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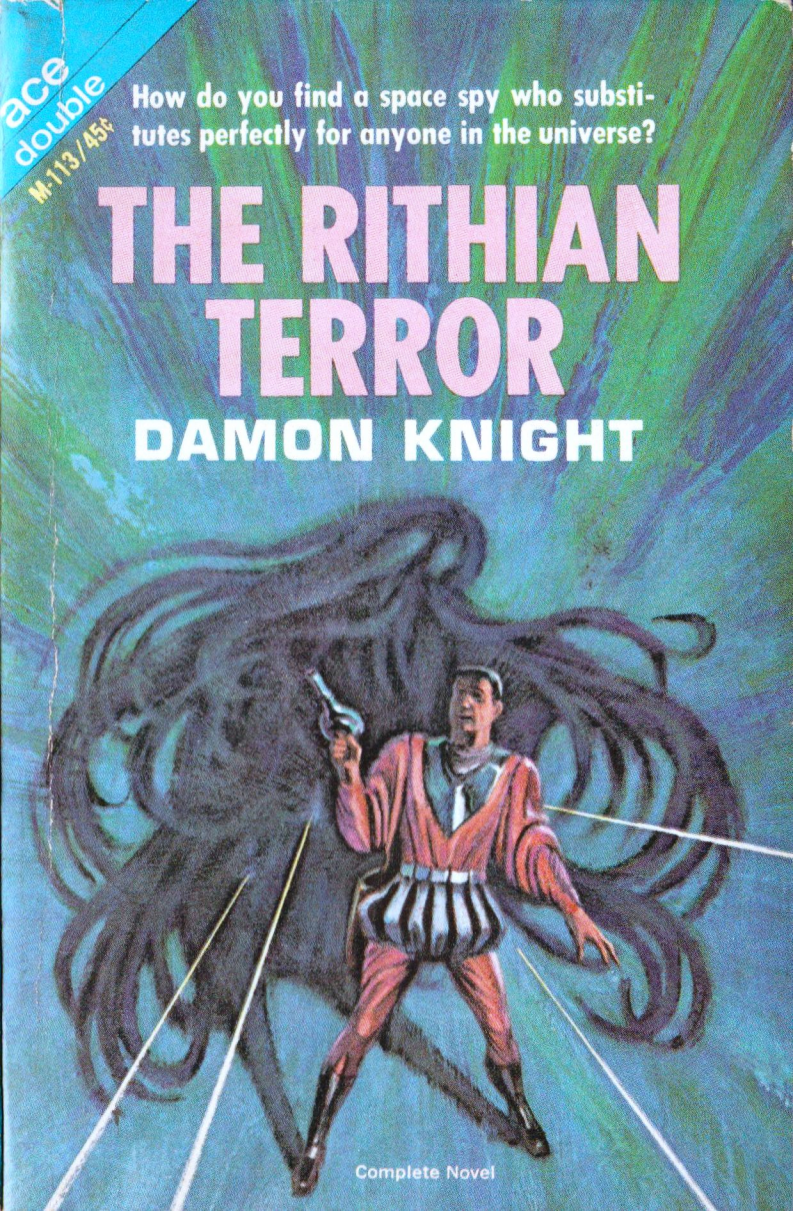
# THE RITHIAN TERROR

## DAMON KNIGHT



Complete Novel

## THE SPY BENEATH THE SKIN

The fate of the Earth Empire hung in the balance—and Security Commissioner Spangler knew it was up to him to find the monster, the Rithian Terror, as some called it. Seven Rithians had landed on Earth. Six had been disposed of. One was loose.

Surely, Spangler reasoned, the stereoptic fluoroscope would flush it out. "That's one test the Rithian can't meet, no matter how good his human disguise may be." Spangler explained to Pembun, the strange, little Colonial who had been sent to help find the monster.

But Pembun didn't agree. "The trouble," he said, "is that the Rithi have no bones. Which would be indication enough under a fluoroscope, if it weren't for the fact that it can easily swallow a skeleton."

Spangler shuddered.

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DAMON KNIGHT is a name that will be familiar to readers of the science-fiction magazines for his reviews and critical comments. His status as a literary critic in this field is such that a collection of his essays was published in 1956 in hard covers under the intriguing title of IN SEARCH OF WONDER (Advent Publishers, Chicago).

However, Mr. Knight is possessed of a cynical and sardonic sense of humor so that in answer to a questionnaire sent out by the publicity desk of Ace Books he gives as his occupation "dog catcher," his hobbies and interests include "petit point, Persian rug weaving, and Black Angus cattle," and similar unlikelihoods.

Our own secret service informs us more reliably that Damon Knight was born in Oregon, near Hood River, that he came to the East Coast in 1941, that he is married and resides in Milford, Pa., and that he is a writer by trade.

His previous Ace Books were MASTERS OF EVOLUTION (D-375) and THE SUN SABOTEURS (F-108).

# THE RITHIAN TERROR

## DAMON KNIGHT

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THE RITHIAN TERROR



OFF CENTER



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# I

SOMEWHERE in the city, a monster was hiding.

Lying back against the limousine's cushions. Thorne Spangler let his mind dwell on that thought, absorbing it with the deliberate enjoyment of a small boy sucking a piece of candy. He visualized the monster, walking down a lighted street, or sitting in a cheap hired room, tentacles coiled, waiting, under the shell that made it look like a man—or a woman. And all around it, the life of the city going on: *Hello, Jeff. Have you heard? They're stopping all the cars. Some sort of spy case . . . My sister tried to fly out to Tucson, and they turned her back. My cousin at the spaceport says nothing is coming in or leaving except military ships. It must be something big.*

And the monster, listening, feeling the net tighten around it.

The tension was growing, Spangler thought; it hung in the air, in the abnormally empty streets. You could hear it: a

stillness that welled up under the beehive hum—a waiting stillness, that made you want to stop and hold your breath.

Spangler glanced at Pembun, sitting quietly beside him. Does he feel it? he wondered. It was hard to tell. You never knew what a colonial was thinking. Probably he decided, he's most heartily wishing himself back on his own sleepy planet, far from all this commotion at the hub of the Universe.

For Spangler himself, this moment was the climax of a lifetime. The monster—the Rithian—was only the catalyst, the stone flung into the pool. The salient fact was that just now, for as long as the operation lasted, all the interminable workings of the Earth Empire revolved around one tiny sphere: Earth Security Department, North American District, Southwestern Sector. For this brief time, one man, Spangler, was more important than all the others who administered the Empire.

The car decelerated smoothly and stopped. Two men in the pearl-gray knee breeches of the city patrol barred the way, both with automatic weapons at the ready. Behind them, the squat bulk of a Gun Unit covered half the roadway.

Two more patrolmen came forward and flung open all four doors of the car, stepping back smartly into crossfire positions. "All out," said the one with the sergeant's cape. "Security check. Move!"

As Spangler passed him, the sergeant touched his chest respectfully. "Good evening, Commissioner."

"Sergeant," said Spangler, in tranquil acknowledgment, smiling but not troubling himself to look at the man directly; and he led Pembun and the chauffeur to the end of the queue.

As the line moved on, Spangler turned and found Pembun craning his short neck curiously. "It's a stereoptic fluoroscope," Spangler explained with languid amusement. "That's one test the Rithian can't meet, no matter how good his human disguise may be. One of these check stations is set up at each corner of every tenth avenue and every fifth cross-street. If the Rithian is fool enough to pass one, we have him.

If he doesn't, the house checks will force him out. He doesn't have a chance."

Spangler stepped between the screen and the bulbous twin projectors, and saw the glowing, three-dimensional image of his skeleton appear in the hooded screen. The square blotch at the left wrist and the smaller one near it were his communicator and thumb-watch. The other, odd-shaped ones lower down were metal objects in his belt pouch—key projectors, calculator, memocubes and the like.

The technician perched above the projector said, "Turn around. All right. Next."

Spangler waited at the limousine door until Pembun joined him. The little man's wide, flat-nosed face expressed surprise, interest, and something else that Spangler could not quite define.

" 'Ow did you ever get 'old of so many portable fluoroscopes in such a 'urry?" he asked.

Spangler smiled delightedly. "It's no miracle, Mr. Pembun, just adequate preparation. Those 'scopes have been stored and maintained, for exactly this emergency, since twenty eighteen."

"Five 'undred years," said Pembun wonderingly. "My! And this is the first time you've 'ad to use them?"

"The first time." Spangler waved Pembun into the car. Following him, he continued, "But it took just under half an hour to set up the complete network. Not only the fluoroscopes were ready, but complete, detailed plans of the entire operation. All I had to do was to take them out of the files."

The car moved forward past the barrier.

"My!" said Pembun again. "I feel kind of like an extra nose." His eyes gleamed faintly in the half-dark as Spangler turned to look at him.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I mean," said Pembun, "it doesn't seem to me as if you rilly need me very much."

That expressionless drawl, Spangler thought, could become irritating in time. The man had been educated on Earth; why couldn't he speak properly?

"I'm sure your advice will prove invaluable, Mr. Pembun," he said smoothly. "After all, we have no one here who's actually had . . . friendly contact with the Rithians."

"That's right," said Pembun, "I almost forgot. We're so used to the Rithi, ourselves, it's kind of 'ard to remember that Earth never did any trading with them." He pronounced "Rithi" with a curious whistling fricative, something between *th* and *s*, and an abrupt terminal vowel. It was not done for swank, Spangler thought; it simply came more naturally to the man than the Standardized "Rithians." Probably Pembun spoke the Rithian tongue at least as well as he spoke standard English.

Spangler half-heartedly tried to imagine himself a part of Pembun's world. A piebald rabble, spawned by half a dozen substandard groups that had left Earth six centuries before. Haitians, French West Africans, Jamaicans, Puerto Ricans. Low-browed, dull-eyed loafers, breeders, drinkers and brawlers, speaking an unbelievable tongue corrupted from already degraded English, French and Spanish. *Colonials*—in fact, if not in name.

"We couldn't do any trading with the Rithians, Mr. Pembun," he said at last, softly. "They are not human."

"Yes, I recollec' now, Commissioner," the little man replied humbly. "It jus' slipped my mind for a minute. Shoo, I was taught about that in school. Earth's 'ad the same policy toward non-'uman cultures for the last five 'undred years. If they 'aven't got to the spaceship stage yet, put them under surveillance and make sure they don't. If they 'ave, and they're weak enough, give them a quick preventive war. If they're too strong, like the Rithi—delaying tactics, subversion, sabotage, divide-and-rule. *Then* war." He chuckled. "It makes my 'ead ache jus' thinking about it."

"That policy," Spangler informed him, "has withstood the only meaningful test. Earth survives."

"Yes, sir," said Pembun vacuously. "She certainly does."

The things, Spangler thought half in mockery, half in real annoyance, that I do for the Empire!

A touch of his forefinger at the base of the square, jeweled thumbwatch produced a soft chime and then a female voice: "Fourteen-ten and one quarter."

Spangler hesitated. It was an awkward time to call Joanna; the afternoon break, in her section, came at fourteen thirty. But if he waited until then he would be back at the Hill himself, tied up in a conference that might not end until near quitting time. It was irritating to have to speak to her in Pembun's presence, too, but there was no help for it now. He had been too busy to call earlier in the afternoon—Pembun's arrival had upset his schedule—and his superior, Keith-Ingram, had chosen to call him while he was on the way to the spaceport, occupying the whole journey with fruitless discussion.

He had not called her for three days. That had been deliberate; this Rithian business was only a convenient pretext. It was good strategy. But Spangler knew his antagonist, knew the limits of her curiosity and pride almost to the hour. Any longer delay would be dangerous.

Spangler reached for the studs of the limousine's communicator, set into the front wall of the compartment. His wristphone would have been easier and more private, but he wanted to see her face.

"You'll excuse me?" he said perfunctorily.

"Of cawse." The little man turned toward the window on his side of the car, presenting his back to Spangler and the communicator screen.

Spangler punched the number. After a moment the screen lighted and Joanna's face came into view.

"Oh—Thorne."

Her tone was poised, cool, almost expressionless—that was to say, normal. She looked at him, out of the screen's upholstered frame, with the expression that almost never changed: direct, gravely intent, receptive. Her skin and eyes were so clear, her emotional responses so deliberate and pallid that she seemed utterly, almost abstractly normal: a type personified, a symbol, a mathematical fiction. Everything about her was refined and subdued: her gesture, movements, her rare

laughter. Her face itself might have been modeled to fit the average man's notion of "aristocracy."

That, of course, was why Spangler had to have her. In this one respect, she was precisely what she looked—the Planters were one of the oldest, most powerful, and most unassailably patrician families in the Empire. Without such an alliance, Spangler knew painfully well, he had gone as far as he could, and a good deal farther than a less determined man would have hoped. With her, he would only have begun —and his children would receive, by right of birth, all that he had struggled to gain.

In nearly all other ways, Joanna was a mirror of deception. She seemed cool and self-possessed, but was neither; she was only afraid. It was fear that delayed and censored every word she spoke, every motion: fear of betraying herself, fear of demanding too much, fear of giving too much.

He let the silence lengthen until, in another second, it would have been obvious that he was hesitating for effect. Then he said politely, "I'm not disturbing you?"

". . . No, of course not." The pause before she answered had been a trifle longer than normal.

She's hurt, Spangler thought with satisfaction.

"I would have called earlier, if I could," he said soberly. "This is the first free moment I've had in three days."

It was a lie, and she knew it; but it was so near the truth that she could accept it, if she chose, without loss of dignity. That was the knife-edge on which Spangler had hung his fortunes. Deliberately, knowing the risk, he had drawn their relationship so thin that a touch would break it.

Had there been any other course he could have taken? Despite himself, Spangler's anxiety led him through each stage of the logic again, searching for a flaw.

Cancel the approach direct. He had asked her to marry him, for the first time, a week after they had become lovers. She had refused without hesitation and without coyness; she meant it.

Cancel the approach dialectical. Joanna had a keen and capable mind, but she could be as stubborn as any dullard.

There is no argument that will wear down a woman's "I don't want to."

Cancel the approach violent: tentatively. Four days ago, at the end of a long weekend they had spent together in the Carpathians, he had tried brutality—not on impulse, but with calculated design which had achieved its primary object: he had reduced her to tears.

After that, apology and reconciliation. After that, silence: three days of it. Silence wounds more than a blow, and wounds more deeply.

Joanna had spent her whole life in retreating from things which had injured her.

But Spangler had three things on his side: Joanna's affection and need for him; ordinary human perversity, which desires a thing, however often refused, the instant it is withdrawn; and the breaking of the rhythm. Rhythm, however desirable in some aspects of the relations between sexes, is fatal in most others. Request, argument, violence— If he had begun the cycle again, as both of them subconsciously expected, he would simply have made his own defeat more certain.

As it was, he had weakened her resistance by making her gather it against a thrust that never came. . . .

Joanna said, "I understand. You do look tired, Thorne. You're all right, though, aren't you?"

Spangler said abruptly, "Joanna, I want to see you. Soon. Tonight. Will you meet me?"

Before, his tone had been almost as casual as hers, and he had watched the minuscule changes in her expression that meant she was softening toward him. Now he spoke urgently, and saw her stiffen again.

Never let her rest, he thought. Never let her get her balance. . . . He spoke softly again: "It will be the last time, if you decide it that way. But let me see you tonight."

". . . All right."

"Shall I send a car for you?"

She nodded, and then her image dissolved. Spangler leaned back, with a sigh, into the cushions.

"My," said Pembun, "look at aw the taw buildings!"

They were stopped twice more before they reached Administration Hill, and went through a routine search at the entrance. From there, the trip to Security Section took less than a minute. The chauffeur left them at Spangler's office door and took the limousine to the motor pool three levels below.

Contrasted with the group that was waiting at the conference table, under the hard, clear glow-light, Pembun looked like a shabby mongrel that had somehow crawled into a pure-bred kennel. His skin was yellowish under the brown; his jowls were wider than his naked cranium; his enormous ears stuck out straight from his head. His tunic and pantaloons were correctly cut, but he looked hopelessly awkward in them.

After all, Spangler reminded himself carefully, the man could not help being what he was.

"Gentlemen," he said, "allow me to present Mr. Jawj Pembun of Manhaven. Mr. Pembun was a member of the colonial government before his planet gained its independence, and since that time has been of service to the Empire in various capacities. He brings us expert knowledge of the Rithians. Lieutenant Colonel Cassina, who is our liaison with the Space Navy—his new aide, Captain Wei—Dr. Baustian of the Bureau of Alien Physiology—Mr. Pemberton of the Mayor's staff—Miss Timoney and Mr. Gordon, of this office."

Pembun shook hands with all of them without any noticeable sign of awe. To the Mayor's spokesman he said affably, "You know, Pemberton was origin'ly my family's name. They just gradually shortened it to Pembun. That' a coincidence, isn't it?"

Pemberton, a fine-boned young man with pale eyes and hair, stiffened visibly.

"I hardly think there is any relation," he said.

Spangler picked up a memo spool that lay before him and tapped it sharply against the table. "At the suggestion of the Foreign Relations Department," he said delicately, "Mr. Pembun was brought in from Ganymede especially for this emergency. I arranged for his passage through the cordon and

met him personally at the spaceport." In short, gentlemen, he thought, this incredible little man has been wished on us by the powers that be, and we shall have to put up with him as best we can.

"Now," he said, "I imagine Mr. Pembun would like to be brought up to date before we proceed." There was a snort from Colonel Cassina which Spangler pointedly ignored. He began the story, covering the main points quickly and concisely. Pembun stopped him only once to ask a question.

"Are you sure that's all the Rithi there were to begin with—just seven?"

"No, Mr. Pembun," Spangler admitted. "We don't yet know how or by whom they were smuggled through to Earth, therefore we must consider the possibility that others are still undetected. To deal with that possibility, Security is patrolling the entire planet, using a random-based spot check system. But we know that these seven were here, and that one of them is still at large. When we find him, we hope to get all the information we need. The idea of suicide is repugnant to these Rithians, I understand."

"That's right," said Pembun soberly. "I guess you can take him alive, all right. Prob'ly could 'ave taken all seven after the accident, if your patrolmen 'adn' shot so quick."

"Those were city patrolmen," said Pemberton acidly, with a flush on his cheekbones, "not Security men. Their conduct was perfectly in order. When they arrived on the scene of the accident, and saw three men attempting to aid four others whose bodies were torn open, exposing the alien shapes underneath, they instantly fired on the whole group. Those were their orders; that was what they had been trained to do in any such event. They would have been right, even if one of the Rithians had not escaped into the crowd."

Pembun shook his head, smiling. "I'm not so good at paradoxes," he said. "They jus' mix me up."

"There is no paradox, Mr. Pembun," said Spangler gently. "A fully equipped Security crew can take chances with an unknown force which a municipal patrol cannot. A patrolman, discovering an alien on this planet, must kill first and inves-

tigate afterwards—because an alien spy or saboteur, by definition, has unknown potentialities. Planning centuries in advance, as we must, we obviously can't foresee every possible variant of a basic situation; but we can and do lay down directives which will serve our best interests in the vast majority of cases. And we can't, Mr. Pembun, we cannot allow crucial decisions to be made on the spot by non-executive personnel."

Colonel Cassina cleared his throat impatiently. "Shall we get on?"

"Just one moment. Mr. Pembun, I want to make this point clear to you if I can. *Interpretation is the dry rot of law.* One interpretation, and the law is modified; two, the law is distorted—three hundred million, and there is no law at all, there is pure anarchy. In a small system, of course—a single planet, for example—there are only a few intermediate stages between planning and execution. But when you consider that we're dealing here with an empire of two hundred sixty planets, an aggregate of more than *eight hundred billion* people, you'll realize that directives must be rigid and policy unified. In an emergency, the lower-echelon official who acts according to his own personal interpretation may be right or wrong. The similar official who follows a rigid policy, prepared to meet the widest possible variety of actual situations, *will* be right—in ninety-nine point nine out of a hundred cases. We take the long view; we can't afford to do otherwise."

Pembun nodded seriously. He said, "We 'ad the same trouble at 'ome—on a smaller scale, of course. Right after we declared our independence, we formed a federation with the two other planets in our system, Novaya Zemlya and Reunion. It seemed like a good idea—you know, for mutual defense and so on. But we found out to keep that big a gov-er'ment running we 'ad to stiffen it up something dreadful, an' some'ow or other it didn' seem to be as cheap to run as three diff'rent gover'ments, either. So we split up ag'in."

Spangler kept his urbane expression with difficulty. Colonel Cassina's neck was brick red, and Dr. Baustian, Captain Wei

and Miss Timoney were staring at Pembun in frank amazement. The others looked embarrassed.

Really, it was a waste of time to take any pains with a barbarian like this. Try to explain the philosophy behind the workings of the greatest empire in history, and all Pembun got out of it was a childish analogy to the history of his own pipsqueak solar system!

He regarded the little man through narrowed lids. Come to think of it, was Pembun really as simple as he appeared, or was he snickering to himself behind that stolid yellow-brown face?

He had said several things which could only be explained by the worst of bad taste or the sheerest blind ignorance. After Spangler's reference to Manhaven's "gaining its independence"—surely a polite way of putting it, since Manhaven had seceded from the Empire only on Earth's sufferance, at a time when she was occupied elsewhere—Pembun had said, "After we *declared* our independence—"

Carelessness, or deliberate, subtly pointed insult?

Was Pembun saying, "There are two hundred sixty planets and eight hundred billion people in your Empire, all right—but there used to be a lot more, and a century from now there'll be a lot less."

