

Scanned by Highroller.

Proofed more or less by Highroller.

Made prettier by use of EBook Design Group Stylesheet.

# **Invader on My Back by Philip E. High**

## ***Chapter One***

THE NORMS had long since moved from the cities; so had the police. Those who remained were jubilant to a degree—it was a pity to lose the police. Cop-killing had been, if not materially rewarding, a considerable boost to prestige. Now they must find other ways of impressing their fellows.

The police themselves, once clear of the cities, formed according to city opinion, an unholy alliance with the Armed Services. Between them, they built enormous forts, reminiscent of the ancient prison camps, which they surrounded with lights, weapons and lethal invisible barriers. Wiseacres asked if the forts had been built to keep the bad elements out or the police in.

Periodically, however, the police made savage punitive raids on the cities—this was when the cities began to get ideas about the Norms.

The Norms, generally speaking, built their rural communities, but a great many people had died in the early days of the *Troubles* and left room for expansion. Again, only the hubs of the great cities remained. The once sprawling suburbs had long ago been pounded to dust in countless clashes of arms.

Besides rearranging the social structure of the race, the *Troubles* had also brought about sharp caste divisions which had nothing to do with wealth, heritage, color, creed, or any previously known cultural factor. These new castes were known by commonplace and often slightly vulgar terms of reference.

There were, of course, the police, the Norms, the Scuttlers—every community has its Scuttlers—the Delinks, who could be subdivided into various categories, and the Stinkers.

The Stinkers were few and unique because a Stinker didn't develop into a Stinker until late adolescence. Once developed, he was exceedingly lucky if he survived a year; usually Stinkers ended up in some quiet place with a lot of holes in their backs.

If, however, by good fortune or singular ability, he lived a year, his chances of survival were good. If he lived two years, he would probably die of old age: no one but a madman would try to take an experienced Stinker.

A Stinker learned survival the hard way; it became his stock-in-trade, creed, religion and way of life.

An experienced Stinker developed a sixth sense for ambush, could smell booby traps a mile away and knew more about poison substances than a research laboratory. Usually he surrounded himself with a large variety of subtle and ingenious weapons and could draw faster and shoot quicker than any other living man. Not even a Father-Assassin in one of the cities would consider one:

"A Stinker, Patron! Are you mad? Look, my good friend, to take a Stinker I must use sixty men. Of these sixty men I shall, at a conservative estimate, lose half. If I lose thirty men, I am below survival level, I am vulnerable, I am gunned down by a bigger guild before I can draw breath. However, Patron, rather than appear ungenerous, I will compromise. I will tell you, without charge and in exquisite detail, just what to do with your five million offer..."

The police, too, stood clear. The Stinkers never did anything indictable and they killed only in self-defense. Lose a couple of squads picking one up—for what?

The Stinkers, therefore, if they could keep their sanity, which was a hard enough job in itself, lived comparatively untroubled lives. That is, if they could stand being virtual lepers, living like hermits and being actively and violently hated. Stinkers were not called Stinkers for nothing!

Craig was a Stinker, an experienced Stinker and survival-wise to the point of near-clairvoyance. He was also a philosophical thinker and highly

intelligent into the bargain.

In his early days he had been almost an infant prodigy and, at fourteen, had majored in cybernetics. At seventeen he had acquired degrees in six sciences and his future had seemed assured.

Regrettably, at the age of eighteen, he began to Stink and his associates, colleagues and odd members of the general public went to considerable lengths to dispose of him.

Perhaps it was his innate genius which saved him; that, coupled with his courage and physical strength.

As soon as he began to notice the growing hostility of those around him, he realized his caste and took precautionary measures. These measures—he had a high degree of technical ability—he improved upon with the passing of time. In truth, they were now the true companions of his isolation, but in those early days they had saved his life many times over.

Now, at the age of thirty-three, Craig was a big man with hairy arms and a brown, sort of unfinished, but not unhandsome, face. He kept his dark hair short and he had the sort of chin which non-Stinkers described as aggressive but in another age would have been called determined. The dark eyes were almost gentle and the mouth sensitive.

Craig did not look like an untouchable and his well-balanced mind had saved him from a sense of persecution. If you were a Stinker, you were a Stinker. You had to accept the fact or go under, because there was not a damn thing you could do about it.

Craig was fortunate in starting with money. He bought equipment, work robots and a deceptively battered-looking flyer which now, thanks to his technical skill, could make a police pursuit ship look as if it were in reverse.

The robots constructed him a comfortable home on an inaccessible mountaintop and with his technical ability and the ship, he traded.

It was a tribute to his ingenuity that he had not only succeeded in creating trade but turned it into a highly lucrative business. All negotiations, prices, requirements and orders had to be conducted in

writing. There was no other way; any other form of contact would, but for his reputation, have exploded into violence.

Craig described himself mentally as a "flyer tinker." He was much more than that but there was a basis of truth in the idea. The police always grabbed the best men, and skilled technicians were, therefore, in short supply. Craig went around fixing things, highly technical things, like converter-tubes, Malpas thermonuclear reactors and the highly unstable Bibnal-Siefert energy accumulators.

It was around noon when Craig came in over Tucker's place. Tucker ran a rural general store, replacement office and a small, three-tier autofactory turning out a variety of goods such as furniture, clothing and unflavored food basics. He did quite well out of it, so well that he not only employed men but could afford guns and guards. In consequence, the nearest police fort was, discreetly, just below the horizon. Tucker could afford a limited independence.

Craig gave his usual call sign but did not descend... experienced Stinkers took nothing for granted. With instruments, he checked for concentrations of chemical explosives, for the telltale blue spots of programmed booby traps or flick-guns, and the surrounding terrain for concealed sharpshooters.

Tucker sent a recognition signal (recorded) and a list of the things he wanted fixed (also recorded). On the receipt of, Craig's call sign, he and his staff immediately took short-time *Comalyzers*. Thus, while Craig went about his business, everyone was blissfully out to the world. It had to be that way, since no one could conduct his normal affairs within a hundred yards of a Stinker without becoming hysterical, violent or both.

Craig brought his ship down slowly, still checking and, one hundred and fifty feet from the ground, said, "Recky, have a look around."

"Yes, sir." There was a plop as Recky dropped through his special exit lock.

A few seconds later he reported an all clear. "Green, sir, lovely and green."

Craig put the ship down.

"Gun, cover my back. Screen, procedure three... ."

When Craig reached his last job, there was a letter perched on a low shelf directly in front of him. Clearly the letter was not from Tucker but it was addressed to Michael Craig.

Craig did not touch it. The letter had obviously been sent to Tucker for delivery and the man had left it in this obvious place for his attention. It had, therefore, come from someone who knew his movements. It might be another customer and it might not.

When he got back to the ship, he sent a remote-controlled device back for the letter. The device slit the envelope, unfolded the letter and beamed back the contents to one of the vessel's receiving screens.

In his early days as a Stinker, Craig had received some ingeniously unpleasant letters and had, long ago, ceased to open them personally. He had received letters covered in impregnating poisons, letters which exploded or fired microscopic missiles, letters which, if laid casually on certain common substances, abruptly and violently ignited. No, he was taking no chances on a letter from an unknown source.

Words appeared on the screen and the source of the letter was a distinct shock. It was from the Police Research Institute, Parapsychological Section and it read:

*Dear Craig,*

*This letter will, no doubt, come as a surprise as will the existence of the above research establishment.*

*In the Troubles of the last three centuries, research into the obscurer sciences had to go by the board but with the slowing—not halting—of the race's cultural decay, it was felt that investigation had to begin somewhere. No sane man can honestly believe that the present situation is due to natural causes alone.*

*The present unbreakable caste system, for example, is clearly inspired by circumstances outside normal psychological behavior patterns.*

*Why are you a Stinker? You do not know and, to be frank, neither do we. We can, however, provide you with additional data.*

1) *In the last fifty years, seven hundred and forty-three Stinkers have developed. Of these, including yourself, only twenty-five have survived.*

2) *As far as we are aware, none of these Stinkers have ever met. Do Stinkers stink to each other, Craig? Would you care to find out for us?*

*There is, we agree, in view of your untouchable caste, no reason whatever for you to help us; nonetheless we should appreciate your cooperation.*

*We have addressed a precisely similar letter to another Stinker in central Africa. Would you consider a meeting?*

*As we have stressed, there is no reason why you should. You are an outcast and, on direct contact, as detested by us as any other member of the community. We deplore it but, without data and your cooperation, we can do nothing about it.*

*Returning to the proposed meeting, although you are no doubt aware of the dangers, we must, in fairness, point them out.*

*We do not know if such a meeting will prove explosive. It could well be a reaction resulting in the deaths of one or both of you.*

*There is also another danger of which you may not be aware. Since the inception of this department, attempts have been made against the lives of its personnel and considerable ingenuity employed in the attempted destruction of our research and record buildings.*

*It could well be, Mr. Craig, that with your involvement similar attempts may be directed against your life and property. Further, we are not dealing with crackpots but a highly efficient organization with considerable scientific backing.*

*Should you decide to interest yourself in this proposal, you will be placed immediately on this department's payroll at the proposed rate of 15800 credits per annum plus all relevant expenses.*

*Kindly notify us within three days of your decision.*

*Please note that all communications must be made on the 6/4 band. This is an official police link and automatically scrambles all messages in*

*transit.*

*Sincerely,*

*Relton T. Gammon Director of Research.*

Craig recorded the contents of the letter and lifted the ship. He was frowning thoughtfully as he did so, not so much at the contents of the letter but the subtlety of its implications. *They have had a go at us, now with your possible involvement, they may take a crack at you too.* A very neat piece of pressure-persuasion that. On the other hand, he was curious. Just what did happen when two Stinkers met?

He had the uncomfortable feeling that despite the obvious dangers he was going to accept. There were too many question marks, too much left up in the air.

He realized abruptly that the letter had been deliberately slanted to rouse his curiosity and he felt a grudging respect for the writer. Money might not buy him but curiosity might.

Probably due to his precarious early years, Craig was a man of quick decisions.

His reply was characteristically abrupt: *Accept. Kindly give African address, call sign, etc.*

The answer was back within five minutes. He studied it and frowned. Jungle country, not a happy choice; he was entering no jungle to meet a man with a survival instinct as acute and overdeveloped as his own. Better make arrangements.

He drafted out a long letter, three-quarters of which was devoted to safety precautions designed to protect both parties. Let's see now, what was the man's name—ah, yes, Hastings, Geo Hastings. Geo? Funny name that, short for George presumably.

When he set out two days later, he took the sea route. There were too many cities and wild communities jealous of their air space on the land route.

The sea route, however, was not without incident. A floating city, busily

sea-farming, beamed a stern warning to keep clear, and two small islands took potshots at him. Fortunately they were well out of range.

He was an hour's flying time from the African coast when Reeky made an irritable tutting noise.

"We have company," he announced with a certain glum satisfaction.

Craig, letting the ship fly itself, looked at the detector screen. "Where?"

"Beyond the range of that thing. One ship, seventy-eight miles behind and twenty-two thousand above. Second ship, twenty miles behind the first and four thousand feet above."

Craig thought about the letter: *Similar attempts may be directed against your life and property.* Hadn't wasted much time, had they?

He changed course and waited.

"Still following?"

"As if they were glued to the same rail."

Craig grinned twistedly. "Gun!"

"Sir. Yes, and goodbye." Gun dropped through his special lock with a plopping sound.

"Recky!"

"On my way."

"Screen, procedure one."

"Can do." The words echoed from the spot he had vacated.

The men in the ships were not only killers, they were full of *Lessedrene* and consequently without emotion. They spoke detachedly, coolly and without emphasis or inflection.

The drug, although eradicating fear, also had the effect of removing enthusiasm and natural caution. Bluntly, the men were emotionally dead but it had to be that way. Normal men with their emotional faculties



unimpaired would have done the job with greater precision and considerable skill, but normal men would now be traveling at full boost in the opposite direction. No one but a lunatic would attempt to take a Stinker in his own flyer—not with two ships.

They were, however, completely without fear and following orders: "Close in and strike before the Stinker reaches the coast."

The detector operator looked up. "I've got something, Pollit."

Pollit, chewing the ends of his limp moustache, said, "What do you mean *something*? Give it magnification, you fool."

The operator gave it magnification. "Okay, it's a bird; yeah a bird, small eagle or something."

"Good, better to be on the safe side, orders." His face blanked slowly. "A bird?"

"Something wrong with that? Look for yourself."

"I am looking. What kind of bird flies at ninety-seven thousand feet, for God's sake?"

The operator frowned at him in a puzzled way. "Well, It's—"

The man never finished the sentence. High above, Gun folded his wings and dropped like a stone. As he dropped, his body vibrated oddly and things happened to the ship below him. Sparks danced on its back and where the sparks danced, the surface opened jaggedly, spraying smoke and fragments.

The vessel lurched, yawed dangerously and finally stood on its tail. Fractionally it seemed to stand there, then it rolled slowly from the perpendicular and plunged downward trailing smoke.

Reeky hit the second ship before they knew he was there, and it disintegrated spectacularly in a billowing cloud of black smoke.

"You didn't need me." Screen sounded almost accusing.

"I might have." Craig looked at a column of smoke rising from the ocean. "If they had got closer, a force screen miles from the ship might

have proved really disconcerting."

Gun returned. "Pranged," he announced contentedly. "What does that mean, by the way? I read it in a book last week."

Craig told him.

"Interesting. I must read up on the period." He ruffled his plastic feathers. "I have calculated, however, that the retentive capacity of my memory is now restricted to a mere seventy thousand additional words. How about fixing me up with two more retentive banks?"

"You'd never get off the ground."

"I've thought of that too. You could reduce the size of my gravity motor by micro-engineering and use three impressed circuits for the job instead of the four space-wasting printed ones."

"If I did that, you could take four retentive banks."

"You anticipate me but I had no wish to appear greedy."

Craig smiled faintly. "As soon as possible, and that is a promise."

Gun extended one wing, examined his feathers and said, "Many thanks."

Craig said nothing but the real debt lay on him. These three had saved his life more times than he could remember. Three robots, no, three *killer* robots, disconcertingly disguised as birds. Birds with anti-gravity motors and veritable arsenals of built-in micro-weapons.

When he had first built them, they had been crude indeed, flying mechanisms with little more than a reflex-response unit. Over the years, however, he had given them life and intelligence. Somehow they seemed to deserve it; perhaps it was a sentimental idea but he had become attached to them. It had been a wise decision for the three had saved his sanity. They had developed into personalities and proved stimulating companions in his isolation. He had given them free-decision, apart from their business as bodyguards, and all three had total-recall. Gun, the golden eagle, was a compulsive reader and was continually absorbing words. Periodically and rather nasally he quoted verse but with singular respect

for mood and meaning.

Reeky, the first of the two kestrels, was apt to become lost in classical music while Screen, the second one, was literally working his way through college in a variety of abstract subjects.

Craig had come to regard them not as robots but loyal and understanding friends. God, how many Stinker-eradicators had been caught by them? A bird overhead—so what? Just let me get this blasted Stinker in my sights.

The amateur assassins had found out about the birds overhead too late.

Craig took the ship in well clear of the coastal cities and at a considerable height. No doubt he showed up on detectors but they'd never waste a strato-missile on a single small ship following a neutral course. A lot of rude words and an incredible amount of threats came out of the radio-speaker but none of the African cities bothered to do anything.

A hundred miles inland, he switched on his print-communicator and gave his call sign. It had been agreed that, at first, their means of communication should be the printed word. Both would speak normally but the p/c would transcribe the sounds into print. There were reasons for this: the two wanted to test emotional reactions first without confusing the issue with sound. At a distance of approximately two miles, if Norms were a yardstick, one or the other should begin to feel something—what?

Printed words appeared on the screen. *Receiving you, Craig. Bear two degrees west and hold it for forty-six miles. You will then see a river winding east. Follow the river until it diverges into a lake. On the far shore of the lake is open country. Put your ship down any place here which feels comfortable for you. Have you got that?*

"Clearly. What then?"

*Providing we get a negative reading, I'll walk out to meet you.*

Two miles from the rendezvous, he called. "Feel anything?"

The screen read, *Not a thing. And you?* It blanked briefly and asked, *Are you armed?*

"Heavily—and you?"

*"Not as you understand it, but, yes, I can take care of myself."*

Craig frowned slightly and asked, "Any reactions yet?"

*Negative. By the way, are you alone?*

"Not exactly; I have three guardians. They are robots."

*You propose bringing them with you?*

"I do. They are perfectly safe unless I am attacked or I order them to action."

*Presumably they are intelligent and have self-decision.*

Craig's dark eyebrows rose slightly. This Geo Hastings was nobody's damn fool. "Correct. They are quiet likable for intellectuals."

*Egghead robots, eh? I rather like the sound of that... Any reactions yet?*

"Not a damn thing. If there was going to be, it should be more than evident by now."

*Going to risk a mile on foot?*

"Of course, and you?"

*Standing by for the same exercise but, as we agreed, we turn around and head back without explanation if anything develops.*

"Check."

Craig put the ship down with more than the usual precautions. It was odd that neither he nor his opposite number had felt anything yet. Again, by the yardstick of the Norm, one or both should be literally frothing at the mouth by now.

He turned to the robots. "You know the procedure. Okay, Reeky, get moving."

He moved toward the lock but as he did so the screen lit again.

It read: *Sorry, Craig, I suppose being over-tense about this meeting, I forgot an important factor. I should have told you that I am a woman.* It blanked.

Craig stared at it unseeingly for several seconds as if trying to bring back the printed words by force of will. A woman! A female Stinker!

It was difficult, no, well-nigh impossible to imagine a woman living through the vilification, treachery, social banishment and direct assault which every Stinker underwent from the first dreadful days of development.

Craig moved his feet uneasily, unsure of himself for the first time in many years. He thought that a woman Stinker, to survive, would have to be harsh, brassy, savage and ruthless to the point of near-insanity. No doubt she was mannish, leathery skinned, wore male attire and probably smoked a pipe.

## ***Chapter Two***

CRAIG stepped out of the ship with the easy casualness which conceals experience. His hands hung loosely without tension but never far from his thigh holsters.

Before moving away from the lock he studied the terrain. Scrub land, low brown grass bisected by numerous animal trails, patches of thorn and one or two huge ant heaps. Not easy country, a little blurred by heat and, despite the nearby lake, the dry season. Anyone so minded could kick up a whole haze of dust through which it would be difficult to see and fire accurately.

Here the one-time expanding civilization had receded and nature had taken over again.

On his left, the nostrils of basking hippos like empty eye-sockets appeared above the surface of the water and one blew a jet of spray with a snorting sound. Part of the bank, too, was thick with the long, sort of sliding, bodies of full-grown crocodiles.

He shrugged and stepped forward unhurriedly. He had not taken twenty

paces, however, before his ear-mike clicked and Reeky reported.

"As far as I can tell, subject is clean." Reeky, sounded dubious of his own report. "Nothing resembling a weapon, visible or concealed. Subject is wearing white with a flowered pattern, no rings or adornments. I can't find a thing. Oh, by the way, bear right a little, you're slightly off course."

Five minutes later, he could see her. She was too far away to distinguish features and the heat haze blurred the outline but he could see the white clearly.

Craig scowled at the distant figure. White with a flowered pattern? Surely not a conventional dress in these surroundings? In any case, she could not be truly feminine, not a Stinker. Again, why wasn't she armed? They had *agreed* to arms. She had raised no objection to his weapons or the robots. He remembered her printed answer to his query concerning the matter: *Not as you understand it*. What exactly had that meant?

When he was close enough to see her clearly, he suffered a considerable shock. She was *young*! Well, maybe a couple of years junior to himself. Her figure, under the flowered clinging frock, was feminine and rounded. She was neither leathery, brassy nor outwardly savage.

Her hair was dark, wavy, but moderately short. The face, although sun-brown, was gentle, rounded and looked as if it might have been inclined to paleness in another climate. The eyes were large, warm and—no, this was his own imagination playing tricks—they *looked* understanding and compassionate. The mouth was full, sensitive and gentle, and he looked in vain for harsh lines or the telltale quirks of inner ruthlessness.

She stopped some twenty feet away and, without moving, said, "Welcome to my domain, Mr. Craig."

He managed a throaty "Feel anything?" and tried to stop himself from staring rudely.

"Only relief, Mr. Craig. You are the first person, the first human being, with whom I have conversed in over ten years."

"You don't look like a Stinker," he said harshly.

"You mean I am not as you imagined. That is mutual. I had a mental picture of you as unshaven and slightly piratical."

He managed an unnatural smile. "I hope I have retained the rudiments of a civilized upbringing."

She smiled. A smile which showed in her eyes. "I am being a poor hostess. I have a flyer in a depression some little distance from here, or would you prefer to use yours?"

"The nearest." He was rapidly regaining his confidence although he was still nonplussed at her appearance and lack of visible weapons.

"This way then."

"One moment please." He called in the three robots and introduced them. "Cover both of us. From here on this lady is under your protection also."

"We get a raise for this, of course," observed Gun dryly.

The woman called Geo Hastings laughed softly and infectiously. "They *are* characters. Allow me to congratulate you."

They began to walk toward the ship, the three robots taking up carefully spaced positions above them.

On the way, he told her about the attack on his journey. She nodded, thoughtfully. "I had a visitor, the night before last. A doped-up gentleman in a hot-rod racing ship with an ejector bay full of pill bombs. He hit six of my decoy hideouts and then crashed in the jungle."

"What made him crash?"

She looked up at him quickly and away. "I like to stay alive. I am a Stinker like you."

"That doesn't answer my question."

"It wasn't intended to, Mr. Craig. The time for confidences, I hope, will come later, when we know each other better."

"For the moment, however, let us say I have certain talents other than

the purely technical."

He nodded, still intensely curious but approving her caution. There was no doubt now she was a Stinker like himself—her talent for survival was now visible.

They reached her ship and he was surprised to find she had a small but modern flyer.

She seemed to read his mind. "Like you, I trade," she said. "A different line of trade but it makes me a fair living."

They entered and she lifted the ship and headed east. "I have a bungalow about fifty miles from here. By the way, will your ship be safe? After the unnatural interest of our unknown well-wishers, perhaps you would like us to go back for it."

He grinned twistedly. "Anyone other than myself who approaches that ship is in for a very nasty shock. In any case, I can call it when I want it: it has certain gimmicks."

She nodded without speaking, her dark eyes thoughtful. Finally, she said; "What is it about us? Why don't we fight?"

"Either one Stinker doesn't register on another or we cancel each other out somehow. I—" he hesitated. "Look, don't misunderstand me, I haven't been around people for a long time, but I could be misunderstood on this... I think I *like* you. That is to say, I don't feel ill at ease in your company."

She smiled with peculiar gentleness and understanding. "My dear Mike—you don't mind me calling you Mike?—I should have known if you were leading up to an improper suggestion or a pass. If it's any consolation, I feel the same about you. I think we are going to be friends."

"I sincerely hope so." He was conscious as he spoke of a happy and warm feeling inside which he could not, at the moment, account for. Slightly embarrassed, he changed the subject quickly. "I suppose we should send a joint report to Gammon when we get to your place."

"Gammon? Oh, yes, the research people. I had forgotten his name for the moment. Gammon, of course."



Relton T. Gammon of the Police Department of Para-psychological Research was a thin, fair-haired man with cold blue eyes and a dedicated kind of mind. He was, however, no sedentary laboratory worker. He had been through the complete field course and seen more than his share of action. Now, hunched over his desk, the almost permanent cigarette hanging from the right-hand corner of his thin mouth, his eyes were intent and thoughtful.

So two Stinkers did not Stink to each other; that was an interesting item of information. Why did they Stink to Norms or for that matter all the other castes? He didn't know. Gammon was aware of intense inner frustration: in five years of research, they were getting nowhere fast.

The door opened and Toynbee stumbled in, shaking.

Gammon pushed the nearest chair forward with his foot and Toynbee almost fell into it. "Oh, God!" He put his hands over his face and sweat ran down his cheeks from under his fingers.

Gammon waited until the trembling of the other's body had stopped. "Why didn't you send for transport?" he asked gently.

"None immediately available. I had to see that report, I couldn't wait." He removed his hands slowly from his face and looked at Gammon with his haunted dark eyes. "I'll be damned glad when they get around to building a connecting corridor between my department and your office." He sighed shudderingly. "You have the report?"

"Yes, Craig has been most helpful."

"Probably a most helpful and pleasant man if we could stand the sight or sound of him." Toynbee took the report with an almost steady hand and began to read it.

Gammon watched him covertly as he read. The pale, hollow cheeks, the untidy black moustache and the wide, haunted black eyes. Toynbee was the most brilliant intelligence in the department but, alas, a Scuttler.

Every one, including Toynbee himself, knew what was the matter. As a psychiatrist, Toynbee could explain it, isolate it and almost dissect it, but could do nothing about it.

Gammon was again aware of an inner and infuriating frustration. They knew what *had* been a cure—the cure didn't work now. A case, a minor caste example, right under their noses, right in the department, and they couldn't do a thing about it. They had tried subliminal techniques, hypnosis, drugs, the whole three combined, limited surgery. They had tried shock treatment, drug induced, electrical, sonic and despite all their efforts, Toynebee remained a Scuttler.

When Toynebee came out of a building, he scuttled, hunched like a frightened rat, close to the wall. He couldn't *help* it. Like all Scuttlers, it took him all his courage to open the door, and when he succeeded there was little reserve left for anything else. He simply had to run, virtually frightened out of his life, for his destination.

Scuttlers were not afraid of open spaces or people—they were afraid of the sky. It did not matter if it was a night sky, a clear sky or a cloudy sky, they were terrified of it. Worse, even under drugs or hypnosis, none of them knew why they feared it; they just did and nothing could cure the fear.

They were perfectly happy under a roof where they *see* the sky. They knew it was there, they could talk about it detachedly and with calm, indoors, but once it became visible they were finished as coherent and reasoning personalities. They became at once Scuttlers, terrified unreasoning hysterical psychotics.

Scuttlers were not restricted to caste, with the exception of the Stinkers: there were Delink Scuttlers as well as Norm Scuttlers.

Toynebee finished the report and looked up, his face thoughtful and his eyes clouded.

"Mr. Gammon, you and I are damn fools." He laid his hands flat on the arms of his chair and leaned forward, his face intense. "We're searching a dead end; we'll never make a breakthrough from this angle."

"Go on." Gammon had a deep and abiding respect for the other's mind.

"We're investigating symptomatics; we're trying to discover what makes effects tick instead of causes. We are like doctors trying to find the cure for a skin abscess by studying the boil alone. Why does a man get a boil, Gammon?" He drew a deep breath. "Ought we not to take blood samples

to determine the root causes? We are not doing that, we are investigating symptoms. You had me through the mill but I am a symptom, not a cause."

