres who had bullied Zeno into leaving his job as research programmer to take on the responsibilities of a department head. And, Zeno always suspected, he had done it because he hoped that the responsibilities would make Zeno resign. Unfortunately, Zeno discovered that his insistence on doing well anything he undertook had doubled the department's efficiency during his short tenure.

Zeno said, "Why is the probability that Londres sent this only point nine-oh?"

"Green is the summoning color from the Top," the computer said. "Therefore, the possibility exists that Samuel Marlowe sent it. However, the probability of that is low."

"Mathematically obvious," Zeno said dryly.

He tucked the flimsy into his belt purse and left the office. He suspected that the computer was in error,

that the probability of Londres having summoned him was closer to 100 percent. After all, he had never seen Samuel Marlowe—not so much as a photograph or a video shot of him. Many employees suspected that he existed only as a name. Not that they credited Londres with actually running Eye-3. As an organization it was good enough for Anthropol to occasionally make use of its talents, and Londres just wasn't that good.

Zeno backtracked past the seemingly endless rows of computers far below the hard soil of the planet Hammett, sealed from any chance bit of dust or pollution or any other matter foreign to their systems. He entered an express shaft. The control robot said politely, "Destination, please?"

"The Top." He tried to give the noun its capital letter.

The door remained open. The air column remained motionless. Zeno repeated himself. The robot said, "Please put your pass card in front of the viewer."

"I have no upper level card."

"Then I can take you only to level 127. I am sorry." The lift started up.

Zeno stepped forward and pressed the emergency button. The lift stopped. An alarm sounded distantly. A voice said, "Report trouble in Lift 36."

"I requested Top. I'm being given level 127."

"Place your card—"

"I have no upper level card. And I don't intend to waste a month asking for one." Zeno was surprised to feel his usually unflappable nature ruffling at the edges. "I have a green directive to report to the Top." He held it in front of the viewer.

"That is not signed."

Zeno took a deep breath. "Tell this robot to take me to the Top immediately. Either that or I keep jamming this emergency button until every maintenance

robot in this building comes here. If that doesn't satisfy you, I'll rewire this hunk of microcircuit so that the viewer spits at every VIP who enters this lift. Now get me to the Top!"

Zeno had deliberately tried to have a tantrum once. He had failed miserably. Since that time he had practiced the techniques he saw other men using: the coldly lifted voice, the dropped voice, the icy stare, the snarl. But somehow he had forgotten to use any of them—and so he had failed again.

The voice said, "Remain calm. The psychiatrist will arrive shortly."

Zeno took a deep breath as a frightening idea burst into his seething mind. He had toyed with this ploy before, but the simple act of thinking about it had always left him too shaken to probe it very deeply. Now, almost involuntarily, he found himself using it.

He said, "I am Zeno Zenobius. I'm in charge of Data Analysis Programming. I am, therefore, capable of revealing the precise whereabouts of some 37 field men on critical assignments. I refer to Capital F field men, not routine investigators."

A new voice, with human tones, broke in. "Leave the lift at level 14. Take shaft 31. It is programmed to the Top only."

"It's about time," Zeno said ungraciously.

He followed instructions and for the second time in his career, he found himself stepping into the luxurious room one level below the very tip of the Spire. He knew what to expect and so he stood quietly while a pressure field enveloped him, lifted him, and moved him through a screening process. No alarms sounded and he was released in front of another door. The door swung open. Zeno walked into a brightly modern office, aimed himself at a massive desk, and dropped into a relaxochair facing the man on the far side of the desk.

He sat quietly, staring at the frosty eyes studying him.

This was Londres. He had features, Zeno thought, that had been quarried from some smooth, icy stone on an airless world deep in the void. His voice was well below zero Celsius.

"Whese are these 37 field agents located?"

Zeno said pleasantly, "I have no authority to give you that information."

"I am the authority."

"I cannot accept that," Zeno said, mimicking a robot's metallic tones.

Londres colored. "Every man beneath my feet to the very foundations of this building is under my jurisdiction."

"I'm more interested in the man above your head," Zeno said. He laid the green sheet on the desk top.

Londres waved it away. "I can have you discharged."

"As you wish. Do you also intend to apply to the Federation for a license to brainwash my knowledge of those 37 agents—and the other data I've accumulated? For example, to get rid of what I know of Operations Shakespeare, Deuteronomy, and Samson Agonistes? And who's the literary show-off who names our investigations anyway? I might add that I can quote you the keys to codes A^x through Z^a."

"You're providing me evidence to ask for a brainwash license! And you're insolent!"

"I'm a human being. I expect to be treated like one—even by the Big Eye and his Eyelash."

A belly laugh burst through the room. "Well said! That will do, Londres. Let Zenobius in to see the Big Eye." The laugh came again. "And sometimes you're a poor excuse for an eyelash."

Londres' expression hated Zeno. Now we're even, Zeno thought with a sense of pleasure that surprised him.

Vindictiveness had never been a trait on his psycho-record.

"Through the door to the left," Londres said.

Zeno went through the door and into a lift. It moved upward a very short distance and let him into a squirrel cage of dancing lights probing at him, of a floor heaving and rolling like a wild sea, of walls pulsating as if he were inside a huge lung. He stopped and waited.

The room suddenly became nothing but a normal corridor leading to another door. This opened as Zeno approached it. He went into a small room containing a few relaxochairs and a single video screen. The screen occupied one wall; the others were curtained. He sat down. And he could feel the tension leaving him, draining away. He thought of Londres and found himself only amused—and a little pitying.

The video screen came on to reveal a small, round-bellied man with a nut-brown face and a toothy smile. "I'm Samuel Marlowe," he said. "The Big Eye, if you prefer. I'm also a lot of other people at times. I run this outfit."

"But not from Hammett," Zeno said.

"Decidedly not. There are too many in the galaxy who'd like to get their hands on me or get me in weapons' range. But this is a completely sealed By-pass hookup. You can speak freely."

"About what?" Zeno asked reasonably. "You called me. I didn't call you."

Marlowe chuckled fatly. "I have your record here, Zenobius. I'm curious as to your opinion of its accuracy."

"So am I," Zeno said. "I've never seen the company file on myself."

"You don't flap easily, do you? We didn't expect you to, or you wouldn't have got this far. Your précis says

that you're independent, intelligent, skillful, completely trustworthy, and utterly without ambition."

"If that means I know my job, it's accurate. I understand my computers; they respond to me. If you mean that I have access to a great deal of information, that's also accurate. And if you mean by independent that I dislike working with others, accurate again. I only took my present position because I had no choice. It was either that or resign. I like my basic work."

"Let me read what else I have," Marlowe said. "Your threats about the 37 key agents and the codes and the three major operations going on now—and I named them, by the way—all of that was bluff. Oh, you accumulate the information, but each day before you go home, you run your memories into a storage bank, leaving only a key index in your mind for quick recall in the future."

"Your desire is to devise new programming techniques, to work on improving our computers' analytical abilities, to devise new codes. You'd like a job in a solitary thinktank."

"Yes," Zeno said. "But that isn't on my record. None of that is."

"No. I got it when you were in the corridor, waiting for the lights and the heaving floor and all the other rigamarole to stop."

"I see. The illusions were to distract me while I was being mind-picked."

"Yes. All of this will be destroyed at the end of our interview."

"Thank you. What else did you steal from my mind?"

"Tactless, too," Marlowe chuckled. "Your private life. You're a loner in that too. You work abstruse problems, you read a great deal, and you write. You follow a fairly rigid regimen of physical exercise and occa-

sionally you visit a pair of charming ladies—twins, I believe.

"Your reading consists of ancient adventure stories: skulking villains, foggy streets, boats full of evildoers slipping over oily waters to dark wharves. Your writing for the most part tries to follow the same lines, but with yourself as the hero."

"I believe it's called a Mitty syndrome," Zeno said quietly. "As long as I don't let it rule me, I see no reason to have it exorcised."

"Nor do I. Now, on the basis of that background and of your having put together data submitted by our field agents on the Galactic Cartage investigation, I have a request to make of you."

Zeno said slowly, "I don't understand what Galactic Cartage has to do with my private life."

"Nothing, perhaps. On the other hand, both reflect a certain way of using your mind. But let me clarify for you. When you took all that apparently unrelated data and programmed it to synthesize in your computers, you were doing more than just your job. You were bringing Anthropol a step closer to a problem that has been bothering them for some time.

"You cannot be aware of this, Zenobius, but some time ago eight Gal-mil officers captured some Federation ships and disappeared. It is suspected that they have available weapons outlawed—and supposedly destroyed—centuries ago. Your synthesis indicates that the recent piratings of Galactic Cartage freighters did not follow the typical pattern of piracy by any of the Freebooter planets: instead they had a distinctly military flavor in the way they were executed."

"Those were my conclusions," Zeno agreed.

"You reached them by putting together data when no one else could see any relationships. This way of thinking not only attracted me but it attracted Anthro-

pol. They suggested that I make this proposition to you. I agreed. Briefly, I want you to live one of your literary efforts, as it were."

"All of this rigamarole was to test me to make sure I am the man you want?"

"Correct. To test your perseverance, among other things. Now, first I want you to look at this audio-video brochure Eye-3 recently received from the Galactic Institute for Sociological Perfection."

Zeno settled back. The screen went blank and then a typical advertising brochure came on, page by page, each one well animated, complete with the correct olfactory and suggested tactile sensations. It was an excellent job, Zeno admitted. Expensive, impressive, compelling.

The first sequence showed an air view of a planet, taken from perhaps 50,000 kilometers. The camera slowly closed down until one section of the planet could be clearly seen. Downs, villages, copses, stretches of gleaming water, rivers and lakes and a seagirt coastline, a lovely city, a contented looking people moving about their daily tasks, their leisure. And ancient trains slipping silently and cleanly across a verdant countryside. Ground vehicles moving on pleasantly landscaped strips of roadway. Accompanying the pictures was a soft, almost insinuating voice.

"Before you is an unashamed approach to the nostalgia that resides in all of us: the desire to return to the 'good old days,' the days of peace and quiet and leisurely living our Earth ancestors knew.

"You are not seeing an actual planet, although one almost like this is at present being developed. The result will be a world of ideal climate zones to appeal to various types of persons, of countries reflecting their individual pasts; so that those of a certain national origin may go back to the land of their ancestors.

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"As you watch these pages, you will recognize scenes from your history books—but different in that they are more idealized. For we have taken the cities of the ancestors of Earth-originated peoples and modified those conditions which were unpleasant, and added those little things to make the environment a more perfect one."

"What is the purpose of all this? To serve science. For this is an experiment in sociology conducted by the Galactic Institute for Sociological Perfection, a Federation approved nonprofit organization. Its *raison d'être* is to create an idealized society and then let it run itself. In this way, we hope to determine precisely what it is that people of varying origins want the most, which of those wants has the highest priority, and what the result of their interactions will be. Will they form distinct socio-economic levels or will they segregate on different bases? How, with unlimited funds and a constant recourse to technological advances as they are needed, will they develop? Toward greater education? More mechanization? This and many other questions we wish answered—as does the Federation. As does every society concerned with the happiness of development of its people.

"That is why we appeal to you. Not for funds—those we have in more than ample supply. But for human beings, for participants in this, the Noblest Experiment in the Galaxy. From your organization we would like one individual with the following qualifications.

"He should be young, between thirty and fifty-five earth years. He should have an inquiring mind and be versed in some field of mathematical work—it does not matter which.

"If you have available such a man, please contact Ralon Gloque at the Institute, submitting the participant's credentials. Should your man be chosen, you

will know that not only will you have had a part in this great experiment but that you and your organization will go down in history as participants in that plan which may ultimately change the social structure of every world in the galaxy."

The voice faded. Zeno said, "What a magnificent snow job!"

The picture disappeared as well and Samuel Marlowe's face replaced it on the viewing screen. "True. But an interesting gambit, don't you agree?"

"Bait," Zeno said. "But what kind of fish are they trying to catch?"

"That's what Anthropol is wondering. One of their men and I had a long talk. It seems that a number of prominent organizations with employees of widely varying talents have been contacted, and that varying types of laborers and artisans from all over the galaxy have been hired."

He paused and added, "You were chosen for a number of reasons, among them your fertile imagination and your lack of agent training. For a task as non-routine as this may well be, we want someone with a different perspective from that a trained agent would have."

"But let me warn you, it's a dangerous assignment. You'll have to undergo layers of intensive programming: one to implant deep in your mind what you need to know to do your job, a tight screen—to protect that and protect everything now in your mind, including your knowledge of Intragal—superimposed on the screen, the knowledge we'll provide for Gloque to wipe away, and finally, whatever program Gloque himself decides to impose on you. Are you agreed?"

Zeno could think of a hundred reasons why he should say no and not one reason why he should say yes. He said, "Yes."

"I expected as much. Your qualifications have already been submitted and accepted. You report to Gloque on Spencer in three days. You'll get there by detouring to Earth in one of our *sub rosa* ships, so you won't be traced by Gloque's organization. On Earth you'll discuss the problem with an Anthropol man named Pogany. He'll also handle the deep programming and the screening."

"I can leave in the morning," Zeno said.

"You can leave now," Marlowe said pleasantly. Zeno felt the brush of a current moving against his face. He tried to fight it for a full ten milliseconds. Then he went quietly to sleep.

He awoke to find himself yawning in the face of a neat, pleasant looking man. "I'm Pogany," the man said.

Zeno's memories of the next days were fragmentary. He recalled discussing with Pogany what kind of subliminal suggestions would best trigger his memories and discussing all that he knew about the Galactic Cartage affair. Later he realized that he had given a great deal of information, getting in return a pleasant smile and an occasional murmured word.

He spent two days on Earth and then shuttled to a waiting ship. Well out in space, he was transferred to another ship, made a By-pass jump, and found himself orbiting around the planet Spencer. Within an hour, he was facing Ralon Gloque in his spartan office at the Galactic Institute.

His interview was brief. Gloque studied him with his strangely constructed eyes. "Yes, I believe you will be an excellent choice, Mr. Zenobius. And I believe you will enjoy the role we've chosen for you."

Zeno listened quietly as Gloque described that role briefly: he was to be the younger son of a titled British family, man-about-town, blessed with an independent

income—and the desire to be of use to society. To that end, he would lend his assistance to those who governed the modified Victorian town of Wooten Dorset.

“Lend my assistance in what way?”

“As that has not been fully determined, I can only say that you will learn at the appropriate time.” Gloque rose. “Now if you will accompany me, we will see to your programming.”

Zeno pushed his eyebrows up. “Programming? I wasn’t aware . . .” He hoped he sounded convincing.

“Don’t be alarmed, Mr. Zenobius.” He smiled and Zeno could feel the warmth emanating from him, the euphoria-creating charm. “After all, you have to be given the language of the period and you have to be programmed for the types of social responses a young man of your economic and social class would automatically give. And, finally, you must be programmed to understand your role in this, the Noblest Experiment in the Galaxy.”

As they strolled from the office, Zeno said, “One more question. Why were this particular era and this particular place chosen?”

“Ah, I was waiting for that question. Without your having asked it, I would have worried concerning your ability to participate in the experiment.”

Get on with it, Zeno thought wearily.

Gloque got on with it. “British literature at the end of the nineteenth century is filled with a concern for the individual and his value to the creation and maintenance of a harmonious society. Men of perception are found in rather unusual fields, science among them; they were men with the ability to move on several levels of society, men of intelligence and compassion, and men of balance. These were highly prized qualities as they were the ones that helped to shape

society. Unfortunately the results were not what many hoped for. However, in our experiment, the results should be more gratifying. You will be one of those men I have just described, but with far greater control over the ultimate destiny of your society than the actual Victorians were. Further, you will be consciously aware of your mission in life."

He led Zeno into an antiseptic looking room where a male nurse who looked very much like Gloque waited.

Zeno submitted quietly to the necessary preliminaries to a thorough mind programming. For all of Gloque's glibness he felt apprehension gripping him. He was quite sure that when he awoke he would not be aware of the old Zeno Zenobius—that would be suppressed, perhaps wiped away.

To rid his being of consciousness-of-self would, he knew, first be a matter of removing all traces of his knowledge of his native speech. Once that was taken from him, a large part of his current view of the universe, his way of thinking, of believing, his ethical code—all of these would forever be beyond his reach. In exchange, he would receive a different medium for conscious thought; one that he was sure would be forged to shape him along the lines Gloque wanted him to be shaped.

And this would happen if Anthropol's carefully implanted screen broke down or if their carefully devised triggering mechanisms failed to operate. Fear was growing when sleep touched. He awakened to find himself calm, at peace with the world. To find himself Zeno Zenobius, citizen of Wooten Dorset, more or less England.

II

Zeno stepped back from the cross-timbered doorway and looked approvingly at the sign extending from above it on a hammered metal arm. Each day for the past four months he had looked at the sign, and each time had felt the same satisfaction. It was a fine sign, definitely a fine sign: well painted, easy to read. It gave its message clearly and unmistakably:

Zeno Zenobius, Private Inquiry Agent
Licensed by H. M. the Queen

He lingered a moment on the broad sidewalk, enjoying the pleasant warmth of the sun tempered just enough by the light, fragrant breeze. He sniffed the air pleurably, finding nothing contradictory in the mingled scents of honeysuckle, rose, gardenia, jacaranda, frangipani and jasmine competing with the sharper odors of sun-warmed pine, eucalyptus, sagebrush, and the sea. Nor did he find anything odd about the public park directly across the High Street with its light flow of silent hover vehicles. The balance of color and shape between the plane trees and the tall, swaying palms, the spreading eucalyptus, and the broad-leafed bananas merely pleased his esthetic senses.

He nodded approvingly as he watched gnarled men move about the gardens, pruning and weeding, watering and planting. In the distance, he could hear children laughing and shouting from their fenced playground on the far side of the park. Beyond its limits

rose the graceful apartment buildings of the town's workers.

Definitely all was as it should be. And he found a warm satisfaction in knowing that he was part of all this. His mind radiated pleasure at the realization that he was actually of its nucleus. Along with those visible around him and a number invisible within the buildings, he was helping to found the perfect society.

Zeno stepped away from his office doorway, one in a row of two-story buildings separated from the broad sidewalk by a wide planting strip filled with gay flowers. As he strolled toward the corner pub for his lunch, he could not help glancing approvingly at the other business establishments in the row. They were definitely the most exclusive in the town, as befitted their position here at the upper end of the High Street: Madame Dubois, Millinery; Madame Lajeune, Salon Parisienne; George Qeoville, Tobacconist, with an elegant display of pipes in the window; A. T. N. Farthing-Froth, Vinter; and in the opposite direction from Zeno's office, similar, fine enterprises. On the corner, past Farthing-Froth's, was the Crown and Cross, the most elegant pub in the entire borough of Wooten Dorset.

For the sheer pleasure of enjoying the architectural beauty, Zeno stepped to the far corner of the sidewalk and glanced back at the row of buildings. They made a pleasing sight with their plaster and timber fronts, their steep-pitched slate roofs with dormer windows like button noses pushing from under eaves.

And then it came again—the one element that threatened to spoil the perfection of this day—as it had so many days these past months. That tiny, amorphous nagging at the side of his skull, that miniscule sense of incompleteness. With the practiced ease of a well-learned habit, he thrust it away and continued on.

It was devilish, and a bit frightening. If it kept at

him, he would have to see Doctor Paul. Because every time it came over him, came also the knowledge that he was being commanded, but in two opposing directions; he was to see the doctor at once and he was to do something else, something not at all clear, in complete secrecy. And this latter he was to do very quickly, perhaps to have done already. Somehow he could not manage to bring to the surface what this action was supposed to be. There was a terrible, frightening urgency about it that only his effort of thrusting it aside could ease.

A woman came down the street, her handsome skirts sweeping just above the tops of her high button shoes, her dark hair a crown with a fashionable hat perched on top. "Ah, Madame Lejeune, *comme ça va?*" He tipped his bowler.

She laughed pleasantly. "Come, Mr. Zenobius. You know that I'm no more French than you. But who would pay my prices for British fashions?" Her smile dipped a little. "And who would suffer me if I were really a Continental?"

He watched her enter her shop and then, humming with the pleasure of having lost the pressure in his skull, he strolled on. Again life, like the weather, was perfection itself. Taking a final draft of the fresh, sea-tinged air, Zeno entered the Crown and Cross.

Its interior was suitably dim, the heavy dark wood paneling aglow, the pewter and silver and brass gleaming, the clean bar and the small neat tables shining. A scatter of well-dressed, obviously prosperous customers glanced up as he entered. But then who in Wooten Dorset was not prosperous? Even those of meaner station had ample food, shelter, and clothing in exchange for their labors.

Cobber, who owned the pub, was behind the bar, while Jenny the barmaid—a handsome Viking type of

girl, with her pale blonde hair, her blue eyes and her big-boned but graceful body—waited on the growing luncheon trade. A strapping girl, he thought her, with a look of power but with a fluid grace as she moved.