Insufferable little planet-crawler. . .

Colonel Cassina said, "Mr. Pembun, do I understand you to suggest that we too should *split up* as you put it? That the Empire should be *liquidated?*"

Cassina snorted and sputtered. Pemberton's face was white with indignation. It was remarkable, Spangler thought with one corner of his mind, how easily Pembun was able to rub them all the wrong way. If it could possibly be arranged, future conferences would be held without him.

"Gentlemen," he said, raising his voice a trifle, "shall we continue?"

After they had left, Spangler sat alone in his inner office, absently toying with the buttons that controlled the big information screen opposite his desk. He switched on one

organizational chart after another, without seeing any of them.

Pembun had behaved himself, in a manner of speaking, after that clash with Cassina. But the things he had said had become not merely irritating, but disquieting.

It had started with the usual complaint from Pemberton, speaking for the mayor. Like almost every planetary and local government department except Security, the city administration wanted to know when the Rithian would be captured and the planetwide blockade ended.

Spangler had assured him that the Rithian could not possibly remain concealed for more than a week at the utmost.

And then Pembun had remarked, "Excuse me, Commissioner, but I b'lieve it would be safer if you said two months."

"*Why,* Mr. Pembun?"

"Well, because Rithi got to 'ave a lot of beryllium salts in their food. The way I see it, this one Rithch wouldn' 'ave more than six or eight weeks' supply with 'im. After that, you can either tie up all the supplies of beryllium salts, so 'e 'as to surrender or starve, or jus' watch the chemical supply 'ouses an' arrest anybody 'oo buys them. Either way, you got 'im. Might take a little more than two months. Say two and a 'alf or three."

"Mr. Pembun," Spangler said with icy patience, "that's an admirable plan, but we're not going to need it. The house checks will get our Rithian before a week is up."

"Clear ever'body out of a building, an' wawk them all past one of those fluoroscopes?"

"That's it," Spangler told him. "One area at a time, working inward from the outskirts of the city to the center."

"Uh-mm," said Pembun. "Only thing is, the Rithi got no bones."

Spangler raised his brows and glanced at Dr. Baustian. "Is that correct, doctor?"

"Well, yes, so I understand," said the physiologist tolerantly, but I assume that would be indication enough—if the fluoroscope showed a very small cartilage and no bones at all?"

Laughter rippled around the table.

"Not," said Pembun, "if 'e swallowed a skel'ton."

Cassina said something rude in an explosive voice. Spangler, incredulous amusement bubbling up inside him, stared at Pembun. "*Swallowed* a skeleton?"

"Uh-mm. You people wouldn' know 'bout it, I guess, becawse you 'aven' done any trading with the Rithi—scientific trading least of awl—but the Rithi got . . ." He hesitated. "Our name for it is *mudabs boyó;* I guess in Standard that would be 'protean insides.' "

"Protean!" from Dr. Baustian.

"Yes, sir. Their outside shape is fixed, almos' as much as ours, or they wouldn' need any disguises to look like a man; but the insides is pretty near all protean flesh—make it into a stomach, or a bowel, or a bladder, or w'atever they want. They could swallow a yuman skel'ton, all right—it wouldn' inconvenience them at awl. An' they could imitate the rest of a man's insides well enough to fool you. They could make it move natural, too. That means they wouldn' need any braces or anything, jus' a plastic shell for a disguise.

"I 'ate to say it, but I don' believe those fluoroscopes are going to do much good."

In a moment, the table had been in an uproar again.

Spangler grunted, switched on his speakwrite and began to dictate a report of the conference. "To Claude Keith-Ingram, Chief Comm DeptSecur," he said. "Most Secret. Most Urgent." He thought for a moment, then rapidly gave an account of Pembun's statement, adding that Dr. Baustian doubted the validity of his information, and that Pembun admitted he had never seen any actual evidence of the Rithians' alleged protean ability.

He read it over, then detached the spool and tossed it into the *out* tube.

He was still unsatisfied.

He had done everything he could be expected to do, exactly according to regulations. If policy were to be changed, it was not for him to change it. Logic and instinct both assured him that Pembun was not to be taken seriously.

But there was something else Pembun had said that still bothered him, for a reason he could not explain. He had not

included it in his report; it would have seemed, to put it mildly, frivolous.

Pembun had said:

*"There's one more thing you got to watch out for—those Rithi got a 'ell of a sense of yumor."*

Spangler passed his hand over the intercom. "Gordon," he said.

"Yes, sir?"

"Did you find quarters for Mr. Pembun?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where is he?"

"G-level, section seven, Suite One-eleven."

"Right," said Spangler, flicking his hand over the intercom to break the connection. He stood up, walked out of the office, and buzzed a scooter.

"G-level," he said into its mechanical ear.

## II

THE DOOR of Suite 111 was ajar. Inside, a baritone voice was singing to the accompaniment of some stringed instrument. Spangler paused and listened.

*Ódum Páwkee mónt a mút-ting*
*Vágis cásh odúm Paw-kée*
*Ódum Páwkee mónt a mút-ting*
*Tóuda por tásh o cáw-fée!*

There was a final chord, then a hollow wooden thump and jangle as the instrument was set down; then the clink of ice cubes in a glass.

Spangler put his hand over the doorplate. The chime was followed by Pembun's voice calling, "Come awn in!"

Pembun was comfortably slumped in a recliner, with his collar undone and his feet high. The glass in his hand, judging by color, contained straight whiskey. On a low table at his side were the remains of a man-sized meal, a decanter, an ice bucket and several clean glasses, and the instrument—a tiny, round-bellied thing with three strings.

The little man swung himself lithely around and rose. "I was 'oping somebody would cawl," he said happily. "Gets kind of lonesome in this place—lonesomer than the mountings a thousand miles from anybody, some'ow. 'Ere, take the company seat, Commissioner. A glawss of w'iskey?"

Spangler took an upright chair. "This will do nicely," he said. "No thanks to the whiskey—I haven't your stomach."

Pembun looked startled, then smiled. "I'll get them to sen' up some soda," he said. He swung himself into the recliner again, reached for the intercom and gave the order.

"W'y I looked surprised for a minute w'en you said that," he explained, turning sidewise on the recliner, "is becawse we

got an expression on Man'aven. W'en we say, 'I 'aven' got your stomach,' that means I don' like you, we're not sympathetic. *'E no ay to stomá."*

Spangler felt an unexpected twinge of guilt—of course Pembun knew he wasn't liked—and then a wave of irritation. Damn the man! How did he always manage to put one in the wrong?

He kept his voice casual and friendly. "What was that you were singing, just before I came in?"

"Oh, that—'Odum Pawkee Mont a Mutting.' " He picked up the instrument and sang the chorus Spangler had heard. Spangler listened, charmed in spite of himself. The melody was simple and jaunty—the kind of thing, he told himself, that would go well sung on muleback . . . or the backs of whatever ill-formed beasts the Manhavenites used instead of mules.

Pembun put the instrument down. "In English, that means, 'Old Man Pawkey climbs a mounting, clouds 'ide Old Man Pawkey. Old Man Pawkey climbs a mounting, all for a cup of coffee!' "

"Is there more?"

Pembun made his eyes comically wide. "Oh, shoo! There's 'bout a trillion verses. I only know every tenth one, about, but we'd be 'ere all night if I sang 'em. It's kind of a saga. Old Man Pawkey was a settler who lived up in the Desperation Mountings in the early days. That's in the temperate zone, but even so it's awful wild country, all straight up and straight down. 'E loved coffee, but of course there wasn' any. Well, 'e 'eard there was some in the spaceport town, Granpeer, down in the plateau country, and 'e went there, on foot. Twenty-two 'undred kilometers. Or so they say."

The conveyor door popped open. Pembun went over to get the soda and pour Spangler a drink. "There were some big things done in those days," he added, "but there were some big lies told, too."

Spangler felt an obscure shock that made him jumpy again. In the conscious effort to sympathize with Pembun, to understand the man in his own terms, he had managed to build up

a picture which was really not too hard to admire: the wild, colorful, free life of the frontier, the hardships accepted and conquered, the deeds of heroism casually done, et cetera, et cetera. And then Pembun himself, in half a sentence, had indifferently rejected that picture. "There were some big lies told, too."

Pembun didn't believe in the Empire; all right. But—if he had no respect for his own planet's traditions, then what in the name of sanity *did* he believe in?

Spangler was a man who tried hard to be liberal. But now, staring at Pembun's round brown face, the yellowish whites of his eyes, he thought once more: It's a waste of time to try to understand this man. He's not civilized; he thinks like an animal. There's simply *no point of contact.*

He said abruptly, "At the meeting, you mentioned something about the Rithians' 'sense of humor.' What, exactly, did you mean?"

He was thinking: In a few minutes I'll be back in my office. I'll drink half of this highball, precisely, and then go.

Pembun leaned back in the relaxer, head turned slightly, eyes alert on Spangler. "Well," he said, "they're kind of peculiar, in this way. They're a real 'ighly-advanced people, technologically—you know that. But the things that strike them funny remind you more of a kind of backwoods planet, like Man'aven. Maybe that's w'y we got along so well with them—Man'aven yumor is kind of primitive. Pulling out a chair we'n a man goes to sit down. That kind of thing. But they beat us.

"They'll go forty miles out of their way to play a joke, even w'en it isn' good business. I've 'eard a novel written by one of their big authors—twelve spools, mus' be more than five 'undred thousan' words long—jus' so 'e could build up to a dirty joke at the end. It was a bes'-seller in their solar system. An' they're crazy about puns—plays on words. Some of their sentences you're suppose' to read as many as fifteen, twenty different ways."

Spangler's memory groped uneasily for a moment and then

produced a relevant fact from his training days. "Like Joyce," he said. "The twentieth-century decadent."

"Uh-mm," Pembun agreed. "I use' to be able to quote pages of *Finnegans Wake*: 'riverrun, past Eve and Adam's, from swerve of shore to bend of bay, brings us by a commodious vicus of recirculation. . .' That's primer talk, compared to Rithi literature."

Spangler swallowed deliberately and set his glass down on the wide arm of his chair. He felt the vast, cool, good-humored patience of a man who knows how to retreat from his own petty emotions. "I don't want to seem obtuse," he said, "but has this got anything to do with my problem?"

Pembun's brows creased delicately. He looked anxious, searching for words. "Nothing, *specifically*," he said earnestly. "W'at I mean is jus' that in general, you got to watch out for that sense of yumor. I mean, you already know that this Rithch is going to 'urt you bad if 'e can. But you got to remember also that if 'e can, 'e's going to do it some way that'll be sidesplittingly funny to 'im. It isn' easy to figure out w'ich way a Rithch is going to jump, but you can do it sometimes if you know w'at makes them lahf."

Spangler swallowed again, leaving exactly half the drink behind, and stood up. He was a trifle impatient with himself for having come here at all, but at least he had the satisfaction of knowing that a lead had been explored and canceled out, that an *x* had been corrected to a zero.

"Thank you, Mr. Pembun," he said from the doorway, "for the drink and the information. Good evening."

"You got to look out for the 'ypnotism, too," said Pembun as an afterthought.

Spangler stood in the doorway without speaking. Pembun looked at him with a politely inquiring expression.

"Hypnotism!" Spangler said, and started back into the room. "What hypnotism?"

"My goodness," cried Pembun, "didn' you know about *that?*"

They lay together in companionable silence, in a darkened

oom, facing the huge unscreened window—window in he archaic sense, a simple hole in the wall—through which feather-light touch of cool, salt air came unhindered. On ither side, where the shore thrust out an arm, Spangler could ee a cluster of multicolored lights—Angels proper on the ight, St. Monica on the left. Straight ahead was nothing but ilver sea and ghost-gray cloud, except when the tiny spark f an airship crossed silently and was gone.

The universe was a huge, half-felt presence that flowed hrough the open window to contain them; as if, Spangler hought, they were two grains of dust sunk in an ocean that tretched to infinity.

It was soothing, in a way, but there was a touch of un-leasantness in it. Spangler shifted his body restlessly, feeling he breeze fumble at his bare skin. The scale was too big, he hought; he was too used to the rabbit-warren of the Hill, erhaps, to be entirely easy outside it. Perhaps he needed a hange. . . .

"That wind is getting a little chilly," he said. "Let's close he window and turn on the lights."

"I thought it was nice," she said. "But go ahead, if you ike." Now I've insulted her window, Spangler thought wryly. Nevertheless, he reached forward and found the stud that olled a sheet of vitrin down over the opening.

It was a period piece, the window—XXI Century, even to he antique servo mechanism that operated it. So was every-hing else in Joanna's tower: the absurd four-legged chairs, he massive tables, the carpets, even the huge pneumatic ouch. There were paper books in the shelves, and not the sual decorator's choices, either, but books that a well-read wenty-first-century citizen might actually have owned—hakespeare and Sterne, Jones and Joyce, Homer and Hem-ngway all jumbled in together. If the fashion would let her, Spangler thought, I believe she would wear dresses.

A glow of rose-tinted light sprang up, and he turned to see oanna with one slender arm around her knees, her head bent olemnly over the lighted cigarette she had just taken from he dispenser. She handed him another.

Spangler pulled himself up beside her and leaned against the back of the couch. The smoke of their cigarettes fanned out, pink in the half-light, and faded slowly into floating haze.

The room's curved walls and ceiling enclosed them snugly, safely. . . .

The XXI Century, the Century of Peace, was a womb, Spangler thought. The comment was Joanna's, not his; she had picked it up in some book or other. "A womb with a view." That was it. A childishly fanciful description, as one would expect from that period, but accurate enough. Self-deception was not one of Joanna's vices—unfortunately. To win her finally and completely, it would be necessary to break down the clear image she had of herself—cast her adrift in chaos, so that she would turn blindly to him for her lost security. It was not going to be easy.

Joanna said, without moving, "Thorne, I'd like to talk seriously to you, just for a minute."

"Of course."

"You know what I'm going to say, probably; but just to have things clear— Do you want us to go on together?"

Matching her tone, Spangler said, "Yes."

" . . . I do too. You know I'm fonder of you than I've ever been of anyone. But I won't ever marry you. You've got to believe that, and accept it, or it's no good. . . . I'm trying to be fair."

"You're succeeding," Spangler told her lightly. He turned and put his hand on her knee. "Just to be equally clear—I've been insufferable to you, and I was a maniac last weekend, and I'm sorry for it. Shall we both forget it?"

She smiled. "Yes. We will."

Her lips moved and altered as he leaned toward her: corners turning downward, pink moist flesh swelling up into the blind shape of desire. His free arm sank into the softness of her back, abruptly hard as her body tautened. Eyes closed, he heard the sibilant whisper of her legs slowly straightening against the counterpane.

Afterward, he lay wrapped in a warm lethargy that was

like floating in quiet water. It was an effort to force himself out of that mindless content, but it was necessary. As he was vulnerable at this moment, so was she. When she spoke to him lazily, he answered her with increasing constraint, until he felt his tension flow into her.

Then he rolled over abruptly, got up and stood at the window, staring out at the vast, obscene emptiness of sky and sea. Now it was easier. As he had often, in his childhood, worked himself deliberately into white-hot anger—when, if he had not forced himself to be angry, he would have been afraid—now, with equal deliberateness, he opened his mind to despair.

Suppose that I failed, and lost Joanna, he thought. But that was not enough. What would be the most dreadful thing that could possibly happen? The answer came of itself: Pembun, and his Rithians with their boneless bodies and their hypnotism. Shapeless faces staring in from a sea of darkness. *Suppose they won.* Suppose the Empire went down under that insensate wave, and all the walls everywhere crumbled to let smothering Chaos in?

Her voice: "Thorne? Is anything the matter?"

He pulled himself back, shuddering, from the cold emptiness that his mind had fastened upon. For an instant it had been real, it had happened, it was *there*. He had been lost and alone, fumbling in an endless night.

When he turned, he knew that his agony showed plainly in his face. He did his best to restrain and suppress it: that would show too.

"Nothing," he said. He walked around the couch, reached past her for a cigarette, then moved to the closet.

"You're going?" she asked uncertainly.

"I've got to be in early tomorrow," he said. "And I've been going a little short of sleep."

". . . All right."

Fastening his cloak, he went to her and took her hand. "Don't mind me, will you? I'm a little jumpy—it's been an unpleasant week. I'll call you tomorrow."

Her lips smiled, but her eyes were wide and unfocused.

Caution was in them, and a hint of something else—pleasure, perhaps, touched with guilt?

He rode home with a feeling of satisfaction that deepened into a fierce joy. If she learned that she could hurt him, learned to expect it, learned to like it, then in time she could endure the thought of being hurt in return. It was only necessary to go slowly, advancing and retreating, shifting his ground, stripping her defenses gradually: until at last, whether for guilt or pleasure or love, she would marry him.

For love and pleasure, fear and hatred, honor and ambition were all doors that could be opened or shut.

Pain was the key.

Early the following morning, alone in his inner office, Spangler looked unhappily into his desk screen, from which the broad, gray face of Claude Keith-Ingram stared back at him.

"You asked Pembun why he hadn't divulged this information earlier?" Keith-Ingram asked sharply.

"I did," Spangler said. "He answered that he had assumed we already knew of it, since the Empire was known to possess the finest body of knowledge in the field of security psychology in the inhabited Galaxy."

"Hmm," said Spangler's superior, frowning. "*Sarcasm*, do you think?"

Spangler hesitated. "I should like to be able to answer that with a definite no, but I can't be sure. Pembun is not an easy man to fathom."

"So I understand," said Keith-Ingram. "However, he has an absolutely impeccable record in the Outworld service. I don't think there can be any question of actual disloyalty."

Spangler was silent.

"Well, then," said Keith-Ingram testily, "what about this alleged pseudo-hypnotic ability of the Rithians? What does it amount to?"

"According to Pembun, complete control under very favorable conditions. He says, however, that the process is rather slow and limited in extent. In other words, that a Rithian

might be able to take control of one or two persons if it could get them alone and unsuspecting, but that it would be unable to control a large group at any time or even a small group in an emergency."

Keith-Ingram nodded. "Now, about this other matter of the protean ability—" he glanced down at something on his own desk, outside the range of the scanner—"none of the available agents who have served in the Rithian system have anything even suggestive to report in that regard."

Spangler nodded. "That could mean anything or nothing."

"Yes," said the gray man. "On the whole, I'm inclined to feel as you evidently do, that there's nothing in it. Pembun may be competent and so on, but he's not Earth and he's not Security. Still, I don't have to remind you that if he's right on all counts, we've got a *very* serious situation on our hands."

Spangler smiled grimly and nodded again. Keith-Ingram was noted for his barbed understatements. *If* Pembun was right, then it followed that the Empire's agents in the Rithian system had carried back no more information than the Rithians wanted them to have. . . .

Keith-Ingram rubbed his chin with a square, well-manicured hand. "Now, to date, the normal procedures haven't produced any result."

"That's correct," Spangler admitted. Using all available personnel, it would take another four days to complete the house checks. Before that time, negative results would prove nothing.

"And according to Pembun, those procedures are no good. Now, has he proposed any alternate method, other than that beryllium-salts scheme of his?"

"No, sir. He held out no hope of results from that one under two and a half months."

"Well, he may have something more useful to suggest. Ask him. If he does—try it."

"Right," said Spangler.

"Good," said the gray man, giving Spangler his second-best smile. "Keep in touch, Thorne—and if anything else odd turns up, don't hesitate to call me direct."

The screen cleared.

Spangler stared at the vacant screen for a few moments, pursing his lips thoughtfully, then leaned back, absently fingering the banks of control studs at the edge of his desk.

Without any conscious warning, he found himself mentally reviewing the film, taken in the Rithian system, which had been used in briefing Security personnel for the spy search.

First you saw only a riotous, bewildering display of green and gold; the shapes were so unfamiliar that the mind took several seconds to adjust. Then you perceived that the green was a swaying curtain of broad-leafed vines; the splashes of gold were intricate, many-petaled blossoms. Behind, barely noticeable, was a spidery framework of metal, and beyond that, an occasional glimpse of mist-blue that suggested open space.

Then the Rithian moved into view.

At first you thought "Spiders!", and Spangler remembered that he had jumped; spiders were a particular horror of his. Then, when the thing stopped in front of the camera, you saw that it was no more like a spider than like an octopus or a monkey.

Curiously, its outline most resembled those of the great golden blossoms. There was a circlet of tentacles, lying in gentle S-curves, and below that another. The thing's body was a soft sac that dangled beneath the lower set of tentacles; there was a head, consisting almost entirely of two huge, dull-red eyes. The creature's body was covered with short, soft-looking ochre fur or spines.

To some people, Spangler supposed, it would be beautiful—the sort of people who professed to find beauty in the striped, oval bodies of big beetles.

The thing turned quickly, hung still for another moment, and then clambered in a blur of limbs up the vine again.

Then there was another scene: darker green, this time—the gloom of a forest rather than a garden city. A Rithian moved into view, clinging to the slick purplish bole of a tree. Three of its fore-tentacles held a long, slender object that was obviously a weapon. It hung motionless for some minutes;

then the gun moved slightly and a brilliant thread of violet flame lanced out from it. Far in the background something reddish shrieked and plummeted through the branches.

That was all, but that little was impressive enough. The weapon the film showed, evidently the equivalent of a light sporting rifle, compared favorably in performance with a Mark LV Becket.

There were other films; Spangler had not seen them, but he could imagine the kind of thing they must be. Pictures of Rithian factories, Rithian spaceships, Rithian laboratories. No matter what they were like in detail, in mass they had been impressive enough to convince Earth's strategists that making war on the Rithians might be disastrous.

