

Worlds of the Imperium

I

I stopped in front of a shop with a small wooden sign which hung from a wrought-iron spear projecting from the weathered stone wall. On it the word antikvariat was lettered in spidery gold against dull black, and it creaked as it swung in the night wind. Below it a metal grating covered a dusty window with a display of yellowed etchings, woodcuts, and lithographs, and a faded mezzotint. Some of the buildings in the pictures looked familiar, but here they stood in open fields, or perched on hills overlooking a harbor crowded with sails. The ladies in the pictures wore great bell-like skirts and bonnets with ribbons, and carried tiny parasols, while dainty-footed horses pranced before carriages in the background.

It wasn't the prints that interested me though, or even the heavy gilt frame embracing a tarnished mirror at one side; it was the man whose reflection I studied in the yellowed glass, a dark man wearing a tightly-belted grey trench-coat that was six inches too long. He stood with his hands thrust deep in his pockets and stared into a darkened window fifty feet from me.

He had been following me all day.

At first I thought it was coincidence when I first noticed the man on the bus from Bromma, then studying theatre announcements in the hotel lobby while I registered, and half an hour later sitting three tables away sipping coffee while I ate a hearty dinner.

I had discarded that theory a long time ago. Five hours had passed and he was still with me as I walked through the Old Town, medieval Stockholm still preserved on an island in the middle of the city. I had walked past shabby windows crammed with copper pots, ornate silver, dueling pistols, and worn cavalry sabres; very quaint in the afternoon sun, but grim reminders of a ruder day of violence after midnight. Over the echo of my footsteps in the silent narrow streets the other steps came quietly behind, hurrying when I hurried, stopping when I stopped. Now the man stared into the dark window and waited, the next move was up to me.

I was lost. Twenty years is a long time to remember the tortuous turnings of the streets of the Old Town. I took my guide book from my pocket and turned to the map in the back. My fingers were clumsy.

I craned my neck up at the stone tablet set in the corner of the building; it was barely legible: Köpmangatan. I found the name on the folding map and saw that it ran for three short blocks, ending at Stortorget; a dead end. In the dim light it was difficult to see the fine detail on the map; I twisted the book around and got a clearer view; there appeared to be another tiny street, marked with crosslines, and labeled Skeppar Olofs gränd. I tried to remember my Swedish; gränd meant alley. Skeppar Olof's Alley, running from Köpmangatan to Trädgårdsgatan, another tiny street. It seemed to lead to the lighted area near the palace; it looked like my only route out. I dropped the book back into my pocket and moved off casually toward the Alley of Skeppar Olof. I hoped there was no gate across the entrance.

My shadow waited a moment, then followed. Slowly as I was ambling, I

gained a little on him. He seemed in no hurry at all. I passed more tiny shops, with ironbound doors and worn stone sills, and then saw that the next doorway was an open arch. I paused idly, then turned in. Once past the portal, I bounded up the alley at top speed. Six strides, eight, and I was at the end and darting to the left toward a deep doorway. There was just a chance I'd cleared the alley before the dark man had reached the entrance. I stood and listened. I heard the scrape of shoes, then heavy breathing from the direction of the alley a few feet away. I waited, breathing with my mouth wide open, trying not to pant audibly. After a moment the steps moved away. The proper move for my silent companion would be to cast about quickly for my hiding place, on the assumption that I had concealed myself close by. He would be back this way soon.

I risked a glance. He was moving quickly along, looking sharply about, with his back to me. I pulled off my shoes and without taking time to think about it, stepped out. I made it to the alley in three paces, and hurried out of sight as the man stopped to turn back. I was halfway down when my foot hit a loose stone, and I flew the rest of the way.

I hit the cobblestones shoulder first, and followed up with my head. I rolled over and scrambled to my feet, my head ringing. I clung to the wall by the foot of the alley as the pain started. Now I was getting mad, and to hell with strategy. I heard the soft-shod feet coming, and gathered myself to jump him as he came out. The footsteps hesitated just before the arch, then the dark round head with the uncut hair peeped out. I swung a haymaker-and missed. He darted into the street and turned, fumbling in his overcoat. I assumed he was trying to get a gun, and aimed a kick at his mid-section. I had better luck this time; I connected solidly, and had the satisfaction of hearing him gasp in agony. I hoped he hurt as bad as I did. Whatever he was fumbling for came free then, and he backed away, holding the thing to his mouth.

"One-oh-nine, where in bloody blazes are you?" he said in a harsh voice, glaring at me. He had an odd accent. I realized the thing was some sort of microphone. "Come in, one-oh-nine, this job's going to pieces . . ." He backed away, talking, eyes on me. I leaned against the wall; I hurt too bad to be very aggressive. There was no one else in sight. His soft shoes made whispering sounds on the paving stones. Mine lay in the middle of the street where I had dropped them when I fell.

Then there was a sound behind me. I whirled, and saw the narrow street almost blocked by a huge van. I let my breath out with a sigh of relief. Here was help . . .

Two men jumped down from the cab, and without hesitation stepped up to me, took my arms and escorted me toward the rear of the van. They wore tight white uniforms, and said nothing.

"I'm all right," I said. "Grab that man . . ." About that time I realized he was following along, talking excitedly to the man in white, and that the grip on my arms was more of a restraint than a support. I dug in my heels and tried to pull away. I remembered suddenly that the Stockholm police don't wear white uniforms.

I might as well not have bothered. One of them unclipped a thing like a tiny aerosol bomb from his belt and sprayed it in my face. I felt myself go limp. I was still conscious, but my feet dragged as they hauled me around to the back of the van, up a ramp, pushed me into a chair. I was dimly aware of the ramp being pulled in, the doors closing. I was fading but not yet out; I shouted after them, but they didn't answer. I heard more clicks and the sounds of things being moved; then the purr of an engine. There was a sensation of motion, very smooth, nothing more. I tried to yell, gave it up. I gathered my strength and tried to get out of the chair; I couldn't make it. It was too hard to keep my eyes open. My last thought as consciousness left me was that they could have killed me there in the deserted street as easily as they had kidnapped me.

II

There was a scratching sound which irritated me. I tried unsuccessfully to weave it into a couple of dreams before my subconscious gave up. I was lying on my back, eyes closed; I couldn't think where I was. I remembered a frightening dream about being followed, and then as I became aware of pain in my shoulder and head, my eyes snapped open. I was lying on a cot at the side of a small office; the scratching came from the desk where a dapper man in a white uniform sat writing. There was a humming sound and a feeling of motion.

I sat up. At once the man behind the desk looked up, rose, and walked over to me. He drew up a chair and sat down.

"Please don't be alarmed," he said in a clipped British accent. "I am Chief Captain Winter. You need merely assist in giving me some routine information, after which you will be assigned comfortable quarters." He said all this in a smooth lifeless way, as though he'd been through it before. Then he looked directly at me for the first time.

"I must apologize for the callousness with which you were handled; it was not my intention. . . . However," his tone changed, "you must excuse the operative; he was uninformed."

Chief Captain Winter opened a notebook and lolled back in his chair with pencil poised. "Where were you born, Mr. Bayard?"

They must have been through my pockets, I thought; they know my name.

"Who the hell are you?" I said.

The Chief Captain raised an eyebrow. His uniform was immaculate, and brilliantly jeweled decorations sparkled on his chest.

"Of course you are confused at this moment, Mr. Bayard, but everything will be explained to you carefully in due course. I am an Imperial Officer, duly authorized to interrogate subjects under detention." He smiled smoothly. "Now please state your birthplace."

I said nothing. I didn't feel like answering any questions; I had too many of my own to ask first. I couldn't place the fellow's accent; this bothered me because the study of dialects and accents had been a hobby of mine for a

long time. He was an Englishman, but I couldn't have said from what part of England. I glanced at the medals. Most of them were strange, but I recognized the scarlet ribbon of the Victoria Cross, with three palms, ornamented with gems. There was something extremely phony about Chief Captain Winter.

"Come along now, old chap," Winter said sharply. "Kindly cooperate. It will save a great deal of unpleasantness."

I looked at him grimly. "I find being chased, grabbed, gassed, stuffed in a cell, and quizzed about my personal life pretty damned unpleasant already, so don't bother trying to keep it all on a high plane. I'm not answering any questions." I reached in my pocket for my passport; it wasn't there.

"Since you've already stolen my passport, you know by now that I'm an American diplomat, and enjoy diplomatic immunity to any form of arrest, detention, interrogation and what have you. So I'm leaving as soon as you return my property, including my shoes."

Winter's face had stiffened up. I could see my act hadn't had much impression on him. He signaled, and two fellows I hadn't seen before moved around into view. They were bigger than he was.

"Mr. Bayard, you must answer my questions; under duress, if necessary. Kindly begin by stating your birthplace."

"You'll find it in my passport," I said. I was looking at the two reinforcements; they were as easy to ignore as a couple of bulldozers in the living room. I decided on a change of tactics. I'd play along in the hope they'd relax a bit, and then make a break for it.

One of the men, at a signal, handed Winter my passport from his desk. He glanced through it, made a number of notes, and passed the booklet back to me.

"Thank you, Mr. Bayard," he said pleasantly. "Now let's get on to particulars. Where did you attend school?"

I tried hard now to give the impression of one eager to please. I regretted my earlier truculence; it made my present pose of cooperativeness a little less plausible. Winter must have been accustomed to the job though, and to subjects who were abject. After a few minutes he waved an arm at the two bouncers, who left the room silently.

Winter had gotten on to the subject of international relations and geopolitics now, and seemed to be fascinated by my commonplace replies. I attempted once or twice to ask why it was necessary to quiz me closely on matters of general information, but was firmly guided back to the answering of questions.

He covered geography and recent history thoroughly with emphasis on the period 1879-1910, and then started in on a biographic list; all I knew about one name after another. Most of them I'd never heard of; a few were minor public figures. He quizzed me in detail on two Italians, Cocini and Maxoni. He could hardly believe I'd never heard of them. He seemed fascinated by

many of my replies.

"Niven an actor?" he said incredulously. "Never heard of Crane Talbot?" and when I described Churchill's role in recent affairs, he laughed uproariously.

After forty minutes of this one-sided discussion, a buzzer sounded faintly, and another of the uniformed men entered, placed a good-sized box on the corner of the desk, and left. Winter ignored the interruption.

Another twenty minutes of questions went by. Who was the present monarch (of Anglo-Germany, Winter specified); what was the composition of the royal family, the ages of the children, etc, until I had exhausted my knowledge of the subject. What was the status of the Viceroyalty of India; explain the working of the Dominion arrangements of Australia, North America, Cabotsland . . . I was appalled at the questions; the author of them must have been insane. It was almost impossible to link the garbled references to non-existent political subdivisions and institutions to reality. I answered as matter-of-factly as possible. At least Winter did not seem to be much disturbed by my revision of his distorted version of affairs.

At last Winter rose, moved over to his desk, and motioned me to a chair beside it. As I pulled the chair out, I glanced into the box on the desk. I saw magazines, folded cloth, coins-and the butt of a small automatic protruding from under a copy of the World Almanac. Winter had turned away, reaching into a small cabinet behind the desk. My hand darted out, scooped up the pistol, and dropped it into my pocket as I seated myself.

Winter turned back with a blue glass bottle. "Now let's have a drop and I'll attempt to clear up some of your quite justifiable confusion, Mr. Bayard," he said genially. "What would you like to know?" I ignored the bottle.

"Where am I?" I said.

"In the city of Stockholm, Sweden."

"We seem to be moving; what is this, a moving van with an office in it?"

"This is a vehicle, though not a moving van."

"Why did you pick me up?"

"I'm sorry that I can tell you no more than that you were brought in under specific orders from a very high-ranking officer of the Imperial Service." He looked at me speculatively. "This was most unusual," he added.

"I take it kidnapping inoffensive persons is not in itself unusual."

Winter frowned. "You are the subject of an official operation of Imperial Intelligence. Please rest assured you are not being persecuted."

"What is Imperial Intelligence?"

"Mr. Bayard," Winter said earnestly, leaning forward, "it will be necessary for you to face a number of realizations; the first is that the governments which you are accustomed to regarding as supreme sovereign powers must in fact be considered tributary to the Imperium, the Paramount Government

in whose service I am an officer."

"You're a fake," I said.

Winter bristled. "I hold an Imperial Commission as Chief Captain of Intelligence."

"What do you call this vehicle we're in?"

"This is an armed TNL scout based at Stockholm Zero Zero."

"That tells me a lot; what is it, a boat, car, airplane . . . ?"

"None of those, Mr. Bayard."

"All right, I'll be specific; what does it travel on, water, air . . . ?"

Winter hesitated. "Frankly, I don't know."

I saw it was time to try a new angle of attack. "Where are we going?"

"We are presently operating along coordinates zero-zero-zero, zero-zero-six, zero-ninety-two."

"What is our destination? What place?"

"Stockholm Zero Zero, after which you'll probably be transferred to London Zero Zero for further processing."

"What is this Zero business? Do you mean London, England?"

"The London you refer to is London B-I Three."

"What's the difference?"

"London Zero Zero is the capital of the Imperium, comprising the major portion of the civilized world; North Europe, West Hemisphere, Australia, etc."

I changed the subject. "Why did you kidnap me?"

"A routine interrogational arrest, insofar as I know."

"Do you intend to release me?"

"Yes."

"At home?"

"No."

"Where?"

"I can't say; at one of several concentration points."

"One more question," I said, easing the automatic from my pocket and pointing it at the third medal from the left. "Do you know what this is?"

Winter shrank back in his chair. "Yes," he said. "Where the devil did you get that?"

"Keep your hands in sight; better get up and stand over there."

Winter rose and moved over to the spot indicated. I'd never aimed a pistol at a man point-blank before, but I felt no hesitation now.

"Tell me all about it," I said.

"I've answered every question," Winter said nervously.

"And told me nothing." Winter stood staring at me.

I slipped the safety off with a click. "You have five seconds to start," I said. "One . . . Two . . ."

"Very well," Winter said. "No need for all this; I'll try." He hesitated. "You were selected from higher up. We went to a great deal of trouble to get you in particular. As I've explained, that's rather irregular. However," Winter seemed to be warming to his subject, "all sampling in this region has been extremely restricted in the past; you see, your continuum occupies an island, one of a very few isolated lines in a vast blighted region. The entire configuration is abnormal, and an extremely dangerous area in which to maneuver. We lost many good men in the early years before we learned how to handle the problems involved."

"I suppose you know this is all nonsense to me," I said. "What do you mean by sampling?"

"Do you mind if I smoke?" Winter said. I took a long brown cigarette from a box on the desk, lit it, and handed it to him. "Sampling refers to the collection of individuals or artifacts from representative B-I lines," he said, blowing out smoke. "We in Intelligence are engaged now in mapping operations. It's fascinating work, old boy, picking up the trend lines, coordinating findings with theoretical work, developing accurate calibrating devices, instruments, et cetera. We're just beginning to discover the potentialities of working the Net. In order to gather the maximum of information in a short time, we've found it expedient to collect individuals for interrogation. In this way we quickly gain a general picture of the configuration of the Net in various 'directions.' In your case, I was directed under sealed orders to enter the Blight, proceed to Blight-Insular Three, and take over custody of Mr. Brion Bayard, a diplomat representing, of all things, an American Republic." Winter spoke enthusiastically now. As he relaxed, he seemed younger.

"It was quite a feather in my cap, old chap, to be selected to conduct an operation in the Blight, and I've found it fascinating. Always in the past, of course, I've operated at such a distance from the Imperium that little or no analogy existed. But B-I Three! Why it's practically the Imperium, with just enough variation to stir the imagination. Close as the two lines are, there's a desert of Blight around and between them that indicates how frightfully close to the rim we've trodden in times past."

"All right, Winter. I've heard enough," I said. "You're just a harmless nut,

maybe. But I'll be going now."

"That's quite impossible," Winter said. "We're in the midst of the Blight."

"What's the Blight?" I asked, making conversation as I looked around the room, trying to pick out the best door to leave by. There were three. I decided on the one no one had come through yet. I moved toward it.

"The Blight is a region of utter desolation, radiation, chaos," Winter was saying. "There are whole ranges of A-lines where the very planet no longer exists, where automatic cameras have recorded nothing but a vast ring of debris in orbit; then there are the cinder-worlds, and here and there dismal groups of cancerous jungles, alive with radiation-poisoned mutation. It's frightful, old chap. You can wave the pistol at me all night, but it will get you nothing. In a few hours we'll arrive at Zero Zero; you may as well relax till then."

I tried the door; it was locked. "Where's the key?" I said.

"There's no key. It will open automatically at Base."

I went to one of the other doors, the one the man with the box had entered through. I pulled it open and glanced out. The humming sound was louder and down a short and narrow corridor I saw what appeared to be a pilot's compartment. A man's back was visible.

"Come on, Winter," I said. "Go ahead of me."

"Don't be a complete ass, old boy," Winter said, looking irritated. He turned toward his desk. I raised the pistol, sighted, and fired. The shot boomed inside the walls of the room, and Winter leaped back from the desk holding a ripped hand. He whirled on me, for the first time looking really scared. "You're insane!" he shouted. "I've told you we're in the midst of the Blight."

I was keeping one eye on the man up front, who was looking over his shoulder while frantically doing something with his other hand.

"You're leaking all over that nice rug," I said. "I'm going to kill you with the next one. Stop this machine."

Winter was pale; he swallowed convulsively. "I swear, Mr. Bayard, that's utterly impossible. I'd rather you'd shoot me. You have no conception of what you're suggesting."

I saw now that I was in the hands of a dangerous lunatic. I believed Winter when he said he'd rather die than stop this bus-or whatever it was. In spite of my threat, I couldn't shoot him in cold blood. I turned and took three steps up the passage and poked the automatic into the small of the back that showed there.

"Cut the switch," I said. The man, who was one of the two who had been standing by when I awoke in the office, continued to twist frantically at a knob on the panel before him. He glanced up at me, but kept on twiddling. I raised the pistol and fired a shot into the instrument panel. The man jumped convulsively, and threw himself forward, protecting the panel with his body.

"Stop, you bloody fool," he shouted. "Let us explain . . ."

"I tried that," I said. "It didn't work. Get out of my way. I'm bringing this wagon to a halt one way or another."

I stood so that I could see both men. Winter half crouched in the doorway, face white. "Are we all right, Doyle?" he called in a strained voice. Doyle eased away from the panel, turned his back to me, and glanced over the instruments. He flipped a toggle, cursed, and turned back to face Winter.

"Communicator dead," he said. "But we're still in operation."

I hesitated now. These two were genuinely terrified of the idea of stopping; they had paid as little attention to me and my noisy gun as one would to a kid with a water pistol. Compared to stopping, a bullet was apparently a trifling irritation.

It was also obvious that this was no moving van. The pilots' compartment had more instruments than an airliner, and no windows. Elaborate ideas began to run through my mind. Space ship? Time machine? What the devil had I gotten into?

"All right, Winter," I said. "Let's call a truce. I'll give you five minutes to give me a satisfactory explanation, prove you're not an escapee from the violent ward, and tell me how you're going to go about setting me down right back where you found me. If you can't or won't cooperate, I'll fill that panel full of holes—including anybody who happens to be standing in front of it."

"Yes," Winter said. "I swear I'll do all I can. Just come away from the control compartment."

"I'll stay right here," I said. "I won't jump the gun unless you give me a reason, like holding your mouth wrong."

Winter was sweating. "This is a scouting machine, operating in the Net. By the Net, I mean the complex of Alternative lines which constitute the matrix of all simultaneous reality. Our drive is the Maxoni-Cocini field generator, which creates a force operating at what one might call a perpendicular to normal entropy. Actually, I know little about the physics of the mechanism; I am not a technician."

I looked at my watch. Winter got the idea. "The Imperium is the government of the Zero Zero A-line in which this discovery was made. The device is an extremely complex one, and there are a thousand ways in which it can cause disaster to its operators if a mistake is made. Judging from the fact that every A-line within thousands of parameters of Zero Zero is a scene of the most fearful carnage, we surmise that our line alone was successful in controlling the force. We conduct our operations in all of that volume of A-space lying outside the Blight, as we term this area of destruction. The Blight itself we ordinarily avoid completely."

Winter wrapped a handkerchief around his bleeding hand as he talked.

"Your line, known as Blight-Insular Three, or B-I Three, is one of two

exceptions we know to the general destruction. These two lines lie at some 'distance' from Zero Zero, yours a bit closer than B-I Two. B-I Three was discovered only a month or so ago, and just recently confirmed as a safe line. All this exploratory work in the Blight was done by drone scouts, unmanned.

"Why I was directed to pick you up, I don't know. But believe me when I say that if you succeed in crippling this scout, you'll precipitate us into identity with an A-line which might be nothing more than a ring of radioactive dust around the sun, or a great mass of mutated fungus. We cannot stop now for any reason until we reach a safe area."

I looked at my watch again. "Four minutes," I said. "Prove what you've been telling me."

Winter licked his lips. "Doyle, get the recon photos of this sector, the ones we made on the way in."

Doyle reached across to a compartment under the panel and brought out a large red envelope. He handed it to me. I passed it to Winter.

"Open it," I said. "Let's see what you've got."

Winter fumbled a moment, then slipped a stack of glossy prints out. He handed me the first one. "All these photos were made from precisely the same spatial and temporal coordinates as those occupied by the scout. The only difference is the Web coordinates."

The print showed an array of ragged fragments of rock hanging against a backdrop of foggy grey, with a few bright points gleaming through. I didn't know what it was intended to represent.

He handed me another; it was similar. So was a third, with the added detail that one rock fragment had a smooth side, with tiny lines across it. Winter spoke up. "The scale is not what it appears; that odd bit is a portion of the earth's crust, about twenty miles from the camera; the lines are roads." I stared, fascinated. Beyond the strangely scribed fragment, other jagged pieces ranged away to the limit of sight, and beyond. My imagination reeled at the idea that perhaps Winter was telling me the literal truth.

Winter passed over another shot. This one showed a lumpy black expanse, visible only by the murky gleam of light reflected by the irregularities in the surface in the direction of the moon, which showed as a brilliant disc in the black sky.

The next was half obscured by a mass which loomed across the lens, too close for focus. Beyond, a huge sprawling bulk, shapeless, gross, immense, lay half buried in tangled vines. I stared horrified at the tiny cow-like head which lolled uselessly on the slope of the mountainous creature. Some distance away a distended leg-like appendage projected, the hoof dangling.

"Yes," Winter said. "It's a cow. A mutated cow which no longer has any limitation on its growth. It's a vast tissue culture, absorbing nourishment direct from the vines. They grow all through the mass of flesh. The rudimentary head and occasional limbs are quite useless." I pushed the

pictures back at him. I was sick. "I've seen enough," I said. "You've sold me. Let's get out of this." I pushed the pistol into my pocket. I thought of the bullet hole in the panel and shuddered.

Back in the office, I sat down at the desk. Winter took the chair. If he had any gimmicks wired up he couldn't reach them from there. He examined his hand distastefully and tightened the handkerchief. I didn't offer to help. He offered me the blue flask again. This time I took a healthy belt from it.

Winter spoke up again. "It's a very unnerving thing, old chap, to have it shown to you all at once that way, I know. I was actually trying to ease the shock, but you must admit you were insistent."

"I can still shoot the pair of you, and anybody else you've got aboard, if it looks like it will help," I said. "I don't like being shanghaied. I don't know what your bosses have in store for me, but I'll bet I won't like it. So what are you going to do about it?"

"I have to bring you in, or give my life in the attempt," Winter said calmly. "I am an Imperial Officer. Inasmuch as you now realize that you can't leave the vessel until we are clear of the Blight, and in view of the fact that in a few hours automatic controls will bring us into phase on the operations ramp at Stockholm Zero Zero, where an escort will be awaiting your arrival, I can't see what advantage you'd derive from killing me. Therefore, we may as well relax and accept the situation." He smiled pleasantly.

I thought about it. I understood on an intellectual level the general idea of what Winter had been telling me, without even beginning to be able to conceive of it as actual physical fact. I thought about it while Winter went on talking, explaining.

I tried to assemble his fragmentary information into a coherent picture: a vast spider web of lines, each one a complete universe, each minutely different from all the others; somewhere, a line, or world, in which a device had been developed that enabled a man to move across the lines. Well, why not, I thought. With all those lines to work with, everything was bound to happen in one of them; or was it?

"How about all the other A-lines, Winter," I said at the thought, "where this same discovery must have been made, where there was only some unimportant difference. Why aren't you swarming all over each other, bumping into yourself?"

"That's been a big question to our scientists, old chap, and they haven't yet come up with any definitive answers. However, there are a few established points. First, the thing is a fantastically delicate device, as I've explained. The tiniest slip in the initial experimentation, and we'd have ended like some of those other lines you've seen photos of. Apparently the odds were quite fantastically against our escaping the consequences of the discovery; still, we did, and now we know how to control it.

"As to the very close lines, theory now seems to indicate that there is no actual physical separation between lines; those microscopically close to one another actually merge, blend . . . it's difficult to explain. One actually wanders from one to another, at random, you know. In fact, such is the

curious nature of infinity, that there seem to be an infinite number of infinitely close lines we're constantly shifting about in. Usually this makes no difference; we don't notice it, any more than we're aware of hopping along from one temporal point to the next as normal entropy progresses."

At my puzzled frown he added, "The lines run both ways, you know; in an infinite number of directions. If we could run straight back along the normal E-line, we'd be traveling into the past. This won't work, for practical reasons involving two bodies occupying the same space, and all that sort of thing. The Maxoni principle enables us to move in a manner which we think of as being at right angles to the normal drift. With it, we can operate through 360 degrees, but always at the same E-level at which we start. Thus, we will arrive at Stockholm Zero Zero at the same moment we departed from B-I Three." Winter laughed. "This detail caused no end of misunderstanding and counter-accusation on the first trials."

"So we're all shifting from one universe to another all the time without knowing it," I said skeptically.

"Not necessarily all of us, not all the time," Winter said. "But emotional stress seems to have the effect of displacing one; of course with the relative positions of two grains of sand, or even of two atoms within a grain of sand being the only difference between two adjacent lines, you'd not be likely to notice; but at times greater slips occur with most individuals. Perhaps you yourself have noticed some tiny discrepancy at one time or another; some article apparently moved or lost; some sudden change in the character of someone you know; false recollections of past events. The universe isn't all as rigid as one might like to believe."

"You're being awfully plausible, Winter," I said. "Let's pretend I accept your story. Now tell me about this vehicle."

"Just a small mobile M C station, mounted on an autopropelled chassis. It can move about on level ground or paved areas, and also in calm water. It enables us to do most of our spatial maneuvering on our own ground, so to speak, and avoid exposing ourselves to the hazards of attempting to conduct ground operations in strange areas."

"Where are the rest of the men in your party," I asked. "There are at least three more of you."

"They're all at their assigned posts," Winter said. "There's another small room containing the drive mechanism forward of the control compartment."

"If the controls are set for an automatic return to your base, why do you need all the technicians on the job?" I asked.

Winter stared. "You don't appreciate the complexity and delicacy of controlling this unit," he said. "Constant attention is required."

"What's this stuff for?" I indicated the box on the desk from which I'd gotten the gun.

Winter looked at it, then said ruefully, "So that's where you acquired the weapon. I knew you'd been searched. Damned careless of Doyle; bloody

souvenir hunter! I told him to submit everything to me for approval before we returned, so I guess it's my fault." He touched his aching hand tenderly.

"Don't feel too bad about it; I'm just a clever guy," I said. "However, I'm not very brave. As a matter of fact I'm scared to death of what's in store for me when we arrive at our destination."

"You'll be well treated, Mr. Bayard," Winter assured me. I let that one pass. Maybe when we arrived, I could come out shooting, make an escape . . . That line of thought didn't seem very encouraging either. What would I do next, loose in this Imperium of Winter's? What I needed was a return ticket home. I found myself thinking of it as B-I Three, and realized I was beginning to accept Winter's story. I took another drink from the blue bottle.

Except for the hum, it was quiet in the room. The old man up front stayed hunched over his instruments. Winter shifted in his chair, cleared his throat, and said nothing. There was an odd sensation of motion, in spite of the fact that the room was steady.

"Why don't we explode when we pass through one of those empty-space lines, or burn in the hot ones," I asked suddenly. "Suppose we found ourselves peeking out from inside one of those hunks of rock you were photographing?"

"We don't linger about long enough, old boy," Winter said. "We remain in any one line for no finite length of time, therefore there's no time for us to react physically to our surroundings."

"How can you take pictures, and use communicators?"

"The camera remains inside the field. The photo is actually a composite exposure of all the lines we cross during the instant of the exposure. The lines differ hardly at all, of course, and the prints are quite clear. Light, of course, is a condition, not an event. Our communicators employ a sort of grating which spreads the transmission."

"I don't get it," I said. I was feeling confused, but a little more at ease. The blue bottle was all right. I had another sample.

"I'm making a special study of what I term 'A-entropy'," Winter said. "I've taken several rather fascinating sequences using a cine-camera, which seem to indicate that there are other 'streams of consciousness' than those with which we're familiar, those we sense as our own personalities. If one focuses a camera on an individual subject, the progressive changes in the subject, all of course occurring at the same instant of normal time, seem to be almost as purposeful as our progressive spatial changes as we proceed along an E-line." Winter warmed to his subject, ignoring my lack of response.

"Now consider a normal cine sequence. Each frame shows the subject in a slightly different position, spatially and temporally. As we proceed along from one frame to the next, we see the action develop. The man walks, the wave breaks, the horse gallops, etc. Well, the same sort of thing can be seen in my films. I've one fascinating sequence. Here, let me show you," he

said.

I leaned forward with the gun in my hand and watched Winter intently as he rose and pulled a small projector from a wall cabinet. He placed it on a table, made a few adjustments, and a scene flashed clearly on the white wall opposite me. A man stood alone in a field.

Winter continued with his running commentary.

"We were progressing directly away from Base; notice the increasing alienness of the scene . . ."

The man changed, the scene behind him changed, drifting and oddly flowing, though he stood unmoving. The sun was visible in the sky. A leaf falling through the air hung, suspended. The man held a hoe, with which he was in the act of rooting out a small green weed. On the screen, the weed grew visibly, putting out leaves. The leaves grew larger, became splotched with red. The man seemed to shrink back, without moving his feet. The hoe shortened, the metal twisting and writhing into a new shape. The man's arms grew shorter, thicker, his back more stooped.