Gammon frowned, aware that the other was pointing to the root of the problem but uncertain how to apply it.

"Can you take it a little further?"

"More than a little." He picked up the report and tapped it with his forefinger. "I am not overly concerned that two Stinkers cancel each other out. What does concern me is, firstly, that someone didn't want them to find that out and/or didn't want them to team up. Why? All Stinkers, providing they don't get too damn close, interfere with no one. Answer me one question, Gammon: at a discreet distance, who the hell *cares* what a Stinker does?"

Gammon frowned at him. "I'm not quite sure what you're driving at but, offhand, no one."

"Exactly. We don't care, the Delinks don't care, no one cares."

"So?"

"So someone cares enough to lose three ships and twenty-eight lives trying to stop these two Stinkers. Look, when we started this department you know the attempts there were to stop us. Everyone we spoke to, investigated or quizzed came in for trouble one way or another. It got so bad that regular troopers wanted higher rates for guarding this block and its personnel."

"When we first started up, we put these attacks down to some Delink organization which had got it into its head that we were investigating psychological warfare. I don't think so now. I think this has nothing to do with a Delink organization."

"Then what?"

"That's the hundred million credit question, isn't it? We've got to start looking, searching for causes. Maybe there is yet another caste we know nothing about."

Gammon thrust another cigarette into the right-hand corner of his thin mouth and puffed it alight. "The attackers were Delinks."

"Delink nobodies—heard any weepings and wailings about them? Who recruited them and doped them up to the eyebrows to do the job?"

Gammon blew twin jets of blue smoke through his nostrils. "Mr. Toynbee, you've made your point. You—"

A call light interrupted him and he pressed a button. "Yes, Gammon here." He listened. "Yes, right, thanks for the information."

He turned to Toynbee again. "Well, if I ever doubted your argument, that clinches it. There're two anonymous carriers heading for the African coast."

"Anonymous?"

"You know the Delinks. They like to have their syndicate symbols plastered all over their ships in glare-paint. Delinks are always inordinately vain."

"And these have no symbols?"

"A nice neutral black." He frowned. "Class four, big enough to carry five hundred men and thirty armored vehicles. Think I ought to warn those two Stinkers?"

"Warn them!" Toynbee laughed briefly. "Warn the attackers, whoever they are."

Gammon frowned. "Keep your sense of proportion, man. I know Craig keeps three very nasty robots but there are limits."

"Not in this case. They're trying to take this girl Hastings in her own stronghold and backed up by Craig—" He let the sentence hang meaningfully. "Do you know what this girl Hastings is—she's quite a dish, by the way—but do you know?"

"No, I don't."

Toynbee smiled faintly. "Neither do I, to be candid. There's no word for it but I've a rough idea what will happen. I suggest you tune in a few spy

beams and get yourself a grandstand seat... you may never see anything like it again."

Craig sprawled in one of the lounge chairs of the bungalow, raised his glass in mock but friendly salutation.

"You are a perfect hostess, Miss Hastings."

"Thank you, Mike. I could be forgiven for being a little rusty on the social graces. Incidentally, as we are friends, call me Geo—my father, celebrating my advent into the world, was a little confused at the time. The agreement, I understand, was to call a boy George and a girl Leona but, as I say, he was alcoholically gay at the time and wrote Geo on the registration form. As no one ever bothered to go and correct the error, I'm stuck with it."

He laughed, strangely happy and at peace. "I like it."

Reeky, perched on the veranda rail, shifted slightly. "Are my esteemed employers enjoying themselves?"

Craig frowned slightly, instantly on the alert. "What's the trouble?"

"Visitors, a great many visitors, all tightly packed into two class four freighters. There are vehicles as well, probably armor-floats."

"How far away?"

"Around four hundred but they're not hanging around to admire the view."

Craig made to rise but she laid her hand quickly on his arm. "No, please. You are my guest here. Allow me to offer you not only the hospitality but the protection of my home."

He stared at her dubiously. "Are you equipped to handle a mob like that?"

"They will be taken care of. However, to ease your mind, perhaps you would like to come into the main lounge and see what happens. I have a screen there."

Doubtfully, he followed her into a large comfortable room equipped

with a large viewing screen.

"There's a chair right opposite the screen—make yourself comfortable. Oh, by the way, that screen is unique. It adjusts itself automatically without personal manipulation. If you want a long shot, it will give you one and if you want a close-up, it will give you that also." She smiled. "About time for the evening meal; I'll go prepare it."

"You are not going to watch?" He was slightly shocked.

"No, Mike. I have seen it too often." Her eyes clouded. "I shall dream about it for nights if I do." She left the room.

Craig scowled at the screen. Seen it too often—seen what too often? What did she have to protect the place? To make this area invulnerable she would need enough automatic weapons to supply an army and impossibly massive minefields.

He scowled at the still blank screen. Where the hell were the visitors, anyway?

As if in answer to his question, the screen brightened instantly, giving him a moderate shot of the two black freighters.

They were coming in fast and already the air in front of them was blurred with curiously rippling distortions of the gravity repeller tubes. Both ships were braking heavily in preparation for a full-stop landing.

He watched them put down, none too skillfully, behind a row of trees some ten miles away.

Again, the screen adjusted itself so that, suddenly, in response to an unspoken thought, he was viewing the vessels from above.

Locks opened, huge ramps jutted out and tilted to the ground, and men poured out. Low-grade Delinks but with no syndicate or assassin guild insignia on their clothing. Pity he couldn't get a close look at their faces.

As if obeying his instructions, the screen gave him a close-up of one of the nearest men. He noted the watery eyes and the bluish color of the lips. As he had suspected, the whole damn lot were hopped sky-high with *Lessedrene*. It was an advantage really: although the men would be

without fear, they would also lack natural caution. They would go blundering, almost happily, into the booby traps and minefields which Geo must have laid on for them.

He stiffened. Why hadn't the ship or Reeky picked up those weapons? To both, the presence of either device should have stood out like brightly polished bayonets in a meadow of short green grass.

He turned his attention back to the screen, conscious of a curious shivery dampness at the back of his neck. What was going on now?

The screen adjusted itself obligingly and he scowled. This was one hell of an odd screen, wasn't it?

In its full-color brightness, the invaders were wasting no time. Armor-floats were already sliding down the ramps, blaster-cannon swung menacingly from side to side like the probing antennas of insects.

He leaned forward, slightly. Maybe this too obliging and uncannily responsive screen was not so hot after all. It seemed suddenly that everything was getting blurred with millions of spots. A racing of specks so numerous that they blurred the trees and made the small river some hundred yards behind the landing site shapeless and black.

Maybe the visitors had brought special equipment. If so, a real expert was doing a first-class jamming job. This was getting out of hand.

He half rose and then something caught his eye in the screen and he dropped back heavily into the chair.

The hatch of one of the armor-floats was suddenly flung open and a man literally hurled himself from the opening. His mouth was open and he beat frantically at his body as if his clothes were on fire. He rolled from the float to the ground and lay there, kicking his legs and beating at his body.

Craig saw that the man was nearly faceless. One eye was completely closed and the other a mere slit. The rest of his face was bluish and grotesquely swollen.

Around the ships it was chaos; uncontrolled armor-floats were crashing into trees or pushing into the milling men.

Obviously screaming men were running into the ships and running out again. Twenty or thirty made a desperate sprint for the river, throwing away their weapons as they did so.

Only about five made it. As they ran, the surrounding trees seemed suddenly to come alive.

Something lashed at the legs of a running man and he toppled, his calves bloody.

Craig caught a brief glimpse of a wild boar and then a rhinoceros appeared between the running men and the river. It snorted, turned and charged.

There was a swirl of dust, bodies rolling—two trampled and still—and the rhino turning with terrifying speed to charge again.

The few who made the river flung themselves into it with the frantic desperation of men in flames. As they struck the water, however, Craig saw leathery log-like things launch themselves into the water from the opposite bank. Those who had reached the river were not going to get out of it again.

Around the ships the melee continued, but the numbers were lessening minute by minute. Those who broke and ran were struck down by something before they had gone a hundred yards. Those who remained were rapidly becoming weaker. Already at least a quarter of them lay still on the ground or, horribly bloated, were crawling in blind circles.

At the police fort, Toynbee reached over and turned off the spy beam. "I think we have seen enough, Mr. Gammon."

"I've seen a little too much." Gammon was pale. "What damn God-awful weapon has that woman got hidden around that place?"

"Weapon?" Toynbee smiled thinly and without humor. "Ever been stung by an African hornet, Mr. Gammon?"

"Hornet!"

"Hornets, a few odd million wasps and other stinging creatures probably including scorpions."



"How the hell does she control forces like that?"

"I told you I didn't know. I only know it happens. There are some damn funny things about these Stinkers, you know. They Stink to us but not to the very young—children adore them. Animals seem to like them and, well, take Craig— those damn robots worship him. Even those cheap mass-produced efforts work harder for him and constantly seek his approval. There's something about Stinkers which frightens me."

"Forget the Stinkers for a minute." Gammon was deep in thought. "What I'm wondering is who mounted this thing? Who recruited those scum-Delinks, bought the ships and all the weapons?"

He touched a switch. "Stop and bring in for interrogation all and any armed ship or party heading for the African coast." He paused, pulling his ear thoughtfully. "I want a twenty-four hour spy beam check on every major city in the world—eh? Look, I know about that—yes—look, I want a twenty-four hour survey, nothing more. Pardon? Now look, Mason, I don't want to pull rank over this thing but if I have to I will. I want that survey, clear? No, I won't know what I'm looking for until I see it, so I shall want pictures. Half an hour, fine." He broke contact.

Toynbee stroked his moustache with the tips of his fingers. "You *do* know what you're looking for, don't you?"

"Yes and no. Another caste, maybe, a new syndicate insignia, something has to be different in one of those cities and I want to find it."

## ***Chapter Three***

IN THE bungalow, Craig said harshly, "My God, how do you do it?"

She shook her head, her eyes strangely moist. "You may not believe this but I don't know. I know it happens but it's involuntary—I don't *do* anything to bring it about. Please sit down and eat; your food is getting cold."

He lowered himself slowly into the chair, frowning. No wonder this girl carried no arms.

"Could you tell me about this from the beginning?"

"Briefly, yes, Mike. I was born out here. My parents, both Norms, came from the United States. I gather they came from somewhere near Pittsburg and, at that time, there were constant battles between the Delinks and the police."

"They decided therefore, to go somewhere out in the wilds where there were no Delinks and no police. They finally settled about eighty miles from here. The nearest city was eight hundred miles away and the nearest police fort six hundred. They were very happy out here; no one bothered them and there was no fighting."

"When I was old enough, Pop used to take me to the police school near the fort in his battered old flyer. This was, in fact, the only contact I ever had with rural civilization."

"When I was around fourteen years old, I began to develop an interest in medicine and at seventeen I became a qualified practitioner. I was all set for a post in the police institute but at eighteen—"

She did not finish the sentence and he said, gently; "I know. You don't have to tell me."

"Don't I, Mike? Did you have parents? That was the worst part. Not your friends refusing to work with you, not the Norms spitting at you as you passed and finally trying to take a shot at you or sticking a knife in your back. It was my parents, being torn apart, loving me as their own daughter, yet revolted and infuriated beyond reason because they had raised a Stinker."

"I cleared out and lived wild in the bush, maybe halfway between my home and the forts. Unfortunately, a week later, a ship put down for some minor repair close enough for the crew to smell me and, of course, they went Stinker-hunting. I just sat in the rough little shack I'd made, waiting for them to come and kill me."

She drew in her breath and shivered. "Wild life, including big game, had been around the shack but had never been unfriendly. I had always had a way with animals in any case."

"As I sat there, waiting to die, I heard a man scream and a lot of firing, then silence."

"Finally I plucked up my courage and went out to see what had happened. The men—eight of them—had been coming up an animal trail and all were dead. Three were maimed, one crushed into the ground and the rest had so many snake bites that any anti-snake venom they may have possessed could never have been used in time to do any good."

"I went over to the ship and there was one man inside. There was no need to worry about him—obviously the crew was going to ditch him some place—he had Spiers' disease. He was too far gone even to know I was a Stinker."

Craig nodded slowly. "Noninfectious, isn't it?"

"Presumed noninfectious. It's the slow degeneration of the nervous system and intensely painful."

"And incurable, I understand."

She looked at him strangely. "Incurable to orthodox medicine, yes."

"You mean there is a cure!"

She averted her gaze. "I told you, like yourself, I trade. My trade is curing Spiers' disease. Cases are sent out to me in pilotless fliers and I cure them; for that I get a return." She paused and took up her story again. "I stood looking at this case in the ship and suddenly, intuitively, I knew what to do. By the time I had finished with him, he was regaining consciousness."

"I wrote a note stating what I was, what had happened to the crew, and future treatment for the sick man. I put the ship on automatic and sent her back to where she had come from."

She paused again and smiled faintly. "Apparently it had been a Delink ship and the sick man a big wheel in one of the syndicates. The next day, an auto-carrier landed. It contained an incredible amount of money and the request that I see three other patients."

"I wrote back, reiterating that I was a Stinker and asking that new patients be *comalyzed* for their own good, and suddenly I was in business. Naturally the Norms heard about it, too, and soon I was treating and curing about ten patients a week. I bought work robots and building

materials and set up house."

She paused and sighed. "Understandably, now and again, Stinker hunters came searching. Every time the same thing happened: nature took up arms against them without any conscious instructions on my part." She smiled at him, her eyes moist again. "Any questions?"

He pushed aside his empty plate, guiltily aware that he had not tasted the well-prepared meal. "Two questions. One, how do you cure Spiers' disease?"

She colored slightly. "I like you, Mike, and if I tell you that, you may get second thoughts."

"The feeling is mutual. Try me."

She frowned slightly. "Very well, you asked for it. I'm a witch. I lay hands on the sick and they get better."

"Faith healing?"

"I am not aware of any particular outside assistance. I just feel that if I touch them, it will cure them and it does. I've tried to evolve a theory about it but none convinces me. You see, it only works with Spiers' disease."

He nodded and smiled gently. "No second thoughts, Geo. I still feel the same."

Her eyes brightened briefly and happily and then she changed the subject quickly. "And the second question?"

"Where did you get that screen of yours?"

"From a grateful patient. I imagine it was stolen property. I remember the note that came with it clearly, it said: 'Dear Miss Hastings. As I can't pay you in cash, please accept this in lieu. You won't find nothing else like it nowhere and many thanks for what you done. B. Garret.' "

Craig smiled. "A Delink patient."

"Of course."

"No understatement there. There is nothing like it anywhere."

"Is it that special?"

"Special!" He laughed. "As far as I am aware the entire human race has never come up with a device responsive to a thought wave. Candidly, even the wave itself is an assumption. It is unproved and, so far, undemonstrable. Mind if I mention this in my next report to Gammon?"

At the police fort, Gammon waited impatiently as the computer sucked in the yards of microfilm from countless survey photographs.

Gammon knew what it was doing: a comparison job with the survey of five years before. A task which would have taken a hundred men five years to accomplish.

The computer, which knew what it was looking for, would take exactly thirty minutes. Nonetheless, Gammon was still impatient, especially since the whole job might produce nothing. If so he would have to justify himself and the consumption of power and the involvement of other vital departments to the Area Commissioner. The Area Commissioner was a huge bearded man who had a thing about waste and blew his top frequently. Gammon didn't care about meeting him unless he had something concrete to report.

It was then that the computer made a triumphant clicking sound and tossed out a postcard-size photograph.

At the bottom of the card were printed words: *City of London, England. Subject (circled) bears insignia of no familiar syndicate. Ground-car (arrowed) of radical new appearance. Suggest, on the basis of long-range analysis, subject's clothing of unfamiliar weave and substance.*

Another photograph was ejected: *City of Chicago, State of Illinois, U.S.A. Note radical construction methods and startlingly unfamiliar design of recent building, particularly building (circled) facing Lake Michigan.*

Gammon stared at the photograph for a long time with a cold feeling in his stomach. *That* was a building? A black object like a horizontal dumbbell supported, or held above the ground, by two rusty-looking spiral

springs.

He handed the photographs silently to Toynbee and punched buttons on the computer for dimensions. They were an unpleasant shock. Each "spring" was three hundred feet high, each "bell" seven hundred and twenty feet long with an overall diameter measurement of one hundred and twenty feet.

Other photographs spilled from the computer: Tokyo, Adelaide, Warsaw, Toronto, Boston, Rio, Madrid.

In the middle of it Craig's report arrived.

Gammon made a strangled sound. "A detailed technical report by an expert on a viewer screen yet to be invented! My God, what next! We'd better see the Commissioner about this."

"He'll probably blow himself clean out through the roof," said Toynbee with a certain glum satisfaction.

The Commissioner had the grace to congratulate them both before virtually exploding. "What, in the name of all unholy, has Bannion been doing for five incompetent blasted years? He's supposed to watch, to be alert, to check! I will not only have his inefficient guts for garters, I will have him pounding a guard perimeter in bare feet."

"He lacked our leads," said Gammon.

"Don't gang up on me, Mr. Gammon; Interdepartmental loyalties are power failures in the mechanisms of efficiency. I am going to blow Mr. Bannion, together with all his staff, right out of his high office and into perimeter patrol work."

Scowling, he began to punch switches. "First things first, Gammon. I'm calling every damn fort near these suspect cities to find out which one is due for a punitive raid. The first one ready to go, you will accompany."

He scowled at his desk and scratched angrily at his beard. "What will you go for?"

Gammon shrugged. "Anything we can see, sir, in the way of odd mechanisms, prisoners for interrogation and, if possible, odd gentlemen

with peculiar ground cars and unusual insignia."

A call light blinked and the commissioner punched a button with unnecessary violence. "Yes?" He listened. "I see; like that is it, Wimble? Look, I've some disquieting information here so I would take it as a favor if I could send two observers with limited authority..." He went into details.

"A maximum!"

"They're having more than a little trouble there, depredations against the Norms and so on. The Delinks there, so Wimble informs *me*, are not only getting big ideas but bigger heads to match. They're mounting a maximum to cut them down to size—if they can."

He paused and looked up at the two men almost with friendliness. "I don't like to cheer you up, but there will be no air cover and the surrounding countryside is rotten with *rogs*. Wimble will fill in the picture when you get there."

Area Commissioner Wimble was a tall, sad-looking man with a bony horse-like sort of face. The pale blue eyes, however, concealed a ruthlessness and a cold tenacity of purpose which, to his immediate colleagues, was often frightening. Wimble stubbornly refused to acknowledge the caste system when it came to Delinks. Lawbreakers were lawbreakers, criminals were criminals, irrespective of caste or heredity.

He said, mildly, "I'm afraid this may be a rough one. Our warped friends have come up with an anti-grav device. Fortunately, the range is limited but, even so, we can't get a ship within twenty miles of the city."

He turned, laid his hand on Toynbee's shoulder and said, with surprising gentleness. "I'm afraid you'll have to watch this from afar, old man. I can't send a Scuttler on a mission like this."

"I shall have a roof over my head."

"And suppose the Delinks blow a hole in it? No, old chap—I understand you're a scientist—a nice comfortable viewing screen for you and all the recording equipment we have."

He turned to Gammon again. "I have arranged for you to accompany

Captain Benson in the command car."

Kent Fort launched its maximum the following day. The lines of heavy armor-floats, like rows of huge and brightly polished black beetles, broke formation in routine order and began to wind like an uncoiling snake toward the perimeter.

To Gammon it was routine; the floats were following a devious programmed highway to the perimeter. Anyone from outside, however, attempting to gain access by the same route would soon run into trouble. The defenses were flexible and in constant movement. A would-be attacker would soon find his forces incinerated in one of the invisible electronic barriers or blown to fragments in one of the shifting minefields.

When the task force returned, however, the new safe route would be code-beamed onto their program tapes and they would pass through in safety. Within seconds of their passing however, this same safe route would be a death trap again.

To Gammon, in the command car, the terrain, too, was depressingly familiar as they began to near the city. The patches of coarse grass, the blackened craters, the burned-out hulks of armor-floats and the sort of tumbled-in wreckage of fixed ground defenses.

Benson, sucking at a thin cigarette, said; "This desert used to be called Croydon once, part of one of the mightiest cities in the world. Now only the hub remains, central London, what used to be the West End. This side of the river, the Delinks have put up fortifications. Candidly, old chap, we don't like what's been going on. The assassin guilds appear to have become quasi-military and the syndicates are turning out arms fit to bust. The whole damn lot are working up to something. That's why we're laying on a maximum before they get around to it."

"Think it will do any good?"

Benson looked at him quickly and away. "I'm not bursting with enthusiasm. Delinks don't invite punitives unless they think they can handle them. This lot have not only been shouting threats but inviting reprisals by hit and run raids into Norm communities. Wimble will never stand that and they know it. While they keep to their own territory, he can almost tolerate them, but one small raid and his veins bulge out beyond his ears. He looks mild and speaks quietly but he has fissionable elements



right where his heart should be when it comes to Delinks."

Something ran across the desolation ahead and dived out of sight down a hollow. A belated ball of fire appeared where it had been but the marksman was far too late.

"Save your fire!" Benson turned away from the control mike, sighing. "Getting trigger-happy. No use wasting effort on *rogs* unless we get blown out of the floats, and then, God help us! The whole area is lousy with the things."

Within the next minute, Gammon saw four more. One, a huge Alsatian *rog*, stood on a mound and wagged its tail with insolent assurance.

Gammon found himself shivering slightly. *Rogs* had been introduced into society in the Cybernetic era before the *Troubles*. They were, in brief, nothing more than robotic pets designed to resemble familiar dog breeds. So skillful were the numerous manufacturers that it became impossible to distinguish a *rog* from a normal canine. The *rog* had the same reflexes, the same loyalties and the same devoted and limited intelligence. The manufacturers missed nothing: *rogs* even had wet cold noses and were warm to the touch.

The advantages were obvious. A *rog* needed no feeding, no tiresome morning or evening walk, didn't smell, chew slippers, bite innocent visitors, fight with other *rogs* or foul the sidewalks. There came a time when there were no dogs left save in a few zoos.

When the *Troubles* came however, the Delinks rounded them up and gimmicked them. The jolly, tongue-lolling, adoring-eyed devoted mechanisms became killers, guards, patrol units and walking bombs. The *rog* had been converted from a pet into a warrior robot.

The convoy of vehicles climbed a low hill and, with the characteristic veering motion of heavy armor-floats, began to undulate down the opposite slope.

Halfway down, Benson said "What the hell?" and brought the column to a halt.

About a hundred yards ahead and directly in their path was a single Delink. He wore the brown, rather sloppy uniform currently in favor in the

area but his shoulders were literally plastered with syndicate insignia and merit tags.

He sat on a big round stone, dragging on a cigarette, and he appeared unarmed. No one believed *that*—to Delinks arms were both a religion and a prestige symbol.

Beside him, however, a rough staff had been thrust into the soil and, on top of the staff, fluttered an unbelievable white flag.

Benson switched on the exterior address system. "Get out of the way, you damn Delink, or well run you down."

"White flag and all, copper-brother?" The exterior mikes picked up the voice perfectly, even to the jeering, nasal and aggressive intonations of all Delink speech.

Benson scowled. "What do you want?"

"Some chat. We have a deal for you."

"We don't make deals with Delinks, you should know that."

"How do you know until you have heard the deal? Perhaps we are going to surrender."

"Are you?"

"Hell, no. But, if I had suggested it, you would have made a deal, wouldn't you?"

"If we believed you, which we wouldn't, yes."

"Then you refute your own claim—you *would* make a deal with Delinks."

Benson reddened slightly. "All right, you've made your point."

"Excellent, mind if I come aboard? This is kind of classified."

Benson hesitated, then he said, "Very well, after we've checked you from head to toe and back again. After which, I warn you, if you twitch an eyebrow or draw a deep breath I'll blast you down to a cinder. Clear?"

"I follow the general outline."

Five minutes later, he entered through the lock. The crew, including Benson and Gammon, withdrew as far as the armored walls of the float would permit. There was no mistaking a Delink; even dressed in police uniform, a Delink could deceive no one. The man gave off something, somehow projected an aura of unpleasantness, of contempt, indiscipline and implied violence.

Presumably it cut both ways, for the man held a highly scented handkerchief to his nose. "My God, I'll need hours in a decontamination unit after this, plus an armed escort. I'll reek of you blasted coppers for days."

"Say what you want to say and get it over," said Benson, harshly.

"Right, copper-friend, I'll make this brief for both our sakes. You've been having trouble lately, slaps at all the law-abiding smug little Norms crouching around your forts like frightened chicks. Yes?"

"Skip the cracks about the Norms—what about it?"

"Just one thing. It wasn't us."

Benson's cheeks reddened and seemed to puff out slightly. "What the hell do you mean it wasn't you? It was you blasted Delinks, wasn't it? Delink floats, Delink uniforms. What the devil are you trying to put over?"

The man drew a deep insulting breath through his scented handkerchief. "You quite finished?" He grinned insolently. "Good, I'm glad about that. I was afraid for the minute you were going to blow yourself up. You coppers do get hysterical about nothing, don't you?"

"Now look, you—"

"Do you want me to finish what I have to say or don't you?"

Benson got a grip on himself with an obvious effort. "Go on."

"Right. When I said it wasn't us, I meant it was a new organization. Don't think we wouldn't if we got the chance, mind—but these raids were neither syndicate nor guild."

The two police officers looked at one another quickly and meaningfully.

"What is another syndicate to you?" asked Gammon. "Ratting on each other now?"

The man flushed. "Delinks don't rat to coppers. Listen, these ain't Delinks; they act like them but they're not."

"How do you know?"

"How do I know you're a copper? How do I know a Norm is a Norm or a Stinker a Stinker? We *know* they're not Delinks; you can recognize, *feel* another Delink. This mob don't feel right, ain't right, you can *tell*."

"So they're muscling in, knocking off syndicate lieutenants and trying to buy out the assassin guilds. No status quo no more, no balance."

Gammon put a cigarette in the corner of his mouth and ignited it with one long breath. "What's the deal?"

The Delink smiled, twistedly. "This is the biggest clobber-run you've mounted in years, do 'us a lot of harm—and you. We've got a lot more guns now; you could lose half of these floats. On the other hand, we could put up a show. A lot of noise, a massive concentration of second-class weapons like we was trying to blow you back to the fort, only nothing to penetrate a floater."

"In exchange for what?" inquired Benson, harshly.

"Same kind of return. A lot of noise, a lot of inaccurate fire. Oh and yes, some of our fortifications and road blocks will have yellow syndicate or guild symbols—clobber these mightily. They'll be defended by robot-dummies with plastic weapons, so no skin off our noses if the pieces get blown to Europe."

"And then?"