She was waiting on three men at a table against the wall. He recognized Thomason, the barrister, Bowen, the stock broker, and Doctor Paul, the town's highly regarded medical doctor.

"Zenobius, old man," Bowen called, "how goes the inquiry business?"

"Badly," Zeno said. "But that's all for the better. Gives me time to work on my book."

"Have you put me in it yet?" Jenny asked with a puppyish eagerness.

"I wouldn't think of it," Zeno said quickly. "It's an adventure story full of villainous people. Not your type at all."

She giggled. Thomason said in his dry, legal voice, "No solid Englishmen for your villains, I hope, old man?"

"Why pick on good Englishmen for villains when there are so many Continentals in the world?" Zeno countered lightly.

"Bravo!" Farthing-Froth said reedily from another table. "I'll drink to that." He downed a pink gin at a gulp.

"Join us and tell us more," Doctor Paul urged. He offered his usual sardonic smile, a twitch of thin lips set tightly in his lean saturnine face. "I like to hear a man with sound beliefs."

Zeno sat next to Paul and ordered a whisky to precede his fish and chips. Bowen, a round-faced, happy looking man whose obvious pleasure with life Zeno found hard to reconcile with the brokerage business, said, "How's your girl Friday these days, Zenobius?"

"Lady Petra Claymore? Working on transcribing my morning's writing, I hope."

"More than likely dreaming of a new gown," Doctor Paul said. "Not even your fascinating prose could keep a young and beautiful titled lady grubbing away all the time."

An impulse made Zeno turn to Paul. He could feel words trembling on the edge of his mind. But some caution made them draw back. He frowned. What the devil? He had almost said something to Paul—but what? He could not remember now, though the words had been clear enough an instant ago.

He realized the three were looking at him oddly and he cleared the frown from his features. "She's a fine worker," he said. "It was my luck when she answered my advertisement for a secretary."

"A bit of a lark for her, I suppose," Thomason said.

"I suppose. But then you never know about these West Country titles. She may have that and no estate."

"From the way the lady dresses, I'd say there's a good deal of estate," Paul observed. He waved slender fingers. "But to important matters. Bowen decided to call a meeting of the Select for tonight. Shall we say dinner at the club and the meeting to follow? Just us four, of course."

Bowen looked briefly surprised and then nodded. "Quite," he said. "Just us four."

Zeno sipped his whisky. "A meeting—me with the Select?"

"As a matter of fact," Paul said, lowering his voice to reach beneath the growing hubbub about them, "It's been intimated to us that more people should be represented on the borough council. We decided to approach you."

Zeno let his eyebrows travel upwards. "What possible standing could a dabbler in detective work and an unpublished author have?"

"A good deal, since he's also the younger son of a

titled family," Thomason murmured. His voice had the dry rasp of parchment rubbed against itself. "That way you satisfy the snobbery inherent in both our lower classes and the tradesmen. But since you remain titleless, you're still sufficiently democratic, old man."

"I'm sure it will strengthen the government here, eh," Bowen said.

Zeno was lifting his glass to his lips. The word "government" seemed to strike against his brain with the force of a hammer. He gasped and almost choked on his whisky. He managed to set the glass down and clung to it, his hand shaking.

"I say, Zenobius . . ." Doctor Paul began.

Zeno had his breath. He managed to smile. "Fine, thanks. Swallowed a bit wrong. Sorry." With a deep, steadying breath, he drew his cheroot case from his pocket, selected a slim, very dark, tarless, antinico-tine health cigar and then returned it to the case. Now why had he done that, he wondered.

His luncheon came and he forced himself to eat slowly, to take coffee afterwards and smoke his cigar with it. He even managed a smile when Jenny bent toward him as she served the coffee. But his mind kept demanding that he return to his office. It was rather frightening, since along with the demand was a strict insistence on secrecy. Finally he was free to leave, to return to his office and enclose himself behind locked doors. There was only the matter of ridding himself of his secretary.

Before he reached his office, he understood the need for secrecy, and he knew what he must do once he was safely alone inside. He knew, although he did not understand.

In the reception room, he found Lady Petra Claymore copying his handwriting on the anachronistic electric typewriter. She looked up and gave him a

bright and somehow disturbing smile. She was a woman of medium height, slender—yet not too slender—with a tower of glossy dark hair, smoky dark eyes, and a piquant, catlike cast to her features.

"Have a good lunch, Mr. Z?" She touched the stand-up telephone. "Not a client nor a call. There's just no crime in Wooten Dorset."

No crime, Zeno agreed silently. Then why was he here as an inquiry agent? The thought disturbed him, but there was no answer. He stood looking at her, realizing just how rusty his mind really was; its doors were thoroughly oxidized from these past months of pleasant living. Somehow, he felt fear rise in him.

He said, "How's the work coming?"

"Nicely. It's a very exciting story."

An idea sent one of his mental doors creaking slowly open. "I thought of a few needed changes. Why don't you trot off—have lunch and a bit of shopping while I work on this." He held his hand out for the manuscript.

"Does that mean you're going to tip back your chair and sleep off your lunch?" she said with pleasant mockery.

"Not today. I really do have an idea. I may even walk with it in the park later. It's too beautiful a day to stay cooped up inside all the time."

"Every day is a beautiful day here," she murmured. Rising, she collected her reticule and left, her full maroon skirt swishing about her.

Zeno hurried into his inner office and locked the door. Taking the smaller of the client's chairs, he propped it under the latch. He checked the window, making sure that it was closed and the curtain completely drawn. Then he went to the side wall and touched the paneling next to the electric log fireplace. A wall section swung back, revealing a small, simple computer. He found nothing unusual, nothing new

in this; the computer was part of his office equipment. It was hidden only because he preferred to appear omniscient should he ever have a client.

Now his actions seemed to come from deep inside himself, but without his control. He put his hand in the narrow space between the computer and the side wall and let his fingers find the slight roughness of a nail-head. He touched it with a firm pressure. The computer and the wall behind it slid silently aside, revealing a flight of narrow stairs pitching steeply upward. He climbed the stairs and at their head opened a door into a narrow room. Here was another computer, small but of a complexity he momentarily found surprising. On its keyboard for graphic input he found a brief printed program.

Still moving somnambulently, Zeno punched the program onto the keyboard, put an earpiece in his ear, and switched from graphic to oral output. The computer said, "In the file beneath this keyboard you will find a minicorder fitted with a tape. Return to your desk, play the tape orally through a private feed-in. Return the tape and minicorder here as soon as you are finished."

Hocus pocus, he thought, but he followed instructions carefully. The minicorder, less than a quarter the size of his small cigar case felt perfectly normal to his touch; yet he could not remember ever having seen one before. He carried it downstairs, closing the panels behind him. He dropped into his office chair, lifted a tiny attachment that he somehow knew fitted above his ear and put it in position. After turning on the machine, he lay back, closing his eyes.

There was no sound; yet he was hearing clearly. He was learning nothing new, he realized. Everything that the machine fed into his mind he was already aware of. Rather than teach him, it was pushing aside a screen

to let the knowledge buried deep come to the surface.

The spool emptied itself and Zeno came slowly upright. He removed the attachment from above his ear, packed the minicorder and returned everything to its former appearance. Unlocking the door, he returned to his chair.

Only now the chair had a different meaning. It was not just an ordinary piece of office furniture; it was a relaxochair, as was the large client's chair and the one Lady Petra used in the front office, although none of them were activated. He reached down and activated his without having to search his mind to remember the process.

He leaned back, letting the chair massage his neck muscles gently. He knew why he was here. He understood the unease that plagued him. He understood a great deal more—including just how narrow was the filament of tightrope he had himself balanced on.

He took inventory. He was on a planet called Nobilis, a planet distant from the galactic core and from Earth as well. A planet that in the Galactic Encyclopedia was briefly noted as “. . . dead world, owned by the Federation through First Discovery and leased on a quinquennial basis to the mining group that makes the highest bid.”

Perhaps not on Nobilis, Zeno thought; rather, in it. For the sun that came up every morning and set every evening without any variation in position was not the weak sun of Nobilis.

What else did he know? Ralon Gloque, he thought, who had programmed him to be the well-to-do younger son of a titled family, one who wrote and played detective as a kind of lark. A strange role for a serious sociological experiment. And he still could not understand its purpose.

But Gloque would do nothing without a reason. The programming given him by the man Pogany from Anthropol had made that clear, as it had made clear the danger Zeno was facing if he accepted this assignment. No, there had to be a good reason for his being cast in this part, just as there would be reasons for the other major characters: the three members of the Select and Lady Petra. That last absurdity was too obvious to ignore. And who else?

His deep programming told him that he was here to find out the answers to that question. As he was to find out precisely what Gloque was using this experiment for. He would receive cooperation from Anthropol agents, but how they were to know him and he them was not in his memory banks.

He sat up and looked around. Gloque had supplied all that he could see, including the relaxochair. And Gloque had supplied the small, simple computer hidden behind the wall panel. But Gloque had not supplied the other computer or the minicorder Zeno had used to dig down below the conditioning Gloque had given him. Nor had he supplied Zeno with the knowledge that this experiment was dangerous to the galaxy—to Zeno's galaxy.

It struck him forcibly that he was in fact two separate individuals: the one Gloque had programmed and the one Gloque had tried to blot out before sending Zeno here. Zeno scowled at the empty air. Something must have gone wrong with his surface programming. He was sure he should have been approached by the Select long before four months had passed. But it wasn't until today that they had shown interest in him. Now for them he would have to be the man Gloque had programmed to do the job he was here to do, but not remembering the past and so be a threat to the experiment. And he would also have to be himself—

THE NOBLEST EXPERIMENT IN THE GALAXY

Zeno Zenobius of Eye-3—to do the job that the Big Eye and Anthropol had entrusted to him. He sat practicing sliding from one role to the other, thinking now in the Victorian English he had been programmed for, now in Intragal, his native language.

III

Zeno spent some time practicing being Zeno I and Zeno II, as he termed his two selves. Zeno I worked at conjuring up the past until he could recall without effort that part he might need in a hurry. Zeno I did his thinking in Intragal—and there was the danger. If he let his awareness of that language be known to the wrong person, his usefulness—not to mention his existence—might well be ended.

He used Intragal mentally to analyze Zeno II: a true citizen of this town of Wooten Dorset, a man for whom his two strange occupations seemed wholly logical and fitting. Zeno II was utterly satisfied with life as it was. He found his eager environment almost euphoric. At the same time, he was eager to be of assistance to his fellows, to agree to whatever demands they placed on him. Such thinking as Zeno II bothered to do was done in a language not altogether strange, since some of its forms were found modified in Intragal.

Zeno blinked as the room's minimal lighting came on softly as night curtained the windows. He pulled himself slowly out of the relaxochair. Time to dress for dinner and the meeting at the club. "I am Zeno II," he told himself firmly, picked up his hat and stick, and strolled into the outer office.

Lady Petra was still at her desk, although the fine old wall clock read nearly 8:00 P.M. She looked up with one of her bright, warm smiles. "I wondered if you were ever going to stop, Mr. Z."

"I might as well have," he said offhandedly. "I gained nothing on the book."

"But I'll bet you're going to spend the rest of the evening nagging at it," she said. "Why don't you relax instead? Have a pleasant dinner, a stroll, and then drop in to my place for a bit of tea later?"

This was the first invitation she had offered him in their four months of association. Zeno almost forgot which self he was at the moment. He checked a desire to question her motives and said, "As a matter of fact, I'm having dinner with the Select at the club."

She registered mild interest. "It's about time you made use of that club. Heaven knows your dues are high enough." She rose, reaching for her reticule. "But that won't stop you from dropping in for tea later."

She let him hold the door for her, said good night with another smile, and turned left to the door that opened onto stairs leading to her flat above the next building. Zeno's own quarters were directly above the office, the doorway and the stairs just to the right.

He climbed to his flat, undressed and entered the shower cubicle, letting it automatically wet, rinse, dry and soothe him. He dressed carefully in his nattiest suit, tapped his hat on his head, took his ivory-headed stick, and strolled out. The night was balmy. The electric street lights flickered slightly to give a hint of gas-lights of the by-gone period. He hummed as he walked; at the moment he was wholly Zeno II.

He knew that he was dressed in perfect taste for the occasion, every one of his seventy-four inches the ideal young British gentleman. Entering the club, he handed his hat and stick to a robot version of the gnarled retainer and strolled into the Commons room. Thomason and Bowen were at the bar.

"Paul had his usual late patient," Bowen said. "But he'll be along. A drink, eh?"

"Eh," Zeno agreed. He ordered whisky. The conversation ran desultorily nowhere. Paul arrived and they moved into one of the small private dining rooms. The dinner, preordered, was served by the finest humanate-type robots Zeno had ever seen. He lit a cigar to accompany the port and coffee and looked around the table.

"An excellent dinner, gentlemen."

"Don't be so stuffy, Zenobius," Thomason remarked dryly. "You're among friends."

"Am I?" Zeno murmured.

Bowen leaned forward. "I say. What is that supposed to mean?"

"You tell me," Zeno said. "I didn't invite myself here." He realized that he was using Zeno I to operate Zeno II and he warned himself to be careful.

Paul's sardonic chuckle broke the moment of tension. "The question is, How well was Zenobius programmed?"

"Everyone's programming has been perfect," Bowen said. "Why shouldn't Zenobius?"

"Not all minds take everything equally," Paul said. "After all, Zenobius has been here four months and he waits until today before he receives the signal that opens his mind." He moved his eyes to Zeno.

"Let's say I was cautious," Zeno said. "But if I was supposed to have been aware of each of your roles, then I wasn't too well programmed. In fact, I'm still in the dark."

"What of an awareness of your own job here?" Bowen demanded.

Zeno wondered if they were trying to trap him. "I have a very definite feeling that I'm supposed to assist someone—but in what, I don't know."

"You will," Paul murmured. "Thomason, with your

typically lucid legal prose, bring some light into Zenobius' darkness."

Zeno could feel them watching him intently. He turned to Thomason with an expectant look. Thomason rubbed his hands together. "To put it simply, old chap, we four—and one other who has not yet revealed himself, or not yet arrived—are the controlling force here. It's our task to make sure that everything goes smoothly, develops along the proper lines."

Zeno could feel the waiting from them. He pressed a hand to his eyes and then dropped it away. "No," he said slowly, "I wasn't aware of that. What are these proper lines?"

"Why, we're just to keep the experiment rolling along. You know, happy people in a happy environment. Make sure that nothing goes wrong with the mechanisms that run this place."

Thomason paused and then added, "And, of course, try to spot and weed out any foreign matter, any dissident elements."

"That," Paul said, "is where you come in. As a writer, you're expected to be a bit eccentric. And everyone knows you're playing at being an inquiry agent. But that part really isn't playing, it's why you're here."

Zeno managed to look uncomprehending. Bowen said in that tart way he'd developed, "What were you previously?"

Zeno had been waiting for the question. He looked blankly at Bowen. "Previously?" he echoed. He sat silently, his expression that of a man struggling with mental constipation. "But there is no previously, is there? That's very strange, somehow; yet, it's also logical."

Although the movement of Bowen's facial muscles came and went too quickly for Zeno to be sure, he

thought he saw relief touch the man. Apparently he had passed whatever test was being applied.

Bowen sat back. "Not poor programming, gentlemen. Perfect. That's the way Zenobius was planned to think. Unfortunately, he took a bit longer than we expected to come to awareness."

Thomason nodded. "Let me put it this way, old chap. This experiment has created a great deal of curiosity and presumably some resentment. There are people who conceivably might want to spoil it—for personal reasons. It's our task to prevent that. To do so, we must know who those people are and guard against them. It's up to you to ferret them out for us."

"A pleasure," Zeno said. "Now I begin to understand the reason for my computer." He smiled at them, hoping he looked sufficiently asinine. "Up to now I've been using it to run story plots through."

No one smiled. Paul said, "Do a bit more mixing than you have been. Talk to people. Prowl around, say you're soaking up atmosphere, that sort of thing. And, for heaven's sake, stop treating that choice bit you have for a secretary as if she had plague."

"Lady Petra?" His surprise was genuine.

"Lady Petra indeed," Bowen said. "I know she was programmed for the role, but who else is she? What else is she?" He looked almost accusingly at Paul.

The doctor spread his hands. "I don't have access to that kind of information any more than you do. The whims of the gods . . ."

Bowen snorted. "Maybe she's nothing. Just a mild joke on everyone in this would-be aristocracy. But we have to be sure. She's to be your first assignment, Zenobius. When we tell you, check her out thoroughly."

He pushed back his chair and rose. The others followed. "You'll have no problem reporting. A man of

your station can find reason to drop in on his broker, his lawyer, or his doctor without causing any comment."

Zeno stood behind his chair. "You keep talking about programming. I know, without quite understanding, that I was programmed for my role here. But wasn't everyone? How could there be a dissident in that case?"

"The programming may not all be perfect," Paul said. "And there are ways to subvert it, although the techniques used should have guarded against that sort of thing."

Since they had obviously failed in his own case, they had undoubtedly failed in a number of others, Zeno thought. And if Pogany was right, it wouldn't only be Combine members and Anthropol agents he would have to look out for, but representatives of other groups as well—possibly dangerous groups."

"I see," he said, as if he didn't see at all.

They went their separate ways. The evening was cooler but still pleasantly balmy. Zeno hummed as he strolled along, feeling the warmth of the food and wine. So she was supposed to take his role of inquiry agent seriously! He chuckled at the irony of it. Then he frowned, as he remembered that Lady Petra was to be his first assignment.

He hoped he wouldn't find anything suspicious to report to the Select. As Zeno I he liked her, finding her efficient and comfortable to be with. As Zeno II, he hadn't yet formed any ideas about her, but he disliked the thought that he might have harbored someone dangerous for these past months.

He walked on, no longer humming, trying to examine her from the viewpoint of Zeno II. That she had been insistent he visit her tonight was easy to construe as suspicious. He reached her door and hesitated. He could, of course, ignore the whole thing and go to his own flat. But that would hardly help either Zeno I or Zeno

II. Taking a deep breath, he opened the door and climbed the stairs.

She welcomed him in with a warm smile and took his hat and stick. "Please sit down. Mr. Z. I'll get the tea things—unless you'd rather have something a bit stronger."

"Tea is fine," he said. He watched her move about. She was very pretty, very ingenuous. He found it hard to believe she was anything but what she claimed to be. But then maybe she thought the same of him—and that was obviously a false picture.

She brought the tea and a plate of small, colored cakes. "They're very good," she said. "Fresh from Mrs. Mac's Bakery." She poured tea. "How was your dinner? I've heard the club has an excellent chef."

Since the chef there was a food dispenser, excellence was hardly the term. But then she couldn't know that, could she?

"Fine," he said. He sipped tea and chose a green cake after she picked a pink one. He nibbled at it, found it tasty, and finished it quickly.

She said casually, "Maybe we can talk out your problem with the book."

"Maybe . . ." He broke off to yawn, blinked at her, and slumped in his chair.

She moved quickly, catching his teacup before it could slip from his fingers. "That's what comes of having a sweet tooth and liking green," she said.

Moving quickly now, Lady Petra stretched Zeno on the sofa and disappeared into her bedroom. She returned with a small black case. From it, she took a portable scanner and panned the entire area outside the row of buildings and through to Zeno's flat as well. All seemed quiet, normal. Apparently Zeno had not been followed nor was he being monitored. She

ran a probe over him in case there should be a bug her coarse scanner had missed, but there was nothing.

Nodding, she attached a band over his head, the electrodes on the ends pressing just above his ears. She attached the power pickup tube to a fitting on top of the band and then fed in power from the pack in the case. She turned the rheostat control up gently so that he would awaken naturally.

Zeno's eyes came open. They were blank as he looked at her. "Hello," she said in Intragal. "Have a good nap?"

"Nap?" His voice was dull, with almost no inflection. "Am I awake enough to know?" She smiled in satisfaction. He was answering her in Intragal.

"How's the chief, by the way," she said chattily.

"The chief?"

"The big boss." Blankness and silence. "You are sleepy. Perhaps you call him the general or . . ."

"Oh, you mean the Big Eye. Old Samuel Marlowe. Still sitting on high, I guess."

Marlowe! She frowned. It was one answer she hadn't expected. Zeno Zenobius was Eye-3! She had met Eye-3 agents before, but never one so unsophisticated.

She said, "I haven't heard from Marlowe for ever so long. I suppose Gloque contacted him and asked for a contributor to the experiment?"

"Yes, and I was selected."

"Well, naturally, Eye-3 would send one of their top agents. But how did you manage to hide that from Gloque?"

He chuckled, though with little humor in the sound. "I'm not a top agent. I'm head of the Data Analysis Section of Eye-3. But I was picked because I found a relationship between apparently unrelated bits of data."

A programmer! What could Pogany have been thinking of, accepting someone like this? Because she knew

that Eye-3 would hardly be here on its own, it would work with Anthropol on anything this big. But this Zeno was a true babe in the woods. The vultures—the professionals—would eat him alive. Even, she admitted to herself, as she was doing right now.