All around, the other plants drew back, apparently drifting through the soil, some fading down to nothing, others gathering together into gnarled clumps. The weed burgeoned enormously. Fleshy leaves waved out toward the man, now hardly a man. Horny armor spread like a carapace across his shoulders, and great clamp-like hands gripped a glittering scythe. Now teeth were appearing along the edge of each leaf, as the scythe merged with their fat stems. The roots of the plant twisted into view above the ground, entailing the legs of the no longer human creature attacking it. He too gained height now, the head enlarging to accommodate great jaws.

All around, the field lay barren, the remaining plants grouped in tight impregnable mounds here and there. The figure of the monstrous animal now reared high above the plant, locked in its leafy embrace. The scythe, buried among the stems, twisted, and tendrils withered and leaves wilted back to shriveled brown husks as new shoots appeared, raw and pink. Plant teeth grated on flaring armor. It was a grim and silent battle, waged without movement under a changeless sky.

Now the plant shrank back, blackening, drooping. The sharp steel blade was visible once more; the armor plates melted gradually back into the shoulders, as the victorious creature gave up his monstrous defensive form. The great jaws dwindled, the hands and legs changed. In the distance, the mounds opened and plants flowed out across the soil. Another minute and the man, or almost a man if you overlooked the green skin and short horns, stood with upraised hoe before a small crimson weed.

The projector blinked off.

"What did you think of that, old chap?" Winter said.

"A nightmare," I said.

"There's a sequence of cause and effect, of attack and defense, in a completely different fashion from anything we know of course, but quite

obvious, I think."

"I think I'd better lay off that little old blue bottle," I said. But I didn't feel as flippant as I sounded. I was shaken all the way through, and for the first time I really believed in what was happening.

"The last of that sequence was made at a tremendous distance from Zero Zero," Winter said. "The frames were actually shot at a rate of one per second of subjective time. No way of telling, of course, just what the normal rate of progression, if any, might be, along that line; what appeared to us to be a brief battle might have been a life-long struggle, or even an age of evolution. The most remote lines we saw, there at the end, represent a divergence point nearly a million years in the past."

"Winter," I said, "this is all extremely interesting, but I'd enjoy it a lot more if I had some idea of what you people have in mind for me. I get the impression that you have small regard for a man's comfort. I think you might be planning to use me in some sort of colorful experiment, and then throw me away; toss me out into one of those cosmic junk-heaps you showed me. And that stuff in the blue bottle isn't quite soothing enough to drive the idea out of my mind."

"Great heavens, old boy!" Winter sat bolt upright. "Nothing of that sort, I can assure you. Why, we're not blasted barbarians! Since you are an object of official interest of the Imperium, you can be assured of humane and honorable treatment."

"I didn't like what you said about 'concentration points' a while back. That sounds like jail to me."

"Not at all," Winter expostulated. "There are a vast number of very pleasant A-lines well outside the Blight which are either completely uninhabited, or are occupied by backward or underdeveloped peoples. One can well nigh select the technological and cultural level in which one would like to live. All interrogation subjects are most scrupulously provided for; they're supplied with everything necessary to live in comfort for the remainder of their normal lives."

"Marooned on a desert island, or parked in a native village? That doesn't sound too jolly to me," I said. "I'd rather be at home."

Winter smiled speculatively. "What would you say to being set up with a fortune in gold, and placed in a society closely resembling that of, say, England in the 17th Century; with the added advantage that you'd have electricity, plenty of modern literature, supplies for a lifetime, whatever you wish. You must remember that we have the resources of all the universe to draw upon."

"I'd like it better if I had a little more choice," I said. It was all very cozy here in this room at the moment, but I was still the victim of a rather crude kidnapping, and I couldn't think of anything practical I could do about it at the moment.

"Suppose we keep right on going, once we're clear of the Blight," I said. "That reception committee wouldn't be waiting then. You could run this

buggy back to B-I Three. I could force you."

"See here, Bayard," Winter said impatiently. "You have a gun; very well, shoot me; shoot all of us. What would that gain you? The operation of this machine requires a very high technical skill. The controls are set for automatic return to the starting point. It is absolutely against Imperium policy to return a subject to the line from which he was taken. The only thing for you to do is cooperate with us, and you have my assurance as an Imperial officer that you will be treated honorably."

I looked at the gun. "According to the movies," I said, "the fellow with the gun always gets his own way. But you don't seem to care whether I shoot you or not."

Winter smiled. "Aside from the fact that you've had quite a few draughts from my brandy flask and probably couldn't hit the wall with that weapon you're holding, I assure you—"

"You're always assuring me," I said. I tossed the pistol onto the desk. I put my feet up on the polished top, and leaned back in the chair. "Wake me up when we get there. I'll want to fix my face."

Winter laughed. "Now you're being reasonable, old boy. It would be damned embarrassing for me to have to warn the personnel at base that you were waving a pistol about."

III

I woke up with a start. My neck ached abominably; so did the rest of me, as soon as I moved. I groaned, dragged my feet down off the desk, and sat up. There was something wrong. Winter was gone; and the humming had stopped. I jumped up.

"Winter," I shouted. I had a vivid picture of myself marooned in one of those hell-worlds. At that moment I realized I wasn't half as afraid of arriving at Zero Zero as I was of not getting there.

Winter pushed the door open and glanced in. "I'll be with you in a moment, Mr. Bayard," he said. "We've arrived on schedule."

I was nervous. The gun was gone. I walked up and down the room thinking. I wondered where my briefcase was, but it seemed less important now. I was into something bigger. I told myself it was no worse than going to one of the Ambassador's receptions. I would try to take it lightly; there wasn't any doubt that I'd have to take it. My best bet was to walk in as though I'd thought of it myself.

The two bouncers came in, followed by Winter. They all had their uniform caps on now, and were acting very formal. Winter turned to face the others, and they both threw him a British salute, only more so. He returned it with a casual wave, and turned to me as they stepped to the side door.

"Shall we disembark, Mr. Bayard?" he said. One of the two men pushed the door open, and stood at attention beside it. Beyond the opening I could see muted sunshine on a level paved surface, and a group of men in white

uniforms, looking in our direction.

Winter was waiting. I might as well take the plunge, I thought. I stepped down through the door and looked around. We were in a large shed, looking something like a railroad station. One of the men in the waiting group turned to another, eyes on me, and said something. The other nodded. They stepped forward.

Winter spoke up from beside me, "Gentlemen, Mr. Brion Bayard."

They looked at me and I looked back. They all wore tight white uniforms, lots of medals, and elaborate brass on their shoulders.

"By jove, Winter," one of them said. "You've brought it off. Congratulations, old man." They gathered around Winter, asking questions, turning to stare at me. None of them said anything to me. I tried to catch Winter's eye. He was standing with one arm behind him, looking smug and modest.

To hell with them, I thought. I turned and started strolling toward the front of the shed. There was one door with a sentry box arrangement beside it. I gave the man on duty a cool glance and started past.

"Ere, Sir, may I see your i-den-ti-fi-cation," the sentry said as I walked by him.

I turned. I was in a careless mood. "You'd better memorize this face," I said coolly. "You'll be seeing a great deal of it from now on. I'm your new commander." I looked him up and down. "Your uniform is in need of attention." I turned and went on. Behind me the sentry was saying, "Ere, I say." I ignored him.

Winter appeared at that point, putting an end to what would have been a very neat escape, I thought. But where the hell would I go?

"Here, old man," he said. "Don't go wandering about. I'm to take you direct to Royal Intelligence, where you'll doubtless find out a bit more about the reasons for you, ah," Winter cleared his throat, "visit."

"I thought it was Imperial Intelligence," I said. "And for the high-level operation this is supposed to be, this is a remarkably modest reception. I thought there would be a band, or at least a couple of cops with handcuffs."

"Royal Swedish Intelligence," Winter explained briskly. "Sweden being tributary to the Emperor, of course; Imperial Intelligence chaps will be on hand. As for your reception, we don't believe in making much of a fuss, you know." Winter waved me into a boxy black staff car which waited at the curb. It swung out at once into light traffic which pulled out of our way as we opened up down the center of the broad avenue.

"I thought your scout just traveled cross-ways," I said, "and stayed in the same spot on the map. This doesn't look like the hilly area of the Old Town."

"You have a suspicious mind and an eye for detail," Winter said. "We maneuvered the scout through the streets to the position of the ramps

before going into Drive. We're on the north side of the city now."

"Who am I going to meet?" I asked. "And will they talk to me, or just talk past my head like that last bunch?"

"You mustn't mind those chaps," Winter said. "They've seen these missions returning a thousand times, and I suppose they've become a bit blasé. They were actually impressed."

Our giant car roared across a bridge, and swirled into a long graveled drive leading to a wrought-iron gate before a massive grey granite building. The people I saw looked perfectly ordinary, with the exception of a few oddities of dress and an unusually large number of gaudy uniforms. The guard at the iron gate was wearing a cherry-colored tunic, white trousers, and a black steel helmet surmounted by a gold spike and a deep purple plume. He presented arms, (a short and wicked looking nickleplated machine gun), and as the gate swung wide we eased past him and stopped before broad doors of polished iron-bound oak. A brass plate beside the entrance said *kungliga svenska spionaget*.

I said nothing as we walked down a spotless white marble-floored hall, entered a spacious elevator, and rode up to the top floor. We walked along another hall, this one paved with red granite, and paused before a large door at the end. There was no one else around.

"Just be relaxed, Mr. Bayard, answer all questions fully, and use the same forms of address as I."

"I'll try not to fall down," I said. Winter looked as nervous as I felt as he opened the door after a polite tap.

The room was an office, large and handsomely furnished. Across a wide expanse of grey rug three men sat around a broad desk, behind which sat a fourth. Winter closed the door, walked across the room with me trailing behind him, and came to a rigid position of attention ten feet from the desk. His arm swung up in a real elbow-buster of a salute, and held it.

"Sir, Chief Captain Winter reports as ordered," he said in a strained voice.

"Very good, Winter," said the man behind the desk, sketching a salute casually. Winter brought his arm down with a snap. He rotated rigidly toward the others.

"Kaiserliche Hochheit," he said, bowing stiffly from the waist at one of the seated figures. "Chief Inspector," he greeted the second, while the third, a rather paunchy fellow with a jolly expression and a somehow familiar face rated just "sir."

"'Hochwelgeboren' will do," murmured the lean aristocratic-looking one whom Winter had addressed first. Apparently instead of an 'imperial highness' he was only a 'high-well-born.' Winter turned bright pink. "I beg Your Excellency's pardon," he said in a choked voice. The round-faced man grinned broadly.

The man behind the desk had been studying me intently during this

exchange. "Please be seated, Mr. Bayard," he said pleasantly, indicating an empty chair directly in front of the desk. Winter was still standing rigidly. The man glanced at him. "Stand at ease, Chief Captain," he said in a dry tone, turning back to me.

"I hope that your being brought here has not prejudiced you against us unduly, Mr. Bayard," he said. He had a long gaunt face with a heavy jaw. From pictures I had seen of King Gustav of Sweden, I suspected he was a relative. He confirmed my guess.

"I am General Bernadotte," he said. "These gentlemen are the Friherr von Richthofen, Chief Inspector Bale, and Mr. Goering." I nodded at them. Bale was a thin broadshouldered man with a small bald head. He wore an expression of disapproval.

Bernadotte went on. "I would like first to assure you that our decision to bring you here was not made lightly. I know that you have many questions, and all will be answered fully. For the present, I shall tell you frankly that we have called you here to ask for your help."

I hadn't been prepared for this. I didn't know what I expected, but to have this panel of high-powered brass asking for my puny assistance left me opening and closing my mouth without managing to say anything.

"It's remarkable," commented the paunchy civilian. I looked at him. Winter had called him Mr. Goering. I thought of pictures of Hitler's gross Air Chief.

"Not Hermann Goering?" I said.

The fat man looked surprised, and a smile spread across his face.

"Yes, my name is Hermann," he said. "How did you know this?" He had a fairly heavy German accent.

I found it hard to explain. This was something I hadn't thought of; actual doubles, or analogs of figures in my own world. Now I knew beyond a doubt that Winter had not been lying to me. "Back where I came from, everyone knows your name," I said. "Reichmarshall Goering . . ."

"Reichmarshall!" Goering repeated. "What an intriguing title!" He looked around at the others. "Is this not a most interesting and magnificent information?" He beamed. "I, poor fat Hermann, a Reichmarshall, and known to all." He was delighted.

"I am certain," the general said, "that Mr. Bayard will have many extremely interesting things to tell us. I think we owe it to him to give a full explanation first."

"Thank you, General," I said. "I'd appreciate that."

"How much have you been told of the nature of our governmental structure, Mr. Bayard, and of our operations in the Net?"

"I think I have a fair grasp of the general concept," I said, "and I understand that your Imperial government claims sovereignty over all other governments. That's about all."

"Insofar as we know at present, only this government, with perhaps one exception which I'll mention in a moment, has the technique of Net operation. We therefore exercise a natural influence of wider scope than other governing bodies. This is not to imply that the Imperium seeks to interfere with or to exploit others. Our relations with all lines are based on honorable treaties, negotiated as soon after contact as practicable. In the case of the Blight Insular lines, there are of course difficulties . . ."

Bernadotte hesitated, then added, "The Imperium limits its exercise of sovereignty; it is invoked as an ultimate resort, in case of anti-civil activity."

"Multi-phased reality is of course rather a shocking thing to encounter suddenly," the General went on, "after a lifetime of living in one's own narrow world. To those of us who have grown up with it, it seems only natural, in keeping with the principles of multiplicity and the continuum. The idea of a monolinear causal sequence is seen to be an artificially restrictive conception, an oversimplification of reality growing out of human egotism."

The other three men listened as attentively as I. It was very quiet, with only the occasional faint sounds of traffic from the street below.

"Insofar as we have been able to determine thus far from our studies of the B-I Three line, from which you come, our two lines share a common history up to about the year 1790. They remain parallel in many ways for about another century; thereafter they diverge rather sharply.

"Here in our world, two Italian scientists, Giulio Maxoni and Carlo Cocini, in the year 1893, made a basic discovery, which, after several years of study, they embodied in a device which enabled them to move about at will through a wide range of what we now term Alternate lines, or A-lines.

"Cocini lost his life in an early exploratory test, and Maxoni determined to offer the machine to the Italian government. He was rudely rebuffed.

"After several years of harassment by the Italian press, which ridiculed him unmercifully, Maxoni went to England, and offered his invention to the British government. There was a long and very cautious period of negotiation, but eventually a bargain was struck. Maxoni received a title, estates, and one million pounds in gold. He died a year later.

"The British government now had sole control of the most important basic human discovery since the wheel. The wheel gave man the power to move easily across the surface of his world; the Maxoni principle gave him all the worlds to move about in."

Leather creaked faintly as I moved in my chair. The general leaned back and drew a deep breath. He smiled.

"I hope that I am not overwhelming you with an excess of historical detail, Mr. Bayard."

"Not at all," I replied. "I'm very much interested."

He went on. "At that time the British Government was negotiating with the Imperial Germanic government in an effort to establish workable trade agreements, and avoid a fratricidal war, which then appeared to be an inevitable eventuality if appropriate spheres of influence were not agreed upon.

"The acquisition of the Maxoni papers placed a different complexion on the situation. Rightfully feeling that they now had a considerably more favorable position from which to negotiate, the British suggested an amalgamation of the two empires into the present Anglo-Germanic Imperium, with the House of Hanover-Windsor occupying the Imperial throne. Sweden signed the Concord shortly thereafter, and after resolution of a number of differences in detail, the Imperium came into being on January 1, 1900."

I had the feeling the general was over-simplifying things. I wondered how many people had been killed in the process of resolving the minor details. I kept the thought to myself.

"Since its inception," the general continued, "the Imperium has conducted a program of exploration, charting, and study of the A-continuum. It was quickly determined that for a vast distance on all sides of the Home line, utter desolation existed; outside that blighted region, however, were the infinite resources of countless lines. Those lines lying just outside the Blight seem uniformly to represent a divergence point at about four hundred years in the past; that is to say, our common histories differentiate about the year 1550. As one travels farther out, the divergence date recedes. At the limits of our explorations to date, the C. H. date is about 1,000,000 B.C."

I didn't know what to say, so I said nothing. This seemed to be all right with Bernadotte.

"Then, in 1947, examination of photos made by automatic camera scouts revealed an anomaly; an apparently normal, inhabited world, lying well within the Blight. It took weeks of careful searching to pin-point the line. For the first time, we were visiting a world closely analogous to our own, in which many of the institutions of our own world should be duplicated.

"We had hopes of a fruitful liaison between the two worlds, but in this we were bitterly disappointed."

The general turned to the bald man whom he had introduced as Chief Inspector Bale.

"Chief Inspector," he said, "will you take up the account at this point?"

Bale sat up in his chair, folded his hands, and began.

"In September, 1948, two senior agents of Imperial Intelligence were dispatched with temporary rank of Career Minister and full diplomatic accreditation, to negotiate an agreement with the leaders of the National People's State. This political unit actually embraces most of the habitable world of the B-I Two line. A series of frightful wars, employing some sort of radioactive explosives, had destroyed the better part of civilization. Europe

was a shambles. We found that the NPS headquarters was in North Africa, and had as its nucleus the former French colonial government there. The top man was a ruthless ex-soldier who had established himself as uncontested dictator of what remained of things. His army was made up of units of all the previous combatants, held together by the promise of free looting and top position in a new society based on raw force."

Bale spoke calmly, but with obvious distaste. "There was no semblance whatever of respect for institutions, position, common decency. The fighting man owned everything, subject only to the Dictator's prior claim; women were property to be used as slaves and concubines, and bought and sold freely. No one else counted. And at the top, living off the fat of the land, the Dictator.

"Our agents approached a military sub-chief, calling himself Colonel-General Yang in charge of a rag-tag mob of ruffians in motley uniforms, and asked to be conducted to the headquarters of the Dictator. Yang had them clapped into a cell and beaten insensible, in spite of their presentation of diplomatic passports and identity cards.

"He did however send them along to the Dictator, who gave them an interview. During the talk, the fellow drew a pistol and shot one of my two chaps through the head, killing him instantly. When this failed to make the other volunteer anything further than that he was an accredited envoy of the Imperial government requesting an exequatur and appropriate treatment, prior to negotiating an international agreement, he was turned over to experienced torturers.

"Under torture, the agent gave out just enough to convince his interrogators that he was insane; he was released to starve or die of wounds. We managed to spot him and pick him up in time to get the story before he died."

I still had no comment to make. It didn't sound pretty, but then I wasn't too enthusiastic about the methods employed by the Imperium either. The general resumed the story.

"We resolved to make no attempt at punitive action, but simply to leave this unfortunate line in isolation.

"About a year ago, an event occurred which rendered this policy no longer tenable." The general turned to the lean faced man.

"Manfred, I will ask you to cover this portion of the briefing."

"Units of our Net Surveillance Service detected activity at a point some distance within the area called Sector 92," Richthofen began. "This was a contingency against which we had been on guard from the first. It was, however, only the second time within the almost 60 years of constant alertness that unauthorized activation of an M-C field had been observed. On the first occasion, nearly fifty years ago, a minor conspiracy among disgruntled officials was responsible, and no harm was done.

"This time it was not so simple. A heavily armed M-C unit of unknown origin had dropped into identity with one of our most prized industrial lines, one

of a group with which we conduct a multi-billion-pound trade. The intruder materialized in a population center, and released virulent poisonous gasses, killing hundreds. Masked troops then emerged, only a platoon or two of them, and proceeded to strip bodies, loot shops . . . an orgy of wanton destruction. Our NSS scout arrived some hours after the attackers had departed. The scout was subjected to a heavy attack in its turn by the justifiably aroused inhabitants of the area before it was able to properly identify itself as an Imperium vessel."

Richthofen had a disdainful frown on his face. "I personally conducted the rescue and salvage operation; over four hundred innocent civilians dead, valuable manufacturing facilities destroyed by fire, production lines disrupted, the population entirely demoralized. A bitter spectacle for us."

"You see, Mr. Bayard," Bernadotte said, "we are well nigh helpless to protect our friends against such forays. Although we have developed extremely effective M-C field detection devices, the difficulty of reaching the scene of an attack in time is practically insurmountable. The actual transit takes no time, but locating the precise line among numberless others is an extremely delicate operation. Our homing devices make it possible, but only after we have made a very close approximation manually."

"In quick succession thereafter," Richthofen continued, "we suffered seven similar raids. Then the pattern changed. The raiders began appearing in numbers, with large cargo carrying units. They also set about rounding up all the young women at each raid, and taking them along into captivity. It became obvious that a major threat to the Imperium had come into existence.

"At last we had the good fortune to detect a raider's field in the close vicinity of one of our armed scouts. It quickly dropped in on a converging course, and located the pirate about twenty minutes after it had launched its attack. The commander of the scout quite properly opened up at once with high explosive cannon and blew the enemy to rubble. Its crew, demoralized by the loss of their vessel, nevertheless resisted capture almost to the last man. We were able to secure only two prisoners for interrogation."

I wondered how the Imperium's methods of interrogation compared with those of the dictator of B-I Two, but I didn't ask. I might find out soon enough.

"We learned a great deal more than we expected from our prisoners. They were talkative and boastful types. The raiding parties depend for their effectiveness on striking unexpectedly and departing quickly. The number of pirate vessels we placed at no more than four, each manned by about fifty men. They boasted of a great weapon which was held in reserve, and which would undoubtedly be used to avenge them. It was apparent from the remarks of the prisoners that they had not had the M-C drive long, and that they knew nothing of the configuration of the Net, or of the endless ramifications of simultaneous reality. They seemed to think their fellows would find our base and destroy it with ease. They also had only a vague idea of the extent and nature of the Blight. They mentioned that several of

their ships had disappeared, doubtless into that region. It appears also, happily for us, that they have only the most elementary detection devices and that their controls are erratic in the extreme. But the information of real importance we learned was the identity of the raiders."

Richthofen paused for dramatic effect. "It was our unhappy sister world, B-I Two."

"Somehow," Bernadotte took up the story, "in spite of their condition of chaotic social disorder and their destructive wars, they had succeeded in harnessing the M-C principle. Their apparatus is even more primitive than that with which we began almost sixty years ago, yet they have escaped disaster.

"The next move came with startling suddenness. Whether by virtue of an astonishingly rapid scientific development, or by sheer persistence and blind luck, one of their scouts succeeded last month in locating the Zero Zero line of the Imperium itself. The vessel dropped into identity with our continuum on the outskirts of the city of Berlin, one of the royal capitals. The crew had apparently been prepared for their visit. They planted a strange device atop a flimsy tower in a field, and embarked instantly. Within a matter of three minutes, as well as we have been able to determine, the device detonated with unbelievable force. Over a square mile was absolutely desolated; casualties ran into the thousands. And the entire area still remains poisoned with some form of radiation-producing debris which renders the region uninhabitable."

I nodded. "I think I understand," I said.

"Yes," the general said, "you have something of this sort in your B-I Three world also, do you not?"

I assumed the question was rhetorical and said nothing.

Bernadotte continued. "Crude though their methods are, they have succeeded already in flaunting the Imperium. It is only a matter of time, we feel, before they develop adequate controls and detection devices. We will then be faced with the prospect of hordes of ragged but efficient soldiers, armed with the frightful radium bombs with which they destroyed their own culture, descending on the mother world of the Imperium.

"This eventuality is one for which it has been necessary to make preparation. There seemed to be two possibilities, both equally undesirable. We could await further attack, meanwhile readying our defenses, of doubtful value against the fantastic explosives of the enemy; or we could ourselves mount an offensive, launching a massive invasion force against B-I Two. The logistics problems involved in either plan would be unbelievably complex."

I was learning a few things about the Imperium. In the first place, they did not have the atomic bomb, and had no conception of its power. To consider war against an organized military force armed with atomics was proof of that. Also, not having had the harsh lessons of two major wars to assist them, they were naïve, almost backward, in some ways. They thought more like Europeans of the 19th Century than modern westerners.

"About one month ago, Mr. Bayard," the general continued, "a new factor was introduced, giving us a third possibility. In the heart of the Blight, at only a very little distance from B-I Two, and even closer to us than it, we found a second surviving line. That line was of course your home world, designated Blight-Insular Three by us."

Bernadotte nodded at Bale, who took up the account:

"Within 72 hours, 150 special agents of Imperial Intelligence, and selected men from the British, Swedish and German Royal Intelligence services had been placed at carefully scouted positions in B-I Three. Our first preliminary survey, which was carried out under Imminent Calamity priority, had given us the rough picture in less than six hours. We found we were dealing with a line having the same type radium bomb as B-I Two, but which had succeeded in averting general destructive war. We had the broad outlines of the past hundred years' developments, and the approximate present political situation. Our men were stationed at points of maximum activity, and spread thin though they were, they immediately began filling in the outline.

"It was important that we not make the same mistake which we had in B-I Two, of beginning contact on the basis of false assumptions as to the conduct one might expect from civilized men. We had an opportunity with the new B-I Three line to establish a close surveillance point from which to carry on scouting operations aimed at giving us a clearer picture of B-I Two. There was also the possibility of enlisting an ally against B-I Two, but only of course in the event the new line had or was about to achieve the M-C field. Unfortunately, the latter was not the case. Still, we felt there must be some way in which we could turn this find to good advantage."

Bale paused and looked at me sharply. "If this seems overly opportunistic or cynical to you, Mr. Bayard, please recall that we were fighting for our existence. And still are," he added.

I had a distinct feeling that Bale didn't like me. All of them were treating me pretty strangely, I thought, in some subtle way. It was almost as if they were afraid of me.

Winter was still standing, in a rather awkward parade rest position. I got the impression most of this was news to him, too.

"We were determined to make no blunders with regard to B-I Three," Bale continued. "Too much was at stake. As the information flowed in from our men, all of whom, being our top agents, had succeeded in establishing their cover identities without difficulty, it was immediately passed to the General Staff and to the Imperial Emergency Cabinet for study. The two bodies remained in constant session for over a week without developing any adequate scheme for handling the new factor.

"One committee of the Emergency Cabinet was assigned the important task of determining as closely as possible the precise C. H. relationship of B-I Three with both B-I Two and the Imperium. This is an extremely tricky chore, as it is quite possible for an amazing parallelism to exist in one phase of an A-line while the most fantastic variants crop up in another.

"One week ago today the committee reported findings they considered to be 98% reliable. Your B-I Three line shared the history of the B-I Two until the date 1911, probably early in the year. At that point, my colleague, Mr. Goering, of German Intelligence, who had been sitting in on the meeting, made a brilliant contribution. His suggestion was immediately adopted. All agents were alerted at once to drop all other lines of inquiry and concentrate on picking up a trace of-" Bale looked at me. "Mr. Brion Bayard."

They knew I was on the verge of exploding from pure curiosity, so I just sat and looked back at Bale. He pursed his lips. He sure as hell didn't like me.

"We picked you up from records at your University, ah," Bale frowned at me. "Something like aluminum alloy . . ." Bale must be an Oxford man, I thought.

"Illinois," I said.

"Oh yes, that's it," Bale said.

I looked at him without expression.

"At any rate," Bale went on, "it was a relatively simple matter to follow you up then through your military service and into your Diplomatic Service. Our man just missed you at your Legation at Viat-Kai . . ."

"Consulate General," I corrected

It annoyed Bale. I was glad; I didn't like him much either.

"You had left the post the preceding day and were proceeding to your headquarters via Stockholm. We had a man on the spot; he kept tabs on you until the shuttle could arrive. The rest you know."

There was a lengthening silence. I shifted in my chair, looking from one expressionless face to another.

"All right," I said. "It seems I'm supposed to ask, so I'll oblige, just to speed things along. Why me?"

Almost hesitantly General Bernadotte opened a drawer of the desk and drew out a flat object wrapped in brown paper. He removed the paper very deliberately as he spoke.

"I have here an official portrait of the Dictator of the world of Blight-Insular Two," he said. "One of the few artifacts we have been able to bring along from that unhappy region. Copies of this picture are posted everywhere there."

He passed it over to me. It was a crude lithograph, in color, showing a man in uniform, the chest as far down as the picture extended covered with medals. Beneath the portrait was the legend: "His Martial Excellency, Duke Of Algiers, Warlord of the Combined Forces, Marshall General of the State, Brion the First, Bayard, Dictator."

The picture was of me.

IV

I stared at the garish portrait for a long time. It wasn't registering; I had a feeling of disorientation. There was too much to absorb.

"Now you will understand, Mr. Bayard, why we have brought you here," the general said, as I silently handed the picture back to him. "You represent our hidden ace. But only if you consent to help us of your own free will." He turned to Richthofen again.

"Manfred, will you outline our plan to Mr. Bayard?"

Richthofen cleared his throat. "Quite possibly," he said, "we could succeed in disposing of the Dictator Bayard by bombing his headquarters. This, however, would merely create a temporary diversion until a new leader emerged. The organization of the enemy seems to be such that no more than a very brief respite would be gained, if any at all, before the attacks would be resumed; and we are not prepared to sustain such onslaughts as these.

"No, it is far better for our purpose that Bayard remain the leader of the National People's State-and that we control him." Here he looked intently at me.

"A specially equipped TNL scout, operated by our best pilot-technician could plant a man within the private apartment which occupies the top floor of the Dictator's palace at Algiers. We believe that a resolute man introduced into the palace in this manner, armed with the most effective hand weapons at our disposal, could succeed in locating and entering the dictator's sleeping chamber, assassinating him, and disposing of the body.

"If that man were you, Mr. Bayard, fortified by ten days' intensive briefing, and carrying a small net-communicator, we believe that you could assume the identity of the dead man and rule as absolute dictator over Bayard's twenty million fighting men."

"Do I have another double here?" I said, "in your Imperium?"

Bernadotte shook his head. "No, you have remote cousins here; nothing closer."

They were going a little too fast for me. Richthofen had leaned back in his chair and was looking at me in a satisfied way, as though everything was settled now. Goering was plainly waiting in suspense for my reaction, while General Bernadotte, with apparent unconcern, shuffled some papers before him.

I could see that all three of them expected me to act solemn and modest at the honor, and set out to do or die for the Fatherland. They were overlooking a few things, though. This wasn't my Fatherland; I'd been kidnapped here. And oddly enough, maybe, I could not see myself murdering anybody-especially, I had the grotesque thought-myself. I didn't even like the idea of being dropped down in the midst of a pack of torturers.

I was facing facts; I was 42 years old, a disillusioned middle-aged diplomat, accustomed to the stodgy routines of Embassy life and the administration of the cynical and colorless policies of an ineffectual State Department. True, among my colleagues of the Foreign Service, I had been rather less ossified physically and mentally than the average, something of a rebel, even; but this kind of hair-raising escapade was not in my line at all.