"Then you can go for the real offenders—the Geeks, we call them. They hold the Regent Street area. Mind you, gotta be frank, they won't make no show; they'll fight but that won't be us, that'll be them."

Gammon looked quickly at Benson. "I think we had better discuss

this—alone."

The Delink grinned insolently. "Do that. I can use some fresh air."

Five minutes later, the two officers were back with Gammon exhaling smoke from another cigarette.

"As we have already pointed out, we don't like deals but, as it happens, we are interested in these—er—Geeks too. However, we are not going into a thing like this without certain guarantees. We propose, if possible, picking up prisoners. You'll have to tie down the trigger fingers of your long range marksmen."

"Okay, okay."

"One other thing. This has virtually degenerated into operation double-cross; don't make it triple-cross, will you?" Benson paused and his pale cold eyes narrowed. "I have been in touch with the Area Commissioner and if this is a trap well use the Seventh Weapon, and that's no idle threat. We'll wipe London right off the map."

The Delink paled. "All right, all right, crack the whip, copper." Then tiredly; "This is level, no double-cross." He drew another deep breath through the handkerchief. "Oh, yes, before I go, there will be some kids to pick up on the frontier; keep a look out for them on your way back."

When he had gone and the column was rolling again Benson drew a deep breath. "Pick up some kids? Doesn't make sense, does it? Yet we do it every month."

## ***Chapter Four***

THE REMARK irritated Gammon, not because Benson had said it but because it was a problem which had been on his mind for years. A people, a race, sharply divided against itself, each caste held apart and, yes, provoked to hostility, by no known cause. It was all a gigantic jigsaw puzzle but in this puzzle none of the pieces would fit.

Often too often, Norm couples had Delink children and, again, too often, Delink couples had Norm children. As neither caste could look after or raise these apparent changelings, there had had to be an exchange system. Norms traded their Delink offspring for the Norm offspring of

Delinks. Strangely, neither caste had ever descended to infanticide.

The column mounted a slight rise and, as they did so, the city came into view, a series of blocks, reaching like fingers toward the sky. Fingers surrounded by blackened stumps and piles of rubble.

On the top of the next rise, about six miles farther on, both the rubble mounds and the blackened stumps of buildings flickered with shifting pinpoints of light.

It was a formidable demonstration of massed weapons but, by implication, token, and, by agreement, well out of range.

Gammon was glad it was. A mile ahead, at least ten square miles of war-torn soil was virtually obliterated. Flame gushed, pouts of oddly colored light and jets of oily black smoke completely concealed the area for at least thirty seconds. Then the eruption died as quickly as it had begun but not completely. In the vast shallow crater, electric-blue accumulator charges coiled and writhed across the still smoking soil like serpents. When the serpents met they lashed at one another and exploded savagely with a dazzling white flash. Elsewhere radiant-heat devices, surrounded by a characteristic reddish haze, glowered like sullen bloody eyes. For several yards around them the soil was a reddish glowing crust in which rock and stone ran molten. Soon, however, these devices would be gone. They would eat their way into the ground and continue to sink until they had consumed themselves in their own heat-producing nuclei.

Gammon shivered slightly. He had once seen one of those things hit a float and when they hit they stuck. The float had crumpled in on itself, become shapeless and spread itself over the soil in a huge bubbling puddle in less than twenty seconds.

Benson was scowling at the explosions. "How long have the Delinks had Jack-in-the-box guns, for God's sake?" He did not wait for an answer but barked a return fire order. This, too, would be just as devastating but, again by agreement, short of the target.

As they neared the city return fire became concentrated and accurate. The Delinks, however, were keeping to their agreement. Although the command car was hit several times, it was always by weapons incapable of perforating the armor. On six occasions the walls turned red and smoked acridly from heat projectors but they were from low-grade and not the

mounted high-frequency weapons.

The fire died considerably as they reached the buildings and rolled into the wide streets. The Delinks were not going to risk blowing up their own strongholds with their own heavy weapons.

Apart from roadblocks, crude barricades and an occasional Delink armor-float, the streets were empty.

Gammon was struck, as so often before, by the appearance of Delink cities. This one was no exception. Naturally each large building was a fortress in itself but the design and architectural approach was singularly disturbing. Each was garish, vividly painted, and displayed a repulsive lack of artistic feeling. The general impression was of complete vulgarity carried to the nth degree and then blown up to double its normal size.

Gammon shook his head, recalling a remark made by a professor he had once known. It struck him now as singularly apt: *Delink architecture is pornographic.*

There were other peculiarities about the cities also: garbage dumps between the buildings, about which no one seemed to worry; odd streets, composed completely of shacks huddled so closely together they were difficult to enter. These were the homes of the underprivileged, the scum-Delinks, so inept at advanced villainy that they were compelled to live by the crumbs which fell from the rich crook's table. It was the same scum-Delinks who had been recruited, doped to the eyebrows and sent after Craig and the Hastings girl.

Gammon's thoughts were interrupted by a heavy impact which flung him sideways and almost out of his impact-chair. Out of the corner of his eye, he was aware of one of their own armor-floats lurching past completely out of control. Clearly it had rammed them before bouncing back and racing ahead.

As it drew away, Gammon saw why: the upper half was a twisted wreckage of torn plates and jagged girders. Here and there, gruesomely, a hand or blue-clad limb protruded. The crew had had it but how the drive motor or the float-repeller units had escaped was beyond him.

The float hit a house at an angle, careened across the road in a shower of sparks and suddenly disintegrated in a gush of flame and fragments.

"They're not playing games here," said Benson sourly. "Thank God we got some backing before we hit these Geeks. What do you think they hit us with?"

"I don't care to think about it." Gammon turned slightly. At the cross-hair screens, police marksmen were searching for roof snipers and picking them off with programmed seeker-slugs.

Apparently they were having some success for Gammon saw three bodies plunge into the street and several more were sprawling limply like flattened dolls on the sidewalk.

The float suddenly swung sideways, while others raced past, forming a double line at the next intersection.

Gammon caught a glimpse of a vulgarly ornate street sign in purple glare-paint. It said, REGENT STREET.

He looked at Benson with a certain respect. This man not only knew his job but was a skilled technician. He had sealed off and completely surrounded the danger spot in a swift and singularly skillful maneuver.

Pits, jagged apertures and crumbling discolorations began to appear on the buildings as the floats opened up with heavier weapons. Windows blew outward cascading glittering showers of resista-glass, and less than a hundred feet ahead a ninety foot section of wall, high above the street, leaned tiredly outward and, breaking as it fell, plunged into the street.

Gammon became suddenly aware of groups of blue-uniformed, round-helmeted figures racing for the doors of the nearest buildings. Several fell but the rest forced the entrances, firing from the hip or tossing pill grenades in front of them.

Less than thirty seconds later, a Geek or Delink flung him-self from a second story window. He had been hit by an igniter-shell and his flaring, twisting body was almost completely consumed before it hit the ground.

Later—it seemed centuries later—some of the blue-clad figures came out again. It was clear that their losses had been heavy but the survivors were triumphant. Among them were small sullen groups of prisoners, hands clasped on the tops of their heads. These were quickly herded into Maria-floats and driven out of the battle area.



Benson leaned toward the command mike and said "Clobber them," savagely. "Cut this damn street down to ground level."

The column did not quite succeed but they came very close. When they pulled out, both sides of the street were so many hollow shells or heaps or smoking rubble.

"You played that one rough," observed Gammon with a certain satisfaction.

"I wish I could have played it rougher." Benson's mouth was like a trap. "God, if the Delinks had joined in we would have been rubbed into the ground. We lost nineteen floats. We had ninety-three dead and one hundred and eighty-five wounded. One or two more maximums with losses like that and we'd be finished. Those Geeks had a lot of new and dangerous sidearms. It's a damn good job we captured a few, otherwise—" He spread his arms and did not finish the sentence.

A light blinked and he touched a button. "Yes!"

"Copper-boss?" inquired a familiar nasal voice.

"Benson here, yes."

"Just an idea, copper, but why don't you put your feet up pulling out? Somehow, some way, no one can see you— imagine that! Again, we're tired of fireworks, yours and ours."

Benson said "Well, thanks," doubtfully.

"Think nothing of it. Oh, one other thing. Never expected to hand this one to a copper and mean it—many thanks." There was a click and silence.

Benson looked blankly at the other. "Can you beat *that*, They're grateful. Those Geeks must have really been getting in their hair. I am rather anxious to have a good look at these neo-Delinks; they must be something special."

"Special?" Gammon, drafting out a report, looked up. "I don't know what Toynbee will make of this but personally I find the conception of a new caste both significant and frightening. It could mean another subdivision in the race, thus splitting us, even more, into consumable

fragments."

"I am not quite sure what you're driving at."

"Neither am I—quite. It just struck me that the old adage of divide and destroy might have meaning somewhere."

"Who?" inquired Benson, bluntly. "Who wants to divide and destroy?"

"God knows," said Gammon. "It just struck me that It might be an angle worth following up."

In Africa, Craig found time passing swiftly. Not only were they both emotionally starved of human contacts but the exchange of ideas and thoughts was mentally stimulating.

There was also another, deeper tie which Craig was unable to pinpoint. Certainly there was now sincere friendship and a deep sympathy of ideas and emotions. Often they sat for hours without speaking, each content in the other's company. There were no awkward silences nor the need to make conversation.

Craig wondered frequently if he was becoming emotionally involved with the girl but treated the subject with reserve. He was aware that he had his defenses up and was treating any emotional reaction with caution. After fifteen years as an outcast with no contact with the opposite sex, a man could go blundering into something which he might later regret.

Pushing this to one side, however, he was still aware of some strong and elusive tie which he was unable to define.

In the middle of his thoughts, a long report arrived from Gammon.

As usual it was factual but it was also unstilted and curiously revealing. Craig realized with considerable shock that, as a correspondent only, Gammon was treating him as a friend. He frowned, trying to recall his own reports, and realized abruptly that he had couched all of them in casual friendly terms. Pen friends! And genuine friendship at that. Clearly Gammon had revealed his inner hopes and anxieties without reserve.

Craig was aware of a brief flood of uncharacteristic bitterness. Comradeship by proxy! Let them come within a mile of each other and

Gammon would boil with hatred... hatred and fear. Gammon's fingers would be twitching near his gun but he would never draw because, despite his fury, he would be aware he would never make it. Craig could blast him down before his fingers could even touch the butt.

He handed the letter to Geo without comment, watching her face as she read.

Strangely her first comment was almost his own. "This man likes you," she said. She frowned thoughtfully. "I have several pen friends, ex-patients and so on. At a distance, they all seem to like me and it's not all gratitude. There's a Father-Assassin in one of the American cities who I have never seen. I cured one of his 'guns' and somehow we started up a correspondence. He writes to me almost with tenderness, as if I were his long-lost daughter. Quite often, with a pathetic lack of reservation, he confides in me. Guild troubles, the lack of dedication in novice 'guns' and so on. Sometimes his letters make me sad for, to him, quite sincerely, this trading in death is a normal and respectable profession. I wonder why, at close quarters, we arouse such hatred. How did all this begin?"

"Don't you know, Geo?"

"Only generally, not specifically. For rather obvious reasons, history is glossed over at school. I know that humanity divided against itself irrespective of race, color or creed, but the beginnings were never explained."

He had a cigarette. "I can give you the beginnings, not the reasons. The trends, although they were not recognized at the time, began to appear soon after World War II. There had, of course, always been crime, hooligans and hoodlums, vandals, gangs and despoilers. Taking the minor issues however the hooligans and vandals had usually been drunks or roistering louts showing off to their girlfriends or comrades."

"Around the fifties, however, vandalism and willful destruction increased but on an altogether different level. It was no longer the sphere of drunks or posturing louts; it was a considered destruction. Fittings torn from walls, seats ripped in public service vehicles, trees cut to the ground in quiet streets, things like that."

"Generally wanton destruction of this kind was due to teenagers who were already indicative of trends. Their clothing was distinctive, their

contempt incredible and their methods ruthless. Gone were the days of the honest fist fight or the roistering bottle-swinging street battles. This new dispensation fought with flick knives, coshes and even guns. There was no mercy, no monetary gain, and no sense of sportsmanship or fair play. Six to one was regarded as a fortunate circumstance, not a cowardly and unfair attack. These were the delinquents—Delinks—and in the course of four generations they began to separate themselves from the rest of humanity."

"Organized crime became a distinct and separate part of the culture, no longer concealed but paraded. Criminals wore distinctive clothing and had the gall to advertise their unlawful skills on printed narcotics."

"Needless to say, there was no longer a criminal class. There were Delink lawyers, doctors, scientists and so on and the enforcement of law became a mockery. It became a series of battles in which, ultimately, the police were compelled to pull out in order to retain their cohesion. Individual police stations, manned by a few men, were going down like sand castles before a rising tide—"

Craig stopped and grinned wryly. "Don't ask me why, I don't know. I can only tell you that the rest, including ourselves, seemed to follow in order."

She looked at Gammon's letter again. "And now another caste—the Geeks. Apparently disliked but not detested like ourselves. I begin to wonder—"

She was interrupted by a series of chimes and she rose.

"Sorry, Mike, carrier warning. It means I have a patient coming in."

"Like me to come with you?"

"No, you keep the house warm. You're my guest. It's only a hop in my flyer to my makeshift consulting rooms; be there and back inside an hour."

When she had gone, however, Craig went out on the veranda.

"Cover her, discreetly, but close enough to be useful."

Gun made a patient sighing sound. "Always in the middle of the

chapter." He put down the book he had been reading and literally shot into the sky. When not using his wings for the purpose of deception, Gun used his repeller tubes at full boost. Periodically he overdid it and his plastic feathers melted from air friction and Craig had to replace them. It was a fiddling sort of job and he usually swore his way through the entire operation.

He wandered back to his chair now with a pleasantly contented feeling. It was nice to feel that you were a member of the human race even if your social life was restricted to one person only. Damn nice person, for all that, not only easy to get along with. There was an inner warmth, a graciousness, a sweetness of character which he could feel... Under other, less exacting circumstances '...

Craig's contented musing stopped abruptly and he spun around with incredible speed, the gun already in his hand.

There was nothing, nothing whatsoever.

He stared around the empty room with incredulous disbelief. His senses had never failed him and this one—it had felt as if someone had slapped a block of ice on the back of his neck—one *knew*, knew without doubt when danger was near.

Shakily, but with the cat-like caution of experience and hugging the walls of the room, he made his way back to the veranda.

Nothing!

His two remaining robot bodyguards, perched on the veranda rail, looked at him with mild surprise.

"Considering some target practice?" inquired Reeky politely.

Craig did not answer. It didn't make sense; nothing, even a micro-missile, could have got within fifty miles of this place without them sporting it.

Then suddenly, with the force of a mental explosion, he knew—*Geo!* Dear God, *Geo!* It was *her* danger, not his. Suddenly he was shouting.

"Get after Gun, cram on the power—*move!*"

They recognized, by the tone of his voice, that here was a number one emergency and they went so quickly that his eye was unable to follow them.

Desperately he punched the ship-recall switch on his belt, aware that at the same time he was sending frantic mental messages of assurance and coming help. Was he going a little crazy?

He did not even bother to check the mental question.

*"Hang on, Geo, help is coming. Please, darling— (darling?) yes, damn you, darling. I don't give two damns, just hang on. You've got to! I love, you do you understand that? I love you."*

She wouldn't know about this, of course, just desperate urgent thoughts, but it had made him realize without doubt—never tell her, behave as before, no need to—thank God, the ship!

He literally hurled himself through the open lock and, as he reached the controls, something warm and almost palpable seemed to touch his mind. Not words, not sound, but a complete and absolute realization of fact. Translated, the feeling meant: *Hanging on, thank God you love me in return.*

With an incredible mixture of elation, anxiety, protective-ness and sheer terror, he punched both boost and interior compensator button in one movement. But for the compensator, the emergency jump would have spread him messily and bloodily over the floor of the control room. As it was, he was flattened in the chair and blood gushed from his nose. The vessel literally kicked itself into the sky in an enormous billow of dust. Seconds later there was a shriek and the sound of thunder which slowly receded like a distant and retreating war.

Taking a bearing on the robots, he came over the area like a ball of fire and braked savagely.

Almost at once, one of the ship's detectors clicked.

"Warning! Warning! Do not leave ship without mask. Considerable concentrations *tetramoluene* at ground level. Don mask before leaving ship. Repeat, don mask before leaving ship."

Cursing, Craig slapped on a mask and thrust one of the spares into his pocket. He took the ship down like an express lift but not without his usual caution and careful observation.

He had already spotted Geo on a low hill almost directly below him. About half a mile to her right was a cluster of small buildings, presumably her surgeries or consulting rooms. Beside the buildings were two large carriers but these, at the moment, had nothing to do with the immediate danger. Surrounding the hill or bounding toward it were countless rogs—*rogs* which, but for the robots, would long ago have climbed the hill and torn the girl to pieces.

The circling robots, however, were putting down an impressive demonstration of fire-power. Great swathes and sudden blackened holes appeared in the charging ranks and a highly skillful Reeky was consistently picking off individual *rogs* who raced ahead of the main packs.

"With you." Craig thrust a greenish capsule into Geo's hand together with the mask. "Swallow that. It will counteract any of the nerve gas you may have picked up."

He did not wait to see if she obeyed. The black heavy guns were already jolting soundlessly but devastatingly in his hands.

Those guns were special and set for spread would have stopped an old-time armored division. Long smoking furrows appeared in the soil and sometimes six or seven *rogs* were blasted out of existence together.

As the ranks began to thin, the robots swooped lower, switching from considered marksmanship to a literal hosing of the area.

Suddenly it seemed only a few remained and these turned and began to race for safety. The robots picked them off with contemptuous ease before they got anywhere.

For some seconds, Craig stood looking at the churned and still smoking soil surrounding the hill. Then he turned and took the girl in his arms.

"I heard you," he said. "I *heard* you."

## ***Chapter Five***

SHE LOOKED up at him without speaking and her arms went around his neck.

Craig cursed the masks under his breath and said "Let's get into the ship," almost brusquely.

Once inside, however, he switched on a whole bank of instruments and trained them on the girl. "Sit tight while they check you over."

The instruments cleared her dispassionately. "Radiation count normal—no *tetramoluene* contamination. Microorganism and virus count, negative."

Craig produced cups and saucers. "I know you don't drink... tea or coffee?"

"Coffee, please, Mike-darling."

He said, "Damn you, stop looking at me like that," and took her in his arms.

Several minutes later, slightly breathless, Craig dropped a brown cube into a cup of cold water. The cube not only contained coffee extract and milk but generated its own heat. He handed the steaming liquid to the girl. "Let's hear this from the beginning."

She sipped the steaming coffee gratefully and tried to smile. "Somehow, as soon as I got here, I felt unhappy. I think you know what I mean."

He nodded quickly. He knew exactly what she meant. The curious feeling of unease when danger was present although not apparent to the normal senses.

She sipped again and continued. "I put the ship down in that depression over there and climbed this hill to look around. Everything looked all right but it didn't feel right so I stayed put, watching. Then, over by the trees, I saw a deer't come bounding into the open and suddenly slither along on its side as if shot. Then two monkeys fell out of a tree and some low-flying birds plunged into the grass and did not rise again."

"I guessed at once that it was either a paralyze-field or some form of gas. I turned to run for the flyer and suddenly the entire area was filled



with rogs. They came out of the jungle from clumps of grass, hollows and holes, and they all raced for my hill."

"And you called me?"

"Not then. I suppose I screamed mentally."

"Ah, that would be when I spun around with a gun. Go on."

"I suppose I was terrified and I found myself literally praying, although hopelessly, for you. When, suddenly, four of the leading rogs exploded, I thought it was a miracle. Then I looked up and saw Gun circling high above. I realized you must have sent him but I could see clearly that he could never hold off those *rog* packs alone.

"It was then, I suppose, I started praying for you again. And suddenly it felt as if something exploded in my mind and I heard your voice—no, not heard it, felt it. I told myself I was crazy but I knew I wasn't. You told me to hold on, you"—her voice broke a little—"you told me you loved me. I had loved you since our first meeting. It had been hell, trying to act normally and speak with casual friendliness when—" She shook her head quickly. "Anyway, Reeky and Screen arrived soon after and the rest you know."

"I don't like it—not the attack part. This was no wild swing by a group of scum-Delinks." Craig was frowning. "This was a long, carefully planned job by a group who really knew their business. The *rogs* must have been traveling overland by secret trails for days but our friends were too smart and too knowledgeable to rely on that alone. Many of those *rogs* must have carried capsules of nerve gas designed to knock out the protection and assistance you usually receive from nature. *Tetramoluene* is non-lethal but will render a human being unconscious for several hours. Fortunately it's a heavy gas and stays close to the ground, which was why you remained safe on your hill."

He leaned forward, suddenly intent. "I *heard* you and when I heard you, knew you were in danger, there was no doubt. I know I *cared*."

He smiled apologetically. "I suppose I knew how I felt before but I was playing it safe. After fifteen years of isolation, well, you know..."

"I know now," she said. She put down her empty cup and held out her arms to him. "Mike—"

Gun entered. "Hello!" he said in a pleased and slightly suggestive voice. "I've read about this sort of thing."

Craig scowled. "Get out of here."

"No, please." She detached herself from his arms and laid her hand on the robot's back. "Thank you, Gun, you saved my life."

Somehow the robot looked slightly abashed. "Think nothing of it, dear lady—is that the appropriate mode of address? No matter, glad I was there. I'll take a scout around outside again. Not without finer feelings, you know, tact and all that sort of thing."

Craig's lips twitched. "You've been reading a British novel, Victorian period," he accused.

"Could be, seemed appropriate somehow. See you."

Craig grinned. "Perhaps we had better put the ship on automatic and get back."

He did so. Then he crossed the control room and stood looking down at her. "You know what we are, don't you? I tell you now, I *say* I love you, but I don't have to. You *know* because of what we are."

In the Kent fort, the interrogator shook his head. "I'm sorry, gentlemen, he won't talk. You know what these Delinks are—brain-gummed. Nothing will touch him. I've been through the whole range of drugs and all I've got out of him is his name." He sighed wearily. "It's Bernard Rennick, if it's any use to you."

"Why a Delink first?" inquired Wimble. "What about these alleged Geeks?"

"Rennick is a top gun," said Gammon. "He was working for them. We want to know why. What he might have told us could have proved useful or served as a lever when we started on the Geeks. I had the idea—" He stopped as another thought occurred to him. "Benson, we can't break him but his own kind might."

Benson frowned. "I don't quite follow you."

"Look, the Delinks owe us a favor. Suppose we called them and explained. Suppose we stuck him in front of a screen and let one of their big wheels have a go at him."

"They'd never do it."

"Why not? We don't want information about them, only the Geeks. Tell them that, tell them why if you like, but try it."

Wimble nodded his long horse-like head. "It sounds reasonable enough. Try it, Benson. You led the attack, they know you and they do owe us a favor. Place this Rennick character in front of a screen just in case and make a call to the city."

"What, free entertainment now?" Rennick dropped sullenly into the chair in front of the screen. He was a lean, sallow-faced man with cold black-button eyes. His thinning hair was greased so tightly to his scalp that it looked like thinly applied paint.

The screen flickered cleared and a face appeared. A round pseudo-benign face with several chins.

The watchers saw the color drain from Rennick's face and his knuckles whiten as he gripped the arms of his chair.

"Hello, Rennick, boy," said the face, softly. "We've been worried about you, very worried. You wouldn't like us to be worried when they let you go, would you? I mean to say, you worked for the Geeks—we didn't care for that—and now you're covering for them."

"No! No!" Rennick's voice was hoarse.

"It's right that you should cover for us," said the face gently. "But not for the Geeks; oh, no, these people are giving a lot of trouble in every city. I suggest, only suggest, mind you, that you tell these nice police gentlemen all they want to know about these Geeks. Could be, that if you did, we might stop worrying about you. Could be that we might even find a place for you somewhere. Think about it, boy." The screen flickered and the face vanished.

"Well?" said Gammon, pleasantly.

Rennick looked up at him bitterly, his forehead beaded with sweat. "You say 'well' like it was as easy as taking a drink or something. If these Geeks ever find out—know what they'd do to me?"

"No," said Gammon evenly, "but I can give you a minute by minute account of what the syndicates will do to you if you don't play ball. Surely you saw enough to know there won't be any Geeks around to do anything. Do you think the syndicates have been nursing the survivors, if any?"

Rennick shook his head. "Perhaps, perhaps not. They're a queer lot, the Geeks. This won't go further?"

"No Geek will ever hear anything from us. On the other hand, well get it to your friends that you repaid a certain favor. Good enough for you?"

"No, but it will damn have to be, won't it? Look, I didn't join those mugs from choice."

"What made you join them at all?"

"Well, I was in a guild, see. One night they knocked off the Father-Assassin and his bodyguard. Snap! Just like that. Top-window job it was, crude, never have worked with normal weapons. The Father, naturally, had his deflector-screen spread out around him like an umbrella, which it might just as well have been for all the good it did. There was a blue flash from way up and then a kind of 'plonk' and it was over. Nothing, just four little clouds of steam hanging in the street lights where the Father and his bodyguard had been. Got a cigarette?"

Gammon gave him one. "Go on."

"Go on, you say. That was our problem, where did we go from there? A guild without a Father is like a syndicate without a bossman. All it can do is sit tight and wait for itself to A-be absorbed by another guild or B—get cut up by another guild from the personal-accounts-to-settle angle.

"Before we could decide what to do, however, the place was invaded by Geeks all sporting funny little brass-colored guns with a little black disc stuck on the end of the barrel. They didn't look like much as weapons but when Durren, number five gun, tried to reach, those same funny little weapons puffed him into a nasty little cloud of steam. After which, naturally, we strained ourselves badly trying to touch the ceiling with our fingertips.

"They knocked off the novices with a sort of casual disdain and turned to us. Their offer was brief and to the point: join the novices or join them. They offered double money and double commission as an inducement. It wasn't the kind of offer a man wastes a lot of time thinking over. We joined them."

Rennick drew a deep breath and looked up. "That's all I know."

"No." Gammon gave him another cigarette. "That's all you know about your part in it. What about the Geeks? What do they look like, how do they operate and where did they come from?"

"Come from?" Rennick stared up at him, puzzled. "They didn't come from anywhere, they just grew up."

"I don't follow you."

"Oh hell on earth! Listen, three or four years ago they were just kids, odd sort of kids, but kids. They was running their own gangs and manipulating juvenile rackets like all the other kids. Somehow, suddenly, they grew up—you know, just grew up—but they grew up with an organization, see? Not like the other youngsters, playing around the crime-lieutenants in the hope a syndicate might take them up or, for that matter, seeking admission to a guild. No, these kids had got themselves an organization as smart and as efficient as any syndicate outfit. Worse, they was still kids, still are kids, not one of them's over twenty, but that didn't stop them from throwing their weight around. It wasn't long before they were bucking the syndicates or, like my own case, commandeering the best, the top gun power."