So the slow campaign had begun: economic sabotage, subversion, propaganda. Nothing overt; nothing that could be surely traced to the Earthmen masquerading as non-Empire traders in the Rithian system. The tiny disruption bombs that had destroyed many another, weaker world would not be planted: the Rithians were a space-faring people, with colonies and a space fleet, and such a people can retaliate if their home world is destroyed. The campaign would be simply one of slow, patient attrition, designed to weaken the Rithians as a race and as a galactic nation; to divide them politically, hamper them economically and intellectually; to enmesh them in so subtle a net of difficulties that eventually, without knowing how it had come about, the Rithians would find that the crest of the wave had passed them by; that they were settling into the trough of history. It would take centuries. Earth could wait.

But the Rithians *had* discovered their enemies. And now the situation was grotesquely changed. No part of Earth's knowledge of the Rithians could any longer be considered reliable. The Rithians might be stronger or weaker than had been thought; the one thing that appeared certain was that they were not as they appeared in the films and the written reports that had reached Earth.

Even the best planning could not always succeed, Spangler thought. It was conceivable that Earth had finally met an

antagonist against whom neither force nor subtlety would be of any use. Wonderingly, Spangler allowed his mind to focus on the idea of a universe in which the human race had been exterminated, like so many other races that had met superior force, superior subtlety. It was like trying to imagine the universe going forward after one's own death, intellectually, it was perfectly easy, emotionally, impossible.

At any rate, the game was not yet played out; and, Spangler reminded himself wryly, he was not charged with the responsibility of revising the Empire's military policy. He had one simple task to perform:

Find the Rithian.

Which brought him inevitably back to Pembun. Spangler's irritation returned, and grew. With a muttered, "*Damn* the man!" he stood and began pacing restlessly up and down his office.

Spangler was a career executive, not a Security operative; but he knew himself to be conscientious, thorough, interested in his work—and he had been in the Department for fifteen years. He ought not to feel about anyone as he felt about Pembun: baffled, uneasy, his mind filled with shadowy suspicions that had no source and no direction.

For the third time that evening, he sat down and leafed through Pembun's dossier. Keith-Ingram was right, the man's early record was absolutely clean. He had been trusted by the Empire, as much as a colonial could be, for thirty years. But DeptSecur never ceased gathering information on anyone. Since the moment of Pembun's arrival on Earth, tiny robot monitoring devices had been following him wherever he went. At a slight distance, they could be mistaken for small flying insects. Their subminiaturized circuits recorded every word he spoke, or that was spoken in his presence.

On his first day, after the conference in Spangler's office, Pembun had stayed in his rooms, had made no calls, and had seen no one but Spangler himself. On the following day, he had left early and had spent the morning sightseeing. In the afternoon, after lunch in the Hill, he had gone shopping and had bought several small articles—listed in the report—in

specialty shops on the Grand Mall and on Prospect Avenue. The proprietor of one of the shops was an ex-Outworlder, a man named Pero Mineth. A précis of his dossier was appended. No suspicion was attached to Mineth, other than the fact of his origin. The two men had spoken in Standard English, and briefly.

On the third day, Pembun had made two calls, one to a member of the visiting trade mission from Gloryfield, the other to an ex-cabinet minister of Manhaven, now resident in the city; later, he had met them for lunch. Their conversation had been recorded in full. It contained occasional remarks in Standard, but the rest was in Outworld dialects.

Spangler stirred restlessly in his chair as he reread the transcript. The machine translations were not satisfactory.

Pembun: *Oo taw preé don stomà pi vantan, combé?* [Where (from) have you taken (on) that stomach since twenty years, comrade?]

Coopo: *De manj, ké penz—no t'ay stomà ti!* [From eating, what (do you) think—you have not (a) small stomach!]

Pembun: *Dakko! So pelloké gri!* [Agreed! I am (a) gray parrot!]

"Gray parrot," no doubt, had some idiomatic significance which had come into use, in the Outworlders' abominably volatile language, since the last time the machines' vocabulary banks had been revised. It was impossible to keep up with them; new expressions came into being and others fell into disuse every day. Recent Manhaven publications, films, tri-D cubes and monitored interstellar messages were being checked; when the doubtful passages were satisfactorily interpreted, the new meanings would be read into the machines for future use; but in a week, or a month, or a year, they would be valueless again.

What a striking example of Empire superiority over the bumbling, loosely organized Outworlds! In Standard, you knew where you were. There was a general vocabulary of ninety thousand words, plus technical and special vocabularies of as many as fifteen thousand words each, and every word always meant the same thing. New words, and adaptations

of old ones, had to be approved by three levels of the Advisory Commission on Standard English; and they moved with admirable deliberation. The result was a perfectly precise and yet perfectly flexible language which could be understood without error by any Standard speaker.

By contrast, language seemed to be some kind of game to the Outworlders. They delighted in changing it, distorting their already slovenly speech—competing with each other in the use of neologisms, new turns of phrase. How could they ever be certain they had really understood one another? Didn't they *care*?

. . . At any rate, Spangler's intuition told him that the conversation at lunch would probably turn out to be innocent. That was not what was bothering him; there was something else.

He stood up, began pacing again. Given: Pembun was clean. He was really what he seemed to be, a clumsy but devoted servant of the Empire. But—Spangler stopped. There was one thing which the dossier did not explain, and it was the first thing an agent of Security should want to know.

"What does he *want*?" Spangler asked aloud.

That was it—it located the sore spot that had been bothering Spangler for four days. What was Pembun after? What did he hope to accomplish? His talk was subtly flavored with amused contempt for the Empire and admiration for the Rithians. Then why was he working for one to defeat the other?

That was the thing to find out.

The December sky was a luminous gray above the transparent roof of the city. It had snowed earlier in the day, but the white flakes had melted as soon as they fell on the heated double panes; the water had run off into gutters and downspouts, and so into the city's water system. Within the city, the temperature remained at its yearround 72°. In less than two weeks, the year would be over: it would be January 1, 2522; but the city crowds would know it only by their fax sheets and calendars.

A little man in badly-fitting clothes solemnly stood in line at the exit from the north-south express tube, was fluoroscoped in his turn, tipped his absurd cap to the uniformed technician, and wandered down the ramp to the Imperial Plaza. An insect, so tiny and grayish that it was almost invisible, floated a meter behind him and above his head. Light glinted from the miniscule lenses of its eyes.

This was an older section of the city, built nearly two hundred years ago to celebrate the annexation of Colombo, Retreat, Godwin's World and Elysium. In spite of the sanctions against transfer of property in declining areas, many substantial businesses had moved out and rows of tawdry shops had sprung up in their place.

Pembun wandered along the row of open-fronted shops, inspecting the heaped souvenirs and gimcracks with childish interest. The tiny insect followed him. He picked up a cadmium-powered kaleidoscope, stared through it, and put it down again. At the next stall, he bought ten jointed dolls, crude things from LoaLoa, and asked the attendant to gift package them. He gave an address for their delivery; the listening insect noted it.

Pembun wandered on. In a fruit stall, where he had just bought a bunch of cultured grapes from a dispenser, he came face to face with a tall, leathery man in a yellow tunic. The two men greeted each other with cries of pleasure.

*"Hernà! Cabró!"*

*"Pembun kukarà! No es in carsé?"*

*"Si, in terrà. Como sa ba?"*

The two men talked on, oblivious to the contemptuous stares of passersby. The hovering insect transmitted every word they spoke.

At last the leathery man turned to go. *"A bentó, Pembun. Ser a festo?"*

*"Tendi—so pelloké gril"*

The two men grinned at each other, waved, and left the fruit stall in different directions. Another insect, high in the air, slanted down and began to follow the leathery man as he walked across the Plaza. Followed by the original insect,

Pembun strolled back to the tube entrance and headed for the Hill.

Two days had passed since Pembun's meeting with the leathery man in the fruit stall. The man had been identified: he was Gonzal Estabor, ex-Elysian, a retired tech/3 in the Imperial Marines. He lived on his pension, supplemented by importing and selling novelties from Elysium and Retreat. His known associates had been listed; among them were three more men and two women whom Pembun had contacted during these last two days.

What in the world was the man up to? The dolls, and some other trinkets he had bought since, had all been delivered to an address on South Palisade. They had been rerouted from there by an automatic machine, and it was not known what had finally become of them. The owner of the building was another known associate of Estabor's.

Now Spangler sat watching one of the circular screens on his desk console. The image on the screen wavered and dipped; there was no color, only black and white, but the resolution was good. As if from a moving point three meters in the air, he was looking down at a curiously distorted Pembun—a gigantic Pembun, his head and shoulders immense, his trunk, arms, legs dwindling in perspective. An irrelevant thought obtruded—is this really the way it is? Is Pembun the giant, and are we the insects?

Spangler shifted his position angrily. He was overstrained, irritable; he did not usually find himself thinking nonsense. He concentrated on the screen, and on the sounds coming out of the speakers beside it.

In the screen, Pembun was walking down a narrow, unpowered street. The moving dot on the city map beside the screen indicated that he was on Paterson, moving west from Waterfield Way. The area he had left was a mean shopping center; now he was passing the blank walls of empty warehouses and factories, condemned by UrbRenew and scheduled to be razed. There was no sound except the distant hum of

the powered streets behind him, and the squeak of Pembun's footsteps on the old pavement.

The viewpoint tilted up; a dark doorway loomed ahead. Pembun was walking up to it, raising a hand to press a button. The scarred old door slid aside. Pembun's head ballooned, grew gigantic and darkened the screen, as the hovering spy-insect swooped closer.

The scene cleared. Pembun was in a small empty room; plastic drums and other litter were piled against one wall. Flies were droning through the air—perfect cover for the spy-insect. A small, weasel-faced man in a dark tunic emerged from another doorway and approached Pembun, finger to his lips. He grinned wickedly.

*"Arro, pelliké!"*

*"Toud'es pré?"*

On the blank translator screen, words began to appear one by one:

HELLO PARROT
IS EVERYTHING READY

*"Segí, combé. Ben."*

CERTAINLY COMRADE COME

The two men turned toward the inner doorway. The floating eye of the spy-insect followed them. In the screen, Pembun and the weasel-faced man were through the doorway, moving past a man who stood on guard, down a scabrous corridor, into a larger room where Spangler glimpsed confused activity. Then something cloudy and shimmering occluded the screen. Nothing more appeared but a vague shifting of light and dark. The sounds of a number of distant voices continued to come from the speakers, but the screen did not clear.

Spangler swore, hit the intercom button.

"Commissioner?"

"What's the matter with that damned spy-eye?"

A pause. "Sir, the eye does not respond to control."

"Send in another one! Send six!"

"Right away, Commissioner."

Spangler fretted, watching the cloudy screen and listening

to the indistinguishable voices. The additional spy devices probably would not be able to enter the building the way Pembun had gone, unless someone happened to open the door; they would have to search the exterior of the building, looking for a crack, or else try to enter through the ventilation system. Either way, time would be lost. He hit the intercom button again.

"Operations." The pale, hard-eyed face of Inspector Makaris appeared on the square intercom screen.

"Inspector, our spy eye at Paterson between Waterson and Cleveland is out of commission. I want you to get a man over there within five minutes—send him in alone with remote recording equipment, but back him up with an armed squad. He is to get in and record, without revealing himself if possible. Get the location from the monitors. Any questions?"

"No, sir," said Makaris, his jaw closing like a trap. Before the screen cleared, Spangler saw his head turn, heard him bark, "Langtree!"

The unmarked copter set TS/3 Chad Langtree down on a roof at the intersection of Urhart and Idris Lane. It took off immediately. Langtree turned, scanning the rooftop and the adjacent buildings with a quick professional glance; then he looked up at the gray-lit dome overhead. Up there, tiny with distance, another copter was hovering. That was the assault squad, armed and ready to come in. Operations had told him it was there, but a good agent learned not to rely on anyone for information he could check himself.

Langtree was a slender pale man with a thread of golden-blond mustache. He wore a blue tunic and slash pantaloons, both garments cut wide enough to conceal the assortment of gadgetry they covered. His spy-eye, set into a filigree pin, was attached to the shoulder of the tunic.

At thirty-eight, Langtree had unlined, almost effeminate features. His pale blue eyes were narrow and expressionless with what seemed stupidity; only a trained observer would see the hardness in them. Inside himself, Langtree was tough, compact and self-sufficient. He did not believe in excess bag-

gage. He did his job, thoroughly and efficiently. If killing a man should be part of the job, he would do it without hesitation, and sleep soundly afterwards. Summoned from the guardroom, he had picked up his gear and costume, got into the copter, changed clothing and absorbed his briefing in flight, all in less than four minutes. His breathing and heartbeat were steady.

Now he turned to the stairhead. When the door did not open to his touch, he slipped his hand up under his tunic, withdrew an instrument with blunt, powerful jaws. He jammed the blades into the crack of the door, pressed the release. With a ringing snap, the door swung open. Langtree was through the doorway and down the steps even as he slid the tool precisely back into its loop.

He went down the stairs with light, long steps, almost seeming to float. At the ground level, he eased the door open, glanced into the street. It was empty to the corner in the direction he could see. He stepped out casually, glanced the other way. No one was in sight but a bent old woman, bright as a macaw in an absurd red-flowered dress, who was hobbling away from him toward the corner.

Langtree followed her, passed her indifferently just as she reached the intersection. One casual sideward glance was enough to fix her wrinkled, knobby face in his memory: about eighty, dark skin, foreign appearance, probably Outworld.

To his right, halfway down the cross-street on the opposite side, a little group of people in garish clothing was approaching the door of a warehouse. There were two men and a woman, all about fifty, and two children, girl about fourteen, gangling, boy about seven, fat. Langtree registered all this in one glance, kept on crossing the street.

On the opposite corner he began limping slightly, and a look of pain crossed his vapid features. Limping more markedly, he crossed to the corner of the building and supported himself against it with one hand. Leaning over, he raised his left foot and began struggling to get the shoe off. In this position, body turned to the right, he could see the whole length of the street and knew that his spy-eye was recording

it as well. The warehouse door was now open and the brightly-dressed group was entering. Langtree's acute vision caught a glint of light as something tiny swooped over their heads through the doorway. The old woman had turned the corner and was now angling across the street, evidently aiming for the same destination. The fat little boy was the last one through; the door closed behind him.

Langtree had his shoe off. He shook it, probed inside with a finger, then replaced it. He straightened, his vapid expression returning. The old woman was nearly across the street. Langtree walked casually after her, timing himself so that he passed behind her just after she had pushed the door button, at exactly the moment the door swung open and she began to enter. When she hobbled in, Langtree was right behind her.

Flies were buzzing in the small bare room; Langtree had felt the minute motion of displaced air past his head as he went through the doorway, and knew that at least one of them was no fly. The old woman had not turned, and did not seem aware that there was anyone with her. A door opened in the opposite wall, beside a mound of rubbish; a weasel-faced little man in a blue tunic came out and grinned at the old woman as she went forward. Langtree stayed close behind her, a little to one side. The little man's gaze flicked over them both, returned to the old woman; he muttered something at her in Outworld jargon. She replied in a shrill cackle. The little man laughed, showing discolored teeth. He squeezed the old woman's shoulder, urged her toward the inner door.

The clear, small voice of the bone-conduction receiver implanted behind Langtree's ear said abruptly: "Translation. Greetings, little mother. Are you ready for the big untranslated word? Yes, yes, garbled word, always ready, ready for a long time."

As Langtree followed the old woman, the little man glanced at him again and said something too rapidly for Langtree to make out the alien sounds. He smiled vacantly and nodded.

The voice behind his ear said: "Are you two together? Reply *Si.*" But already the little man had put one arm across

the doorway and was saying something else. The old woman had paused, was turning her head.

"I don't recognize you" said the voice behind Langtree's ear. "Where are you from, what group do you belong to?" Langtree kept a vacant smile on his face. The little man turned and shot a question at the woman. She replied, shaking her head.

"Is he with you?" said the tiny voice.

The little man was looking at him coldly. "I think there 'as been a mistake," he said in badly accented Standard. The voice behind Langtree's ear continued, "No, I never saw him in my life."

Langtree allowed a look of embarrassment to creep over his face. "Isn't this 17906 Paterson?" he asked.

"No, sir." The little man shook his head. "You are on the wrong si' of town. That address is ten miles from 'ere."

Langtree shuffled his feet, looked bewildered and then stubborn. "But they told me to take the tube downtown and get off at the Imperial Plaza," he said. "Are you sure this isn't—"

"No, sir," the little man said again. He took Langtree's arm and began to propel him toward the outer door. Langtree stumbled, went along passively, making his muscles limp. "Well, I'm certainly sorry," he said. "Uh, how do I get over to where you said?"

"Take the crosstown tube, or go south to one of the power' streets," the little man said curtly. Langtree was outside the door. It closed in his face.

On Spangler's console, one screen showed a moving view of a deserted street as Langtree walked along it; another, an aerial view of the closed warehouse doorway. Above, from the square intercom screen, Makaris' face looked at him stonily.

"Langtree tried to run a bluff," said Makaris, skipping off each word. "It was worth the risk, to try to get in directly. Now he'll have to do it the hard way." He paused, added unwillingly, "For a job like this, we need operatives trained

to speak Outworld languages. Machine translation and relay is too slow."

"By the time we trained them, the damned jargon would be different," Spangler said.

Makaris nodded expressionlessly. His head turned, then swung back. "Results are beginning to come in from the Outworld resident survey. A little over a hundred calls made so far, using a fax quiz cover, and the percentage of completed calls is hanging right around twenty-three."

"Run a computer test," Spangler said.

"Already done, Commissioner. Correlation with the assembly in the warehouse is fifty-one per cent, plus or minus three. That means—"

"It means there may be a couple of hundred Outworlders already in that warehouse. How could this thing have gone so far before we got even a hint, a rumor, a suspicion?"

Makaris did not reply.

"What does the computer say about the purpose of the assembly?"

"Not enough data yet. Insurrection fifteen per cent, plus or minus eight. Sabotage, eleven per cent, plus or minus six. Correlation with Rithian activity, seven per cent—"

"All right. Makaris, I want heavy assault armor and Gun Units on standby in the tubes around that area. What about those spy-eyes?"

"Twenty in the building now, Commissioner, through ventilators, under doors and so on. So far we haven't been able to get any of them into that section of the warehouse. The fire doors are down, they can't get through."

"What about the ventilators?"

"Dead Storage is still hunting for the building blueprints. Meanwhile, we're trying to find the route by trial and error, but no results yet."

Spangler swore, then turned to the center screen as his eye caught a movement. A dumpy couple in bright figured clothing was approaching the warehouse door. Each held by the hand a child of six or seven.

"The children, too!" Spangler said. "That's the part I fail to grasp, Makaris. Can they be so degraded. . ."

A fourth screen lighted up, and Spangler saw the warehouse doorway expand, grow gigantic as the door opened. He caught a glimpse of a man's head as the spy-eye flitted through; a moment of confusion and darkness, then the view steadied. The weasel-faced little man was approaching the newcomers.

*"Arro, Manel, Deli. Como gran su niyo!"*

*"Mesi, Udo. Mi Frank ay ja set ano!"*

Spangler saw the words begin to appear on the translator screen; he watched them half-attentively.

HELLO MANEL DELI HOW LARGE YOUR CHILDREN

THANKS UDO MY FRANK HAS ALREADY SEVEN YEARS

Spangler tensed. The group at the door swelled nearer as the spy-eye drifted toward them. The door opened, ballooned bigger—the spy-eye was through.

A corridor, a doorway, then a flare of milky light, then nothing. The screen went dark.

"Again!" said Spangler, and hit the console with his fist.

In a private room at the rear of the warehouse, Pembun and a grizzled, sad-eyed man of sixty were sitting on packing crates with slender little glasses of aromatic liquor in their hands.

"Well, Enri?" said Pembun, lifting his glass.

Enri Rodriz gave him a sad, affectionate smile, and raised his glass in turn.

"To peace," Pembun said.

"To peace." They drank, and smacked their lips. "Good jolt," Pembun said.

"The best, old friend. They don't make *conya* like this on Earth, and their half-assed laws say you can't import it except for your own use. Tell me, why should a government tell people what they can or can't guzzle?"

"Let's talk of something more pleasant," Pembun said.

"This may be our last chance to hoist one together, Enri. I myself am as vigorous as ever, but in all honesty, you are not getting any younger."

Rodriz' brown eyes flashed with mock anger. "Do you tell me this to my face? Have you forgotten the time I picked you up by the ankles—with one hand, by God!—and tossed you into the manure cart?"

Pembun shook his head solemnly. "Truth, Enri. I came out smelling like you."

Rodriz grinned. "What a sharp tongue it has, for such a little man."

"Sharp as the tail of the scorpion your little sister hid in the towel."

Rodriz made a face of dismay. "Ai, yi," he said dolefully, rubbing his rump with one huge hand. "What a brat she was! Do you know, she has three grandbrats already?"

Pembun shook his head. "To me, she's still small enough to walk under the donkey. I couldn't even guess what she looks like, Enri, because as I remember her, her tongue is always sticking out."

"Children," said Rodriz. "Sometimes I think they are bad now, but we were worse." He picked up a slender-necked bottle from the floor, filled both glasses.

"The children," said Pembun.

"Yes, the children." They drank, smacked their lips again. "If only we could all be back in the mountains of Combé," said Rodriz sentimentally. "But a man does what he has to do."