I was ready to tell them so in very definite terms, when my eye fell on Bale. He was wearing a supercilious half-smile, and I could see that this was just what he expected. His contempt for me was plain. I sensed that he thought of me-almost-as the man who had killed his best agent in cold blood, a cowardly blackguard. My mouth was open to speak; but under that sneering expression, different words came out; temporizing words. I wouldn't give Bale the satisfaction of being right.

"And after I'm in charge of B-I Two, what then?" I said.

"You will be in constant touch with Imperial Intelligence via communicator." Richthofen spoke eagerly. "You'll receive detailed instructions as to each move you'll make. We should be able to immobilize B-I Two within six months. You'll then be returned here."

"I won't be returned home?"

"Mr. Bayard," Bernadotte said seriously, "you will never be able to return to B-I Three. The Imperium will offer you any reward you wish to name, except that. The consequences of revealing the existence of the Imperium to your line at this time are far too serious to permit consideration of the idea."

"That's not giving me much of a break," I said. "You people seem to take a lot of pride in your high ethical standards. How does this fit in?"

There was a note of anger in Richthofen's tone as he spoke up. "The continued well-being of the Imperium is at stake, Mr. Bayard," he said. "Perhaps even its continued existence. We consider the Imperium to be an institution worth preserving, at whatever cost of individual discomfort or inconvenience. We regret having to infringe your personal rights; but in the cause of Humanity, it is necessary."

Bernadotte spoke in a more conciliatory tone. "There is another, more personal consideration which we can offer to you, Mr. Bayard," he said. "You do not of course know that same devotion to the cause of the Imperium as do we, who have in our lifetimes seen the change it has brought to a petty, brawling, narrow world. We do not expect that you would be eager to risk your life in the service of what perhaps seems to you simply another foreign state. We are prepared to go to great lengths to provide an adequate incentive to you to help us, in the one way in which only you can serve.

"According to the dossier which we compiled, we noted that both of your parents were so unfortunate as to lose their lives in the wreck of an airship in 1953." He paused and looked at me for confirmation.

I nodded. What was this all about? I didn't like being reminded of that bitter night when the airliner on which they had been bound for Europe for a

holiday and a visit with me had gone down into the Atlantic.

"We have made an investigation in B-I Two; in that line both of your parents are alive and well."

Bernadotte waited for the effect, then continued. "Since they did not approve of the conduct of their son, the Dictator Bayard, they were not incorporated into the official household, but were established in comfort on an estate in the south of France. They had previously been North African Colons, you understand."

I was dumbfounded. I remembered hearing many times as a boy the story of how my father had flipped a great silver 5-franc piece to decide whether to emigrate to North Africa or to North America. In the world I knew, America had been the decision. But in this other strange universe, they had become North Africans; and they still lived!

There was too much that was new, undreamed of, coming at me all at once. I couldn't assimilate it. I'd been very fond of my parents. All I could think of was that perhaps once again I'd meet them, my mother and father, beyond all expectation . . .

Bernadotte was still talking. ". . . will of course place them together with you, in whatever setting you elect."

Bernadotte addressed Bale. "Do you have the information on Mr. Bayard's military service?"

Bale spoke from memory. "Mr. Bayard served for two years with the rank of Captain, later Major, in the Army of the United State of America . . ."

"United States," I said; "plural." I enjoyed correcting Bale; he thought he was pretty good at this memory bit. He glared, but continued.

". . . during a world-wide war, from 1942-1944. He received a slight wound, and was invalidated out just prior to the cessation of hostilities."

Bale annoyed me. Slight wound, hell. I had a scar on my chest and a bigger one on my back, just to the left of the spine; machine gun slugs make a bigger hole leaving than they do going in.

All eyes were on Bernadotte. He looked as though what he was about to say was important.

"I have been authorized by the Emergency Cabinet," he said with gravity, "to offer you an Imperial commission in the rank of Major General, Mr. Bayard. If you accept this commission, your first assignment will be as we have outlined." Bernadotte handed a heavy piece of parchment across the table to me. "You should know, Mr. Bayard, that the Imperium does not award commissions, particularly as General Officer, lightly."

"It will be a most unusual rank," Goering said, smiling. "Normally there is no such rank in the Imperium Service; Lieutenant General, Colonel General, Major General. You will be unique."

"We adopted the rank from your own armed forces, as a special mark of

esteem, Mr. Bayard," Bernadotte said. "It is no less authentic for being unusual."

It was a fancy sheet of paper. The Imperium was prepared to pay off well for this job they needed done. Anything I wanted, even things I hadn't conceived of . . . I think they thought the strange look on my face was greed at the thought of a general's two stars. Well, let them think it. I didn't want to give them any more information which might be used against me.

"I'll think about it," I said. Bale looked disconcerted now. After expecting me to back out, he had apparently then expected me to be dazzled by all the rewards I was being offered. I'd let him worry about it. Suddenly Bale bored me.

Bernadotte hesitated. "I'm going to take an unprecedented step, Mr. Bayard," he said. "For the present, on my personal initiative as head of State, I'm confirming you as Colonel in the Royal Army of Sweden without condition. I do this to show my personal confidence in you, as well as for more practical reasons." He rose and smiled ruefully, as though unsure of my reaction. "Congratulations, Colonel," he said, holding out his hand.

I stood up too. I noticed everyone had.

It was my turn to hesitate. I looked him in the eye. Chief of State he'd said. No wonder he'd looked like the King of Sweden; he was the king. And he'd introduced himself simply as General Bernadotte. I liked him. I took his hand.

"Thank you, sir," I said. On impulse, I stepped back a pace and threw him a snappy US-type salute. He returned it with a wide smile.

"You may have twenty-four hours to consider your decision, Colonel," he said. "I'll leave you in the excellent care of Graf von Richthofen and Mr. Goering until then."

Richthofen turned to Winter, still standing silently by. "Won't you join us, Chief Captain," he said.

"Delighted," Winter said.

"Congratulations, old boy, er, Sir," Winter said as soon as we were in the hall. "You made quite a hit with the general." He seemed quite his jaunty self again.

I eyed him. "You mean King Gustav?" I said.

Winter blinked. "But how did you know," he said. "I mean, dash it, how the devil did you know?"

"I have my methods," I said. It was my turn to be mysterious.

"But it must be," Goering said with enthusiasm, "that also he in your home world is known, not so?"

"That's right, Mr. Goering," I said, "now you've dispelled my aura of

mystery."

Goering chuckled. "Please, Mr. Bayard, you must call me Hermann." He gripped me on the bicep in friendly fashion as we moved down the hall. "Now you must tell us more about this intriguing world of yours."

I found myself liking Goering. After all, he was no more the brutal cynic of the Luftwaffe than I was the dictator of a ruined world.

Richthofen spoke up. "I suggest we go along to my summer villa at Drottningholm and enjoy a dinner and a couple of good vintages while we hear all about your home, Mr. Bayard; and we shall tell you of ours."

He smiled and added, "We're not often so solemn," he nodded toward the room we had just left. "I'm afraid the spirit of our colleague Bale dominated the meeting."

"Just so," Hermann said. "This has been always the failing of the English; everything is taken with such gravity, just because of a little threat to our existence; no real German battle-joy, you see." He winked at Winter to show it was not ill-meant.

"Now about Chief Captain Winter," he went on. "What is his place in the B-I Three? We should all make a guess. I say a hairdresser, such delicate hands."

"Now, I say, Reichsmarshal," Winter began with mock asperity, then burst out laughing. "I say, actually, Bayard," he said, "what kind of troops did Mr. Goering command back there in B-I Three? Swiss Navy, that sort of thing?"

"Yes," Hermann said. "You don't mind if I call you Brion? Now, was I a brave commander, or did I show my heels to the enemy?"

"You were a fighter pilot, Hermann," I said. "You were an ace; you shot down over twenty planes in aerial battle in World War One."

I added nothing about Goering's later, less savory career. This fellow had nothing in common with the gross Goering of Nazi Germany.

"Better and better, Brion," Hermann said gleefully. "You see, Manfred, I am a bold fellow after all."

"I say," Winter put in. "World War One, you said. You chaps have had to resort to numbering to keep them straight? How does anyone survive?" He sounded genuinely shocked.

"When did it occur, this war in which our Hermann played such a part?" Richthofen asked, as we entered the elevator.

"From 1914 to 1918," I said. I had a thought. I realized why his name was familiar to me. Manfred Rittmeister, Friherr von Richthofen, Germany's leading ace. Hadn't Bernadotte called him Manfred? I glanced at him. He looked about the right age. A coincidence, or had the Imperium set out to dazzle me with luminaries?

"You were another famous fighter pilot, Graf von Richthofen," I said. "You

scored seventy victories; they called you the Red Knight."

Hermann shouted out with laughter. "Hermann and Manfred, the Terrible Two," he said. "What a pair of fighters we are, not so?"

Richthofen smiled a slight smile. "What you tell us sounds remarkably like our boyhood dreams of martial glory, Mr. Bayard," he said. "Quite foreign to our actual selves. We are fortunate that we live in a world where such ferocious ambitions are outgrown and we can mature to more productive endeavor." He glanced fondly at Hermann. "Our friend Goering here plays the clown, and is in fact a fellow of boundless good nature; but he is also one of the most astute planners on the staff of our German Intelligence Service."

"And the modest von Richthofen," Hermann said, "is the chief of that same service; a position of great importance in this age of the Maxoni device."

We emerged from the building and entered another of the immense black cars, which awaited us with engine idling.

"It's astonishing," Winter said, "how many figures you have encountered already who are eminent in your own world."

"Not so astonishing," I said. "They're eminent here, too; ability counts in any world, I see."

"I say," Winter said, "that's a bit of a blow to my ego, old boy; I should like to have been a big-wig in some environment; by your rule, I'm condemned to monotonous anonymity."

The car took the center of a broad tree-lined avenue, sweeping along at fifty, then sixty. Through the window, Stockholm looked gayer in color than the city I knew. We crossed a bridge, for which we slowed slightly, then whirled up a steep street, down another, and followed a wide straight highway out of town into parklike countryside. My companions, or escort, chatted gaily, and I joined in, feeling a quickening of interest in this alien world of the Imperium. There was a vitality here, a spirit to which I couldn't help responding.

V

I stood before a long mirror and eyed myself, not without approval. Two tailors and a valet had been buzzing around me like bees for half an hour, putting the finishing touches on their handiwork. I had to admit they had done all right.

It had been a long time since I had taken much interest in the clothes I wore. Every two years, between assignments, I had dutifully re-equipped myself for the next tour with the standard wardrobe of drab business suits, nothing which might attract possibly unfavorable attention to a diplomatic member of an Embassy staff.

Now I wore narrow-cut riding breeches of fine grey whipcord; short black boots of meticulously stitched and polished black leather; a white linen shirt without collar or cuffs beneath a mess jacket of Royal Blue, buttoned

to the chin. A gold bordered blue stripe ran down the side of the trousers and heavy loops of gold braid ringed the sleeves from wrist to elbow. A black leather belt with a large square buckle bearing the Royal Swedish crest supported a jeweled scabbard containing a slender rapier with an ornate hilt. In the proper position on the left side of my chest were, to my astonishment, a perfectly accurate set of my World War II service medals and the Silver Star. On the shoulder straps, the bright silver eagles of a U. S. Colonel gleamed. I was wearing the full dress uniform of my new position in the Imperium society.

The valet squatted on the floor, adjusting a pair of silver spurs, while the tailors mouthed pins and conferred over the details of the gold-lined blue cape. I looked at the mirror and readied the usual disparaging comments that the sight of this regalia would require at home; then I checked myself. Damn it, I thought, I might as well be honest with myself; I look great! This is the way a man ought to dress when he goes to a party.

I was glad now I hadn't let myself deteriorate into the flabby ill-health of the average Foreign Service Officer, soft and pale from long hours in offices and late hours of heavy drinking at the interminable diplomatic functions. My shoulders were reasonably broad, my back reasonably straight; no paunch marred the lines of my new finery. This outfit made a man look like a man; how the devil had we gotten into the habit of draping ourselves in shapeless double-breasted suits, in mousy colors, of identical cut?

Goering was sitting in a brocaded armchair in the luxurious suite to which Richthofen had shown me in his 'little villa.'

"You cut a martial figure, Brion," he said. "It is plain to see you have for this new job a natural aptitude."

"I wouldn't count on it, Hermann," I said. His comment had reminded me of the other side of the coin; the deadly plans the Imperium had in mind for me. Well, I could settle that later. Tonight I was going to enjoy myself.

Over a dinner of pheasant served on a sunny terrace in the long Swedish summer evening, Richthofen had explained to me that, in Swedish society, to be without a title was an extremely awkward social encumbrance. It was not that one needed an exalted position, he assured me; merely that there be something for others to call one; Herr Doctor, Herr Professor, Ingenjör, Redaktör; my military status would ease my entry into the world of the Imperium.

It had sounded like a silly masquerade at first, but by the time we finished off the third bottle of Chateau Neuf du Pape, 1953, it was all settled. Tonight was the night of the Empire Day Ball, and we'd all go. I might as well; I was here, and what the hell, I thought. As for the uniform, the King had said no strings attached; and I was over-due for a good time.

Winter came in then, carrying what looked at first like a crystal ball.

"Your topper, sir," he said with a flourish. What he had was a chrome-plated steel helmet, with a rib running along the top, and a gold dyed plume growing out of it.

"Good God," I said. "Isn't that overdoing it a little?" I took the helmet; it was feather light, I discovered. The tailor took over, placed the helmet just so, handed me a pair of white leather gloves, and faded out.

"You have to have it, old boy," Winter said. "Dragoons, you know."

"You are complete," Hermann said. "A masterpiece."

He was wearing a dark grey uniform with black trim and white insignia. He had a respectable but not excessive display of ribbons and orders.

"Hermann," I said expansively, "you should have seen yourself when you were all rigged out in your medals back home. They came down to here," I indicated my knees. He laughed.

Together we left the suite and went down to the study on the ground floor. Winter, I noted, had changed from his whites to a pale yellow mess jacket with heavy silver braid and a nickel-plated Luger.

Richthofen showed up moments later; his outfit consisted of what looked like a set of tails, circa 1880, with silver buttons and a white beret.

"We're a cool bunch of cats," I said. I was feeling swell. I caught another glimpse of myself in a mirror. "Sharp, daddy-o," I murmured.

A liveried butler swung the glass door open for us and we descended the steps to a waiting car. This one was a vast yellow phaeton, with the top down. We slid into our places on the smooth yellow leather seats and it eased off down the drive.

It was a magnificent night, with high clouds and a brilliant moon. In the distance, the lights of the city glittered. We rolled smoothly along, the engine so silent that the sound of the wind in the tall trees along the way was clearly audible.

I had had a good general briefing at dinner on the current state of world affairs, and on the people I might expect to meet tonight. It appeared that the Imperium was not the only important state in this new world after all. A New Roman Empire had inherited much of the domain of its remote predecessor, and now competed in the far corners of the globe for mastery of what still remained uncommitted of Africa, Asia, the Polynesian Isles; the traditionally colonial, backward areas of the world. The rivalry, however, was of a new kind. The great powers competed in the speed and efficiency with which they developed these ancient pestholes of famine, disease, and ignorance into members of modern society. There were a few little wars going on, but I got the impression they were conducted under rules as rigid as any cricket match.

"Civilized man," Richthofen had said, "has a responsibility. His is not the privilege of abdicating the position he holds as leader in the world. His culture represents the best achievements so far made by man in his long climb up from primordial beginnings. We have inherited the fruits of the struggle to master hostile nature, to conquer disease, to harness natural forces; we are less than true men if we allow these achievements to be lost, to leave vast areas to the ancient enemy, ignorance, or worst of all, to

lose by default our hard-won position, to retreat before the savage, the backward in the name of enlightened social ideas. We have a duty to perform; not to narrow nationalistic policies, not to false ideas of superiority based on religions, social position, untenable racial theories, skin color; but to mankind, that all shall benefit from the real superiority of our western culture, which is bringing man up off his knees into the light of his glorious future."

"Hear, hear," said Winter.

It sounded like a campaign speech, I thought, but I couldn't argue with it. I'd seen enough starving babies during my duty in the Orient to feel no patience with the policy of letting backward peoples suffer under the rule of local bosses, just because they were local. "Self determination of peoples" they'd called it. A lot like self-determination of kindergarten kids dominated by a bully. I preferred a world in which every human born had a chance at the best humanity had learned, rather than being sacrificed to the neuroses, hatreds, manias and over-compensations for inferiority of petty provincial leaders.

What we lacked, back in my world, I thought, was a sense of responsibility, and the courage to assume the burden of leadership. Here they hadn't hung back; right or wrong, they couldn't be accused of vacillation.

"Boys," I said, "I like you, even if you are a bunch of kidnapers."

Manfred looked at me. "I think the day will come, my friend," he said, "when you will forgive us for that crime."

Goering had thought to bring along a small flask, and by the time we had each tapped it twice we were passing through the iron gates of the Summer Palace. Colored floodlights bathed the gardens and people already filled the terraces on the south and west sides of the building. The car dropped us before the gigantic entry and moved off, as we made our way through the crowd, and into the reception hall.

Light from massive crystal chandeliers glittered on gowns and uniforms, polished boots and jewels, silks, brocades, velvet. A straight-backed man in rose-pink bowed over the hand of a lovely blonde in white. A slender black-clad fellow with a gold and white sash escorted a lady in green gold toward the ballroom. The din of laughter and conversation almost drowned out the strains of the waltz in the background.

"All right, boys," I said. "Where's the punchbowl?"

I don't often set out to get stewed, but when I do, I don't believe in half measures. I was feeling great, and wanted to keep it that way. At the moment I couldn't feel the bruises from my fall, my indignation over being grabbed was forgotten, and as for tomorrow, I couldn't care less. I was having a wonderful time. I hoped I wouldn't see Bale's sour face.

Everybody talked, asked me eager questions, made introductions. I found myself talking to someone I finally recognized as Douglas Fairbanks, Sr.; he was a tough-looking old fellow in a naval uniform. I met counts, dukes, officers of a dozen ranks I'd never heard of, several princes, and finally a

short broad-shouldered man with a heavy sun tan and a go-to-hell smile whom I finally realized was the son of the Emperor.

I was still walking and talking like a million dollars, but somewhere along the line I'd lost what little tact I normally had.

"Well, Prince William," I said, maybe weaving just a little, "I understood the House of Hanover-Windsor was the ruling line here. Where I come from the Hanovers and Windsors are all tall, skinny, and glum-looking."

The Prince smiled. "Here, Colonel," he said, "a policy was established which put an end to that unfortunate situation. The Constitution requires that the male heir marry a commoner. This not only makes life more pleasant for the heir, with so many beautiful commoners to choose from, but maintains the vigor of the line. And it incidentally produces short men with happy faces occasionally."

I moved on, meeting people, eating little sandwiches, drinking everything from aquavit to beer, and dancing with one heavenly-looking girl after another. For the first time in my life my ten years of Embassy elbow-bending were standing me in good stead; from the grim experience gained through seven evenings a week of holding a drink in my hand from sundown till midnight while pumping other members of the Diplomatic Corps who thought they were pumping me, I had emerged with a skill; I could hold my liquor.

Somewhere along the line I felt the need for a breath of fresh air and stepped out through the tall French door onto a dark balustraded gallery overlooking gardens. I leaned on the heavy stone rail, looked up at stars visible through tall tree-tops, and waited for the buzzing in my head to die down a little.

The night air moved in a cool torrent over the dark lawn, carrying the scent of flowers. Behind me the orchestra played a tune that was almost, but not quite, a Strauss waltz.

I pulled off the white gloves that Richthofen had told me I should keep on when I left my helmet at the checkroom. I unbuttoned the top button of the tight-fitting jacket.

I'm getting old, I thought; or maybe just tired.

"And why are you tired, Colonel?" a cool feminine voice inquired from behind me.

I turned around. "Ah, there you are," I said. "I'm glad. I'd rather be guilty of talking out loud than of imagining voices."

I worked on focusing my eyes a little better. She had red hair, and wore a pale pink gown that started low and stayed with the subject.

"I'm very glad, as a matter of fact," I added. "I like beautiful redheads who appear out of nowhere."

"Not out of nowhere, Colonel," she said. "From in there, where it is so warm and crowded."

She spoke excellent English in a low voice, with just enough Swedish accent to render her tritest speech charming.

"Precisely," I said. "All those people were making me just a little bit drunk, so I came out here to recover." I was wearing a silly smile, and having a thoroughly good time being so eloquent and clever with this delightful young lady.

"My father has told me that you are not born to the Imperium, Colonel," she said. "And that you come from a world where all is the same, yet different. It should be so interesting to hear about it."

"Why talk about that place?" I said. "We've forgotten how to have fun back there. We take ourselves very seriously, and we figure out the most elaborate excuses for doing the rottenest things to each other . . ."

I shook my head. I didn't like that train of thought. "See," I said, "I always talk like that with my gloves off." I pulled them on again. "And now," I said grandly, "may I have the pleasure of this dance?"

She smiled and held out her hand, and we danced. We moved along closer to the music-or away from the light from the French doors. We talked and laughed while one waltz followed another.

Suddenly I paused. "Don't those boys know anything but waltzes?" I asked.

"You don't like waltzes?" she said.

"Sure, they're great, but wait a minute, I've got an idea." I took her hand and led her back through the French doors, across the floor, around behind a row of giant tropical plants to the concealed orchestra.

I signaled the leader as the musicians paused for a brief break. He came over.

"Yes, Colonel?" he smiled.

"How good are you?" I asked. "I mean . . ." I tried to figure out how to get it across. "If I hum a tune," I said, "can you play it?"

"That depends on how well you hum, Colonel," he said.

"OK, assuming I hum all right, can you get the tune and play it, with all the trimmings?"

"I think so," he said.

"What about in a different tempo?"

He frowned. "Could you give me an example?"

I was holding my girl's hand. "Listen," I said. I tried a few bars of 'Night and Day.' He looked interested. I cleared my throat and said. "Now get this. It's a great number."

I hummed 'Night and Day' all the way through for him twice. The members of the orchestra gathered around and listened.

"All right, Colonel," he said. "I have it, I think." He hummed it back to me. He had the tempo.

"All right, Gentlemen," he said to the others, "let's try it."

The players returned to their places. The leader turned to me and nodded, with a wink, and raised his arms. "Watch the tempo!" he cautioned the musicians.

"Come on," I said. I grabbed my girl's hand and we headed back for the floor.

The music started, softly at first, but smooth and sure. The beat was heavy, but good; the melody clear and true as only experts can make it.

Couples about to begin a waltz paused, and looked toward the source of the music. The band was warming to its work now. Like the masters they were, they slid easily into orchestration effects that brought out the best of the old tune.

"Just follow me," I said. She came into my arms. "Closer," I said. "This is no waltz."

The other dancers faded back as if by signal, and an excited murmur ran around the room. My partner was a natural. Without faltering, she followed me through first the simplest and then the more complex of the infinite variations on the basic fox-trot theme that I had practiced as one of the standard diplomatic skills at a thousand dull affairs.

Her eyes were shining as she looked at me. "A strange song," she said. "A strange man."

The orchestra finished a third refrain of the old tune and without a pause eased into one of their old numbers, but rearranged to the new tempo. They were good.

People began tentatively trying out the new music on the floor, watching us, and laughing excitedly as they caught on. In a few minutes the floor was crowded again.

As the music stopped, they crowded around. "What is it called?" they asked. "Wonderful!" "The first really new music in years. Show us another."

We went back, amid a crowd, and congratulated the orchestra. They beamed.

"Want to try another?" I asked the smiling leader. He was eager to go, so I hummed 'Stardust,' 'I'll Get By,' more Cole Porter, whatever I could think of. The leader was like a miner panning out egg-sized nuggets. They played them all, the old familiar tunes, with an odd other-world flavor.

"I love your music," my girl said. "In a few days it will be heard in every town in the Empire."

They wanted more, and more. I gave them 'All the Things You Are,' 'Moon Love,' and finally 'Begin the Beguine.' The crowd went crazy when they

finished, clapping and cheering and demanding more.

The orchestra had just begun the encore when a shattering blast rocked the floor, and the tall glass doors along the east side of the ballroom blew in. Through the cloud of dust which followed up the explosion, a swarm of men in motley remnants of uniforms leaped into the room. The leader, a black-bearded giant wearing a faded and patched U. S. Army-type forest green battle jacket and baggy Wehrmacht trousers, jacked the lever on the side of a short drum-fed machine gun, and squeezed a long burst into the thick of the crowd.

While I stood frozen, a tall man with blood on his face, wearing the deep purple of the Imperial Guards Regiment, leaped forward from the front rank of the crowd which had recoiled from the explosion, whipping out his sabre. The gunner whirled toward him, and fired two rounds before the gun jammed. I heard them smack into the man in purple, knocking him backwards. He rolled over, rose to his knees, still gripping the sabre, eyes fixed on the bearded man who cursed and jerked at the operating lever. The officer rose to his feet and lunged, arm and sabre one rigid line aimed at the other's chest. The sabre slammed against the forest green, as the man in purple collapsed amid rubble from the smashed windows. The curtains flapped around the bearded man as he dropped the gun, and gripped with both hands the hilt which protruded from his chest. I watched as he strained at it, and it moved. He was still on his feet, his back arched, biceps bursting through the rotted fabric of the ancient uniform. The blade came sliding out bright and clean. I stared, fascinated. He had it almost clear when his legs folded and he crashed to the floor.

While I had watched this violent exchange, men had poured through the breached wall, firing into the crowd. Men and women alike fell under the murdering attack, but every man who remained on his feet rushed the nearest attacker without hesitation. Standing in the rubble, a bristle-faced redhead wearing an undersized British sergeant's blouse pumped eight shots from the hip, knocking down an oncoming officer of the Imperium with every shot; when he stepped back to jam a new clip into the M-1, the ninth man ran him through the throat with a jewel-encrusted rapier.

I still stood frozen, holding my girl's hand. I whirled, started to shout to her to get back, to run; but the calm look I saw in her eyes stopped me. She'd rather be decently dead than flee this rabble.

I jerked my toy sword from its scabbard, dashed to the wall, and moved along it to the edge of the gaping opening. As the next man pushed through the cloud of dust and smoke, peering ahead, gripping a shotgun, I jammed the point of my sword into his neck, hard, and jerked it back before it was wrenched from my hands. He stumbled on, choking, the shotgun falling with a clatter. I reached out, raked it in, as another man appeared. He carried a Colt .45 in his left hand, and he saw me as I saw him. He swiveled to fire, and as he did I brought the poised blade down on his arm. The shot went into the floor and the pistol bounced out of the loose hand. He fell back into the trampling crowd.

There was the stamp and grating of feet, the cursing and shouting of the attackers, the insistent ragged close range firing, groans from wounded on

the floor; and behind, the orchestra calmly struck up the Imperial Anthem. There were no screams from the women, no yells for mercy from a man of the Imperium. They came on silently, dying ten to one, but never pausing.

Another fellow lunged out of the dust, cutting across the room, and saw me. He leveled a heavy rifle on its side across his left forearm. He moved slowly and clumsily. I saw that his left hand was hanging by a thread. I grabbed up the shotgun and blew his face off. It had been about two minutes since the explosion.

I waited a moment, but no more came through the blasted window. I saw a wiry ruffian with long yellow hair falling back toward me as he pushed another magazine into a Browning automatic rifle. I jumped two steps, set the point of the sword just about where the kidneys should be, and rammed with both hands. Not very elegant style, I thought, but I'm just a beginner.

I saw Goering then, arms around a tall fellow who cursed and struggled to raise his battered sub-machine gun. A gun roared in my ear and the back of my neck burned. I realized my jump had literally saved my neck. I ran around to the side of the grappling pair, and shoved the blade into the thin man's ribs. It grated and stuck, but he wilted. I'm not much of a sport, I thought, but I guess guns against pig-stickers makes it even.

Hermann stepped back, spat disgustedly, and leaped on the nearest bandit. I wrenched at my sword, but it was wedged tight. I left it and grabbed up the tommy gun. A long-legged villain was just closing the chamber of his revolver as I pumped a burst into his stomach. I saw dust fly from the shabby cloth of his coat as the slugs smacked home.

I glanced around. Several of the men of the Imperium were firing captured guns now, and the remnant of the invading mob had fallen back toward the shattered wall. Bullets cut them down as they stood at bay, still pouring out a ragged fire. None of them tried to flee.

I ran forward, sensing something wrong. I raised my gun and cut down a bloody-faced man as he stood firing two .45 automatics. My last round nicked a heavy-set carbine man, and the drum was empty. I picked up another weapon from the floor, as one lone thug still standing pounded the bolt of his rifle with his palm.

"Take him alive," someone shouted. The firing stopped and a dozen men seized the struggling man. The crowd milled, women bending over those who lay on the floor, men staggering from their exertions. I ran toward the billowing drapes.

"Come on," I shouted. "Outside . . ." I didn't have time or breath to say more, or to see if anyone came. I leaped across the rubble, out onto the blasted terrace, leaped the rail, and landed in the garden, sprawled a little, but still moving. In the light of the colored floods a grey-painted van, ponderously bulky, sat askew across flower beds. Beside it, three tattered crewmen struggled with a bulky load. A small tripod stood on the lawn, awaiting the mounting of their burden. I had time for one momentary mental vision of what a fission bomb would do to the Summer Palace and its occupants, before I dashed at them with a yell. I fired the pistol I had

grabbed, as fast as I could pull the trigger, and the three men hesitated, pulled against each other, cursed, and started back toward the open door of their van with the bomb. One of them fell, and I realized someone behind me was firing accurately. Another of the men yelped and ran off a few yards to crumple on the grass. The third jumped for the open door, and a moment later a rush of air threw dust against my face as the van flicked out of existence. The sound was like a pool of gasoline igniting.

The bulky package lay on the ground now, ominous. I felt sure it was not yet armed. I turned to the others. "Don't touch this thing," I called. "I'm sure it's some kind of atomic bomb."

"Nice work, old boy," a familiar voice said. It was Winter, blood spattered on the pale yellow of his tunic. "Might have known those chaps were fighting a delaying action for a reason. Are you all right?"

"Yeah," I said, breathless. "Let's get back inside. They'll need tourniquets and men to twist them."

We picked our way through the broken glass, fragments of flagstone, and splinters of framing, past the flapping drapes, into the brightly lit dust-rolled ballroom.