"This got the bossmen worried?"

"Worried! Brother, you have no idea. This city be lucky, New York is lucky, but in Chicago only two syndicates and four guilds are holding out. These Geeks have new weapons, new applications and a kind of single-minded drive. When they go after something they really go. Of course, being kids, they're green, a really spectacular how-the-hell-did-they-get-him, knocking-off job is way above their heads. That's why they're so damned anxious to recruit top guns: they want their experience, see?"

"Just how are these Geeks different?"

"Oh hell how should I know? They feel different, like a Norm feels different. You don't feel comfortable, at home, at ease with one close. Know what I mean? It's not so marked as being near a Norm or a copper but it's there; you can feel it like an itch inside your stomach."

"I'd call that an apt description," remarked Toynbee, dryly.

"And I." Gammon looked at the gunman with cold eyes. "Rennick, it amazes me that a man with your capacity for intelligence should deliberately restrict himself to the role of an artistic slaughterman. I know it's no use talking—this angle doesn't register with a Delink—part of your brain is blind or deaf or both. Not your fault or mine, a barrier, crossed wires, God knows. Don't know why I mentioned it really, only sometimes, as now, it makes me so blasted *sad*." Suddenly he thrust out his chin. "You laugh, Rennick and I'll knock you out of that chair."

The gunman stared up at him with curious fixity. "I don't see it any funnier than you, copper." Then tiredly, "Do you think we're so stupid that we *can't* understand?"

He half rose. "We can understand, just as well as you, perhaps better; our trouble is, it doesn't *stick*." "Say that again." Toynbee was suddenly at his side.

"Oh hell, what is this, back to the third degree or something?"

"All I want is a little more information like that. It might be worth your while, your stay here as a prisoner. You don't really believe they'll make room for you, do you?"

"For me!" Rennick laughed bitterly. "Not the way they put it. They'll roll out the carpet all right... a white one, and let me redden it."

Gammon thrust another cigarette into the corner of his mouth. "I heard you were shot while trying to escape. We could let that get to the right people. Will that do you?"

"In exchange for what?"

"The kind of information you started to give us, about yourself, nothing else."

Rennick scowled at them. "You're a bunch of mugs."

"Could be. Is it a deal?"

The gunman scowled. "I don't like it but it sounds better than being rubbed out. Right, settled."

"Fine." Toyne intended to waste no time. "So you understand a series of observations which constitute a moral argument. It's square-talk but you understand it. Right?"

"Right."

"There is no barrier, no misunderstanding of what has been said?"

"None. When he said it, I understood him perfectly, but like I said it doesn't *stick*. Hell, I even agreed with him at the time but it doesn't *last*. It's like a chalk mark on a wall—before you can get around to making it permanent, something sponges it off. You remember, or think you remember, that it did make sense but now it's gone, and all you got left is the wall."

"Anything else?"

"That kind of sense frightens you, makes you feel vulnerable. You spit back—reflex, you know."

Toyne straightened. There was the suggestion of a smile at the corners of his thin mouth. "Mr. Rennick, I will vouch personally to the fact that you were shot to pieces while trying to escape. But, by God, the price of your life is some damned hard work."

Later, Gammon said, "You really think you have a lead on something?"

"Let's say I've loosened the lid. Candidly, I'm half afraid to lift it—I'm not at all happy about what might be inside." He sighed. "I suppose we'd better look at the Geeks now."

The two men waited while the two were brought in. Cammon prevented himself drawing in his breath sharply with an effort.

The Geeks not only felt all wrong but they looked all wrong. There was nothing he could put his finger on but somehow they were offbeam. Taken

feature by feature they were normal humans but the way those features were put together...

Both were youthful but somehow ageless. Both had long narrow eyes, not the slanting eyes of an Oriental, but straight narrow eyes so that in some curious way they resembled masks. Both faces were pudgy, rosy and small-mouthed. Small but pouting to match the cold but bland expression. They reminded Gammon, for no reason he could explain, of depraved cherubs.

Wimble, looking down at them, was obviously experiencing similar distaste.

"Give me a reeking Delink any day," he said. He turned to his two guests. "Want to talk to them before I unleash the interrogators again?"

"Not particularly, thank you, but unfortunately duty makes slaves of us all."

Wimble showed his equine teeth in a grimace of sympathy. "I know just how you feel."

Gammon crossed the room and looked down at them. "I'd like to ask you a few questions."

"No doubt." Only one of them spoke but both looked at him with cold contempt.

Gammon decided to ignore that one. "Do you propose to answer?"

"That depends on the character of the question. We shall not observe the obtuse sullen silence of a Delink."

"Well, thank you for your few kind words."

"Don't thank us, we are not without compassion. You and your fellows must be tired. Pulling Delink chestnuts out of the fire must be an exhausting if unrewarding task."

Gammon flushed angrily. "What the hell do you mean?"

"You require a diagram, perhaps? My dear friend, we were a thorn in the Delink flesh, so they connived with you to pull it out. Naturally, as the



unfortunate victims, we are inclined to prejudice, but we still regard this temporary alliance as immoral and unethical."

Gammon clenched his fists and forced them open again.

"You're hardly in a position to throw the first stone."

"In a sense that is true, save that we never claimed to have ethics or morals. It would appear, therefore, that the stalwart upholders of the law are the first to flout it—or do you find that incompatible with your somewhat elastic reasoning processes?"

"I understood," said Gammon, in a carefully controlled voice. "You were prepared to answer some questions, not drown me in ethical philosophies."

"Of course, a painful subject for you. What do you wish to know?"

"Who are you?"

"A direct question deserves a direct answer. We are the new race. In brief, after a short period of readjustment and modification of existing life, evolution has come up with something better. It is more intelligent, better suited for survival and is, in consequence, taking over."

The thing called a Geek looked up at Gammon with its long contemptuous eyes. "Little man, you've had your one sweet hour, your local victory, but, like a certain deluded king, you're telling the tide to go back."

Gammon paced angrily up and down. "Another minute of that and I should have strangled the little bastard."

"Unfortunately," said Toynbee, "he was speaking the truth."

"The truth!"

"He believes it. He wasn't bragging or trying to impress you. He was stating facts as he saw them."

Gammon shivered slightly and lifted a folder from the table. "You seen this medical report?"

"Yes. It supports his statement. A Geek is tougher, more intelligent and better suited to survive than the rest of mankind."

"How? Evolutionary processes are well-nigh timeless. Someone, God knows who, is asking me to believe all these changes have taken place in just over three hundred years and that I won't wear. Something has been working on these Geeks or alternatively they've been playing around with genetics and using the discovery on themselves."

"They're all kids," pointed out Toynbee reasonably.

"Thanks for nothing. That means that something has been working on them. What?"

Before Toynbee could attempt to answer the question, there was a plop and a dispatch dropped out of the delivery slot.

Gammon picked it up. "For me. Looks like Craig—excuse me."

"Before you get lost in that," said Toynbee, "hand me that medical report again. I just can't believe myself that an organism as complicated as a human being can mutate to such an extent in so short a time."

Gammon tossed it over. "Cheer yourself up but don't cry on my shoulder, I'm using it myself."

There was a long silence while both men read.

It was Toynbee who finished first and his face was pale. "This makes me sweat. A strengthened heart, with possibility of a five hundred year life expectation; muscular changes; increased brain capacity and a reorganized nervous system. These claims are true, much as I hate to admit it: they are a superior life-form."

"Are they—are they?" Gammon's smile was long and feline and threatened to displace his cigarette. "With one exception, old chap: the Stinkers!"

He tossed Craig's report across the table. "Read that. Read, digest and sweat a little more. The Stinkers are tele-paths."

Toynbee stared at him. "You're not serious?"

"Read it, damn you."

The other made to read and changed his mind. "My God, if this is true, it would account for the desperate attempts to dispose of those two and stop their meeting. If they had never met, their talent would have remained latent and undiscovered."

"*I'm* thinking ahead of you. There is a superior life-form, superior to the Geeks, I mean. It could mean that the Geeks realize it, perhaps know that a Stinker, in full command of his talent, stands between them and world dominance."

"And that's why they're in such a hell of a hurry to get them?"

"In a hurry! Read that report. They're beginning to lay on a maximum effort."

Toynbee read it carefully while Gammon paced nervously up and down.

When he had finished, his forehead was wet. "Which way do we jump?"

"I've been thinking about that. The balance is in favor of the Stinkers. The Geeks aim to take over; they've told us so. The Stinkers, however, have always minded their own business."

"Will they now?"

"That's a chance we have to take, Isn't it? We haven't time to dither."

Toynbee nodded soberly then smiled sadly. "Odd, isn't it? A minority group, twenty-five pariahs—we can't bear to get near them—yet we have to back them to survive. Do you think they stand a chance? The odds against them, at a rough estimate, are about three-quarters of a million to one."

Gammon's mouth thinned. "Not anymore. From here on, we're on their side, at a discreet distance, of course..."

In Africa, Craig said, "I'd like to beg a favor."

She kissed him. "Trying to think of something to which I shall say no?"

He grinned. "Not really. However, at the risk of spoiling it forever, I'd like to take the back off that marvelous screen of yours and find out what

makes it tick—if possible."

She kissed him again. "I'll prepare a meal while you do it." After a time, she said, "Shall we have today's dinner for tomorrow's breakfast?"

He released her, laughing. "Sorry."

"I am, too, darling, but I'm as curious about that screen as you."

He fetched some equipment from the ship and, thirty minutes later, said, "Good God!" in a shocked voice.

"What is it?"

"*Thessaline*." He shook his head. "The commonest and cheapest plastic in existence and it's sensitive to human thought. Look, a six inch disc of the stuff, held tight against ten terminal points. If you think of, say a long shot—ah there! —it bends visibly and presses against the fourth terminal, thus altering the picture."

"What is the tube behind it?"

"Believe it or not, a heater, keeping the plastic at constant five degrees centigrade, at which temperature presumably it is most sensitive to a mental impression."

Craig resisted a temptation to scratch his head. "The real problem lies in knowing just how and where it will bend to a given thought."

"We could chart that," she said quickly.

"I suppose we could." He was suddenly intent. "I have a recorder and a portable computer in the ship."

Four hours later, they had erected a crude-looking device with which, however, they could shut off the recorder and switch it on again by a mental command.

They had also learned a lot. Control was limited to simple commands in a strictly limited sphere. The screen, for example, was limited to close-up, magnify, long shot and four vision angles. A complicated mechanism could be controlled by thought impulses but would require a *thessaline* response disc for each section, thus rendering the application

cumbersome and impractical.

Craig pulled his ear thoughtfully. "This might prove interesting in the field of micro-engineering, very interesting indeed."

She smiled. "You're itching to experiment, aren't you? Run along."

"You'll think I've deserted you; I'm apt to get lost in my work."

"I know, my darling. Our minds are one now, remember? I don't have to ask why and you need no explanations."

## *Chapter Six*

HE WORKED solidly for three days and only once did she interrupt him.

"All right, darling?" She saw his puzzled expression and laughed. "You jabbed your thumb, I felt it."

He took her in his arms. "I forget things like that. It's all right, I dusted it."

She glanced at his workbench and stiffened slightly. "You're working on your guns?"

"Only an idea. With persons unknown anxious to remove us I want them rather special."

She walked back to the bungalow thoughtfully. She could not enter his mind unless he opened it to her but she could sense his intensity of purpose and strong undercurrents of anxiety.

She was filled with a curious mixture of warmth and sadness. His anxieties were for her and, although she was comforted by them, she was sad that they were there.

When he had finished, however, he was cheerful and smiling. "Oh, by the way, among other things, I made—" He hesitated. "Geo, I love you. Will you marry me?"

She put her arms around his neck. "Oh, of course! You know I will."

He removed his hand from his pocket "Perhaps we had better make it official."

"A ring—an engagement ring!"

He put it on her finger. "Genuine diamonds, my love, laboratory constructed but diamonds nonetheless."

"It's—" She stopped. At that moment their minds were touching and there was no further need for words. "*There is love in this ring—belonging—sincerity. It will also protect me?*" "*Yes, yes, do nothing. It is a telepathic weapon made to keep you safe for me.*"

Miles away, six men were making their way cautiously along an animal trail. They had already traveled over a hundred miles and were weighed down with equipment but they moved almost tirelessly.

These, however, were no doped up scum-Delinks but members of the new dispensation. They were lean, hard, muscular and as pupils of some of the world's best guild-guns, appallingly swift and appallingly dangerous.

This was a Geek commando unit and they knew exactly what they were going to do and how they were going to do it.

They had made an uneventful journey by sea lightened only by the efficient but pointless destruction of two decoy flyers by an alert police patrol.

Their small vessel had sailed on unsuspected and now they were well on their way.

"So no one can take a Stinker." The leader chuckled in an oddly liquid way. He carried a paralyzer beam which was rendering all life incapable of movement for several hundred feet ahead.

"How far to the hill?"

"Seven miles," said the third in line. Then irrelevantly, "Our reflexes are quicker than a Stinker's. He will never know what hit him."

"He will know," said the leader with a certain icy triumph. "It is justice that he will know. He has given us considerable trouble. Furthermore, the

news of his death and how it was brought about will cause considerable alarm. The others, their morale undermined, will be far less formidable."

They strode cautiously on until they came to the beginnings of a low hill.

"This is the hill?"

"This is the one."

"Excellent, we will clear the summit and set up the equipment."

An hour and a half later the leader pressed a button. "This, no doubt, will warn Craig, but there is very little he can do about it, is there?"

"Only wait."

"As you observe, rather obviously, he can only wait... for us to come to him."

In the bungalow Craig could scarcely fail to know—all three robots had fallen from the veranda rail completely immobilized.

Gun in hand, he sprinted for the ship only to find the controls completely dead.

The crisis seemed to heighten and strengthen the telepathic bond between him and Geo. Despite the obvious and immediate danger, he was acutely aware of the fullness of the bond. It was completely and utterly comprehensive. It conveyed both ideas and emotions:

*"We're in a spot. (I love you, will do my utmost to protect you.) Our friends have an electro-inhibitor field beamed at the area. All mechanisms are therefore dead. Since, however, such a device could not have been set up within detectable range, they will take several hours to get here."*

*"I love you. (Calm, tenderness, concern for your safety.) Escape?"*

*"Which way will they come?"*

*"I see. (Don't die to save me. I cannot contemplate life without you, my love—go together, please.)"*

*"Not beaten yet, Geo, a lot of ideas. (My arms around you.) Hold on."*

*"I have an idea, Mike. (Desperate, inspirational.) Look—"*

*"(Admiration, respect, love.) By God, its worth a try but I'd better get on with immediate things first!"*

The Geek commandos arrived within observation distance one hour after dawn on the following day.

"Suppose," said the fifth-in-line, "something goes wrong?"

"You are a defeatist, Gelvin."

"On the contrary, I am a realist. Accidents can occur, unforeseen contingencies arise for which these Stinkers are not necessarily responsible."

"I still regard your misgivings as negative thinking. However, for the benefit of your wilting morale, I have an emergency caller. A single call would bring us at least six hundred trained men from various African cities within an hour."

The second-in-line interrupted them. "Not a thing." He sounded uneasy.

"What do you mean—not a thing?"

He held up various instruments. "Look, every damn one with a negative reading. One would expect a man with Craig's reputation and technical ability to have the approaches sewn up tight. There are no chemical mines, no trigger-guns, no echo-sonic detonators. Obviously, with our electro-inhibitor field, radar and similar equipment is unworkable but one would expect *something*. Personally, I don't like it."

The leader frowned, his cherub lips pursed thoughtfully. "I see your point. Are you sure they are still in the area?"

"Certain. I am getting full readings on the organic-response meter. Both are in, or in the immediate area of, the bungalow."

The leader stroked his cheek thoughtfully with his fingertips. "We must proceed with additional caution. Fortunately, the trees are beginning to thin. I suggest we spread out until we reach point D; we know what to do



when we get there."

They spread out and began to advance cautiously some eighty yards apart.

They advanced without incident for nearly a mile and then, almost in sight of the bungalow, one of the men threw up his arms and abruptly disappeared.

The others ran over to the spot, looked down and refused to meet each other's eyes.

"We underestimated him," said the leader with a certain sullen resentment. "This man Craig is clever."

"Too damn clever for comfort," said one of the group. "None of my instruments are designed to detect concealed holes in the ground. Any point in pulling Vendon out of there?"

"With six sharpened stakes right through his body—what the hell for?" He scowled. "Craig will pay for this, but pay. I object strongly to one of my best men being caught in an animal trap." He looked about him. "Obviously—we shall have to fight fire with fire. Select long sticks and check the ground ahead as you go."

"Just one question," said one of the men. "Just how did Craig know which way we were coming? We could have circled the place a dozen times, struck from north, south, east or west, but he lays his traps along the approach route. How?"

"You are assuming. He may have covered every approach."

"Could be, but it strikes me he had very little time to create such cumbersome traps on such a scale."

"Time will show, won't it? Forward!"

They got a hundred yards and then one of the men staggered, clutched at his chest and pitched forward on his face.

"My God!" The leader stood looking down at the body bitterly and slightly pale. "What next!" He turned the body over with his foot. "Another

damned animal trap and as undetectable as the last. You see how it worked, don't you? That vine across the trail is hooked to that bow among the bushes." He rolled the body over further. "As you observe, the arrow has gone right through his chest."

"Don't you think we'd better press that emergency switch?"

"The situation is beginning to remind me of a certain nursery rhyme: Ten Little Indian Boys."

Five minutes later the leader obliged but the sponsor of the idea was not there to approve it. A heavy spear had dropped from a high tree, passed through his body and pinned him to the ground.

The three survivors looked at one another. "Do we wait for help or go ahead as planned?"

"Let us not lose faith in ourselves. There are two of them, one a woman, and three of us. We are twice as fast as any Stinker."

"But less experienced."

"No one denies that. On the other hand, our superiors might take a somewhat biased view if we did nothing. No, we still have our equipment, and our plan is perfect, so we will go ahead as planned. Voyle, encircle the house and take it from the back. According to my instruments the woman is in a rear room. Think you can handle one woman? Good, away you go."

He turned. "Payne, get the instruments in operation." He picked up a beam-caller. "I'll start needling this Stinker right now."

He raised the caller to his lips. "Hello, Craig, congratulations on your barbaric ingenuity. Unfortunately for you we are still here and I personally have a score to settle. Your reputation suggests you are a tough case. Maybe you were when you had three robots and a lot of equipment to hide behind. How do you feel now with nothing but your guns and your native skill? Not so good, eh? Don't worry, boy, if you are as good as they say you are, you have a sporting chance. One against one. Fair?"

"Naturally you suspect treachery so I will tell you what I intend to do. I propose walking directly toward the house, alone. Come out and take me, Craig, if you can. Oh, and, yes, please don't regard this as a gesture."

Consider the repercussions if I took you alone—and I shall. The reputation of all you invincible Stinkers would be gone forever, a legend shattered and the superiority of a new dispensation established forever. So as you see, not only would I derive personal satisfaction, but the political and social repercussions would be impressive and far-reaching."

"You may, if you wish, ignore the invitation. In which case, with considerable regret, I shall be compelled to drop a nasty little missile right in your front garden. As you will appreciate, this would be a much simpler and far more effective way of disposing of you. The alternative, for reasons already stated, suits me—and perhaps you—far better. After all, you just might survive... until the next time. Again, it's a question of pride, isn't it? You can die skulking in a house or you can go down fighting like a man. Which is it to be? If you do not appear within two minutes. I shall be compelled to use the missile."

In the bungalow: "It's a trap, my darling."

"I know it's a trap, Geo, but what's the alternative? I object to waiting here like a trapped rabbit for him to drop something on us."

"You stand no chance out there."

"Perhaps, perhaps not." He gave a brief but comprehensive telepathic picture of his preparations. "Perhaps *he* is walking into a trap. Through the binoculars, he is wearing some sort of harness, the kind one needs to repel a paralyzer field. I must go, you understand, for both our sakes. It is our only hope."

Craig walked out into the sunlight, unhurriedly, hands swinging loosely at his sides. He was aware of the heat of the sun, He was aware of tension tightening the inside of his stomach like a slowly tightening spring.

As he walked forward the soft contemptuous beamed voice of the Geek killer mocked him.

"Well, well, a gesture, Craig, congratulations. Too bad such heroics will never be inscribed on the role of martyrs. Perhaps you have hopes, Craig. If so, let me disabuse your mind. I represent a new order whose reflexes are four times as fast as your own. Before your fingertips touch your formidable weapons, I can blast you to so many cinders."

It was then that Craig walked into the paralyzer field, but he was prepared for it and contrived to fall on his back.

The voice continued to mock him. "My dear friend, don't tell me that terror has overcome you! How sad." The voice hardened. "You are a fool, my Stinker friend. Surely you did not imagine for one minute that I would demean myself by entering into the mock heroics and absurd gunplay of an ancient Western. It will, however, give me infinite pleasure to bum you slowly from feet up."

He approached the prone man unhurriedly and thrust the beam-caller into his pocket. "Close enough to converse without mechanical aid now, close enough to..."

He never finished the sentence and he had no time to raise the weapon ready in his hand. He lived just long enough to see both weapons leap unaided from Craig's thigh holsters and discharge themselves in his face.

The Geek vanished completely in a smear of red flame and black smoke, then the charred body toppled backward, rolled over twice and was still.

At the same instant a homemade, obsolete mini-mortar lobbed a chemical explosive missile smack on the instrument operator.

When the billows of smoke cleared, there was a shallow crater, a few shards of metal and a blackened but still functioning wristwatch.

The remaining Geek, approaching the rear of the house, heard the distant explosion but was too intent on his mission to consider it.

He made the last few yards in a brief controlled sprint and kicked open the back door, gun in hand.

He caught a brief glimpse of a dark, gentle-faced woman raising her hands as if to protect herself and then a needle of white light seemed to leap from her hand and hit him full in the chest.

The gun dropped from his hand. He turned stiffly as if to leave and then fell through the open door; smoke was gushing from his mouth and nostrils.

With the disappearance of the paralyzer field, Craig rolled over and

climbed painfully to his feet. He did not glance at the dead Geek and there was no feeling of triumph. The dead man, despite his boasted superiority, had never stood a chance and had fallen into his own trap.

A paralyzer field affected only the nervous system and not the brain. His two guns—and the mortar—had obeyed a mental command.

*(Love, tenderness, concern, relief.)* She was beside him, pulling his arm around her shoulder. "*Lean on me; I know how much it hurts.*"

*"Bless you—love you—you're a wonderful woman. Be all right in a minute."*

The Geek reserves failed to get away unnoticed. An alert detector crew picked up several of the ships as they left.

The Area Commissioner of Fort Transvaal pressed a switch. "Attention all patrols..."

The Geek vessels were not prepared for interception and they took a nasty beating.

Some, however, got through but an unpleasant shock awaited them.

"Unidentified vessel, bearing eight/sixty-five. Height ninety-eight miles, speed eleven hundred—"

"Hell, there's another! Bearing nine/fifty-three. Height one-ten, speed—"

"There's two *more!*"

"Police?"

"If they are, they're X-type, furthermore they are all different. I cannot suggest a single reason for so many experimentals. But for the fact that we escaped in the battle undetected, the police forces were more than adequate to deal with us. I can see no reason whatever for these vessels."

"Another! By God, that's Craig's ship! Something has gone damn wrong."

"Let us not become hysterical, Burton. The odds are still in our favor."

We outnumber these unknowns by three to one."

"Shorten the odds," said the screen operator harshly. "The first ship we spotted has three black cylinders in line astern."

"They could be missiles—wait! Wait! Another ship and another! I don't like this."

"Watch it, you fool, number one is changing course toward us—

"Two more blasted ships—hold on! I know that last ship! That's Dombey's."

"Who the hell is Dombey?"

"Skip it. That one—that's Miguel. My God. Dombey from Canada and Miguel from South America. Stinker ships!"

They looked at each other without comment; the inferences were too obvious. All the ships were Stinker ships.

They had no time to ask themselves how the Stinkers had got together. The vessels were suddenly attacking from all angles.

It could hardly be called a battle. Although the Geeks had numerical superiority, they were outclassed. Their ships were standard and inferior, underpowered and underarmed. More important still, Geek air battle experience was nonexistent. They had superior intelligence, immensely faster reactions but this in no way compensated for the cold-blooded and considered ferocity of an experienced and survival-wise Stinker.

Worse, as the attack developed, the Stinkers were near enough to bring about reactions. The Geeks boiled with repugnance and ill-considered fury... bloody Stinkers, warped, evil, repellent.

In the midst of their fury, however, another factor entered —fear. A horrible, undermining and inexplicable terror which they were completely unable to combat.

Forty minutes later, the last Geek vessel plunged into the earth with such force that trees, four miles distant, shivered from the impact.

Craig landed first and waited while the others brought down their

vessels with the caution which had become second nature.

Finally the door of the first vessel to land opened and a huge bearded man stepped out.

Very white teeth showed briefly through his black whiskers. "Well, the stage is right and the words historical. Stinker Craig, I presume?" He held out his hand.

Craig shook it. "I imagine we're about eight hundred and fifty miles out geographically but I salute the idea." .

Both men were aware of a warm bond of friendship and understanding between them.

"The name is Hammond," said the bearded man. "And to keep the records straight, Stinker Hammond from down-under."

He produced and lit a long black cigar. "Owe you immense thanks, you know. Never knew I had telepathic gifts until I heard your—both your voices speaking in my mind. Couldn't believe it at first, then somehow, suddenly, there was a complete link between the whole lot of us. To me, however, the big thing was I had friends. You can *tell* with this talent. Always imagined it would be a hell of a set-to if two Stinkers met. What gave you the idea—calling for help, I mean?"

Craig grinned. "Desperation. It was my future wife's idea anyway."

"Brilliant, brilliant." The white teeth appeared through the whiskers again. "You know something, Craig? I talk too much. I could get this whole lot over in one second flat mentally but I like the sound of my own voice."

"One gets tired of talking to oneself or to the robots."

"Damn right you do, Craig. I even got dead sick of my own back talk."

Gradually the Stinkers assembled. There were sixteen men and eight women.

"Where is the other one? There should be twenty-five of us."

"Carlos—Carlos the Spaniard is a cripple." Vivid mental pictures of Carlos attacked by a mob at the age of eighteen. "He knows he has mental

talents. He has preserved his life by projecting pictures into the minds of those who seek to attack him. Pictures of ships, robots and weapons which he does not possess. Alas, he is confined to a wheelchair and later we must visit him. He is lonely."