"Then you were the one who found the relationship between the Combine and the missing Gal-mil personnel?"

"I didn't know any were missing," Zeno said. "No, I found that the pirating of Galactic Cartage ships was not typical of Freebooter tactics. That it had a strongly military flavor about it."

"It adds up to the same thing. It's become a famous bit of synthesis. Don't you miss your computers when they can do that for you?"

"Oh, I have a nice one here."

"That computer in the office? It's a child's toy. I had one in my nursery."

"No, the one at the top of the secret stairs. It's good for a mini-type."

"Oh, I forgot that one. I suppose you've already used it on me."

"Not yet," he said. "But I will, of course."

"They told you to, didn't they? The men at the club."

"Yes, of course. They think I'm one of them." He chuckled tonelessly again.

She saw his eyelids drooping and she quickly cut the current. He fell asleep peacefully. Removing the equipment, she returned him to the chair and sat on the sofa to wait for him to awaken. She had been right: since lunch, he had been acting differently. She suspected that something that had happened in the pub had triggered the removal of a screen Anthropol had put over his knowledge of himself, the real Zeno, just as she had had a screen placed over her. Only her

triggering had come on the first day she had been here.

Zeno awoke, sat up, and blinked at her. "I say! I didn't mean to drop off that way. Frightfully sorry!" he was speaking English, she noticed.

He rose, gathered his hat and stick, and bowed formally. He murmured the proper thank you and good night and hurried to his own flat. There he went into his walk-in closet, opened the panel leading to the computer, took out a scanner, and examined the area. Silence. Wondering only mildly how he had known the scanner was there, he went to his parlor and removed a microcorder from inside the heel of his left boot. He saw that it had been running, ran it backward, attached the remote private monitor to his ear, and leaned back to listen.

When she asked, "How's the chief, by the way?" he thought proudly, "She thinks I'm Anthropol!" He listened, admiring the casual skill of her questioning, and feeling a little disconcerted at the way she had managed to draw information away from him. She had turned him inside out, neatly and painlessly.

Replacing the microcorder, he prepared for bed. Tomorrow he would run her questions and answers through the computer to see if he could get a good probability reading on which group she might belong to.

After that, he just might know what to do next.

IV

Bowen and Thomason leaned back in their relaxo-chairs and swirled the kaf in their mugs. Thomason adjusted the chair to massage his bony shoulders. "Well, we know Zenobius isn't Number Four," he said sourly. "Who in Pluto is?"

"Maybe Paul will find out," Bowen offered. He nodded at the doorway as the doctor came into the room. It was small but very comfortably furnished with the kind of furniture men of their century were accustomed to. It was also thoroughly hidden far beneath Dr. Paul's offices.

"I got through to Gloque," Paul said. "Zenobius is from Eye-3, but apparently they took the experiment in good faith. He's a programmer, not an agent." He smiled dourly. "Gloque's digging got nothing but a lot of special programs and some rather, ah, odd daydreams. A bit of a lady's man in his mind, our Zenobius."

"How did the programming take?"

"Gloque said they tested him thoroughly. He doesn't recall who or what he was; he just knows that he's here on a special mission to help the Select. But he isn't Number Four."

"Who is then?" Thomason demanded.

Paul spread his hands. "Gloque said we'd know through the proper sign. He's like the rest of them, acts as if we can't be trusted with the whole picture."

"Is there anyone here who is?" Bowen wondered. "As I understand it, there'll be only four of us who really know who we are and where we came from. The others

are like Zenobius or are completely indoctrinated to accept what is and not to even be aware that they have pasts."

He took a half angry breath. "If we're that exclusive, why can't we be told why we're here?"

"My dear chap," Thomason said, lapsing into English, "we're here to make certain that the experiment goes as planned, that anyone investigating it will see only what our principles want them to see."

"And what's the purpose of all this?" Bowen demanded fretfully. "What can this ridiculous experiment possibly lead to? What can a handful of programmed humans and a lot of holographic projections prove—or end up doing for the Combine?"

"I suppose you could be considered subversive," Thomason said. "You ask a lot of questions."

"No, he's just human," Paul answered. "If we weren't supposed to ask questions, they'd have been programmed out of us." He smiled in his dour way. "And it does give us something to do. You have to admit this isn't the liveliest job in the galaxy."

Thomason nodded agreement. "All right, let's see how much we can figure out between us." He held up a hand, ticking down his fingers as he spoke. "Bowen represents the Mining and Milling interests. You, Paul, represent Smelting and Refining. I represent Metals Processing. Among us, we cover all ten members of the Combine. So what does that leave for Number Four?"

Dr. Paul sounded more than usually saturnine. "Gloque will tell us in good time. Right now, I'd rather determine the purpose of all this. After all, we're high enough up in our respective organizations to have some inkling. If we put together our knowledge along with the rumors we've collected—"

"I can say this much," Bowen interrupted. "The ultimate result will be the destruction of the Federation

as a policing force that can put teeth into its restrictive barriers and keep us from making the profits we deserve!"

"I've heard too," Thomason offered, "that the plan has to do with creating an unbeatable fighting force."

"If it works," Bowen said dreamily.

"It will work," Paul said flatly. "It has to. And think of what it means—it's something worth working for. The Combine running things as they should be run. Why we'd have the power to get the corporation systems to stop quibbling over economic philosophies and knuckle down to us. No more of this pampering newly discovered retrogressed cultures. It will be like the old days before the Federation had any power. Exploitation. That's what brings a world up fast. Then, by Vulcan, the galaxy would pay what labor and products are really worth. This silly breaking up of monopolies would be at an end. There'd be no more of this ridiculous competition to throttle us."

"I don't need a lecture on economics," Thomason said. He drew more kaf from the side of his relaxo-chair. "What I want to know is how can we guard against spies? You don't think the Federation is taking all this on trust, do you? They may have the place swarming with Anthropol agents. And then there's the Galactic Military. With some of their officers having defected, they'll be alert to anything that smacks of military maneuvers from supposedly nonmilitary sources."

"That's what Zenobius is for," Paul pointed out. "He'll do our investigating for us. And if anyone is suspicious he'll find out and let us know. If anyone tries to get rid of him to protect themselves, we'll know that too."

"Providing Zenobius is to be trusted," Bowen said.

"Gloque thinks he is," Paul snapped.

"If he should make a mistake, then it's our necks," Thomason pointed out. "We're here to do a job for the

Combine. We have to trust to Gloque. If he's made a mistake—say with Zenobius' programming—where do we go? We couldn't run far enough in the galaxy to get away from the Combine."

"I agree," Bowen said. "I say we make certain of Zenobius, no matter what Gloque says."

Paul stroked his chin. "I suppose we could search his flat and his office. I don't think it's necessary, but it would make us all feel safer if we were certain."

"Then if Zenobius is cleared, we'll make sure he really checks out that secretary of his thoroughly," Thomason said. "To use a period simile, she seems like the fifth wheel to a carriage. What the deuce could Gloque have had in mind by putting her here?"

"Since he didn't include her as one of the Select, we could assume that she's just so much window dressing—like so many of the genuine citizens of this fair town," Paul said dryly.

"I want to be sure of that too. Even if Zenobius is what Gloque thinks he is, what's to prevent the girl from using his equipment if she's a plant?"

"Let's sleep on it," Paul said. "I'll think of a way to get him away from his place tomorrow night." He added thoughtfully, "I can check him out in less than an hour."

"And if he isn't what Gloque claims him to be?"

Paul looked at Bowen and smiled. "I am a doctor," he said. "Doctors do have accidents with their patients occasionally—unfortunate ones."

Zeno spent his morning writing period humming as he worked out a series of programs for his computers. He had his door locked although he knew Lady Petra wouldn't come until during these hours unless she was asked. Even so, after last night he couldn't risk her even glimpsing his work.

Finished, he checked the lock on the door and then

slid aside the wall panel to reveal the office computer. He swung it away and quickly climbed the narrow stairs to what he thought of now as his Anthropol computer. He fed his program into the machine and listened with pleasure to its soft mutterings.

He lost his pleasure when the results peeled into his hand. The computer informed him: Five possible allegiances for Lady Petra Claymore: Anthropol, Gamil, Eye-3, Soc-Research, Unknown."

"Many thanks," Zeno said sourly. Shutting off the power, he retreated to his office. He began to feel better again as he checked over the programs he had written for the office computer. They incorporated all the information he had been able to think of concerning the Select. This data he fed into the machine and then added a story plot that he had constructed from bits and pieces of remembered ancient stories. Instructing the machine to tell him where each of the three men might best fit into the plot, he turned off the power, gathered his hat and stick, and prepared to go to lunch.

Lunch was a brief affair. Of the Select, only Bowen was there, and he was finishing his coffee as Zeno took a seat. He paused long enough to say, "Dinner again tonight, old man? We need to discuss a bit of policy."

Zeno said, "Delighted," and wondered which of the three would be late. He suspected it would be Doctor Paul. Medical men had a ready excuse for missing appointments. They also, Zeno thought sardonically, had ready made excuses for being seen near someone else's lodgings.

He suspected that any checking made on him would be very thorough, and that if he was found to deviate from his programmed role his removal would be equally

thorough. Somehow as Zeno I he couldn't feel disturbed at the prospect.

Back in the office, he sent Petra to lunch and then ran the program he had fed earlier to the office computer. He spent an hour chuckling over the results. He wished he could see Paul's face when he checked the contents of the computer and found himself built into a story plot as a villain. Destroying the readout, Zeno settled back in his chair to wait for Petra to return.

When she came, he called her into his office. She sat down, smoothing her long skirt over her legs. "Story going well, boss man?"

"That isn't good English—of any period," he said.

Her eyebrows went up. "Any period? What does that mean?"

"Let's stop fencing," Zeno said. "Let's, as our supposed contemporaries would have said, take the bull by the horns. Of course, you have an advantage over me."

"I am prettier," she said. "And I do have a title. And I type better."

"You also dope teacakes pretty well," he said. "And you own some pretty clever electronic gadgets."

"I do what?"

Earlier he had carefully primed his desk tape machine with the material from his minicorder. Now he flipped on the switch, leaned back, and watched her. She listened in silence, her features expressionless.

"I did the question and answer bit rather well, don't you think?" she murmured when the tape had gurgled to its end. Her luminous eyes studied him. "Why did you risk doing that?"

Zeno ran the tape back and set it to erase. "I expect Doctor Paul to check me out tonight," he said. "Probably while I'm at dinner again with his friends. I'd check me out if I were in his position."

"Do you have anything to hide?"

"Nothing he can find," Zeno said. "Do you?"

Her smile was infuriating. "Nothing anyone can find," she answered. "But he can hardly check me out if I'm home."

"No, I've been told to do that. It's my first assignment, in fact."

"And you're going to report our little tea party, of course." She nodded. "I should have probed you for a tape machine before I opened you up last night. It was careless of me."

"If I don't come up with something," Zeno said carefully, "they'll think we're working together."

"In cahoots," she said. "A lovely word, isn't it? Ancient American slang of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries."

"Don't dither," he said. "I have to know where I stand with you—or where you stand—before I can risk reporting anything to the Select."

"You make them sound like villains."

"They're on the other side," Zeno said. "But then maybe we are too."

"If I told you about myself, I'd lose my advantage over you, wouldn't I?"

"Do you alway talk in questions?" he asked peevishly. "And I've stuck my neck out too far to worry about advantages. If you are on their side, I'm dead anyway. One report to Gloque and . . ."

She made a face. "And this could all be double-talk. You could have been programmed to respond as you did last night just to trip up some nosy female who has a drawerful of electronic equipment."

He nodded. "It looks like we're at an impasse. Unless we find a way to be sure of one another, we aren't going to get very far."

"I think we've done beautifully up to now," she said.

"Or didn't you realize most of this conversation has been in Intragal instead of in English?"

Zeno felt a little ill. He would have to watch Zeno I getting so absorbed in his subject that he overwhelmed Zeno II. He did a little mental footwork and got his balance back. "If you deep-probed me, you'd come up with the same information you got last night."

"I have more sophisticated equipment than is generally available. Certainly more sophisticated than the Combine apparently has."

He blinked. "You lost me. What is the Combine?"

It was her turn to stare. "You mean that you were sent here without that information?"

"There are some things about the past—or whatever you call the world out there—that I haven't dredged out of my memory yet," he confessed. "But I remember all the information that was pumped into me. That term wasn't used."

"You do need help," she said. "Lots of it. Just what *are* you here for?"

"The same as any other agent, I suppose. To find out the real purpose behind this Noble Experiment."

"Without even knowing who your real opponents are? I—no, look, let's do this right. After your dinner, after the good doctor has checked you out, come to my place again. We'll do a thorough job on one another. Then we'll know who is telling the truth. I'll submit first."

"Fair enough," he said, "but if I am being watched, my going to your place again so soon could arouse suspicion."

"All right," she said. "Go to your flat. I'll show you the way to get into mine without being seen." She saw his concern. "And don't worry. Doctor Paul won't discover it any more than he'll locate my equipment. Or, I hope, yours."

He gave her a challenging grin. "Just try to find mine."

"I might," she murmured. She rose in her graceful way and left. Zeno shook his head. But not at Lady Petra; at himself. He thought he'd done a rather good job of fencing with her. He only hoped he could keep up the same pace later tonight.

V

The dinner went much as Zeno had expected. Paul was delayed by a patient, the food was very roast beef and Yorkshire pudding, and so was the conversation until Paul arrived in time to share the cigars and port.

Zeno found himself growing annoyed by this waste of what could have been a pleasant evening with Lady Petra and her electronic gadgetry. Annoyance was not a trait belonging to Zeno II, and he suspected that he was becoming more and more Zeno I. He had to curb himself to keep from asking the wrong questions when Paul arrived.

Lighting his cigar, Bowen said, "Now that we're all here, we can get to business. Zenobius, we want you to take on another assignment. In addition to checking out Lady Petra, we want you to check out each one of us."

This was one gambit Zeno hadn't expected. "Do you doubt each other?"

"Not really," Thomason said smoothly. "But by having you give each of us a clean bill of health, as it were, the others should remain satisfied. And, frankly, we will be able to work together more satisfactorily."

Zeno slipped on an expression of bland acceptance. "Of course," he said. "I'll begin in the morning." He rose, patting a yawn. "And now if you gentlemen will excuse me, I was up late last night working." With a nod he started for the door and stopped, turning.

"By the way," he said casually, "who checks the checker?"

Paul gave him a shrewd, sharp glance. Zeno met it with a guileless expression. Paul laughed sardonically. "We'll put that on the agenda for the next meeting," he said. "Good night, Zenobius."

Zeno strolled out, humming tunelessly. Once in his flat, he barely had time to lay down his hat and stick and loosen his coat when Petra popped in from his bedroom. "This wye to the room of 'orrors, gov'ner," she said.

Zeno followed her through his bedroom and into his walk-in closet. The panel leading to his mini-computer was on his right, but Petra went straight ahead through an opening in what Zeno remembered to have been solid wall between their two buildings. Entering her closet, Petra turned and lifted her hand toward the wall. It slid neatly into place and wooden paneling dropped over it.

"Clever," Zeno said. "Do you have a set of controls for me?"

She showed him a ring with a tiny stud. "Sorry. It's my own invention and not on the market yet. This is the one and only."

They went through her bedroom and into a parlor similar to his, but with a fussily feminine décor. She waved him to a deep chair set in front of a low table. "Gloque's idea of what a lady likes to surround herself with."

"Maybe he suspects you and was just getting revenge in advance," Zeno commented. He sat down and stretched his legs. "Paul showed up?"

"Complete with probe," she said. "But our screens were a bit too strong for his equipment. I'm sure that he's satisfied you're no more than you've been programmed to be."

She gave him a quick smile. "And you should have

seen his face when he checked the office computer and found himself part of a story plot."

"You were there?"

"No, but I have my little electronic spies," she said comfortably. "But here, listen to the tape I made on Paul's interview with me. He came here after he checked you out."

She ran a replay of the doctor's visit. Zeno fully enjoyed the way Petra fielded Paul's obviously loaded questions. If she could be believed, Zeno had established a pattern of working, eating, and sleeping, and he lived that pattern religiously.

From the tape, Petra's voice said, "Thank heaven, Mr. Z was triggered yesterday, doctor. I was getting bored."

"Triggered?" Paul echoed. "I don't understand, Lady Petra."

"Come off it," she said almost rudely. "I was programmed to do a job, just as everyone else here. And I've been doing it—boring as it has been."

Paul had evidently decided to drop his pretense of ignorance. "Then you've been checking Zenobius?"

"Yes, and if he's anything beyond what he was programmed to be, he's too good for me—for all of us. We, and the whole experiment, will have been blued and tattooed."

"That's a rather odd phrase," Paul said musingly. "I wonder—"

Her voice cut in sharply. "Doctor, do you think it wise for us to talk in Intragal this way?"

Zeno chuckled at the explosive sound that came from Paul. He said, "I was? I didn't realize . . ." A moment later he left, whatever he had been about to say earlier obviously forgotten for the moment.

Petra stopped the tape. Zeno said, "I presume you have a reason for protecting me?"

"At least one," she assured him. "Now I'll get the equipment and the tea." She disappeared and returned with her black case. She went away again and came back with the tea service and another plate of cakes. Spending a few moments to show how the mind probe worked, she settled on the sofa, picked up a green cake and ate it. In a few moments she was asleep.

Zeno fumbled the unfamiliar apparatus onto her head, swearing at himself for wasting precious minutes. But finally everything was in place. He awakened her, nodding in satisfaction at the glazed look in her eyes.

He said, "How's the chief?"

"Chief? Oh, you think I'm Anthropol. Sorry to disappoint you, lover."

"What is your Gal-mil rank?"

"All Gal-mil is rank as far as I'm concerned. Do I look like one of *those* females?"

He tried again. "Do you get your orders through Londres or directly from Marlowe?"

"What in the name of Lafitte is a Londres?"

"I sometimes wonder myself," he murmured. He said, "Gloque then?"

"The only instructions Gloque gave me were put on the top of my head, like yours. No one gave me orders. I gave them to myself—after consulting with the Baron, of course." She chuckled without inflection. "I let him think the ideas were his, as usual."

Zeno felt as if he'd been kicked under the breast-bone. "The Baron of Jondee?"

"Is there another one?"

He decided to ask a question he should have asked some time before. "What is your real name?"

"Chloe Helos, lover." The glaze began to leave her eyes.

Zeno turned off the machine and sat back. In a moment he felt strong enough to rise and remove the elec-

trodes from her head. Then he waited for her to awaken. For the first time since he had become aware of Zeno I, he felt his confidence shaking. Chloe Helos of Jondee! Of all the people in the galaxy to get himself mixed up with, to be in competition with!

She broke into his thoughts by waking up and stretching. "Well?"

"You're a Freebooter!"

"Oh, Pluto!" she snapped. "I wish you Federation types would stop believing all the propaganda you're fed. There is a difference between a Freebooter and a Privateer. The only thing Jondee has in common with the Freebooter systems is that none of us is Federation allied. But Freebooters are pirates, killers, looters, thieves."

"You steal from the Federation."

"Ideas, lover. Only ideas. Oh, and an electronic gadget now and then. And we always improve them. After all, the Baron's research labs have some of the best brains in the galaxy working in them."

She sat up. "You can believe this or not, but we're gadflies to the Federation—loyal opposition, if you wish, not enemies. A lot of what they do, we approve of. But a lot we don't. The Jondee system is a community of free spirits who happen to dislike the rigid structure imposed by the Federation."

"There's room for any culture to live within that structure comfortably," Zeno said. "And democratically, as long as they don't impose on others. Don't tell me Jondee doesn't impose rules on its other member planets."

"We do, but we think our rules are good and yours aren't." She grinned a little mockingly. "Truthfully, lover, we have never hurt anyone knowingly. We don't go around killing Federation men. We use their own thing against them and often turn it to a neat profit."

"Rogues," he said. "Confidence men of the galaxy!"

"That's better than being called a Freebooter—or a member of a corporation system. By our own lights, we're honest."

He said, "Let's drop the political philosophy or whatever it is we're arguing about. I still don't know why you're here."

"To stop Gloque from destroying not only the Federation but Jondee too." She smiled at the disbelief on his face. "It won't be the first time I've helped pull the Federation out of trouble. Ask Pogany, if you don't believe me. He and I have stood together to block corporation systems from raiding galactic stock exchanges and creating panic on planets with shaky economies. We've stood together against efforts by Freebooter groups to fuse into an organization big enough to challenge the Federation. And I've helped Anthropol stop more than one raid on a culturally retrogressed planet. After all, the Baron and I like the balance of power the way it is. A stable galaxy is a profitable galaxy—for us."

Zeno said, "Let's get my probing over and lay this all out in the open."

"I know all I need to know about you. I'll tell you what you need to know about me. And the first thing you need is a little background. Or has your mind dredged up memories since last night?"