Dead and wounded lay in a rough semi-circle around the broken wall. I recognized a pretty brunette in a blue dress whom I had danced with earlier, lying on the floor, face waxen. Everyone was splattered with crimson. I looked around frantically for my redhead, and saw her kneeling beside a wounded man, binding his head.

There was a shout. Winter and I whirled. One of the wounded intruders moved, threw something, then collapsed as shots struck him. I heard the thump and rattle as the object fell, and as in a dream I watched the grenade roll over and over, clattering, stop ten feet away and spin a half a turn. I stood, frozen. Finished, I thought. And I never even learned her name.

From behind me I heard a gasp as Winter leaped past me and threw himself forward. He landed spread-eagled over the grenade as it exploded with a muffled thump, throwing Winter two feet into the air.

I staggered, and turned away, dizzy. Poor Winter. Poor damned Winter.

I felt myself passing out, and went to my knees. The floor was tilting . . .

She was bending over me, face pale, but still steady.

I reached up and touched her hand. "What's your name?" I said.

"My name?" she said. "Barbro Lundin; I thought you knew my name . . ." She seemed a bit dazed. I sat up. "Better lend a hand to someone who's worse off than I am, Barbro," I said. "I just have a weak constitution."

"No," she said. "You've bled much."

Richthofen appeared, looking grim. He helped me up. My neck and head ached. "Thank God you are alive," he said.

"Thank Winter I'm alive," I replied. "I don't suppose there's a chance . . . ?"

"Killed instantly," Richthofen said. "He knew his duty."

"Poor guy," I said. "It should have been me."

"We're fortunate it wasn't you," Richthofen said. "It was close. As it is, you've lost considerable blood. You must come along and rest now."

"I want to stay here," I said. "Maybe I can do something useful."

Goering had appeared from somewhere, and he laid an arm across my shoulders, leading me away.

"Calmly, now, my friend," he said. "There is no need to feel it so strongly; he died in performance of his duty, as he would have wished."

Hermann knew what was bothering me. I could have blanked out that grenade as easily as Winter, but the thought hadn't even occurred to me. If I hadn't been paralyzed, I'd have run.

I didn't struggle; I felt washed out, suddenly suffering a premature hangover. Manfred joined us at the car, and we drove home in near silence. I asked about the bomb and Goering said that Bale's men had taken it over. "Tell them to dump it at sea," I said.

At the villa, someone waited on the steps as we drove up. I recognized Bale's rangy figure with the undersized head. I ignored him as he collared Hermann.

I went into the dining room, poured a stiff drink at the sideboard, sat down.

The others came behind me, talking. I wondered where Bale had been all evening.

Bale sat down, eyeing me. He wanted to hear all about the attack. He seemed to take the news calmly but sourly.

He looked at me, pursing his lips. "Mr. Goering has told me that you conducted yourself quite well, Mr. Bayard, during the fight. Perhaps I was hasty in my judgment of you . . ."

"Who the hell cares what you think, Bale?" I said. "Where were you when the lead was flying? Under the rug? You've got a hell of a lot of gall strutting in here and delivering your pompous opinion." I was getting madder by the second.

Bale turned white, stood up glaring and stalked out of the room. Goering cleared his throat and Manfred cast an odd look at me as he rose to perform his hostly duty of conducting a guest to the door.

"Inspector Bale is not a man easy to associate with," Hermann said. "I understand your feeling." He rose and came around the table.

"I feel you should know," he went on, "that he is among the most skillful with sabre and epee. Make no hasty decision now . . ."

"What decision?" I asked.

"Already you have a painful wound," he said; "now we must not allow you to be laid up at this critical time. Are you sure of your skill with a pistol?"

"What wound?" I said. "You mean my neck?" I put my hand up to touch it. I winced; there was a deep gouge, caked with blood. Suddenly I was aware that the back of my jacket was soggy. That near-miss was a little nearer than I had thought.

"I hope you will accord Manfred and myself the honor of seconding you," Hermann continued, "and perhaps of advising you . . ."

"What's this all about, Hermann?" I said. "What do you mean: seconding me?"

"Why," he seemed confused, "we wish to stand with you in your meeting with Bale . . ."

"Meeting with Bale?" I repeated. I know I didn't sound very bright. I was beginning to realize how lousy I felt.

Goering stopped and looked at me. "Inspector Bale is a man most sensitive of personal dignity," he said. "You have given him a tongue-lashing before witnesses, and a well deserved one it was; however, it remains a certainty that he will demand satisfaction." He saw that I was still groping. "Bale will challenge you, Brion," he said. "You must fight him."

VI

There was the sound of a car and Manfred rose with a word, went out of the room.

"Doubtless Bale's seconds arrive," Goering said. "I may speak for you?"

"Sure," I said, "but . . . yes, thanks, Hermann." Bale hadn't wasted any time.

I heard voices and Manfred came into the room with two strangers. Two blood-spattered officers, fresh from the battle of the ballroom wearing the Grey uniforms of the Imperial Intelligence strolled casually up to us, one young, the other elderly, both slender and tough-looking, both calmly courteous.

"Ah, there you are, Goering," said the older man. He was limping slightly from a wound in the thigh. "You know von Rentz, I believe?" He indicated the younger man.

Goering rose and bowed stiffly from the waist. "I do, your excellency," he said. He turned to me. "Brion, I have the honor to present Count Hallendorf; Captain von Rentz. Gentlemen, Colonel Bayard."

Both officers clicked heels with stiff bows.

"Colonel Bayard," said the count.

"Hiya, boys," I said carelessly. "Bale send you out to do his arguing for him?"

Hermann stepped forward quickly. "Colonel Bayard has done me the honor of permitting me, together with the Friherr von Richthofen, to speak for him, gentlemen," he said smoothly. He took their arms and led them away, talking earnestly. Richthofen came over to me.

"Brion," he said, shaking his head. "I seem to sense that in your country the ritual of the affair of honor is not practiced."

"That's right, Baron," I said. "We insult each other all the time. The guy who can get the other fellow maddest without getting mad himself wins."

"That is not the custom here," Richthofen said. "One substantiates one's opinion with action. This is a most awkward piece of business; we have quite enough to fight in the enemy, I think. But Inspector Bale seems to feel otherwise; the personal affront takes precedence." He stepped over and examined my gouged neck.

"Brion, go and sit down; lie down if you can. You are too important to the Imperium and to us, your friends, to be subjected to this ordeal, but there is nothing for it but to see it through. I'll join you later." He turned away, then back. "What is your choice of weapons, Brion?"

"Water pistols at twenty paces," I said. What with the liquor, the carnage, and the pain in my head, neck, back and assorted other places, I was feeling pretty sardonic.

Richthofen shook his head resignedly and hurried off. There was blood on his boots.

I was cold, chilled to the bone. I was still half asleep, and I carried my head tilted forward and a little to the side in a hopeless attempt to minimize the vast throbbing ache from the furrow across the back of my neck.

Richthofen, Goering and I stood together under spreading linden trees at the lower end of the Royal Game Park. It was a few minutes before dawn. I was taking the "affair of honor" a little more seriously now. I was wondering how a slug in the knee-cap would feel.

There was the faint sound of an engine approaching, and a long car loomed up in the gloom on the road above, lights gleaming through morning mist.

The sound of doors opening and slamming was muffled and indistinct. Three figures were dimly visible, approaching down the gentle slope. My seconds moved away to meet them. One of the three detached itself from the group and stood alone, as I did. That would be Bale.

Another car pulled in behind the first. The doctor, I thought. In the dim glow from the second car's small square cowl lights I saw another figure emerge. I watched; it looked like a woman, wrapped in a cloak. The lights went off, and I looked back to the group of seconds.

I heard the murmur of voices, a low chuckle. They were very pally, I

thought. Everything on a very high plane.

I thought over what Goering had told me on the way to the field of honor, as he called it.

Bale had offered his challenge under the Toth convention. This meant that the duelists would not try to kill each other; the object of the game was to inflict painful wounds, to humiliate one's opponent.

This could be a pretty tricky business. In the excitement of the fight, it wasn't easy to inflict wounds that were thoroughly humiliating but definitely not fatal. It was almost as much of a disgrace to kill one's opponent as to fail to meet him, I was told. The latter form of disgrace, however, was not unknown, while the former was unheard of.

I wondered what Bale would try for; possibly he had in mind something more painful even than smashed joints. I didn't know; this was a new sport to me, but Bale was an old-timer. I'd find out in a few minutes, I thought.

It had been explained to me that the most daring choice of weapons was the pistol; one not only ran the risk of inflicting a fatal wound, but one also exposed oneself to greater risk of death. It was commoner to use sabre or epee; first blood was usually satisfaction enough. However, since I was unfamiliar with the latter weapons, Goering and Richthofen had agreed that the pistol was the better choice. Well, I couldn't argue with that; I had carried a .45 for a year or so in Europe during the war, and fired it frequently on the range, as well as at a few moving targets in combat.

I had had about two hours sleep. My seconds had let me go to my suite finally after completing the arrangements, and I had dropped into a coma at once. They had a tough time getting me on my feet again, at five a.m. My morale was always lowest at this hour, even without a slashed neck and the prospect of painful and humiliating wounds. Richthofen had lent me a pair of black trousers and a white shirt for the performance, and a light overcoat against the pre-dawn chill. I wished it had been a heavy one. The only warm part of me was my neck, swathed in bandages.

The little group broke up now. My two backers approached, smiled encouragingly, and in low voices invited me to come alone. Goering took my coat. I missed it.

Bale and his men were walking toward a spot in the clear, where the early light was slightly better. We moved up to join them.

"I think we have light enough now, eh Baron?" said Hallendorf.

Richthofen glanced around. "I think perhaps five minutes more," he said, "for the sake of accuracy."

Goering and von Rentz were discussing the position of the starting line. The doctor stood by silently, bag in hand. Bale stood in the background.

Goering came over to me, muttered a few words of instruction. Bale came forward. Von Rentz handed him something; the seconds stood back. Bale walked over to me, and with a contemptuous gesture tossed a white

leather military glove at my feet. I stared at Bale for a moment before stooping over to pick it up and hand it negligently to Goering. I had been briefed on the formal challenge.

Richthofen and Hallendorf were making a little ceremony of opening the heavy box von Rentz had supplied, and looking over the two long-barreled Mausers nestling inside. I thought of the thirty-one people killed in the attack at the palace and the dozens more badly wounded. I would have thought they'd have had their fill of guns for one night.

I could see better now; the light was increasing rapidly. Long pink streamers flew in the east; the trees were still dark silhouettes.

Hallendorf stepped up to me, and offered the box. I picked up one of the pistols, without looking at it. Bale took the other, methodically worked the action, snapped the trigger, examined the rifling. Richthofen handed each of us a magazine.

"Five rounds," he said. I had no comment.

Bale stepped over to the place indicated by Hallendorf and turned his back. I could see the cars outlined against the sky now. The big one looked like a '30 Packard, I thought. At Goering's gesture, I took my post, back to Bale.

"At the signal, gentlemen," Hallendorf said, "step forward ten paces and pause; at the command, turn and fire. Gentlemen, in the name of the Emperor and of honor!"

The white handkerchief in his hand fluttered to the ground. I started walking. One, two, three . . .

There was someone standing by the smaller car. I wondered who it was . . . eight, nine, ten. I stopped, waiting. Hallendorf's voice was calm. "Turn and fire."

I turned, holding the pistol at my side. Bale pumped a cartridge into the chamber, set his feet apart, body sideways to me, left arm behind his back, and raised his pistol. We were a hundred feet apart across the wet field.

I started walking toward him. Nobody had said I had to stay in one spot. Bale lowered the pistol slightly, and I saw his pale face, eyes staring. The pistol came up again, and almost instantly jumped as a flat crack rang out. The spent cartridge popped up over Bale's head and dropped on the wet grass, catching the light. A miss.

I walked on. I had no intention of standing in the half dark, firing wildly at a half-seen target. I didn't intend to be forced into killing a man by accident, even if it was his idea. And I didn't intend to be pushed into solemnly playing Bale's game with him.

Bale held the automatic at arm's length, following me as I approached. He could have killed me easily, but that was against the code. The weapon wavered; he couldn't decide on a target. My moving was bothering him.

The pistol steadied and jumped again, the shot sounding faint on the foggy air. I realized he was trying for the legs; I was close enough now to see the

depressed angle of the barrel.

He stepped back a pace, set himself again, and raised the Mauser higher. He was going to try to break a rib, I guessed. A tricky shot, easy to miss-either way. My stomach muscles tensed with anticipation.

I didn't hear the next one; the sensation was exactly like a baseball bat slammed against my side. I felt that I was stumbling, air knocked from my lungs, but I kept my feet. A great warm ache spread from just above the hip. Only twenty feet away now. I fought to draw a breath.

Bale's expression was visible, a stiff shocked look, mouth squeezed shut. He aimed at my feet and fired twice in rapid succession; I think by error. One shot went through my boot between the toes of my right foot, the other into the dirt. I walked up to him. I sucked in air painfully. I wanted to say something, but couldn't. It was all I could do to keep from gasping. Abruptly, Bale backed a step, aimed the pistol at my chest and pulled the trigger; it clicked. He looked down at the gun.

I dropped the Mauser at his feet, doubled my fist, and hit him hard on the jaw. He reeled back as I turned away.

I walked over to Goering and Richthofen as the doctor hurried up. They came forward to meet me.

"Lieber Gott," Hermann breathed as he seized my hand and pumped it. "This story they will never believe."

"If your object was to make a fool of Inspector Bale," Richthofen said with a gleam in his eye, "you have scored an unqualified success. I think you have taught him respect."

The doctor pressed forward. "Gentlemen, I must take a look at the wound." A stool was produced, and I gratefully sank down on it.

I stuck my foot out. "Better take a look at this too," I said; "it feels a little tender."

The doctor muttered and exclaimed as he began snipping at cloth and leather. He was enjoying every minute of it. The doc, I saw, was a romantic.

A thought was trying to form itself in my mind. I opened my eyes. Barbro was coming toward me across the grass, dawn light gleaming in her red hair. I realized what it was I had to say.

"Hermann," I said; "Manfred; I need a long nap, but before I start I think I ought to tell you: I've had so much fun tonight that I've decided to take the job."

"Easy, Brion," Manfred said. "There's no need to think of it now."

"No trouble at all," I said.

Barbro bent over. "Brion," she said. "You are not badly hurt?" She looked worried.

I smiled at her and reached for her hand. "I'll bet you think I'm accident prone; but actually I sometimes go for days at a time without so much as a bad fall."

She took my hand in both of hers as she knelt down. "You must be suffering great pain, Brion, to talk so foolishly," she said. "I thought he would lose his head and kill you." She turned to the doctor; "Help him, Dr. Blum."

"You are fortunate, Colonel," the doctor said, sticking a finger into the furrow on my side. "The rib is not fractured. In a few days you will have only a little scar and a big bruise to remind you."

I squeezed Barbro's hand. "Help me up, Barbro," I said.

Goering gave me his shoulder to lean on. "For you now, a long nap," he said. I was ready for it.

* * *

I tried to relax in my chair in the cramped shuttle. Just in front of me the operator sat tensed over a tiny illuminated board, peering at instrument faces and tapping the keys of what looked like a miniature calculating machine. A soundless hum filled the air, penetrating my bones.

I twisted, seeking a more comfortable position. My half-healed neck and side were stiffening up again. Bits of fragments of the last ten days' incessant briefing ran through my mind. Imperial Intelligence hadn't been able to gather as much material as they wanted on Marshall of the State Bayard, but it was more than I was able to assimilate consciously. I hoped the hypnotic sessions I had had every night for a week in place of real sleep had taken, at a level where the data would pop up when I needed it.

Bayard was a man of mystery, even to his own people. He was rarely seen, except via what the puzzled intelligence men said 'seemed to be a sort of electric picture apparatus.' I had tried to explain that TV was commonplace in my world, but they never really understood it.

They had given me a good night's sleep the last three nights, and a tough hour of cleverly planned calisthenics every day. My wounds had healed well, so that now I was physically ready for the adventure; mentally, however, I was fagged. The result was an eagerness to get on with the thing, find out the worst of what I was faced with. I had enough of words; now I wanted the relief of action.

I checked over my equipment. I wore a military tunic duplicating that shown in the official portrait of Bayard. Since there was no information on what he wore below the chest, I had suggested olive drab trousers, matching what I recognized as the French regulation jacket.

At my advice, we'd skipped the ribbons and orders shown in the photo; I didn't think he would wear them around his private apartment in an informal situation. For the same reason, my collar was unbuttoned and my tie loosened.

They had kept me on a diet of lean beefsteak, to try to thin my face a bit. A hair specialist had given me vigorous scalp massages every morning and evening, and insisted that I not wash my head; this was intended to stimulate rapid growth and achieve the unclipped continental look of the dictator's picture.

Snapped to my belt was a small web pouch containing my communication transmitter. We had decided to let it show rather than seek with doubtful success to conceal it. The microphone was woven into the heavy braid on my lapels. I had a thick stack of NPS currency in my wallet.

I moved my right hand carefully, feeling for the pressure of the release spring that would throw the palm-sized slug-gun into my hand with the proper flexing of the wrist.

The little weapon was a marvel of compact deadliness. In shape it resembled a water-washed stone, grey and smooth. It could lie unnoticed on the ground, a feature which might be of great importance to me in an emergency.

Inside the gun a hair-sized channel spiraled down into the grip. A compressed gas, filling the tiny hole, served as both propellant and projectile. At a pressure on the right spot, unmarked, a minute globule of the liquefied gas was fired with tremendous velocity. Once free of the confining walls of the tough alloy barrel, the bead expanded explosively to a volume of a cubic foot. The result was an almost soundless blow, capable of shattering ¼" armor, instantly fatal within a range of ten feet.

It was the kind of weapon I needed; inconspicuous, quiet, and deadly at short range. The spring arrangement made it almost a part of the hand, if the hand were expert.

I had practiced the motion for hours, while listening to lectures, eating, even lying in bed. I was very conscientious about that piece of training; it was my insurance. I tried not to think about my other insurance, set in the hollowed-out bridge replacing a back tooth.

Each evening, after the day's hard routine, I had relaxed with new friends, exploring the Imperial Ballet, theatres, opera and a lively variety show. With Barbro, I had dined sumptuously at half a dozen fabulous restaurants and afterwards we had walked in moonlit gardens, sipped coffee as the sun rose, and talked. When the day came to leave, I had more than a casual desire to return. The sooner I got started, the quicker I would get back.

The first step on my route was the trip to North Africa, so that my shuttle could drop me directly into the palace at Algiers. We had spent a lot of time on pinpointing the exact position of the Dictator's apartment.

Goering and a group of intelligence men had seen me off as I boarded a huge bi-plane with five exposed engines, which looked a little like a Gotha or Handley-Page of World War I. I had made my way up the sloping aisle, and gone to sleep in the wicker seat almost before the plane started moving.

I awoke at dusk as we circled Algiers, and stared down out of the round

window at the airport which lay to the east of the old city rather than in its accustomed position. We landed and a small reception committee rushed me along at once to another meeting, for final additions to my instructions.

Afterwards I had a restless night after sleeping all day on the plane and had only started yawning as I sat in the car on the way to the stately manorial house which the Dictator Bayard had enlarged as his personal fortress in the world of B-I Two.

We rode an elevator to the top floor, and climbed a narrow twisting stair to emerge through a door onto the wind-swept roof. I was cold and fuzzy-eyed. I looked up without enthusiasm at the steel scaffold which loomed from the tarred surface of the roof, reaching to the exact height of the floor of the Dictator's apartment-we hoped. I had to climb it to the platform at the top where a miniature version of the M-C scout lay, looking barely big enough for one. I wondered where the Operator would fit.

There was nothing left to say, no reason to wait. The intelligence men shook hands in a brisk no-nonsense way, and I started up. The iron rungs were cold to the touch, and slippery with moisture. Suppose I fell now? Where would the project be then? But one of the things that I admired about these Imperials was that they weren't too damned careful, not so hell-bent for womb-to-tomb security as the scared people at home.

Now, cramped in my seat in the shuttle, waiting for the hours to pass before I should be deposited in the dictator's suite, forty feet above the old roof level, I thought of the Imperial officers and their ladies standing up to the guns barehanded. I thought of the dead, lying in their riddled finery on the polished ballroom floor. I remembered the bearded raider, fighting to withdraw the length of the sabre from his chest, and wondered how many times he had gambled his life, before death called his bet.

He had worn part of an American uniform; perhaps he had been an American, a broken survivor of some hell-bomb war in which another America had not been the victor. I pictured him buying the jacket ten or fifteen years earlier, in some bright American PX, proud of the new gold bar on the shoulder, with his sweetheart at his side. Why wasn't my sympathy with him, and with the desperate courage of his ragged crew? I didn't know; there was a difference. The Imperials had died with their pride intact. The others had been too much like my own memory of war, vicious and bitter.

I thought of Winter, dying in my place. I had liked Winter. He had been no fanatic, eager to make the grand gesture-but he hadn't hesitated.

Maybe, I said to myself, if a man wants to have something to live for, he's got to have something he'll die for.

The Operator turned. "Colonel," he said, "brace yourself, sir. There's something here I don't understand."

I tensed, but said nothing. I figured he would tell me more as soon as he knew more. I moved my hand tentatively against the slug-gun release. I already had the habit.

"I've detected a moving body in the Net," he said. "It seems to be trying to

match our course. My spatial fix on it indicates it's very near."

The Imperium was decades behind my world in nuclear physics, television, aerodynamics, etc., but when it came to the instrumentation of these Maxoni devices, they were fantastic. After all, they had devoted their best scientific efforts to the task for almost sixty years.

Now the Operator hovered over his panel controls like a nervous organist.

"I get a mass of about fifteen hundred kilos," he said. "That's about right for a light scout, but it can't be one of ours . . ."

There was a tense silence for several minutes.

"He's pacing us, Colonel," the Operator said. "Either they've got better instrumentation than we thought, or this chap has had a stroke of blind luck. He was lying in wait . . ."

Both of us were assuming the stranger could be nothing but a B-I Two vessel.

"Perhaps they've set up a DEW line to pick up anyone coming in," I said. The Dictator's men were geared to modern war; they wouldn't be likely to ignore such measures. The Imperium didn't yet know the fanatic war-skill of Atomic Man . . . Still, it was strange . . .

"This won't do," the Operator said. "I can't drop out of the Net at our destination with this chap on my back. Not only would there be the devil to pay with this fellow identifying with an occupied space, but there'd be precious little secrecy left about the operation."

"Can't you lose him?" I asked.

He shook his head. "I can't possibly change my course here in the Blight. Correction requires a momentary identification. And, of course, our maximum progression rate is constant, just as his is; he can't help clinging like a leech once he's got us."

I didn't like this at all. The only thing we could do was keep going until we crossed the Blight, then try to shake him off. I didn't want to have this turn into a dry run.

"Can we fire a shot at him?" I asked.

"As soon as the projectile left the M-C field, it would drop into identity," the Operator said. "But, of course, the same thing keeps him from shooting at us."

The Operator tensed up suddenly, hands frozen. "He's coming in on us, Colonel," he said. "He's going to ram. We'll blow sky-high if he crosses our fix."

My thoughts ran like lightning over my slug-gun, the hollow tooth; I wondered what would happen when he hit. Somehow, I hadn't expected it to end here.

The impossible tension lasted only a few seconds; the Operator relaxed.

"Missed," he said. "Apparently his spatial maneuvering isn't as good as his Net mobility. But he'll be back; he's after blood."

I had a thought. "Our maximum rate is controlled by the energy of normal entropy, isn't it?" I asked.

He nodded.

"What about going slower," I said. "Maybe he'll overshoot."

I could see the sweat start on the back of his neck from there.

"A bit risky in the Blight, sir," he said, "but we'll have a go at it."

I knew how hard that was for an Operator to say. This young fellow had had six years of intensive training, and not a day of it had passed without a warning against any unnecessary control changes in the Blight.

The sound of the generators changed, the pitch of the whine descending into the audible range, dropping lower.

"He's still with us, Colonel," the operator said.

The pitch fell, lower, lower. I didn't know when the critical point would be reached when we would lose our artificial orientation and rotate into normal entropy. We sat, rigid, waiting. The sound dropped down, almost baritone now. The Operator tapped again and again at a key, glancing at a dial.

The drive hum was a harsh droning now; we couldn't expect to go much further without disaster. But then neither could the enemy . . .

"He's right with us, Colonel, only . . ." Suddenly the Operator shouted.

"We lost him, Colonel! His controls aren't as good as ours in that line, anyway; he dropped into identity."

I sank back, as the whine of our M-C generator built up again. My palms were wet. I wondered into which of the hells of the Blight they had gone. But I had another problem to face in a few minutes. This was not the time for shaken nerves.

"Good work, Operator," I said at last. "How much longer?"

"About-Good God-ten minutes, sir," he answered. "That little business took longer than I thought."

I started a last minute check. My mouth was dry. Everything seemed to be in place. I pressed the button on my communicator.

"Hello, Talisman," I said, "here is Wolfhound Red. How do you hear me? Over."

"Wolfhound Red, Talisman here, you're coming in right and bright, over." The tiny voice spoke almost in my ear from the speaker in a button on my shoulder strap.

I liked the instant response; I felt a little less lonesome.

I looked at the trip mechanism for the escape door. I was to wait for the Operator to say, "Crash out," and hit the lever. I had exactly two seconds then to pull my arm back and kick the slug-gun into my palm before the seat would automatically dump me, standing, out the exit. The shuttle would be gone before my feet hit the floor.

I had been so wrapped up in the business at hand for the past ten days that I had not really thought about the moment of my arrival in the B-I Two world. The smoothly professional handling of my hasty training had given the job an air of practicality and realism. Now, about to be propelled into the innermost midst of the enemy, I began to realize the suicidal aspects of the mission. But it was too late now for second thoughts-and in a way I was glad. I was involved now in this world of the Imperium; it was a part of my life worth risking something for.

I was a card the Imperium held, and it was my turn to be played. I was a valuable property, but that value could only be realized by putting me into the scene in just this way; and the sooner the better. I had no assurance that the Dictator was in residence at the palace now; I might find myself hiding in his quarters awaiting his return, for God knows how long-and maybe lucky at that, to get that far. I hoped our placement of the suite was correct, based on information gotten from the captive taken at the ballroom, under deep narco-hypnosis. Otherwise, I might find myself treading air, 150 feet up . . .

There was a slamming of switches, and the Operator twisted in his chair.

"Crash out, Wolfhound," he cried, "and good hunting."

Reach out and slam the lever; arm at the side, snap the gun into place in my hand; with a metallic whack and a rush of air the exit popped and a giant hand palmed me out into dimness. One awful instant of vertigo, of a step missed in the dark, and then my feet slammed against carpeted floor. Air whipped about my face, and the echoes of the departing boom of the shuttle still hung in the corridor.

I remembered my instructions; I stood still, turning casually to check behind me. There was no one in sight. The hall was dark except for the faint light from a ceiling fixture at the next intersection. I had arrived OK.

I slipped the gun back into its latch under my cuff. No point in standing here; I started off at a leisurely pace toward the light. The doors lining the hall were identical, unmarked. I paused and tried one. Locked. So was the next. The third opened, and I looked cautiously into a sitting room. I went on. What I wanted was the sleeping room of the Dictator, if possible. If he were in, I knew what to do; if not, presumably he would return if I waited long enough. Meanwhile, I wanted very much not to meet anyone.

There was the sound of an elevator door opening, just around the corner ahead. I stopped; better get out of sight fast. I eased back to the last door I had checked, opened it and stepped inside, closing it almost all the way behind me. My heart was thudding painfully. I didn't feel daring; I felt like a sneak thief. Faintly, I heard steps coming my way. I silently closed the

door, taking care not to let the latch click. I stood behind it for a moment before deciding it would be better to conceal myself, just in case. I glanced around, moving into the center of the room. I could barely make out outlines in the gloom. There was a tall shape against the wall; a wardrobe, I thought. I hurried across to it, opened the door, and stepped in among hanging clothes.

I stood for a moment, feeling foolish, then froze as the door to the hall opened and closed again softly. There were footsteps, and then a light went on. My closet door was open just enough to catch a glimpse of a man's back as he turned away from the lamp. I heard the soft sound of a chair being pulled out, and then the tiny jingle of keys. There were faint metallic sounds, a pause, more faint metallic sounds. The man was apparently trying keys in the lock of a table or desk.

I stood absolutely rigid. I breathed shallowly, tried not to think about a sudden itch on my cheek. I could see the shoulder of the coat hanging to my left. I turned my eyes to it. It was almost identical with the one I was wearing. The lapels were adorned with heavy braid. I had a small moment of relief; I had found the right apartment, at least. But my victim must be the man in the room; and I had never felt less like killing anyone in my life.

The little sounds went on. I could hear the man's heavy breathing. All at once I wondered what he would look like, this double of mine. Would he really resemble me, or more to the point, did I look enough like him to take his place?

I wondered why he took so long finding the right key; then another thought struck me. Didn't this sound a little more like someone trying to open someone else's desk? I moved my head a fraction of an inch. The clothes moved silently, and I edged a little farther. Now I could see him. He sat hunched in the chair, working impatiently at the lock. He was short and had thin hair, and resembled me not in the least. It was not the Dictator.

This was a new factor for me to think over, and in a hurry. The Dictator was obviously not around, or this fellow would not be here attempting to rifle his desk. And the dictator had people around him who were not above prying. That fact might be useful to me.

It took him five minutes to find a key that fit. I stood with muscles aching from the awkward pose, trying not to think of the lint that might cause a sneeze. I could hear the shuffling of papers, faint muttering as the man looked over his finds. At length there was the sound of the drawer closing, the snick of the lock. Now the man was on his feet, the chair pushed back, and then silence for a few moments. Steps came toward me. I froze, my wrist twitching, ready to cover him and fire if necessary the instant he pulled the door open. I wasn't ready to start my imposture just yet, skulking in a closet.

I let out a soundless sigh as he passed the opening and disappeared. More sounds as he ran through the drawers of a bureau or chest.

Suddenly the hall door opened again, and another set of steps entered the room. I heard my man freeze. Then he spoke, in guttural French.

"Oh, it's you, is it, Maurice . . ."

There was a pause. Maurice's tone was insinuating.

"Yes, I thought I saw a light in the chief's study. I thought that was a bit odd, what with him away tonight."

The first man sauntered back toward the center of the room. "I just thought I'd have a look to see that everything was OK here."

Maurice tittered. "Don't try to rob a thief; I know why you came here—for the same reason as I."