All had skills but some were unique. Miss Matsumi, a tiny Japanese woman, said softly, "I frighten people."

They pressed for details and she gave a mental picture of being chased by Stinker hunters on first development. Exhausted and almost paralyzed with terror she had wished suddenly and intensely that her pursuers were as frightened as she was.

The mob of Stinker hunters became suddenly afflicted with panic and had run screaming in the opposite direction. Miss Matsumi had become another Stinker who no one cared to take.

All of them had had enough character to create trade or self-support. Even the crippled Carlos supported himself with an old converter and chemically produced foodstuffs.

"Let us talk to him. He will be anxious; he feels like a very kind and gentle man."

It was the first time Craig had linked with an outsider in conjunction with others and he was considerably shaken. He had an instant mental picture not only of the man's character but also his appearance.

Carlos had a noble, clear-cut and typically Spanish cast of feature which was both proud and sensitive. Despite the wheelchair—one was almost unconscious of it—Carlos looked and felt like a holy man. The white hair was carefully combed, the ancient but brilliant dark eyes, serene.

*"My friends, my dear and unexpected friends, how welcome you are. How glad I am to know you."* His feelings were so direct and so sincere that several women dabbed their eyes furtively.

To Craig, however, the man's dominant characteristic was his infinite compassion. "Lord forgive them for they know not what they do" was the driving force of all his thinking. Yet despite this, there was no implication of intense religion. It was merely that compassion to him was a way of life and one could feel it.



It soon became apparent, however, that besides the compassion there was also a brilliant mind...

*"I am grateful for friends, such sincere and united friends."*

*"Perhaps together we can accomplish something; alone it was impossible but perhaps together—"*

*"Accomplish something?"*

*"My friends, I weep for the manipulated children of the earth, all humanity. They are buffeted by powers beyond themselves. I feel it in my mind..."*

## ***Chapter Seven***

BACK AT THE BASE, Gammon and Toynbee scowled over an accumulation of reports.

"Well, air-section S/A certainly gave our Geek friends a pounding."

"Not half the pounding they got from the Stinkers." Gammon ground out a stub of cigarette and inserted another in the corner of his mouth. "Where is Craig's last report?"

"I'm reading it now. For God's sake let me finish it."

Gammon raised his eyebrows slightly. It was unlike Toynbee to sound tense and petulant.

After a time Toynbee put the report carefully down on the table. His movements were controlled, too controlled. It looked as if he was going to considerable lengths to stop his hands from shaking.

Gammon was quick to perceive it. "Care to summarize?"

"Not particularly. It takes some absorbing and it frightens me to death. However, to save time... Look, according to Craig, there's the equivalent of a Father-Stinker, a man called Carlos."

"Carlos the Spaniard. Oh, yes, I've heard of him. According to Fort Madrid he runs a fort of his own, warrior robots, minefields, barriers, the lot."

Toynbee used an obscene word and looked up at him bitterly. "Prepare yourself for your first shock. Carlos lives in a broken-down four room villa with two dogs and a bedraggled but affectionate jackdaw. Furthermore, he is confined to an ancient power-driven wheelchair and by skillful chemistry derives a frugal living from the soil and one of the ancient B-type converters dating back to the year dot. There are no barriers, no robots, no weapons and no damn minefields."

"Don't be a damn fool."

"That's the sort of reaction I might have expected. I'm only summarizing, remember?"

"Sorry. No offense intended. I just feel kind of strung up."

"Apology accepted; I'm just as damn touchy as you. Listen, this man Carlos projects those things from his mind mentally."

"Good God!" Gammon removed the mangled cigarette from the corner of his mouth and spat fragments of tobacco. "My nerve is crumbling."

"Hang on to what you have left. This man Carlos, being a cripple and a hermit by force of circumstance, has been probing around with this unusual mind of his." Toynbee hesitated. "Don't jump on me when I tell you this, but Carlos says there's something out there. A kind of broadcast on a mental or telepathic level and that this broadcast is responsible for our present plight, the *Troubles* and everything else."

Gammon blanched. "If this is true, where the hell is it coming from?"

"That one I can't answer but"—he hesitated—"but I'm beginning to get an outline. Look, suppose, just suppose, a Delink is a Delink because this telepathic what-have-you deletes his appreciation of moral logic before he can absorb it. The character I have been working over in the lab admits that he can not only understand my arguments but can assess and appreciate their worth at the time. Unfortunately, he has no retention and no recall. If he tries to retain the logical basis of the words, he becomes apprehensive for no reason he can explain."

"Anxiety neurosis?"

"That was my interpretation also. The more he tries to retain the logic

of my words, the greater the anxiety, consequently he rejects it."

"Forgive me for being obtuse but where is the outline?"

"You're not being obtuse, my friend, merely looking in the same damn direction I was looking. Now look at it this way: suppose this alleged telepathic broadcast affects different kinds of minds in different ways. To give a rather broad example, take a power broadcast. A ground car will pick up that power and translate it into energy for propulsion, a radiant unit will convert that same power into heat, and so on. Suppose this telepathic broadcast reacts on different types of brains in different ways. Let us assume, therefore, that it doesn't touch the Norms but plays hell with what we call a Delink-type brain. In short, again drawing a parallel with a power broadcast, the Delink-type brain converts that broadcast into lawlessness... ."

Gammon stared at him and ground out a cigarette which he had hardly begun. There was respect in his face, part agreement but a certain caution. "On the basis of a hypothesis your logic is unassailable, but it still remains a hypothesis. Bluntly, we are using one unproved theory to support another which is unscientific—we have no *proof*."

Toynbee looked up at him and quirked one side of his mouth in mockery of a smile. "Perhaps I can supply that proof. Would you be good enough to send Waldron in, please."

The medical officer entered some seconds later rubbing his hands. He was a tall, beaming man who always looked as if he had recently been washed and scrubbed to a healthy pink.

"Well, gentlemen, what can I do for you?"

Toynbee, outwardly calm, looked up at him. "I want you," he said, "to pump me full of *Lessedrene*."

Waldron lost his almost permanent beam. "You want *what!*" Then, in carefully controlled tones, "Are you mad, Mr. Toynbee?"

"I don't think so, Doctor. I am given to understand that *Lessedrene* inhibits fear."

"It also inhibits every other emotion."

"I am not concerned with other emotions, only fear."

Waldron's eyes narrowed but he got his benign beam back with considerable effort. "My dear sir, I don't think you quite realize what you're asking. *Lessedrene* is one of the most dangerous drugs known to science. To begin with, it has countless side effects, is apt to dilate the heart and can have long-lasting repercussions on the entire nervous system. Frankly, I wouldn't use that stuff on a scum-Delink, although I'm told they use it themselves, and most certainly I would never use it on you."

Toynbee blinked at him expressionlessly. "I'm sorry, but I'm afraid you'll have to. If you don't, I'm afraid I shall have to go over your head."

"You can't do that, Toynbee." Waldron was flushed now. "You can't go pounding on the Medical Commissioner's door without valid reason or supposition of emergency, particularly over a subject like *Lessedrene*."

"I have a valid reason and this is an emergency."

The knuckles of Waldron's thin pink hands whitened but he said evenly, "If I ask for those reasons you will, of course, tell me they are classified which, no doubt, will be true. That is one of the rights of your position but I also have rights and, unless I assert them, I should not only be failing in my duty as a doctor but laying myself wide open from a legal angle. I am doing neither for you, Toynbee, so you are going to listen. Afterward should you still decide to take the risk, the responsibility for whatever you may decide will in yours, not mine."

Toynbee nodded tiredly. "Point taken. Say your piece."

"Very well. Apart from the side effects already mentioned, there are other effects which I cannot emphasize too strongly. It is true that *Lessedrene* inhibits fear totally and absolutely, but only *at the time*. A subject under the influence of this drug could and, no doubt, would, attack a lion with his bare hands. If he survives such an encounter his troubles are by no means over because the fear he *should* have felt at the time he was dealing with the lion will occur in full once the drug has worn off. *Lessedrene* only holds fear at bay, it does not erase it from the mind forever. It like the old-time anesthetics which, while rendering the patient immune to pain, did nothing to alleviate the shock to the system. Believe me, Toynbee, under the influence of *Lessedrene* a man could take ten

thousand risks in icy calm; but once the drug wore off, those risks would hit him like a physical blow, an enormous accumulative nervous shock and that shock could kill him!"

He drew a deep breath and leaned forward. "Mr. Toynbee, off the record, I wish you wouldn't. I know we haven't always seen eye to eye but on the whole we've been good friends. I hate losing my friends; I'm not an easy man to get along with."

"I know, and I appreciate your sincerity. I'm sorry but I have to do it."

"What the hell do you want?"

Toynbee grinned at him sadly and twistedly. "Something quite simple. I want to look at the sky."

Waldron looked stunned. "But you're a Scuttler! The terror which the drug holds at bay will hit you like a club later. Besides, what *point* is there in it?"

"The point is I might see something. Listen, most of this is classified but we suspect that a Scuttler can see something up there which others can't. Something which, if I were normal, I should see instantly."

"But you're not normal, you're a Scuttler." Waldron sounded as if he were praying for understanding.

"Precisely. We suspect that the abnormality was placed there to prevent my looking."

Waldron's pink forehead corrugated but he was not without intelligence. "Very well, you appear to have some valid grounds for your wish but as for shooting you full of the stuff, definitely no. I will inject you with one tenth of a grain with a discreet needling of *menthocene-hyadile*. This shot will last you exactly fifteen minutes but due to the *menthocene* will only reduce your natural hysteria by eighty-five percent. The latter drug will also act as limited narcotic when the *Lessedrene* wears off."

He paused and seemed suddenly to grow a few inches taller. "And when it wears off, Mr. Toynbee, you are under my care. Is that quite clear? There is no precedent then for overruling my authority; I shall be in complete charge."

He paused again and cleared his throat disapprovingly. "When do you wish to begin this—ah—dubious experiment?"

Toynbee winked furtively at Gammon. "Right now," he said with a straight face.

Twenty-five minutes later, he stood at the door feeling curiously numb. It was true he had the shakes but fear was only a smoky unreal kind of ghost which pranced and gestured at the far limits of his imagination. There were, however, unexpected side effects. He felt neither pleased nor triumphant nor heroic. In point of fact his basic reason for coming seemed futile and unnecessary. He didn't care what was up there, if anything.

He walked slowly out into the street and looked up. *Well*, he thought. *Fancy that*. It was, however, a thought, a thought which engendered no reflex and evoked no emotional response. He felt neither surprise, satisfaction nor even curiosity.

"See anything?" inquired Gammon.

Toynbee looked at him with blank eyes. "What's it to you?" he asked.

"Now look—"

"Shut up!" Waldron kicked his ankle painfully. "Get it through your head: he doesn't feel anything, he isn't even interested. The drug takes everything—"

Forty minutes later, however, Toynbee was glad of the sedatives which Waldron was pumping into his bloodstream. What had been a smoky kind of ghost had suddenly assumed an appalling reality and had plunged into his mind, gouging and rending.

Waldron had been compelled to strap him down. Not only had he rolled off the couch twice but he was suffering minor convulsions. It was almost five hours before he could think coherently and another six before he could construct a sentence.

Waldron put him to sleep for eight hours before he could say it.

"Well?" Gammon looked down at the pale ravaged face with respect and

affection.

Toynbee grinned back at him, palely. "Yes," he said. "There is something, about every five miles there's a 'thing.' It's black, bulbous, and looks like a huge potato. Got the picture? Good. Right, now take your potato and get yourself the biggest box of pins you can find. Keep sticking the pins into your potato until you can find no more space and that's it. They look like potatoes which have been used as pin cushions."

"And you say there's one about every five miles?"

"Around about. They look as if they're anchored. Funny thing, while I was looking, a flyer ran straight at one and it simply moved out of the way and resumed its original position after the vessel had passed."

Gammon scowled at him. "You anticipate me. I was going to ask about that. Any theories?"

"One, for what it's worth. I think these contrivances are fitted with some sort of hypnotic device so that the majority don't see them. Also, they must contain some purely mechanical gimmick or they would show up on detector screens."

"Where do you fit in?"

"The Scuttlers, you mean? Ah, there's the arty part. Whoever put them up there knew in advance that their hypnotic trick wouldn't work with a certain type of mind so they incorporated something else to take care of that. They projected an anxiety neurosis in relation to the sky. Certain groups of people, including myself, became Scuttlers."

Gammon pulled at his chin, frowning. "Those who couldn't see might look, but those who could see were terrorized into not doing so. My friend, you are not only beginning to convince me but you have proved the basis of your theory."

"Where do we go from here? Looks as if well have to fall back on mundane things like routine and formal investigation, doesn't it? Feel strong enough to help me work this out?"

"How?"

"I'll ask a question, you try to answer it. Between us, we may come up with something. Look, obviously the Norms didn't arrange this because they got the roughest deal of the lot. The Delinks did very little better and, come to think of it, the stinkers didn't rake off any cream, which leaves us with the Geeks. Think it's the Geeks?"

"No," flatly.

"Why not?"

"For the very obvious reason that until six years ago there were no Geeks. This business has been going on for over three centuries."

Gammon said "Damn!" explosively. "That leaves us with the unpleasant thought that this is the work of outsiders-aliens. Sounds a bit melodramatic."

"Unfortunately, melodramatic or otherwise, it is the most logical conclusion."

Gammon's eyes narrowed. "I agree up to a point but there are holes in the theory through which I could drive a brigade of armor-floats in battle formation. Take our invader, call him 'Ugly.' Ugly arrives here with enough gimmicks and telepathic what-have-yous to conquer the entire world in six weeks flat, coffee breaks included. At the end of three hundred years, however, he still appears to be fumbling around trying to figure out what to do next. It doesn't make sense and, on top of this, while wearing himself to death on this divide-and-destroy-when-I-get-around-to-it technique, he permits a new dispensation to arise... an advanced breed of man who might, in the long run, kick him clean off the planet."

"Or," said Toynbee, softly, "do the final destroying job for him."

Gammon blanched. "I wish you hadn't brought that up. You're right, of course, too right, and because of it I'm going to have some damn sleepless nights. On the other hand, this easy-plan, long-term credit invasion still doesn't make sense."

"Too much—" Toynbee stopped frowning. "I've remembered something."

"Important?"



"Yes. Yes. I think it could be and please don't get impatient; I have to tell this my way. Listen. Years ago, when I was much younger, I used to be mad on travel. Of course, I could never look at the sky but if a flyer was going to say, Fort Brisbane, my father used to fix things so I could go. Four terminals and an E/M viewer screen and I was away. Needless to say, everything was fixed so that I could only look but those trips used to be the joy of my life. They had the devil's own job to make me eat—I used to crouch at the screen watching the rivers and mountains rolling below us and I was lost, completely lost, until one day we, or rather I, ran into something."

"I don't follow you."

"I'm trying to tell you; listen, will you. We passed over an area of land which frightened me more than the sky had ever done. I had convulsions and it took three of the crew to hold me down before a medic could get close enough to inject a knockout shot."

"Well?"

"Suppose there's something down there that the Ugliers know the Scuttlers might see and don't want him to."

Gammon stiffened. "Where was it?"

Toynbee frowned. "I can't tell you the exact state, I was only sixteen at the time, but it was definitely in the U.S.A."

"That is a considerable area," said Gammon dryly.

"I know, but we might be able to cut it down a little. It was a sort of dusty area with those huge oddly shaped cliffs and mountains one so often sees in those old Westerns they still resurrect when they are hard up for program matter."

"Seen one recently?"

"Why yes, about six weeks ago."

"Title?"

*"Cattle War."*

"Texas—I like westerns. That narrows things down a little." He seemed suddenly to go limp. "How the hell will we find it?"

"That's simple enough; take me."

"Good God, man, Waldron will never sanction another shot of *Lessedrene* if you held a gun to his head."

"I don't need it, do I? When I get the shakes, just cut the screen—we will be there."

"You're a glutton for punishment, aren't you? I still doubt if Waldron will take this so damn soon."

"Does he have to know why we're going?"

"I would still be worried about you."

"Bring Waldron along then; tell him you want him there to keep an eye on me."

Gammon scowled at him. "You should have been a Delink conman. You're forcing me into a crooked deal with my own conscience, you know that?"

Toynbee smiled. "Get things moving before you reach a decision, eh?"

Two days later Gammon was scowling downward. "Six damn hours we've been cruising over this damn great state. We could still be searching in another six days."

"True." Toynbee looked irritable himself. "Which way do you think we would have gone? I remember we put down at Fort Denver first."

"You did?" Gammon poured over a map. "The logical route then is this way. I'll tell the pilot."

Forty minutes later, Toynbee made a gurgling sound and a word that sounded like "mountain" and rolled out of his chair.

Gammon managed to press three emergency burtons at once. One cut the screen, the second told the pilot to slam on the repulser brakes and the third brought Waldron into the narrow compartment.

"What the hell!" He knelt down beside the twitching body and made a rapid examination. "He's having traumatic convulsions." He made swift injections. "What the devil have you been doing to him?"

"Nothing. He just rolled out of the chair." Gammon's conscience was playing hell in his mind.

"Really!" Waldron was pale. "He's had one of the biggest shocks of his entire life." He looked at Gammon accusingly. "I can't prove anything but I suspect this was a put-up job you and this damn fool patient of mine connived. Everything was too damn smooth, you and your friendly invitation to 'keep an eye on the patient.' You wanted me here because you knew what was going to happen. You knew his life might be in danger. Let me tell you something, Mr. Gammon: without immediate treatment, he would have died! Think that over."

Gammon said nothing, aware that the choking feeling of guilt would betray him.

Waldron continued to glower at him. "If you think I've been rough on you, wait until *he* comes around. By the time I've finished with him he'll wish the shock *had* killed him."

He made for the door and turned. "Out. The patient should sleep for eight hours—undisturbed."

Gammon made his way shakily forward to the pilot. "Is there a mountain around here?"

The pilot looked at him tiredly. "Take your pick, sir."

"Very helpful. Where were we when I punched the emergency switch?"

"As I was hitting near six hundred, some way back. I can backtrack on the route-master if you like, sir."

"Do that please."

The pilot pressed a number of buttons and a map appeared in a tiny screen in front of him. In the center of the map was a bright red spot.

"There she is, sir. We were right over that hunk of rock that looks like a

wedding cake gone mad."

"Hunk of rock you call it! Must be all of twenty miles across."

"Twenty-three point O eight, sir, if you include the lower slopes."

"Take her back and let's have a look at it."

"Sir."

"Well." Gammon stared downward frowning. "Looks ordinary enough."

"You can say that again, sir. One damn great sunbaked rock is very much like another around here. Want me to take her down? There are plenty of flat spots for a landing."

"Yes, please, as near to the center as you can but nice and slowly."

The pilot obliged slowly while Gammon strained his eyes and most of the ship's instruments trying to see something. The huge pile of jagged gray rock was devoid of everything but dust and was as desolate as the surface of the moon. "I am inclined to the opinion—" Gammon never finished the sentence.

There was a curious plunking sort of sound, followed by a faint shriek and an unpleasant acrid smell.

He was aware of the pilot's hands moving so swiftly that their movements seemed blurred and then he was nearly flung from the observer's chair.

The ship bucked wildly and suddenly hurtled skyward like a missile.

At forty-six thousand feet, the pilot began to ease the vessel off.

"Daren't take her much higher. I don't trust these emergency seals at too great a height."

"Emergency seal?" Gammon looked blank.

The pilot sighed. "It was all rather sudden, I'm afraid. Look up there."

Gammon looked. In the roof of the vessel, slightly to his left, was a neat

round perforation through which he could have thrust his clenched fist. Seal-plast had been sprayed over it from the automatics but the hole was still clearly visible.

"There's another in the floor," said the pilot with gloomy satisfaction. "Whatever it was went right through us. What do we do now?"

Gammon looked at him narrowly. "I'm going back to base to mount a maximum from the ground. I'm going to take that mountain apart piece by piece."

## *Chapter Eight*

FOUR DAYS later, a huge armada of vessels was dumping troops and arms in the immediate area of the mountain. Medium armor-floats cruised around in the area kicking up clouds of fine dust.

Gammon, in a crowded command car, watched the troops begin to deploy.

"What do you expect to find, sir?" The Divisional Commander had an aggressive but slightly puzzled expression.

"I told you, I don't know."

"Opposition?"

"At a guess, yes and possibly heavy. Something took a shot at us the other day and I want to find out what."

"We can find no evidence of an armed force opposing us, sir."

"Neither can we but it's there. Or was."

"Very well, I'll order my men to act as if the mountain was occupied by hostiles, sir. Scouting parties are already moving forward, sir."

"Fine. I want spy eyes with each group of men. I want the picture right here on these screens. Oh, have you arranged to beam this back to base?"

"All in hand, sir." The Commander's expression suggested he was humoring a madman. The only time he had been ordered to take and hold an empty mountain had been on a training exercise. Maybe this man

Gammon knew what he was doing but he doubted it.

Gammon himself had already dismissed the Commander from his mind. He was watching the advancing scouts and the scouts were not happy. They cursed the heat, the dust, the mountain and the Commander—particularly the Commander.

Gammon looked up at the flushed angry face. "Eavesdroppers never hear good of themselves, do they? I expect I shall be the next target. By the way, aren't they being a little casual? I seem to remember telling you that there might be opposition. The way they are going, they could be picked off like flies."

The Commander's flush darkened to something approaching purple and he punched a switch savagely. "Commander here. What the hell do you men think you're playing at? Going to a dance or something? You're soldiers, remember".

He turned and glowered at Gammon. "Suit you, sir?"

Gammon, watching the screen, ignored the implied insolence and nodded. "That's better."

The men were now approaching cautiously, taking advantage of every possible cover.

"If you ask me, sir"—the Commander's voice was insultingly controlled—"this is something of a farce. The men are now less than a hundred yards from the lower slopes and nothing has happened. If there were hostiles in that mountain they would have opened up by now."

"You think so?" Gammon did not even glance up at him.

"My God, I'm not a green lieutenant, you know. We could rush them now, establish a force at the base of the slope which they would be unable to dislodge without exposing themselves. Frankly—" He stopped.

From halfway up the bare desolate slopes came a brief scarlet flash and then, below, a shimmering distortion like an exaggerated heat haze.

Gammon heard the Commander draw in his breath sharply and make a curious half-finished gesture with his hands.

There had been a slab of gray rock behind which three men had been crouching. Now there was a wide shallow crater, the sides of which glowed ruddily from heat.

The Commander punched a switch and in the screen the face of the mountain leaped at them and appeared to stop a bare ten feet away.

"There's nothing up there... nothing." The Commander turned. "I noted the spot—I've a photographic mind—and there's not a damn thing there."

He turned again and flicked a switch with his finger. "Attention, all officers and N.C.O.'s. Procedure D34. Advise all troops under your command that area contains large numbers of embedded weapons, presumed automatic and unmanned. Repeat, procedure D34."

He looked at Gammon. "I owe you an apology, not only for what I said but what I was thinking."

Gammon smiled. "My own thoughts were not entirely complimentary; we were both a bit on edge," He turned his attention to the screen again.

The troops had been quick to respond and large numbers of decoy shock troops were already approaching the mountain from all sides. Of course they were not troops; they were service dummies. A face, a plastic frame to fill out a uniform, a fake weapon and the whole lot driven realistically forward by a motor. They had one or two other gimmicks which the sonic boys had put on a tape: normal breathing, a heartbeat and similar natural noises.

The dummies were expendable. They were designed not only to trigger automatics but to mark, precisely, where those same weapons opened up. High speed cameras would now be trained on the slopes, recording and pinpointing with startling accuracy every flash, distortion or temperature change which might be caused by weapon.

The Commander proved himself both conscientious and determined once he knew what he was up against. He threw away nearly four hundred dummies before he was satisfied. "I can replace dummies; I can't restore a dead man to his wife and children."

He paused and studied a slip of paper ejected by a computer. "Hmm, one hundred and eighty-three weapons in that rock. How do you want it?"

Shall I clobber the mountain down to ground level or, since it's obviously a fortification, do you want it captured?"

"Captured, please."

"Fine. I'll knock those weapons out first and then send in the experts to clear out booby traps. I'm rather anxious to see inside that mountain myself."

He gave a brief order and Gammon, still watching the screen, saw numerous lances of light leap toward the mountain and—he half rose from his chair—disappear without reaction into the bare rock.

"My God!" A vein stood out like a cord on the Commander's temple. His hand reached for a switch and stopped halfway.

Jets of smoke and flame suddenly gushed from the naked rock and a fragment of what looked like part of a latticed tower rose, disintegrating, from a cliff ledge. It fell back and vanished once more into the rock.

"That damn rock isn't real; it's a blasted illusion." The Commander's face was now so close to one of the screens that it was misted by his breath.

As he spoke, a curious thing happened: the entire mountain became misty and ill-defined. There were curious shimmerings and distortions and then the entire rock face seemed to swirl and disperse like smoke.

Gammon bit back a whimpering sound with considerable effort. There was no mountain, there was...

The Commander dropped heavily into the nearest chair. "I don't believe it," he said. "I just don't believe it."

Gammon didn't believe it either but he was looking at it and he forced himself to concentrate.

There was a double circle of slender latticed towers, spidery and impossibly fragile-looking. Some were seven or eight hundred feet in height and looked too frail to stand up at all.

Others rose only a few feet but all had one thing in common: all had the



tops shot off. These, undoubtedly, had held the automatic weapons.

Beyond the towers, within the circle of latticed sentinels, were—there was no mistaking what they were—they were spaceships. But no such spaceships had ever been built on Earth. They were black, bulbous and, good God, they must be two miles in length. Not only were they laid out in neat orderly rows but they were laid one upon another like a pile of huge black misshapen drainpipes.

Gammon did not stop to count them but he was aware that they rose nearly a thousand feet into the sky. . "Let's get over there."

"With you." The two men nearly got wedged in the door and stumbled into the waiting flyer side by side.

"Step on it, pilot."

When they arrived, the troops had already taken up commanding positions and awed experts were staring upward unbelievably at the vast pile of vessels.

It was not, however, quite what Gammon had expected. It was like a forgotten tomb, a graveyard of monsters which had long been dead.

The huge vessels were inches deep in dust and the great locks yawned open and frightening like the eye-sockets of black skulls.

A frightened looking runner appeared suddenly.

"Yes, soldier?"

"Captain Wilson's compliments, sir. We've unearthed something. The captain thinks you ought to see it."

They walked over to where a worried looking artillery captain had been supervising a battery emplacement. The long-snouted energy weapons stood in an untidy and dangerous cluster. Excavations had begun but had been halted. Disbelieving, pale-faced men stood staring down into the shallow hole.

The Commander frowned disapprovingly at the huddle of exposed weapons. "Well, Captain, what is it?"

"There, sir, down there."