"No. I told the truth to you. I really have gaps. And I don't know what this experiment is all about. I don't know what this Combine is."

"Then let me fill you in, lover."

Zeno poured some tea and sat back to be filled in. Lady Petra said, "As you probably know, Jondee has some very sophisticated devices."

"Taken from the Federation and refined in the Baron's laboratories," Zeno said dryly.

"Some of them," she admitted. "But that's neither here nor there. The important thing is that on my space yacht, the *Nosy Parker*, I have a beam that monitors priority By-pass communications. I was out cruising around, listening to some Federation communications about their problem with their missing Gal-mil officers, when I picked up a signal in a new code. It took a little while for my computer to break it down, but it was worth the effort. I was tuned in on a directive to eleven ships to use a set of By-pass coordinates that isn't on any of the charts.

"Naturally, I sent my yacht after the eleven ships. I had to know where they were going." She paused and sipped some tea. "Eleven ships no bigger than shuttles," she said. "And they ended up docking around a ship just sitting out on the far edge of the galaxy and simply blanketed with screens. I went after them, putting up a few screens of my own and orbited as closely as I dared. I blanked out their monitors and tried to break through their screens with an audio-video probe. It took me a while but I finally managed to make contact soon enough to pick up most of what was going on inside the ship. I taped it all and then left." She paused and added softly, "There were ten representatives of the big metals outfit. The eleventh was our friend Gloque."

Zeno listened quietly as she outlined the substance of the tape she had made. "But that's impossible!" he exclaimed. "Even if this Combine does what it plans, where will it get the military know-how to maintain power, let alone defeat the Federation in the first place?"

"Lover, don't forget the defecting Gal-mil officers."

He said, "Even so, the Federation has a larger and better equipped force than this Combine could ever hope to get together."

"But does it have the weapons?" she asked. "When

those Gal-mil officers defected, they captured Federation ships very easily. The evidence indicates they used weapons that were outlawed—and supposedly destroyed—centuries ago. Weapons the Federation doesn't know enough about to defend against."

Zeno shook his head. "I still don't see how this Combine can get out from under the eye of Gal-mil or Anthropol long enough to put their plan into action, especially with the Federation on guard."

"Neither do I," she admitted. "And neither does Anthropol. But I sent them that tape and they know that this experiment is the crux of the whole affair. And that's why you're here and Anthropol agents are here."

"Where?" he demanded. "If there are any, why don't they contact me?"

"Maybe you're supposed to contact them."

"Pogany didn't give me any such orders," he said.

She took a deep breath. "Let's just hope there are Anthropol agents here—lots of them. If there aren't—if they were all eliminated by Gloque's screening—we're in trouble, lover."

She met his eyes. "When you're playing detective for the Select, remember that. This isn't one of your stories now, Mr. Z. This isn't for fun. It's for survival for us all."

"I realize how serious it is," Zeno said. "And I'm sure there'll be Anthropol agents around when we need them." He smiled at her, wishing fervently that he felt as confident as he tried to sound.

VI

Zeno awakened to soft, warm sunlight and the sensation that he was reliving a recent bit of his life. He felt very much as he had that morning when he'd found the green memo on his desk and found himself faced with the problem of fighting his way to the top of the Spire.

He had solved that problem with one of his infrequent outbursts of brashness. It was time, he decided, to apply the same technique to his present problem. He let his mind work on it while he dressed and ate. By the time he reached the office, his confidence reservoir was well filled.

Petra offered him a good morning as if nothing had changed. He said briskly, "Come into my office, please." She lifted an eyebrow but followed him docilely.

Zeno said, "Lock the door and sit down, Lady Petra."

She locked the door and sat in the client's chair. Again her eyebrow went up. Zeno leaned back and said almost casually, "How did you manage to get Gloque to choose you for the experiment?"

"When I decided to do some personal snooping," she said quickly, "I used some of my, ah, contacts until I found someone who had been invited and who I could substitute for." She flashed a smile at him. "There happens to be a genuine Lady Petra Claymore on one of the monarchy planets. A few temporary facial alterations, eye lenses, and a hair change and I made a very creditable replacement."

"And she was obliging enough to let you take her place?"

"She didn't have much choice. At the moment, she's enjoying an enforced vacation in a recreation area on one of the Jondée system's planets."

"What talents does the real Lady Petra have that made Gloque recruit her in the first place?" he wondered.

"Despite her title, she works for a living. She writes a society gossip column for a newspaper syndicate. She is, in other words, a natural born snoop. From the programming Gloque gave me, I've concluded that my job here is just that—snooping. So far my only orders have been to keep an eye on the social hierarchy of Wooten Dorset and report anything I feel is suspicious."

"Does that include me?" Zeno said.

"You, Farthing-Froth, Horsely, the banker—most of the business and professional people except the Select." She threw him another of her bright smiles. "So far I've sent Gloque such tidbits as Farthing-Froth's being seen with Madame Lejeune at a rather late hour, Dorson, the factory manager, showing a bit of interest in the wife of our tobacconist, and Zeno Zenobius showing no interest in anything." She shrugged. "After all, Gloque recruited a gossip columnist and that's what he got."

"How do you get this information to him?"

"I send a tape to Post Office Box 132," she said. "I presume it gets from there to Gloque, wherever he is." She spread her hands. "And honest, boss, that's all I know. You pumped me dry."

Zeno refused to be amused in his current mood. He said briskly, "Not quite. I want all the information you can dredge out of your mind on everyone in Wooten Dorset you think might be consciously working for Anthropol or the Combine or Gloque." He set up the

microphone of the tape recorder to pick up both their voices, drew a pad of paper into writing position, and nodded to her. They both talked, her remarks stimulating memories in him and his bringing ideas from her. When they had finished, Zeno was surprised to see the size of the list.

"That takes in every business and professional person in town," he said. He rose. "Go polish your nails or something while I see what the mini-computer makes of all this."

The computer, he discovered, had a lot of ideas about his data. And when he showed Petra the results, he had the feeling that some of the information surprised her as much as it did him.

The Select, the computer informed him, was not yet complete. It was still lacking a fourth member; unfortunately it was unable to suggest who that might be or what organization he (or she) might represent. In addition, Zeno learned, the Select were not wholly happy. They weren't fully aware of what went on in the experiment, nor even of what their total roles in it were.

He also learned that there was a high probability that the Select were the only ones who had direct contact with the outside, and if they did that went through Gloque.

"I certainly don't have any way of getting through to the Baron," Petra complained. "I've been trying since I arrived here. I can't find any exit point from this place either. If either of us has to make a run for it . . ." She paused and drew a finger graphically across her throat. "Kaput."

"Maybe the computer will come up with something," he said, and handed her another readout.

The computer was silent on the subject, but it did offer the information that there were seven possible

Anthropol agents in Wooten Dorset. In the order of probability they were Zeno himself, Petra, Doctor Paul, Jenny, Bowen, Farthing-Froth, Horsely, Thomason, Madame Lejeune and Madame Dubois, the milliner.

"What do we do," Zeno wondered crossly, "wait for one or more of them to come up and wave an ID disc at us?"

"We keep gathering more data and beating your computer with it until we get an answer," she said.

Zeno turned sourly back to the readout sheets on his desk. He grunted in surprise. Wooten Dorset wasn't populated by some thousands of carefully programmed people after all. At the most, the computer insisted, there were fewer than a hundred. The rest were illusion, cleverly created holographic projections for the eye and nicely coordinated sound projections for the ear.

He said, "Then most of the workers who swarm to the train station to go to work in the factories every day don't exist after all!"

"No more than do those children you hear playing across the park," she agreed. "But why? What's the point of a factory that has practically no workers?"

Zeno drew his pad toward him again. "That's the next step, to ask the computer about things and events instead of people. Adding what we've just learned to what we already know, we just might get some useful answers."

Petra left to man the outer office and he went to work. He was waiting for the computer to finish muttering to itself and disgorge some information when a buzz came from his intercom in the office below. Leaving the machine on its own, he hurried downstairs, closing panels as he went.

When he questioned the intercom, she said, "A client to see you, Mr. Z. A lady."

Zeno sat down heavily. A genuine client? The hairs at the nape of his neck prickled. It was either a mistake or things were actually beginning to move. Hastily, he swept his notes and all the print outs from the computer into his waste basket and turned it to destruct. Then he lighted a cigar, leaned back, and said, "Show the lady in, please."

The door opened and Petra ushered Jenny into the office. She flicked an eyebrow at him and shut the door quietly, leaving them alone. Zeno was on his feet. He ushered Jenny to the client's chair and returned to his own, puffing on his cigar and waiting for her to speak.

She was dressed in her obvious best: a long, fitted green affair with her usual primly high neck. She wrapped her gloved hands in the reticule on her lap and sniffed. "That's a nice smelling cigar, Mr. Z."

"Tasty too," he said. "What can I do for you, Jenny?"

"You've done it already," she said. Smiling, she opened her reticule, calmly drew a small vibrator ring from it, and slipped the ring onto her finger. "Stand away from your desk, please, Mr. Z."

"What in the name of—"

"And you can drop the English bit," she said. "In case you hadn't noticed, we've been speaking Intragal. So let's not waste each other's time."

Zeno stood up, reached for an ashtray and let his hand knock the intercom lever to open the circuit. Then he backed toward the wall. He tapped his cigar into the tray and looked at her.

"Don't be heroic," she said to him. "This vibrator won't kill but it can hurt a lot. And I'm quite capable of using it on full power." She smiled prettily.

"I'm quite comfortable the way I am," he assured her dryly.

She began examining his desk, looking up now and

then to check on him. She said finally, "You are careful, aren't you. There's nothing here at all."

He fervently hoped Petra—as he made himself continue to think of her—was hearing all this. Not that he was afraid. He was far too curious for that. But Jenny moved with a trained competence. And she also had that vibrator ring.

She eyed him thoughtfully. "Just who are you, Mr. Z?"

"Ask Gloque," he said.

"Is that supposed to be a trap?" She laughed at him. "It isn't, really, because obviously if I know enough to come here like this, I know about Gloque. Now answer my question."

He crushed his cigar into the ashtray and took a step forward. "I'm afraid I haven't anything to hide. I'm just what I'm supposed to be. If you want, you can check out my flat too." He thrust the small tray at her. "Hold this and I'll open the way upstairs for you."

"An inside entrance?" Automatically she reached for the filled tray. Zeno let it slip from his fingers, muttered an apology, and made a move to bend down to pick it up. Jenny had been well programmed in her role of barmaid, he thought. Before he could move very far, she had swept her skirt behind her knees and started to retrieve the ashtray and cigar butt.

Zeno grabbed her right wrist and swung her, turning the vibrator away from himself. "Petra! Now!" he shouted.

Then he grunted in surprise. The skin he held was soft and smooth. But under that pleasant softness were muscles like tough metal cords. Jenny did a bit of turning on her own and Zeno found himself on his back, hunting for air.

He heard the door open. Jenny said, "That was naughty," and looked toward the front of the office. Zeno saw Petra duck to one side at the same time that she

threw a heavy paperweight. Jenny stepped sideways and back. Zeno found an ankle, gripped, and pulled. Jenny came down on top of him.

"Over nine stone at least," he thought foolishly as she made impact. He tried to roll out from under her. She wriggled and he suddenly felt the jolt of a million needles stab the nerve centers of his leg. He fell back, jittering helplessly on the floor.

Blurrily he saw that Petra was standing over Jenny and holding the bigger woman's wrist so that her hand was turned back and pressed against her breast. Petra said, "Go ahead, honey, vibrate yourself."

Jenny swore in Intragal, and then in what seemed to Zeno to be the languages of a dozen scattered worlds; she had a fascinating vocabulary, he thought. He lay listening and feeling the effects of the vibrator wearing off.

Petra said, "Push the ring off your finger before I pull your shoulder out of its socket."

Jenny pushed. Petra caught the ring deftly and stepped back. "Now go shut the door," she said to Jenny. "And you, Mr. Z, come on and try to get up."

"He didn't get much of a charge," Jenny said sullenly. She shut the door and then sat in the client's chair. Zeno got to his feet and made it to his own chair. He sat down gratefully.

Petra said, "Shall we take her upstairs for a probe session, Mr. Z?"

Jenny glared angrily at her. Then the glare collapsed and she said in a tearful voice, "Oh, Pluto! I knew I'd muff it. You don't need to probe me." She brightened a little. "Maybe we can swap?"

"That depends on what you have to offer," Zeno said. He was fully recovered now and he wriggled his leg in pure pleasure. "Just who are you?"

"Jendra Morton, Apprentice Agent, Anthropol," she said promptly.

"And just who did you think I was?" he demanded.

"I didn't know," she confessed, "but I knew something was happening when you changed so suddenly yesterday. I thought I'd better find out why you became so different."

Zeno didn't offer an explanation. He said, "What did Gloque program you to do?"

"Keep my ears open at the pub and tape any conversations I might think he'd want to hear."

"And then?" Petra said.

"Then I put the tapes in the mail . . ." She stopped and looked from one to the other. "All right, addressed to Post Office Box 132."

"How many have you sent?"

"Two," Jenny said. "Most of the talk in the pub isn't worth bothering with. Except when Mr. Bowen and the others and Mr. Z meet."

Zeno said, "Do you have any copies of those tapes?"

She said thinly, "I'm not that much of an apprentice, Mr. Z. Of course I do." She started up. "I'll get them now if you want and—"

"No hurry," he said dryly. "Just bring them to me some afternoon soon during your rest period before the evening rush."

"All right." She stood. "You haven't told me very much, you know."

"In time," he said.

Jenny moved toward the door. Petra stepped toward her as if to open it first. Somehow she tripped over the rug and half fell into Jenny. She said, "Thanks," as Jenny carefully straightened her up. Then she escorted Jenny out.

When she came back, Zeno handed her a tiny bug. "Under Jenny's chair," mouthed silently.

Petra began to take the bug apart. Finally she nodded and spoke aloud. "This isn't Anthropol issue, by the way. It's a type I've never seen before."

"Jenny's a better actress than she is an agent," Zeno said. "Or are we just supposed to think that?"

Petra put most of the bug back together. "Maybe we'll find out soon," she said. "I returned the compliment and planted one of these—only smaller—in that beautiful mop of hair she wears."

She replaced the bug under the chair. "If you want to tell the lady anything, you'll have to push the tab back in the slot. Meanwhile all she's getting through it is a lovely head-splitting frequency howl."

Taking a tiny receiver from her reticule, she pressed it to her ear. "Why don't you go to lunch, Mr. Z? I'll sit and listen to Jenny. She should be back to work by now."

Zeno rose. "If the Select aren't at the pub, I think I'll go on to the club. You never know when an absent-minded remark will come in handy."

"Just be sure it isn't your remark," she said, and settled back in her chair.

VII

After Zeno left, Petra sat in his relaxochair, sipping kaf and listening to the sounds coming into the remote receiver from the miniscule bug she had tucked into Jenny's luxuriant hair. It was an extremely sensitive bug and Petra winced at the cacophony of noise that poured into her ear: glasses clinking, footsteps, raucous laughter, shouted orders. It was quite a noisy crowd this day.

Finally Petra heard Jenny's voice as she spoke to Cobber during a momentary lull. "I'm sorry I was late getting back, but I had such a funny experience. I took a stroll in the park after I did a bit of shopping this morning. It's such a lovely day. And you can be sure that I kept my eye on the Guildhall Clock. But by the duckpond, I found this poor old lady looking like she might faint. She told me her head kept buzzing and she was that dizzy she feared she might fall.

"I tried to get her to go to Doctor Paul but she hadn't the strength, poor soul, and it was all I could do to get her to her rooms nearby. But she did ask me to tell the doctor about her." There was a rustle of paper. "I wrote this message to deliver to the club but it got so late I came straight here. If things get a bit quiet can I—"

"Impossible," Cobber said. "Look at them coming in today."

"But we need some pickles, we're that close to having an empty jar, and I thought—"

"Ah, pickles. I knew that and forgot. Here, give me

the message and I'll deliver it and get the pickles. You can keep the customers happier than I." He chuckled.

"I'm ever so grateful, Mr. Cobber. The poor lady . . ."

"Yes, of course. Now hop to that front table by the windows."

Quickly Petra rose, gathered up her reticule and gloves and hurried out. She saw Cobber some distance ahead and she hurried her footsteps but still kept well behind him. When he turned into the greengrocers, she risked catching up and managed to meet him at the pickle display.

"Why, Mr. Cobber, what a pleasant surprise at this time of day."

"Ah, Lady Petra," he said, bowing awkwardly. "It isn't often one sees you in a place like this at any hour."

"Oh, I forgot to have Mr. Z's favorite biscuits delivered. And when he has his tea this afternoon, he'll want some." She smiled. "And a client came just after he left for lunch. I have to go to the club to tell him so he won't linger over his port."

"Ah, I have to go there myself," he said obligingly. "I have a message for Doctor Paul. I can tell Mr. Zenobius for you."

"You're a dear," she said. "But I'm sure your time is more valuable than mine. Let me deliver your message and you can hurry back to the Crown and Cross."

"I've always said a true lady is kindness itself," he answered. He surrendered the envelope he held in his hand. "And to tell the truth, I don't relish going there. It's a bit of a nob place for the likes of me."

After a bit more conversational maneuvering, Petra bought her biscuits and left. Once she saw Cobber heading with quick strides back to the pub, she stepped into a doorway and opened the envelope. She read, "I want to meet M and M, S and R, and P tonight, midnight at *the* Place." It was signed "Number 4."

Petra bought paper and envelopes at the stationer's, copied the message in a backhand script, sealed it in an envelope, wrote Paul's name on the front, and strolled to the club. For all that she was Lady Petra Claymore, she was stopped in the foyer by a liveried robo-servant.

Such lovely anachronisms, she thought—humanate robots in a bustle and corset culture. "Please tell Mr. Zenobius that Lady Petra Claymore would like a word with him."

The robo-servant disappeared. Petra dropped the envelope inside the front door and deliberately put her heel on it. When Zeno appeared, she said quickly, "Get back as soon as you can. And make sure the robot sees that envelope." She hurried away.

In less than twenty minutes, Zeno was back in the office. "Paul got the message, all right, and whatever it said didn't make him very happy."

She told him about the message. "Then our computer was right," he said. "The Select is unbalanced."

"No longer," Petra said. "They now have Number 4. And from the tone of the wording, I'd say she expects to be Number One." She waved him to silence as she listened to the bug. "Jenny is leaving for her afternoon rest. Since she's seeing the Unholy Three at midnight, I suspect she'll come here this afternoon in an effort to learn more about you first."

"Or because of my fatal charm," he said dryly. He headed for the wall panel. "Send her up to my flat when she arrives. I'll get the tea ready."

"I already took care of things," Petra said. "The knockout drops are in the vanilla bottle in your kitchen. But they won't work without the activator. That's mixed in the tea milk. So take yours black."

"*Semper paratis*," he said. "It's too bad you don't work for the Federation. We'd do well as a team."

"I could reserve that and point out that the Baron could use a computer man with a flair for thinking."

"Tempting," Zeno said. "But thirty years of life under the Federation is hard to set aside."

"This discussion is pointless," she said, "since neither one of us may ever get away from here."

"We've done all right so far," Zeno said in an effort to bolster his own shaky confidence. He opened the panel and slipped away. He barely had enough time to prepare for Jenny when she arrived.

Ushering her into the parlor, he seated her on the sofa and suggested tea. "Ever so nice," she murmured. "But let me do it, Mr. Z."

"You take a rest and see what it's like to be waited on for a change," he said.

He returned with the tea service and then wandered away to select a cigar from his humidor. Deciding she'd have time enough to switch their tea cups, he turned and took a chair opposite her. He had an anxious moment until he saw her pour milk into her tea. Then he settled back.

"Shall we get to business, Jenny? Did you bring the tapes?" He took a cake.

She chose a cake too, not biting into hers until he had started on his own. She said, "Not yet, Mr. Z. I have to know which side you're on first, mine or theirs."

He watched her face as he said, "Maybe neither. I could be working for myself or Jondée or one of the coporation systems, hoping to cut myself a piece of the profit pie."

"There's no chance of anyone—" she began. Whatever she intended to say, Zeno could only guess. A yawn swallowed her words, and before she could finish it, she was asleep.

Zeno said quietly, "Petra."

She came through his bedroom door. "Let's get her to my place, lover. Lafitte, she's heavy!"

Together they maneuvered Jenny through the wall and into a small room behind Petra's bedroom. Zeno wasn't too surprised to find it; little that Petra did surprised him any more. They laid Jenny on a small bed and he glanced around. This was obviously a detention cell, comfortable but austere, with the only furniture the bed and a food dispenser.

"Made for me?" he suggested.

"It might have been," she agreed. She busied herself slipping the band over Jenny's head. "Let's get started. She's a big girl and she may not stay out for the full thirty-six hours I planned for. Two drops might not be enough for that."

"Two drops? I gave her four," Zeno said.