"Some parts of it are less pleasant than others," Pembun said. They both looked at the long, carefully sealed carton that lay across two packing cases against the wall.

"True, old friend. When I think of the hours of labor that went into *that* alone, not to mention the rest of it! The planning, the secrecy, everything done at night—weeks and months!"

"Still, you don't have to wear it. You should have done this years ago, when I was safely elsewhere."

"There weren't enough of us here then. We were too

scattered. But this will not be the last, Jawj, believe me."

"It may be the last for me."

"Courage," said Rodriz, pouring the glasses full again. "Drink, my friend, you're pale, you need it."

There was a rap at the door. A perspiring young man stepped in, closed the door and leaned against it. "In the name of God, when will you be ready? I can't keep them quiet any longer."

Rodriz twisted massively around to look at him. "Gently, gently," he said. "Where is your consideration? A man doesn't do a thing like this like putting on his hat. It takes moral preparation. When he's ready, he'll be ready, understand? They've waited this long, they can wait another minute or two."

"You wouldn't say that if you were out there," the young man said bitterly. He looked from one to the other, opened his mouth again, closed it in resignation and went out.

"Impatience," said Rodriz heavily. "That's the trouble with everybody nowadays."

"All the same, he's right," Pembun said. "If I sit here any longer, Enri, I think I may begin to get a little jumpy. I can't say I'm ready, but hell! let's get on with it."

"One more drink first," said Rodriz, giving him an anxious look. He filled the glasses. "Good will among men."

They drank. Pembun set down his glass with care and stood up. "All right, open it and let's see the damned thing."

Rodriz took a little electroblade from his pocket and began to open the long carton. He turned the lid back. Inside was a folded garment made of heavy fabric with a dull sheen. Pembun ran his fingers over it absently; then the two men lifted the thing out and unfolded it. Rodriz held it up for Pembun's inspection. It was like the empty skin of a great bird. The huge wings hung to the floor, the grotesque, beaked and crested headpiece lolled as if the neck were broken.

Pembun considered it grimly, then sat down on one of the packing cases and began to remove his shoes. Rodriz waited in sympathetic silence while Pembun stripped to his underclothes; then he opened the front of the gray garment and

held the legs while Pembun stepped into them. The feet were clawed, monstrous.

Pembun got his arms into the sleeves and held them out; the gray wing-feathers spread with a rustling sound. Rodriz pulled the closure up over the bulge of Pembun's belly; the seam disappeared. "Hold still a minute," he muttered. He went behind Pembun, lifted the headpiece, lowered it carefully over Pembun's head. He walked around in front again, pulled the closure all the way up to the chin.

Where Pembun had stood, a gigantic crested gray bird stared fiercely at Rodriz over a cruel yellow beak. "How do I look?" Pembun's muffled voice asked.

"Magnificent," said Rodriz, his face shining with excitement. *"Tes pelloké gril"*

The bright disc of Langtree's hand-flash swung ahead of him as he advanced through the subcellar. The deeper he went, the more he could feel the skin of his back and neck prickling with apprehension. His palms and forehead were growing moist.

Langtree did not like dark, enclosed places. It was his one disability; it dated from some buried childhood experience that the psychs had not been able to dig up. He was coldly aware of it, and had never allowed it to influence any decisions he made while on duty. But in spite of himself, his nervousness increased the farther he penetrated into this maze of subcellars under the old warehouse. He was too conscious of the darkness pressing in beside and behind him; it took an increasing effort to keep from swinging the light around to see what was there.

There had been no sound except those he made himself; he knew there was nothing there in the darkness, staring eyelessly at him. . . . It was not any specific thing he was afraid of, only the darkness itself. The darkness, the underground feeling. If his light should go out—

Langtree's hand tightened convulsively on the flash. The light would not go out. It was powered by an atomic battery, good for a century of continuous operation. In any event, all

he had to do was reach a stairway that would take him up into the rear of the warehouse—and there it was, glinting in the light of the flash, dusty gray-painted steps with a tube rail, running up to a massive firedoor.

Langtree darted lightly up the steps, then paused in dismay. The door was crossed by two heavy bars of steel, atomic-welded to the frame on either side.

"Report," said the tiny voice behind his ear, after a moment. "What's the trouble, Langtree?"

Langtree made sure his voice would be steady before he answered. "No entry here without cutting torches," he said. "Stand by." There was a long pause, then: "Negative, Langtree. Find another entrance."

"Acknowledged," said Langtree curtly. He turned, descended the stairs, started deeper into the cellar.

The bobbing disc of his flash went ahead of him; the darkness around it seemed to grow deeper. Now his mental picture of the ground plan told him that he was directly under the part of the warehouse that he wanted to reach, here was another stairway . . . another fire door, barred like the first. He swung the flash around. The huge space was empty except for a domed metal shape against the far wall.

He went on, found a third stairway. It was blocked like the other two.

The blackness seemed to flow in around him very gently, touching his back like cool fog. The thought crossed his mind that if he merely reported there was no practical entrance, it would only mean a delay; no one would ever know; there would be no mark against him on the record. . . . But he had seen what he had seen.

He went back, angling across to the incinerator. The chute was still connected, a metal tube, square in cross-section, about a hundred and twenty centimeters wide, that dropped from the ceiling into the incinerator shell.

He played his flash into the shell, saw the black square hole gaping in the top of the dome. His jaws were clenched; he relaxed them with an effort.

"Going up," Langtree said.

On Spangler's console, a large screen now displayed a computer chart made up of dots and interconnecting lines. The red dots represented Outworld residents of the city who could not be located by visiphone; the black dots, those who had responded. The lines between them represented known associations. It was obvious, even at a glance, that the many red dots and the few black ones formed separate networks, with a few linkages between.

"Here's the report from Computing," Makaris said. His face was grim in the tiny screen. "Five hundred seven calls made; percentage of completion has dropped to nine point five. Correlation with the meeting in the warehouse is eighty-seven per cent, plus or minus one."

"Purpose of the assembly?" Spangler snapped.

"Insurrection, thirty-one per cent, plus or minus two. Sabotage, twenty-six per cent, plus or minus two. Unauthorized attempt to leave Earth, eighteen per cent, plus or minus four. Correlation with Rithian activity, still low but rising, eleven per cent, plus or minus three."

"All right—that's good enough," Spangler said. He glanced at a memex that lay open on the desk beside him. "Plan H, 103, red alert."

"Acknowledged," said Makaris. You never had to tell the man anything twice, and no order ever seemed to surprise him. He was a good subordinate—too good, perhaps. The matter was one which had occupied Spangler's thoughts before. At present, at least, Makaris was not a danger. Under certain circumstances, it would not be disagreeable to think of Makaris taking over the Commissioner's post . . . if, for example, Spangler had moved up to the position now occupied by Keith-Ingram. . . .

Plan H 103 was another of the detailed, thorough operational plans which had lain unused in DeptSecur's files for over a century. It provided for protective detention, under maximum security, of up to ten thousand resident aliens. At this moment, orders would be flowing out to activate the detention centers, assign personnel, check and issue equipment.

Through his edge of excitement, Spangler felt a moment's ontempt for his adversaries. This was like a game of chess—he intentions of each side were unknown to the other, except s they could be deduced from the moves on the board. But pangler could put any number of pieces into play—power-ul pieces, unlimited by any rules—armored queens, bishops ristling with machine-guns. . . .

One of the smaller screens on the console still showed the xterior of the warehouse; the door was closed. Four more ave Spangler a view of the armed squads in jump suits now assed on rooftops near the warehouse; a sixth, seventh and ighth, the squat shapes of Gun Units in subsurface tubes ow cleared of civil traffic, around the area. The ninth, tenth nd eleventh screens showed variations of the same view—the nterior of the anteroom behind the closed warehouse door.

Spangler cast his mind back over his handling of the ituation, and could find no flaw. He was probing into the rea of the seditious meeting by means least calculated to larm the Outworlders. Every stage was backed up by nother, all the way to power sufficient to crush an armed prising.

He had resisted every temptation to take Outworlders into ustody as they approached the meeting place. That was octrine—keep a loose net, catch all the fish. Yet a feeling f uneasiness persisted. What had he overlooked?

Motion caught his eye. On the exterior warehouse screen, vo more figures were approaching—a fat woman and a angling youth. The door opened; they entered.

On the three interior screens, the now-familiar playlet as enacted. The little man came out, smiling.

*"Ben, ben, a von ora—peshl"*

*"No so tardé?"*

*"No, no, a von ora."*

On the translator screen:

COME COME AT A GOOD TIME HURRY WE NOT LATE
NO NO. . .

Spangler tensed. As the woman and the boy began to move

through the inner door, the doorway seemed to swell on all three screens. Three spy-eyes were making the attempt at once.

The heads of the woman and boy ballooned, swelled out of sight. Once more, on all three screens, there was a blur of movement, then a sudden flare of light: but not before Spangler had glimpsed, on one of the three, a raised fist holding a bright plastic cylinder, an intent dark face behind it.

"Run that over!" he said sharply.

After a moment's pause, a larger screen lighted up. The spy-eye was moving forward in dream-slow motion. It turned; the face, the hand with the lifted cylinder swam into view. A cloud of glittering particles appeared at the tip of the cylinder, slowly expanded.

Spangler barely felt his fist strike the surface of the desk. A tide of exasperation threatened to choke and drown him.

*"Insect spray,* by God!"

In the darkness, Langtree was jackknifed into the narrow refuse chute, working his way upward a foot at a time, like a mountaineer in a rock chimney. His flash illuminated the chute above him in a hot yellow-white glare, but the darkness flowed upward against his body with an inexorable, insistent pressure. His back was against one wall of the chute, feet against the other. His back and leg muscles were already trembling with the strain, though he had climbed only a few meters. Somewhere above him was light and air; someday he would reach it, and then he would be able to resume his duty. But now there was only the darkness and the choking pressure of the chute, and the slow, painful movements that hitched his body upward.

Far up the chute, the flash picked out something anomalous, a dark thin line across the wall. Langtree stared at it, tilted his neck awkwardly. Faint sounds drifted down the chute—an indistinguishable murmur of voices, isolated shouts, all distant and blurred. There was his goal. All he had to do was to master himself, keep moving upward until he reached it. He straightened his legs, feeling his back scrape up along

the wall. He raised one foot, then the other. He could feel sweat trickling along his ribs; his tunic was soaked, clinging to his skin. He pushed with his feet again: another infinitesimal gain, another pause to rest. Push again, with muscles that jerked and trembled. The dark line above was a little nearer. The sounds grew louder.

Outworlders—how he detested them! Ugly, uncouth, insolent brown faces . . . The thought gave him strength enough for another lurch upward. The darkness, pressing in, squeezing him tight inside this narrow box, like a fist closing around his chest so that he could not get his breath . . . Langtree locked his jaws, heaved upward again.

Louder now, the sounds washed down around Langtree as he inched up toward the dark line. Now, when he turned the flash away from it, he could make out a hairline of yellow light outlining three sides of a square. It was the hatchway, the exit from the chute. He was almost there.

The noise swelled to a confused roar. Straining for breath, his whole body shaking, Langtree hitched himself up the last meter until his feet were planted just above the square hatch. Now the noise was a din that made the chute vibrate and boom around him, squeezing him tighter, making it impossible to think. With the last of his strength, he raised one foot, kicked the hatch. It gave. It was swinging open, letting in a deafening blast of sound and a dazzle of light. Langtree felt himself slipping; he grabbed desperately for the top of the hatchway, clamped his hands hard, swung himself out into a confusion of color and noise.

Something huge and impossible was drifting toward him through the air . . .wings, fierce eyes. . . . Then, as he staggered for balance on rubbery legs, hands seized him from behind. Something dark and smothering dropped over his face. A touch on his palm—his fingers closed around something long and heavy— A club, a weapon! It was all happening too fast, he could not think, get his balance. A shove from behind—he went reeling into darkness toward that impossible thing. . . .

Both hands clenched around the club, he swung it with

the strength of panic. There was a jolt that ran all the way up to his shoulders, a crash of something broken, yells, screams all around him. Langtree was yelling too, spittle flying from his lips, but he could not hear his own voice. The club was gone; he was clawing at the cloth over his head, dragging it away, blinking wildly in the sudden glare of light.

Over his head, suspended from a ceiling trolley, a huge gray bird swayed upright in the air—wings spread, yellow eyes glaring fiercely. Under its great clawed feet something else was dangling—circling and spinning at the end of a cord—and under that, all around Langtree, what seemed like hundreds of yelling children were milling, down on all fours, fighting and scrambling to get at the heap of bright objects that lay under the gray bird.

A flushed little girl straightened up, holding something in both hands. Her dark pigtails, standing out stiffly on either side of her head, were tied with huge pink bows of ribbon. The thing in her hands was a doll—a painted, staring doll. . . . A boy in a mussed white tunic was working his way out of the crowd, clutching a red wagon. . . .

The things on the floor were all toys, and glittering plastic bags of candy. Langtree could not take it in. His brain was numbed by the suddenness, the noise, the shouting. The thing that spun and circled under the claws of the gray bird, slowing now, was the brown, broken top half of what might have been a gigantic earthenware jar. It was gaily painted with stars and lightning-strokes of primary red, blue, yellow, glittering with scraps of silver paper.

Dazed, Langtree saw that hollow fragments of the jar were lying among the dwindling heaps of toys. That was the thing he had broken; there on the floor was the wooden club he had done it with.

He was aware that men and women in bright costumes were closing in around him. Someone laid a hand on his arm, said something unintelligible. With a convulsive movement he backed away, brought up with a crash against the cold metal of the refuse chute. His hand found the gun at his

waist, swung it up. "Keep off!" he shouted hoarsely. "You're all under arrest!"

He was crouched, every muscle tense, ready to fire at the first movement toward him. Yet at the same time, with a sense of doom, he realized that something was terribly wrong.

The huge room was hung with streamers and pendants of twisted, colored paper. The noise around him was dying away a little, faces turning toward him. There were hundreds of Outworlders in the room, all in bright, stiff tunics and flowered dresses; and the children, hundreds of children, all painfully clean, hair combed and shining . . .

As if in a nightmare, he saw the great gray bird fold one wing toward its head, saw the cruel beak tilt up and a human face appear under it. It was a broad, brown face, staring down at him with an expression of surprise and concern—a face he recognized.

"Pay!" someone was shouting. "Pay! Pay!" The din of voices lessened still more.

"I know you," Langtree gasped, staring. "Pembun, from Manhaven. Don't make a move, any of you—I'm Sergeant Langtree, from Security. I want to know—I demand to know."

The gray bird said something sharply in Outworld language. The men around Langtree darted forward, began herding the children away. After a moment the bird swayed, dropped half a meter, then another. The broken top of the brown jar struck the floor, bounced, rolled. Then the bird with Pembun's face was standing before Langtree, peeling open its gray breast, pulling the beaked headpiece back over a perspiring forehead.

"There's been some mistake, Sergeant," Pembun's voice said. "I'm afraid you've come all this way for nothing."

Langtree's mouth was dry; his tongue would not work properly. "But all this—this—"

Pembun's heavy face turned mournful. "Sergeant," he said gently, "there's no law on Earth against celebrating Christmas, is there?"

## III

THE FLOW CHART of Administration Hill was enormously complex. Processions of speedsters, coptercars and limousines merged, mingled and separated again; scooters, for intramural transport, moved in erratic lines among the larger vehicles and darted along the interoffice channels reserved for them alone. Traffic circles and cloverleaves directed and distributed the flow. At every instant, vehicles slipped out of the mainstream, discharged or loaded passengers, and were gone again. The cars, individually, were silent. In the aggregate, they produced a sound that just crossed the threshold of audibility—a single sustained tone that blended itself with the hum of a million conversations. The resulting sound was that of an enormous, idling dynamo.

Pembun's movements traced a thin, wavering line across all this confusion. And wherever he passed, he left a spreading wave of laughter in his wake.

At the intersection of Corridors Baker and One Zero, he tried to dismount from a scooter before it had come to a complete stop. The scooter's safety field caught him, half on and half off, and held him, his limbs waving like an angry beetle's, until it was safe to put him down.

A ripple of laughter spread, and some of the recordists and codex operators, with nothing better to do in their morning break, followed him into the Section D commissary.

His experience with the scooter seemed to have dazed the little man. He boarded the moving strip inside the commissary and then simply stood there, watching the room swing past him. He made a complete circuit, passing a dozen empty tables, and began another. The recordists and codex girls nudged their friends and pointed him out.

On the third circuit, Pembun appeared to realize that he would eventually have to get off. He put out a foot gingerly, then drew it back. He faced in the other direction, decided that was worse, and turned around again. Finally, with desperate resolution, he stepped off the slowly-moving strip. His feet somehow got tangled. Pembun sat down with a thud that shook the floor.

The laughter spread again. A man at a strip-side table got something caught in his windpipe and had to have his back pounded. Diners at more distant locations stood up to see what was happening. Half a dozen people, trying to hide their smiles, helped Pembun to his feet.

Pembun wandered out again. A blue-capped official guide came forward, determinedly helpful, but Pembun, with vehement gestures, explained that he was all right and knew where he was going.

His bones ached, from his coccyx all the way up to his cranium. That had been his sixth pratt-fall of the morning, and there were others still to come.

He felt more than a little foolish—this place was so *big!*—but he plowed through the press at the commissary entrance, signaled for another scooter and rode it half a kilometer down the corridor.

On the walkway, just emerging from one of the offices, was a group which included two people he knew: the darkly mustachioed Colonel Cassina and his expressionless aide, Captain Wei. Pembun waved happily and once more tried to get off the scooter before it had stopped.

He writhed frantically in the tingling, unpleasant grip of the safety field. When it set him down at last, he charged forward, slipped, lost his balance, and—

The group wore a collective expression of joyful disbelief. There were suppressed gurglings, as of faulty plumbing; a nervous giggle or two from the feminine contingent; snickers from the rear. Colonel Cassina allowed himself a single snort of what passed with him for laughter. Even the impassive Captain Wei emitted a peculiar, high-pitched series of sounds which might be suggested by *"Tcheel tcheel tcheel"*

Helpful hands picked Pembun up and dusted him off. Cassina, his face stern again, said gruffly, "Don't get off before the thing stops, man. That way you won't get hurt." He turned away, then came back, evidently feeling the point needed more stress. "*Don't get off before the thing stops.* Understand?"

Pembun nodded, wordless. Mouth half open, he watched Cassina and Wei as they boarded a tandem scooter and swung off up Corridor Baker.

When he turned around, a disheveled Gordon was looming over him. "There you are!" cried the young man. "Really, Mr. Pembun, I've been looking for you upwards of an hour. Didn't you hear your annunciator buzzing?"

Pembun glanced at the instrument strapped to his right wrist. The movable cover was turned all the way to the left. "My!" he said. "I never thought about it, Mr. Gordon. Looks like I 'ad it turned off all the time."

Gordon smiled with his lips. "Well, I've found you, anyhow, sir. Can you come along to the Commissioner's office now? He's waiting to see you."

Without waiting for an answer, Gordon simultaneously hailed a double scooter and spoke into the instrument at his wrist.

"That's fine," said Pembun happily. "That was w'ere I 'ad a mind to go, any'ow."

He boarded the scooter in front of Gordon, and this time followed Cassina's advice. He waited until the scooter had come to a complete stop, got off without difficulty, and strolled cheerfully into Spangler's office.

"Sorry I was 'ard to find," he said apologetically. "I 'ad my mind on w'at I was doing, and I didn' notice I 'ad my communicator turned off."

"Perfectly all right, Mr. Pembun," said Spangler, with iron patience. Neither he nor Pembun had alluded to the warehouse fiasco during the three days since it had happened; their relationship was polite and formal. "Sit down. That's all, Gordon, thanks." He turned to Pembun. "Your suggestions are being followed up," he said curtly. "My immediate super-

ior has directed me to ask you if you can help us still further by suggesting some new line of attack—one preferably that won't require two or three months to operate."

"I was working on that," Pembun told him, "and not getting much of anyw'ere. But it doesn' matter now. I got another idea, and I was lucky. I found your Rithch."

As Spangler's face slowly froze, Penbun added, " 'E's Colonel Cassina's aide, Captain Wei."

Spangler began in a strangled voice, "Are you seriously saying—" He stopped, pressed a stud on the edge of his desk, and began again. "This conversation is being recorded, Mr. Pembun. You have just said that you have found the Rithian, and that he is Captain Wei. Tell me your reasons for that statement, please."

"Well, I better start at the beginning," said Pembun, "otherwise it won't make sense. You see, I 'ad a notion this Rithch might be a little worried. The fluoroscopes wouldn' bother 'im, of course, but the planet-wide embargo would. And so far as 'e knew, you might bring up something that would work better than fluoroscopes. So I thought it jus' might be possible that 'e'd 'ide 'imself in the middle of the people that were looking for 'im. That way, 'e'd be able to dodge your search squads, and 'e might stand a chance of getting 'imself out through the cordon. That was w'y 'e picked Colonel Cassina, seemingly. Any'ow, I thought it would strike 'im funny.

"So I went around making people lahf, jus' taking a chance. It was kind of 'ard, because like I told you, the Rithi got a primitive sense of yumor. Now, if you go and fall on your be'ind in front of a Rithch, 'e's going to lahf. 'E can't 'elp 'imself. That's w'at Captain Wei did. I've 'eard the Rithi lahf before. It sounds enough like yuman lahfter to fool you if you're not paying attention, but once you've 'eard it you'll never be mistaken. I'm telling you the truth, Commissioner. Captain Wei is the Rithch."