Gammon and the Commander stared down and Gammon had the uncomfortable feeling that someone had slapped a cold compress at the back of his neck.

Lying full-length in the hole was a skeleton. He could see at once it was humanoid but far from human. In the first place it was nearly nine feet long and what might have been described as the shoulders was a huge bone like the yoke of an ox. From this, the spidery rib cage descended in a curious formation of linked spirals. The hips were almost as massive as the shoulders, the legs squat and unjointed to the ankles. The arms, contrastingly, were frail-looking, many-jointed, and terminated in eight-fingered hands with a long central thumb.

It was the skull, however, which made Gammon feel cold. The eye-sockets were triangular and there was no jaw. There was only a round circular hole and, afterward, he remembered thinking that the damn thing must have sucked up its food through a tube or proboscis.

Before ten minutes had passed, six more had been unearthed. Only the skeletons, though, no clothes, artifacts or items of equipment.

Experts who later entered the great vessels reported them stripped of motors, lights and every possible form of equipment. Even the mechanisms which had operated the great locks had been painstakingly removed. The ships were hollow shells, a series of vast echoing compartments containing nothing.

There were massive housings which might once have contained drive motors, ports through which weapons might have been fired and in one vast compartment a slanting erection which could have held a control bank of instruments.

"Hulks!" The Commander sounded strangled. "It makes no sense whatever, Mr. Gammon. Candidly, thinking about it gives me a funny feeling inside my head. Nothing fits and nothing makes sense. Do you know that one ship was packed tight with alien skeletons and we're unearthing about four a minute? What sense can it make? An invader lands here, God knows when, presumably undetected, and promptly dies. I tell you, it doesn't make *sense*."

"Before he dies," Gammon reminded him, "he strips his vessels completely, destroys every artifact and means of identification and yet camouflages his tomb and surrounds it with automatic weapons."

"You don't make things any simpler, do you?"

"The facts are not simple." Gammon rose. "Well have to call in experts."

"Every expert in Norm and police society is already here." Gammon shook his head. "Not all. There is only one group of people who might be capable of sorting out this puzzle. The rest will have to be thrown out."

"Thrown out! But good God, Mr. Gammon, they've had no real time to—"

"I don't think we've got much time. I have a nasty feeling that as soon as our Geek friends hear of this, they'll be dropping disintegration missiles all over it."

"What the hell has this thing got to do with the Geeks?"

"I don't know, call it a hunch. I want your troops to draw a forty mile perimeter around this site. I want that perimeter packed with every interceptor device you can dig up. Nothing gets through, understand? Nothing except those ships giving the correct call sign, clear? God help the man who makes a mistake or gets carried away by his feelings. I'll be happy to strangle him personally—and that includes you, Commander!"

"Me!" The other paled. "What's so damned important?"

"The experts—experts you don't know about. There will be about twenty-four of them and they're V.I. P.'s, so watch It."

"Who are these alleged specialists?"

Gammon's lips twitched and for the first time in many hours he managed a genuine smile. "Just a little group of Stinkers," he said.

Craig read the first four words of the report and realized at once that it was relevant to all of them.

He sent out a mental call and had the immediate impression of them crowding around him. He could now easily distinguish each one by their

thoughts.

It was an odd feeling, knowing that they were reading the report through his eyes.

When he had finished, the general reaction was one of urgency. Like Gammon, all had the uncomfortable hunch that they must get there before the Geeks learned of the find.

"Come." He took Geo's hand and, as always, something electric seemed to pass between them. "*We are one. No secrets between us. We belong, love, love.*"

Other minds withdrawing tactfully, respectfully, with warm approval, happy at their happiness and, somewhere in a brief warm comradeship, "*We too.*" It was Miguel and Miss Matsumi.

"*Glad for them, so glad, wish them a heaven such as ours.*" An hour later, Stinker vessels began to descend cautiously beside the vast alien ships. They had no idea what they were going to do but ideas began to form in their united minds. "*I feel something, telepathic imprints remain, let us concentrate on those. Bitterness, treachery, betrayal. Carlos, I have the impression—yes, Miguel, undoubtedly—can you draw them?*"

Their deliberations were, however, interrupted less than an hour later.

On the western horizon there was a livid flash and a tiny sphere of light. The sphere of light was, however, brighter than the sun. Beneath it, the mountains puffed steam from their peaks, splintered and ran molten. A giant wind howled into valleys and ravines and a dozen huge twisters went spinning like genies away from the center of the disturbance. The next missile was intercepted above a small lake. There was a brief *swoosh*, a suggestion of steam and then the lake was empty. Trees lining the bank exploded like match heads and were gone. The bed of the lake cracked, splintered, re-cracked and began to glow sullenly red like a coal fire. A mile away, the small river which had fed the lake fought its way forward, bubbling, steaming and exploding over the red-hot pebbles.

At the site of the great vessels, Gammon's voice, enormously amplified and almost shrill with anxiety began to boom a warning: "Craig, get yourself and your friends out of there fast! We intercepted two missiles but well have to pull out. If the Geeks are as smart as I think they are,

they'll soon start plastering the perimeter where the interceptors are. We can't take that risk." The voice paused. "I'm sorry, Craig, I don't know how they got hold of it, but the Geeks are using the Seventh Weapon."

*"Out—everyone out. We have enough."*

Seconds later, the Stinker vessels were arrowing toward the sky. A bare three minutes after their departure a tiny sun appeared and expanded above the alien ships.

The huge vessels seemed to glisten briefly; they almost writhed, then vast sections of plating curled and twisted like scorching paper. Finally the whole lot began to run like black tallow exposed to a hot flame. A second missile reduced the entire site to a wide, smoking crater in which nothing remained but a black bubbling liquid.

Craig saw the distant flashes and shivered slightly. The Seventh Weapon, the ultimate weapon, previously possessed only by the police. Now the Geeks had it and it was a weapon whose only recommendation was its purity. There was no fallout, no pollution of any kind, but otherwise...

The warhead the Geeks were using was probably no bigger than the human thumb. A warhead as big as the old-time hand grenade, however, would have entirely devastated the whole state of Texas. The entire topsoil would have been burned down to bedrock, mountains blasted to hills and vast lakes reduced to glowing craters.

It was not a happy picture, and if what they suspected of the Geeks was true...

He shivered and became practical. Something must be done; first a detailed report to Gammon and then, since they might not have long to live...

He put the ship on automatic and dictated his report. Then, "*Geo, love/want/need/desire you for my own. Requesting Gammon arrange proxy marriage—subject your approval —now. Regret deeply absence of (mental picture: Geo in white, music, orange blossoms.)*"

*"Darling (surge of intense love). Yes, yes, I shall be yours. (Belonging, part of you. Music and flowers in my heart.)"*

*"Geo, our friends—"*

*"Yes, yes, our wedding guests..."*

Thirty minutes later the print communicator was ejecting its authorization and license through the delivery slot, like a printed advertisement.

### **STANDARD AUTHORIZED (PROXY) MARRIAGE CEREMONY**

Insofar that Michael Craig (registration 66/2/5) and Geo Hastings (registration 9/44/7) have agreed together...

Printed, detached and unfeeling words on an official form, dispatched by a machine, recorded by a machine and solemnized by a standard computer. Cold, unromantic and almost contemptuous and yet they were not alone—their friends were there in their minds.

Somewhere in South America, Miguel was playing a battered but sweetly soulful violin and both of them could hear the music in their minds. They were surrounded by love and warmth and good wishes.

In their minds, Hammond in Australia raised a glass and showed his teeth through his beard. *"Damn good luck-love you two. Been saving this for a special occasion; this certainly is the occasion."*

They could taste the sweetness of the three hundred year old wine through his senses as it touched his lips.

Geo felt the lips of the women on her cheek as they kissed her mentally with genuine good will but unashamed slightly tearful envy. *"Bless you, Geo—good luck."*

The mental hands of the men slapped Craig's back. *"Damn good luck. You don't need it, it's there for eternity."*

When the flyer reached Craig's mountain stronghold, the guests tactfully withdrew and they were alone.

Craig awoke early the following morning and looked down on his sleeping bride. He was filled with peace and an unbelievable sort of floating wonder.

He had read about love, but this went beyond the ecstasies of poets and the music of inspired dreamers. The perfection of their union left him breathless even now. No doubt it was due to the telepathic bond which permitted no misunderstanding or false premise.

He realized that, as far as the Stinkers were concerned, mankind had taken a giant stride forward. Marriage would be a permanent and almost spiritually inspired union from this day on. Telepaths would never form an ill-suited union: with the ability to read each other's minds and feel each other's emotions such a marriage would be impossible.

And then, it seemed, in the midst of his happiness, a cloud passed over the sun and an anguished voice cried desperately for help in his mind.

His bride awoke instantly and sat upright at his side.

*"Miguel?"*

*"Yes, Miguel—poor Miguel. We are on our way, my friend."*

*"Not you, Mike, your honeymoon—"*

*"Shut up (deep affection). Want me to punch your head?"*

*"I'm sorry, I just—"*

*"Forget it. I... we—we are one now—are on our way."*

They were already dressed and made for the door together, both aware of a coldness inside. The Geeks had the Japanese girl, Miss Matsumi. Miguel, who loved her, had heard her call mentally once... and then silence.

## ***Chapter Nine***

IN THE FORT, Gammon's cigarette twitched at the corner of his mouth as he read through Craig's latest report.

Finally he put it down. "From a scientific angle this is completely without merit. Every fact mentioned is derived from this group's peculiar talents. I'm inclined to distrust this crystal ball viewpoint."

Toynbee looked at him. "I have the feeling that you are talking to

convince yourself."

Gammon frowned. "There are occasions when I think we have worked together too damn long. All right, damn you, the report may not be scientific, maybe these Stinkers did just sit around feeling things, but the conclusions are logical."

Toynbee grinned. "Suppose *you* summarize—just for a change."

Gammon smiled twistedly. "As you wish." He tossed across a sheet of paper. "That is what the Stinkers think the invaders looked like. It was drawn by one of them, a man named Miguel."

Toynbee studied it and shuddered slightly. "I think I'd prefer to sit down with a Stinker." He looked again at the round head with its triangular eyes and curled proboscis. The thing had a barrel body, squat legs and long thin supple arms which almost reached the ground.

Gammon, watching his expression, said, "Pity it."

"Pity it!"

"You heard me. According to what the Stinkers felt, it was a gentle, peace-loving and highly advanced life-form. It came here under duress, bluntly, at gun point. The skeletons we found, some odd hundred thousand, were all that remained of a once thriving civilization."

Toynbee frowned at him. "You're not making very much sense."

"Not yet I'm not. Listen, the Stinkers think these unfortunate creatures were carriers for some sort of parasite." He paused and looked at the other directly. "Look, just as a kind of confirmation and assuming the conclusions are correct, could you carry on from there?"

"You mean draw logical conclusions from the data so far to hand?"

"Exactly."

"Well—" Toynbee frowned. "Assuming these creatures were, as you suggest, parasites,, one must conclude, since they needed carriers, they were comparatively helpless."

"Go on, you're doing fine."



"The parasites, then, were the real invaders and they got here using the advanced technology of another life-form. Let's see now, since they were comparatively helpless, they needed that advanced technology both to establish themselves and to construct a hideout and/or hideouts from which they could operate."

Toynbee paused and paled slightly. "I'm not sure I care for my own logic."

"Never mind that—I don't care for it either. So far you're bearing out everything Craig has said."

"Thanks for nothing. Where was I? Oh, yes. Conclusion one. Having established themselves, they then concealed the means of their invasion by the telepathic illusion of a Texas mountain. There is a subsidiary and unpleasant conclusion to be drawn from that. Having played their part, I am quite sure that the carriers did not destroy themselves in a wild orgy of self-loathing. I think they were ordered to destroy themselves, their technology and all clues as to their planet of origin in case, subsequently, that same technology might be used against them or provide a clue as to the whereabouts of the parasites themselves."

"How do you mean—ordered?"

"You would bring that one up, wouldn't you? I think the invaders exercised intense telepathic control over their carriers."

Gammon paled. "If I didn't know otherwise I'd say you read this damn report over my shoulder. Anything else?"

"One other point, the most frightening of all. The invaders are still here and still taking over. I think, by our standards, they are well-nigh immortal and can afford to take their time."

Gammon nodded. "It fits and not only fits but confirms the Stinkers' conclusions. I have an uncomfortable feeling, however, drawing on my limited knowledge of parasites, that these things, having sucked us dry of whatever they want, will move on. In a couple of million years, maybe, the one hundred thousand remaining humans will be dumping these creatures on some other unfortunate planet. Whereupon, having carried out all their orders, they will be telepathically forced to destroy themselves."

"I wish you'd shut up," said Toynbee uneasily. He sighed. "The Stinkers don't know where these parasites are?"

"No. They are working on it but these flying things in the sky are fouling up the wavelengths or whatever they use."

"That's neat too," said Toynbee bitterly. "These things sit around in armchairs with their presumed legs crossed and let their mechanical gimmicks divide humanity up for the slaughter. No, that's wrong; they don't want to slaughter us. They want some of us here to use. Not only are they parasites, but sooner or later, they'll want carriers again."

He rose, abruptly. "Gammon, we've *got* to find them. If we have to drain the oceans and sift every grain of sand in existence we've got to find them."

"Sure-how?"

"Don't be facetious. We'll have to invent and build machines capable of registering and tracing telepathic waves. Well have to-"

"Sorry." Gammon pressed a switch. "Yes?" He listened and his face slowly drained of color. Then he acknowledged and broke contact. "We won't have time to build, maybe not time to live. The Geeks have attacked Fort Manitoba."

"It's holding?"

"Holding?" Gammon laughed harshly. "Like Hell! They used the Seventh Weapon. There's nothing left."

Over a thousand miles away, a Geek convoy wound its way cautiously along a track. It was a formidable collection of arms and armor but it was carefully avoiding used highways. Camouflaged and shielded, it passed unnoticed beneath the routine patrol lanes of police flyers.

The patrols were too numerous now, too well organized and numerically far superior to the Geeks. Consequently, this particular mission had been compelled to use uninhabited country and make wide detours to avoid both the forts and Norm communities.

The mission had, however, gone well. The Geek commander, a thin-face

humorless youth of twenty, was well satisfied. They had the Stinker woman and the prepared plan had gone smoothly and without incident. Micro-capsules of nerve gas had been introduced into her home by remote control during a brief absence. All they had to do then was wait for her to return and trigger the capsules.

She had keeled over without a sound and then the task force, concealed at a respectable distance about the house, had moved in and picked her up.

They had selected the Japanese girl for a variety of reasons, the first being that she was the easiest. Once rendered unconscious she would be unable to use her unpleasant talents on her kidnappers and, secondly, she lived in a remote area where such a mission would pass unnoticed.

The Geeks wanted her for purposes of study. They were now well aware that the Stinkers, limited in numbers as they were, represented far more than nuisance value. In the first place their combat experience and survival talents had proved overwhelming to the Geek superior but "green" reflexes. It would take several years of intense training to match either the technical advances of their flyers or the sheer experienced cunning of their combat techniques.

In time, of course, they would be knocked out one by one but, at the moment, their very existence was dangerous grit in the well oiled machinery of planned expansion.

Their telepathic gifts were the major problem. It gave the Stinkers an edge which, relatively speaking, multiplied their numbers by ten.

A specimen therefore had to be captured, the operation of its brain studied and methods devised to counter the advantage or render it negative.

The Geek commander knew the reasons but was unable to call to mind anyone capable of understanding the problem let alone being able to do anything about it.

As soon as his mind wandered in this direction, however, he was filled with assurance. How stupid he was. Men had been trained for such tasks in other cities in all the specialist branches, neurosurgery, psychiatry and so on.

It never occurred to him to ask how a few callow youths who had not developed into Geeks until late adolescence had acquired the training, the skill and, above all, the experience for such exacting and precise specializations.

At the time, the Geek commander had problems of his own —a woman. Maria was gay, pouting, provocative and curved and, at a strictly fleshy level, she made his blood boil in his veins. He wanted her, he was emotionally involved with her and he wanted to marry her. As far as he was capable of emotion he was in love with her, but there was a snag—Deleth.

Deleth was tall, lank-haired, flat-chested and awkward but he found himself being pushed toward her against his will. Something like, but not quite, a conscience whispered in his mind that he should take pity on her and that she would make him a good wife. Reason told him she wouldn't. She was stupid, slow of response and untidy. Again, the new-conscience told him, she worshiped him. This was true. He shuddered inwardly. She followed him whenever possible like a shadow. Wherever he turned was the same vacuous adoring face with its pleading, worshiping eyes. It flattered his vanity but made him want to run in terror.

Something else whispered in his mind also... duty. Duty to an obviously devoted woman and duty to the race. Eugenically the match would be ideal: the offspring of such a union would be more perfect Geeks and the Geeks would be masters of the Earth.

Naturally the commander did not refer to himself as a Geek. He regarded himself as a superior member of the human race and was conscious of many qualities to prove it. Nonetheless, his emotional problems filled his mind to the exclusion of all else—but not for long.

Something which looked like a small bird or falcon swooped suddenly from the sky and one of the smaller armor-floats shuddered to a halt and seemed to fall in on itself like a crushed can.

A belated and rather panicky crisscross of energy discharges lanced luridly behind it. Before the "*bird*" became an invisible speck, another float keeled sideways smoking furiously.

The commander switched on all his instruments. Previously he had kept them shut down as the presence of detectors would have registered on

police instruments and betrayed his presence. Now, however, he had no choice; without them he was blind.

The story they told was not pretty. In the immediate area but behind low hills and therefore unassailable, were six flying robots. Three were tube-shaped and three disguised as birds.

At extreme range and only barely detectable were flyers-Stinker flyers. He was surrounded. How the hell had the Stinkers found out? Surely the woman had had no time to call for help.

One of his instruments lit, denoted the projection of an audio-beam.

"Going some place, Geek?" inquired an unpleasantly confident voice.

The commander felt both fury, terror and a boiling resentment. Everything had, until now, been so perfectly planned and gone so precisely and, God, this was an important mission—far more important than it outwardly appeared. Police forts were not smeared for amusement—although that would come—but to draw away embarrassing patrols. No doubt at this moment every ship the police had was cruising over the crater which had been Fort Manitoba.

The commander spoke back, threateningly and with a confidence he was far from feeling.

"If you make one more move to intercept or attack this convoy we shall kill the prisoner."

"Will you now? Seems a pretty poor bargain to me. Seven hundred men, ninety-six armor-floats—sorry, it's ninety-four now, isn't it? And an incredibly valuable—dead—hostage seems a pretty poor kind of mission to me. I wonder what your superiors will say when you trundle that hostage in dead."

"She will remain unharmed unless you attack."

"Really? So if we knock out just one man, you will kill her. Right?"

"Yes."

"In which case, we shall kill just one man, but before we do, consider.

Point one: we might be kind and let you go. In which case you will be faced with the unenviable task of explaining to your superiors first why you destroyed so valuable a hostage for such negligible losses. A hostage which, remember, cost the destruction of a police fort."

"Point two: if you kill the prisoner, we shall expect proof. We shall expect you to produce the body for Christian burial. If you don't, we shall attack."

The voice paused and chuckled. "You're thinking now, aren't you, Geek? You're thinking that you can't go back with a dead prisoner and an almost intact convoy. You know too damn well what they would do to you after all the trouble they've taken. So you think to yourself, maybe I won't kill her for the loss of just one man... or two or even three. How will you know where to stop? Just when will you carry out your threat?"

The Geek commander dabbed at his forehead. "This convoy is perfectly capable of defending itself."

"Is it? Your instruments were shut down. For all you know your vehicles may be plastered with limpet bombs just waiting for us to throw the switch."

"Bluff!"

"You think so—watch!"

There was a crashing explosion which the commander only heard, but several fragments of metal fell on the ground in front of his vehicle.

"Give in, Geek."

"Go to hell. If you kill your own kind by your attack that's your business."

"Don't worry, we have her vehicle spotted. In any case we have bought what we want—time. You're outclassed, Geek boy. While I've been talking and everyone in the convoy listening, time has passed. If you must travel with a stolen grenade, make sure the pin doesn't work loose while you're doing something else."

Time? Grenade? The commander's mind raced and suddenly everything

fell into horrifying place. The girl had been knocked out by nerve gas but she was due for an injection or she would regain almost immediate consciousness. He glanced frantically at his watch—the injection was five minutes *overdue!*

As he leaped frantically for the door he was conscious, bitterly conscious, that he had been outclassed. With his hand on the lock, he froze. No, *no!* He mustn't open it. He screamed piercingly in sheer uncontrollable terror.

Fortunately he never knew the rest in the enormous game of bluff which he had lost so humiliatingly. He did not know, for example, that the Stinkers had analyzed the remaining traces of the gas and correctly calculated the length of its effect. They had shadowed the convoy for more than an hour and timed their provocative diversion at precisely the right time. As for the rest... the rest had been sheer bluff. Reeky, hurtling over the convoy had had time only to plant one limpet bomb on one vehicle before rocketing out of range.

Worse, if it had come to a showdown, the convoy, with its new Geek weapons, outgunned and outranged anything the Stinkers possessed.

Fortunately the Geek commander would never know this. He was running madly across the countryside screaming. He had no idea what he was afraid of but he ran on madly trying to escape it.

Five minutes later a Stinker ship landed in the chaos of vehicles which had been the convoy.

*"My love, you are safe?"*

*"So far now, my Miguel."*

He picked her up in his arms and carried her to the door.

*"They are still running."*

She smiled sadly. *"It would appear I still frighten people."*

He kissed her. *"Some people only..."*

Later, the entire group held a long conference.

*"We must therefore represent a particular obstruction or danger to them."*

*"We must not become vain or overconfident because of this. We are a minority group whose numbers are static. Unless fortune smiles upon us, sooner or later, we shall be overwhelmed by superior numbers."*

*"Couldn't we recruit?"*

*"Recruit!"*

*"Gammon states that several hundred of our kind are born each year. Several hundred, therefore, mature each year but survive only a limited period. If, using our powers, we could contact them, we could, perhaps, rescue them before they are hunted down and killed."*

*"We could set up reception centers for survival instruction and their indoctrination in our group."*

*"We will draw up a rescue plan, allocate operation areas."*

*(Enthusiasm/eagerness/humor.) "Hail the cloak-and-dagger Stinkers. Let's get down to business."*

Mark Wayne lived in a fairly large rural community near Fort Ohio. He was eighteen, gay, witty and popular—or, at least, it seemed he had been popular once. In the last two months, however, things had slowly been going wrong.

It had begun in a small way at work. He was a technician employed at a small autofactory run by a combine of local businessmen.

Lately for some inexplicable reason, the chief technician had been at pains to find fault with his work.

*"You're overrunning number three."*

*"This is the normal output for this motor."*

*"Don't tell me my business, Wayne. If I say you're overrunning, you're overrunning, understood? You're getting a damn sight too big for your boots lately. You can wipe that insolent grin off your face too."*



"Honestly, I wasn't smiling, Mr. Cage."

"Don't give me that, boy. Think I'm blind or something?"

Pointless incidents like that had been going on for weeks and on each occasion they grew more pointed and violent.

"It's getting to the point, Wayne, where I just can't stand you around anymore. You're insolent, careless and incompetent. My kid could do the job better than you and he's only seven years old."

Wayne had given up trying to explain or defend himself but it made no difference.

"I know what you're thinking, you damned cocky little upstart. Your very attitude and expression shouts it out loud. I've got news for you, buddy boy, it's mutual. The very sight of you makes me feel downright *sick*."

Wayne lay on his bed in his small room and sighed. It was not only at work, but people didn't invite him to parties anymore and friends and acquaintances somehow failed to see him in the street unless he drew attention to himself. Usually they nodded and hurried on and always they had an urgent engagement elsewhere.

His girl—no, let's face it—his ex-girl had developed a permanent series of headaches and could never come out.

He banged his clenched fist on the pillow and wondered for the thousandth time what he had done wrong. Best thing to do, of course, was to have a night out. Go out on the town and forget his troubles or rather drown them. He had never been drunk in his life but it seemed worthwhile now.

Warmth seemed to come suddenly to his mind—Morris. Of course, he should be back by now, should have arrived at the flyer port almost an hour ago.

He rose, crossed to the caller and dialed the number. Morris was his best friend, been north on an instructional course; they'd do the town together.

The screen lit and Morris' face appeared. "Why, Mark, my old—pal." The last word faded oddly and the face which had been all smiles was suddenly cold and unfriendly. "You want something?"

"Want something? No, I just called to see if you were free this—"

"Sorry, Wayne, tied up for days, administration details, you know. Call you sometime." The screen blanked pointedly.

Wayne sat on the edge of the bed for nearly ten minutes shivering. What had he done? Oh God, what had he *done*? Why did everybody hate him?

He felt tears at the back of his eyes but he was not without courage and determination. To hell with them, to hell with them all—he'd do the town by himself. Damned if he wouldn't get roaring drunk and come home singing his head off. Give them something to talk about.

He threw on his clothes and went out. Where should he go? The Golden Bar? The Laughing Peacock? Of course, there was always the old Firewater Tavern but he'd heard that was a rough dump. No, he'd pass that contemptuously on his way.

He didn't quite pass it.

When he reached it, there was a man leaning against the wall near the door. A man with tousled graying hair, a flushed face and a stub of cigarette stuck to his lower lip.

As Wayne approached, the man seemed to stiffen defensively. He flicked the stub from his lip with his finger and, as Wayne drew level, spat very deliberately at his feet.

"Watch it, friend." Wayne was not annoyed. Clearly the man had had more drink than was good for him and, in any case, his voice had not been unfriendly.

The man lurched in front of him. "Who the hell are you calling friend?" he asked belligerently.

"Easy, I'm not looking for trouble, no offense."

"I'll bet." The man swayed slightly. "I'll bet a thousand you're not looking for trouble, but you're going to get it first the same, you bloody Stinker. By God, wait till I tell the boys. They'll love this. Long time since the boys hunted a Stinker—"

Wayne turned and ran. Stinker! Stinker! The sound of his own feet seemed to shout the word at him.

He reached his room and flung himself on the bed, panting. Stinker! There was no doubt in his mind; it explained everything. He had read and heard enough about the subject to know it was true.

He realized he was horribly and coldly terrified but at the back of his mind was a curious understanding and compassion. It was not his fault; it was not their fault. Some curious change had taken place inside him which perverted the interpretation of normal communication. He had started by irritating people and had now reached the stage where he infuriated them beyond reasonable control. To them, everything he did was distorted, misunderstood or blown up to double its size. Quiet acceptance was seen and felt as sullen or insolent resentment, normal speech as sarcastic abuse, his very walk a cocky challenge. He didn't stink in respect to smell, but his very appearance infuriated those about him beyond bounds and beyond control. Because of it, sooner or later, they would kill him. Mobs would form, hunters would grasp weapons or, perhaps, some normally quiet citizen in a frenzy of hatred would plunge a knife into his back. It would be done without conscience or regret and when it was done the murderer or murderers would feel, and be told, they had done the community a necessary service.