"Then she'll sleep long enough," Petra said. "Probably over sixty hours."

She turned on the current and waited until Jenny awoke, her eyes glazed.

"Jendra," she said softly, "do you have everything right? You made a mistake today. You can't afford another one tonight."

"Who are you?" Her voice was inflectionless.

"That is not important, except that I'm your superior. I was told you were competent. But after today's slip up . . ."

"But I had to know about Zenobius. I thought he might try to pass himself off as Number 4." She paused. "And I used my cover."

"Even so, we can't afford risks at this stage. You have to know your role perfectly."

"I do," Jenny said. "I know it perfectly. I am perfectly programmed."

"We'll see," Petra said in her soft, insinuating voice. "I'm going to test you, first to see just how perfect

your conditioning is and then to see how well you know the procedure."

"Who are you?" Jenny demanded again. "Did Gloque send you to check on me?"

"Gloque doesn't send me. I send him," Petra said. Her voice had changed. Now it was brusque, commanding.

Zeno swallowed a chuckle of appreciation. What a woman!

Petra said, "Name the members of the Combine."

"I don't know them all. I only know that they represent the big metals interest."

"That's less than perfect programming," Petra said severely. "Learn them to keep from being tricked." Zeno listened in open astonishment as she rattled off the names of the ten member companies. But then, he recalled, she had taped their meeting with Gloque.

"I have them," Jenny said, and despite her lack of voice inflection, she sounded impressed by Petra's knowledge.

"And learn which of the big three represents which set of interests."

"Oh, I know that. Bowen is Mining and Milling. Paul is Smelting and Refining. And Thomason is Metals Processing." She sounded the least bit pleased with herself.

"Very good. And you're going as representing whom?"

"I'm Number 4. That's all they need to know."

"Is it?" Petra murmured. "Then why did Gloque boast about the perfect cover he had for you as Number 4?"

"For me?" She hesitated. "This is more complicated than I thought. If I should have been programmed for that—"

"Enough," Petra interrupted. "The omission is not important. Just remember that you dare not fail. If something happens due to your failure, it won't be you

alone who is destroyed. Gloque is the screen between you and the Combine. Once he's pierced, they'll be revealed. And once they're revealed—"

"There are only ten men who can be implicated," Jenny said quickly. "They can be sacrificed."

"They will be—before they get a chance to talk," Petra said. "But we aren't dealing with fools in this game. One slight lead beyond them and . . ."

She paused. Jenny's head bobbed up and down. "I won't fail."

Zeno saw Petra's lips form an old-fashioned English swearword. She had obviously been hoping Jenny would reveal something more, but either she had been programmed to suppress it or she didn't relate Petra's tangible questioning to the wanted answer.

Petra said, "Why did you wait until tonight to reveal yourself to the Select?"

"I had to be sure they were the right ones."

"And you are sure now?"

"I was, but—"

"But there is doubt! Then you have to be doubly careful. All right, let's run the test and see where the greatest danger to you lies. Detail your actions for tonight."

"They are the same as I was originally programmed for."

"Are they? Your programming has been found wanting in two areas. Now don't waste any more of my time."

Jenny said, "I go to the Communication Center at midnight."

"Be specific! Be thorough! I want no more mistakes in Gloque's programming. Pluto knows he messed up Zenobius badly enough."

"The Communication Center," Jenny repeated, "is below Doctor Paul's office. I go to his door and say,

'Doctor, I have a buzzing in my head.' He will answer, 'Come in and let me hear it.' I will go into his office and say in Intragal, 'It seems to come four times every hour.' He will tell me to go into a closet to prepare to be examined."

If Jenny hadn't been under the influence of Petra's drug and probe, Zeno would have suspected sarcasm in the deliberate way she spoke. But Petra showed no sign of being bothered. She said crisply, "Doctor Paul also will speak in Intragal?"

"Yes. I am sorry. I will try to be more specific. I will go into the closet with him. It is an elevator. We will descend to the Center."

"More of Gloque's childish folderol!" Petra snapped. "Later, I'll give you a simpler set of signals. I assume that you know you're to openly take command of the Select?"

"Yes. I work directly with Gloque. If they should balk, he will be notified immediately. He can control them."

"Why should they balk?" Petra demanded.

"I am a woman. They might object. . . ."

"Gloque didn't inform them that Number 4 might be a woman?"

"He gave me to understand that they might object when they found out."

"All right. We'll assume they accept—one way or another. The next step?"

"The Select help me plan the move that will get me caught by a Federation spy."

"His identity?" She sounded challenging, Zeno thought. As if she knew and wanted to make sure of Jenny's knowledge.

"Gloque is working on it," Jenny sounded apologetic.

"The fool! That information should have reached you before now!"

Jenny said nothing. Petra said, "And precisely what do you reveal to the Federation spy once you've been caught?"

"They will find information on me that reveals plans for the Combine to arm many Freebooter groups and make a concerted attack on Galactic Cartage ships. With those ships armed, the Combine will begin attacking the Federation."

Petra stared wide-eyed at Zeno. Then she said to Jenny, "How will the Federation spies find this information?"

"I don't know. Gloque is sending it day after tomorrow with the next group of incoming settlers."

"The fool," Petra snapped. "He's staying dangerously close to the maximum time table. And I suppose one of the new arrivals will walk up to you openly and hand over a packet of information?" Zeno admired the sneer she managed to put into her voice.

"No, do not be so harsh. The evidence will be in a new dress to be delivered to the Salon Parisienne. I go there and buy it. Then Gloque will tell me how to remove it from the dress."

"That's better," Petra said in a slightly mollified tone. "All right, carry out your orders. Dismissed."

Jenny shut her eyes and fell into a deep, quiet sleep. Zeno said, "From the way she takes orders, she could have had some kind of military training."

Petra nodded. "That's why I used a spit and polish snarl on her. She responded to that approach better." She shook her head. "But that could mean she could be from Gal-mil or any of the anti-Federation militaristic planets."

"Whatever she represents, we're in trouble," Zeno said. "The scheme she outlined will do just what it's intended to do—mislead the Federation into sending its forces to guard Galactic Cartage ships."

"And so give the Combine's real fighting force a chance to do what it really plans, whatever that is," Petra agreed. "But stopping things now won't help. Gloque will just arrange for someone else to be captured with the false information."

"Then you'd better wake her up before midnight," Zeno said. He looked down at Jenny. "If she can be waked."

"Oh, she can be," Petra said. "But I don't intend to do it. I'm going to go as Number 4 in her place."

VIII

"I don't like your taking a risk like that," Zeno said. "If they suspect you. . . ."

"You're sweet to worry about me," Petra said, "but I didn't come here for a vacation. Now help me undress her. If she should wake early, she'll feel a lot more helpless in just a chemise than fully clothed."

Bending, Zeno undid Jenny's high button shoes and drew them from her feet. He examined them carefully, paying particular attention to the heels since that was a favorite carrying place for ID. He thought for a moment that he felt the left heel give but before he could do much Petra caught his attention.

"Lover! Look, she's wired for transmission." She had Jenny down to her stays and she was pointing at them. Her eyes widened and she put a hand to her mouth. "A direct line to Gloque?" she whispered.

Zeno felt a little ill at the possibility. He watched as Petra began to examine the stays carefully. She drew them off, leaving Jenny in her chemise. She examined the stays from the inside and then picked up Jenny's dress. Finally she turned to the girl's mass of blonde hair.

Stepping back with the audible sigh of relief, Petra said, "We're safe for the time being. She's not operative at the moment. From the way she talked, I assume she has direct communication with Gloque, but this hookup is so clever it outsmarted itself."

She showed Zeno the button at the top of Jenny's high-necked dress. "Have you noticed that she always

wears dresses that come high on the neck? This is the reason. The button is a subvocal transducer. It's designed to pick up the throat movements of someone trained to use it. Fortunately, it won't pick up direct sounds or even the muscle movement contractions of normal speech."

"What kind of training?" Zeno asked.

She smiled and patted his arm. "Stop worrying about my playing Number 4, lover. I'm a pretty good ventriloquist, and that's the kind of training it takes."

He said, "That's how she sends out. How does she receive from Gloque?"

"Those big, fancy-headed hairpins she wears. See how the decorative knob is pressed just above her ear? It works by vibration. Now all we have to worry about is Gloque's being suspicious because he's tried to contact her lately and had no answer."

Smiling at Zeno, she put the hairpin into her own luxuriant hair and held the button lightly to the base of her throat. She practiced subvocalizing briefly, set the button aside, and wrapped Jenny's corset around herself. Replacing the button, she wrinkled her forehead in concentration.

Zeno could see the faintest movement of her throat muscles. He could hear no sound, either from Petra or from the hairpin, but the way her smile broadened he guessed that she was enjoying a conversation. Finally she put the button and corset down.

"We're in luck. He hasn't been trying to contact Jenny. When I told him I wanted a final check before making my contact tonight, he sounded almost eager to tell me that everything was going smoothly. He sounded as if," she added thoughtfully, "I might be his superior in some respects."

Zeno shook his head. "If Jenny is Gloque's superior, then who is her superior?"

"Maybe no one here," Petra said. She adjusted the hairpin. "I'll keep this ready in case Gloque tries to make contact. And now I have to find a way to cut down those stays so they'll fit me."

"You are a bit smaller," he said. "What about her dress?"

"All I need is the throat button. I'll put that on one of my own dresses."

Zeno helped her carry Jenny's clothing and her equipment into the parlor. Spreading out the corset, she went to work on it. He watched for a few moments and then glanced at the clock.

"It's time for Jenny to go back to work," he said. "Cobber will be getting the wind up."

She gave him an inquiring glance and returned to her work. He said, "And I was thinking that she might have some more interesting equipment where she lives."

She gave a mock sigh. "It's too bad you can't see your way clear to migrating to Jondee, lover. I can see that you have the perfect devious mind for it." She rose and brought him an oddly shaped tool. "In case you have to pick a lock."

Returning to his own flat, Zeno gathered his hat and stick and strolled to the pub. It was well-filled and Cobber was sweating as he tried to do his work and Jenny's too. Zeno established himself in a quiet corner and sipped a glass of stout until Cobber found time to take a few moment's rest. Zeno beckoned him over. "I say, Cobber old man, I'm worried about Jenny."

"So am I, sir," Cobber puffed. "She's never been late this way before."

Zeno said in a confidential tone, "As a matter of fact, she might not come at all." He saw that he had Cobber's attention and he let his story spinning imagination take over. "She came to see me about a delicate problem this afternoon—a young man. It seems he's made

protestations of undying love but that she's heard he's been seen with another girl, a dressmaker's assistant, I believe."

"That would be Farthing-Froth's apprentice, young Finch," Cobber scowled.

"She told me in confidence, of course," Zeno said. "But I checked on the young man in question. He's really quite loyal to her. I thought I'd tell her if I could find her." He paused hopefully. "She might be home, crying. . . ."

Cobber obligingly gave him the information he wanted. "She lives just up above, sir. The stairs lead up from the alley." He looked worriedly around the busy pub. "If I can help. . . ."

"No, I'll see," Zeno said. He winked at Cobber. "And I'm sure Jenny wouldn't want to think anyone else knew of her problem. You know how reticent young women are, eh."

And, he thought, if that wasn't sufficiently Victorian, he'd been reading the wrong books. Finishing his stout, he left and made his way to the alley. He found the stairs. They led into a hallway with four doors opening from it. One informed him that Jendra Morton lived behind it. Using the lock pick Petra had given him, he eased the door open and stepped into a dark room.

When he returned to his flat, he used the kitchen stairs that led down to the alley. Going through to Petra's parlor, he solemnly laid a large box on the sofa where she sat, watching Jenny on a small monitor.

"All done?"

"Yes, and blast this corset. What have you there, lover?"

He opened the box and began handing her its contents. "Three dresses with buttons at the neck. One spare antenna corset. Six large-headed hairpins. All

carefully locked in her wardrobe. But I got in, thanks to this." He returned the lock pick.

"I'd say you've pretty thoroughly immobilized our Jenny," Petra said. She rose. "Time for me to go and be Number 4. Keep an eye on the monitor, will you, lover? At least until you go to bed."

"Bed?" he said fiercely. "If you aren't back by three, I'm coming after you!"

"What a nice compliment," she said, and left.

Zeno watched the monitor, tried to read, drank innumerable cups of tea, and consulted his watch every few minutes. Finally he remembered Jenny's shoes and he got them from Petra's bedroom. He went to work on the heel that had seemed loose before. Finally it yielded to a slight outward and downward tug coupled with a gentle twist to the left. He heard a click and the toe of the shoe slid open to allow a tiny metal disc to drop to the floor.

Zeno picked up the disc and stared stupidly at it. It was the size of his little fingernail and the etched writing on it was too small for him to make out. But he had a sinking feeling he knew what he was holding.

Getting a magnifying glass, he focused it on the disc, reading the obverse side. It said clearly, "Jendra Morton, Agent Class D4, Infiltration Specialist, Anthropol." The reverse side read, "Audio Field +3."

Zeno sat down heavily. This was what he had suspected on seeing it—an Anthropol agent's ID disc. Confirmation could only be made by someone with a voco-print instrument that would match the voice print of the bearer with a set of waves from the disc. Forgery was virtually impossible since the waves of all such discs were frequency-scrambled in random changing patterns. Only a programmed voco-print instrument could unscramble them.

This much Zeno knew from his work at Eye-3. Now,

he thought, he knew something else. Jendra Morton had been programmed very cleverly to play a double—no, a triple agent. And his and Petra's cleverness could very well have been the one thing that would ruin the entire Anthropol plan.

There was one possible way to find out. Ducking into his closet, he squeezed into the small room housing his mini-computer. He sat a moment in thought and then fed in a program. He picked up the readout and stared at the two tapes of paper he held. The top one, he realized, contained the answers to the questions he had asked earlier that day, just before Jenny had come into his office.

As he read it, he felt excitement mounting. Considering the amount of information he had fed into the machine, this was a surprisingly cryptic answer. The printout said merely, "What the factories here actually manufacture is an unanswerable question based on data given."

He looked at the other tape. He had asked for probabilities on Jenny. The readout told him, "Triple agent probability point oh-three-one. Double agent, point oh-five-two. Agent associated with but not representing Combine, point seven-six. Other possibilities, point one-five-seven."

"I don't want to believe you," Zeno said sulkily, "and I'm going to make damn sure you're wrong." Getting his hat and stick, he left.

Petra stepped into the dark puddle in front of Doctor Paul's door and drew at the bell pull. The door came open so quickly that she knew he had been poised on the other side.

"I'm so glad you're up, doctor. I have this terrible buzzing in my head."

He gaped at her. "You!" He recovered himself quickly. "Come in, Lady Petra."

She entered and he shut the door. "Now tell me about it."

She stared at him without expression. "I told you. I have a buzzing in my head."

He took a deep breath. "Let me hear it." He led her into his private office.

Her expression relaxed. She said in Intragal, "It seems to come four times every hour."

He looked unhappy, but he said, "Please go into that closet and disrobe," also in Intragal.

Petra went into a roomy closet. Paul joined her. The floor began to drop. It moved downward rapidly and for some time, lowering them a good hundred meters, she judged. When the lift had stopped, they stepped into a small but comfortably furnished room. Bowen and Thomason lounged in chairs, sipping kaf. Both men stared at Petra.

"Gentlemen, Number 4."

She said, "Your Victorian manners are slipping, gentlemen."

They both rose, their faces startled and at the same time a little red. Petra said graciously, "Please sit down," and took a chair.

"It's hard to believe," Bowen blurted out.

"Because I'm a woman?"

"No," he said quickly, and obviously dishonestly. "But Zenobius checked you out and found nothing, not even as much as we know."

"I am, after all, well programmed," she murmured. "And by the way, I used a sleep drug and a probe on him. He's quite, quite harmless. Not at all clever for an Eye-3 man. He will be useful to me, however."

"And to us?"

She waved it aside. "Not much, thanks to his poor

programming. Gloque will be reprimanded for that. Now let's get to the business at hand."

They stared at her. Paul said, "You'll have Gloque reprimanded!"

"Just who do you represent?" Thomason snapped.

Her eyes were cold as she turned from one to the other of them. "I sense a certain suspicion among you gentlemen. Whatever the reason, let's banish it now. I suggest you call Gloque and ask him where Number 4 stands in relation to you."

"He'll be asleep," Paul said hurriedly.

"I'm sure he'll be annoyed," she purred. "But he is well paid for being annoyed. If you prefer, I'll have him call you."

Bending to draw kaf from her relaxochair, she gave her throat button the half turn that activated it. Subvocally she said, "Number 4 calling Gloque." She repeated it twice more before the hairpin gave two tiny throbs and his voice said, "What?"

"Number 4," she said. "The Select don't seem to feel comfortable with me. They don't feel that I have authority over them."

It was a colossal bluff and as she straightened up, kaf in hand, she had to force herself to look relaxed, casual. If Jenny had been lying, had been programmed to mislead an interrogator, there could be a kickback that would put both her and Zeno in a rather unpleasant orbit.

She lifted the mug to her lips. "Well?" her throat asked.

"I'll call Paul immediately."

She sipped her kaf. In thirty seconds a buzzer sounded from the other room. Paul's eyes widened. Murmuring an apology, he rose and left the room. They could hear his voice as he identified himself. He said, "Num-

ber 4 . . ." He was silent. Then, "Yes, yes. Yes, sir. I see. Thank you."

He returned and sat down. His voice was dry. "To quote Gloque, 'I understand Number 4 has arrived. Give her full cooperation. You are under her command.' He signed out."

Petra nodded indifferently. The others tried to look pleased. She said, "To answer a previous question, just think of me as the coordinator between Gloque and the Combine and—some others."

Paul took a deep breath. "You waited a long time to contact us . . ."

"To check you out," she said flatly. "And since the beginning of the end isn't immediate, what was the hurry?"

"And we checked out to your satisfaction?" Thomason asked.

"To date," she said calmly. "Now, to business. I have reason to believe that an Anthropol agent and one from Jondee—and perhaps others—are here. I do not refer to the obvious Anthropol agent, the one who will take me into custody at the proper time . . ." She could tell from their expressions that she was bewildering them. Apparently she knew more of the plan than they did.

She said, "What time does the train arrive?"

"Two P.M.," Bowen said, "day after tomorrow."

"How many colonists? I mean genuine ones." Again she was bluffing. If the theory of projected people wasn't right . . .

Bowen laughed. "Sixty arrivals. Four genuines."

She frowned. "On whose orders? At this stage we hardly need that many new ones."

Paul spread his hands. "Gloque sends them. Sometimes he tells us in advance what to expect, at other times he doesn't. After all, our job is to make sure that

no spies get into a position where they can learn anything."

"And you're sure they haven't?"

"We don't even know who this Anthropol agent is that you claim will detain you."

Bowen said bitterly. "We weren't informed of this."

"You were to be. You definitely will be by tomorrow," she said. "But to satisfy your curiosity, I'm to be detained and questioned. Evidence will be found on my person. This evidence will start the Federation's wheels grinding—in the way we want them to. Their interest will turn from the experiment. Then the plan will enter its final phase."

"Which is?"

"You will be told in good time." She fervently wished that she had the answer to that question. She added, "I want Zenobius with you to meet the train." She held up a hand at Bowen's startled protest. "He is associated with the Select, remember. Let him feel the importance of that association. And he will be of use to me. I can learn a great deal questioning him without his being aware just how much he reveals to me. And I would obviously be out of place meeting the train."

She picked up her mug. "Now, about the possible agents . . ."

"Based on simple logic, there aren't many possibilities," Thomason said. "Of all those in the town, only we three, you, and Zenobius get around, as it were."

"An agent doesn't have to have physical access to every place," she said coolly. "I suggest you make a more thorough and very quick check of a number of people who come in frequent contact with the public, including you gentlemen. Farthing-Froth, Cobber, Jenny . . ."

They listened as she ran off the names of the town's

businessmen. Bowen said, "And if we find these agents?"

"The Anthropol agent must be left alone. I decide how to handle him—or her. But the Jondee agent is to be detained for deep probing."

"If there is one. Gloque mentioned no such possibility."

"My information does not come from Gloque," she said coldly.

She rose. "That is all for now, gentlemen. Stand by for further instructions. Once the train has deposited the people, affairs will begin to move, I assure you."

"Thank God for that," Bowen said in English.

"If we knew a little more . . ." Paul began.

"The less you know, the less chance there is of your revealing anything should you be tripped up. Anthropol agents aren't complete fools, you know. They can be dangerous even after their identities are revealed."

She started toward the lift and then turned back. "I've decided to change the ridiculously complicated password. From now on, if I send anyone to you, or come myself, the signal will be simply, 'Doctor I have four small symptoms.' Or, suitably for Bowen, 'I want to buy four stocks.' Or for Thomason, 'I have four new legal problems.' That will be the entire signal.

"If, however, the old password is used, you'll know it's someone who managed to get information not meant for them. Detain that person at all costs. And contact me immediately. Is this understood?"