Spangler, his lips thin, put his hand over the communicator plate. "Dossier on Captain Wei," he said.

"If you'll excuse me, Commissioner, I don' know w'ether

'e knows 'e gave 'imself away or not. If 'e knows we're after 'im and we don' catch 'im pretty quick, 'e's liable to do something we won't like."

Spangler glanced at Pembun, his face sharp with irritation, and started to speak. Then his desk communicator buzzed and he put his hand over it. "Yes?"

Gordon's worried voice said, "There *is* no dossier on Captain Wei, Commissioner. I don't understand how it could have happened. Do you want me to check with District Archives in Denver?"

After a moment Spangler shot another glance at Pembun, a look compounded of excitement, intense dislike and unwilling respect. He said, "Do it later, Gordon. Meanwhile, get me Colonel Cassina, and then call the guardroom. I want all the available counter-Rithian trainees with full equipment, and I want them *now*."

There was no doubt about it: "Captain Wei" was the Rithian spy. Somewhere, somehow, it must have managed to meet Cassina and make friends with him; or, at any rate, contrived to remain in his company long enough to take over control of Cassina's mind—to convince him, probably, that "Wei" was an old and valued friend, with whom Cassina had worked elsewhere; that "Wei" was now free to accept a new assignment, and that Cassina had already arranged for his transfer.

Introduced by Cassina, the supposed Chinese officer had passed without question. But there was no dossier in the files bearing that name. "Captain Wei" did not exist.

All this time, Spangler thought with a shudder, that monster had been living in their midst, sitting at their conferences, hearing everything that was planned against it. It must have been hard for it not to laugh.

The bitterest thing of all was that Pembun had found it. If it ever got out that a moon-faced colonial had solved Spangler's problem for him by falling on his rear all over Administration Hill . . .

Spangler impatiently put the thought out of his mind. They

were at the doorway to Cassina's private office. "Wei" was in the smaller office immediately beyond; it communicated both with Cassina's suite and with the outer offices.

He saw the squad leader raise his watch to his ear. By now the other half of the detail would have reached the outer offices and quietly evacuated them. It must be time to go in.

The squad leader opened the door, and Spangler stepped in past him. Pembun was immediately behind; then came the five operatives, all armed with immobilizing field projectors, and Mark XX "choppers"—energy weapons which, in the hands of a skilled operator, would slice off an arm or leg or tentacle—as neatly as a surgeon could do it.

The operatives were encased from head to foot in tight, seamless gasproofs. The upper halves of their faces were covered by transparent extensions of the helmets; the rest of the face-coverings, with the flexible tubes that led to oxygen tanks on their backs, dangled open on their chests.

This, at any rate, was according to standard operating procedure. The Rithian was urgently wanted alive, but no chances could or would be taken. "Wei's" room would be shut off by two planar force screens, one projected by the standard equipment in Cassina's desk, the other by a portable projector set up by the squad in the outer offices. At the same instant, the air-conditioning ducts serving the room would be blocked off. Inside that airtight compartment, the operatives would simultaneously gas and immobilize the Rithian; and if anything went wrong, they would use the choppers. It was a maneuver that had been rehearsed by these men a hundred times. Spangler was certain that nothing would go wrong.

Spangler had told Cassina nothing—had only asked if Wei were in his office, then had hesitated as if changing his mind and promised to call back in a few minutes. Now Cassina stood up behind his desk, eyes bulging. "What's this? What's this?" he said incredulously.

"Wei," Spangler explained briefly. "Stand out of the way, please, Colonel. I'll explain in a moment."

"Explain!" said Cassina sharply. "See here, Spangler—"

The squad leader moved forward to the closed door of the inner office. At his signal, three of the remaining men took positions in front of the door; the other moved to herd Cassina out from behind his desk.

Cassina stepped aside, then moved suddenly and violently. Spangler, frozen with shock, saw him stiff-arm the approaching operative and instantly hurl himself into the group at the door. The group dissolved into a maelstrom of motion; then the door was open. Cassina had disappeared, and the others were untangling themselves and streaming in after him.

Spangler found himself running forward. A wisp of something acrid caught his throat; muffled shouts rang in his ears. A man's green-clad back blocked his view for an instant, then he darted to one side and could see.

The Rithian, his back oddly humped, was half-crouched over the dangling, limp body of Colonel Cassina. The monster's hands were clenched around Cassina's throat.

Everything was very clear, highly magnified.

A voice Spangler had not heard in years, the nasal, high-pitched voice of his Classics instructor, suddenly filled the room. Evidently the loudspeaker system had been turned on, though why they had got Professor Housty to declaim, *"The quality of mercy is not strained; it droppeth as the gentle rain . . ."* Spangler really could not say.

It was very strange.

Everything had suddenly gone dead still, and the room was tilting very slowly to a vertiginous angle, while the tensed body of the Rithian—or was it really Captain Wei—collapsed with equal slowness over the body of his victim. Spangler tried languidly to adjust himself to the tilting of the room, but he seemed to be paralyzed. There was no sensation in any part of his body. Then the floor got bigger and bigger, and at last turned into a dazzling mottled display that he watched for a long time before it grayed and turned dark.

"What happened?"

That was just the question Spangler wanted answered; he wished they had let him ask it himself. He tried to say something, but another voice cut in ahead of him.

"He went into the room without a suit. The gas got him."

Whom were they talking about? Slowly it dawned on Spangler that it was himself. That was it; that was why everything had been so strange a moment ago—

He opened his eyes. He was lying on the couch in his own private office. Two medical technicians, in pale-green smocks, were standing near the head of the couch. Farther down were Gordon, Miss Timoney, and the squad leader. Pembun was sitting in a chair against the wall.

One of the medics languidly picked up Spangler's wrist and held it for a few seconds, then gently thumbed back one eyelid. "He's all right," he said, turning in Gordon's direction. "No danger at all." He moved away, and the other medic followed him out of the room.

Spangler sat up, swinging his legs over the side of the couch, and drew several deep breaths. He still felt a little dazed, but his head was clearing. He said to the leader, "Tell me what happened."

The leader had removed his gasproof and was standing bareheaded, in orange tights and high-topped shoes. He had an olive face, with heavy black brows and a stiff brush of graying black hair. He said, "You got a whiff of the gas, Commissioner."

"I know that, man," Spangler said irritably. "Tell me the rest."

"Colonel Cassina attacked us and forced his way into the inner office," the leader said. "We were taken by surprise, but we fired the gas jets and then got inside as fast as we could. When we got inside, we found the Rithian apparently trying to throttle Colonel Cassina. My men and I used the choppers, but, not to excuse ourselves, Commissioner, the Colonel interfered with our aim. The Rithian was killed."

Spangler felt an abrupt wave of nausea, and mastered it with an effort. "Colonel Cassina? How is he?"

"In bad shape, I understand, Commissioner."

"He's in surgery now, sir," Gordon put in. "He's alive, but his throat is crushed."

Spangler stood up a little shakily. "What's been done with the Rithian?"

"I've had the body taken down to the lab, sir," Gordon said. "Dr. Baustian is there now. But they're waiting for your orders before they go ahead."

"All right," said Spangler, "let's get on with it."

He caught a glimpse of Pembun, with a curious expression on his face, trailing along behind the group as they left.

At first the corpse looked like the body of a young Chinese murdered by a meticulously careful ax-fiend: there was a gaping wound straight down from forehead to navel, then a perpendicular cross-cut, and then another gash down each leg.

Then they peeled the human mask away, and underneath lay the Rithian. The worst of it, Spangler thought, was the ochre fur: it was soft-looking, and a lighter color where it was rumpled—like the fur of the teddy bear he remembered from his childhood. But this was an obscene teddy bear, a thing of limp tentacles and dull bulging red eyes, with a squashy bladder at the bottom. It ought to have been stepped on, Spangler thought, and put into the garbage tube and forgotten.

It filled the human shell exactly. The top ring of tentacles had been divided, three on each side, to fit into "Wei's" arms. In the middle of each clump of tentacles, when the lab men pried them apart, was the white skeleton of a human arm; the shoulder joint emerged just under the ring. The tentacles in the second ring had been coiled neatly around the body, out of the way. The rest of the torso, and the leg spaces, had been filled by a monstrous bulging of the Rithian's sac-like abdomen.

Then the dissection started. . . .

Spangler stayed only because he could not think of a suitable excuse to leave; Cassina was still in shock and could not be seen.

Baustian and the other bio men were like children with new toys: first the muscles, and the nerve and blood and lymph

systems in the "legs" the Rithian had formed from its shapeless body; then, when they cut open the torso, one bloody lump after another held up, and prodded, and exclaimed over. "Good Lord, look at this pancreas!" or "this liver!" or "this kidney!"

In the end, the resemblance to a teddy bear was nothing at all. The most horrible thing was that the more they cut, the more human the body looked. . . .

Later, he was standing in front of Cassina's door, and Pembun was holding his arm. "Don' tell 'im the Rithch is dead," the little man said urgently. "Tell 'im it was awl a mistake. Let 'im think w'at 'e likes of you. It may be important."

"Why?" Spangler asked vacantly.

Pembun looked at him with that same odd, haunted expression Spangler had noticed before, when they had left his office. He ought to be feeling cocky, Spangler thought vaguely, but he isn't.

" 'E's still in danger, Commissioner. 'E's not responsible for 'is own actions. You've got to convince 'im that you weren't after Wei at all, and that Wei's all right, otherwise I believe 'e'll try to kill 'imself."

"I don't understand you, Mr. Pembun," Spangler said. "How do you know the doctors or nurses haven't already told him?"

"I told them not to say anything," Pembun said, unabashed, "and let them think the order came from you."

Spangler's lips tightened. "We'll talk about this later," he said, and palmed the doorplate.

## IV

CASSINA'S EYES were closed. His face was a dead olive-gray except for a slight flush on either cheekbone. He had the stupid, defenseless look of all sleeping invalids.

His head was supported by a hollow in the bolster; a rigid harness covered his neck. His mouth was slightly open under the coarse black mustachios, and a curved suction tube was hooked over his lower teeth.

The tube emitted a low, monotonous gurgling, which changed abruptly to a dry sucking noise. An attendant stepped forward and joggled the tube with one finger; the gurgling resumed.

As Spangler glanced away from the unconscious man, a medic came forward. He was tall and loose-limbed; his brown eyes gleamed with the brilliance that meant contact lenses. "Commissioner Spangler?"

Spangler nodded.

"I'm Dr. Householder, in charge of this section. You can question this man now, but I want you to avoid exciting him if you can, and don't stay longer than fifteen minutes after the injection. He's got sixteen drugs in him already."

Spangler stepped forward and sat down by the bedside. At Householder's nod, an attendant set the muzzle of a pressure hypodermic against Cassina's bare forearm. She pressed the trigger, then unscrewed the magazine, dropped it into a tray and replaced it with another. In a moment Cassina sighed and opened his eyes.

Another attendant set a metal plate on the bed under Cassina's hand and gently forced a stylus between his fingers. Cables from plate and stylus led back around the foot of the bed to a squat, wheeled machine with a hooded screen.

The attendant went to the machine, snapped a switch and then sat down beside it.

Cassina's eyes turned slowly until he discovered Spangler. He frowned, and seemed to be trying to speak. His lips moved minutely, but his jaw still hung open, with the suction tube hooked inside it. The monotonous gurgling of withdrawn sputum continued.

"Don't try to talk," Spangler said. "Your throat and jaws are immobilized. Use the stylus."

Cassina glanced downward, and his hand clenched around the slender metal cylinder. After a moment he wrote, "What have you done to Wei?"

The words crawled like black snakes across the white screen. Spangler nodded, and the attendant turned a knob; the writing vanished.

Spangler looked thoughtfully at Cassina. The question he had been expecting was, "What happened?"—meaning "What happened to me?" In the circumstances, the question was almost a certainty—probability point nine nine nine.

But Cassina had asked about Wei instead.

Grudgingly, Spangler said, "Nothing, Colonel. We weren't after Captain Wei, you know. The Rithian spy had concealed itself in his room. We couldn't warn Wei without alerting the Rithian."

Cassina stared gravely at Spangler, as if trying to decide whether he were lying. Spangler abruptly found himself gripping his knees painfully hard.

"He's all right?" Cassina scrawled.

"Perfectly," said Spangler. "Everything's all right. We've got the Rithian, and the alert is over."

Cassina drew a deep breath and let it out again. His mouth still hung idiotically slack, but his eyes smiled. He wrote, "What have you got me in this straitjacket for?"

"You were injured in the struggle. You'll be fit again in a few days. We're going to put you back to sleep now." Spangler motioned; the horse-faced girl pressed the hypo against Cassina's arm and pressed the trigger.

After a moment she said, "Colonel Cassina, we want you

to write the numbers from one to fifty. Begin, please."

At "15" the scrawled numerals began to grow larger, less controlled; "23" was repeated twice, followed by a wild "17".

It was long after office hours, but Spangler still sat behind his desk. He had switched off the overhead illumination, the only light came from the reading screen in front of him. The screen showed a portion of the transcript of his interview with Cassina.

Spangler flipped over a switch and ran the film back to the beginning. He read the opening lines again.

*Q.* : *Can you hear me, Colonel?*

*A.* : *Yes.*

*Q.* : *I want you to answer these questions clearly, truthfully and fully to the best of your ability. When and where did you first meet Captain Wei?*

*A.* : *In Daressalam, in October,* 2501.

*Q.* : *Are you certain of that? Are you telling the truth?*

*A.* : *Yes.*

Cassina's conscious mind was convinced that he had first met "Wei" twenty years ago in the Africa District. Several repetitions of the question failed to produce any other answer. Spangler had tried to get around the obstacle by asking for the first meeting after December 18, 2521—the date of the Rithian agents' discovery by the city patrol.

He skipped a score of lines and read:

*Q.* : *What happened after that dinner?*

*A.* : *I invited him up to my quarters. We sat and talked.*

*Q.* : *What was said?*

*A.* : (2 *sec. pause*) *I don't remember exactly.*

*Q.* : *You are ordered to remember. What did Wei tell you?*

*A.* : (3 *sec. pause*) *He told me—said he was Capt. Wei, served under me in the Africa Department from* 2501 *to* 2507. *He—*

*Q.* : *But you knew that already, didn't you?*

*A.* : *Yes. No.* (2 *sec. pause*) *I don't remember.*

*Q.* : *I will rephrase the question. Did you or did you not*

*know prior to that evening that Wei had served under you in the Africa Department?*

*A.* : (3 *sec. pause*) *No.*

*Q.* : *What else did he tell you that night?*

*A.* : *Said he had done Naval Security work. Said he had applied for transfer, to be attached to me as my aide.*

*Q.* : *Did he tell you anything else, either instructions or information, other than details of your former acquaintance or details about his transfer, that evening?*

*A.* : *No.*

*Q.* : *Skip to your next meeting. What did he tell you on that occasion?*

Gradually the whole story had come out, except one point. Spangler had struck a snag when he came to the evening of the 26th, two days ago.

*Q.* : *What did Wei tell you that evening?*

*A.* : (4 *sec. pause*) *I don't remember. Nothing.*

*Q.* : *You are ordered to remember. What did he tell you?*

*A.* : (6 *sec. pause*: *subject shows great agitation*) *Nothing, I tell you.*

*Q.* : *You are ordered to answer, Colonel Cassina.*

*A.* : (*subject does not reply; at the end of five seconds begins to weep*)

*Dr. Householder*: *The fifteen minutes are up, Commissioner.*

*End trnscrpt* 15. 52 *hrs* 12/28/2521.

Later in the afternoon, after his first report to Keith-Ingram, Spangler had had another session with Cassina under the interrogation machine. He had drawn another blank, and had had to give up after five minutes because of Cassina's increasing distress. On being released from the machine, Cassina had gone into a coma and Householder declared that it would be dangerous to question him again until further notice.

Half an hour later, while he was talking to Pembun, Spangler had had a report that Cassina, still apparently unconscious, had made a strenuous effort to tear himself free of the protective collar and had gone into massive hemor-

rhage. He was now totally restrained, drugged, receiving continuous transfusion, and on the critical list.

Pembun. Pembun, Pembun. There was no escaping him: no matter where your thoughts led you, Pembun popped up at the end of the trail, as if you were Roger trying to get out of the Space Thing's dreadful garden.

Pembun had been right again; Pembun was always right. They had triggered some post-hypnotic command in Cassina's mind, and Cassina, twitching to the tug of that string, had done his best to kill himself.

"It seems to me," Pembun had said that afternoon, "that the main question is—*w'y* did Colonel Cassina try so 'ard to get to the Rithch w'en 'e found out you were after 'im? 'E 'ad a command to do it, of coursè, but w'y? Not jus' to warn the Rithch, becawse 'e didn' get enough warning that way to do 'im any good, an' besides, if it was only that, w'y did the Rithch try to kill Cassina?"

"All right," Spangler had said, keeping his voice level with difficulty. "What's your explanation, Mr. Pembun?"

"Well, the Rithch mus' 'ave left some information buried in Cassina's subconscious that 'e didn' want us to find. I 'ad an idea that was it, and that's w'y I asked you not to tell Cassina the Rithch was dead—I thought 'e might 'ave been given another command, to commit suicide if the Rithch was discovered. I think we're lucky to 'avè Colonel Cassina alive today, Commissioner; I b'lieve 'e's the most important man in the Empire right now."

"That's a trifle strong," Spangler had said. "I won't deny that this buried information, whatever it is, must be valuable. But what makes you assume that it's crucial? Presumably, it's a record of the Rithian's espionage or sabotage activities. . ."

"Sabotage," Pembun had said quickly. "It couldn' be the other, Commissioner, becawse the Rithch wouldn' care that much if you found out something you already know. I b'lieve Cassina knows this: 'e knows w'ere the bombs are buried."

"Bombs!" Spangler had said after a moment. The idea was

absurd. "They wouldn't be so stupid, Mr. Pembun. We have military installations on two hundred sixty planets, not to mention the fleet in space. We'd retaliate, man. It would be suicide for them to bomb us."

"You don' understand, Commissioner. They don' want to bomb Earth—if they did, there wouldn' 'ave been any need for the Rithch to leave a record of w'ere the bombs were. 'E'd simply set them with a time mechanism, and that would be that. We couldn' do a thing till after they went off. But 'e was the last one alive, an' 'e couldn' be sure 'e'd get back with 'is information, so 'e 'ad to leave a record. That only means one thing. The Rithi just want to be able to warn us: *'Leave us alone-or else.'* "

Spangler's mind had worked furiously. It was terrifyingly possible; he could find no flaw in it. Suitably placed, a few score medium-sized disruption bombs would break a planet apart like a rotten apple. "Medium-sized" meant approximately six cubic centimeters; they would be easy to smuggle, easy to conceal, almost impossible to find. The only defense would be a radio-frequency screen over the whole planet; and if the enemy knew the precise locations of the bombs, even that defense would not work; a tight directional beam, accurately aimed, would get through and trigger the bombs. All it required was a race stubborn enough to say, "Leave us alone—or else"—and mean it. from what Pembun had said about the Rithians, they might well be such a race.

But Earth played the percentages. Earth took only calculated risks. Earth would have to succumb.

That chain of reasoning had taken only a fraction of a second. Spangler examined it, compared it with the known facts, and discarded it. He smiled.

"But, Mr. Pembun—*we've got* Cassina. It doesn't matter whether we get the information out of him or not; all we care about is that the *Rithians* aren't going to get it."

Pembun had looked absurdly mournful. "No, you're assuming that Cassina is the only one 'oo's got the information. I wish that was so, but I don' see 'ow it can be. Don' you see, giving it to Colonel Cassina was a mistake, becawse 'is mind

is the obvious place for us to look. Now, I can see the Rithch making that mistake, deliberately, becawse it struck 'im so funny 'e couldn' resist it—but I can't see 'im making that mistake becawse 'e was stupid. I think Colonel Cassina was jus' an afterthought: 'e was feeling cocky, and 'e decided to plant the message one more time, right under your noses. I think 'e and 'is friends 'ad *already* planted it a 'undred or two 'undred times, 'owever many they 'ad time for. An' if it was me, I would 'ave picked interstellar travelers —agents for trading companies, executives who travel by spaceship a lot, visitors to Earth from other systems. I think that's w'at they did. If they did, it's practic'ly a mathematical certainty that their agents will eventually reach one of those people. You could keep up the embargo, not let anybody leave, but 'ow long would it take to process everybody 'oo might carry the message?"

"Years," Spangler had said curtly, staring at his desk-top. "That's right. It could be done, and if you were lucky it might work. But it would kill Earth just as sure as blowing it up. . . . We've got to find out what Colonel Cassina knows, Commissioner. There isn' any other way."

After that, the news about Cassina had come, almost as if it had been timed to underscore Pembun's words. Then the second and more painful interview with Keith-Ingram. Then Spangler had turned to some of the routine matters that had been filling his in-box all day, and quite suddenly it had been quitting time.

Spangler had started to leave, but had stopped at the door, turned to look at the silent, comforting walls, turned around and sat down at his desk again. Acting on an impulse he could hardly explain, he had called Joanna and begged off taking her to dinner. He had been sitting there, hardly moving, ever since.

He pressed the stud of his thumb-watch. "Twenty-one-eighteen and one quarter."

Three hours; and he had had no dinner. There was a

sickish taste in his mouth, and he felt a little light-headed, but not at all hungry.

He thumbed open the revolving front of the desk, took out a dispenser vial of pick-me-ups, and swallowed one moodily.