## ***Chapter Ten***

WAYNE realized abruptly that he was virtually praying and tried to force himself to calmness.

As he did so, a voice seemed to speak in his mind: "*Calm down. We can hear you.*" He had a vivid mental picture of a handsome dark-skinned man and a tiny slant-eyed girl.

*"Keep calm. We are telepaths, so are you. All Stinkers are telepaths."*

Wayne sat upright, wondering if he were mad. Had the strain been too much?

*"Don't panic. Think back as if answering in your mind-do you hear us?"*

He put his head in his hands, his mind a blank wall of complete disbelief, but he thought: *"I hear you."*

*"Good. You know what you are and what danger you are in?"*

*"Yes."*

*(Relief, compassion, understanding and warm comradeship.) "Have you a gun?"*

*"A sporting weapon."*

*"Load it and, if you're forced, use it. Get out of town while it is still dark by the shortest and safest route. As you go send a mental picture of the town layout and which way you're heading. Don't stop for anything, run. We're on our way to pick you up."*

Wayne obeyed almost in a panic. He didn't stop to ask himself if they were friends; he *knew* they were.

As he approached the door, however, he heard a movement outside.

Quite unconsciously he sent a clear mental picture of his situation.

*"Probably a guard sent to keep an eye on you while the hunters get together. Fire through the door."*

*"Right."* He raised the ancient sporting rifle to his shoulder, aimed at the center of the door and pulled the trigger. There was a crashing explosion and a cloud of smoke. The door panel splintered and ran with a thousand cracks like glass but outside there was a gasp and the sound of something heavy striking the floor.

He wrenched open the door, jumped over the groaning body in front of it and ran down the short corridor. Some instinct seemed to warn him to avoid the small elevator and he leaped, feet first, for the swinging doors of the fire-emergency chute.

It seemed a long fast slide but somehow he landed upright in the street still clasping his rifle.

No one was about and he walked quickly up the street close to the wall and cursing the lighting system. There were no shadows in this town at night.

Before he had gone a hundred yards there was a livid flash from a doorway and a sudden blackened hole in the wall beside his head.

He turned and fired back, once—twice, then he turned and ran. There were no further shots from the doorway so he assumed his attacker had either been hit or taken fright.

Behind him, however, the town had come to life.

"Stinker!"

"There's a Stinker loose—this way!"

There were shouts and the sound of running feet.

He turned and fired again. There was a scuffle, warnings.

"Look out, the bastard's got a gun. Go tell Hanley that the Stinker's armed."

He ran on. Someone fired from a side street and missed.

He reached the outskirts of the town but the sounds of pursuit were not only drawing closer but growing in volume. Somewhere vehicles were being started and the light behind him increased as headlights were switched on.

Thank God, the country! He leaped a low hedge and nearly went sprawling in an irrigation ditch. Beyond the ditch, the ground was uneven and the grass lumpy and treacherous.

He realized with a cold feeling inside that his action had been hasty and ill-timed. The road wound around this and a rough track bisected it further along. In any case, most of the vehicles which must now be in pursuit would be floaters of some kind and could pass just as swiftly over rough ground as a street surface.

A finger of brilliant light leaped from the hedge he had just vaulted and began to sway, searching.

He dropped to one knee, raised the rifle, took careful aim and fired.

The light went out and, back on the road, a man groaned and held his arm.

"You hit, Barton!"

"Just a scratch. Carry on."

"Right, we'll take this track on foot. The rest of you race out to Dene's Corner and spread out in an arc parallel to the road. That way well have him boxed."

A mile from Dene's corner, however, the driver of the lending vehicle, a flat truck, jammed both heels into the brake slot and came to a neck-wrenching stop.

Lying across the road and completely blocking it was a slender, black, needle-shaped flyer.

The driver, scarlet with fury, slid back the door and jumped into the road. What mad suicidal—fury choked him. He hated the ship and its invisible pilot. Hated—hated—*hated!* His hands were clenched painfully and his lips were twisted but in the midst of his fury was the recognition of its cause: Stinker!

That was a Stinker ship and its pilot was a Stinker. Remote reason tempered his fury. Stinkers didn't have ships unless they were old Stinkers, experienced Stinkers.

The ship was heavily armed, he could see that, and some of the weapon slots were pointed straight at him.

Other men had also left their vehicles and had joined him. He sensed that their fury and frustration was as great as his own. They burned to blast this insolent vessel and its Stinker pilot clean off the road but, in the final reckoning, not one of them had the nerve.

"Go home," said a soft feminine voice. "Go home. The hunt is over. Go home before you learn to regret it."

They didn't go, not at first. They swore obscenely and shouted abuse

until, suddenly, apprehension ousted the fury from their minds. Maybe that ship would open up... They'd be blasted to cinders... Get out of here... They could have left it too late.

Desperately they turned and ran, cannoning into and stumbling over each other in their panic. Not one had the nerve or the control to start one of the vehicles, all of them raced away in blind panic.

As Miss Matsumi had remarked, she could still frighten people.

Those following their quarry on the track met with no more success.

"There he is, right ahead!"

Lights flashed on but it wasn't Wayne. This was a tall dark man with very white teeth and a total stranger.

A stranger in one sense but not in another. He was a Stinker. A Stinker of such proportions that their quarry seemed almost bearable by comparison. They seethed with fury but they were wary. No one but an experienced Stinker would stand in their way so calmly and with such assurance.

"Go home, my friends, go home."

They shouted abuse, obscene, hysterical, but no one tried to raise a weapon. Not that they didn't want to. Why didn't Mac do something? He only had to shift his gun slightly—his finger was nearly around the trigger. Mac thought, *What the hells the matter with Byers? All he has to do—* No, no, you only had to start something and God alone knew where it might stop.

The Stinker's hands, held casually at his sides, twitched ever so slightly toward his thigh holsters.

"You heard me. Go home."

They stumbled back, halfheartedly cursing him.

"Go!" One of the guns seemed literally to leap from the holster to his hand.

They broke and ran and, when they looked, he had gone. They shouted

and yelped at the place where he had stood but no one went back to find him and Wayne was completely forgotten.

The Stinkers succeeded in saving fifty-two males and thirty-eight females before the Geeks woke up to the danger.

The Geeks now controlled thirty-eight cities and were rapidly strengthening their hold on the remainder. In the controlled cities, the Delinks still pursued their illegal professions but carefully and they took orders. They knew they were living on sufferance. There was a great deal of sabotage and a considerable amount of skilled slaughter but it did little to alter the general picture. With each sortie, the Delink position was weakened and the Geek hold strengthened.

In those cities where control was still disputed, Delink opposition was considerable and often heroic. One small guild, surrounded but determined, held out for six weeks. Before they were finally overwhelmed, their top guns had accounted for nearly two hundred and seventy-five besieging Geeks.

It was a painful lesson but the new dispensation was quick to learn from it. They abandoned frontal assault and resorted to guile. Large sums were paid for information and the rewards for active collaboration were too great for the Delink mind to resist. Defiance and courage began to collapse in a surging wave of corruption and intrigue.

It was at approximately this period that the Geeks became aware of the Stinker rescue operations.

Notices began to appear in every city offering fabulous rewards for the whereabouts of suspect developing Stinkers.

The mobs got a few, secret organizations a few more, but far more innocent people died in the witch hunts than Stinkers. And the genius who pointed out three Geek commanders to a lynch mob was never caught. Very little was left of the Geek commanders either.

The Stinkers, however, had quickly discovered that a large percentage of their kind were receptive to telepathic suggestion some two years before they became repellent to society and the Geek countermeasures became pointless.



Slender young girls and boys whose voices cracked at embarrassing moments simply packed their bags and vanished overnight. The exodus of teenagers from both Norm and Delink societies rose to the alarming figure of sixty a month.

Gammon, beset daily by countless new problems, was not happy about the news either—what next? This business was beginning to get him down. Where the hell was Toynbee? Hadn't seen him for days. It was all very well to shut oneself up to follow an alleged vital line of research but, damn it, there were limits.

At that moment Toynbee came in. He looked tired but triumphant.

Gammon chose to ignore both the weariness and the expression,

"Where the hell have you been?" He glowered.

Toynbee grinned. Gammon's glowering was, he knew from experience, more from want of companionship than actual disapproval.

"Working, I told you."

Gammon tried to frown but curiosity got the better of him. "Anything worthwhile?"

"I think so. The computers confirm it as the most logical on the data to hand."

"Well, you took your damned time."

"Sorry, there was a lot of cross checking to do. I wasn't able to come up with a lot but what I have seems to fit the rest."

He sat down and leaned back tiredly. "This is a rough picture, some of which you know: the invading parasites arrived here with their unfortunate hosts some four hundred years ago but the hosts did not, as we imagined, destroy themselves on arrival. On the contrary, having concealed their masters successfully, they were here to work. Their job was to construct and set in motion the mechanisms of conquest which their masters would operate telepathically. There were, for example, all these invisible gimmicks in the sky and, I have no doubt, countless other complicated mechanisms. At a guess, the hosts were glad of the

annihilation ordered— they must have been worked damn near to death anyway."

"Before their work was done, however, they had to begin all over, making modifications as snags were beginning to appear."

"Snags!" Gammon made it sound like a swear word. "How the hell do you know that?"

"I don't. It's pure supposition but it's the only supposition which fills the framework of fact."

Gammon wobbled his perpetual cigarette. "All right, go on. What were the snags?"

"Allow me to explain in my own way, please. In the first place—in my own opinion—this was not the first time by any means that the invader, or his forebears, had played this little take-over-a-planet lark and he was getting pretty good at it. Now and again, though, he ran up against something which shook him and we, the human race, rattled him considerably. Possibly he was becoming smug or overconfident but here, I believe, he goofed badly. I am quite sure he correctly assessed the level of intelligence, the technical development and the cultural achievements of the race and decided cheerfully we were ripe for the plucking or whatever it was he had in mind to do. What he failed to take into account or did not consider was that we, ourselves, were already developing into a parapsychological culture."

The cigarette fell out of Gammon's mouth and he made no effort to retrieve it.

"Say that again—simply."

"You know damn well what I mean. The human race had begun to develop mental abilities of its own. I think the invader became aware of this from the numerous reports of 'sightings.' People saw things in the sky, saucers, lights, cigar-shaped objects, U.F.O.'s. The whole mechanism of conquest was being revealed because a percentage of the race could see through or, were immune to, the telepathic screen put up to hide these operations."

"The invader realized immediately that in three or four generations

their methods of concealment would be rendered useless. They therefore incorporated a device designed to prevent those with this particular gift from seeing what was going on. They improvised, for want of a better description, an anxiety neurosis device precisely designed to affect the minds of those with this gift and *prevent* their looking at the sky."

Toynbee paused and said, "Got a cigarette?"

Gammon gave him one. "And then?"

"Then Scuttlers began to appear, people like myself with the gift of vision but psychologically incapable of looking at the sky and thus giving the show away."

"And the Delinks?"

"The Delinks and the Norms are, I think, part of the invasion plan. I will agree, before you bring it up, that we always had a criminal class, but not on this scale—not one-half of all humanity. This almost exact division was designed to keep us occupied fighting one another while the invader put over his plan according to routine occupation procedure and at his leisure."

"I don't see where the Stinkers fit into this."

"Don't you? Then you are not your usual bright self. As I said, man was developing mental abilities of his own and the Stinker was the second snag. Let me put it this way: had we been allowed to develop without interference, the growing numbers of telepaths would have been accepted as part of society by now. People would have come to understand that, with the passing of generations, the entire race would be telepathic."

Toynbee paused and grinned faintly. "This was a possibility which made the invader's hair stand on end. They were telepathic themselves and growing numbers of humans with similar talents might have revealed their presence and tossed a great dirty wrench into the whole mechanism of invasion. They had to do something about it and do it fast but, by God, they were damned ingenious in their choice of methods. With the characteristic psychology of a parasite life-form, they did nothing themselves but arranged their little broadcasting gimmicks so that *we* did it."

Gammon blinked at him and made a vague strangled sound both of confirmation and shock. "They turned a quite ordinary man with a telepathic gift into a Stinker so that we would carry out the executions for them."

"Exactly. I think that was another modification they had to make in these telepathic broadcasting devices. Naturally, I cannot state precisely how this gimmick works but I should imagine basically it works on the lines of a distorting mirror. The beams from these telepathic devices strike the human telepathic mind and reflect back a distorted picture to the non-telepathic viewer. Everything the recipient feels or sees is distorted and so obnoxious that it fills his mind with uncontrollable hatred and, no doubt, fear. The recipient feels that he is doing himself and the entire world a service if he removes this revolting danger."

Toynbee ground out the cigarette which had never reached his lips. "Strangely, the invader's biggest blunder was psychological. He underestimated the resilience and toughness of the human mind. Clearly he never suspected that a few fine and exquisitely well-balanced minds could survive both continual human assault and the paranoia-inducing life of a despised outcast. No doubt they consoled themselves with the fact that the Stinkers were both few, isolated and unaware of their telepathic abilities. Then, of course, blindly, we stepped in because if two Stinkers met there was a ninety percent chance of them discovering their mental abilities."

"Unfortunately, the invader was within an ace of, but not quite ready, to deal with it. He was compelled to improvise, using scum-Delinks to carry out a job which no guild of assassins would have undertaken for a king's ransom. Naturally, these clumsy efforts failed miserably. Taking an experienced Stinker with such crude tools was about as pointless as hunting a tiger with a butterfly net."

Toynbee rose, stretched and sat down again. "The invader was not unduly worried, however. He was developing a species of the human race by rush genetics capable of taking a Stinker. A species far more responsive to telepathic control than the normal human. This was not an improvisation; this was part of the overall plan, an 'improvised' human designed to take over the world from both Delinks and Norms."

Gammon banged his clenched fist on the edge of his desk in sudden realization. "The Geek! The blasted Geek!"

"Precisely, the blasted Geek. An organic telepathic slave, warrior and maid-of-all-work adapted to do the final takeover and cleaning up for the invader."

Gammon pulled angrily at his chin but he was pale. "What happens now?"

"You know as well as I. There is only one logical answer— a showdown, and fast. Daily the Stinkers increase in numbers and we, with Stinker cooperation, are putting two and two together too swiftly for comfort. My guess is that the Geeks, imagining it to be their own idea, are mobilizing, drilling and turning out weapons as fast as they can."

"Have you told Craig about this?"

"Yes. I took the liberty of sending him my complete findings, suppositions included."

Gammon met the other's eyes for a long frank moment. "The Stinkers are our only hope, aren't they?"

"Yes, I think they are."

"One question. Why can't the human telepaths find these parasites?"

"Two answers. One, I think the invader's telepathic abilities are on a different wavelength to the human otherwise they wouldn't need machines or find it necessary to adapt the Geeks to receive it. Two, the Stinkers are confused by the mechanical telepathic broadcasts."

Gammon swore and said, "It figures," sourly. "What do we do?"

"Face it. We can't do much but keep working and standing on a permanent yellow alert."

"If there's one thing I can't stand, it's hanging around waiting to be hit. Can't we take the fight to the enemy?"

"Don't be a fool. You saw and witnessed the casualty figures when they mounted a maximum, with Delink cooperation, on a single London street. How do you think we'd get by now against trained, organized and superior Geeks with new weapons?"

"You're saying we've lost already. I'll concede in logic but not in spirit."

"I didn't say give in. We still have the last string—the Stinkers."

The contents of Toynbee's report was passed telepathically through every community, now totaling several thousand, and a rapid decision was arrived at by the exchange of ideas.

*"Since we are receptive to, confused by and incidentally classified as Stinkers because of the invader's mechanical broadcasters, these must be destroyed or jammed."*

Craig: *"I have done a certain amount of research. I think they could be destroyed."*

Miguel: *"Confirmed. I have been able to determine that they are basically electrical in content."*

*"Overload?"*

*"Precisely."*

*"We shall need the full cooperation of police laboratories, since we have neither the facilities nor the power source for full-scale countermeasures."*

*"Let us pool our knowledge; time is limited."*

With teleprinter communication, a crude but presumably effective device was constructed within two weeks. Police, workshops turned out duplicates but the work of coordinating the devices took another ten days.

By this time, everyone, including the Stinkers, were sweating. The Geeks would not wait forever and Intelligence and spy-eye reports showed numerous troop movements and the massing of supplies preparatory to a full-scale assault.

There was, however, little evidence of a Seventh Weapon assault. The Geeks were going to do it the hard way.

Toynbee thought about this for a long time and suddenly snapped his fingers. "They won't use it. They can't afford to fling those things around indiscriminately or have us reply—the masters might cop one."

Gammon thought about it and his eyes blazed suddenly. "I've got an idea. Get me Craig on the teleprinter."

Tersely and savagely Gammon outlined his idea. "I was tempted to launch this thing straight away but I couldn't do it before consulting you. Let me know what you think of it but don't take all day."

"We won't take all day," was the reply. "We can get a decision on this in thirty seconds."

It took sixty.

"Unanimously approved. Congratulations on superb strategy."

Toynbee, who had heard the proposal, nodded. "I second that."

"Thanks, one of my rare moments. At least it will keep the odds even and perhaps give us a clue."

The buzzer sounded. "Yes—yes, excellent, right." He broke contact, looking slightly short of breath. "We're ready. I suppose I'd better let Craig know."

Craig sent back, "Congratulations—when?"

"Thirty minutes at fifteen hundred hours." Gammon sighed. "No time to warn the population; couldn't without giving the show away. I'm afraid we'll have quite a few casualties."

"Not all ours," said Toynbee with a certain satisfaction.

"No, the Geeks are bound to catch some of it, too."

"Yes, I can visualize the physical results but the psychological ones may be startling."

Gammon nodded and glanced at his watch. "Doesn't time crawl."

## ***Chapter Eleven***

THE REMAINING minutes seemed like hours. Gammon, pacing restlessly up and down, could hear his own heart beating in his chest.

Strangely, when the final seconds did arrive, there was no drama. No disembodied voice began to chant a minus count from ten to zero. Presumably, at exactly fifteen hundred hours, some high official pressed a switch but the two men had only their watches to go by.

Gammon, who finally managed to stop pacing, spent the last sixty seconds at the window, watching.

He did not know quite what he expected to see but when it came he was shaken.

Distortion appeared in the sky, like rain streaming down clear glass, patches of distortion in orderly rows and squares.

He shook his head worriedly and concentrated on the nearest.

The distortion became smoky, took outline and solidified.

It looked like a barrage balloon, black, bulbous but spiked with quills like a porcupine. To him it looked gross, menacing and vaguely obscene.

As he stared at it, a curl of black smoke seemed to creep between the spikes and then it wobbled as if shaken about on an uneven surface. One end dropped, leveled itself and then, like a huge weary animal, it rolled over and plunged earthward.

Gammon decided that it had not only been higher but a great deal larger than it had appeared. When it struck the ground, dust, rocks and soil spewed upward like water, and the impact shook the floor.

God, everywhere, all over the world, things like that, as big as that were plunging earthward. It must be like an air raid because no doubt some had fallen in cities—must be like being bombed with two-story buildings.

"I can see." Toynbee was beside him.

Gammon said, "Sure, sure," absently, still lost in his thoughts.

Toynbee pulled at his arm. "You don't understand and you're not listening—*I can look at the sky.*"

"Good God!" Gammon came out of his reverie abruptly. Then, with genuine feeling, "I'm really glad, old man, honestly. We've proved our



point, haven't we?"

"More than proved it." Toynbee looked as if he were about to burst from excitement. "I'm not a Scuttler anymore, I'm normal."

Gammon remembered he had work to do and strode quickly across the room. "Sorry, I have a brief speech to make." He flicked a switch. "This is Gammon. Ready to send?"

He waited for the affirmative and began. "Attention all humans and all aliens. This is a statement from the Police Department, attention."

"It is known to us that that section of the human race known as the Geeks are mobilizing for an all-out assault on the rest of humanity. Before that attack begins, however, let me issue a solemn warning. Should the Geeks, in that attack, resort to the Seventh Weapon, we will retaliate. We have had several hundred years to stockpile and our reserves are considerable."

"Hear this, then. Hear and take warning. For every weapon of this kind directed against us, we will throw five back. Not at specific targets, not necessarily at cities nor even at the advancing Geeks but indiscriminately. I will repeat that—*indiscriminately!*"

He paused and went on quietly. "Somewhere on this planet are out-world invaders, aliens. Oh, yes, my friends, we know all about you or at least enough to classify you as telepathic parasites. We know you are here, we know you are hidden, but do not become smug. One of these indiscriminate missiles may be reserved for you. In any case, even if you survive, what will it profit you to inherit a cinder? Who will remain as carriers to transport you to your next victim? Think carefully and then think again before you use that weapon."

"To humanity itself: you have seen strange objects fall from the sky; many of you may have died because of them but we did not put them there. The Norms did not put them there, nor did the Stinkers, the Delinks nor, in fairness, the Geeks. They were put there by the invader for your ultimate enslavement."

"Before I close, consider whose side you are on. It does not matter if I am a policeman, Delink or Stinker. Whose side are you on—mine... or the invader's?"

Gammon flicked the switch. "That should stir up a fair amount of trouble somewhere."

It did, but not until later. There were more immediate repercussions which had nothing to do with Gammon's broadcast.

There had been numerous casualties both in Norm and Delink communities when the alien mechanisms had plunged suddenly from the sky but the first sign of change was the unexpected appearance of Scuttlers on the streets, helping in the rescue work.

In Delink communities, at least twenty percent of the population was aware of a new and peculiar ability to think clearly. The large majority, needless to say, was confirmed by thought-habit, tradition and upbringing into a fixed pattern, but even these were having second thoughts about treachery and collaboration. Hell, a Delink was a Delink but what the hell was a blasted Geek? Mentally, although quite unconsciously, such thinkers were laying the foundation of a resistance movement.

The Geeks themselves were unaware of any internal changes and continued as before except for certain changes of opinion. The Seventh Weapon, for example, was a throwback to the Nuclear Age and, as such, its use would debase the new dispensation completely.

Their preparations for all-out attack continued as before with certain key units drafted to remote areas as surprise and harass shock units. As most of these units were set down so far from a possible battle that intervention was a geographical impossibility, the reason for the move seemed obscure. They were, however, assured by their officers that in the overall strategy their presence in such remote areas would finally turn the police retreat into a demoralized route.

Assault Day was brought forward three weeks and weapon production trebled. In the twelve remaining days after this alteration, however, all did not go well.

Delink resistance not only increased but was far more skillful and showed higher qualities of command and organization. The intake of false, valueless or totally misleading information rose alarmingly and a significant number of hitherto trustworthy collaborators became double agents.

There were other, more significant changes elsewhere which the Geeks knew nothing about.

Gammon was the recipient of one of them. He was busy with Toynbee when the caller buzzed.

"Damn." He flicked the switch, scowling. "Yes, Gammon here, what is it?"

"Will you take an outside visual, sir?"

"Eh? What the hell do you mean—an outside visual?"

"It is not a police call, sir. I presumed, therefore, it was some sort of police agent with his own transmitter."

Gammon was tempted to remind the operator that his department was not attached to Intelligence but checked himself. He'd had his fingers in too many pies lately and a crack of that kind might bring other departments down on his head. Maybe it was someone he did know.

"Very well. Hook it in number three."

The screen lit, and there was something oddly familiar about the face but he couldn't place it. He knew he ought to but he couldn't.

"Who the hell are you?" he asked ungraciously.

The face grinned. "Really! After all we've done for each other, I'm hurt that you should forget me so quickly."

"All we've done for—" Gammon's mouth fell open as recognition- struck him. "My God—*Craig!*" Another thought struck, leaving him oddly shaken. "Why haven't I thrown something at the screen?"

Craig laughed. "For the same reason that Scuttlers are out in the sunlight. When those airborne gimmicks blew, there was no telepathic beam to turn them into psychotics or us into Stinkers. We are acceptable now; no need to hold your nose."

Gammon shook his head, conscious of an enormous relief and a glowing feeling of friendship. Somehow he had always liked this man. "What can I do for you?"

"Well, don't roll out a red carpet, but we'd like to visit you—'we' meaning myself and my wife. There is a lot to discuss."

Gammon grinned delightedly, his cigarette almost burning his cheek. "I'll send a couple of ships to lead you in and, by God, if there is a red carpet on the premises, I'll roll it out and be damned to you."

When Craig arrived two hours later, Gammon almost pumped his hand off. "By God, it's good to know you, really know you without wanting to spit in your eye, if you know what I mean."

Despite his genuine warmth, Gammon was still a policeman and an astute judge of men. Craig was lazy-looking, likeable, casual in his movements but inside he was like cold steel. He could understand the lack of enthusiasm even a top gun might show at being invited to take this ex-Stinker. Craig could blast him clean out of his boots before his fingers twitched.

Gammon waved them to chairs, vaguely aware that Mrs. Craig's eyes were full of stars and her face serene but radiant. God, Craig had snapped her up quick—couldn't blame him. She was a beautiful woman with a kind of inner beauty one couldn't quite explain in words. Damn funny really, how he, Gammon, had played cupid.

His face felt suddenly hot. "I say, do you read minds?"

"You mean, am I reading yours?" Craig was grinning.

"Well, no, not exactly, not—"

"All right all right, I'll put you out of your misery. No, I am not reading your mind because I am unable to do so. I cannot even read the mind of another telepath unless he or she opens it to me."

"Well, that's a relief anyway," said Toynbee, frankly. "Odd what a horrible, critical and perverse mind one has when one is trying to think along neutral and innocuous lines."

Gammon laughed. "Sorry, forgetting my manners. I haven't introduced you yet..."

An hour later, after a meal, they got down to business.

This time, however, Gammon remembered his manners. "Can I find you a book or something, Mrs. Craig, while we go into technicalities?"

She laughed softly. "That will not be necessary—I understand technicalities."

"You do?" Gammon looked blank.

She laughed again. "I'm teasing you; it's not fair of me. No, Mr. Gammon, I do not understand technicalities personally, but I understand them through my husband's mind. I know it is difficult to understand but, to all intents and purposes, we are one mind, one individual, not two."

Craig grinned. "Sorry, true. As you may have heard, my wife exerts considerable influence over wild creatures."

"I did know that."

"I thought you might. On the other hand, since those sky gimmicks were knocked out, there have been marked changes. She seems to exert a peculiarly soothing effect on nature. I have not seen a lion lie down with a lamb but, in the immediate area of my wife's bungalow, I have seen a herd of wildebeests grazing untroubled while a leopard wandered through and among them."