They nodded in chorus. Petra entered the lift and let it carry her upwards and away. As she rode, she adjusted the ornament in her hair against her free ear. It picked up the voices through the bug she had carefully planted before leaving.

She heard Paul say, "—who the devil she represents?"

Bowen sounded irritated. "I don't like this. A woman coming in and lording it over us, accusing us of pos-

sibly being enemy agents. She was too much of a good thing. I'm going to talk to Gloque personally."

"Be reasonable," Paul said. "He already made himself clear."

"Reason be damned," Bowen snapped.

Hastily, Petra opened her throat contact. "Number 4 here."

"Again?"

"Bowen is acting too much of the Victorian male. He may be worth further investigation. He objects to a woman being his superior. I wonder how much of his complaining is smokescreen."

"Bowen was carefully chosen and carefully programmed."

"There have been many errors in programming," she said coldly. "The timing is too tight for us to take risks now. In addition, my checking indicates the possibility of a Jondee agent here as well as one or more Anthropol agents."

"You are sure?"

"I did not say that. I have strong grounds, however. I suggest that if Bowen calls, you leave the channel open."

A momentary silence. Then he said into it. "He is calling me now."

Petra listened as Bowen's voice came to her. "Gloque. I'm calling in regard to Number 4."

"Number 4 is not our concern, Bowen. Both of us are employees subject to her orders."

Bowen let out a gusty breath. "Why weren't we warned of this, or programmed to expect it?"

"If you wish to question the manner in which the operation is being performed, I will put you through to your employers."

"That won't be necessary," Bowen said hastily. "But can you make it clear to her that we three are above

suspicion?" He began to sound irritated again. "I particularly dislike being accused—even by inference—by a pint-sized—"

And that could have torn it, Petra thought. She said quickly, hoping to take Gloque's mind from a description that could hardly fit the definitely full-sized Jenny. "Tell Bowen he uses a lot of energy protesting his innocence." She listened to the message being relayed.

Bowen made a despairing sound. Gloque said, "Is that all, Bowen? If so, return to your work and leave me to mine."

Then Gloque's voice came aimed at Petra. "I believe he will cooperate now."

"You handled it well," Petra said. She wondered if she had just imagined a subtle change in Gloque's voice. "You might reinforce your statements tomorrow."

"Tomorrow—yes," he said.

Petra tuned out and went toward her flat.

IX

Petra returned to her flat to find Zeno gone. She looked quickly at the monitor and nodded. Jenny still slept peacefully under a light coverlet. She was heading for her bedroom when Zeno appeared, a sheaf of readouts in his hand.

"There you are, lover! What are you up to?"

"Getting ready for tomorrow and trying to stop trouble," he said. "How did it go?"

"Let me loosen this cursed corset and I'll tell you," she said.

She joined him corsetless, obviously relieved. Gravely Zeno handed her a small balloon of brandy. She sipped it gratefully. "I wish you wouldn't be so cryptic," she complained. "What's happening tomorrow? What kind of trouble are you trying to stop? And how can I contact Gloque without an antenna?"

He grinned at her in what she considered that infuriating superior manner the male animal sometimes displayed. "The trouble first," he said. He tossed Jenny's ID disc into her palm. "In her shoe."

"Pooh," Petra said. "I have half a dozen of these, but they're all out of date. And I defy you to tell them from good ones without a voco-print machine." She shook her head. "Whatever Jenny represents, it isn't Anthropol, lover. She has too much power. Tonight I found out just how much." She sketched out what happened.

"I know she isn't Anthropol," Zeno said. He showed her the results from the computer. "But do—or did—the real

Anthropol agents here know it? All she has to do was approach people she suspected of being Federation and revealing herself as she did to us. And maybe they weren't as lucky as we were and roused her suspicions."

"Are you saying that we can't locate any Anthropol agents because Jenny blew the whistle on them to Gloque?"

"I didn't find a whistle among her things," Zeno said, "but I do know that three of our local citizens haven't been very visible the past two days."

He poured himself a brandy and sat down heavily. "After I found the ID discs, I had the computer check Jenny out, and when it told me that the probability of her being an agent associated with the Combine but not part of it, I decided to do some checking on my own."

"In Wooten Dorset—after midnight?"

"Why not? The man I wanted to see was still awake, cleaning his pub. I told him that I hadn't yet found Jenny and I wanted his help. So when I asked questions, he answered them. It took me a while since I didn't want to be too direct, but I managed to find out that he hasn't seen two of his regular customers and one of our neighbors in two days. He hadn't thought much about it until I asked my questions, and I had to spin a wild tale or two to get him to promise not to say anything."

"Who are they?" she demanded impatiently.

"Farthing-Froth, Horsely, the banker, and Madame Dubois, our neighbor milliner."

"Lover! They were all on the computer's list of possible agents."

"I said we had trouble," Zeno told her. "Of course, they could all be sick, except that nobody in Wooten

Dorset gets sick. They could have gone away on business trips, except that there's no place for them to go."

"You made your point," she admitted. "What else happened?"

"When I was getting the results on Jenny I found the readout to the questions I was posing the computer when Jenny came and interrupted us yesterday afternoon. I'd forgotten all about it." He riffled through his sheets and handed her one.

She read aloud, "What the factories here manufacture is an unanswerable question based on data given."

He said, "The interesting thing is that I didn't ask it a direct question about factories. I merely fed it data on events and background and asked for a synthesis."

She took another gulp of brandy. "What does it mean? I've always assumed that the factories made consumer goods for the experiment—clothing and communication equipment and that sort of thing."

"They seem to," Zeno said cautiously. He handed her another sheet. "I fed the computer all the information I could think of, past and present, related even indirectly to the factory. There's the answer I got."

She read, "Logically, there must be two factory complexes: one apparently manufacturing items that satisfy Federation inspection; the other definitely manufacturing items that will help fulfill the ultimate goal of the experiment."

Petra whispered, "Weapons! The outlawed weapons!"

"That's my guess," Zeno said.

"We'd better find out fast and try to do something," she said. "This affair is coming to a head day after tomorrow." She emptied her glass. "But how can we make sure?"

"That's what I'm getting ready to do tomorrow," he said. He handed her the remaining sheet. She read it with a puzzled expression. "This seems to say that

the computer suspects possible sabotage in the factory. What good will that do?"

"The Select ordered me to check for possible subversion activities," he said. "I'll take this to Paul, since he seems to be the leader, and get him to let me visit the factory."

"And do what, once you're there?"

"I haven't figured that out yet," he admitted. "But I'll think of something."

"Or I will," she said. "I'm going with you." He started to protest and closed his mouth when she added firmly, "I'm supposed to keep a check on you, remember. And as Number 4, I'd hardly let you go to the factory and not go along to make sure you didn't see something you weren't supposed to."

"If there's really anything to see," he said.

"There's one way to find out," she said. "I'll call Gloque and see what his reaction is." She rose. "I'll go put on those plutonic stays."

When she came back, she sat down and stared off into space. Her throat muscles barely rippled as she talked with Gloque. Finished, she shut off the contact and nodded to Zeno.

"Gloque bought it," she said. "He didn't sound very pleased, but short of admitting he doesn't believe I'm really Number 4, he couldn't say no."

"We're all set then," Zeno said. "Let's get some sleep. Tomorrow will be a busy day."

His busy day began a little sooner than he expected. He was lying in bed thinking about waking up when Petra invaded his room. He sat up, blinking. Either this was a ridiculous dream or she was standing at the foot of his bed waving one of his undervests at him.

"Come on, lover, I want you to model this for me. And wear this." She showed him a piece of sticking plaster.

By the time he had himself sorted out and put together for the day, Zeno was in his bathroom, wearing a not too comfortable undervest on his torso and a piece of sticking plaster over newly shaved skin above his left ear. He was wiping his face when Petra's voice made him jump. "What are you doing now, lover?"

He jumped and looked around for her, grunting when he realized that the voice came by vibration through the sticking plaster; that she had not invaded his privacy.

She said, "If you want to talk to me, use the rosette in the buttonhole of your gray suit. It's a mini-mike."

Zeno strode to his closet, found the gray suit, and said, "Shut up until I've had breakfast!"

Grumbling, he dressed and ate and went downstairs to the office. Petra was at her desk. "A fine way to talk to me when I sat up until all hours making you a nice undervest."

"It itches," he said ungraciously.

"Sorry," she said. "By the way, it's geared to pick up a frequency I don't think the local boys have the equipment to monitor." She lifted her hair to show him a similar piece of sticking plaster behind her own ear. "If we get split up today, being able to talk to each other just might come in handy." She touched a brooch on the shoulder of her dress. "My mike."

"You," he said, "are a handy gadget to have around." He started for his office. "I'm going to call Paul now."

"He's all prepared," she said. "I called him and found that Gloque had already made contact. You're to be given 'complete cooperation,' to quote Paul. With me watching, of course. But you don't know all this, of course, so go speak your piece."

"Are you always so full of vim and ideas in the morning?" he said, and went into his office. He used the telephone, still finding it a strange, awkward way of

communicating over distance. Paul answered almost immediately.

Zeno said, "Zenobius here. Can you talk, doctor?"

"This is a private line," Paul said. "Go ahead."

Zeno went ahead, explaining that his computer had made a remark that worried him. He quoted the read-out and then said, "I asked myself, what if these dissident elements Thomason spoke of the other night really do exist here, and we've been looking in the wrong place for them?"

"A good point," Paul said. "I think you'd better have a look around the factory."

"Dash it," Zeno said, "that's a fine idea. But what do I look for?"

"I don't know," Paul said sharply. "You're the inquiry agent, I'm not." He added in a more pleasant voice, "I'll call Dorson, the factory manager, and tell him you're coming to gather story material." He gave a barking laugh. "That will do. You can take Lady Petra along, supposedly to make notes. And while she's keeping the men's eyes occupied, you can do a bit of looking around."

"Capital," Zeno said. "I'll leave right away."

By midmorning Zeno could feel that Petra's patience was unraveling almost as fast as his own. This venture had looked promising when a private one-car train had carried them deeper into the planet and delivered them to the great cavern housing the complex of five factories.

But then their guide turned out to be a servo-robot rather than the manager, and within an hour they realized they were being given the standard tour prepared for Federation inspection teams. When they were taken to the inspection center of the fifth factory and treated to the sight of men's frock coats coming into sight on a moving belt, passing beneath a set

of probes that supposedly searched for flaws, and then disappearing into a tube labeled "Packing Department," Zeno decided that he had had enough.

He whispered to Petra, "You'd better start making noises like Number 4 or we'll both collapse from boredom."

She nodded. "Hold tight, lover." Stepping toward the robot, she said loudly, "Dorson, I assume you're listening. You'd be a fool not to monitor us." A pause. She added, "Have the guide show us the *real* factory."

"One moment, please," a voice said from a grille above them.

The robot had been moving toward an exit. It stopped now and remained motionless. Petra and Zeno stood, waiting. A full three minutes passed before a reedy, lugubrious man appeared.

"You took long enough," Petra said in the voice she had used when questioning Jenny. "I presume you were calling Gloque." She added, "You are Dorson?"

He nodded. Then his eyes slid from her to Zeno and back again. Her voice came impatiently, "I know what I'm doing. What did Gloque tell you?"

Zeno thought, Gloque must have a different frequency for contacting Dorson or both he and Petra would have picked him up through Jenny's hairpins.

Dorson let another layer of worry sag his jowls. "I am to answer any questions you might ask—when we're alone."

She made a half-angry gesture. Zeno saw her expression grow faintly distant as it did when she was contacting Gloque subvocally. He couldn't hear her, but he did get Gloque's almost immediate reply.

"I misunderstood. I assumed Zenobius couldn't know.
..."

She must have interrupted, Zeno thought, since Gloque broke off abruptly. Then he said, "Yes. I will

be waiting for your detailed explanation, ah, report on your return to Wooten Dorset. No, I do not question you. No, it will not be necessary for you to contact your principles. This is too small a matter."

Petra reached to her neck and touched the button there. Then she looked expectantly at Dorson. He was obviously listening to someone. His head kept nodding. Finally he gave a shrug. "I'm sorry," he said to Petra. "I was not aware. . . ."

"Gloque is to be commended for his caution," she said smoothly. "And so are you."

"True," Zeno said in a pontifical tone. "Commended."

"Follow me, please." Dorson led the way to the exit and onto a movable belt. Some distance along it branched. They went to the left and through an archway labeled "Packaging and Storage." It was a large room filled with crates and with a large lift set in the far wall.

"Presumably that carries the goods in these crates to Wooten Dorset," Zeno said.

"Where they are distributed to the retail outlets," Dorson said.

Zeno said, "Let's not continue to play games, Dorson. I calculated the speed of that machine turning out men's frock coats. Projecting the daily production figure, that factory could clothe a city of half a million in a month—at least from neck to waist. What actually happens to the goods that go through your so-called inspection station? Do they loop back and appear again in a few moments?"

"Actually the same piece of goods appears once every thirty-three minutes," Dorson said.

"And it's the same in the other four factories?"

He nodded. "Communications, surface vehicles, food dispensers, and electrical apparatus, each has a slightly different round-trip rate. But the principle is the same."

"Saves money," Petra said dryly, "not to mention wear and tear on nonexistent machinery." Her voice grew tart. "Do we stand and admire these empty crates, Dorson?"

He shook his head and hurried them to the lift. "Presumably it only goes upwards," he said. He aimed a small device that looked like a palm torch at a control panel inset near the front of the lift. They began to descend.

Two hundred meters at least, Zeno thought, when they came to a stop. He moved along beside Petra as Dorson led the way out and onto another moving belt. It deposited them in a corridor with two closed doors. Coming through one, they could hear the muted hum of machinery. Dorson led them through the other.

This was obviously a control room. One wall contained a series of video tubes. Opposite them was a three-dimensional flow chart. Dorson pressed a stud and a small, bright light appeared at the far end of the flow chart maze. He said with a touch of pride, "You will notice that the areas of activity are numbered on the flow chart to correspond with the numbers on the video screens. Thus when the light reaches Area One on the chart, you need only to look at video screen number one to see the activity that is taking place."

They looked, watching the mining and processing of metals, the shaping of the metals into tubular forms, the attaching of smaller bits of metal to the tubes, and then the brief disappearance of the whole into a verticle tube.

Dorson said, "If you will watch screens six and seven, you will see the final furbishing of each item and then the scan checking for quality control."

"And then?" Petra said in the cold voice she had adopted with Dorson.

"Then, each item is packaged and sent to the sur-

“face where it is stored for ultimate pickup.”

“How many rejects have you had?” Zeno asked.

“Less than one per cent,” Dorson said proudly.

Zeno glanced at Petra, hoping that she would take his meaning. She said, “That figure will be altered slightly. I wish to inspect one of the finished items.”

“But it will mean a delay in production to remove one that is not automatically rejected. I’ll have to shut down the production line.”

She stared icily at him. “The time is coming close. We can risk no error—none at all. Now please do not waste our time protesting . . .” She nodded toward the screen showing the inspection stage of the process. “Choose one at random.”

Dorson moved away to a control panel and threw a switch. Zeno watched in fascination as the entire process froze. Dorson manipulated another switch and a robot appeared on screen seven, unlatched a large metal plate, swung it aside, and drew out a fair-sized piece of machinery. The door was closed and latched again and the robot disappeared from the screen. Dorson set the process in motion again.

“It will be here soon,” he said.

Zeno was watching the screens. “How many humans work on this project?”

“Myself and four maintenance men. They are thoroughly programmed and frequently retested,” he added.

“And how many in the display factory above?”

“Some fifteen,” Dorson said. “Of course the work they do is of no value. However, they are not aware of that. We have them so that whenever a visiting inspection team wishes to question an employee, one is available.”

The robot arrived, carrying something that reminded Zeno of pictures of an ancient weapon he had seen in

some of the old books. A Gatling gun? No, he recalled, a machine gun, that was the name.

But this formidable looking piece of ordnance would hardly be so archaic. Bending, he studied it, but when he straightened up he knew no more than he had before. Petra, he noticed, was nodding and making small sounds of satisfaction.

"Quite acceptable," she said to Dorson.

"Definitely," Zeno said.

Dorson made a snorting sound of relief. Petra said, "Replace it. Now we wish to leave."

Dorson was obviously delighted to get them back on the train. He made effusive noises as the train began to pull out but, Zeno noticed, before it was moving well, he was scuttling for his office.

"Gone to contact Gloque," Zeno said. He frowned. "That was all a little too easy, it seemed to me. If Gloque does suspect you because of Bowen's remark . . ."

"Then he's setting a trap for us," Petra acknowledged. "But my guess is that Gloque can't be sure that I am or am not the real Number 4. And until he is sure, he can't do anything that would offend his superiors."

Zeno said softly, "If you don't come up with a good explanation for letting me see so much, Gloque will be sure you aren't Number 4."

"I'm trying to think of something," she said, and fell silent. She looked up once during the brief ride. "And you'd better have something to say to Doctor Paul."

They were both quiet until they reached Zeno's office. Once there, they went quickly up the narrow stairs behind the panel and through the wall to Petra's parlor. A quick look at the monitor reassured them that Jenny still slept.

"Pour us a brandy, lover, while I take these plutonic stays off," Petra said.

When she came back, Zeno handed her a drink and

then took the chair opposite the sofa where she curled up. He said, "Any ideas for Gloquel?"

"None," she admitted. "All I can think of is what we saw today."

"I hate to show my ignorance," Zeno said, "but what did we see?"

Her voice bordered on anguish. "A weapon outlawed centuries ago and presumably destroyed—a selective atomic disintegrator!"

She went on, "Don't you see? Somehow, those eight defecting Gal-mil officers got one. That's how they conquered those ships. They set the disintegrators for humans and wiped out the personnel. Then they simply walked in and took over.

"Lover, with a weapon like that, the Combine can send Federation ships and everything else into nothingness. And because no one in the Federation knew the weapon still existed, they have no defenses against it!"

Zeno closed his eyes and visualized the ugly weapon again. And for the first time since Londres had summoned him upstairs that day months ago, he felt the real danger of the experiment.

"Then we have to find a way to tell Anthropol what we know as soon as possible," he said. He was on his feet. "Damn it, we have to!"

"But how?" Petra wailed. "The only communication channel we have is to Gloquel!"

X

Petra emptied her brandy glass and set it aside. "I just can't think," she said. "If there was only some way we could make Gloque open up a channel to the outside."

Zeno frowned, opened his mouth, and then closed it again. He got to his feet. "Speaking of Gloque," he said with an attempt at casualness, "call him now and tell him something before he has the Select out after me. Tell him I held a vibrator to your head if you have to." He moved toward her bedroom door. "I'll go downstairs and take care of Doctor Paul."

"Maybe if I get Gloque off my mind, I'll be able to think of some way to get outside," she said. She leaned her head against the back of the sofa and reached for her throat button.

Zeno went through her bedroom toward the opening in the wall. He stopped, looking at the stays she had tossed on a chair. The idea that had brushed like a faint breeze across his mind moments ago came back with more force. Turning, he went to the parlor door. Petra was motionless except for a slight rippling of her throat muscles.

On impulse, Zeno took one of the big-headed hairpins he had got from Jenny's room and pressed it above his ear lightly. A surge of excitement went through him as he heard Gloque's smooth voice: "I see. Yes, that explains it. You handled the situation well. But I assure you that Zenobius was perfectly programmed." A change

came into his voice. Almost, Zeno thought, a note of apology. "Yes, perhaps there was an error, however. Ah, that should take care of the matter. Excellent."

Zeno laid down the hairpin and hurried to his office. He was humming as the breeze of idea became a wind in his mind. Putting in his call to Doctor Paul, he talked briefly, listened a good deal, and then returned to Petra.

She was sipping another brandy. "What did you tell Paul?"

"The truth," Zeno said. "About the weapon, not about you."

Her eyes widened. "That's dangerous ground, lover! What did Paul say?"

"He asked me a lot of questions," Zeno said. "I don't think he wanted to believe me. Then he said, 'By the way, Zenobius, let's keep this to ourselves for the time being. No point in upsetting the others at this stage, is there?' "

"Now why in the name of Morgan would he do that?" she wondered.

"I'll probably find out tomorrow—if not sooner," Zeno said dryly. "And just what did you tell Gloque about my programming?"

"I just said that I suspected you of being more than you pretend, and to test my theory I gave you your head. And that you proved me right by insisting that the upper factory was just a cover up for a more potent one."

"And the only way I could even think of such a possibility would be because he had programmed me badly."

"That's the general idea. He didn't like being told that either."

"I know," Zeno said, trying not to sound smug. "I heard."

"You heard? Lover, don't tell me you've taken to wearing Jenny's other set of stays and her hairpins!"

"Just the hairpin," Zeno said. He sat down. "You weren't wearing your stays either when you talked to Gloque. They're still in your bedroom."

"But I couldn't have contacted him . . ." She broke off and put her hands to her waist. "I'm not, am I! I don't understand. . . ."