It came down to this, Spangler thought slowly. They had been very nearly beaten; except for one man—Pembun—they would have been beaten. And that was all wrong.

Pembun was uncouth, ill-educated, unmannered. His methods were the merest improvisation. He had intelligence, one was forced to admit, but it was crude, untutored and undirected. Yet he got results.

Why?

It was possible to explain all the events of the past two days simply by saying that Pembun had happened to possess special knowledge, not available to Security, which had happened to be just the knowledge needed. But that was an evasion. The knowledge was not "special"; it was knowledge Earth should have had, and had tried to get, and had failed to get.

Again, *why*?

It seemed to Spangler that since Pembun's arrival the universe had slowly, almost imperceptibly turned over until it was upside down. And yet nothing had changed. Pembun was the same; so were Spangler and the rest of the world he knew. It was a little like one of those optical illusions that you got in Primary Camouflage—a series of cubes that formed a flight of stairs going upward; and then you blinked, and the cubes were hollow, or the stairs were hanging upside down. Or like the other kind, the silhouettes of two men, with converging perspective lines at the top and bottom: you thought one man was much taller, but when you measured them you found that both were the same—or even that the one that had seemed smaller was larger than the other. . . .

Spangler swore. He had been on the point, he realized, of getting up, taking a scooter to G-level, Suite 111, and humbly asking Pembun to explain to him why the sun now revolved around the Earth, black was white, and great acorns from little oak trees grew.

He picked up a memocube and flung it violently onto the desk again.

The gesture gave him no relief; the feeling of rebellion passed; depression and bewilderment remained.

Like a moth to the flame—like Mohammed to the mountain—Spangler went to Pembun.

This time the door was closed.

After the space of three heartbeats, the scooter moved off silently down the way he had come, lights winking on ahead of it in the deserted corridor and fading when it passed. It turned the corner at Upsilon and disappeared, heading for the invisible lategoer who had signaled it.

Silence.

Down the corridor for five meters in either direction, glareless overhead lights showed Spangler every detail of the satin-finished walls, the mathematical lines of doors and maintenance entrances, the almost invisible foot-traces that, sometime during the night, would be vibrated into molecular dust and then gulped by suction tubes. Beyond was nothing but darkness. Far away, a tiny dot of light flared for an instant, like a shooting star, as someone crossed the corridor.

Spangler had an instant's vision of what it would be like if the whole thing were to stop: the miles of empty corridors, the darkness, the drifting dust, the slow invasion of insects. The dead weight of the Hill, bearing invisibly down upon you, the terrible, unsentient weight of a corpse.

Swallowing bile, he put his hand over the doorplate.

There was a long pause before the door slid open. Pembun, in underblouse and pantaloons, blinked at him as if he had been asleep. "Oh—Commissioner Spangler. Come awn in."

Spangler said hesitantly, "I'm disturbing you, I'm afraid. It isn't anything urgent; I'll talk with you tomorrow."

"No, please do come in, Commissioner. I'm glad you came. I was getting a little morbid, sitting 'ere by myself."

He closed the door behind Spangler. "Drink? I've still got 'alf the w'iskey left, and all the soda."

The thought of a drink made Spangler's stomach crawl. He refused it and sat down.

On the table beside the recliner were several sheets of paper and an ornate old-fashioned electropen.

"I was jus' writing a letter to my wife," Pembun said, following his glance. "Or trying to." He smiled. "I can't tell 'er anything important without violating security, and I know I'll prob'ly get back to Ganymede before a letter would, after the embargo is lifted, any'ow, so there rilly wasn' much sense to it. It was jus' something to do."

Spangler nodded. "It's a pity we can't let you leave the Hill just now. But there's an amusement section right here, you know—cinemas, autochess, dream rooms, baths—"

Pembun shook his head, still smiling. "I wouldn' take any pleasure in those things, Commissioner."

His tone, it seemed to Spangler, was half regretful, half indulgent. No doubt they had other, more vigorous pleasures on Manhaven. Narcotics and mixed bathing would seem to them effete or incomprehensible.

Without knowing what he was about to say, he blurted, "Tell me truthfully, Pembun—do you despise us?"

Pembun's eyes widened slightly, then narrowed, and his whole face subtly congealed. "I try not to," he said quietly. "It's too easy. Did you come 'ere to ask me that, Commissioner?"

Spangler leaned forward, elbows on knees, clasping his hands together, "I think I did," he said. "Forgive my rudeness, Pembun, but I really want to know. What's wrong with us, in your view? What would you change, if you could?"

Pembun said carefully, "W'at would you say was your motive for asking that, Commissioner?"

Spangler glanced up. From this angle, Pembun looked somehow larger, more impressive. Spangler stared at him in a kind of rapture of discovery: the man's face was neither ugly nor ludicrous. The eyes were steady and alive with intelligence; the wide mouth was firm. Even the outsize ears, the heavy cheeks, only gave the face added strength and a curious dignity.

He said, "I want information. I've misjudged you grossly—and I apologize, but that's not enough. I feel that there must

be something wrong with my basic assumptions, with the Empire. I want to know why we failed in the Rithian affair, and you succeeded. I think you can help me, if you will."

He waited.

Pembun said slowly, "Commissioner, I think you 'ave another motive, w'ether you realize it consciously or not. Let me tell it to you, and see if you agree. Did you ever 'ear of pecking precedence in 'ens?"

"No," said Spangler. "By the way call me Spangler, or Thorne, won't you?"

"All right—Thorne. You can cawl me Jawj, if you like. Now, about the 'ens. Say there are twelve in a yard. If you watch them, you'll find out that they 'ave a rigid social 'ierarchy. 'En A gets to peck all the others, 'en B pecks all the others but A, C pecks all but A and B, and so on down to 'en L, 'oo gets pecked by everybody and can't peck anybody back."

"Yes," said Spangler, "I see."

Pebmun went on woodenly, "You're 'en B or C in the same kind of a system. There are one or two superiors that lord it over you and you do the same to the rest. Now, usually w'en anybody new comes into the yard, you know right away w'ether it's someone 'oo pecks you or gets pecked. But I'm a different case. I'm a different breed of 'en, and I don't rilly belong in your yard at all, so you try not to peck me excep' w'en I provoke you; it would lower your dignity. That's until you suddenly find that *I'm* pecking *you*. Now you've *got* to fit me into the system above yourself, becawse all this pecking wouldn' be endurable if you got it from both directions. So you came 'ere to say, 'I know you're 'igher in the scale than me, so it's all right. Go a'ead—peck me.' "

Spangler stared at him in silence. He was interested to observe that although he felt humiliated, the emotion was not actually unpleasant. It's a species of purge, he thought. It's good for us all to be taken down a peg now and then.

"What's more," Pembun said, watching him, "you enjoy it. It's a pleasure to you to kowtow to somebody you think

is stronger, especially w'en your status and seniority aren't in any danger. Isn' that true?"

"I won't say you're wrong," Spangler answered, trying to be honest. "I've never heard it expressed just that way before, but it's certainly true that I'm conditioned to accept and exert authority—and you're quite right, I enjoy both acts. It's a necessary state of mind in my profession, or so I've always believed. I suppose it isn't very pretty, looked at objectively."

Pembun started to reach for the whiskey decanter, then drew his hand back. He looked at Spangler with a wry smile. "W'at you don' realize," he said, "is that I get no pleasure out of it. This may be 'ard for you to understand, but it's no fun for me to beat a man 'oo's not trying to 'it me back. This 'ole conversation 'as been unpleasant to me, but I couldn' avoid it. You put me in a position w'ere no matter w'at I said, even if I rifused to talk to you at all, I'd be doing w'at you wanted. And this is the funny part, Commissioner—in making me 'urt your self-esteem, you've 'urt mine twice as bad. I expec' I'll 'ave a bad taste in my mouth for days."

Spangler stood up slowly. He took two deep breaths, but his sudden anger did not subside; it grew. He said carefully, "I don't need to have a mountain fall on me. That's a quaint expression we have, Mr. Pembun—it means that one clear and studied insult is enough."

Suddenly Pembun was just what he had seemed in the beginning: an irritating, dirty-faced, ugly little beast of a *colonial.* Pembun said, "You see, now you're angry. That's becawse I wouldn' play the pecking game with you."

Spangler said furiously, "Mr. Pembun, I didn't come here for insults, or for barnyard psychology either. I came to ask you for information. If you are so far lost to common civility—" The sentence slipped out of his grasp; he started again: "Perhaps I had better remind you that I'm empowered to *demand* your help as an official of the Empire."

Pembun said, unruffled, "I'm 'ere to 'elp if I can, Commissioner. W'at was it you wanted, exactly?"

"I asked you," said Spangler, "to tell me what, in your opinion, were the causes of Security and War Department

failure in the Rithian case." As Pembun started to speak, he cut in: "Put your remarks on a spool, and have it on my desk in the morning." His voice sounded unnaturally loud in his own ears; it occurred to him with a shock that he had been shouting.

Pembun shook his head sadly, reprovingly. "I'll be glad to—if you put your request in writing, Commissioner."

Spangler clenched his jaw. "You'll get it tomorrow," he said. He turned, opened the door and strode away down the empty corridor. He did not stop to signal for a scooter until he had turned the corner, and Pembun's doorway was out of sight.

He found Joanna in the tower room, lying against a section of the couch that was elevated to form a backrest. The room was filled, choked to bursting by a male voice shouting incomprehensible syllables against a strident orchestral background. Spangler's brain struggled futilely with the words for an instant, then rejected them in disgust. The recording was one of Joanna's period collection, sung in one of the dead languages. German; full of long vowels and fruity sibilants.

She waved her hand over the control box, and the volume diminished to a bearable level. She stood up and came to meet him.

"I thought you sounded upset when you called," she said, kissing him. "Sit here. Put your feet up. Have you had anything to eat?"

"No," said Spangler. "I couldn't; I'm too tired for food."

"I'll have something up. You needn't eat it if you don't want to."

"Fine," he said with an effort.

She dialed the antique food-selector at the side of the couch, then came to sit beside him.

The voice was still shouting, but as if it were a long distance off. It rose to a crescendo, there was a dying gasp from the orchestra, a moment's pause, and then another song began.

"Why don't you have that translated?" he asked irritably.

"I don't know; I rather like it as it is. Shall I turn it off?"

"That's not the point," said Spangler with controlled impatience. "You like it as it is—why? Because it's incomprehensible? Is that a sane reason?"

The food-selector's light glowed. Joanna opened the hopper, took out a tube of broth and a sandwich loaf, and put them on the table at Spangler's elbow.

"What are you really angry about, Thorne?" she asked quietly.

"I'll tell you," said Spangler, sitting erect. The words spilled out of him, beyond his control. "Do you think it isn't obvious to me, and to everyone else who knows you, what you're doing to yourself with this morbid obsession? Do you think it's pleasant for me to sit here and watch you wallowing in the past, like a dog in carrion, because you're afraid of anything that hasn't been safely buried for five hundred years?"

Her eyes widened with shock, and Spangler felt an answering wave of pure joy. This was what he had come here to do, he realized, though he hadn't known it before. It was what he should have done long ago. She blushed furiously from forehead to breast, then turned ivory-pale.

"Stop it," she said in a tight voice.

"I won't stop," Spangler said, biting the words. "Look at yourself. You're half-alive, half a woman. You let just enough of yourself live to do your work, and answer when you're spoken to, and respond to your lover. The rest is dead and covered with dust. I can taste it when I kiss you. How do you think I feel, wanting you, knowing that you're out of my reach—not because . . . "

She got up and started toward the door. Spangler reached her in one stride, pushed her backward onto the couch and held her there with his whole weight.

" . . . not because you belong to anyone else, or ever will, but because you're too timid, too selfish, too wrapped up in yourself ever to belong to anybody?"

She struggled ineffectively. Her eyes were unfocused and glazed with tears; her whole body was trembling.

Spangler tore open her gown, pulled it away from her body. "Go ahead, look at yourself! You're a woman, a living human being, not a mummy. Why is that so hateful? Do you get any pleasure from killing yourself and everything you touch?" He shook her. "Answer me!"

She gasped, "I can't . . ."

"What can't you? You can feel, you can speak, you can do anything a normal human being can do, but you won't. You wouldn't leave that smug little shell of yours to save a life. You wouldn't leave it to save the Empire—not even to save yourself."

"Let me go."

"You're not sick, you're not afraid, you're just selfish. Cold and selfish. Everything for Joanna, and let the rest of the universe go hang!"

"Let me go."

Her trembling had stopped; she was still breathing hard, but her pale lips were firm. She raised her lids and looked at him squarely, without blinking.

Spangler raised his open right hand and struck her in the face. Her head bobbed. She looked at him incredulously, and her mouth opened.

Spangler hit her again. At the third blow, the tears started again. Her face crumpled suddenly and a series of short, animal sounds came out of her. At the fourth, she stopped trying to turn her head aside. Her body was limp, her eyes closed and without expression. Her sobs were as mechanical and meaningless as a fit of the hiccoughs.

Spangler rolled away from her, stood up and went to the chair. He felt purged and empty. There was a heavy tiredness in his limbs; he could feel his heart beating slowly and strongly. He said tonelessly, "You can get up now. I won't hit you again."

After a moment she sat up, spine curved, head hanging. When she got to her feet and turned toward the bathroom door, Spangler followed and stepped in front of her, grasping her arms.

"Listen to me," he said. "You're going to marry me, and we're going to be happy. Do you understand that?"

She looked up at him without interest.

"You fool," she said.

She stood motionless until he let her go, and then moved without haste through the doorway. The door closed behind her, and Spangler heard the lock click.

# V

SPANGLER ENTERED his office, as he usually did, half an hour before the official opening time. He had sat up for a long time after leaving Joanna's tower the night before, and had slept badly afterwards. This morning he had a headache which he pick-me-ups would not entirely suppress; but his mind felt cold and clear. He knew precisely what he wanted to do.

Last night's blunder was not irreparable. It was all but disastrous; it was criminally foolish; it had set him back at least six months; but it had not beaten him.

His first move would be to send her a present: something he would prize too much to reject—old paintings, or books or recordings. Very likely there would be something of the sort among the property seized by the Department in treason cases; if not, he would get it from a private collector. He had already composed the note to go with the gift: it was humble without servility, regretful without hope. It implied that he would not see her again; and he would not—not for at least a month.

The last three weeks of that time Spangler had allotted to grand strategy—planting rumors, sure to reach Joanna: that he was overworking; that he never smiled; that he was ill but had refused treatment. That sort of thing, details to be worked out later.

The first week was dedicated to an altogether different purpose. His ruinous outburst last night had at least had one good effect; it had taught Spangler that he could not fight both battles at once. Commencing today, his total energies would be aimed at one objective: to crush Pembun.

It could be done; it would be done. He had underestima-

ted the man, but that was over. From now on, things would be different.

"Ten hours," said his thumbwatch.

On his desk was a spool of summarized reports addressed to him from Keith-Ingram. The activities of the Rithians had now been partially traced: eight of them, traveling together, had reached Earth as passengers aboard a second-rate tramp freighter, docking at Stambul, on the evening of December 10th. From Stambul they were known to have taken the stratosphere express to Paris, but no further trace of their movements had so far turned up until seven of them appeared in Albuquerque on the 18th, with one exception: the eighth Rithian had shipped out aboard a liner leaving for the Capri system on the 12th, only two days after the group had arrived. It had disembarked at Lumi, where its trail ended.

Doubtless, Spangler thought, it had changed its disguise there and continued by a devious route. By now it was back in the Rithian system.

Its return before the others' was puzzling. Obviously the group had not finished its collective task, or the others would have got out too; either it had had a separate assignment, which it had completed before the others, or some single item of information had been turned up which the Rithians thought sufficiently important to send a messenger back with immediately.

He glanced quickly through the conference schedule which Miss Timoney had made up the previous afternoon, then laid it aside and spent the rest of his half-hour in dictating notes to Pembun, Keith-Ingram and Dr. Baustian.

The note to Pembun repeated yesterday's question, word for word.

Keith-Ingram's reported the condition of Colonel Cassina and gave Pembun's analysis of the situation, without comment.

Baustian's requested him to submit, as soon as possible, a reliable procedure for identifying Rithians masquerading as human beings.

Pembun's reply popped into his in-box almost immediately;

the man must have prepared it last night and held it ready for Spangler's formal request.

Spangler put the spool viciously into the screen slot and skimmed through it. It was in reasonably good Standard; so good, in fact, that Spangler conceived an instant suspicion that Pembun could speak Standard acceptably when he chose.

The document read, in part:

*In my judgment, the most serious weakness of Empire executive personnel is an excessive reliance on prescribed methods and regulations, and inadequate emphasis on original thinking and personal initiative. I am aware that this is in accord with overall policy, which would be difficult if not impossible to alter completely within the framework of the Empire, but it is my feeling that attention should be given to this problem at high policy levels, and efforts made to alter existing conditions if possible.*

*It is not within my competence to suggest a model of procedure, especially since the problem appears to be partly philosophical in nature. The tendency of Empire executive personnel to interpret regulations and directives in a rigid and literal manner, is in my opinion clearly related to the increasing tendency toward standardization in Home World art, manners, customs and language. In the final category, I would cite the obsolescence of all Earth languages except Standard, and in Standard, the gradual elimination of homonyms and synonyms, as well as the increasing tendency to restrict words to a single meaning, as especially significant. . . .*

Spangler removed the spool and tossed it into his "awaiting action" box. A moment later it was time for his first conference.

He had left word with Gordon to give him any message from Baustian as soon as it arrived. Forty-five minutes after the conference began, a spool popped into the in-box in front of him.

Colonel Leclerc, Cassina's replacement, had been giving a long and enthusiastic account of certain difficulties encountered by the Fleet in maintaining the supra-Earth cordon, and

the means by which they were being overcome. Leclerc was the oldest man at the table, and fairly typical of the holdovers from the last generation but one, when, owing to the shortage of governmental and military personnel caused by the almost-disastrous Cartagellan war, standards had been regrettably lax. He was the sort of man one automatically thought of as "not quite class." His manner was a little too exuberant, his gestures too wide, his talk imprecise and larded with anachronisms. Spangler waited patiently until he paused to shrug, then cut in smoothly: "Thank you, Colonel. Now, before we continue, will you all pardon me a moment, pleäse?"

He slipped the spool into place and lighted the reading screen. The note read:

*Baustian, G. B., BuAlPhyl*
*Spangler, T., DeptSecur*
*MS MU*
12/29/2521
*BAP CD*18053990
*Ref DS CD*50347251

1. *Recommended procedure for identifying members of the Rithian race masquerading as humans is as follows:*
2. *Make* 1.7 *cm. vertical incision, using instrument coated with paste of attached composition* (*Schedule A*), *in mid-thigh or shoulder region of subject. Reagent, in combination with Rithian body fluids, will produce brilliant purple precipitate. No reaction will take place in contact with human flesh.*
3. *For convenience of use, it is recommended that incision be made by agency of field-powered blade in standard grip casing, as in attached sketches.* (*Schedule B*)
4. *If desired, blade coating may also contain soporific believed to be effective in Rithian body chemistry.* (*Schedule C*)
5. *End.*

*Att BAP CD*18053990*A*
*BAP CD*18053990*B*
*BAP CD*18053990*C*

Spangler smiled and cleared the screen.

"The information is satisfactory, Commissioner?" Colonel Leclerc demanded brightly.

"Quite satisfactory, Colonel." Quickly, so as to give Leclerc no opportunity to launch himself into his subject again, Spangler turned to Pemberton, the mayor's aide. "Mr. Pemberton?"

The young man began querulously, "We don't want to seem impatient, Commissioner, but you know that our office is under considerable strain. Now, you, you've given us to understand that the Rithian has already been captured and killed, and what we want to know is, how much longer . . ."

Spangler heard him out as patiently, to all outward appearance, as if he had not heard the same complaint daily since the embargo began. He put Pemberton off smoothly but noncomittally, and adjourned the conference.

Back in his office, Spangler finished reading Baustian's note and dictated an endorsement of paragraphs one to three. Paragraph four was a good notion, but anything with a rider like that on it would take twice as long to go through channels.

Spangler rewound the spool and set the machine to make three copies, one of which he addressed to Keith-Ingram, one to Baustian, and the third to the man in charge of the fabricators assigned to Security, with an AAA priority. Then he took out Pembun's message and read it through carefully.

*With regard to the assumed success of the Rithian pseudo-hypnosis against Empire agents,* (Pembun had added) *I would again suggest that the basic fault may be deeply rooted in the social complex of Earth, and in the rigid organization of Empire administration. On most of the Outworlds of the writer's experience, good hypnotic subjects are in a minority, but my impression is that this is not the case on Earth, at least among Empire personnel. It may be said that a man who has successfully absorbed all the unspoken assumptions and conditioned attitudes required of him by responsible position in the Empire is already half hypnotized; or to put it differently, that non-suggestive minds tend to be weeded*

*out by the systems of selection and promotion in use. For example, the addressee, Commissioner T. Spangler, is in the writer's opinion suggestible in the extreme. . . .*

Spangler grinned angrily and rewound the spool.

How typical of the man that report was!—a solid gelatinous mass of naïveté surrounding one tiny thorn of shrewdness. In Pembun's place, Spangler would simply have disclaimed ability to answer the question. Since Pembun was not employed by any department concerned, the reply would have been plausible and correct; nothing more could ever have come of it.