"The hell you have!" Gammon pushed a cigarette into the corner of his mouth. "What do you deduce from this?"

"I don't know that I dare deduce anything but I could guess that when man finally reaches telepathic maturity his influence will change the face of the Earth. War, misunderstanding, broken marriages, intolerance and hypocrisy will be out."

"What about the misfits and the crooks?"

"The mass mind of the race will be able to adjust the minds and, if necessary, the glandular balance and metabolic rate of those so afflicted."

Craig paused and smiled faintly at Gammon's intensely interested face. "As you know, my wife was already effecting cures on Spiers' disease. This complaint, we have since discovered, was caused by the constant irritation of the telepathic gimmicks on certain sensitive minds. Geo could cure this

telepathically because it was, in effect, a telepathic disease."

"One day," said Toynbee, softly, "I'd like to put all this on tape. It will keep me occupied for a couple of years."

Gammon opened his mouth to ask more questions but checked himself. The man got him so interested that he forgot where he was and that there was work to do.

"Hadn't we better get down to business? What about the Geeks?"

"Well, we can't tell you when they are going to attack but we can tell which way they are coming once they start moving. We can't read their minds but we can feel their presence. The fact that I could both feel and count their numbers enabled me to plot their progress and set booby traps in their path when they sent a commando unit to get us."

"That will be a great help." Gammon nodded quickly. "I must be frank with you, however. Our little friends are loaded down with new and rather frightful weapons. We shall be outclassed and probably outnumbered."

Craig smiled faintly. "We haven't been sitting around, you know—have you any portable detector equipment?"

"What sort of detector equipment?"

"Oh, you know, the usual stuff to detect minefields, automatic weapons and so on?"

Gammon frowned at him. "You must know we have."

"Like me to make it look silly?"

Gammon almost glowered. "Are you aware we have the best technical laboratories of all time? We have equipment so delicate it will pick up and pinpoint a gram of gunpowder in a mountain of slag, register and report the presence of a filing mechanism and scream its head off at one thousandth of a gram of *Gelthite* ten miles away?"

"Shut up bragging," cut in Toynbee, curtly, "and prove it."

"Right, let's get out to the test ground." Ten minutes later, Craig had finished burying a number of objects. "I have laid a small minefield,

naturally a safe one with limited charges. See if your experts can find it." Gammon grinned but with a certain lack of confidence. "In this fort I have the world's top expert." He pressed the communicator lapel of his jacket.

"I want Gilson down here with his entire squad and all his equipment, fast."

Gilson proved to be a tall, confident man with a red face and large teeth. His smile had the toothy supercilious contempt of an irritable camel.

"Find a minefield! Ha! My instruments will dig sixty feet and comb it like a woman's hair. It will find an instrument as small as a bee's ear and hand it to you on a platter." He gestured contemptuously. "All right, boys, switch them on."

They switched. Numerous banks of instruments emitted a low humming sound and massive housings like huge cameras swayed to and fro probing the rough soil.

After ten minutes, Gilson said, "Cut! What is this, some sort of gag? I have a negative reading on every damned instrument."

"Really?" Craig grinned. "Watch!"

There were six needles of yellow flame as black smoke and fragments of soil geysered from the ground.

Gilson said nothing but his smile looked lopsided. He walked over and inspected the small craters.

"How the hell did you do that?" There was respect, awe and unease in his voice.

Craig softened the blow. "Not a fair test, really. The mine cases were a mixture of clay and vegetable adhesives which, naturally, would not ring a bell on your instruments. Inside was a clockwork plastic motor and seven different separate chemicals. Not one of those seven chemicals would have raised the mildest reaction in your instruments separately. By certain impulses, however, directly after your probe, I set the clockwork motor going. This brought the seven chemicals together in the correct order and they immediately became unstable and blew."

"But I should have got the trigger." Gilson was almost wringing his hands. "To beam an impulse to a receptor circuit, you've got to have a trigger. I should have picked it up."

Gammon patted his back soothingly. "Not for a telepathic impulse, my friend." He turned to Craig. "I should have thought of that sooner. Lucky I didn't bet on it. I presume our workshops can turn these things out quickly?"

"By the hundreds; they're simple enough to construct."

"And the telepathic trigger?"

"Even simpler, a common plastic."

"We'll give these Geeks one or two nasty shocks with help like that."

"Don't belittle your ability. It was your genius to give that Seventh Weapon warning."

"It stopped them using it, perhaps." Gammon sighed tiredly.

Craig patted his shoulder. "It also gave the show away, which is why we agreed so quickly."

"Gave the show away?" Gammon looked at him blankly. "Certainly. Been keeping track of their troop movements?"

"Why, yes, naturally."

"Good, let's go back to your office and take a look at some of them, shall we?"

Gammon looked puzzled but agreed. "Now you come to mention it, some of the dispositions look odd. I thought so at the time but was unable to find reasons for it."

He pressed a switch when he arrived at his office and a wall map lit. "Let's see now—ah, yes, a whole damn division settled here near Dover, England. They're putting up fortifications for all they're worth and the same thing is happening on the opposite side of the channel in France. Why? Do they think we're going to pop suddenly out of the ocean or something? Again, over here in Europe, they've practically smothered



Gibraltar. Now in the United States, they're here; used to be Fort Knox a couple of centuries ago but the whole area got clobbered, if you remember."

He paused and shrugged. "Here's a couple of mad ones: two divisions in the Andes, three in the middle of the Sahara."

He stopped. "What are you laughing at?" Craig shook his head. "Sorry, not laughing at you; it's just that they fell for it."

"I don't follow you."

"Sorry, but when you made your speech about the Seventh Weapon, you not only prevented its use for a period of time but you triggered a defense mechanism. Our invaders not only awoke to possible danger to themselves but were compelled to take additional defensive measures. The Geeks are not building additional fortifications, they are building heat-shields, air-coolers and strengthening already powerful defenses. In short, my good friends, quite unconsciously they are protecting their masters."

Toynbee came forward. "You mean the parasites are controlling Geek troop movements for their own protection?"

"Quite, and we can make a pretty good guess where they are, can't we?" He pointed. "They're in the old channel runnel, hence the protection and additional troops on each side of the channel. At Gibraltar, they're in the old fortifications in the rock."

"Then they must be in the vaults at Fort Knox." Gammon's voice cracked slightly.

"Exactly. God knows what sort of fortifications they've made for themselves in the Sahara or up in the Andes."

"I wonder what they look like." Toynbee's voice was musing. "Presumably they're well-nigh helpless from the purely physical point of view."

He paused and looked at Craig. "I understand they're on a different telepathic wavelength than you?"

Craig nodded. "Different and too powerful. We could tune in but, from

tentative feelers, they could burn our minds out before we knew what hit us."

"You can offer no direct help in that respect?"

"Not yet. It will be a different story when the Geeks launch their offensive or one of their immediate hideouts is threatened. They will then be using their mental —energies in several spheres at once and we could start prodding them around a bit."

Gammon shivered. "Sooner you than me. The idea of these things makes me feel slightly sick. Is there anything else we can do?"

"Yes. I think there is. Follow up your speech and try to stir up the Delinks. You must have contacts and, now that the gimmicks are gone, you will be less mutually repugnant to each other. Have you thought what a couple of assassin guilds could do operating as guerilla bands in the Geek rear?"

Gammon thought about it and his expression became almost blissful. The Geeks might be superior beings but, by God, they didn't know all the tricks. A top guild knew more ways of killing people than a first-class hotel knew about preparing food.

He grinned. "I like that."

"Good, here's another idea. With your approval, we propose attaching telepathic observers to your area headquarters. These observers will not only be able to tell you where the Geeks are but which way they are heading and at what speed. Furthermore, they can't be jammed or blotted out like detector or spy instruments."

"Another good idea but I'll have to have a say in command areas. Some of the brass, particularly the old-timers, may regard the introduction of telepathic observers as a questionable and dangerous eccentricity. Incidentally, what about the rest of you?"

Craig shrugged. "We had in mind small groups of strike forces to be called upon by our observers when things start going in the wrong direction."

"Excellent." Gammon rubbed his hands together quickly. "Almost I am

happy, but not quite. The Geeks outnumber us, they have new weapons, new techniques and the backing of the aliens."

Craig nodded soberly. "We are aware of that also. What is your personal reaction?"

"Personal reaction? Oh, I see what you're getting at." Gammon's mouth tightened. "To fight to the last, naturally."

"With due respect, couldn't we have every Seventh Weapon we have aimed at those hideouts? If it looked like we were going under, we could throw the lot at them. There wouldn't be much left of poor old Earth but there wouldn't be any triumphant parasites either. No known defense in existence, including multiple repulser screens, could stand up to solar temperatures like that."

Gammon smiled twistedly but there was considerable respect in his eyes. "I don't think there's a man or woman on Earth who wouldn't go for that. Yes, yes, yes, I'm with you all the way. If we go, by God, we'll take these crawlies with us, every damn one."

He thrust a cigarette into his mouth and began to press switches. "Excuse me, no sense in wasting time, speak to some top brass, then get onto a few Delinks I happen to know."

## ***Chapter Twelve***

THE GEEKS observed the strictest possible security measures regarding their day of assault but, as to many things, they were outclassed by sheer experience.

The Delinks had forgotten more about gathering information, conning facts and beam-tapping than a Geek could learn in a lifetime.

Within three days, the Delinks had the time of the proposed assault to the exact minute and for that exact minute in every city they made their own preparations.

In many, since the destruction of the telepathic mechanisms, there had been notable mental changes. A large number had found themselves with a sense of racial unity. It was all right knocking off cops when there were only cops, but not for a damned outsider. Cops were at least human and

compared with Geeks even Stinkers were preferable— they'd heard that Stinkers were bearable now anyway.

They were not, generally, given to deep thought but those who accepted the idea of aliens felt repugnance and anger. All, however, were unanimous in their detestation of the Geeks. Stinkers may have changed but not the Geeks; they still *felt* all wrong and they were so damned cocky, cool, efficient and passionless.

The Geeks themselves, however, were now a formidable war machine, efficient, well-trained, superbly equipped and peculiarly nerveless.

On the day of the attack, they moved to their appointed positions with the precision of machines and stood waiting.

The Delinks watched from concealed vantage points with sly unpleasant smiles. These creeps thought they knew it all, with their armed guards and intensive security precautions. Kids, blasted kids but cold frightening kids with bleak eyes and, despite their youthful faces, a kind of wizened and ancient look.

Look at 'em, dressed up in their pretty uniforms, like toys; that's what they looked like, wooden toys. The soldiers—all the same height—standing in rows. The officers in their long coats, slightly taller, conferring with intent faces all peering at their watches.

When the order came to move, the soldiers should have boarded the armor-floats - and troop carriers. Some did but not all.

In London, a Geek soldier clutched at a blackened hole in his chest and crumpled to the ground. A button—someone had got to the clothing stores weeks before—had unaccountably exploded.

In New York, a cleverly concealed plastic explosive attached to the instep of an officer's boots blew him and three private soldiers to fragments.

All over the world it was happening: armor-floats sabotaged or booby trapped, equipment gimmicked, made lethal.

It made small difference to the Geek's numerical superiority but it caused confusion, upset time tables and made an ominous start to the

great attack.

As the troops left the city, the top guns of the leading guilds took a hand, and they knew their business: weapons with curved or varying trajectories, weapons which fired around corners, micro-missiles proceeding at walking pace until within ten feet of the target.

The Geeks suffered many casualties before their long armored columns began to wind out from the cities like endless snakes.

The columns had air and stratosphere cover but for defensive purposes. The Geek flyers were not ready for a showdown yet, not until they had succeeded in knocking out the bases of supply.

Needless to say, both sides had already hurled missiles and like giants with shields, both were employing detonator or deflector screens. High in the sky, there was a continuous flickering and an ever-spreading pall of black smoke.

Halfway to the nearest forts, the columns ran into the first of the new telepathic minefields. Float after float was blasted skyward but the Geeks pressed on with horrific disregard for losses.

Their commanders, however, were aware of a certain unease. Police resistance was far less than they had anticipated and, rightly, they suspected the existence of the-card-up-the-sleeve. It was there but not in the area they suspected.

In the Andes a quite normal and right-seeming eagle which had been perched on a peak, unmoving for several hours abruptly changed character. It lowered its head in an odd way and blasted eighteen men, two work robots and a new emplacement clean out of existence. Normal instruments had checked the bird several times in routine sweeps but, deactivated, Gun's internal structure was screened by his plastic feathers.

When the dust cleared, the bird had gone but trouble had only just begun. Troops which had been hacking their way through the jungle below the mountains for several days suddenly opened up with all they had. Detection, due to the thick mat of jungle above them, had not found them.

Worse, the fire was accurate and concentrated. Geek mountain emplacements and fortifications suddenly flared red and puffed out of

existence.

Large sections of mountain rumbled downward carrying away several more emplacements in rivers of debris and bouncing rocks, some of which were as big as two-story buildings.

Almost at the same instant, alarms began to sound in the detector systems heralding both missiles and flyers. The Geeks realized with horror that they were not only hard pressed and under siege, but they hadn't room to move or deploy. So much of their previous maneuvering space had been blasted away or was under the fire of fixed weapons that they were getting in each other's way.

In the English Channel both near Dover and the French coast rather smug-feeling Geeks, glad to be out of the main battle, were shocked to see slender vessels suddenly emerge from the water and begin firing almost as soon as they appeared. As they did so, a multiplicity of robotic objects emerged from the waves and, under fire-cover from the sea, began to crawl up the beaches.

A lot were knocked out but those which escaped crawled into the new fortifications and promptly exploded.

Near Fort Knox, a Geek armored column having fought its way with prohibitive twenty-five percent losses to the nearest police fort found it almost empty but full of automatic weapons and shifting minefields. By the time it had fought its way out again, a police armored column which had been hidden in gullies, constructed pits and runnels, was already miles away and racing for Fort Knox. This column had the heaviest flyer cover the Geeks had ever seen and it shot the local opposition out of the sky in less than ten minutes.

Miles away, Craig, lying back in a long chair with sweat beading his forehead, had his eyes closed.

In front of him Gammon and Toynbee watched the report screens tensely. Periodically Gammon forgot himself and unashamedly bit his nails. This battle was hell on the nerves and the report screen seemed to give only part of the picture.

It was all right for Craig, lying back holding his wife's hand and listening mentally, but was it? Maybe it was worse, he didn't know.

"It's working!" Craig was upright now, his eyes open. "Geek columns are pulling back on seven fronts. Near Fort Kent in England, they were within a mile of the perimeter. Now they have turned and are racing for Dover. In South America they're piling into transport planes and racing for the Andes. I hope we're ready for them."

"Ready for them!" Gammon grinned gleefully. "I've a picked fleet at damn near orbital height waiting to drop right on their backs."

"Well, cheer up. Four more columns are racing to the relief of Fort Knox and a friend of mine, Miss Matsumi, is waiting where the four columns must converge on a rather high road." He winked. "In case you've forgotten. Miss Matsumi frightens people, even Geeks."

Gammon laughed but inside he was all elation. It had worked, the carefully timed series of assaults on the remote Geek outposts had turned the tables. These attacks had been so successful that the main forces had been compelled to rush to their defense—not *their* defense: the defense of their parasitic masters.

The Geeks themselves were pulling back and racing to the relief of the beleaguered garrisons for a variety of reasons—none of them the real ones. There were vital installations to protect, secret weapons, anything.

The top Geek brass, in their turn, thought that the decision to withdraw was their own idea. These particular strongholds were in the fundamental line of attack and must be held at all costs. Once secured, of course, and made invulnerable, conquest of the planet could proceed as before.

It was not quite as easy as that. The roads and areas over which they had advanced had somehow been re-mined behind them. The same damn undetectable mines as before, only there seemed more of them this time.

More disconcerting, however, was the resistance of Delink cities—cities from which Delink heavy weapons had supposedly been confiscated.

These same cities now burned with fury against them; lights blinked from rubble and hill and the general toll was almost as bad as that inflicted by the police forts.

Where they returned or were compelled to pass, nearly every street was mined and so many buildings booby trapped that to enter was suicide.

From the military point of view, the withdrawal was a gigantic tactical blunder. On all fronts, the Geeks had surrendered the initiative to a vastly more experienced fighting force which could successfully predict the disposition of the Geek forces.

The police, taking a calculated risk, had deliberately weakened their strong points and concentrated their main strength on the hideouts. In consequence, around these vital installations they had numerical superiority, immense air supremacy and an overwhelming balance of fire-power.

As a result the Geek assault groups had been compelled to rush to their support over extended distances and with no prior preparations.

Under such conditions a vastly superior and more heavily armed enemy became vulnerable. Flyers were clawed from the sky and racing columns, their flanks dangerously exposed, fell victim to numerically inferior but compact strike forces.

One of the most efficient war machines the world had ever seen was being chopped to pieces by superior strategy.

In the fort, although elated, Gammon looked as if he had not slept for days. There was darkness under his eyes, his face was drawn and there was a brown mark at the corner of his mouth from continual smoking.

Automatically he snapped a switch. "Yes?" It seemed to him that he had been receiving and issuing messages for several months.

His face blanked. "Say that again!"

Presumably the unseen caller said it again for Gammon punched about six switches at once. "I want a fighter with escort *now!* This is top, plus priority, so don't hang about."

He turned, the exhaustion gone from his face and his eyes almost blazing. "We've taken Fort Knox!"

Twenty minutes later a flyer was racing them halfway around the world. The pilot, under instructions, was pushing it; the vessel was wrapped in a pink bubble of heat from air friction.



Below them, too far below to distinguish, fighting was still going on. Roads and open spaces were littered with shot-up armor-floats, pitted with blackened craters, gouged with a variety of weapons and sullenly smoking.

At one spot was sheer chaos: three Geek armored columns racing for Fort Knox had converged onto a cliff road and had instituted the pile-up of all time. Wrecked floats dotted the countryside for several miles; some lay in ravines, one upon another, several were locked together. Others, abandoned, careered around colliding with those that were still. Many burned redly and periodically exploded.

Police flyers which had been waiting for just this occasion were now diving like meteors from the sky and adding to the confusion.

Miss Matsumi, climbing into Miguel's flyer, bunched back a flood of tears. *"I hated doing that. I know it had to be done but I hated doing it."*

Miguel laid his hand gently on her shoulder. *(Compassion, understanding, love.) "Yes, yes, I know, too; it is not their fault."*

At Fort Knox the party was met by a triumphant Chief Commander with a wounded arm and a blackened face.

"Congratulations." Gammon pumped his good hand enthusiastically.

"Thank you. It has not been easy. Made me wonder if these Geeks were quite human—they fought like madmen or robots. They fought wounded, they fought dying and they kept firing, shot full of holes and falling to the ground. Those without arms fought with their teeth, clawed with nails and screamed like animals."

"Have you got through into the deep vaults yet?"

"Not yet. We've got through nine booby trapped locks with the loss of thirty men but now we've run up against another one which the experts say is thirty-five feet thick. It's not ours—no man ever made it—and heat won't touch it. At the moment we're blasting our way through it with every weapon we have, inch by inch."

"We'll go down."

"Right, I'll lead the way, sir—er—do you think the lady should go? It's a little rough down there."

"The lady is with me," said Craig quietly. "It will be all right; she is a doctor." He did not bother to explain further.

"Very well, this way. Keep well to the side, please, we're still running casualties out."

As they descended, Gammon became slowly aware of a peculiar unease which increased as they descended. In the rigged-up lighting system which the army was using, he saw that Toynbee was feeling it, too.

"What the hell is this feeling? For two pins I'd turn and run." He addressed the question to Craig.

The other smiled without humor and Gammon saw there was sweat on his face.

"We're getting too near the aliens for comfort. Fortunately they are on a different wavelength or they could burn out our brains but we are now near enough to be discomforted."

"Discomforted!" Gammon scowled. "That's the understatement of the year, isn't it?"

He walked on slowly, becoming aware of the nature of the feeling. It was hatred, no, more than hatred, sheer naked malevolence. The aliens were trying to drive them back by the feeling in their minds.

After twenty minutes of walking, climbing obstacles and squeezing through narrow openings they reached the final door.

A chief technician, sweat cutting white lines in his blackened face, made a weary gesture. "Only another six inches to go, thank God. Hell, we've used enough power to sink a couple of large islands. This door is fantastic."

He made a gesture. "One more blast in just a minute."

"Any paralyzer guns down here?"

Gammon, trying to fight off the malevolence, jumped. "Eh, sorry, what

was that, Craig?"

Craig repeated his question.

"Why, yes, I guess so—why?"

"We need some. There's something waiting behind that door when we get through it."

"The aliens?"

"Oh, yes, our parasitic friends are there, all right, but there is something else."

Gammon looked at him and gave a quick order. If Craig said there was something behind that door, there was.

"Take cover!"

The tunnel flared with a mixture of greenish, blue and brilliant white light which hurt their eyes. Heat and a curious electric tingling touched their bodies and was gone.

"We're through!" The voice was cracked with triumph,

"Paralyzers." Craig's voice was a bark.

There came the odd crackling discharge of the weapons as the order was obeyed and from far in the distance came a peculiarly sad hooting sound.

"What the hell was that?" Gammon's voice cracked a little.

"I told you there was something behind that door." Craig strode forward. "It would be better if we went first."

By the time they had covered the remaining hundred yards and squeezed their way through numerous housings and equipment, experts had succeeded in cooling the jagged opening. Craig edged his way through with Gammon close behind him.

At the end of the jagged opening was a vast lighted room but directly in front of them, sprawled by the opening, were six—Gammon blinked,

recognizing them instantly; they'd dug up skeletons of these creatures, seen a drawing of one of them.

Before he could pause to study them, however, malevolence seemed to strike him with almost physical force and his eyes were drawn to the contents of the room.

Tanks, row upon row of square transparent tanks, filled to the top with a darkish liquid. Above each tank was a sort of framework and from framework hung...

Gammon looked again and shuddered. The thing looked like a huge and partly skinned bat, and it hung half in and half out of the liquid. It had no eyes, no wings but its resemblance to a huge bat was unmistakable. The things pulsed slowly and regularly like the throats of toads.

Gammon turned to the Commander, who was staring almost pop-eyed at the scene.

"Bring down the Seventh Weapon," he said softly. "Dump it smack in the middle of this lot, set the timing for reasonable evacuation and seal this place up." He looked about him. "God, I'm going to enjoy watching this lot fry. I can feel no pity whatever."

Five hours later, an area of ground which had once held Fort Knox heaved like the back of a wounded animal. Jets of vapor hissed from sudden fissures and abruptly ignited into five hundred foot geysers of flame. The surface of the earth smoked, became a red crust and crumbled into an ever widening crater.

In the Andes, a mountaintop took on the property of a volcano and abruptly blew its top in a sheet of white flame.

In the English Channel a pillar of swirling steam was rising five thousand feet into the sky and, only a few hundred miles away, the steaming ocean was pouring into the crater which had been Gibraltar.

Elsewhere the fighting was over—dazed and demoralized Geeks wandered around the countryside, some still aimlessly trailing their weapons in their hands.

"Why were we fighting?"

"I don't understand what we were fighting about."

"Nor I. We have nothing against the police. You know, I did a lot of things I didn't mean to do and I had ideas which didn't seem to be *my* ideas."

"Yes, everything seemed so rational, so reasonable then, but now I can't understand why."

Farther away, Craig had succeeded in establishing mental communication with the aliens.

"We were slaves, you understand. We attended the purification machines, attended the nutrient tanks, but our work was nearly done. In another two or three generations of what you call the Geeks, they would have taken over and we should have been destroyed."

Weeks later, Gammon held a party, a private party but a big one. "You've got to celebrate some time, if only to ease the tension."

Gammon invited close friends in the force and there were numerous Stinkers among the guests, including, of course, Craig and his wife. There was even a mild sprinkling of ex-Delinks, including one slightly abashed but wholly reformed Father-Assassin.

Gammon enjoyed himself but did not get drunk. He never permitted anything to interfere with his clarity of mind.

Besides the party, however, both he and Toynbee wanted private words with Craig. There were certain loose ends which they were unable to explain and wanted cleared up.

Finally they succeeded in cornering him.

"What I don't understand," said Gammon, after broaching his subject, "is what these damn parasites got out of it. They were completely helpless, blind and presumably disinterested in the planet they had conquered. Why did they do it?"

Craig smiled. "You're almost answering the question yourself but, as it's somewhat involved, I'd better explain."

He paused to smile at his wife sitting some distance away. "I don't know how these creatures began but presumably they evolved to their present state of outward helplessness. Not that helplessness mattered, since they could always enslave some other unfortunate life-form to take care of their wants."

"I'm afraid," said Toynbee, "I am unable to perceive any particular elation in hanging upside down in a tank of fluid even if someone does take care of your needs."

Craig laughed. "I'm afraid you're both missing the point. Our invader, specifically, was not blind, not helpless. He was enjoying every possible physical experience and, at the same time, drinking the most intoxicating wine of all—absolute power."

They stared at him blankly. Finally Toynbee said, "How?"

"Through his host, of course. The invader was telepathic. Everything the host experienced the parasite experienced and, if he liked that particular experience, he could do a little mental manipulation to get some more."

"The invader *saw*, but through the eyes of his hosts, moved and felt through the same medium and, each time, absorbed a quota of knowledge from the same source."

"I assume and I can only assume, mind you, that after a time it paled. The invader had run through the whole range of the host's experiences, wearied of that particular world and wanted to move on."

Craig sighed and shook his head. "The last time that happened, they gave their usual tele-hypnotic orders and the hosts went out to find one for them. Unfortunately they found us and the parasites moved on."

"I imagine the situation was not new. The human race was not exactly cut to order but with a little alteration would be ideal. The slaves, under the instructions of their masters, set up the usual mechanism of conquest, and the parasites went to work telepathically creating a section of the human race which, after a few generations, would be ideal for their full control. These, needless to say, were the Geeks. Through the adapted senses of these unfortunates, the parasites intended to explore this new world and run through another gamut of experience. No doubt, after a few thousand years, they would weary of it and want to move on. It would then

be the Geeks' turn to go out and find one for them." Craig stopped and shook his head. "Is that enough?"

"Too damn much." Toynbee shivered. "I'm going to find myself another drink, maybe several drinks—I need them."

Gammon only grinned lazily. "He worries too much, too sensitive. Speaking for myself, I have a philosophy—it's over. If I worried about what might have happened I'd be a nervous wreck. In any case, this is a party, a celebration. People are here to enjoy themselves."

He gestured with his glass, grinning. "I'm surprised at you—as chief architect of our victory you ought to be singing. You and Geo should be sitting together, holding hands, twined in each other's arms or even kissing."

Craig winked at Geo and looked up at him, smiling. "We are," he said. "Don't you realize that yet? We are."