"I think I do," Zeno said. "As I see it, Gloque has to be close by, yet located where he can monitor not only what is reported from down here but what will take place on the surface when the big operation starts. And that means he's physically above us; under a surface dome, most likely.

"And if so, it would hardly take a high gain antenna like the ones in those corsets to reach him. In fact, why risk an antenna that might shoot signals others could pick up when all he'd need is a simple relay system placed around here at strategic points?"

Petra's eyes gleamed. "Lover, you are thinking. Keep going."

He said, "Jenny is Gloque's superior, and that means she represents someone pretty powerful. If she wanted to contact her bosses, would she be set up so that she could only do it by going through Gloque or would she be fixed so she could By-pass him and make a direct contact?"

"Lafittel!" Petra exclaimed. "Direct, of course. But how?" Jumping up, she scurried into her bedroom and came back with the corset antenna she had recently removed. She began to go over it carefully, nodding to herself.

"You're right," she said. "With this, she could reach out and feed into a priority By-pass channel. She could make contact anywhere in the galaxy." She frowned.

"But how does she send? Is there a special transmitter in her room . . . ?"

"Too inconvenient," Zeno said. "She might want to talk to her superiors when she isn't near her room." He stared from the stays to Petra. "Why not the same way she talks to Gloque—through that throat button?"

Petra rose and disappeared again. She returned with a small case. Opening it, she revealed a set of mini-tools and a magnifying eyepiece. She also carried her dress, having put a robe on in its place. Zeno poured himself more brandy and sipped it as he watched her skillfully take apart the throat button and examine it through the eyepiece.

"Two circuits!" she said gloatingly. "Turn it one way and you get Gloque's frequency with the antenna damped out. Turn it the other and you get an entirely different frequency with the antenna tied in."

Taking one of her tiny tools, she probed the inside of the button. "Now if I had the probe kit in my reticule over there—"

Zeno brought the probe kit. She said, ". . . then I could find out just what that frequency is."

He waited while she found out. She set the probe aside. "It isn't too far from the special frequency the Baron and I use." She peered into the button's insides again. "There's a tiny potentiometer in here. If I move it one marking and probe again . . ."

Zeno realized that she expected no comment from him: she was talking to herself. She gave a faint gurgle of pleasure and exchanged the probe for a miniscule tool. "Ten teeth between each giga-unit. If I move it this way five, six, six-point-three . . ." He could see sweat beading her forehead. She set the tool aside and leaned back. "That's as close as I can come, and it's put this thing almost to its limit."

She drank some more of her brandy. "Maybe we

can set one of those hairpins to receive at the frequency I hope I'll be sending on."

"Receive who?"

She seemed surprised. "Why the Baron, of course. Who else would I know how to contact on a special frequency?"

"According to your reputation, almost anybody in the galaxy," he said dryly. "But what happens if you do get the Baron? Will he tell Anthropol?"

"If he gets this message, he'll tell them all right—if he has to deliver the information personally. I told you, lover. This is survival for Jondee."

Zeno stopped arguing and brought one of the extra hairpins. She examined it with the eyepiece and then very carefully laid it on the tabletop and hit it lightly with the edge of her tool case. The coating shattered, revealing the powerful mini-receiver inside. She used the eyepiece again.

"Fixed on two frequencies," she said disgustedly. "We can receive Gloque and, separately, whoever else Jenny contacts, but we can't change the setting." She tossed the pin aside. "I was afraid of that when I saw that it was a sealed unit."

"Then how will we know if the Baron gets your message?"

"We won't," Petra said. "Not until the fireworks start. Then if we get out of here, we'll know he heard me. If we don't, we'll know that I snafued it."

Zeno didn't understand the word, but the meaning was painfully clear.

She busied herself putting the throat button together again and replacing it on her dress. Then, putting the dress back on, she adjusted the button. She said, "While I'm sending, can you tickle a meal out of the food dispenser for us?"

Zeno left. When he returned, wheeling a cart laden

with food, she was sitting with her head back, her features a little drawn. She smiled faintly at him.

"I sent until my muscle gave out, lover. I'll send again before I go to sleep and in the morning. But without a chance for an answer from the Baron, all we can do is hope."

"I hope better on a full stomach," Zeno said, and pushed the tray closer to her.

The next morning Petra appeared rested and considerably more cheerful than when Zeno had left her the night before. "Today is the big day," she said brightly. "You meet a train and Jenny buys a new dress."

"I'll be lucky if I get as far as Bowen's office, let alone the depot," Zeno said. "What makes you think Gloque will let me wander around now that you told him I'm an active agent?"

"Oh, didn't I tell you?" She smiled at him. "I fixed that, lover. I told Gloque that as soon as we returned to the office yesterday I reprogrammed you and now you're Wooten Dorset Zenobius again."

"You fixed it," Zeno agreed, "unless Gloque has decided you aren't the real Number 4. Then he'll hardly believe you reprogrammed me."

"That's one of the risks we have to take," she said.

"One of the risks? What are the others?"

"Well, Paul might think you know too much and try to neutralize you. And then there's Jenny. I'm going to try programming her this morning. But if she doesn't respond, we're in trouble."

He wrinkled his forehead. "Why let Jenny loose at all? Can't you give her some more of that sleep dope?"

"Hardly," Petra said. "The evidence is in a dress, remember. And can't you see me trying to convince the Salon Parisienne that a dress big enough to fit Jenny

was made for me? No, we have to risk waking her up and turning her loose."

She stepped back and studied him. "Sartorially splendid," she said. "But are you wearing your wired vest?"

"Vest and receiver." He lifted the hair above his left ear and showed her the small piece of sticking plaster there. He adjusted his boutonniere microphone.

She stepped farther back and bent her head toward the brooch on her dress. "Are you receiving me?" she whispered.

"Very nicely," he said. "And you?"

"Loud and clear. Now if I don't get messages from Gloque and from you at the same time, I should be all right."

Zeno glanced at the clock and went for his hat and stick. "We should keep our microphones open. Even if we don't get too many chances to talk to one another, we should be able to figure out what goes on."

"Good luck," she said into her brooch, and disappeared.

Zeno strolled to Bowen's office through the soft sunshine. But somehow the weather that had been so perfect these last months had lost its ability to please. He couldn't help remembering what lay deep beneath his feet, and he wondered just how many of those weapons had been finished and shipped to the surface to await collection. Hundreds, perhaps thousands by now, he thought. And one was too many.

He entered Bowen's office as if nothing had changed. And apparently it hadn't, he decided, as Paul gave him a brief, secretive nod. Chatting amiably, Bowen led the way to the station. Zeno watched in fascination as a flood of travelers came from the train that pulled up to the platform.

He tried to separate illusion from reality, but Bowen had carefully placed them where they could see but

not touch. Only four of that mob were genuine people, Zeno thought. And of the four, probably only one had a reason for coming. The others were so much window dressing. He moved his attention from the passengers to a car farther down the line. Freight was being unloaded there, and Zeno wondered which of the crates was the real one—the one containing Jenny's dress.

His attention swung back as Bowen spoke. "Here come our genuines. Those two couples and. . . ." He broke off and then said, "Gloque said four but I count five!"

Five, Zeno agreed, and he felt as if a pair of icy hands had reached inside his body to turn his stomach upside down. The fifth person was Londres. And there was no doubting his reality.

Bowen started forward. "Let's greet them and find out who that fifth one is."

The others moved with him. Then things began to happen a little too fast for Zeno to take them in easily. The couples paused as Bowen began to introduce himself and the others. The younger of the two men waved aside the outstretched hand. "We've come for the subversives."

"They're in the detention cells," Bowen said. "But. . . ."

The man gave a sharp nod and led his companions away. They moved efficiently, Zeno noticed, with no wasted effort. All were large, even the women, with stolid expressions.

"The devil," Bowen grumbled. "Why weren't we told—" He broke off as Londres came abreast of them. "Londres," he said in his ice-lined voice. His eyes swept past the Select and froze briefly on Zeno. Then with no sign of recognition, he strode away.

Thomason said on a thin voice, "I need a drink." With Bowen at his side, he started for the club. Paul lingered so that he and Zeno were a few steps behind.

Zeno was watching a long, thinnish crate being wheeled past on a handcart. He saw the stenciling on the side that consigned it to the Salon Parisienne, and then Paul's voice brought him around.

"Don't say anything about yesterday yet, Zenobius. Something damn funny is going on today."

Zeno couldn't make a connection between the two statements but he merely nodded and wondered how he could get alone long enough to talk with Petra. He found his chance at the club. Going into the wash-room while the others lined up at the bar, he found it empty. He spoke quickly into his boutonniere. "The dress is on its way and Londres has arrived."

"What's a Londres?" she asked quickly. He told her. She said, "Checking on you, lover? Play your cards close to your vest. And what about the four genuines that were expected?"

He told her about them. "Subversives?" she echoed. "Those must be our missing neighbors!"

"My guess," Zeno agreed. He told her what Paul had said.

"Keep on top of it all if you can," Petra said. "And don't lose contact with me, whatever you do. I've just reprogrammed Jenny and I have a feeling I didn't do very well getting through her screens. I'll contact Gloque now and get my instructions on the dress."

Before Zeno could answer, the washroom door opened and Londres came in. For Petra's benefit, Zeno said loudly, "Ah, Londres old man," in English.

"Drop that stupid pose," Londres growled in Intragal. "Why haven't you reported?"

"How?" Zeno asked flatly. "I was given no way to make contact."

"An enterprising agent would have found a way," Londres said.

Zeno said blandly, "Then you should be able to

show me that way and make contact with Marlowe. That is, presuming he knows you're here."

The sticking plaster above his ear vibrated gently. "Ataboy, lover."

Londres arctic tones dropped another twenty degrees Celsius. "What is that supposed to mean, Zenobius?"

"I'm just wondering how you managed to get here."

"The same way you did: programmed, screened. . . ."

Zeno strode toward the door. Londres turned as if to block his path and then paused. Zeno said, "That's a lot of work for Gloque to go to since this experiment isn't going to last beyond today."

Londres took another step toward him, but Zeno was at the door. He opened it, letting in a flood of sound from the club bar. "Don't try to duel me with my own weapons, Zenobius," Londres said.

Zeno walked on. Petra said to him, "You took an awful chance, lover. But I think you smoked him into the open."

Zeno had to wait a good ten minutes before he could get away from the bar to a quiet place and answer Petra. "I smoked him out all right. And it looks as if he sold out to the Combine." His voice was heavy and he felt a little ill. "But why, with the position he had!"

"Lover, any member of the Combine could buy and sell Eye-3 out of petty cash. Don't you think an offer of money and power would tempt a man like Londres?"

"Power, yes," Zeno said. "Being second in command has galled him for a long time, I think." He swallowed a desire to curse Londres. "But what did he come here for? Hardly to check on me. He doesn't really think I'm a danger to the operation."

"He might after yesterday," Petra said. "I suspect he's here to check up on both of us. Gloque suspects me,

I'm certain. I think he called Jenny's superiors. They tried to contact her, couldn't, and then sent Londres to troubleshoot. And that means he knows enough about Jenny to recognize her when they meet."

"They're supposed to meet!"

Petra said quickly, "At teatime in the Queen Victoria Arms. I called Gloque and got instructions on the dress. He told me to put it on as soon as possible." Her voice seemed to shake a little. "The evidence that will mislead the Federation is in the shoulder padding—and audio-video wire mixed with horsehair. Any simple probe will uncover it."

"But what about Number 4 meeting Londres. Maybe he's the Anthropol agent," Zeno said with a brief surge of hope.

"Hardly," Petra said. "He's carrying the final instructions: where Number 4 is to go to be arrested and who the agent will be. But Jenny is still wearing the bug I planted in her hair. I should be able to listen in." Her voice stopped and then came back. "I've got Jenny stirring now. Wish me luck, lover."

Zeno wished her luck. He said, "I'll be at the Queen Vic when they meet. They're sure to take one of the curtained booths in the tea salon. I'll try to stay close and keep an eye on them. Join me there."

"If you're still around to be joined," she said abruptly. "Between your telling Paul how much you know about the weapons and the way you opened Londres up—" Again she broke off. He heard her swearing. Then she spoke. "Jenny is getting to her feet. Lafitte, she's big! Bye bye, lover. It was fun working with you."

Zeno felt cold all over. In the short time he had known Petra Claymore—Chloe Helos, damn it, he thought—he had come to regard her as completely self-sufficient and virtually unflappable. But he had heard gen-

uine despair in her warning to him and in her last remark about Jenny.

He wasn't feeling much better. He could see Londres not too far away and he suddenly remembered that Londres had been made liaison man between Eye-3 and the Federation. And that could only mean that everything Eye-3 had done in this affair and everything Anthropol had shared with Eye-3 was known to the Combine.

XI

Petra turned from the monitor and went into the small room where Jenny had been sleeping. She felt a brief sense of relief as she saw that Jenny's eyes were still glazed. She moved obligingly under Petra's direction, dressing herself and then following down the alley and up the stairs to her own room.

Petra led her into the hall and halfway down the stairs toward the front door. A quick glance showed that the glaze was beginning to fade from Jenny's eyes and Petra said, "Sorry, love," and pushed her. Jenny cascaded loosely down the remaining stairs to sprawl loosely at the bottom.

Petra hurried past her to the front door, turned and came back just as Jenny lifted her head. "Jenny!" she cried. "Whatever happened? Are you hurt? Where have you been?"

Jenny looked dazedly around and then, with Petra's help, got slowly to her feet. "I don't know," she confessed. She pressed a hand to her head. "I feel . . ."

"Don't talk," Petra said hurriedly. "Let me help you to your room." As they started away, she glanced down and saw the bug from Jenny's hair squashed on the floor. "We've been looking for you everywhere these past two days," she added to hide the sudden feeling of failure that swept over her. With exaggerated care, she steered Jenny up the stairs and seated her on the sofa.

"Two days!" Alarm spread across Jenny's features. "I've been missing for two days?"

"Ever since you left Mr. Z's flat," Petra said. She reached into her hair and pulled out a big-headed hair-pin. "Oh, I found this where you fell. It must be yours." She smiled. "It talks."

Jenny snatched it. "What did it say?" she demanded, and her voice was no longer fuzzy. Now it was hard and clear. The programming, Petra realized, hadn't lasted very long.

"Nothing that made much sense, but then codes don't as a rule. And I didn't hear very much—just something about a dress at the Salon Parisienne waiting for you and about your meeting a man at the Queen Vic for tea."

"A man? What man?"

Petra spread her hands. Her eyes were large, innocent. "Does it sound important?"

Jenny stood up, thrusting the pin into her hair. "It could be," she said. "Thanks very much for telling me. I . . ." She swayed a little as if dizzy and reached to steady herself on Petra's shoulder. Petra tried to go limp, to pull herself away. But Jenny's hand slid down to her upper arm and then pain sliced nauseatingly, sending Petra to her knees. She almost welcomed the blackness that came from Jenny's hand chopping against the side of her neck.

She awakened to find herself thoroughly roped in a straight chair. Jenny had on a big, fancy hat and was drawing on her gloves. "Sorry I can't stay and chat," she said. "But I'll come back later and we'll have a nice, cozy talk."

She smiled a little too pleasantly. "And later I'll go to Mr. Z's and retrieve my things. You and he made quite a haul, I discover."

Petra was silent, slumped, still half-groggy. She waited until Jenny left and then drew in deep breaths until her head cleared. The pain remained in her arm, and

she tried to recall the one other time she had been treated in the same fashion—and with the same results. But her mind refused to function clearly and she turned her attention to more immediate problems.

Bending toward the brooch on her bodice, she whispered, "Zeno. If you can hear me, cough twice."

"I can talk," he said. "I'm across from the dress shop. I heard Jenny. Are you all right?"

"She tied me up," Petra said, "but I think I can work loose in time."

"I'll come right over."

"No! You stay there and try to hear what they say. I pushed Jenny down some stairs and the monitor bug fell out of her hair. When she got up, she stepped on it. I have no way of listening to her and Londres. So it's up to you."

She began to work on her ropes, listening to Zeno's comments as she struggled. He said, "Here comes Jenny . . . she's going into the Salon." After a longish wait, his voice came again. "She's coming out and she has the new dress on. She's heading for the Queen Vic."

Again there was a wait. He said finally, "She's meeting Londres in the lobby. They recognized one another right away! Now they're going into the tearoom."

Petra felt a slight give in one of her wrist ropes and redoubled her efforts to work free. Zeno said, "They've taken one of the curtained booths. I'm going into the one on their right." She heard a waiter's voice and the creak of wood as Zeno sat down. He ordered tea in a low voice.

He said, "I'm going to push my mike against the wall between me and them. Let me know if their talk comes through."

Petra paused a moment. She heard the faint but clear voices of Jenny and Londres. She said, "I'm getting it, lover," and went back to work, storing their dialogue

as she strained to increase the slack in the loosening rope.

It gave suddenly and one arm came free. She rested, panting a little. She dipped her head toward the brooch. "They're leaving soon. Get ready to follow. I'll be along in a few minutes."

She had heard all she needed and now she concentrated on freeing herself. Finally she was on her feet, stamping the needles from her legs and rubbing circulation into her hands and arms. Not bothering even to set her hat straight, she hurried out.

She met Zeno a half block from the Queen Victoria. "They're in the lobby," he said. "They act as if they're killing time."

"They are," Petra said. "At first, they discussed us, and Londres told her what we suspected—that he'd been sent here to check us out and that I'd been impersonating her for two days. Jenny was furious!

"Then," she went on, "they got down to business. Londres told her that she was to go to Paul's at five o'clock. There, she'll be taken to the exit point to be picked up. A space yacht is parked by Gloque's headquarters up on the surface. The agent will take her there, supposedly steal the yacht from under Gloque's nose, and race to safety."

"But who's the agent?" Zeno demanded.

"Londres himself," Petra said. "They haven't taken any chances, have they?"

Zeno was silent. Then he said, "They don't have to take chances. We do. I'm going to Paul's right now and see if I can't pass myself off as the agent who's to pick up Jenny. I'll keep my microphone open and if you can stay pretty close behind . . ."

"The cavalry to the rescue," she smiled, but it was a tremulous effort. "What if Paul won't believe you?"

"As a lady I know once remarked, 'I'm not here for a vacation,'" Zeno said. He started away.

Petra strode beside him. "Just remember that I told the Select anyone using the old password would be working against them. And Jenny will use it. So you might have to take her out of their detention tank."

"If they don't put me in it with her," Zeno said, and moved off.

The tower clock on the Guildhall told him that he had just five minutes before Jenny was due at Doctor Paul's. That meant she would be leaving the Queen Vic lobby about now. He hurried his step.

Paul answered his pull of the bell ring. Zeno said, "Doctor, I have four small symptoms. Can you treat them?" He spoke in Intragal.

Paul's face was expressionless as he led Zeno inside and through the reception room to his own office. "What the devill How did you get that password?"

"From Number 4, of course. Why do you think I was allowed to look at the real factory? Now be quiet and listen. There's trouble coming up—and soon. You're going to have a visitor, a spy."

He saw Paul's eyes narrow with interest and went on, "We think she's from a nonallied corporation group. And that extra man we saw at the depot today is from the same group."

"What possible reason could a corporation group have for taking risks this way?" Paul demanded.

"It hopes to cause trouble so that it can pick up the pieces for its own profit," Zeno said. "Anyway, the two—the spy and the extra man—have been together all afternoon. If we can get them in the detention cells, we can wait for Number 4. She has the final instructions."

He hoped it sounded as easy and smooth as it seemed to flow from his mind. It was, he thought, a pretty good improvisation.

Paul reached for the telephone. He jiggled the hook three times. Then he said, "Zenobius is coming down. He'll explain to you. Number 4 sent him."

He hung up. "Go into that closet. It's a lift and it'll take you down to where Bowen and Thomason are waiting. I'll handle this spy. Who is it, by the way?"

"Jenny, the barmaid from Cobber's pub."

Paul nodded with no show of surprise. He opened the closet door. Zeno went inside. The door shut and the floor began to descend. When it stopped, he stepped into a comfortably furnished room to face Bowen and Thomason. Neither looked particularly happy to see him.

They looked even less happy after he finished repeating the story he had told Paul. He added a final embellishment. "We think she will try to pass herself off as Number 4 so that she can be picked up the the Anthropol agent who is to take her and the evidence to his superiors."

Bowen said half-angrily, "We were told by Number 4 that we would have all this explained to us. But it hasn't been yet. Why should Number 4 permit herself to be taken away by an Anthropol agent?"

Zeno said, "Because Number 4 is to be carrying evidence that will lead the Federation into concentrating their forces pointlessly. Meanwhile, our plan will go into its final stages. Before Anthropol realizes it has been hoodwinked, we will be in control." He paused and added, "Unfortunately, this spy, Jenny, passed herself off as Number 4 and got the evidence. If she can get away from here with it, her superiors will rescue her and then they'll learn the plan. They can change the evidence so that we will find ourselves in combat with the Federation. The result may well be chaos if we haven't had time to prepare properly. And then the corporation system can move in and take over the shattered remains of both of us!"