The first man snarled. "You're a fool, Maurice. Come on, let's get out of this."

Maurice didn't sound like a titterer now. "Not so fast and smooth, Flic. Something's coming up and I want in."

"Don't call me Flic," the first man said. "You're crazy."

"You didn't mind being a flic when you threw the weight of the badge around in Marseilles in the Old Days; see, I know all about you." He laughed, an ugly sound.

"What are you up to," the first man hissed. "What do you want?"

"Sit down, Flic; oh, don't get excited; they all call you that." Maurice was enjoying himself. I listened carefully for half an hour while he goaded and cajoled, and pressured the other. The first man, I learned, was Georges Pinay, the chief of the dictator's security force. The other was a civilian military adviser to the Bureau of Propaganda and Education. Pinay, it seemed had been less clever than he thought in planning a coup that was to unseat Bayard. Maurice knew all about it, and had bided his time; now he was taking over. Pinay didn't like it, but he accepted it after Maurice mentioned a few things nobody was supposed to know about a hidden airplane and a deposit of gold coins buried a few miles outside the city.

I listened carefully, without moving, and after a while even the itch went away. Pinay had been looking for lists of names, he admitted; he planned to enlist a few more supporters by showing them their names in the Dictator's own hand on the purge schedule. He hadn't planned to mention that he himself had nominated them for the list.

I made the mistake of overconfidence; I was just waiting for them to finish up when a sudden silence fell. I didn't know what I had done wrong, but I knew at once what was coming. The steps were very quiet and there was just a moment's pause before the door was flung open. I hoped my make-up was on straight.

I stepped out, casting a cool glance at Pinay.

"Well, Georges," I said, "it's nice to know you keep yourself occupied when I'm away." I used the same French dialect they had used, and my wrist was against the little lever.

"The Devil," Maurice burst out. He stared at me with wide eyes. For a moment I thought I was going to get away with it. Then Pinay lunged at me. I whirled, side-stepped; and the slug-gun slapped my palm.

"Hold it," I barked.

Pinay ignored the order and charged again. I squeezed the tiny weapon, bracing myself against the recoil. There was a solid thump and Pinay bounced aside, landed on his back, loose limbed, and lay still. Then Maurice hit me from the side. I stumbled across the room, tripped and fell, and he was on top of me. I still had my gun, and tried to bring it into play, but I was dazed, and Maurice was fast and strong as a bull. He flipped me and held me in a one-handed judo hold that pinned both arms behind me. He was astride me, breathing heavily.

"Who are you?" he hissed.

"I thought you'd know me, Maurice," I said. With infinite care I groped, tucked the slug-gun into my cuff. I heard it click home and I relaxed.

"So you thought that, eh?" Maurice laughed. His face was pink and moist. He pulled a heavy blackjack from his pocket as he slid off me.

"Get up," he said. He looked me over.

"My God," he said. "Fantastic. Who sent you?"

I didn't answer. It seemed I wasn't fooling him for a minute. I wondered what was so wrong. Still, he seemed to find my appearance interesting. He stepped forward and slammed the sap against my neck, with a controlled motion. He could have broken my neck with it, but what he did was more painful. I felt the blood start from my half healed neck wound. He saw it, and looked puzzled for a moment. Then his face cleared.

"Excuse me," he said, grinning. "I'll try for a fresh spot next time. And answer when spoken to." There was a viciousness in his voice that reminded me of the attack at the palace. These men had seen hell on earth and they were no longer fully human.

He looked at me appraisingly, slapping his palm with the blackjack. "I think we'll have a little talk downstairs," he said. "Keep the hands in sight." His eyes darted about, apparently looking for my gun. He was very sure of himself; he didn't let it worry him when he didn't see it. He didn't want to take his eyes off me long enough to really make a search.

"Stay close, Baby," he said. "Just like that, come along now, nice and easy."

I kept my hands away from my sides, and followed him over to the phone. He wasn't as good as he thought; I could have taken him anytime. I had a hunch, though, that it might be better to string along a little, try to find out something more.

Maurice picked up the phone, spoke softly into it and dropped it back in the cradle. His eyes stayed on me.

"How long before they get here?" I asked.

Maurice narrowed his eyes, not answering.

"Maybe we have just time enough to make a deal," I said.

His mouth curved in what might have been a smile. "We'll make a deal all right, Baby," he said. "You sing loud and clear, and maybe I'll tell the boys to make it a fast finish."

"You've got an ace up your sleeve here, Maurice," I urged. "Don't let that rabble in on it."

He slapped his palm again. "What have you got in mind, Baby?"

"I'm on my own," I said. I was thinking fast. "I'll bet you never knew Brion had a twin brother. He cut me out, though, so I thought I'd cut myself in."

Maurice was interested. "The devil," he said. "You haven't seen your loving twin in a long time, I see." He grinned. I wondered what the joke was.

"Let's get out of here," I said. "Let's keep it between us two."

Maurice glanced at Pinay.

"Forget him," I said. "He's dead."

"You'd like that, wouldn't you, Baby," Maurice said. "Just the two of us, and maybe then a chance to narrow it back down to one." His sardonic expression turned suddenly to a snarl, with nostrils flaring. "By God," he said, "you, you'd plan to kill me, you little man of straw . . ." He was leaning toward me now, arm loosening for a swing. I realized he was insane, ready to kill in an instantaneous fury.

"You'll see who is the killer between us," he said. His eyes gleamed as he swung the blackjack loosely in his hand.

I couldn't wait any longer. The gun popped into my hand, aimed at Maurice. I felt myself beginning to respond to his murder-lust. I hated everything he stood for.

"You're stupid, Maurice," I said. "Stupid and slow, and in just a minute, dead. But first you're going to tell me how you knew I wasn't Bayard."

It was a nice try, but wasted.

Maurice leaped and the slug-gun slapped him aside. He hit and lay limp. My arm ached from the recoil. Handling the tiny weapon was tricky. It was good for about fifty shots on a charge; at this rate it wouldn't last a day.

I had to get out fast now. I reached up and smashed the ceiling light, then the table lamp. That might slow them up for a few moments. I eased out into the hall and started for the dark end. Behind me I heard the elevator opening. They were here already. I pushed at the glass door, and it swung open quietly. I didn't wait around to see what their reaction would be when they found Maurice and Georges. I went down the stairs two at a time, as

softly as I could. I thought of my communicator and decided against it. I didn't have anything good to report.

I passed three landings before I emerged into a hall. This would be the old roof level. I tried to remember where the stair had come out in the analogous spot back at Zero Zero. I spotted a small door in an alcove; it seemed to be in about the right place.

A man came out of a room across the hall and glanced toward me. I rubbed my mouth thoughtfully, while heading for the little door. The resemblance was more of a hindrance than a help now. He went on, and I tried the door. It was locked, but it didn't look very strong. I put my hip against it and pushed. It gave way with no more than a mild splintering sound. The stairs were there, and I headed down.

I had no plan, other than to get in the clear. It was obvious that the impersonation was a complete flop. All I could do was to get to a safe place and ask for further instructions. I had gone down two flights when I heard the alarm bells start.

I stopped dead. I had to get rid of the fancy uniform. I pulled off the jacket, then settled for tearing the braid off the wrists, and removing the shoulder tabs. I couldn't ditch the lapel braid; my microphone was woven into it. I couldn't do much else about my appearance.

This unused stair was probably as good a way out as any. I kept going. I checked the door at each floor. They were all locked. That was a good sign, I thought. The stair ended in a damp cul-de-sac filled with barrels and mildewed paper cartons. I went back up to the next landing and listened. Beyond the door there were loud voices and the clatter of feet. I remembered that the entry to the stair was near the main entrance to the old mansion. It looked like I was trapped.

I went down again, pulled one of the barrels aside. By the light of a match I peered behind it at the wall. The edge of a door frame was visible. I maneuvered another barrel out of place and found the knob. It was frozen. I wondered how much noise I could make without being heard; not much, I decided.

I needed something to pry with. The paper cartons looked like a possibility; I tore the flaps loose on one and looked in. It was filled with musty ledger books; no help.

The next was better. Old silverware, pots and pans. I dug out a heavy cleaver and slipped it into the crack. The thing was as solid as a bank vault. I tried again; it couldn't be that strong, but it didn't budge.

I stepped back. Maybe the only thing to do was forget caution and chop through the middle. I leaned over to pick the best spot to swing at-then jumped back flat against the wall, slug-gun in my hand. The door knob was turning.

VII

I was close to panic; being cornered had that effect on me. I didn't know

what to do. I had plenty of instructions on how to handle the job of taking over after I had succeeded in killing the Dictator, but none to cover retreat after failure.

There was a creak, and dust sifted down from the top of the door. I stood as far back as I could get, waiting. I had an impulse to start shooting, but restrained it. Wait and see.

The door edged open a crack. I really didn't like this; I was being looked over, and could see nothing myself. At least I had the appearance of being unarmed; the tiny gun was concealed in my hand. Or was that an advantage? I couldn't decide.

I didn't like the suspense. "All right," I said. "You're making a draft; in or out." I spoke in the gutter Parisian I had heard upstairs.

The door opened farther, and a grimy-faced fellow was visible beyond it. He blinked in the dim light, peered up the stairs. He gestured.

"This way, come on," he said in a hoarse whisper. I didn't see any reason to refuse under the circumstances. I stepped past the barrels and ducked through the low doorway. As the man closed the door, I slipped the gun back into its clip. I was standing in a damp stone-lined tunnel, lit by an electric lantern sitting on the floor. I stood with my back to it. I didn't want him to see my face yet, not in a good light.

"Who are you?" I asked.

The fellow pushed past me and picked up his lantern. He hardly glanced at me.

"I'm just a dumb guy," he said. "I don't ask no questions, I don't answer none. Come on."

I couldn't afford to argue the point; I followed him. We made our way along the hand-hewn corridor, then down a twisting flight of steps, to emerge into a dark windowless chamber. Two men and a dark haired girl sat around a battered table where a candle sputtered.

"Call them in, Miche," my guide said. "Here's the pigeon."

Miche lolled back in his chair and motioned me toward him. He picked up what looked like a letter-knife from the table and probed between two back teeth while he squinted at me. I made it a point not to get too close.

"One of the kennel dogs, by the uniform," he said. "What's the matter, you bite the hand that fed you?" He laughed, not very humorously.

I said nothing. I thought I'd give him a chance to tell me something first if he felt like it.

"A ranker, too, by the braid," he said. "Well, they'll wonder where you got to." His tone changed. "Let's have the story," he said. "Why are you on the run?"

"Don't let the suit bother you," I said. "I borrowed it. But it seemed like the

people up there disliked me on sight."

"Come on over here," the other man said. "Into the light."

I couldn't put it off forever. I moved forward, right up to the table. Just to be sure they got the idea, I picked up the candle and held it by my face.

Miche froze, knife point in his teeth. The girl started violently and crossed herself. The other man stared, fascinated. I'd gone over pretty big. I put the candle back on the table and sat down casually in the empty chair.

"Maybe you can tell me," I said, "why they didn't buy it."

The second man spoke. "You just walked in like that, sprung it on them?"

I nodded.

He and Miche looked at each other.

"You got a very valuable property here, my friend," the man said. "But you need a little help. Chica, bring wine for our new friend here."

The girl, still wide-eyed, scuttled to a dingy cupboard and fumbled for a bottle, looking at me over her shoulder.

"Look at him sitting there, Gros," Miche said. "Now that's something."

"You're right that's something," Gros said. "If it isn't already loused up." He leaned across the table. "Now just what happened upstairs," he said. "How long have you been in the palace; how many have seen you?"

I gave them a brief outline, leaving out my mode of arrival. They seemed satisfied.

"Only two seen his face, Gros," Miche said, "and they're out of the picture." He turned to me. "That was a nice bit of work, Mister, knocking off Souvet; and nobody ain't going to miss Pinay neither. By the way, where's the gun? Better let me have it." He held out his hand.

"I had to leave it," I said. "Tripped and dropped it in the dark."

Miche grunted.

"The Boss will be interested in this," Gros said. "He'll want to see him."

Someone else panted up the stairs into the room. "Say, Chief," he began, "we make it trouble in the tower . . ." He stopped dead as he caught sight of me, and dropped into a crouch, utter startlement on his face. His hand clawed for a gun at his hip, found none, as his eyes darted from face to face. "What-what . . ."

Gros and Miche burst into raucous laughter, slapping the table and howling. "At ease, Spider," Miche managed. "Bayard's throwed in with us." At this even Chica snickered.

Spider still crouched. "OK, what's the deal," he gasped. "I don't get it." He glared around the room, face white. He was scared stiff. Miche wiped his

face, whooped a last time, hawked and spat on the floor.

"OK, Spider, as you were," he said. "This here's a ringer. Now you better go bring in the boys. Beat it."

Spider scuttled away. I was puzzled; why did some of them take one startled look and relax, while this fellow was apparently completely taken in? I had to find out. There was something I was doing wrong.

"Do you mind telling me," I said. "What's wrong with the get-up?" Miche and Gros exchanged glances again.

"Well, my friend," Gros said, "it's nothing we can't take care of. Just take it easy, and we'll set you right. You wanted to step in and take out the Old Man, and sit in for him, right? Well, with the Organization behind you you're as good as in."

"What's the Organization?" I asked.

Miche broke in, "For now we'll ask the questions," he said. "What's your name? What's your play here?"

I looked from Miche to Gros. I wondered which one was the boss. "My name's Bayard," I said.

Miche narrowed his eyes as he rose and walked around the table. He was a big fellow with small eyes.

"I asked you what's your name, Mister," he said. "I don't usually ask twice."

"Hold it, Miche," Gros said. "He's right. He's got to stay in this part, if he's going to be good; and he better be plenty good. Let's leave it at that; he's Bayard."

Miche looked at me. "Yeah," he said, "you got a point." I had a feeling Miche and I weren't going to get along.

"Who's backing you, uh, Bayard?" Gros said.

"I play a lone hand," I said. "Up to now, anyway. But it seems I missed something. If your Organization can get me in, I'll go along."

"We'll get you in, all right," Miche said.

I didn't like the looks of this pair of hoodlums, but I could hardly expect high-toned company here. As far as I could guess, the Organization was an under-ground anti-Bayard party. The room seemed to be hollowed out of the walls of the palace. Apparently they ran a spying operation all through the building, using hidden passages.

More men entered the room now, some via the stair, others through a door in the far corner. Apparently the word had gone out. They gathered around, staring curiously, commenting to each other, but not surprised.

"These are the boys," Gros said, looking around at them. "The rats in the walls."

I looked them over, about a dozen piratical-looking toughs; Gros had described them well. I looked back at him. "All right," I said. "When do we start." These weren't the kind of companions I would have chosen, but if they could fill in the gaps in my disguise for me, and help me take over in Bayard's place, I could only be grateful for my good luck.

"Not so fast," Miche said. "This thing is going to take time. We got to get you to a layout we got out of town. We got a lot of work ahead of us."

"I'm here now," I said. "Why not go ahead today; why leave here?"

"We got a little work to do on your disguise," Gros said, "and there's plans to make. How do we get the most out of this break and how do we make sure there's no wires on this?"

"And no double-cross," Miche added.

A hairy lout listening in the crowd spoke up.

"I don't like the looks of this stool, Miche. I don't like funny stuff. I say under the floor with him." He wore a worn commando knife in a sheath fixed horizontally to his belt buckle. I was pretty sure he was eager to use it.

Miche looked at me. "Not for now, Gaston," he said.

Gros rubbed his chin. "Don't get worried about Mr. Bayard, boys," he said. "We'll have our eyes on him." He glanced up at Gaston. "You might make a special effort along those lines, Gaston; but don't get ahead of yourself. Let's say if he has any kind of accident, you'll have a worse one."

The feel of the spring under my wrist was comforting. I felt that Gaston wasn't the only one in this crew who didn't like strangers.

"I figure time is important," I said. "Let's get moving."

Miche stepped over to me. He prodded my leg with his boot. "You got a flappy mouth, Mister," he said. "Gros and me gives the orders around here."

"OK," Gros said. "Our friend has got a lot to learn, but he's right about the time. Bayard's due back here sometime tomorrow, so that means we get out today, if we don't want the Ducals all over the place on top of the regulars. Miche, get the boys moving. I want things folded fast and quiet, and good men on the standby crew."

He turned to me as Miche bawled orders to the men.

"Maybe you better have a little food now," he said. "It's going to be a long day."

I was startled; I had been thinking of it as night. I looked at my watch. It had been one hour and ten minutes since I had entered the palace. Doesn't time go fast, I thought to myself, when everyone's having fun.

Chica brought over a loaf of bread and a wedge of brown cheese from the cupboard, and placed them on the table with a knife. I was cautious.

"OK if I pick up the knife?" I asked.

"Sure," Gros said. "Go ahead." He reached under the table and laid a short-nosed revolver before him.

Miche came back to the table as I chewed on a slice of tough bread. It was good bread. I tried the wine. It wasn't bad. The cheese was good, too.

"You eat well," I said. "This is good."

Chica threw me a grateful smile. "We do all right," Gros said.

"Better get Mouth here out of that fancy suit," Miche said, jerking his head at me. "Somebody might just take a shot at that without thinking. The boys have got kind of nervous about them kind of suits."

Gros looked at me. "That's right," he said. "Miche will give you some other clothes. That uniform don't go over so big here."

I didn't like this development at all. My communicator was built into the scrambled eggs on my lapels. I had to say 'no' and make it stick.

"Sorry," I said. "I keep the outfit. It's part of the act. I'll put a coat over it if necessary."

Miche put his foot against my chair and shoved; I saw it coming and managed to scramble to my feet instead of going over with the chair. Miche faced me, skin tight around his eyes.

"Strip, Mister," he said. "You heard the man."

The men still in the room fell silent, watching. I looked at Miche. I hoped Gros would speak up. I couldn't see anything to be gained by this.

Nobody spoke. I glanced over at Gros. He was just looking at us.

Miche reached behind, brought out a knife. The blade snicked out. "Or do I have to cut it off you," he growled.

"Put the knife away, Miche," Gros said mildly. "You don't want to cut up our secret weapon here; and we want the uniform off all in one piece."

"Yeah," Miche said. "You got a point." He dropped the knife on the table and moved in on me. From his practiced crouch and easy shuffling step, I saw that he had been a professional.

I decided not to wait for him. I threw myself forward with my weight behind a straight left to the jaw. It caught Miche by surprise, slammed against his chin and rocked him back. I tried to follow up, catch him again while he was still off balance, but he was a veteran of too many fights. He covered up, back-pedaled, shook his head, and then flicked out with a right that exploded against my temple. I was almost out, staggering. He hit me again, square on the nose. Blood flowed.

I wouldn't last long against this bruiser. The crowd was still bunched at the far end of the room, moving this way, now, watching delightedly, calling

encouragement to Miche. Gros still sat, and Chica stared from her place by the wall.

I moved back, dazed, dodging blows. I only had one chance and I needed a dark corner to try it. Miche was right after me. He was mad; he didn't like that smack on the jaw in front of the boys. That helped me; he forgot boxing and threw one haymaker after another. He wanted to floor me with one punch to retrieve his dignity. I dodged and retreated.

I moved back toward the deep shadows at the end of the room, beyond Chica's pantry. I had to get there quickly, before the watching crowd closed up the space.

Miche swung, again, left, right. I heard the air whistle as his hamlike fist grazed me. I backed another step; almost far enough. Now to get between him and the rest of the room. I jumped in behind a wild swing, popped a stinging right off his ear, and kept going. I whirled, snapped the slug-gun into my hand, and as Miche lunged, I shot him in the stomach, faked a wild swinging attack as he bounced off the wall and fell full length at my feet. I slipped the gun back into my cuff and turned.

"I can't see," a man shouted. "Get some light down here." The mob pushed forward, forming a wide ring. They stopped as they saw that only I was on my feet.

"Miche is down," a man called. "The new guy took him."

Gros pushed his way through, hesitated, then walked over to the sprawled body of Miche. He squatted, beckoned to the man with the candle.

He pulled Miche over on his back, then looked closer, feeling for the heartbeat. He looked up abruptly, got to his feet.

"He's dead," he said. "Miche is dead." He looked at me with a strange expression. "It's quite a punch you got, Mister," he said.

"I tried not to use it," I said. "But I'll use it again if I have to."

"Search him, boys," Gros said. They prodded and slapped, everywhere but my wrist. "He's clean, Gros," a man said. Gros looked the body over carefully, searching for signs of a wound. Men crowded around him.

"No marks," he said at last. "Broken ribs, and it feels like something funny inside; all messed up." He looked at me. "He did it bare-handed."

I hoped they would go on believing that. It was my best insurance against a repetition. I wanted them scared of me, and the ethics of it didn't bother me at all.

"All right," Gros called to the men. "Back on the job. Miche asked for it. He called our new man 'Mouth.' I'm naming him 'Hammer-hand.'"

I thought this was as good a time as any to push a little farther.

"You'd better tell them I'm taking over Miche's spot here, Gros," I said. "We'll work together, fifty-fifty."

Gros squinted at me. "Yeah, that figures," he said. I had a feeling he had mental reservations.

"And by the way," I added. "I keep the uniform."

"Yeah," Gros said. "He keeps the uniform." He turned back to the men. "We pull out of here in thirty minutes. Get moving."

I went over to the sink and washed the blood off my face. My nose ached. I peered at it in the broken mirror; it was swelling fast. I went back to the table and finished my bread and cheese while Gros paced up and down, taking reports and giving orders as men came and went. Miche's body was hauled away. I didn't ask where.

Gros came over to the table. "OK, Hammer-hand," he said. "On your feet." He handed me a dingy cape. "Stay right with me and do what I tell you." He hitched his trousers up to be sure I wouldn't miss the revolver stuck in his belt.

I stood up. "I'm ready," I said. I draped the wrap over my shoulders, concealing the insignia.

I followed Gros through the small door opposite the stair by which I had entered. A low-ceilinged passage led downward, twisting around steel pilings occasionally. Gros lit the way ahead with a fading electric lantern. The rest of the men were in nearly total darkness, but they seemed to know the way. Only a curse now and then indicated a collision in the dark.

We arrived at a wooden panel barring the way. Gros called two men forward, and together they drew back half a dozen heavy barrel-bolts. Gros eased the panel aside an inch and peered out. He signaled to the men to set it aside; everyone was silent now.

Gros hissed at me. "Stay close; do what I do. And get ready to run like hell."

I was at Gros's heels as he stepped down into a room dimly illuminated by sunlight filtering through boards covering shattered windows along the far side. Crates, boxes, and lift vans were stacked everywhere. We moved cautiously through them. I wondered why Gros didn't wait until night to make this break.

We stopped by a massive burlap-wrapped bale, and men silently surrounded it, pushing. It slid to one side with only a faint scraping, exposing a trap door. The lid was carefully raised and propped, and Gros motioned me down. I scrambled over the edge and found a wooden ladder with my feet. Gros came behind me, followed by the men.

I reached a dirt floor, wet and slimy with seepage. Gros pushed past me, prowled ahead, neck bent under the wooden beams which reinforced the ceiling. We moved on.

Behind, I heard feet sloshing in the dark, men stumbling and groping. They didn't know this route so well.

There was light ahead now, a faint lessening of darkness. We rounded a

curve where a great boulder bulged into the passage, and a ragged line of daylight showed.

Gros beckoned the men closer. They bunched up, filling the cramped passage.

"Most of you never came this way before," he said. "So listen. We push out of here into the Street of Olive Trees; it's a little side street under the palace wall. There's a dummy stall in front; ignore the old dame in it.

"Ease out one at a time, and move off east; that's to the right. You all got good papers. If the guy on the gate asks for them, show them. Don't get eager and volunteer. If there's any excitement behind, just keep going. We rendezvous at the thieves' market. OK, and duck the hardware."

He motioned the first man out, blinking in the glare as the ragged tarpaulin was pushed aside. After half a minute, the second followed. I moved close to Gros.

"Why bring this whole mob along?" I asked in a low voice. "Wouldn't it be a lot easier for just a few of us?"

Gros shook his head. "I want to keep my eyes on these slobs," he said. "I don't know what ideas they might get if I left them alone a few days; and I can't afford to have this set-up poisoned. And I'm going to need them out at the country place. There's nothing they can do here while I'm not around to tell them."

It sounded fishy to me, but I let it drop. All the men passed by us and disappeared. There was no alarm.

"OK," Gros said. "Stay with me." He slipped under the mouldy hanging and I followed as he stepped past a broken-down table laden with pottery. An old crone huddled on a stool ignored us. Gros glanced out into the narrow dusty street, then pushed off into the crowd. We threaded our way among loud-talking, gesticulating customers, petty merchants crouched over fly-covered displays of food or dog-eared magazines, tottering beggars, grimy urchins. The dirt street was littered with refuse, starving dogs wandered listlessly through the crowd; the heat was baking, early though it was. No one paid the least attention to us. It appeared we'd get through without trouble.

Under the heavy cloak, I was sweating. Flies buzzed about my swollen face. A whining beggar thrust a gaunt hand at me. Gros ducked between two fat men engaged in an argument. As they moved, I had to side-step and push past them. Gros was almost out of sight in the mob.

I saw a uniform suddenly, a hard-faced fellow in yellowish khaki pushing roughly through the press ahead. A chicken fluttered up squawking in my face. There was a shout, people began milling, thrusting against me. I caught a glimpse of Gros, face turned toward the soldier, eyes wide in a pale face. He started to run. In two jumps the uniformed man had him by the shoulder, spun him around, shouting. A dog yelped, banged against my legs, scuttled away. The soldier's arm rose and fell, clubbing at Gros with a heavy riot stick. Far ahead I heard a shot, and almost instantly another,

close. Gros was free and running, blood on his head, as the soldier fell among the crowd. I darted along the wall, trying to overtake Gros, or at least keep him in sight. The crowd was opening, making way as he ran, pistol in hand. He fired again, the shot a faint pop in the mob noise.

Another uniform jumped in front of me, club raised; I shied, threw up an arm, as the man jumped back, saluted.

I caught the words, "Pardon, sir," as I went past him at a run. He must have caught a glimpse of the uniform I wore.

Ahead, Gros fell in the dust, scrambled to his knees, head down. A soldier stepped out of an alley, aimed, and shot him through the head. Gros lurched, collapsed, rolled on his back. The dust caked in the blood on his face. The crowd closed in. From the moment they spotted him, he didn't have a chance.

I stopped. I was trying to remember what Gros had told the men. I had made the bad mistake of assuming too much, thinking I would have Gros to lead me out of this. There was something about a gate; everyone had papers, Gros said. All but me. That was why they had had to come out in daylight, I realized suddenly. The gate probably closed at sundown.

I moved on, not wanting to attract attention by standing still. I tried to keep the cloak around me to conceal the uniform. I didn't want any more soldiers noticing it; the next one might not be in such a hurry.

Gros had told the men to rendezvous at the thieves' market. I tried to remember Algiers from a three-day visit years before; all I could recall was the Casbah and the well-lit streets of the European shopping section.

I passed the spot where a jostling throng craned to see the body of the soldier, kept going. Another ring surrounded the spot where Gros lay dead. Now there were soldiers everywhere, swinging their sticks carelessly, breaking up the mob. I shuffled, head down, dodged a backhanded swipe, found myself in the open. The street sloped up, curving to the left. There were still a few cobbles on this part, fewer shops and stalls. Wash hung from railings around tiny balconies above the street.

I saw the gate ahead. A press of people was packed against it, while a soldier examined papers. Three more uniformed men stood by, looking toward the scene of the excitement.

I went on toward the gate. I couldn't turn back now. There was a new wooden watch tower scabbed onto the side of ancient brick wall where the sewer drained under it. A carbon arc searchlight and a man with a burp gun slung over his shoulder were on top of it. I thought I saw one of The Organization men in the crowd at the gate.

One of the soldiers was staring at me. He straightened, glanced at the man next to him. The other soldier was looking, too, now. I decided a bold front was the only chance. I beckoned to one of the men, allowing the cloak to uncover the front of the uniform briefly. He moved toward me, still in doubt. I hoped my battered face didn't look familiar.

"Snap it up, soldier," I said in my best Ecole Militaire tone; he hove to before me, saluted. I didn't give him a chance to take the initiative.

"The best part of the catch made it through the gate before you fools closed the net," I snapped. "Get me through there fast, and don't call any more attention to me. I'm not wearing this flea-circus for fun." I flipped the cloak.

He turned and pushed through to the gate, said a word to the other soldier, gestured toward me. The other man, wearing sergeant's stripes, looked at me.

I glared at him as I approached. "Ignore me," I hissed. "You foul this up and I'll see you shot."

I brushed past him, thrust through the gate as the first soldier opened it. I walked on, listening for the sound of a round snapping into the chamber of that burp gun on the tower. A goat darted out of an alley, stared at me. Sweat rolled down my cheek. There was a tree ahead, with a black shadow under it. I wondered if I'd ever get that far.

I made it, and breathed a little easier.

I still had problems, plenty of them. Right now I had to find the Thieves' Market. I had a vague memory of such a thing from the past, but I had no idea where it was. I moved on along the road, past a weathered stuccoed building with a slatternly tavern downstairs and sagging rooms above, bombed out at the far end. The gate was out of sight now.

Ahead were more bomb-scarred tenements, ruins, and beyond, open fields. There was a river in sight to the right. A few people were in view, moving listlessly in the morning heat. They seemed to ignore the hubbub within the walled town. I couldn't risk asking any of them for the place I sought; I didn't know who might be a police informer, or a cop, for that matter. They had been ready for us, I realized. Gros wasn't as well-hidden as he had thought. Probably the police could have cleared his outfit from the palace at any time; I suspected they had tolerated them against such a time as now. The ambush had been neat. I wondered if any of the 'boys' had made it through the gate.

Apparently word had not gone out to be on the alert for a man impersonating an officer; I didn't know how much Maurice had said when he telephoned for his men, but my bluff at the gate indicated no one had been warned of my disguise.

I paused. Maybe my best bet would be to try the tavern, order a drink, try to pick up something. I saw nothing ahead that looked encouraging.

I walked back fifty feet to the doorless entrance to the bistro. There was no one in sight. I walked in, barely able to make out the positions of tables and chairs in the gloom. The glassless windows were shuttered. I blinked, made out the shape of the bar. Outside the door, the dusty road glared white.

A hoarse-breathing fellow loomed up behind the bar. He didn't say

anything.

"Red wine," I said.

He put a water glass on the bar and filled it from a tin dipper. I tasted it. It was horrible. I had a feeling good manners would be out of place here, so I turned and spat it on the floor.