That must have occurred to Pembun; and yet he had gone stolidly ahead to answer the question fully, and, Spangler was ready to believe, honestly. It was a damaging document; some phrases in it, particularly "within the framework of the Empire," were clearly treasonable. But he had written it; and then he had slipped in that comment about Spangler.

That comment was just damaging enough to Spangler to offset the mildly damaging admissions Pembun had made about himself. Therefore Pembun had actually taken no risk at all. But why had he troubled to dictate a carefully-phrased quarter-spool to be buried in the files, when a disclaimer, in two lines, would have served? Just for "something to do?"

Spangler thought not. There was a curious coherence in Pembun's oddities: they all hung together somehow. Wincing, he forced himself to go back over the recollection of last night. There again, from the normal point of view, Pembun had given himself unnecessary difficulty. Confronted with that inconvenient question of Spangler's, "What's wrong with the Empire?" and the even more embarrassing, "Do you despise us?", any ordinary person would simply have lied.

At any rate, Pembun, by his own statement, had got no pleasure from telling the truth. What was that remark? ". . . a bad taste . . ." Never mind. What emerged from all this, Spangler thought, was the picture of a man who was compulsively, almost pathologically honest. Yes, that expressed it. His frankness was not even ethico-religious in character: it was symbolic, a *gesture.*

Spangler felt himself flushing, and his lips tightened.

The question remained: What did the man want?

He had no answer yet; but he had a feeling that he was getting closer.

At eleven hours a report came from the head of the infirmary's psychiatric section. The information Security wanted from Colonel Cassina was still unavailable and in PsytSec's opinion could not be forced from him without a high probability of destroying the subject's personality. Did Spangler have the necessary priority to list Colonel Cassina as expendable?

At eleven-ten, a call came through from Keith-Ingram.

"On this Cassina affair, Thorne, what progress are you making?"

Spangler told him.

Keith-Ingram rubbed his square chin thoughtfully. "That's unfortunate," he said. "If you want my view, the Empire can spare Colonel Cassina, all right, but I'll have to go to the High Assembly for permission, and the Navy will fight it, naturally. I rather wish there were another way. Have you consulted Pembun about this?"

"The report had just come in when you called."

"Well, let's get this cleaned up now, if we can. Get him on a three-way, will you?"

Face stony, Spangler made the necessary connections. The image of Keith-Ingram dwindled and moved over to occupy one half of the screen. In the other half, Pembun appeared.

Keith-Ingram said, "Now, Mr. Pembun, you've helped us out of the stew right along through this affair. Have you any suggestions that might be useful in this phase of it?"

Pembun's expression was blandly attentive. He said, "My, that would be a 'ard decision to make. Let me think a minute."

Out of screen range, Spangler's fingers moved spasmodically over the edge of his desk.

Finally Pembun looked up. "I got one notion," he said. "It's kind of a long chance, but if it works it will get you the information you want without 'urting the Colonel. I was

thinking that w'en the Rithi planted that information, they mus' 'ave given their subject some kind of a trigger stimulus to unlock the message. Now, if the trigger is verbal, we 'aven' got a chance of 'itting it by accident. But it jus' now struck me that the trigger might be a situation instead of a phrase or a sentence. I mean, it might be a combination of diff'rent kinds of stimuli—a certain smell, say, plus a certain color of the light, plus a certain temperature range, and so on."

"That doesn't sound a great deal more hopeful, Mr. Pembun," Spangler put in.

"Wait," said Keith-Ingram, "I think I see what he's getting at. You mean, don't you, Mr. Pembun, that the Rithians might have used as a stimulus complex the normal conditions on their home world?"

"That's it," Pembun told him with a smile. "We can't be sure they did, of course, but it seems to me there's a fair chance. Any'ow, it isn' as far-fetched as it sounds, becawse those conditions would be available to the Rithi on any planet w'ere any number of them live. You wawk into a Rithch's 'ouse, an' you think you're on Sirach. They're use' to living in those vine cities of theirs, you see. They 'ate to be penned up. So w'en they 'ave to live in 'ouses, they put up vines in front of illusion screens, an' use artificial light an' scents, an' fool themselves that way."

"I see," said Keith-Ingram. "That sounds very good, Mr. Pembun; the only question that occurs to me is, can we duplicate those conditions accurately?"

"I should think so," Pembun answered. "It shouldn' be too 'ard."

"Well, I think we'll give it a trial, at any rate. What do you say, Thorne? Do you agree?"

Spagler could tell by the almost imperceptible arch of Keith-Ingram's right eyebrow, and the frozen expression of his mouth, that he knew Spangler didn't, and was enjoying the knowledge.

"Yes, by all means," said Spangler politely.

"That's settled then. I'll leave you and Thorne to work

ut the details. Clearing." His smile faded out, leaving half he screen blank.

Spangler said coldly, "This is your project, Mr. Pembun, nd I'll leave you entirely in charge of it. Requisition any pace, materials and labor you need, and have the heads f sections call me for confirmation. I'll want reports twice laily. Are there any questions?"

"No questions, Commissioner."

"Clearing."

Spangler broke the connection, then dialed Keith-Ingram's umber again. He got the "busy" response, as he expected, but eft the circuit keyed in. Twenty minutes later Keith-Ingram's ace appeared on the screen. "Yes, Spangler? What is it now? 'm rather busy."

Spangler said impassively, "There are two matters I wanted o discuss with you, Chief, and I thought it best not to bring hem up while Pembun was on the circuit."

"Are they urgent?"

"Quite urgent."

"All right, then, what are they?"

"First," said Spangler, "I've sent you a note on a new esting method of Baustian's, for detecting any future Rithan masqueraders. I'd like to ask you for permission to use t here in the Hill, in advance of final approval, on a provisional test basis."

"Why?"

"Just a precaution, sir. We've found one Rithian here; I vant to be perfectly sure there aren't any more."

Keith-Ingram nodded. "No harm in being sure. All right, horne, go ahead if you like. Now what else was there?"

"Just one thing more. I'm wondering if it wouldn't be a ound idea to open the question of Cassina's expendability nyhow, regardless of this scheme of Pembun's. If it turns ut to be a frost, there'll be less delay before we can go ahead vith the orthodox procedure." His stress on the word "orthoox" was delicate, but he knew Keith-Ingram had caught it.

The older man gazed silently at him for a moment. "As a natter of fact," he said, "it happens that I'd already thought

of that. However, I may as well say that I have every confidence in Pembun. If all our personnel were as efficient as he is, Thorne, things would go a great deal more smoothly in this department."

Spangler said nothing.

"That's all then? Right. Clearing."

Recalling that conversation before he went to bed that night, Spangler thought, We'll see how much confidence you have in Pembun this time tomorrow.

Everything was ready by ten hours.

There was no puzzle, Spangler thought with satisfaction, without a solution. No matter how hopelessly involved and contradictory a situation might appear on the surface, or even some distance beneath it, if you kept on relentlessly, you would eventually arrive at the core, the quiet place where the elements of the problem lay exposed in their basic simplicity.

And this was the revelation that had been vouchsafed to Spangler:

The real struggle was between savagery and civilization, between magic and science, between the double meaning and the single meaning.

Pembun was on the side of ambiguity and lawlessness. Therefore he was an enemy.

What had blinded Spangler, blinded them all, was the self-evident fact that Pembun was *human*. Loyalty to a nation or an idea is conditioned; but loyalty to the race is bred in the bone. As the old saying has it, "Blood is thicker than ichor."

Pembun's humanity was self-evident; but was it a fact?

"Wei" had been a human being, too—until the moment when he was unmasked as a monster.

Pembun belonged to a world so slovenly that Rithians were allowed to come and go as they pleased. Was it not more than possible, was it not almost a tactical certainty, that given opportunity and the made-to-order usefulness

of Pembun's connection with the Empire, they had at the least made him their agent?

Or, at most, replaced him with one of themselves?

The idea was fantastic, certainly. The picture of Pembun playing the role of Rithian-killer, deliberately betraying his confederate in order to safeguard his own position, was straight out of one of those wild twentieth-century romances—the kind in which the detective turned out to be the murderer, the head of the Secret Police was also the leader of the Underground, and, as often as not, the subordinate hero was a beautiful girl disguised as a boy by the clever stratagem of cutting her hair.

But that was precisely the kind of world that Pembun came from, whether he was human or Rithian; that was the unchanging essence of the ancient Unreason, beaten now on Earth but not yet stamped out of the cosmos. That was the enemy.

"Ten oh-one," said his watch. In a few moments, now, one part of the question would be answered.

He glanced at the four men in workmen's coveralls who stood by an opened section of the wall. One of them held what appeared to be a cable cutter; the others had objects that looked like testing instruments and spare-part kits. The "cutter," underneath its camouflage shell, was an immobilizing field projector; the rest were energy weapons.

The men stood quietly, not talking, until a signal light flashed on Spangler's desk. He nodded, and they crouched nearer to the disemboweled wall, beginning a low-voiced conversation. A moment later, Pembun appeared in the doorway.

Spangler glanced up from his reading screen, frowning. "Oh, yes—Pembun," he said. "Sit down a moment, will you?" He gestured to one of the chairs along the far wall. Pembun sat, hands crossed limply in his lap, idly watching the workmen.

Spangler thumbed open the front of his desk and touched a stud; a meter needle swung far over and held steady. The room was now split into two parts by a planar screen just in front of the desk. Spangler closed the microphone

circuit which would carry his voice around the barrier.

The intercom glowed; Spangler put his hand over it. "Yes?"

The man said, as he had been instructed, "Commissioner, is Mr. Pembun in your office?"

"Yes, he is. Why?"

"It's that routine test, sir. You told us to give it to everybody who'd been in the Hill less than six months, and Mr. Pembun is on our list. If you're not too busy now—"

"Of course—he would be on the list," Spangler said. "That hadn't occurred to me. All right, come in." He turned to Pembun. "You don't mind?"

"What is it?" Pembun asked.

"We have a new anti-Rithian test," Spangler explained easily. "We're just making absolutely certain there aren't any more Weis in the Hill. In your case, of course, it's only a formality."

Pembun's expression was hard to read, but Spangler thought he saw a trace of uneasiness there. He watched narrowly, as a white-smocked young man carrying a medical kit came in through the door to Pembun's right.

The workmen separated suddenly, and two of them started toward the door. When they had taken a few steps, one of them turned to call back to the remaining two. "You certain two RBX's will do it?"

"What's the matter, don't you think so?"

"It's up to you, but . . ." The men went on talking, while the medic approached Pembun and opened his kit. "Mr. Pembun?"

"Yes."

"Will you stand up and turn back your right sleeve, please?"

Pembun did as he was told. His upper arm was shapeless with overlaid fat and muscle, like a wrestler's. The medic placed one end of a chromed cylinder against the fleshy part of the shoulder, and pressed the release. Pembun started violently and clapped his hand to the injury. When he took it away, there was a tiny spot of blood on his palm.

The medic extruded the cylinder's narrow blade and showed it to Spangler. "Negative, Commissioner."

"Naturally," Spangler said dryly. The medic tore off a swab from his kit and wiped Pembun's wound, then put a tiny patch of bandage on it, closed his kit and went away.

Negative, Spangler thought regretfully. Too bad; it would have been gratifying to find out that Pembun had tentacles under that blubber. But it had been a pleasure to watch him jump, anyhow. He opened his desk and cut the field circuit.

The two workmen near the door finished their discussion and left. Spangler said to the remaining pair, "Will you wait outside for a few minutes, please?"

When they had gone, Pembun came forward and took the seat facing the desk. "That's a rough test," he said. " 'Ow does it work?"

Spangler explained. "Sorry if it was unpleasant," he added, "but I believe it's more effective than the old one."

"Well, I'm glad I passed, any'ow," said Pembun, poker-faced.

"To be sure," said Spangler. "Now—your report, Mr. Pembun?"

"Well, I've 'ad a little trouble. I asked Colonel Leclerc to see if 'e couldn' send somebody to Santos in the Shahpur system, to get some Rithian city-vines from the botanical gardens there. 'E gave me to understand that you rifused the request."

"Yes, I'm sorry about that," Spangler said sympathetically. "Until this question is settled, we can't very well relax the embargo, especially not for an Outworld jump."

Pembun accepted that without comment. "Another thing that 'appened, I wanted copies of any Rithi films the War Department might 'ave, in 'opes that one of them would include a sequence of a Rithch I could use to build up the illusion there was a Rithch in the room. That was rifused too; I don' know w'ether it went through your office or not."

"No, this is the first I've heard of it," Spangler lied blandly, "but I'm not surprised. War is extremely touchy about its M. S. files—I'm afraid you'd better give up hope of any

help there. Can't you make do without those two items?"

Pembun nodded. "I figured I might 'ave to, so I went a'ead and did the best I could. I don' promise it will work, becawse some of it is awful makeshift, but it's ready."

Spangler felt a muscle jump in his cheek. "It's ready *now*?" he demanded.

"W'enever you like, Commissioner." Pembun got up and turned toward the door.

Spangler made an instant decision. He had not planned to take the second step against Pembun until he had manufactured a plausible opportunity, but he couldn't let Pembun's examination of Cassina procede. He said sharply, "Just a moment!" and added, "if you don't mind."

As Pembun paused, he put out his hand to the intercom. "Ask those workmen to step in here again, will you?"

The door opened, and all four of the pseudo-workmen trooped in. Pembun looked at them with an expression of mild surprise. " 'Aven' you got those RBX's *yet*?" he asked.

No one answered him. Spangler said, "I'll trouble you to come down to the interrogation rooms with me, Mr. Pembun." At his gesture, the four men moved into position around Pembun, one on either side, two behind.

"Interrogation!" said Pembun. "W'y, Commissioner?"

"Not torture, I assure you," Spangler replied, coming around the desk. "Just interrogation. There are a few questions I want to ask you."

"Commissioner Spangler," said Pembun, "am I to understand that I'm suspected of a crime?"

"Mr. Pembun," Spangler answered, "please don't be childish. Security is empowered to question anyone, anywhere, at any time, and for any reason."

## VI

AFTER THE initial struggle, Pembun had relaxed. He was breathing shallowly now, his eyes half open and unfocused.

"Have you got enough test patterns?" Spangler asked, using a finger-code.

"Yes, I think so, Commissioner," the young technician replied in the same manner. "His basics are very unusual, though. I may have some trouble interpreting when we get into second-orders."

"Do the best you can." He leaned forward, close to Pembun's head. "Can you still hear me, Pembun?" he said aloud.

"Yes."

"State your full name."

"Jawj Pero Pembun."

"How long have you been an agent of the Rithians?"

A pause. "I never was."

Spangler glanced at the technician, who signaled, "Emotional index about point six."

Spangler tried again. "When and where did you last meet a Rithian before coming to Earth?"

"In April, twenty-five fourteen, at the Spring Art Show in Espar, Man'aven."

"Describe that meeting in detail."

"I was standing in the crowd, looking at a big canvas called 'easley and the Tucker.' The Rithch came up and stood eside me. 'E pointed to the painting and said, 'Very amusing.' E was looking at the picture through a transformer, so the olors would make sense to 'im. I said, 'I've seen Rithi collages hat looked funnier to me.' Then 'e showed me 'ow, by hanging the transformer settings, you could make it look

like Yeastley 'ad a mouldy face with warts on it, and the Tucker 'ad a long tail. I said . . ."

Pembun went on stolidly to the end of the incident; he and the Rithch, whose name he had never learned, had exchanged a few more remarks and then parted.

The emotional index of his statement did not rise above point nine on a scale of five.

"Before that, when and where was your last meeting with a Rithch?"

"On the street in Espar, early in December, twenty-five thirteen."

"Describe it."

Spangler went grimly on, taking Pembun farther and farther back through innumerable casual meetings. At the end of half an hour, Pembun's breathing was uneven and his forehead was splotched with perspiration. The technician gave him a second injection. Spangler resumed the questioning.

Finally:

". . . Describe the last meeting before that."

"There was none."

Spangler sat rigid for a long moment, then abruptly clenched his fists.

He stared down at Pembun's tortured face. At that moment he felt himself willing to risk the forcing procedures he had planned to use on Cassina, forgetting the consequences; but there would be no profit in it. In Cassina's case, the material was there; it was only a question of applying enough force on the proper fulcrum to get it out. Here, either the material did not exist, or it was so well hidden that the most advanced Empire techniques would never find a hint of it.

But there had to be something: if not espionage, then treason.

Spangler said, "Pembun, in a war between the Rithians and the Empire, which side would you favor?"

"The Empire."

Hoarsely: "But as between the Rithian culture and that of the Empire, which do you prefer?"

"The Rithi."

"Why?"

"Becawse they 'aven' ossified themselves."

"Explain that."

"They 'aven' overspecialized. They're still yuman, in a sense of the word that's more meaningful than the natural-history sense. They're alive in a way that you can't say the Empire is alive. The Empire is like a robot brain with 'alf the connections soldered shut. It can't adapt, so it's dying; but it's still big enough to be dangerous."

Spangler flicked a glance of triumph toward the technician. He said, "I will repeat, in the event of war between the Rithians and the Empire, which side would you favor?"

Pembun said, "The Empire."

Spangler persisted angrily, "How do you justify that statement, in the face of your admission that you prefer Rithian culture to Empire culture?"

"My personal preferences aren' important. It would be bad for the 'ole yuman race if the Empire cracked up too soon. The Outworlds aren' strong enough. It's too much to expect them to 'urry up and make themselves self-sufficient, w'en they can lean on the Empire through trade agreements. The Empire 'as to be kept alive *now*. In another five centuries or so, it won' matter."

Spangler stared a question at the technician, who signaled: 'Emotional index one point seven."

One seven: normal for a true statement of a profound conviction. A falsehood, spoken against the truth-compulsion of he drug, would have generated at least 3.0.

So it had all slipped out of his hands again. Pembun's tatement was damaging; it would be a black mark on his lossier: but it was not criminal. There was nothing in it to ıstify the interrogation: it was hardly more than Pembun had iven freely in that report of his.

Spangler made one more attempt. "From the time I met ou at the spaceport to the present, have you ever lied to ıe?"

A pause. "Yes."

"How many times?"

"Once."

Spangler leaned forward eagerly.

"Give me the details!"

"I tol' you the song, *Odum Pawkee Mont a Mutting*, was 'kind of a saga.' That was true in a way, but I said it to fool you. There's an old song with the same name, that dates from the early days on Man'aven, but that's in the old languages. W'at I sang was a modern version. It's not a folk song, or a saga, it's a political song. Old Man Pawkey is the Empire, an' the cup of cawfee is peace. 'E climbs a mounting, and 'e wears 'imself out, and 'e fights a 'undred battles, and 'e lets 'is farm go to forest, jus' to get a cup of cawfee—instead of growing the bean in 'is own back yard."

A wave of anger towered and broke over Spangler. When it passed, he found himself standing beside the interrogation table, legs spread and shoulders hunched. There was a stinging sensation in the palm of his right hand and the inner surfaces of the fingers; and there was a dark-red blotch on Pembun's cheek.

The technician was staring at him, but he looked away when Spangler turned.

"Bring him out of it and then let him go," Spangler said, and strode out of the room.

The screen filled one wall of the room, so that the three-dimensional orthocolor image appeared to be physically present beyond a wall of non-reflecting glass.

Spangler sat a little to right of center, with Gordon at his left. To his right was Colonel Leclerc with his aide; at the far left, sitting a little apart from the others, was Pembun.

Spangler had spoken to Pembun as little as possible since the interrogation; to be in the same room with him was almost physically distasteful.

On the ancillary screen before Spangler, Keith-Ingram's broad gray face was mirrored. The circuit was not two-way, however; Keith-Ingram was receiving the same tight-beam image that appeared on the big wall screen, and so were

several heads of other departments and at least one High Assembly member.

The pictured room did not look like a room at all: it looked almost exactly like the Rithian garden-city Spangler had seen in the indoctrination film. There were the bluish light, the broad-leaved green vines and the serpentine blossoms, with the vague feeling of space beyond; and there, supported by a crotch of the vine, was a Rithian.

The reconstruction was uncannily good, Spangler admitted; if he had not seen the model at close hand, he would have believed the thing to be alive.

But something was subtly off-key: some quality of the light, or configuration of the vine stalks, or perhaps even the attitude of the lifelike Rithian simulacrum. The room as a whole was like a museum reconstruction: convincing only after you had voluntarily taken the first step toward belief.

Leclerc was chatting noisily with his aide: his way of minimizing tension, evidently. The aide nodded and coughed nervously. Gordon shifted his position in the heavily-padded seat, and subsided guiltily when Spangler glanced at him.

Keith-Ingram's lips moved soundlessly; he was talking to one of the high executives on another circuit. Then the sound cut in and he said, "All ready at this end, Spangler. Go ahead."

"Right, sir." Distastefully, Spangler turned his head toward Pembun. "Mr. Pembun?"

Pembun spoke quietly into his intercom. A moment later, the vines at the left side of the room parted and Cassina stepped into view.

His face was pale and he looked acutely uncomfortable. Under forced healing techniques he had made a good recovery, but he still looked unwell. He glanced down at the interlaced vines that concealed the true floor, took two steps forward, turned to face the motionless Rithian, and assumed the "at ease" position, hands behind his back. His stiff face eloquently expressed disapproval and discomfort.

No one in the viewing room moved or seemed to breathe.

Even the restless Leclerc sat statue-still, gazing intently at the screen.

How does Cassina feel, Spangler wondered irrelevantly, with a bomb inside his skull?

Leclerc had set his watch to announce seconds. The tiny ticks were distinctly audible.