Thomason started to speak and choked back the words as the lift came down. Zeno darted into a curtained alcove that contained communications equipment. He listened, his heart hammering. Now if that fool Bowen didn't give him away . . .

The door to the lift opened and Paul escorted Jenny into the room. "Gentlemen, Number 4."

"You're sure?" Bowen demanded. He still sounded irritated.

Zeno swore at him silently. But Paul said in his sardonic way, "Of course. She gave the password exactly as Gloque said she would." He leaned a little on the *Gloque*.

Jenny said sharply, "We have no time to waste. I'm to be picked up by the exit point at any moment."

"By who?" Thomason asked.

"You will see when the time comes." Watching through the crack between the curtain and the wall, Zeno saw her march to a side door, open it, and disappear. He wondered if the three following her with apparent docility realized that she obviously knew the arrangement down here without having to be shown. If so, then they must also realize that she could well be the genuine Number 4.

As Paul, the last man, disappeared through the doorway, Zeno slipped out and followed. He peered around the door edge and down a lighted tunnel that had been beamed from solid rock, the walls and floor and ceiling gleaming softly with that peculiar half gloss laser-cut stone gave off. When they rounded a corner, he stepped into the tunnel and went after them.

He paused at the corner and looked around it to see them go through a doorway some distance ahead. He hurried there with long strides and put his ear to the panel. There was a sudden low scream and the clang of metal. Jenny cried, "What is the meaning of this?"

"You're in a detention cell," Bowen said blandly. "The real Number 4 sent a warning for us to expect you."

Jenny brought her magnificent galaxy-wide vocabulary into play. "If you don't think I'm Number 4, you drooling idiots, call Gloque and have him describe Number 4!"

Zeno stepped through the doorway, one hand in his pocket, his finger poking out as if he carried a weapon there. "Don't bother," he said. "I'll take the lady off your hands, gentlemen." He moved forward and they fell back. Nice bits of acting, he thought. He glanced at Jenny and winked at her.

Her eyes were wide, her expression one of incredulity. "You! I don't believe it!"

Through the plaster above Zeno's ear, Petra's voice said, "You're doing great, lover. But stall. I'm coming."

Zeno said, "If you'll let her out of that cell, I'll take her for a little trip to the surface. I'm sure Gloque will enjoy talking with her."

"Of course," Bowen said. He opened the door. Jenny came angrily into the corridor. She shot a suspicion-filled look at Zeno and then turned for a door a short distance away. Zeno moved after her, looking back to wink at Paul and the others.

Jenny had her hand on the door latch when Petra came from the tunnel, moving briskly. Jenny swore.

"Good," Petra said. "Very good, Zenobius." She nodded to the Select. "You gentlemen did well. You'll be commended."

"They're a bunch of fools!" a harshly icy voice said from behind Petra. Zeno turned, leaving his stomach behind. Londres stood in the doorway, a vibrator in his hand. "Jenny is the real Number 4," he snapped.

"I warned you about this man," Zeno snapped in return.

"Did you now," Jenny said. She caught his arm and

tried to throw him. But this time Zeno was prepared. He twisted away, reached out and jerked the entire bodice of Jenny's dress from her. Then he gave her a hard push that sent her spinning into the Select.

"Come on, Petral! I've got the evidence!"

Petra raced toward him and then fell with a cry as Londres flicked a charge from the vibrator at her. She got to her knees, shaking one leg so that Zeno knew she had taken only a small edge of the beam. He moved, putting Jenny and the bewildered Select between Londres and himself. Londres stalked forward, the vibrator ready in his hand.

Jenny tried to push Bowen aside to get at Zeno. Bowen shoved back, sending her into Thomason. Things moved a little fast for Zeno to sort them out, but he thought he saw Paul give Thomason an additional push that sent him caroming into Londres.

At the same time Petra dove from her knees and rolled against Londres's legs. The double impact sent him sprawling. The vibrator skittered out of his hand. Jenny made an unladylike growling sound and dove after it. Zeno tried to follow but Doctor Paul was ahead of him. Paul's hand chopped out, driving Jenny dazedly to one side. Then he had the vibrator. He rose, backing to the wall and waving it.

"You can all stand up now," he said in his sardonic voice. "I'll take that so-called evidence, Zenobius."

Petra was on her feet, still shaking her leg. She backed alongside Zeno, who had moved well away from Bowen. Tomason got up and stood beside Bowen, while Jenny and Londres lined up together. "Take it where?" she asked pleasantly.

"The same place Zenobius planned to take it," he said. "And you too, if you're who I think you are."

"Ask Pogany," she said boldly.

"I'll do that," Paul said. He glanced upward. "When

we manage to get ourselves out of here." He waggled the vibrator at the door Jenny had been about to open when Petra came. "The extra lift is big enough for everyone. Shall we take a ride?"

"Not if we leave these four loose," Zeno said. He stepped forward. "Now if you'll all face the wall and lean against it with your hands above your heads and your feet back and spread. . . ." He grinned at Petra. "A trick from the old books."

A little persuasion was required from Paul's vibrator, but finally Zeno, with Petra's help, had the four hobbled at the ankles and their wrists tied with their own belts and bootlaces. Pulling the horsehair-stuffed shoulder pads from the bodice of Jenny's dress, Zeno gallantly replaced the remains back on her. She spat a curse at him.

"Clever," Paul said approvingly to Zeno. He herded the four into the lift. Zeno and Petra followed.

On the way up, Petra said, "Can you prove you're Anthropol?"

"Not at the moment," he said. He grinned sourly at her. "Can you prove you're Chloe Helos?"

Jenny stared at Petra and exploded in another wrathful spray of invective. Londres waited until she finished and then fixed his icy gaze on Zeno. "You'll regret this, Zenobius. All of you will regret it. But I'm going to make your punishment my personal responsibility."

"You've been trying that for years," Zeno said. "Why should you stop now." He turned his back on the man.

The ride was long. When the lift finally stopped and the door slid open, Zeno blinked at light from a watery, distant sun. The landscape about them was a flat, rubble-littered plain, sterile and empty except for a small squat building in the near distance with a sleek-looking space yacht beside it.

"How do we get past Gloque?" Petra wondered.

"He'll know the plan has gone wrong," Paul admitted. "The only chance is to immobilize him as soon as he appears." He placed the four in front as a shield and they all moved toward the small house and the yacht. Zeno paused to pick up a fist-sized rock and then rejoined the others.

Zeno said, "When I snatched Jenny's bodice, I also took away her means of communicating with Gloque—if that helps."

"It might," Paul said, and then paused as Gloque appeared in the doorway of the building and came slowly toward them. He moved easily, as if he might be out for an afternoon stroll.

"It might have helped," Londres corrected coldly. "Except that I happen to have a similar communicator."

"That is correct," Gloque said from a few meters away. One hand came up, holding a strange-looking weapon. Immediately Jenny and Londres dropped flat. Bowen and Thomason followed. Paul took careful aim with the vibrator and shot Gloque.

He merely smiled, showing no sign of having felt the shock. He said, "I'm holding a hand version of the selective disintegrator. Would you prefer to surrender or to disappear permanently?"

"It's nice of you to give us a choice," Petra said dryly. Paul started to aim his vibrator again. She stopped him. "He's not bluffing."

Paul let his vibrator fall to the ground. Zeno looked at his rock and tossed it aside.

Gloque said, "Untie them, please, and then go to the yacht."

"Well," Petra said with determined brightness, "we almost made it."

XII

Gloque stood in the entry hatch of the space yacht, turned toward Jenny in the control room. "Your By-pass coordinates are set," he said in his smooth voice. "In less than thirty minutes, you will enter By-pass. You will find the ship with your superiors waiting on the other side. I will contact them for you."

"Tell them I intend to get rid of Zenobius and the Jondee witch," Jenny said. "But I'll keep Paul to help me deliver the evidence as we planned." She laughed a little, without much humor. "Have them get the deep probe and the programmer ready. Before we've finished with the good doctor, he'll never know that he didn't get the evidence and carry it—and me—to Anthropol all on his own."

Londres, sitting in the salon across from the three chairs holding Paul, Zeno, and Chloe—as Zeno finally permitted himself to think of her—said, "I'll take care of Zenobius. You can have the other one." He held his vibrator on his leg, aimed at them.

Gloque said, "I'll keep Bowen and Thomason in custody for you until their fates are decided." He departed and the hatch cover swung shut. The yacht began to move, lifting slowly upward and then angling toward the watery sun. From a speaker in the control room, Gloque's voice said, "The dome lock is open. You may pass through."

Jenny increased their speed. In a few moments the sky darkened as they swirled away from the small planet and space began to close around them. Jenny ap-

peared. She looked quite cheerful now. A great Valkyrie of a woman enjoying her triumph, Zeno thought.

He said, "I know now who you represent! The Gal-mil mutineers!"

"Aren't you clever." She laughed at him as she dropped to a seat by Londres.

"It's the only answer that computes from the data," Zeno said.

"I told you he was more computer than man," Londres said to Jenny. "That's why he was so dangerous to us." His cold eyes turned on Zeno. "What else have you computed, Zenobius?"

The patch behind Zeno's ear vibrated as Chloe, head dropped tiredly to her breast, whispered in the brooch pinned there, "Stall them, lover. Get their attention."

Zeno said in the general direction of Jenny and Londres, "As I see it, enough of those atomic disintegrators have now been made and stored on the surface back there to arm all the ships the Combine has managed to gather together—with the help of the dissident Gal-mil officers."

"Under our guidance," Jenny corrected him smugly.

Zeno ignored her. "While the Federation ships are busily following the fake evidence and protecting Free-booter and other ships from capture, the Combine will be sending its ships here to be armed. And once they are, then the Combine Fleet will move out against the Federation fleet and annihilate it."

"He is clever!" Jenny said to Londres. She turned to Zeno. "In a month, we'll have control of every armed vessel in the galaxy—those we haven't destroyed, that is. In two months there won't be any milksop Galactic Military, nor any Anthropol, nor any Federation! Did you compute that too, Mr. Zenobius?"

"Keep talking," Chloe's voice whispered through Zeno's ear patch.

Zeno said, "No. Nor can I compute why such an elaborate experiment was necessary. Was it just a protective screen to hide the making of the atomic disintegrators?"

"Not 'just a screen,' " Jenny answered. "It was a decoy. It absorbed the Federation's interest enough to let us organize more openly than we would have otherwise dared. And what better place to make the weapons than in a factory run by the top talent of the Combine?" She nodded to Petra and Zeno. "Not perfect, obviously, or you two wouldn't have got to the real factory beneath the cover one. But good enough as it turned out."

"And all Gloque's idea," Zeno mused.

Jenny laughed. "Gloque! Hardly. He's the front man. Do you think this affair is something that came overnight. If you could untangle the past you'd find that Gloque's Galactic Institute for Sociological Perfection was conceived by a dozen Gal-mil officers—we eight so-called dissidents among them—and financed by Mining and Metal Industry monies. We've been working with their top men for years now, very quietly, very carefully."

Zeno said, "From that information I can only conclude that the abortive attempt of the eight officers to infiltrate Gal-mil's high command was deliberately clumsy. They wanted to be exiled."

"Of course," Jenny said in the same cheerful tone. "We wanted to be exiled so we could make our break and get the Federation involved in hunting for us. We wanted Anthropol to think exactly as they did think: that there must be some connection between the experiment and us and to waste their efforts watching it so closely."

"But you hardly wanted Gloque's meeting with the Combine known," Zeno challenged.

"No, that was an error. We don't yet know how that information became available." She smiled. "But it wasn't a fatal error. We recovered very nicely and turned it to our own use. It just added to Anthropol's interest in the experiment."

"Where," Paul asked, "did you get the outlawed weapons in the first place?"

Jenny glanced at him. "Two of my superiors on patrol captured a Freebooter ship. It had one aboard. It was a very old ship and the only thing we can guess is that centuries back when the Federation destroyed the original weapons, one somehow escaped destruction and floated off into space. Freebooters came along and scavenged it. Not knowing what it was for, they simply kept it, as those packrats will keep things. My superiors recognized it and it was then they conceived the plan."

"And within this month you speak about, you'll have a galaxy full of ships armed with them." Chloe said, and added, "The whole fleet under the direction of psychotic Gal-mil officers! Lafittel They'll be at each others throats and at the throats of the Combine in less than a year—each one trying to take control, each one thinking he—or she—knows the best way to do things."

Jenny swung on her. "Psychotic!" she repeated defensively. "We're the only truly stable officers Gal-mil had. The rest are milksops that let Anthropol and the Federation push them around."

"She means," Paul said evenly, "that the present leadership of Gal-mil occasionally shows a willingness—reluctant though it may be—to cooperate, to admit that there just might be some other way than total, immediate force to solve galactic problems."

"Milksops!" Jenny repeated vehemently. "Once we've won, there'll be no more coddling of retrogressed cultures. They'll face up to realities. If they can't become

contributing worlds, then they'll have to put up with the dregs."

"She means," Paul said in the same even voice, "that under the leadership of the Combine—directed by her fellow officers, of course—the galaxy will exploit for cheap labor every world it can. Plunder and rob not only resources but people as well—Earth-originated and alien."

"I thought all Gal-mil officers had to know their Earth history," Chloe murmured.

Jenny turned scathingly on her. "We know our history and we know the mistakes that were made. We won't make the same mistakes."

"Every would-be conqueror in history made the same boasts," Chloe said. She smiled at Jenny. "They all had one thing in common, and it seems you and your fellow officers share that.

"None of them ever really grew up," she went on softly. "They were all mental adolescents first discovering that life wasn't perfect because it denied them some of the things they wanted. So like babies crying in their cribs, snatching, holding their breaths to get what they wanted, they all had their tantrums. Some of those tantrums unfortunately cost thousands, even millions of lives. But none of those adult-sized children ever succeeded in the long run."

Jenny flushed and half rose from her chair. She settled back, shrugging. "Go ahead and talk," she said. "You'll never live to know how wrong you are."

"Another manifestation of the same syndrome." Chloe seemed to ignore Jenny, to be addressing Paul and Zeno. "It's most marked in their complete inability to separate fact from belief. To them, what they believe is incontrovertible fact. Everyone should be able to see that. And those who don't, why, liquidate them!"

Jenny was on her feet. Chloe went on calmly. "Haven't you noticed that again and again in retrogressed and

primitive cultures, Paul? And in would-be intellectuals? They create a model in their mind and this model becomes reality—the only reality. Then they go around screaming, ‘Why can’t you see that I’m right?’ They—”

“That will do!” Jenny snapped.

Chloe looked indifferently at her. “Don’t try giving me orders. You’re no longer a subofficer in any genuine organization. You’re just playing at your little games. And don’t interrupt when you’re being scolded, child.”

Zeno saw happen what Chloe had been trying to make happen. Jenny’s stability, obviously precarious at best, slipped away from her. She made a gobbling sound and strode forward, reaching for Chloe.

Zeno said sharply, “Now!”

He came out of his chair, jamming his head into Jenny’s middle. He bounced off, straightened, grabbed Jenny’s arm and spun her toward Londres. Paul gave her an additional push as she went past him. She went faster, fighting to gain her balance. Londres came half out of his chair, trying to bring the vibrator around so that he could shoot without hitting Jenny’s staggering body.

Just as Londres had the vibrator lined up on Zeno, Chloe hit Jenny with her shoulder and drove her into the path of the beam.

Jenny stiffened with a cry that chopped apart the curse jarring angrily out of her. Paul and Zeno kept moving until they were around behind Londres’ chair. He had no chance at all. Zeno’s hand clamped on his wrist, pushing the vibrator downward. Paul chopped him expertly alongside the neck. He folded gracefully back into his chair. Paul picked up the vibrator.

Chloe turned for the control room. “If I can get this beast off autopilot before it takes us into By-pass . . .”

Zeno went with her, standing in the control room doorway to watch as she studied the controls. She

nodded and made three quick adjustments. A subtle feeling of change came over the faint vibrations running through the yacht. Almost simultaneously with the change, a huge ship loomed in the viewscreen, a ship whose insignia startled Zeno even though he was expecting it.

He pointed at the oncoming ship with its insignia growing bolder every second. He stared in fascination at the bust of a man, old-fashioned aviator's goggles on his forehead, a windwhipped scarf around his neck, and a flamboyant red mustache hiding the curve of his upper lip.

"Here comes your Baron."

She cast him a sideways look. "All you have to do, lover, is say the word and he'll be *our* Baron."

She rose, patting his cheek. "Let's go open the airlock."

Zeno followed her silently. She activated the airlock control when a faint beep signaled to them. In a moment the owner of the red mustache came into the small salon, his features split in a wide grin.

"Ah, my dear. You're in one piece, I see."

Jenny made a vicious sound. "I'm going to enjoy having both of you taken care of!"

The Baron turned to her with a lifted eyebrow. "You, madame," he said, "are going to enjoy nothing more uplifting than the landscape of a maximum security detention planet."

Chloe said to him, "You certainly took long enough."

"Sorry, my dear. But I did need a little time to prepare after I received your message. And then this yacht threw up a silly little field that took time to pierce."

He looked back at Jenny and Londres. "So here are the would-be rulers of the New Order! I have to admit that the female is a fine-looking specimen physically, though hardly intellectually."

"You'll regret that!" Jenny cried. "Nothing can stop us now! The minute we reached the surface of that planet, the word went out. The Federation and all its little hangers-on are finished!"

"First time I ever knew I was a Federation hanger-on," the Baron chuckled. "Tell that to Pogany, Chloe."

"Where is Pogy?" she asked quickly.

The Baron grinned at her. "Along with Gal-mil's top commander, he's busy coordinating Project Mop-up." His glance moved to Jenny and his grin widened.

Jenny made a sneering sound. The Baron said, "Your rank was, I believe, major. You're one of twelve dissidents. The other seven who escaped with you are being run down at this moment. The four who remained in the Gal-mil hierarchy in order to disrupt it are in custody already. The next step is to remove the innocent people from your precious little planet down there. Then it, and all the disintegrators, will be totally vaporized."

Jenny turned white. "You're lying! The Federation couldn't know so soon!"

"But they do," he said in the patient tone he used for children. "My bright little Chloe here and Zenobius figured out how you used that subvocalizer of yours to communicate with your superiors. They changed the frequency and contacted me instead. I alerted Anthropol. The rest was easy. We monitored Gloque's conversations with the outside, pinpointed all your ships, and then stood by. Gathering them in as they arrive for their precious weapons will be no trouble at all."

Zeno stretched his legs in the salon of Chloe's personal space yacht, which had been tucked safely in the belly of the Baron's great ship. Together, Zeno and

Chloe watched the video of the activity around them in space.

"There go Paul and the Baron tying up to the Galmil command ship," she said. "Paul will get a good deal of credit, bringing in Jenny that way."

"Not to mention bringing in Londres."

"Londres is your pigeon, lover. They're going to give you the credit for him."

Zeno groaned. "Then Eye-3 will want to promote me again. I spent years resisting the last promotion before I finally buckled to the pressure."

She said softly, "It was kind of fun being on the other side for a while, but I don't think I'd like it as a steady diet. Look at the machinelike way those Federation ships are cleaning up the Combinel It's a beautiful case of teamwork. But we had the real fun of it; we did the individual work."

"Isn't it always that way? Individuals behind the final teamwork?"

She smiled at him. "Perhaps. But it's guaranteed to be that way with the Baron." She put a hand on his arm. "And if you don't want a promotion, come with us, lover. You can be one of us."

"A free spirit roaming the galaxy," he murmured.

"Exactly."

"Roaming the galaxy and causing mischief," he went on. "Children sticking their tongues out at adults." He smiled at her. "It's tempting. And if you went along with the offer, I might consider it. But you'd find me pretty dull stuff after a time. Adventuring isn't in my blood. My idea of excitement is to have a new program to write, a new computer language to analyze."

"Well, you could have a nice rut on Jondée too. But I'm afraid I don't go with the package—not much of me anyway. I don't belong to anyone; I don't like clipped wings.

"Look!" She broke off to point. "There they go after the planet."

They watched in silence as the swarm of ships, great and small, closed around the planet. They saw the pale flash as the dome collapsed. Then it was all over.

"Now they'll load the real people on board and vaporize the rest," she said. "And it was a lovely town in some ways, wasn't it?"

"It had its moments," Zeno admitted.

She reached out and opened a circuit. "Baron, did you pick up Gloque?"

The answer came so promptly that Zeno knew she and the Baron were hooked by a direct circuit. "We have. And we found why he was able to shake off that shot from a vibrator. Our friend Gloque is a new species of humanate robot. And when we walked in on him, he solved his problem very neatly. He simply turned himself off."

Chloe stretched, rose, and bent to plant a warm kiss on Zeno's mouth. Straightening up, she said, "That's just like Mr. Z here, Baron. For a little while I had him turned on. But now he's turned himself off again."