I pushed the glass across the bar. "I want wine," I said. "Not what you wring out of the bar-rag." I dropped a worn thousand franc note on the bar.

He muttered as he turned away, and was still muttering when he shuffled back with a sealed bottle and a wine glass. He drew the cork, poured my glass half full, and put the thousand francs in his pocket. He didn't offer me any change.

I tried it; it wasn't too bad. I stood sipping, and waited for my eyes to get used to the dim light. The bartender moved away and began pulling at a pile of boxes, grunting.

I didn't have a clear idea of what to do next if I did find the survivors of the Organization. At best I might find out what was wrong with the imposture, and use their channels to get back into the palace. I could always call for help on my communicator, and have myself set back inside via shuttle, but I didn't like the idea of risking that again. I had almost been caught arriving last time. The scheme couldn't possibly work if any suspicion was aroused.

A man appeared in the doorway, silhouetted against the light. He stepped in and came over to the bar. The bartender ignored him.

Two more came through the door, walked past me and leaned on the bar below me. The bartender continued to shuffle boxes, paying no attention to his customers. I started to wonder why.

The man nearest me moved closer. "Hey, you," he said. He jerked his head toward the gate. "You hear the shooting back there?"

That was a leading question. I wondered if the sound of the shots had been audible outside the walls of the fortified town. I grunted.

"Who they after?" he said.

I tried to see his face, but it was shadowed. He was a thin broad fellow, leaning on one elbow. Here we go again, I thought.

"How would I know?" I said.

"Kind of warm for that burnoose, ain't it?" he said. He stretched out a hand as if to touch the tattered cape. I stepped back, and two pairs of arms wrapped around me in a double bear-hug from behind.

The man facing me twitched the cape open. He looked at me.

"Lousy Ducal," he said, and hit me across the mouth with the back of his hand. I tasted blood.

"Hold on to them arms," another man said, coming around from behind me. This was one I hadn't seen. I wondered how many more men were in the room. The new man took the old military cape in his hands and ripped it off me.

"Look at that," he said. "We got us a lousy general." He dug his finger under the top of the braided lapel of my blouse and yanked. The lapel tore but stayed put. I started to struggle then; that was my communicator they were about to loot for the gold wire in it. I didn't have much hope of getting loose that way, but maybe it would distract them if I kicked a little. I swung a boot and caught the rangy one under the kneecap. He yelped and jumped back, then swung at my face. I twisted away, and the blow grazed my cheek. I threw myself backward, jerking hard, trying to throw someone off balance.

"Hold him," a man hissed. They were trying not to make too much noise. The thin man moved in close, watched his chance, and slammed a fist into my stomach. The pain was agonizing; I cramped up, retching.

The men holding me dragged me to a wall, flung me upright against it, arms outspread. The fellow who wanted the braid stepped up with a knife in his hand. I was trying to breathe, wheezing and twisting. He grabbed my hair, and for a moment I thought he was going to slit my throat. Instead, he sawed away at the lapels, cursing as the blade scraped wire.

"Get the buttons, too, Beau Joe," a husky voice suggested.

The pain was fading a little now, but I sagged, acting weaker than I actually was. The communicator was gone, at least the sending end. All I could try to salvage now was my life.

The buttons took only a moment. The man with the knife stepped back, slipping it into a sheath at his hip. He favored the leg I had kicked. I could see his face now. He had a straight nose, fine features.

"OK, let him go," he said. I slumped to the floor. For the first time my hands were free. Now maybe I had a chance; I still had the gun. I got shakily to hands and knees, watching him. He aimed a kick at my ribs.

"On your feet, General," he said. "I'll teach you to kick your betters."

I rode the kick, rolled to the left, ended on my face a few feet away. I tried to scramble up, still faking a little; but not much. I didn't need to. He followed, fists doubled. A real tough guy.

I made it to my feet, tottered, backed away. I wasn't worried about putting up a front; I just wanted a little room.

The man stepped in fast now, feinted with his left, and punched hard with his right at my face. The only way I could dodge it was to drop. Even so, I took a hard left in the chest. I sat down hard, bounced, as the tall man circled, readying another kick.

The others laughed, called out advice, shuffled around us in a circle. There was an odor of dust and sour wine.

"That General's a real fighter, ain't he?" somebody called. "Fights sittin down." That went over big. Lots of happy laughter.

I grabbed the foot as it came to me, twisted hard, and threw the man to the floor. He swore loudly, lunged at me, but I was up again, backing away. The ring opened and somebody pushed me. I let myself stumble and gained a few more feet toward the shadowed corner. I could see better now, enough to see pistols and knives in every belt. If they had any idea I was armed, they'd use them. I had to wait.

Beau Joe was after me again, throwing a roundhouse left. I ducked it, then caught a couple of short ones. I stepped back two paces, glanced at the audience; they were as far away as I'd get them. It was time to make my play. The man shielded me as the slug-gun popped into my hand, but at that instant he swung a savage kick. It was just luck; he hadn't seen the tiny weapon, but the gun spun into a dark corner. Now I wasn't acting any more.

I went after him, slammed a hard left to his face, followed with a right to the stomach, then straightened him out with another left. He was a lousy boxer.

The others didn't like it; they closed in and grabbed me. Knuckles bounced off my jaw as a fist rammed into my back. Two of them ran me backwards and sent me crashing against the wall. My head rang; I was stunned. I fell down and they let me lie. I needed the rest.

To hell with secrecy, I thought. I got to my knees and started crawling toward the corner. The men laughed and shouted, forgetting about being quiet now.

"Crawl, General," one shouted. "Crawl, you lousy spy."

"Hup, two, soldier," another sallied. "By the numbers, crawl."

That was a good one; they roared, slapped each other. Beau Joe had picked himself up and started for me now. Where the hell was that gun?

He grabbed my jacket, hauled me to my feet as I groped for him. My head spun; I must have a concussion, I thought. He jabbed at me, but I leaned on him, and he couldn't get a good swing. The others laughed at him now, enjoying the farce.

"Watch him, Beau Joe," someone called. "He's liable to wake up, with you shakin' him that away."

Beau Joe stepped back, and aimed a straight right at my chin, but I dropped and headed for the corner again; that was where the gun went. He kicked me again, sent me sprawling into the wall-and my hand fell on the gun.

I rolled over, and Beau Joe yanked me up, spun me around, and stepped back. I stood, slumped, in the corner, watching him. He was enjoying it now. He mouthed words silently, grinning in spite of his bleeding mouth. He intended to keep me propped there in the corner and beat me to death. As

he came to me, I raised the gun and shot him in the face.

I wished I hadn't; he did a back-flip, landed head first, but not before I caught a glimpse of the smashed face. Joe was not beau any more.

I held my hand loosely at my side, waiting for the next comer. The same fellow who had grabbed me before rushed up. He jumped the body and twisted to deliver a skull-crusher, face contorted. I raised the gun a few inches as he leaped and fired at his belly. The shot made a hollow whop, as the man's feet left the floor. He smashed into the wall as I side-stepped.

The other three fanned out. It was too dark to see clearly here, and they didn't yet realize what had happened. They thought I had downed the two men with my fists. They were going to jump me together and finish it off.

"Freeze, bunnies!" a voice said from the door. We all looked. A hulking brute stood outlined there, and the gun in his hand was visible.

"I can see you rats," he said. "I'm used to the dark. Don't try nothing." He beckoned a man behind him forward. One of the three in the room edged toward the rear, and the gun coughed, firing through a silencer. The man slammed sideways, and sprawled.

"Come on, Hammer-hand," the big man said. "Let's get out of here." He spat into the room. "These pigeons don't want to play no more."

I recognized the voice of Gaston, the big fellow who had wanted to bury me under the floor. Gros had appointed him my bodyguard, but he was a little late. I had taken a terrible beating. I tucked the gun away clumsily and lurched forward.

"Cripes, Hammer-hand," Gaston said, stepping forward to steady me. "I didn't know them bunnies had got to you; I thought you was stringing them. I was wondering when you was going to make music with that punch."

He paused to stare down at Beau Joe.

"You pushed his mush right in," he said admiringly. "Hey, Touhey, get Hammer-hand's wrap-around, and let's shove." He glanced once more around the room.

"So long, Bunnies," he said. The other men didn't answer.

VIII

I don't remember much about my trip to the Organization's hide-out in the country. I recall walking endlessly, and later being carried over Gaston's shoulder. I remember terrific heat, and agonizing pain, from my battered face, my half-healed gunshot wounds, and innumerable bruises. And I remember at last a cool room, and a soft bed.

I awoke slowly, dreams blending with memories, none of them pleasant. I lay on my back, propped up on enormous fluffy feather bolsters, with a later afternoon sun lighting the room through partly-drawn drapes over a wide dormer window. For awhile I struggled to decide where I was. Gradually I

recalled my last conscious thought.

This was the place in the country Gros had been headed for. Gaston had taken his charge seriously, in spite of his own suggestion that I be disposed of and although he knew Miche and Gros were dead.

I moved tentatively, and caught my breath. That hurt, too. My chest, ribs, and stomach were one great ache. I pushed the quilt down and tried to examine the damage. Under the edges of a broad tape wrapping, purple bruises showed all around my right side.

Bending my neck had been a mistake; now the bullet wound that Maurice had re-opened with the blackjack began to throb. I was a mess. I didn't risk moving my face; I knew what it must look like.

As a secret-service type, I was a complete bust, I thought. My carefully prepared disguise had fooled no one, except maybe Spider. I had been subjected to more kicks, blows, and threats of death in the few hours I had been abroad in the Dictator's realm than in all my previous 42 years, and I had accomplished exactly nothing. I had lost my communicator, and now my slug-gun, too; the comforting pressure under my wrist was gone. It wouldn't have helped much now anyway; I was dizzy from the little effort I had just expended.

Maybe I had made some progress, though, in a negative way. I knew that walking in and striking a pose wasn't enough to get me by as the Dictator Bayard, in spite of the face. And I had also learned that the Dictator's regime was riddled with subversives and malcontents. Perhaps we could somehow use the latter to our advantage.

If, I thought, I can get back with the information. I thought that over. How would I get back? I had no way of communicating. I was completely on my own.

Always before I had had the knowledge that in the end I could send out a call for help, and count on rescue within an hour. Richthofen had arranged for a 24-hour monitoring of my communications band, alert for my call. Now that was out. If I was to return to the Imperium, I would have to steal one of the crude shuttles of this world, or better, commandeer one as Dictator. I had to get back into the palace, with a correct disguise, or end my days in this nightmare world.

I heard voices approaching outside the room. I closed my eyes as the door opened. I might learn a little by playing possum, if I could get away with it.

The voices were lower now, and I sensed several people coming over to stand by the bed.

"How long has he been asleep?" a new voice asked. Or was it new? It seemed familiar somehow, but I connected it with some other place.

"Doc give him some shots," someone answered. "We brought him in this time yesterday."

There was a pause. Then the half-familiar voice again. "I don't like his

being alive. However-perhaps we can make use of him."

"Gros wanted him alive," another voice said. I recognized Gaston. He sounded sullen. "He had big plans for him."

The other voice grunted. There was silence for a few moments.

"He's no good to us until the face is healed. Keep him here until I send along further instructions." The voice spoke in cultivated French, much different than the alley slang of the others. I didn't dare to risk a glimpse; but if I pretended to just be awakening . . . I groaned and moved, then opened my eyes. I was a little late; the men were already passing through the door.

I hadn't liked what I'd heard, but for the present I had no choice but to lie here and try to regain my strength. At least, I was comfortably set up in this huge bed. I drifted off to sleep again.

I awoke with Gaston sitting by the bed smoking. He sat up when I opened my eyes, crushed out his cigarette in an ash tray on the table, and leaned forward.

"How are you feeling, Hammer-hand?" he said.

"Rested," I said. My voice came out in a faint whisper. I was surprised at its weakness.

"Yeah, them pigeons give you a pretty rough time, Hammer-hand, I don't get why you don't lay the Punch on them sooner."

I tried to speak, croaked instead, shook my head.

"Take it easy," Gaston said. "You lost a lot of blood. Them scalp wounds bleed plenty."

A throb from the back of my head told me where the scalp wound was. I didn't remember getting it.

"I got some chow here for you," Gaston said. He put a tray from the bedside table on his lap and offered me a spoonful of soup. I was hungry; I opened my mouth for it. I never expected to have a gorilla for a nursemaid, I thought.

Gaston was good at his work, though. For the next three days he fed me regularly, changed my bedding, and performed all the duties of a trained nurse with skill, if not with grace. I steadily gained strength, but I was careful to conceal the extent of my progress from Gaston and the others who occasionally came in. I didn't know what might be coming up and I wanted something in reserve.

Gaston told me a lot about the Organization during the next few days. I learned that the group led by Gros and Miche was only one of several such cells; there were hundreds of members, in half a dozen scattered locations in Algeria, each keeping surveillance over some vital installation of the regime. Their ultimate objective was the overthrow of Bayard's rule, enabling them to get a share in the loot.

Each group had two leaders, all of whom reported to the Big Boss, a stranger about whom Gaston knew little. He appeared irregularly, and no one knew his name or where he had his headquarters. I sensed that Gaston didn't like him.

On the third day I asked Gaston to help me get up and walk a bit. I faked extreme weakness, but was pleased to discover that I was feeling better than I had hoped. After Gaston helped me back into bed and left the room, I got up again, and practiced walking. It made me dizzy and nauseated after a few steps, but I leaned on the bed post and waited for my stomach to settle down, and went on. I stayed on my feet for fifteen minutes, and slept soundly afterwards. Thereafter, whenever I awoke, day or night, I rose and walked, jumping back into bed when I heard footsteps approaching.

When Gaston insisted on walking me after that, I continued to feign all the symptoms I had felt the first time. The doctor was called back once, but he assured me that my reactions were quite normal, and that I could not expect to show much improvement for another week, considering the amount of blood I had lost. This suited me perfectly. I needed time to learn more.

I tried to pump Gaston about my disguise, subtly; I didn't want to put him on his guard, or give any inkling of what I had in mind. But I was too subtle; Gaston avoided the subject.

I searched for my clothes, but the closet was locked and I couldn't risk forcing the door.

A week after my arrival, I allowed myself enough improvement to permit a walk through the house, and down into a pleasant garden behind it. I saw several new faces, men who stared curiously at me, and muttered together as I passed. They seemed neither friendly nor hostile. I caught a glimpse, too, of an elderly female, the housekeeper, I guessed.

The layout of the house was simple. From the garden I had seen no signs of guards. It looked as though I could walk out any time, but I restrained the impulse. I didn't want to get a mile or two, and fall over in a faint; and I needed clothes, papers, information. I wanted my slug-gun, but that was hopeless, I was afraid. I would settle for a pistol, if I could get one. Even that looked impossible. I wondered when I would find out what the Organization planned for me.

One morning Gaston brought me in some clothes to replace the patched bathrobe I had been wearing for my daily exercise. This was a real break for me. I had been assuming that if I decided to leave suddenly, I would have to take the clothes off someone when I left; in my condition, that would be an undertaking in itself.

I still didn't have much in the way of plans. What could I do if I did leave the house? I could try to make my way back into the walled town and re-enter the palace the way I had come out. Once there, I would dispose of the Dictator and, posing as the ruler, order a shuttle placed at my disposal, with an Operator. Then I could return to the Imperium. Very simple, except

for a few details.

I walked around the house freely now, using two canes, and resting frequently. There were eight other large bedrooms on the second floor of the house, in addition to mine; only two seemed to be in use. Downstairs, there were two dining rooms, a study, library, large kitchens, and a vast parlor. One room was locked. A wall surrounded the garden. It was a pleasant old place, and I was sure the air of peace and placidity helped in avoiding the attention of the police. It was a clever camouflage, and I thought it would make my departure easy.

By the time ten days had passed, I was getting very restless. I couldn't fake my role of invalid much longer without arousing suspicion. The inactivity was getting on my nerves; I had spent the night lying awake, thinking, and getting up occasionally to walk up and down the room. By dawn, I had succeeded in fatiguing myself, but I hadn't slept at all.

I had to be doing something. I got out my canes, and started to reconnoiter the house after Gaston had taken away my breakfast tray. From the upstairs windows I had a wide view of the surrounding country. The front of the house faced a paved highway, in good repair. I assumed it was a main route into Algiers. Behind the house, tilled fields stretched a quarter of a mile to a row of trees. Perhaps there was a river there. There were no other houses near.

I thought about leaving. It looked to me as though my best bet would be to go over the wall after dark and head for the cover of the trees. I had the impression that the line of trees and the road converged to the west, so perhaps I could regain the road at a distance from the house, and follow it into the city. But first I had to know what the plans of the Organization were; I might be able to turn them to my advantage.

There seemed to be no one stirring in the house as I hobbled along with my two sticks. I wandered up and down the hall, then slowly descended the stair. I was about to go out into the garden, when I heard the sound of a motor approaching. I paused and listened. It pulled up in front of the house and stopped. There was a sound of slamming doors, voices; then the car started up, and headed back the way it had come.

I hurried back into the house, and took the stairs fast. I hoped no one saw me, but I was determined not to call my free wandering to the attention of the man whose voice I had heard. It was the same one I had heard the first day here, and I still couldn't place it; but I was sure that it belonged to the Big Boss Gaston had told me of.

I slowed down at the top of the stairs and picked my way along to my room. I got into bed and waited for something to happen. Surely the Big Boss's return meant an end to suspense.

Hours passed, while I sat on the edge of the bed or paced restlessly but silently up and down, canes in hand in case of sudden interruption. Gaston brought my lunch at noon, but wouldn't stay to answer questions.

Occasionally I heard a raised voice, or the sound of footsteps; otherwise, all was peaceful. About three o'clock, another vehicle approached, a truck

this time. From my windows I could see only a part of it, but two men seemed to be unloading something heavy from it. After half an hour it drove away.

It was almost dinner time when I heard them approaching my door. I was lying down, so I stayed where I was and waited. Gaston entered with the doctor. The doctor was pale, and perspiring heavily. He avoided my eyes as he drew out a chair, sat down and started his examination. He said nothing to me, ignoring the questions I asked him. I gave up and lay silently while he prodded and poked. After awhile he rose suddenly, packed up his kit, and walked out.

"What's the matter with the doc, Gaston?" I asked.

"He's got something on his mind," Gaston said. Even Gaston seemed subdued. Something was up; something that worried me.

"Come on, Gaston," I said. "What's going on?"

At first I thought he wasn't going to answer me.

"They're going to do like you wanted," he said. "They're getting ready to put you in for Bayard."

"That's fine," I said. That was what I had come here for. This way was as good as any. But there was something about it . . .

"Why all the secrecy?" I asked. "Why doesn't the Big Boss show himself? I'd like to talk to him."

Gaston hesitated. I had the feeling he wanted to say more, but couldn't.

"They got a few details to fix yet," he said. He didn't look at me. I let it go at that. At least I knew now things were moving.

After Gaston left the room, I went out into the hall. Through the open back windows I heard the sound of conversation. I moved over to eavesdrop.

There were three men, strolling out into the garden, backs to me. One was the doctor; I didn't recognize the other two. I wished I could see their faces.

"It was not for this I was trained," the doctor was saying. He waved his hands in an agitated way. "I am not a butcher, to cut up a side of mutton for you . . ."

I couldn't make out the reply, but what I had heard was enough. There was something terrible brewing here in this quiet house. I wanted to get on with the job ahead. I wished the Big Boss would get around to talking to me.

They were all out in the garden now; maybe this would be a good time to take a look around downstairs. I wanted to know what all the gear was I had seen them bringing in this afternoon. Maybe I could learn something about the coming move.

I went down to the landing and listened. All was quiet. I descended to the hall on the ground floor, listened again. Somewhere a clock was ticking.

I went into the main dining room; the table was set for three, but no food was in sight. I tried the other dining room; nothing. I went across and eased the parlor door open. There was no one there; it looked as unused as ever.

I passed the door I had found locked once before and noticed light under it. I stepped back and tried it. It was probably a broom closet, I thought, as I turned the knob. It opened.

I stood staring. There was a padded white table in the center of the room. At one end stood two floodlamps on tall tripods. Glittering instruments were laid out on a small table. On a stand beside the operating table lay scalpels, sutures, heavy curved needles. There was a finely made saw, like a big hacksaw, and heavy snippers. On the floor beneath the table was a large galvanized steel wash tub.

The sight of the room frightened me. I didn't like it; it reminded me of a blood-spattered battalion aid station where I had once lain for an hour among the hopeless cases and the dead, while the surgeons worked on the lightly wounded, the ones who might live. They were out of morphine and they had gotten to me after I had lain conscious for more than an hour breathing through a fog of agony, listening to the high wailing screams of the men under the knife.

I didn't understand this; I wished I had stayed upstairs and waited for the Big Boss's proposition. I turned to the door, and heard footsteps approaching.

I looked around, saw a door, jumped to it and jerked it open. When the two men entered the room, I was standing rigid in the darkness of a storeroom, with the door open half an inch.

The flood lights flicked on, then off again. There was a rattle of metal against metal.

"Lay off that," a nasal voice said. "This is all set. I checked it over myself."

"Then it's sure to be loused up," a thin voice answered.

The two bickered and complained as they fussed around the room. They seemed to be medical technicians of some sort.

"They're nuts," Nasal-voice said. "Why don't they wait until morning, when they got plenty sunlight for this? No, they gotta work under the lights."

"I don't get this deal," Thin-voice said. "I didn't get what was supposed to be wrong with this guy's legs, they got to take them off. How come if he's . . ."

"You ain't clued in, are you, Mac?" Nasal-voice said harshly. "This is a big deal; they're going to ring this mug in when they knock off the Old Man . . ."

"Yeah, that's what I mean," Thin-voice cut in. "So what's the idea they take off the legs?"

"You don't know much, do you, small-timer?" Nasal-voice said. "Well, listen; I got news for you." There was a pause.

"Bayard's got no pins, from the knees down." Nasal-voice spoke in a hushed tone. "You didn't know that, did you? That's why you never seen him walking around on the video; he's always sitting back of a desk.

"There ain't very many know about that," he added. "Keep it to yourself."

"Cripes," Thin-voice said. His voice was thinner than ever. "Got no legs?"

"That's right. I was with him a year before the landing. I was in his outfit when he got it. Machine gun slug, through both knees. Now forget about it. But maybe now you get the set-up."

"Cripes," Thin-voice said. "Where did they get a guy crazy enough to go into a deal like this?"

"How do I know," the other said. He sounded as though he regretted having told the secret. "These revolutionist types is all nuts anyway."

I stood there feeling sick. My legs tingled. I knew now why nobody mistook me for the Dictator, as I walked into a room; and why Spider had been taken in, when he saw me sitting.

The two technicians left the room. I felt weak and nauseated. I looked at the tub under the table, and then down at my legs. I was trembling. I didn't have to think about making a decision any longer; it was made.

I was leaving now. Not tomorrow, not tonight; now. I had no gun, no papers, no map, no plans; but I was leaving.

It was almost dark; I stood in the hall and drew deep breaths, trying to get hold of myself. My leg muscles twitched and quivered. I pushed the memory of the saw and the tub from my mind. I was getting out.

I thought of food. I didn't want it now, but I knew I would need my strength; I remembered the kitchen, and went to the door. I listened; all was silent. I pushed through the door and in the gloom went to the large refrigerator against the wall. I found a half of a small ham, and a wedge of dry cheese. I took a long pull from a partly used bottle of white wine. It was a little sour, but it helped. I was feeling steadier now.

I dropped my finds into a string bag on the table, and added a round loaf of bread. I selected a sturdy french knife from the drawer, and thrust it in my belt. All set. Let's go.

The kitchen faced the garden, with a back door set just outside the walled portion, a service entrance. That suited me fine; I wouldn't have to climb the wall. Through the window I could see the men in the garden, standing under a small cherry tree in the gloom, still talking. I considered whether to risk opening the door now; the top half of it would be visible to them over the garden wall. I examined it in the failing light. It was a dutch door, the

type that opens in two sections. I tried the latches carefully. The upper one was locked, but the bolt holding the halves together opened easily, and the lower part swung silently open—below the line of vision of the men outside. I didn't wait; I bent over and stepped through.

A short path led off to the drive beside the house; I ignored it and crept along beside the wall, through weed-grown flower beds.

I reached the end of the wall, and through the screen of a trellis checked on the three men; they were walking toward the house. They seemed like ordinary men of substance, having a quiet chat and stroll in the garden before dinner. It wasn't dinner they were planning in the old house though; it was my living dismemberment.

I turned to start out across the plowed field and a dark form rose up before me. I recoiled, my wrist twitching in a gesture that had become automatic; but no slug-gun snapped into my hand. I was unarmed, weak, and shaken, and the man loomed over me, hulking. I didn't know what to do.

"Let's go, Hammer-hand," he whispered. It was Gaston.

The thought of running for it flashed through my mind, but it was hopeless; I was trapped here before I had even begun. This was bitter. I backed away, unwilling to accept defeat, but unable to prevent it.

"I'm leaving, Gaston," I said. "Just don't try to stop me." Vague ideas of a bluff were in my mind. After all, he called me Hammer-hand.

He came after me. "Hold it down to a roar," he said. "I wondered when you was going to make your break. You been getting pretty restless these last few days."

"Yeah," I said. "Who wouldn't?" I was just stalling; I had no plan.

"You got more nerve than me, Hammer-hand," Gaston said. "I would of took off a week ago. You must of wanted to get a look at the Big Boss real bad to stick as long as you did."

"I saw enough today," I said. "I don't want to see anymore."

"Did you make him?" Gaston asked. He sounded interested.

"No," I said. "I didn't see his face. But I've lost my curiosity."

Gaston laughed. "OK, chief," he said. He handed me a soiled card, with something scribbled on it. "Maybe this will do you some good. It's the big boss's address out of town. I swiped it; it was all I could find. Now, let's blow out of here."

I stuck the card in my pocket. I was a little confused.

"I'm headed for the river," I said. "I'll kill anyone who gets in my way."

"That's the idea," Gaston said. "We're wasting time."

"You're going with me?" I asked.

"Like the man said, Hammer-hand, I'm with you."

"Wait a minute, Gaston; you mean you're helping me get away?" I couldn't believe it.

"Somebody said I was supposed to keep an eye on you, look out you didn't have no accidents," Gaston said. "I always done all right doing what my brother told me; I don't see no reason to stop now just because they killed him."

"Your brother?" I said.

"Gros was my brother," Gaston said. "I ain't smart like Gros, but he always took care of me. I always done what he said. He told me to look out for you, Hammer-hand."

"What about them?" I asked, nodding toward the house. "They won't like it when they find us both missing."

Gaston spat. "To hell with them monkeys," he said. "They gimme the willies."

I was beginning to feel jolly all of a sudden, by reaction.

"Why the hell didn't you say so a week ago," I said. "You could have saved me some sleepless nights."

"That joint is bugged plenty," Gaston said. "You can't say nothing in there. Besides, in case you didn't make it, I didn't want you to have nothing to conceal, if you know what I mean."

"I wouldn't have talked," I said.

Gaston looked at me. "You would have talked, Hammer-hand. They all do."

"OK," I said. "Never mind that now." I was in a mood to push my luck. "Listen, Gaston; can you go back in there and get the clothes I had on when I got here?"

Gaston fumbled in the dark at a sack slung over his shoulder. "I thought you might want that suit, Hammer-hand," he said. "You was real particular about that with Miche." He handed me a bundle. I knew the feel of it. It was the uniform.

"Gaston," I said, "you're a wonder. I don't suppose you brought along the little gimmick I had on my wrist?"

"I think I stuck it in the pocket," he said. "Somebody swiped the fancy gloves you had in the belt, though. I'm sorry about the gloves."

I fumbled over the blouse, and felt the lump in the pocket. With that slug-gun in my hand I was ready to lick the world.

"That's OK about the gloves, Gaston," I said. I strapped the clip to my wrist and tucked the gun away. I pulled off the old coat I wore and slipped the blouse on. This was more like it.

I looked at the house. All was peaceful. It was dark enough now that we wouldn't be seen crossing the field. It was time to go.

"Come on," I said. I took a sight on a bright star and struck out across the soft ground.

In fifty steps the house was completely lost to view. The wall and high foliage obscured the lights on the first floor; upstairs the house was in darkness. I kept the star before me and stumbled on. I never knew how hard it was to walk in a plowed field in the dark.

Gaston puffed along behind me. I spoke softly every few steps to guide him. Before me there was nothing but darkness.

It was fifteen minutes before I made out a deeper darkness against the faintly lighter sky ahead. That would be the line of trees along the river; I was still assuming there was a river.

Then we were among the trees, feeling our way slowly. The ground sloped and the next moment I was sliding down a muddy bank into shallow water.

"Yes," I said, "it's a river all right." I scrambled out, and stood peering toward the west. I could see nothing. If we had to pick our way through trees all night, without a moon, we wouldn't be a mile away by dawn.

"Which way does this river flow, Gaston?" I asked.

"That way," he said. "To Algiers; into the city."

"Can you swim?" I asked.

"Sure," Gaston replied. "I can swim good."

"OK," I said. "Strip and make a bundle of your clothes. Put whatever you don't want to get wet in the middle; strap the bundle to your shoulders with your belt."

We grunted and fumbled in the darkness.

"What about the shoes?" Gaston said.

"Tie the laces together and hang them around your neck," I said. "They'll get wet, but that won't matter much."

I finished my packing and stepped down into the water. It was warm weather; that was a break. I still had the slug-gun on my wrist. I wanted it close to me.

"Ready, Gaston," I called softly.

"Right with you, chief."

I stepped out into the stream, pushed off as the bottom shelved. I paddled a few strokes to get clear of the reeds growing near the shore. All around was inky blackness, with only the brilliant stars overhead to relieve the emptiness.

"OK, Gaston?" I called.

I heard him splashing quietly. "Sure," he said.

"Let's get out a little farther and then take it easy," I said. "Let the river do the work."

The current was gentle. Far across the river I saw a tiny light now. We drifted slowly past it. I moved my hands just enough to keep my nose above water. The surface was calm. I yawned; I could have slept tonight, I thought, remembering the sleepless hours of the night before. But it would be a long time between beds for me.

I saw a tiny reflection on a ripple ahead, and glanced back. There were lights on in the second story of the house we had left. It seemed to be about a mile away. That wasn't much of a start, I thought, but maybe they wouldn't look in the middle of the river.

I called to Gaston, pointing out the lights.

"Yeah," he said. "I been watching them. I don't think we got nothing to worry about."