Three seconds went by, and nothing happened. Theoretically, if the buried message in Cassina's brain were triggered by the situation, the buried material would come out verbally, with compulsive force.

Four seconds.

Pembun bent forward over his intercom and murmured. In the room of the image the Rithian dummy moved slightly—tentacles gripped and relaxed, shifting its weight minutely; the head turned. A high-pitched voice, apparently coming from the dummy, said, "Enter and be at peace."

Six seconds.

The watch ticked once more; then the dummy spoke again, in the sibilants and harsh fricatives of the Rithian language.

Nine seconds. Ten. The dummy spoke once more in Rithian.

Twelve seconds.

Cassina's expression did not change; his lips remained shut.

Pembun sighed. "It's no use going on," he said. "I'm afraid it's a failure."

"No luck, Chief," said Spangler. "Pembun says that's all he can do."

Keith-Ingram nodded. "Very well. I'll contact you later. Clearing." His screen went blank.

Pembun was speaking into the intercom. A moment later a voice from behind the vines called, "That's all, Colonel." Cassina turned and walked stiffly out. "Clearing," said the voice; and the big screen faded to silvery blankness.

Spangler sat still, savoring his one victory, while the others stood up and moved murmuring toward the door. Vines, he thought mockingly. Dummy monsters. Smells!

The next time, it was very different.

Cassina lay clipped and swathed in the interrogation harness. His glittering eyes stared with an expression of frozen terror at the ceiling.

Spangler, at the bedside, was only partly conscious of the other men in the room and of the avid bank of vision cameras. He watched Cassina as one who marks the oily ripples of the ocean's surface, knowing that fathoms under, a gigantic submarine battle is being fought.

In the submerged depths of Cassina's mind, a three-sided struggle had been going on for more than half an hour without a respite. The field of battle centered around a locked and sealed compartment of Cassina's memory. The three combatants were the interrogation machine, the repressive complex which guarded the sealed memory, and Cassina's own desperate will to survive.

The dynamics of the battle were simple and deadly. First, through normal interrogation, Cassina's attention had been directed to the memory-sector in question. The pattern of that avenue of thought was reproduced in the interrogation machine—its jagged outline performed an endless, shuddering dance in the scope—and fed back rhythmically into Cassina's brain, so that his consciousness was redirected, like a compass needle to a magnet, each time it tried to escape. This technique, without the addition of truth drugs or suggestion, was commonly used to recover material suppressed by neurosis or psychic trauma; the interval between surges of current was so calculated that stray bits of the buried memory would be forced out by the repressive mechanism itself—each successive return of attention, therefore, found more of the concealed matter exposed, and complete recall could usually be forced in a matter of seconds.

In Cassina's case, the repressive complex was so strong that these ejected fragments of memory were being reabsorbed almost as fast as they were emitted. The repression was survival-linked, meaning to say that the unreasoning, magical nine-tenths of Cassina's mind was utterly convinced that to give up the buried material was to die. Therefore the battle

was being fought two against one: the repressive complex, plus the will to survive, against the interrogation machine.

The machine had two aids: the drugs in Cassina's system, and the tireless, pitiless mechanical voice in his ears: *"Tell! . . . Tell! . . . Tell! . . . Tell!"*

And the power of the machine, unlike that of Cassina's mind, was unlimited.

Cassina's lips worked soundlessly for an instant; then his expression froze again. Spangler waited for another few seconds, and nodded to the technician.

The technician moved his rheostat over another notch.

Seventy times a second, blasting down Cassina's feeble resistance, the feedback current swung his mind back to a single polarity. Cassina could not even escape into insanity, while that circuit was open; there was no room in his mind for any thought but the one, amplified to a mental scream, that tore through his head with each cycle of the current.

The repression complex and the will to survive were constants; the artificial compulsion to remember was a variable.

Spangler nodded again; up went the power.

Cassina's waxen face was shiny with sweat, and so contorted that it was no longer recognizable. Abruptly his eyes closed, and the muscles of his face went slack. The technician darted a glance to one of the dials on his control board, and slammed over a lever. Two signal lights began to flash alternately; Cassina's heart, which had stopped, was being artificially controlled.

An attendant gave Cassina an injection. In a few moments his face contorted again, and his eyes blinked open.

The silence in the room was absolute. Spangler waited while long minutes ticked away, then nodded to the technician again. The power went up. Again: another notch.

Without warning, Cassina's eyes screwed themselves shut, his jaws distended, and he spoke: a single, formless stream of syllables.

Then his face froze into an icy, indifferent mask. The signal lights continued to flash until the technician, with a tentative gesture, cut the heart-stimulating current; then the

steady ticking of the indicator showed that Cassina's heart was continuing to beat on its own. But his face might have been that of a corpse.

Spangler felt his body relax in a release of tension that was almost painful. His fingers trembled. At his nod, the technician cut his master switch and the attendant began removing the harness from Cassina's head and body.

Spangler glanced once at the small vision screen that showed Keith-Ingram's intent face, then took the spool the technician handed him, inserted it into the playback in front of him, and ran it through again and again, first at normal speed, then slowed down so that individual words and syllables could be sorted out.

Cassina had shouted, "You will forget what I am about to tell you and will only remember and repeat the message when you see a Rithian and smell this exact odor. If anyone else tries to make you remember, you will die. *Vuyown fowkip tiima Kreth Grana yodg pirup* pet shop *vuyown geckyg odowo coyowod, cpgnvib btui tene* book store *ikpyu. Nobcyeu kivpi cyour myoc. Aoprosu . . .*

There was much more of it, all in outlandish syllables except that "pet shop" was repeated once more. The others crowded around, careful only not to obstuct Keith-Ingram's view, while Spangler, pointedly ignoring Pembun, turned the spool over to Heissler, the rabbity little Rithian expert who had been flown in early that morning from Denver.

Heissler listened to the spool once more, made heiroglyphic notes, frowned, and cleared his throat. "This is what it says, *roughly*, he began. "I don't want to commit myself to an exact translation until I've had time to study the text *thoroughly*." He glanced around, then looked down at his notes.

"On the map we sent you by Kreth Grana you will find a pet shop on a north-south avenue, with a restaurant on one side of it and a book store on the other. The first bomb is at this location. The others will be found as follows: from the first location through the outermost projection of the adjacent coastline—" Heissler paused. "A distance, in Rithian terminol-

ogy, which is roughly equal to six thousand seven hundred kilometers. I'll work it out exactly in a moment . . . it comes to six seven six eight kilometers, three hundred twenty-nine meters and some odd centimeters—to the second location, which is also a pet shop. From this location, at an interior angle of—let's see, that would be eighty-seven degrees, about eight minutes—yes, eight minutes, six seconds—here's another distance, which works out to . . . ah, nine thousand three hundred seventy-two kilometers, one meter—to the third location. From this location, at an exterior angle of ninety-three degrees, twenty minutes, two seconds . . ."

Spangler palmed his intercom, got Miss Miss Timoney, and directed her: "Get street maps of all major North American cities and put all the available staff to work on them, starting with those over five hundred thousand. They are to look for a pet shop—that's right, a *pet shop*—on a north-south avenue, which has a restaurant on one side of it and a book store on the other. This project is to be set up as temporary but has triple-A priority. In the meantime, rough out a replacement project to cover all inhabited areas in this hemisphere, staff to be adequate to finish the task in not over forty-eight hours—and have the outline on my desk for approval when I come back to the office."

". . . seven thousand nine hundred eighty-one kilometers, ninety-eight meters, to the fifth location. Message ends." Heissler folded his hands and sat back.

Spangler glanced at Keith-Ingram. The gray man nodded. "Good work, Thorne! Keep that project of yours moving, and I'll see to it that similar ones are set up in the other districts. Congratulations to you all. Clearing." His screen faded.

. . . And that was it, Spangler thought. Undoubtedly there were millions of pet shops in the world which had a restaurant on one side and a book store on the other, and were on north-south avenues; but there couldn't be many pairs of them on a line whose exact distance was known, and which passed through the salient point of a coastline adjacent to the first. It was just the sort of mammoth problem with which the

Empire was superlatively equipped to deal. Within two days, the bombs would have been found and deactivated.

Curiously, it was not his inevitable promotion which occupied Spangler's mind at that moment, not even the certainty that the Empire's most terrible danger had been averted. He was thinking about Pembun.

In more ways than one, he thought, this is the victory of reason over sentiment, science over witchcraft. *This is the historic triumph of the single meaning.*

He glanced at Pembun, still sitting by himself at the end of the room. The little man's face was gray under the brown. He was hunched over, staring at nothing.

Spangler watched him, feeling the void inside himself where triumph should have been. It was always like this, after he had won. So long as the fight lasted, Spangler was a vessel of hatred; when it was over, when his emotions had done their work, they flowed out of him and left him at peace. Sometimes it was difficult to remember how he could have thought the defeated enemy so important, how he could have burned with impotent rage at the very existence of a man so small, so shriveled, so obviously harmless. Sometimes, as now, Spangler felt the intrusive touch of compassion.

It's how we're made, he thought. The next objective is always the important thing, the only thing that exists for us . . . and then, when we've reached it, we wonder why it was so necessary, and sometimes we don't know quite what to do with it. But there's always something else to fight for. It may be childish, but it's the thing that makes us great.

Pembun stood up slowly and walked over to Colonel Leclerc, who was talking ebulliently to Gordon. Spangler saw Leclerc turn and listen to something Pembun was saying; then his eyebrows arched roguishly and he shook his head, putting a finger to his pursed lips. Pembun spoke again, and Leclerc grinned hugely, leaned over and whispered something into Pembun's ear, then shouted with laughter.

Pembun walked out of the room, glancing at Spangler as he passed. His face was still gray, but there was a faint, twisted smile on his lips.

He's made a joke, Spangler thought. Give him credit for courage.

He felt suddenly listless, as he had been after the scene with Joanna. He moved toward the door, but a sudden tingling of uneasiness made him hesitate. He turned after a moment and walked over to Leclerc.

"Pardon my curiosity, Colonel," he said. "What was it that Pembun said to you just now?"

Leclerc's eyes glistened. "He was very droll. He asked me if I knew any French, and I said yes—I spoke it as a child, you know; I grew up in a very backward area. Well, then he asked me if it was not true that in French 'pet shop' would have an entirely different meaning than in Standard." He snickered.

"And you told him—?" Spangler prompted.

Leclerc made one of his extravagant gestures. "I said yes! That is, if you take the first word to be French, and the second to be Standard, then a pet shop would be—" he lowered his voice to a dramatic undertone—"a shop that sold impolite noises."

He laughed immoderately, shaking his head. "What a thing to think of!"

Spangler smiled wryly. "Thank you, Colonel," he said, and walked out. That touch of uneasiness had been merely a hangover, he thought; it was no longer necessary to worry about anything that Pembun said, or thought, or did.

Pembun was waiting for him in his outer office.

Spangler looked at him without surprise, and crossed the room to sit beside him. "Yes, Mr. Pembun?" he said simply.

"I 'ave something to tell you," Pembun said, "that you won't like to 'ear. Per'aps we'd better go inside."

"All right," said Spangler, and led the way.

He found himself walking along a deserted corridor on the recreation level. On one side, the doorways he passed beckoned him with stereos of the tri-D's to be experienced inside—a polar expedition on Nereus VI, an evening with Ayesha O'Shaughnessy, a nightmare, a pantomime, a ballet, a battle

in space. On the other, he glimpsed the pale, crystalline shells of empty dream capsules.

He did not know how long he had been walking. He had boarded a scooter, he remembered, but he did not know which direction he had taken, or how long he had ridden, or where he had got off. His feet ached, so he must have been walking quite a long time.

He glanced upward. The ceiling of the corridor was stereocelled, and the view that was turned on now was that of the night sky: a clear, cold night, by the look of it; a sky of deep jet, each star as brilliant and sharp as a kernel of ice.

Pembun's gray-brown face stared back at him from the sky. He had been watching that face ever since he had left his office; he had seen it against the satin-polished walls of corridors; it was there when he closed his eyes; but it looked singularly appropriate against this background. The stars have Pembun's face, he thought.

A bone-deep shudder went through his body. He turned aside and went into one of the dream rooms, and sat down on the robing bench. The door closed obsequiously behind him.

He looked down into the open capsule, softly padded and just big enough for a man to lie snugly; he touched its midnight-blue lining. The crystal curve of the top was like ice carved paper-thin; the gas vents were lipped by circlets of rose-finished metal, antiseptically bright.

No, he thought. At least, not yet. I've got to think.

A pun, a pun, a beastly, moronic pun . . .

Pembun had said, "I've made a bad mistake, Commissioner. You remember me asking w'y Colonel Cassina tried so 'ard to get to the Rithch w'en 'e saw we'd found 'im out?"

And Spangler, puzzled, uneasy: "I remember."

"An' I answered myself, that Cassina must 'ave been ordered to do it so that 'e could be killed—becawse of the message in 'is brain that the Rithch wouldn' want us to find."

"You were right, Mr. Pembun."

"No, I was wrong. I ought to 'ave seen it. We know that

the Rithch's post-'ypnotic control over Cassina was strong enough to make 'im try to commit suicide; 'e almost succeeded later on, even though we 'ad 'im under close observation and were ready for it. So it wouldn't 'ave made sense for the Rithch to order 'im to come and be killed. If Cassina 'ad tried to kill *'imself*, right then, the minute we came into the office, there isn' any doubt that 'e would 'ave been able to do it. We never could 'ave stopped 'im in time."

Spangler's brain had clung to that unanswerable syllogism, and gone around and around with it, and come out nowhere. "What are you getting at?"

"Don't you see, Commissioner? W'at the Rithch rilly wanted was w'at actually 'appened. 'E wanted us to kill *'im*—becawse it was in 'is brain, not in Cassina's, that the rilly dangerous information was."

Pembun had paused. Then: "They love life. 'E couldn' bring 'imself to do it, but 'e could arrange it so that we'd be sure to kill 'im, not take 'im alive."

And Spangler, hoarsely: "Are you saying that that message we got from Cassina was a fraud?"

"No. It might be, but I don't think so. I think the Rithch left the genuine message in Cassina's mind, all right, for a joke—and becawse 'e knew that even if we found it, it wouldn' do us any good."

Spangler had hardly recognized his own voice. "I don't understand you. What are you trying to—What do you mean, it wouldn't do us any good?"

No triumph in Pembun's voice, only weariness and regret: "I told you you wouldn' like it, Commissioner. Did you notice there were two Standard phrases in that message?"

"Pet shop and book store. Well?"

"You can say the same things in Rochtik—*brutu ka* and *lessi ka*. They're exact translations; there wouldn' 'ave been any danger of confusion at awl."

Spangler had stared at him, silently, for a long moment. Inside him, he had felt as if the solid earth had fallen away beneath him, all but a slender pinnacle on which he sat perched; as if he had to be very careful not to make any

sudden motion, lest he slip and tumble down the precipice.

"Did you know," he asked brittlely, "that I would ask Colonel Leclerc what you said to him?"

Pembun nodded. "I thought you might. I thought per'aps it would prepare you, a little. This isn' easy to take."

"What are you waiting for?" Spangler had managed. "Tell me the rest."

"*Pet* 'appens to be a sound that's used in a good many languages. In Late Terran French it 'as an impolite meaning. But in Twalaz, w'ich is derived from French, it means 'treasure,' and a pet shop would be w'at you cawl a jewelry store.

"Then there's Kah-rin, w'ich is the trade language in the Goren system and some others. In Kah-rin, *pet* means a toupee. And as for 'book store,' *book* means 'machine' in Yessuese, 'carpet' in Elda, 'toy' in Baluat—and *bukstor* means 'public urinal' in Perroschi. Those are just a few that I 'appen to know; there are prob'ly a 'undred others that I never 'eard of.

"Prob'ly the Rithi agreed on w'at language or dialect to use before they came 'ere. It's the kind of thing that would amuse them. . . . I'm sorry. I told you they liked puns, Commissioner . . . and you know that Earth is the only yuman planet w'ere the language 'asn't evolved in the last four 'undred years. . . ."

Now he understood why Pembun's face was gray: not because Spangler had defeated him in a contest of wills—but because the Empire had had its death-blow.

Night upon night, deep after endless deep; distance without perspective, relation without order: the Universe without the Empire.

One candle, that they had thought would burn forever, now snuffed out and smoking in the darkness.

Another deep shudder racked Spangler's body. Blindly, he crawled into the capsule and closed it over him.

After a long time, he opened his eyes and saw two blurred faces looking in at him. The light hurt his eyes. He blinked

until he could see them clearly: one was Pembun and the other was Joanna.

" 'Ow long 'as 'e been in there?" Pembun's voice said.

"I don't know, there must be something wrong with the machine. The dials aren't registering at all." Joanna's voice, but sounding as he had never heard it before. "If the shutoff didn't work—"

"Better cawl a doctor."

"Yes." Joanna's head turned aside and vanished.

"Wait," Spangler said thickly. He struggled to sit up. Joanna's head reappeared, and both of them stared at him, as if he were a specimen that had unexpectedly come to life. It made Spangler want to laugh.

"Security," he said. "Security has been shot out from under me. That is a pun."

Joanna choked and turned away. After a moment Spangler realized that she was crying. He shook his head violently to clear it and started to climb out of the capsule. Pembun put a hand on his arm.

"Can you 'ear me, Thorne?" he said anxiously. "Do you understand w'at I'm saying?"

"I'm all right," said Spangler, standing up. "Joanna, what's the matter with you?"

She turned. "You're not—"

"I'm all right. I was tired, and I crawled in there to rest. I stayed there, thinking, for an hour or so. Then I must have fallen asleep."

She took one step and was pressed tight against him, her cheek against his throat, her arms clutching him fiercely. Her body trembled.

"You were gone six hours," Pembun said. "I got Miss Planter's name from your emergency listing, and we've been looking for you ever since. I shouldn' 'ave jumped to conclusions, I guess." He turned to go.

"Wait," said Spangler again. He felt weak, but very clear-headed and confident. "Please. I have something to say to you."

Joanna pulled away from him abruptly and began hunt-

ıg for a tissue. Spangler got one out of his pouch and handed : to her.

"Thanks," she said in a small voice, and sat down on the ench.

"This is for you, too, Joanna," said Spangler soberly. Part of it." He turned to Pembun.

"You were wrong," he said.

Pembun's face slowly took on a resigned expression. " 'Ow?"

"You told me, under interrogation, that your only reason or working with the Empire, against its rivals, was that ıe Empire was necessary to the Outworlds—that if it roke up too soon, the Outworlds would not be strong nough to stand by themselves."

"If you say so, I'll take your word for it, Commissioner."

"You said it. Do you deny it now?"

"No."

"You were wrong. You justified your position by saying hat the Outworlds would be forced to overspecialize, like he Empire, in order to break away from it . . . that the cure vould be worse than the disease. You've given your life to vork that must have been distasteful to you, every minute f it." He took a deep breath. "I can't imagine why, unless ou were reasoning on the basis of two assumptions that a wenty-first century schoolboy could have disproved—that ke causes invariably produce like results, and that the end ıstifies the means."

Pembun's expression had changed from boredom to sur- rise, to shock, to incredulous surmise. Now he looked at pangler as if he had never seen him before. "Go awn," he aid softly.

"Instead of staying on Manhaven, where you belonged, ou've been bumbling about the Empire, trying to hold ogether a structure that needed only one push in the right lace to bring it down. . . . You've been as wrong as I was. oth of us have been wasting our lives.

"Now see what's happened. Earth is finished as a major ower. The Empire is dead this minute, though it may not egin to stink for another century. The Outworlds have *got*

to stand alone. If like measures produce like ends, then that's the way it will be, whether you like it or not—but history never repeats itself, Pembun."

"Jawj," said the little man.

"—Jawj. Incidentally, I know you dislike apologies—"

"You don't owe me any," said Pembun. They smiled at each other with the embarrassment of men who have discovered a liking for each other. Then Spangler thrust out his hand and Pembun took it.

"Thorne, what are you going to do?" Joanna asked.

He looked at her. "Resign tomorrow, get a visa as soon as I can, and ship Out. If I can find a place that will take me."

"There's a place for you on Man'aven," said Pembun. "If there isn't, we'll make one."

Joanna looked from one to the other, and said nothing.

"Jawj," said Spangler, "wait for us outside a few minutes, will you?"

The little man grinned happily, sketched a bow, and walked out. His voice floated back: "I'll be with Miss O'Shaughnessy w'en you wawnt me."

Spangler sat down beside Joanna. She looked at him with an expression compounded equally of bewilderment, pain and submissiveness.

"Miss O'Shaughnessy?" she asked.

"One of the tri-D's across the corridor. I wonder if he has any idea of what he's getting into." He paused. "I have something else to say to you, Joanna."

"Thorne, if it's an apology—"

"It isn't. If Pembun told you anything about the last few days, then perhaps you understand part of the reason for—what I did."

"Yes."

"But that's nothing. What I have to tell you is that I made up my mind to marry you three months ago . . . not because you're Joanna . . . but because you're a Planter."

"I knew that."

Spangler stared at her. "You what?"

"Why else do you think I wouldn't?" she demanded, meeting his gaze.

Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes glittering with the remnants of tears. The aloof, icy mask was gone. She looked, pangler discovered, nothing whatever like a statue of aristocracy.

"Will you come with me?"

She looked down. "Will you go without me, if I don't?"

" . . . Yes," said Spangler. "I've got a lot to do, and a lot to make up for. Thirty years. I can't do it here."

"In that case," Joanna said, "—you'll have to persuade me, won't you?"