They could follow our trail to the water's edge easily enough I knew, with nothing more than a flashlight. As if in response to my thought, a tiny gleam appeared at ground level, wavering, blinking as trees passed between us. It moved, bobbing toward the river. I watched until it emerged from the trees. I saw the yellow gleam dancing across the water where we had started. Other lights were following now, two, three. The whole household must have joined the chase. They must be expecting to find me huddled on the ground near by, exhausted, ready for the table they had prepared for me in the presence of my enemies.

The lights fanned out, moving along the shore. I saw that we were safely ahead of them.

"Gaston," I said, "have they got a boat back there?"

"Nah," he replied. "We're in the clear."

The little lights were pitiful, bobbing along the shore, falling behind.

We floated along then in silence for an hour or more. It was still, almost restful. Only a gentle fluttering of the hands was required to keep our heads above water.

Suddenly lights flashed ahead, over the river.

"Cripes," Gaston hissed, backing water. "I forgot about the Salan bridge. Them bunnies is out there waitin' for us."

I could see the bridge now, as the lights flashed across the pilings. It was about a hundred yards ahead.

"Head for the far shore, Gaston," I said. "Fast and quiet."

I couldn't risk the splash of a crawl stroke, so I dog-paddled frantically, my hands under the surface. They would have had us neatly, if they hadn't shown the lights when they did, I thought. They couldn't see us without them, though, so it was just a chance they had to take. They must have estimated the speed of the river's flow, and tried to pinpoint us. They didn't miss by much; in fact, they might not have missed at all. I concentrated on putting every ounce of energy into my strokes. My knees hit mud, and reeds brushed my face. I rolled over and sat up, breathing hard. Gaston floundered a few feet away.

"Here," I hissed; "keep it quiet."

The light on the bridge blinked out suddenly. I wondered what they'd do next. If they headed along the banks, flashing lights, we'd have to take to the water again; and if one man stayed on the bridge, and flashed his light down at just about the right moment . . .

"Let's get going," I said.

I started up the slope, crouching low. The lights appeared again, down at the water's edge now, flashing on the tall grass and cat-tails. Another appeared on the opposite bank. I stopped to listen. Feet made sloshing sounds in the mud, a hundred feet away. Good; that would cover our own noise. My wet shoes dangled by the strings, thumping my chest.

The ground was firmer now, the grass not so tall. I stopped again, Gaston right behind me, looking back. They'd find our tracks any minute. We had no time to waste. The bundle of clothing was a nuisance, but we couldn't stop now to dress.

"Come on," I whispered, and broke into a run.

Fifty feet from the top we dropped and started crawling. I didn't want to be seen in silhouette against the sky as we topped the rise.

We pulled ourselves along, puffing and grunting. Crawling is hard work for a grown man. Just over the top we paused to look over the situation. The road leading to the bridge wound away toward a distant glow in the sky.

"That's an army supply depot out that way," Gaston said. "No town."

I raised up to look back toward the river. Two lights bobbed together, then started slowly away from the water's edge. I heard a faint shout.

"They've spotted the trail," I said. I jumped up and ran down the slope, trying to breathe deep, in for four strides, out for four. A man could run a long time if he didn't get winded. Stones bruised my bare feet.

I angled over toward the highway, with some idea of making better time. Gaston was beside me.

"Nix," he said, puffing hard. "Them bunnies got a machine."

For a moment I didn't know what he meant; then I heard the sound of an engine starting up, and headlights lanced into the darkness, beams aimed at the distant tree-tops as the car headed up the slope of the approach to

the bridge from the other side. We had only a few seconds before the car would slant down on this side, and illuminate the road and a wide strip on either side; we'd be spotlighted.

Ahead I saw a fence, just a glint from a wire. That finished it; we were stopped. I slid to a halt. Then I saw that the fence lined a cross road, joining the road we were paralleling twenty feet away. Maybe a culvert . . . I didn't wait to discuss it; I dived for the only possible shelter.

A corrugated steel pipe eighteen inches in diameter ran beside the main road where the other joined it. I scrambled over pebbles and twigs and into the gaping mouth. The sounds I made echoed hollowly inside. I kept going to the far end, Gaston wheezing behind me. I stopped and looked over my shoulder. Gaston had backed in and lay a few feet inside his end. The glow of the headlights gave me a glimpse of a heavy automatic in his hand.

"Good boy," I hissed. "Don't shoot unless you have to."

The lights of the car flickered over trees, highlighted rocks. Through the open end of the pipe I saw a rabbit sitting up in the glare, a few feet away. He turned and bounded off.

The car came slowly along the road. A sharp stick under my chest poked me, pebbles dug into my knees. I watched the lights; the car passed, moved on down the road. I breathed a little easier.

I was on the point of turning to say something to Gaston when a small stone rolled down into the ditch before me. I stiffened. A faint scuff of shoes on gravel, another stone dislodged-and then a flashlight beam darted across the gully, played on the grass opposite, came to rest on the open end of the drain pipe. I was about two feet inside; the light didn't quite reach me; I held my breath. Then the steps came nearer, and the light probed, found my shoulder. There was a frozen instant of silence, then the sharp slap of the slug-gun hitting my palm. The steps shuffled back, light stabbing into my eyes as I lunged forward, shoulders clear of the pipe. I caught a glimpse of the car a hundred feet away now, still edging along. I heard a sharp intake of breath as the man with the light readied a shout. I pointed the gun to the right of the flash and the recoil slammed my arm back. The flashlight skidded across the rocky bottom of the ditch as the man's body crashed heavily and lay still. The flashlight was still on. I jumped for it, flicked it off, and dropped it on the ground. I groped for the man's feet, hauled him back toward the pipe.

"Gaston," I whispered. The sound was hollow in the dark tunnel. "Give me a hand." He crawled out the far end, turned and reentered head first. The limp body was pulled away into the drain pipe. I pushed at the feet. I couldn't tell who it was. I was glad it wasn't the doctor; he wouldn't have fitted.

I backed out, ran to the far end, and helped Gaston the last two feet. "After the car," I said. I had what I hoped was an idea. I was tired of being chased; the hunted would become the hunter.

I headed up the ditch at a trot, head down, Gaston at my heels. The car had stopped a hundred yards away. I counted three flashlights moving in

the edge of the field. I wondered how many there were, whether the driver had remained with the car. We'd soon find out the answer to that.

I stopped. "Close enough," I hissed. "Let's split up now; I'll cross the road and come up the other side. There's only one man over there. You get up in the tall grass and sneak in as close to the car as you can. Watch me and take your cue."

I darted across the road, a grotesque figure, naked, my bundle dangling by its strap from my shoulder. The car's headlights were still on. I was sure no one could see us from beyond them, looking into the glare. I dropped down into the ditch, wincing as sharp sticks jabbed my bare feet. The man on my side was casting about in wide circles, fifty feet from the road. A cricket sawed away insistently.

The car started backing, swung to one side of the road, then went forward; the driver was in the car, all right; he was turning around. They must have come up the road to cut us off, planning to move back to the river, searching foot by foot until they flushed us. No one seemed to have missed the man who now lay quietly in the steel pipe.

The car swung around and moved along at a snail's pace, headlights flooding the road I had just crossed. I hoped Gaston was well concealed on the other side. I couldn't see him. I dropped down to the bottom of the ditch as the lights passed over me. The car came on, and stopped just above me. I could see the driver, staring out through the windshield. He leaned forward, peering. I wondered if he had spotted Gaston. Then I realized he was looking for the man who had been coming along on foot, checking the ditch; he'd be a long time seeing him from here.

He opened the door, stepped out, one foot on the running board. The car was long and top-heavy looking, with flaring fenders. Dust roiled and gnats danced in the beams from the great bowl-shaped headlights. I couldn't just lie here and watch, I thought. I would never have a better chance.

I picked up a heavy stone, rose silently to hands and knees, and crept up out of the ditch. The chauffeur stood with a hand on top of the door, looking over it. He turned his back to me, and ducked his head to re-enter the car. I came up behind him in two steps, and hit him as hard as I could on top of the head. He folded into the seat. I shoved him over, jumped in, and closed the door. It was hard to get the coat off him in the dark, while trying to stay down behind the door, but I managed it. I put it on and sat up. There was no alarm. The three flashlights continued to bob around in the fields. The engine was running quietly. I looked over the controls. The steering wheel was in the center, and there were three pedals on the floor. I pushed at them tentatively. The left hand one caused the engine to race a bit as I touched it; the accelerator. Logically, the one on the right should be the brake. The center one must be the clutch. I pushed it in and the car edged forward. I tried the brake; OK.

I let the center pedal in again, and started off slowly; the car seemed to slip in gear, and the pedal went slack; an automatic transmission. I steered to the right side of the road, crept along the edge. Gaston must be about here, I thought. I stared out into the darkness; I could see practically

nothing.

I eased to a stop. The flashlight nearest me swung back and forth, moving toward the bridge. I reached out to the dash, pushed in a lever that projected from it. The headlights died.

I could see better now. The flashlights to my right stopped moving, turned toward me. I waved cheerfully. I didn't think they could make out my face in the dim beam at that distance. One of the lights seemed satisfied, resumed its search; the other hesitated, flashing over the car.

There was a shout then, and I saw Gaston up and running toward me. The flashlights converged on him as he leaped across the ditch ahead, coming into the road. The lights came bounding toward him and someone was yelling. Gaston stopped, whirled toward the nearest light, aiming the pistol. There was a sharp bam, bam. Both lights on his side dropped. Not bad shooting for a .45, I thought. I jerked open the door and Gaston jumped in beside me. Behind there was a faint shout from the remaining man on the other side of the road, and the crack of a gun. The slug made a solid thunk as it hit the heavy steel of the car. I floorboarded the center and left pedals; the car jumped ahead, then coasted. Another slug starred the glass beside me, scattering glass chips in my hair. I let my foot off, tried again. The car surged forward; the acceleration was excellent. Apparently putting the center pedal all the way in disengaged it. I flipped the lights on. The car shifted up, tires squealing. Ahead, a figure stumbled down into the ditch, scrambled up the other side into the road, waving its arms. I saw the open mouth in the taut white face for an instant in the glare of the lights before it was slammed down out of sight, with a shock that bounced us in our seats.

The bridge loomed ahead, narrow and highly arched. We took it wide open, crushed down in the seat as we mounted the slope, floating as we dropped on the other side. The road curved off to the left, tall trees lining it. The tires howled as we rounded the turn and hit the straightaway.

"This is great, Hammer-hand," Gaston shouted. "I never rode in one of these here machines before."

"Neither did I," I yelled back. I kept moving at top speed for a mile, then slowed to fifty kilometers; I didn't want to get pinched. I followed the road another mile or so, and then turned off down a side road to the right, into the shelter of a clump of trees. I set the brake, but left the engine idling; I didn't know how to start it again.

I leaned back and let out a long breath. "OK, Gaston," I said. "Fall out for a ten-minute break."

IX

I got out of the car and opened my bundled clothing on the seat. It was still dry. I felt better when I was dressed again. My feet were cut and bruised; I had to ease the socks and shoes on. Gaston was better off.

We pulled the body of the driver out of the car and laid him out in the grass. It was one of the men I had seen at the house, but not the Big

Boss. I wondered if that had been the man who had fired after us. As far as I knew, he was the only one we had left alive.

That was quite a thought. A few weeks ago, I was as mild and inoffensive as any other middle-aged paper-shuffler. Now to get in my way was to die violently. I was learning fast; I had to.

I opened the string bag I had rolled in the middle of my clothing. I was ravenous; I carved slices of ham and bread, and Gaston and I sat in the car and chewed silently.

No cars passed on the road. The night was still black, with no moon. My next problem was to get into the Walled Town. The road led along the river's edge into the heart of the city, according to Gaston. The Dictator's stronghold lay at the edge of the city, north of the highway we were on. He had fortified the area, enclosing shops and houses within an encircling wall like a medieval town, creating a self-sufficient community to support the castle and its occupants, easily patrolled and policed. It was no defense against an army, but practical as a safeguard against assassins and rioters.

"That's us," I said aloud. "Assassins and rioters."

"Sure, chief," Gaston said, swallowing. "Let's go some more."

I backed out, and pulled onto the highway again. There was a glow in the sky ahead. From the road, only a few scattered lights were visible. The countryside seemed almost unpopulated.

Twenty minutes of driving brought us to the bombed-out edge of the city. The rubble stretched ahead, with here and there a shack or a tiny patch of garden. To the right the mass of the castle loomed up, faintly visible in the glow from the streets below it, unseen behind the wall. To the original massive old country house, Bayard had added rambling outbuildings, great mismatched wings, and the squat tower.

I pulled over, cut the headlights. Gaston and I looked silently at the lights in the tower. He lit a cigarette.

"How are we going to get in there, Gaston?" I said. "How do we get over the wall?"

Gaston stared at the walls, thinking. "Listen, Hammer-hand," he said. "You wait here, while I check around a little." He flipped the cigarette out the window and fumbled at the door. "How do you open these things," he said. "I don't feel no doorknob."

I opened the door for him.

"I'm pretty good at casing a layout," he said, leaning in the window. "I know this one from the inside; I'll find a spot if there is one. Keep an eye peeled for the street gangs." Then he was gone.

I sat and waited. I rolled up the windows and locked the doors. I couldn't see any signs of life among the broken walls around me. Somewhere a cat yowled.

I checked my clothes over. Both lapels were missing; the tiny set was still clipped to my belt, but without speaker or mike, it was useless. I ran my tongue over the tooth with the cyanide sealed in it. I might need it yet. I thought of the proud face of my red-haired girl, back in Stockholm Zero. I wondered if my failure here would mean the end of her brilliant world of peace and order. Somewhere along the line I dozed off.

The door rattled. I sat up, startled. Gaston's face pressed against the glass. I unlocked it and he slid in beside me.

"OK, Hammer-hand," he said. "Think I got us a spot. We go along the edge of the drainage ditch over there to where it goes under the wall. Then we got to get down inside it and ease under the guard tower. It comes out in the clear on the other side."

I got out and followed Gaston over broken stones to the ditch. It was almost a creek, and the smell of it was terrible.

Gaston led me along its edge for a hundred yards, until the wall hung over us just beyond the circle of light from the guard tower. I could see a fellow with a burp gun leaning against a post on top of the tower, looking down onto the street inside the wall. There were two large floodlights beside him, unlit.

Gaston leaned close to my ear. "It kind of stinks," he said, "but the wall is pretty rough, so I think we can make it OK."

He slid over the edge, found a foothold, and disappeared. I slid down after him, groping with my foot for a ledge. The wall was crudely laid with plenty of cracks and projecting stones, but slimy with moss. I set my foot as well as I could and let myself down, holding onto a knob of rock and feeling for another. Once over the edge, we were out of sight of the guard. I groped along, one precarious foot at a time. We passed the place where the light gleamed on the black water below, hugging the shadow. Then we were under the wall, which arched massively over us. The sound of the trickling water was louder here. I heard Gaston muttering faintly ahead.

I tried to see what was going on. Gaston had stopped and was descending. I could barely make out his figure, knee-deep in the malodorous stream. I moved closer. Then I saw the grating. It was made of iron bars, and completely blocked the passage. I hung on. My arms were beginning to tremble with fatigue.

I climbed over to the grating. It was better there; I leaned against the rusty iron and tried to ease my arms. The defense system didn't have quite the hole in it we thought it had. Gaston moved around below me, reaching under the surface to try to find a bottom edge. Maybe we could duck under the barrier; I didn't like to think about it.

Suddenly I felt myself slipping. I gripped the bars, stifling a cry. Below me, Gaston hissed a curse, scrabbled upward. My grip was firm, I realized in an instant; it was the grating that was slipping. It dropped another eight inches with a muffled scraping and clank, then stopped. The rusty metal had given under our weight. The corroded ends of the bars had broken off at the left side. There wasn't room to pass, but maybe we could force it a

little farther.

Gaston braced himself against the wall and heaved. I got into position beside him and added my weight. The frame shifted a little, then stuck.

"Gaston," I said. "Maybe I can get under it now, and heave from the other side." Gaston moved back, and I let myself down into the reeking water. I worked an arm through, then dropped down waist deep, chest deep, pushing. The rough metal scraped my face, caught at my clothing; but I was through.

I crawled back up, dripping, and rested. From the darkness behind Gaston I heard a meshing of oiled metal parts and then the cavern echoed with the thunder of machine gun fire. In the flashing light I saw Gaston stiffen against the grating and fall. He hung by one hand, caught in the grating. There were shouts, and men dropped onto the stone coping at the culvert mouth. Gaston jerked, fumbled his pistol from his blouse.

"Gaston," I said. "Quick, under the bars . . ." I was helpless. I knew he was too big.

A man appeared, clinging to the coping with one hand, climbing down to enter the dark opening. He flashed a light at us and Gaston, still dangling by the left hand, fired. The man fell over into the stream with a tremendous splash.

Gaston gasped. "That's . . . all . . ." The gun fell from his hand into the black water.

I moved fast now, from one hand-hold to the next, slipping and clutching, but not quite falling somehow. I managed to get a look back as I reached the open air. Two men were tugging at the body wedged in the opening. Even in death, Gaston guarded my retreat.

I came up over the side, and flattened against the wall, slug-gun in my hand; the street was empty. They must have thought they had us trapped; this side was deserted. I was directly under the tower. I eased out a few feet, and craned my neck; a shadow moved at the top of the tower. There was still one man on duty there. He must have heard the grating fall, and called for reinforcements.

I looked down the street ahead. I recognized the Street of the Olive Trees, the same one I had come through on my way out with Gros, ten days earlier. It slanted down, curving to the right. That was where I had to go, into the naked street, under the guns. I liked it here in the shadow of the tower, but I couldn't stay. I slipped off along the wall, trying to walk quietly. I got about five steps before the searchlight snapped on and swung around. I leaped forward, running for my life. The light found me, burning my leaping shadow against dusty walls and the loose-cobbled street. I tried to guess how many instants it would take the lone man on the tower to leave the light, and get his sights on me. Instinct told me to leap aside. As I did, the gun clattered and slugs whined off the stones to my left. I was out of the light now, and dashing for the protection of the curving wall ahead. The light raked across the street, caught me. Almost instantly the gun broke loose again. I bounded high in the air, twisted, hit and rolled in

shadow and was up and running again. The light was still groping as I rounded the turn. Just ahead, a man stepped out of a doorway and spread his arms, crouching. I was moving fast. I stiff-armed him, without breaking my stride. He rolled into the gutter. No lights came on above me; I ran in utter silence. The dwellers in these scarred tenements had learned to sit silent behind barred windows when guns talked in the narrow streets.

I passed the spot where Gros had died, dashed on. In the distance a whistle blew, again and again. A shot ran out, kicking up dust ahead. I kept going.

A newspaper blew along in the gutter. A bristly sewer rat scuttled away ahead. Only the yellow glow of a bare bulb on a tall pole relieved the blackness. My shadow overtook me, leaped ahead.

I heard running feet behind me now. I searched desperately ahead, scanning the shabby stalls, empty and dark, trying to find the one we had used the day we left the palace, where the old woman huddled over her table of clay ware. It had been tiny, with a ragged gray awning sagging over the front, and broken pots scattered before it.

I almost passed it, caught myself, skidded, and dived for the back. I fought the stiff tarpaulin, found the opening, and squeezed through.

I panted in complete darkness now. I tried to remember the trip out. This part was just a narrow tunnel, low ceilinged, leading back to the ladder. I started off, feeling my way. I cracked my head on a low beam, crouched lower. Behind me I heard voices, as the men shouted to each other, searching. I had a moment's relief; they didn't know this entry.

I slipped in the slime on the floor, bumped the walls, felt my way around the boulder, and kept on. It couldn't be much farther. It had been only a few steps, I thought, on the way out. I came to a turn, and stopped. There had been no turn in this part of the route. I started back, feeling the walls on both sides.

I heard a louder shout and a light flashed in the tunnel, near the entrance; someone had found it. I stopped. The light flashed again, and I saw the ladder, set in a niche at the side. I sprang to it, went up it in two leaps, and crashed against the door overhead. It was solid. I gripped the ladder, remembering the bale that concealed it. It had taken three men to push it aside. I climbed up higher, set my feet at the ends of the rung, put my back under the panel, and surged; it lifted, dropped back. The light lanced out, played over the wall below me. Desperately I put one foot on the next rung and heaved, and heaved again. The lid came up, and flew suddenly open. I crawled out onto the floor, blood pounding in my head. Through a blinding haze of pain in my skull, I saw the empty store-room, the open lid. I gripped my head. It felt as though a spike had been driven into it. I rose to my knees in agony, gasping with each heartbeat. I must have busted something, I thought. That bale weighed five hundred pounds.

A light flickered, casting giant shadows on the wall, then a face appeared in the opening where the lid had fallen back. I lay still, wishing that somehow this nightmare could end now, and let me rest.

The fellow's eyes were not adjusted to the darkness; he peered uncertainly around, throwing the light on looming crates and bales, then stared in my direction. With a sudden twist of his body, he brought up an automatic pistol, and in the same instant I fired the slug-gun once again. I closed my eyes against the sight of the face that tumbled back out of sight. The light went out.

I was tired of killing men; that was the one shortcoming of my faithful weapon; it was always fatal.

I got to my feet and groped my way back of a steel lift-van and sank down again. The pain was a little less now, but any movement made it surge up blindingly. I lay there and waited for them to come to me. I couldn't hope to find a better place to make my stand; and I had to have a little time before I could go on.

I could hear the shouts only faintly, rising and falling. After awhile they faded and there was only silence. I raised my head, listening, then rose carefully and went to the open trap-door. All I heard was a drop of water falling with a soft spat below. I had lost my pursuers.

I felt my confidence returning. I had been dead, trapped there in the fetid tunnel, and yet somehow I lived. The man who had stumbled into the hidden entrance must have done so unobserved, and no one else had looked along that stretch. Probably each man had been assigned a portion of the street to search, and the lucky winner had not been missed in the confusion.

I looked at my watch. Things happened fast in this war world; it was not yet half past nine. I had left the house at seven. I had killed four men in those two hours, and a man had died for me. I thought how easily a man slips back to his ancient role of nature's most deadly hunter.

The pain was washing away from my head now, leaving me shaky and drowsy. I yawned, sat on the floor. I had an impulse to lie back and go to sleep, but instead I got up and began feeling my way toward the panel that concealed the entrance to the passage in the massive walls. I wasn't finished yet; I was in the palace, unwounded, armed. I had all I had a right to hope for: a fighting chance.

I bumped into things in the darkness, trying to stay on course. I wished I had been more observant on the way out, but then I had no thought of coming back alone. I reached the wall, groped along it. I hoped I would be able to identify the panel when I found it. I tapped hopefully, listening for a hollow sound. I wasn't yet ready to start worrying about how I would pass the heavy bolts that held it shut.

The walls sounded solid. I shuffled along, feeling for hinges, cracks, anything to betray the false section of wall. There was nothing. I retraced my steps, wishing for light, found nothing. I came to a corner, started back. The boards lining the wall were heavy slabs, rough surfaced. I felt nail heads and splinters, nothing else.

I had to have light. I thought of the flashlight the man had been carrying; it was lying at the bottom of the ladder now. It was either that or wait until

morning when a little sunlight would filter through the boarded windows. I might as well get going.

I moved off in what I hoped was the direction of the trap door, going slowly, feeling with my feet. I didn't want to find the open door by falling through it. I groped, banged my shins, cracked my head, swore. I cast about, working in the dark with no sound but my own breathing and the scrape of my shoes. I found it at last, when the open lid took the skin off a knuckle as I swung my arms ahead of me.

I felt for the ladder with my feet, went down. At the bottom I tried to avoid stepping on the body by putting my foot down wide of the ladder, and jerked it back as I felt the yielding mass. I swung off on the other side.

I didn't like the idea, but I reached down and began running my hands over the wet mud floor. There were shallow pools of gritty water, and round pebbles, a dead rat, and once something alive that wriggled from under my hand. I felt around the body, and finally under it. It seemed immensely heavy as I dragged it aside, and my head throbbed again. I had to be careful; I had a lot to do before I could relax and be an invalid.

After nearly an hour's search, I found it lying against the wall twenty feet from the ladder. I grabbed it up, flicked the switch, and it went on. The lens was cracked, but the thing worked. I was grateful then for the soft mud of the passage floor.

In two minutes I was back at the wooden wall, flashing the light along the joints. I saw the door almost at once; it was easy if you knew what to look for. I pushed against it; it was as unyielding as the rest of the wall. I had to have something to work on it with.

I threw the light over the crates nearby, started off among them. With any luck, there should be a crowbar here somewhere, to pry the lids off the boxes. I prowled up and down the narrow aisles between the looming crates, and among broken boards in the far corner discovered scattered tools; a nail-puller, heavy pliers, rusty tin snips-and a five-foot pry bar. I was still lucky. That suited me just fine.

As I pushed the end of the bar into the crack at the side of the door, I wondered what attention the noise would attract. If anyone heard it, it would probably be one of the Organization's stand-by crew, and they knew me. I wasn't too worried, and I had no choice. I heaved, splintering wood.

The big bar worked fast. In five minutes I had a twelve inch board hanging by a few nails at the top. Carrying the steel bar, I lifted the board and slipped under it into the passage. There were no branching corridors to get lost in, I saw. I quickly covered the distance to the door opening onto the room where I had met Miche and Gros. It stood half open. I looked into the room, flashing my light. It was deserted. I wondered where the Organization's men were. I had expected to find someone here.

I stepped past the door, and a rope dropped over my shoulders pinioning my arms. I was hauled backwards, slammed against a table. I threw myself forward, twisting, the light and the pry bar clattering to the floor. The light cast a dim beam toward a distant corner; I couldn't see my assailant.

The rope twisted around my chest now, tightening, and I was jerked back, falling against the table again. This time I was forced down on it, and the rope creaked as it was cinched up under the table, tying me down.

Other ropes flipped across me, pinioning my legs. I fought, kicked, wrenched a leg loose and had it trapped again. There was a rope around my neck now, and for a moment I thought I was going to be choked; but it held at the last instant, leaving me just breathing space.

"You want it tightened up?" a meaty voice grated in my ear. "Just lay nice and quiet."

I got the idea; I lay still. I didn't know whether I was in the hands of the Organization or the Ducal Guard. Maybe if I waited and said nothing, I would find out.

I couldn't see much, only the cobwebbed ceiling. The light moved, flashed in my face. I couldn't see who was behind it.

"It's the stoolie," the voice said unemotionally. "Lots of gall coming back here. What were you after, stoolie, figure on fingering the rest of the boys?"

"Use your head," I said. "I came back here to finish the job I came for; to . . ."

A blow rocked my head. There was a long silence while my head rang. The light went off. Feet shuffled. A match scratched, and the candle gave a weak illumination.

"I seen you kill Miche," the voice said softly. "You're a pretty hard boy, but I put you down. You look real nice laid out there. I'm going to cut you up a little and then I'm going to see what I can do with the irons. I ain't as good as Miche was with the irons, but Miche would of liked it this way."

"I was almost killed in the ambush myself," I said. I wanted to talk him into letting me go. I didn't want to kill anymore.

There was the sound of a knife being whetted. A shadow moved rhythmically on the ceiling as he stroked the blade across the stone. This one was really nuts, I thought.

My arms were at my sides, held by a rope across the forearms. I worked at the rope, got it up to the elbow. I felt over the other ropes in reach, but there were no knots that I could feel. I wanted to relieve the pressure on my throat, but I couldn't quite reach that high.

"Cut the ropes," I called. "I'm not an informer. I've just come from the place in the country, with Gaston."

The whetting sound stopped. "Where's Gaston?"

I hesitated. "He was killed," I said. "The sentry . . ."

The man laughed, a breathy cackle. "Yeah," he said. "It works out like that, don't it?" His voice hardened. "I'll think about Gaston and Miche and the

others while I work with the knife."

So be it, I thought. I twitched my wrist, and the slap of the gun was loud in the silence.

"What's that?" the voice snapped, the chair rasped, feet scraped. My hands were relaxed against the table, the tiny gun held by one thumb against my palm. The light came closer, and I saw the man behind it now, in the faint glow of the candle; grey stubble across a hollow cheek, narrowed eyes, bushy hair. I wanted him to come a little closer. I slapped the table with my left hand; it sounded a little like the other slap.

"You can't blame me for trying," I whined.

He seemed to relax a bit, edged closer. "You was a tricky guy . . ." That was as far as he got. I raised the gun and blew him out like the light in his hand. The thud and clatter echoed and died. I was alone again in silence.

I relaxed then, went limp; all the energy seemed to drain out of me. The temptation to sleep was almost undeniable. But the rope galled my throat, and I had to free myself. I started in, tugging and twisting, working the rope down. I thought of how my reactions had changed in the few weeks since Winter had plucked me from the street in the Old Town. I had been outraged by the brutality of that kidnapping, had considered myself recklessly daring when I waved the little pistol at my captors.

And now, my strongest reaction when the rope dropped on me in the dark had been the thought that I would have to kill again. Being tied no longer bothered me; I knew I could free myself. The only thought that stirred me was that in a few minutes, with luck, I would face the Dictator in his most inner fortress.

I couldn't understand where the rest of the Organization was. This poor mad fellow I had had to kill talked as though he were the only survivor. Maybe the ambush in the Street of the Olive Trees had been followed up by an extermination of the rats in the walls, too.

I worked one arm free, then quickly loosened the rope from my feet and waist; it fell slack around my neck, and I slid from under it. I yawned, then slapped at my face to try to wake myself up. I hadn't slept for forty hours and I had exerted myself in ways I hadn't even thought of for years; I was exhausted.

I went over to Chica's cupboard, rummaged in it, and found a bit of cheese and a bottle of wine. I was thirsty, but the wine would make me even drowsier. I nibbled at the cheese and wondered where Chica was. I hoped she was safe; she seemed like a shy and hopeful girl.

There was no reason to linger here. I crossed to the stair and made my way up to the corridor. The silence was complete until I reached the door which had caused me such consternation when it opened, as I stood at bay at the foot of the hidden stair. I put my ear to the panel, and caught a faint and distant hum of voices, the tiny clatter of things being rattled together. It was the normal hubbub of an occupied household. I felt an unexpected quickening of my pulse; I was sure somehow that I would find the Dictator

in residence this time.

I turned the knob and pushed the door open a crack. It grated against a box outside. I forced it six inches, and peered through. There was only darkness, and the sounds, a little louder now. My heartbeat quickened to match the rise in volume. I was nearing my goal. I was no longer the eager neophyte, I thought, ignorant of the realities; I came now, steeled by necessity, a hardened fighter, a practical killer. I was armed and I was desperate, and I bore the scars of combat. I did not intend to fail.

I went up the stairs, pausing at each landing to listen. There was nothing but the sounds of normal activity. I reached the level of the old roof, and for a moment remembered vividly the other stair that I had climbed in another world, mounting to the tower where my shuttle lay. I didn't linger with the thought. There were no sounds from beyond the door; the latch still hung from splintered wood, just as I had left it when I passed this way coming down. I opened it silently, crossed quickly to the other door from which the private stair led up, and was beyond it, waiting for the sound of any notice I might have attracted. All was quiet; I breathed a sigh, relaxed my tense right wrist. Murdering people is getting to be a chore, I thought.

I yawned, shook my head. I couldn't seem to clear my thoughts fully; I tried to realize that in a matter of minutes, or perhaps even seconds, I might be face to face with my double, my other self, the Dictator of the State. I yawned again.

Forty feet to go, I thought. I went up, passing landings, moving silently. The walls here were smooth and new looking, painted a pale green. The doors were new, of heavy polished wood. Nothing old and shabby would be fitting in the tower apartment of the Dictator.

I reached the top, listened again. I eased the door open and looked down the length of the hall. This was the first sight I had seen when the shuttle had pitched me headlong into this living nightmare. It hadn't changed. I stepped into the hall, tried the first door. It opened, and I saw that it was a bedroom. I went in, and by the faint light shining through the curtains from below, looked over a wide bed, a large desk against the far wall, a closet door, an easy chair, and through a partly open door, a roomy bathroom to the right. There was a closed door in the center of the left wall, probably a communicating door to a sitting room, I thought. I closed the door behind me, and crossed to the windows. There were steel shutters, painted light green to match the walls, folded back behind the draperies. On impulse, I closed them. They fitted well. I went to the desk and found the lamp in the dark, flipped it on. I had had enough of groping through the dark for one night.

The room was very handsome, spacious, with a deep pile grey-green rug and a pair of bold water-colors on the wall. Suddenly I was aware of my own reek. The clothes seemed to crawl on my back. I had lain in mud, waded a sewer, crept through ancient dust. I was filthy. Without considering further, I pulled the encrusted tunic off, tossed my clothes in a heap by the door, and headed for the bath.

It was finished in grey-green tile, and the tub was long and deep. I turned

the tap, and hot water poured forth. I climbed in, adjusted the temperature, and looked around for the soap. The slug-gun was in the way; I laid it on the floor beside me.

I took half an hour soaping myself, and then climbed out and got my uniform. I had nothing else to put on, and I wouldn't wear it as it was. I soaped it up, rinsed it out, and draped it over the side of the tub. There was a vast white bathrobe behind the door, and I wrapped myself in it and went back into the bedroom. I liked the room; it was what I would like to have for myself, some day. And the thought struck me that we must be much alike in some ways, my twin and I.

I remembered the slug-gun, and retrieved it. The thought penetrated to my dulled mind that I was behaving dangerously. I had no idea when my victim might return; he could have come in when I was naked and helpless in the bathtub. I tried again to shake myself alert. But alarm wouldn't come. I felt perfectly safe, secure, comfortable. This won't do, I thought. I'm going to go to sleep on my feet.

I have to keep active, I told myself. I've got to stay alert. I'll hear him coming, and have a moment to hide in the bathroom. I yawned again.

I sat down in the chair opposite the door, and prepared to wait it out. I got up, as an afterthought, and turned the light out. I don't remember sitting down again.

X

I dreamed I was at the seashore, and the sun reflected from the glassy water. It flashed in my eyes, and I turned away. I twisted in the chair, opened my eyes. My head was thick.

I stared at the pale green walls of the room, across the grey-green rug. It was silent in the room and I didn't move. The connecting door stood open.

I remembered turning the light off, nothing more. Someone had turned it on; someone had opened the door. I had come as a killer in the night; and someone had found me here sleeping, betrayed by my own exhaustion.

I sat up, and in that instant realized I was not alone. I turned my head, and looked at the man who sat quietly in the chair on my left, leaning back with his legs thrust out stiffly before him, his hands lightly gripping the arms of a rosewood chair upholstered in black leather. He smiled, and leaned forward. It was like looking into a mirror.

I didn't move. I stared at him. His face was thinner than mine, more lined. The skin was burned dark, the hair bleached lighter by the African sun; but it was me I looked at. Not a twin, not a double, not a clever actor; it was myself, sitting in a chair, looking at me.

"You have been sleeping soundly," he said. I thought of hearing my voice on a tape recorder, except that this voice spoke in flawless French.

I moved my hand slightly; my gun was still there, and the man I had come to kill sat not ten feet away, alone, unprotected. But I didn't move. I

wasn't ready, not yet. Maybe not ever.

"Are you rested enough," he said, "or will you sleep longer before we talk?"

"I'm rested," I said.

"I do not know how you came here," he said, "but that you are here is enough. I knew that my destiny would not desert me. I did not know what gift the tide of fortune would bring to me, but there could be no finer thing than this; a brother."

I didn't know what I had expected the Dictator Bayard to be; a sullen ruffian, a wild-eyed megalomaniac, a sly-eyed schemer. But I had not expected a breathing image of myself, with a warm smile, and a poetic manner of speech, a man who called me brother.

He looked at me with an expression of intense interest.

"You speak excellent French, but with an English accent," he said. "Or is it perhaps American?" He smiled. "You must forgive my curiosity; linguistics, accents, they are a hobby of mine; and in your case, I am doubly intrigued."

"American," I said.

"Amazing," he said. "I might have been born an American myself . . . but that is a long dull tale to tell another time."

No need, I thought. My father told it to me often, when I was a boy . . .

He went on, his voice intense, but gentle, friendly. "They told me, when I returned to Algiers ten days ago, that a man resembling myself had been seen here in the apartment. There were two men found in my study, quite dead, a great deal of excitement, a garbled report. But I was struck by this talk of a man who looked like me. I wanted to see him, talk to him; I have been so very much alone here. It was a thing that caught my imagination. Of course, I did not know what brought this man here; they even talked of danger . . ." He spread his hands in a Gallic gesture.

"But when I came into this room and found you here, sleeping, I knew at once that you could not have come but in friendship. I was touched, my friend, to see that you came here as to your own, entrusting yourself to my hands."

I couldn't say anything. I didn't try.

"There are few in this land who have the courage to stand before me as a man, to treat me as a friend. There are legends of my ferocity, my deadliness, which keep all men on guard in my presence, fear blending with hatred. But they are only legends, born out of the same fear and hatred they engender; the two emotions we know most well in these bitter days. Love and trust-those words-we have all but forgotten.

"When I lit the lamp and saw your face, I knew at once that this was more than some shallow impersonation; I saw my own face there, not so worn by war as my own, the lines not so deeply etched; but there was the call of blood to blood; I knew you for my brother."

I licked my lips, swallowed. He leaned forward, placed his hand over mine, gripped it hard.

"Together, my brother, we shall yet redeem a civilization that must not die; you with your whole body, your strong legs, to be everywhere at once; and I with my dream, and the lessons the years have taught me. It is not too late even now to triumph over the petty plotters, the gnawers from within, who seek to bring down the little island of order I have created in the ruins of war; bring it down so that they may loot the ruins, kill the last feeble flower of Western Culture, and give the world over to barbarians."

He fell silent then, abruptly. He smiled, gripped my hand again, and leaned back in his chair with a sigh.

"Forgive me again, brother; I fall easily into oratory, I fear; a habit I should do well to break. There is time enough for plans later. But now, will you tell me of yourself? I know you have in you the blood of the Bayards."

"Yes, my name is Bayard."

"You must have wanted very much to come to me, to have made your way here alone and unarmed. No one has ever passed the wall before, without an escort and many papers."

I couldn't sit here silent, but neither could I tell this man anything of my real purpose in coming. I reminded myself of the treatment the Imperial ambassadors had received at his hands, of all that Bale had told me that first morning in the meeting with Bernadotte; but I saw nothing here of the ruthless tyrant I expected; instead, I found myself responding to his spontaneous welcome.

I had to tell him something. My years of diplomatic experience came to my assistance once again. I found myself lying smoothly, by indirection.

"You're right in thinking I can help you, Brion," I said. I was startled to hear myself calling him by his first name so easily, but it seemed the natural thing to do.

"But you are wrong in assuming that your State is the only surviving center of civilization. There is another, a strong, dynamic, and friendly power, which would like to establish amicable relations with you. I am the emissary of that government."

"Marvelous," he said, "but where?" He leaned forward again, eyes lighting. "There is nothing but silence on the wireless, and reconnaissance as far north as Moscow, east to India, and westward to the sea has discovered to me nothing but ruin and savagery." He sat up. "Of course; America!"

I sought for a neutral replay as he paused, went on.

"I grieved for your country, my brother. It was one of the first and fairest victims of the Age of Madness. You cannot know what gratitude I feel to know that of it something still remains; that the spark was not wholly quenched."

"Humans are tough animals," I hedged. "Not easy to kill."

"But why did you not come to me openly? The course you chose, while daring, was of extreme danger; but it must be that you were aware of the treachery all about me, and feared that my enemies would keep you from me."

He seemed so eager to understand that he supplied most of his own answers. I seemed to be doing pretty well by keeping my comments to a minimum. But this seemed an opportune moment to broach the subject of Bale's two agents who had carried full diplomatic credentials, and who had been subjected to beating, torture, and death. It was a contradiction in the Dictator's character I wanted to shed a little light on.

"I recall that two men sent to you a year ago were not well received," I said. "I was unsure of my reception. I wanted to see you privately, face to face."

Bayard's face tensed. "Two men?" he said. "I have heard nothing of ambassadors."

"They were met first by a Colonel-General Yang," I said, "and afterward were interviewed by you personally."

Bayard's face was white. "There is a dog of a broken officer who leads a crew of cutthroats in raids on what pitiful commerce I have been able to encourage. His name is Yang. If he has molested a legation sent to me from your country, I promise you his head."

"It was said that you yourself shot one of them," I said, pressing the point.

Bayard gripped the arm of the chair, his eyes on my face.

"I swear to you by the honor of the House of Bayard that I have never heard until this moment of your Embassy, and that no harm came to them through any act of mine."

I believed him. I was starting to wonder about a lot of things. He seemed sincere in welcoming the idea of an alliance with a civilized power. And yet, I myself had seen the carnage done by his raiders at the Palace, and the atom bomb they had tried to detonate there.

"Very well," I said. "On behalf of my government, I accept your statement; but if we treat with you now, what assurance will be given to us that there will be no repetition of the bombing raids . . ."

"Bombing raids!" He stared at me. There was a silence.

"Thank God you came to me by night, in secret," he said. "It is plain to me now that control of affairs has slipped from me farther even than I had feared."

"There have been seven raids, four of them accompanied by atomic bombs, in the past year," I said. "The most recent was less than one month ago."

His voice was deadly now. "By my order, every gram of fissionable material known to me to exist was dumped into the sea on the day that I established this State. That there were traitors in my service, I knew; but

that there were madmen who would begin the Horror again, I did not suspect. If it is not now too late, I can only ask that you accept my pledge to you and to your government that I will place every resource of this State at the disposal of a force of my most loyal men, a division known as the Ducal Guard, veterans who have been with me since I led them into battle at Gibraltar, on the last day that I stood with my own feet on this earth. They will go with death orders to seek out and destroy those guilty of this monstrousness."

"It is not too late," I said.

He turned and stared across the room at a painting of sunlight shining through leaves onto a weathered wall. "Many times, brother, in these years, I have prayed that it was not too late. Do not mistake me; I prayed to no hollow God of the priests; I prayed to the manhood within myself that I should be able to do what no one else would pause from looting long enough to try; to save what remained of man's accomplishments in the arts, to keep a little foothold against returning darkness. I fought them when they burned the libraries, melted down the Cellini altar pieces, trampled the Mona Lisa in the ruins of the Louvre.

"There was loot for all, mountains of loot; so many had died and there were whole cities almost intact. Yes, loot is the one thing we do not lack. Destruction seemed to become an end in itself. I could save only a fragment here, a remnant there, always telling myself that it was not too late. But the years passed, and they have brought no change. Instead, it is the people who have changed; they seem to live now only for looting. At first it was a necessity; the survivors of twenty years of war, atomic bombings, disease, starvation, were forced to prowl through the ruins in search of the necessities of life. But there was so much treasure to uncover, so few to divide it among; it became a way of life.

"There was an end to industry, farming, family life. No one has children now. There are no marriages, just casual liaisons; and now they fight over the spoils.

"Even with the plenty that lies about us for the taking, men fight over three things; gold, liquor, and women.

"I have tried to arouse a spirit of rebuilding against the day when even the broken store houses run dry; but it is useless. Only my rigid martial rule holds them in check.

"I will confess, I had lost hope. There was too much decay all around me; in my own house, among my closest advisors, I heard nothing but talk of armament, expeditionary forces, domination, renewed war against the ruins outside our little island of order. Empty war, meaningless overlordship of dead nations. They hoped to spend our slender resources in stamping out whatever traces might remain of human achievement, unless it bowed to our supremacy."

When he looked at me I thought of the expression, 'blazing eyes.'

"Now, my hope springs up renewed," he said. "With a brother at my side, we will prevail."

I thought about it. The Imperium had given me full powers. I might as well use them.

"I think I can assure you," I said, "that the worst is over. My government has resources; you may ask for whatever you need; men, supplies, equipment. We ask only one thing of you; friendship and justice between us."

He leaned back, closed his eyes. "The long night is over," he said.

There were still major points to be covered, but I felt sure that Bayard had been grossly misrepresented to me, and to the Imperial government. I wondered how Imperial Intelligence had been so completely taken in and why. Bale had spoken of having a team of his best men here, sending a stream of data back to him.

There was also the problem of my transportation back to the Zero Zero world of the Imperium. Bayard hadn't mentioned the M-C shuttles; in fact, thinking over what he had said, he talked as though they didn't exist. Perhaps he was holding out on me, in spite of his apparent candor.

Bayard opened his eyes. "There has been enough of gravity for now," he said. "I think that a little rejoicing between us would be appropriate. I wonder if you share my liking for an impromptu feast on such an occasion?"

"I love to eat in the middle of the night," I said, "especially when I've missed my dinner."

"You are a true Bayard," he said. He reached to the table beside me and pressed a button. He leaned back and placed his finger tips together.

"And so now we must think about the menu." He pursed his lips, looking thoughtful. "Something fitting for the event," he said.

"And with a bottle of wine, I hope," I said. I was feeling more at ease now. I liked the Dictator Bayard, even if I still had reservations.

"But naturally, brother," he said, staring at me with a smile. "I think I shall be able to offer you something quite adequate in wines." He hesitated. "May I not use your given name? I feel that between us there should be no need for formality."

Now it was my turn to hesitate. "My name is also Brion," I said after a moment. "So we can call each other Brion," I added with a smile.

He laughed. "Splendid. And now let me make a suggestion. Tonight permit me to select the dinner; we will see if our tastes are as similar as ourselves."

"Fine," I said.

There was a tap at the door. At Brion's call, it opened and a sourfaced fiftyish little man came in. He saw me, started; then his face blanked. He crossed to The Dictator's chair, drew himself up, and said, "I come as quick as I could, Major."

"Fine, fine, Luc," he said. "At ease. My brother and I are hungry. We have a very special hunger, and I want you, Luc, to see to it that our dinner does the kitchen credit."

Luc glanced at me from the corner of his eye. "I seen the gentleman resembled the Major somewhat," he said.

"An amazing likeness. Now;" he stared at the ceiling. "We will begin with a very dry Madeira, I think; Sercial, the 1875. Then we will whet our appetites with Les Huitres de Whitstable, with a white Burgundy; Chablis Vaudesir. I think there is still a bit of the '29."

I leaned forward. This sounded like something special indeed. I had eaten oysters Whitstable before, but the wines were vintages of which I had only heard.

"The soup, Consommé Double aux Cepes; then, Le Supreme de Brochet au Beurre Blanc, and for our first red Burgundy, Romanee-Conti, 1904."

Brion stared with speculative eyes at the far corner of the room. "Next, Les Quenelles de Veau Benedict, with a Bordeaux; the Chateau Lafite-Rothschild, 1890. By then, I think a Grouse d'Ecosse Rotie sur la Canapé would be appropriate, followed by Poireaux Meuniere for a touch of sweet.

"We will have a demi-bouteille of Le Croton '33 then, along with something to nibble; Brie de Meaux, Stilton, and Roquefort will do.

"Crusted Port, 1871, should clear the palate of cheese in readiness for café and Brandy; The Reserve, 1855, Luc. The occasion demands it." He turned to me.

"Among the treasures I was able to rescue from wanton destruction are included what remains in the world of the great vintages. Curiously, the troops usually smashed the wine cellars in disappointment at not having found something stronger. I saved what I could." I was impressed.

"Those old years," I said. "Fabulous!"

"The tragedy is," he said sadly, "that there are no new years. The last authentic vintage year was 1934; a few barrels only. Now the vineyards of France are dead. I am doing what I can here with a few vines, but it is not a thing that interests people today."

Luc went away quietly. If he could carry that in his head, I thought, he was the kind of waiter I'd always wanted to find.

"Luc has been with me for many years," Brion said. "A faithful friend. You noticed that he called me 'Major.' That was the last official rank I held in the Army of France-in-Exile, before the collapse. I was later elected as Colonel over a regiment of survivors of the Battle of Gibraltar, when we had realized that we were on our own. Later still, when I saw what had to be done, and took into my hands the task of rebuilding, other titles were given me by my followers, and I confess I conferred one or two myself; it was a necessary psychological measure, I felt. But to Luc I have always remained

'major.' He himself was a sous-officer, my regimental Sergeant-Major."

"That must have been a terrible time," I said.

"The most terrible part was the realization in recent years that men have changed," he said. "At first, we all seemed to have the same aim; to rebuild. We had to use the only organizing force remaining in our shattered world, military discipline, to make a beginning, to set up some sort of framework within which we could rebuild. I tried, as soon as we had pacified a few hundred square miles, to hold an election. I wished to turn the leadership over to another, so that I could rest and perhaps forget a little; but I almost lost all we had gained in the riots that broke out. I tried twice again in the next ten years, and always the result was the same; bloodshed, a raw struggle for power. So I remain, an unwilling master.

"Now it appears that even that uneasy peace was not long to endure; only your coming will save what we have built."

"I know little about events of the last few years in Europe," I said. "Can you tell me something about them?"

He sat thoughtfully for a moment. "The course was steadily downhill," he said, "from the day of the unhappy Peace of Munich in 1919. Had America come into the war, perhaps it would have ended differently; but of course you know and remember the armed truce of the 20's. America faced the Central Powers alone, and the end was inevitable. When America fell under the massive onslaught in '32, it seemed that the Kaiser's dream of a German-dominated world was at hand. Then came the uprisings. I was only a boy, but I held a second Lieutenant's commission in the Army of France-in-Exile. We spearheaded the organized resistance, and the movement spread like wildfire. Men, it seemed, would not live as slaves. We had high hopes in those days.

"But the years passed, and stalemate wore away at us. At last the Kaiser was overthrown by a palace coup, and we chose that chance to make our last assault. I led my battalion on Gibraltar, and took a steel-jacketed bullet through both knees almost before we were ashore.

"I will never forget the hours of agony while I lay conscious in the surgeon's tent. There was no more morphine, and the medical officers worked over the minor cases, trying to get men back into the fight; I was out of it, and therefore took last priority. It was reasonable, but at the time I did not understand."

I listened, rapt. "When," I asked, "were you hit?"

"That day I will not soon forget," he said. "April 15, 1945."

I stared. I had been hit by a German machine gun slug and had waited in the aid station for the doctors to get to me on April 15, 1945. There was a strange affinity that linked this other Bayard's life with mine, even across the unimaginable void of the Net.

At my host's suggestion, we moved out to the terraced balcony and deft men in white jackets spread a table there with fine linen, Swedish glass,

and old silver.

Luc came back with the Madeira then, poured it silently, left. We talked, exchanged reminiscences. I limited myself to generalities and in return learned a lot about this lonely man. His parents-our parents-lived at a distance from Algiers; not, as I had been told, because they were estranged from their son, but because he had removed them to a place of safety far from the storm center of Algiers. I thought of seeing them soon, but there was a sense suddenly of unreality about it all.

The courses arrived one by one, wheeled onto the terrace by bustling servitors supervised by Luc, each dish surpassing the last in its perfection. I saw that the Dictator was a gourmet of rare distinction; and Luc was as good as he seemed.

We mellowed with each succeeding bottle of great wine. I hinted, and finally asked Bayard openly about the shuttles, and the M-C drive. He didn't know what I was talking about. Even through the glow I felt the tension begin again inside me; although I had won my way into the palace and the Dictator's friendship, I was still marooned. The raids and the shuttles were under the control of some other hand here. The job of finding that hand still lay ahead.

We were feeling wonderful now. I told Bayard about my escape from the ambush at the bridge and got out my faithful slug-gun to explain to him how it worked. He was enthralled, and asked if they could be supplied to his Ducal Guard. I laid the gun on the table, and showed him the clip on my wrist that flipped the gun into my hand at a motion.

He countered by calling for Luc to bring a heavy walnut gun case containing a beautiful collection of strange automatics, multi-barreled pistols, and miniature revolvers.

We finished the 1855 brandy, and still we sat, talking through the African night. We laid ambitious plans for the rebuilding of civilization. We enjoyed each other's company, and all stiffness had long since gone. I closed my eyes, and I think I must have dozed off. Something awakened me.

Dawn was lightening the sky. Brion sat silent, frowning. He tilted his head.

"Listen."

I listened. I thought I caught a faint shout and something banged in the distance. I looked inquiringly at my host. His face was grim.

"All is not well," he said. He gripped the chair arms, rose, got his canes, started around the table.

I got up and stepped forward through the glass doors into the room. I was dizzy from the wine and brandy. There was a louder shout outside in the hall and a muffled thump. Then the door shook, splintered and crashed inward.

Thin in a tight black uniform, Chief Inspector Bale stood in the opening, his face white with excitement. He carried a long-barreled Mauser automatic

pistol in his right hand. He stared at me, stepped back, then with a sudden grimace raised the gun and fired.

In the instant before the gun slammed, I caught a blur of motion from my right, and then Brion was there, half in front of me, falling as the shot echoed. I grabbed for him, caught him by the shoulders as he went down, limp. Blood welled from under his collar, spreading; too much blood, a life's blood.

He was on the floor, on his back, and I crouched over him. His mouth opened, and he tried to say something; I never knew what it was. He was looking in my face as the light died from his eyes.

"Get back, Bayard," Bale snarled. "Rotten luck, that; I need the swine alive for hanging." I stood up slowly, thinking of the gun on the table behind me.

He stared at me, gnawing his lip. "It was you I wanted dead, and this fool's traded lives with you."

He seemed to be talking to himself. I recognized the voice now, a little late. Bale was the Big Boss. It was the fact that he spoke in French here that had fooled me.

"All right," he said in abrupt decision. "He can trade deaths with you, too. You'll do to hang in his place. I'll give the mob their circus. You wanted to take his place, here's your chance."

He stepped farther into the room, motioned others in. Evil-looking thugs came through the door, peering about, glancing at Bale for orders.

"Truss this man up," he said, jerking his head toward me. "Just his arms."

I stepped back, edging toward the table. If I could have just one shot at that thin-lipped face.

Two of them grabbed at me; I dodged back, turned, reached for the gun. My fingers hit it, knocked it spinning to the floor. Then they had me, twisting my arms behind me.

"I want him put where he'll keep for a few hours," Bale said.

"Yeah," one of the men said. "I know a place; he'll keep good down in them cells over the other side of the shelters; OK we dump him there?"

"Very well," Bale said. "But I'm warning you, Cassu; keep your bloody hands off him; I want him strong for the surgeon."

Cassu grunted, twisted my arm until the joint creaked, and pushed me past the dead body of the man I had come in one night to think of as a brother. He had fought for his cause through bitter years; I hoped he had died before he realized that he had fought in vain.

They marched me off down the corridor, pushed me into an elevator, led me out again through a mob of noisy roughs armed to the teeth, down stone stairs, along a damp tunnel in the rock, and at the end of the line, sent me spinning with a kick into the pitch black of a cell. I fell, groped for a wall for

support, found a bare wooden shelf which was the bed, and sat down on it. The iron-barred door clanged.

My stunned mind worked, trying to assimilate what had happened. Bale! And not a double; he had known who I was. It was Bale of the Imperium, a traitor. That answered a lot of questions. It explained the perfect timing and placement of the attack at the palace, and why Bale had been too busy to attend the gala affair that night. I realized now why he had sought me out afterward; he was hoping that I'd been killed, of course. That would have simplified matters for him. And the duel; I had never quite been able to understand why the intelligence chief had been willing to risk killing me, when I was essential to the scheme for controlling the dictator. And all the lies about the viciousness of the Bayard of B-I Two; Bale's fabrications, designed to prevent establishment of friendly relations between the Imperium and this unhappy world.

Why? I asked myself. Did Bale plan to rule this hell-world himself, make it his private domain? It seemed so. Here was a world enough like the world of the Imperium that Bale would have at his disposal the same luxuries and conveniences that he knew at home; he could loot this world's duplicates of the treasure troves of the cities; stores, palaces and museums.

And I saw that Bale did not intend to content himself with this world alone; this would be merely a base of operations, a source of fighting men and weapons, including atomic bombs. Bale himself was the author of the raids on the Imperium. He had stolen shuttles, or components thereof, and had manned them here in B-I Two, and set out on a career of piracy. The next step would be the assault on the Imperium itself, a full-scale attack, strewing atomic death. The men of the Imperium would wear gay uniforms and dress sabres into battle against atomic cannon.

I wondered why I hadn't realized it sooner. The fantastic unlikeliness of the development of the M-C drive independently by the war-ruined world of B-I Two seemed obvious now.

While we had sat in solemn conference, planning moves against the raiders, their prime mover had sat with us. No wonder an enemy scout had lain in wait for me as I came in on my mission. The wonder was that I'd escaped death on that first step of my journey.

When he found me at the hide-out, Bale must have immediately set to work planning how best to make use of the unexpected stroke of luck. And when I had escaped, he had had to move fast.

I could only assume that the State was now in his hands; that a show execution of Bayard in the morning had been scheduled to impress the populace with the reality of the change in regimes.

Now I would hang in the Dictator's place. And I remembered what Bale had said; he wanted me strong for the surgeon. The wash tub would be useful after all. There were enough who knew the Dictator's secret to make a corpse with legs embarrassing.

They would shoot me full of dope, perform the operation, bind up the stumps, dress my unconscious body in a uniform, and hang me. A dead

body wouldn't fool the public. They would be able to see the color of life in my face, even if I were still out, as the noose tightened.

I heard someone coming, and saw a bobbing light in the passage through the barred opening in the door. I braced myself. Maybe this was the man with the saws and the heavy snippers already.

Two men stopped at the cell door, opened it, came in. I squinted, at the glare of the flashlight. One of the two dropped something on the floor.

"Put it on," he said. "The boss said he wanted you should wear this here for the hanging."

I saw my old costume, the one I had washed. At least it was clean, I thought. It was strange, I considered, how inconsequential still had importance.

A foot nudged me. "Put it on, like I said."

"Yeah," I said. I took off the robe and pulled on the light wool jacket and trousers, buckled the belt. There were no shoes; I guessed Bale figured I wouldn't be needing them.

"OK," the man said. "Let's go, Hiem."

I sat and listened as the door clanked again; the light receded. It was very dark.

I wasn't thinking about anything, now. My mind wandered over bits and fragments from the past few weeks; the street where I'd been picked up, the office where Bernadotte had told me about the job, Goering's face as he grappled the raider on the ballroom floor; and Barbro's red hair and level grey eyes.

I fingered the torn lapels of my jacket. The communicator hadn't helped me much. I could feel the broken wires, tiny filaments projecting from the cut edge of the cloth. Beau Joe had cursed as he clashed at them.

I looked down. Tiny blue sparks jumped against the utter black as the wires touched.

I sat perfectly still. Sweat broke out on my forehead. I didn't dare move; the pain of hope awakening against all hope was worse than the blank acceptance of certain death.

My hands shook. I fumbled for the wires, tapped them together. A spark; another.

I tried to think. The communicator was clipped to my belt still; the speaker and mike were gone, but the power source was there. Was there a possibility that touching the wires together would transmit a signal? I didn't know. I could only try.

I didn't know Morse Code, or any other code; but I knew S O S. Three dots, three dashes, three dots; over and over, while I suffered the agony of hope.

A long time passed. I wondered when the surgeon would arrive. Probably Bale had sent to the house in the country for him; it shouldn't take more than an hour and a half, or at most two hours; and surely it had been that long. I had to fight to stay awake now. Fatigue, a heavy dinner, and too much good wine were catching up with me.

My fingers cramped, stiff and aching. It was cold in the cell, and my clothes were still damp. I tapped the wires together and watched the blue spark dance.

I thought of Bayard, holding on alone against the tide of destruction, decay, anarchy, battling to preserve something of civilization out of the ruin of a world; I thought of the gallant men of the Imperium, facing disaster sword in hand; and I thought of blandfaced men in dowdy grey flannel suits, sitting in embassy offices back in my own world, devising petty swindles, engaging in spiteful office intrigues, little greedy selfish men, feathering their nests.

I knew I didn't have much longer to wait. I went over it again in my mind; it would take perhaps thirty minutes for Bale to get a messenger on the way to the hideout; the trip itself might take twenty minutes. Then allow half an hour to load the table, the instruments-and the wash tub. Another twenty minutes for the return, and then maybe another half hour to set up the operating room. That totaled a little over two hours. My sense of time was confused, but surely it had been that long. I tapped the wires, and waited. I almost fell off the bunk as I dozed for an instant. I couldn't stop; I had to try until time ran out for me.

I heard them coming from far off, the first faint grate of leather on dusty stone, a clink of metal. My mouth was dry, and my legs began to tingle. I thought of the hollow tooth, and ran my tongue over it. The time for it had come. I wondered how it would taste, if it would be painful. I wondered if Bale had forgotten it, or if he hadn't known. I took a breath; there was no reason to wait.

There were more sounds in the passage now, sounds of men and loud voices; a clank of something heavy, a ponderous grinding. They must be planning on setting the table up here in the cell, I thought. I went to the tiny opening in the door and looked through. I could see nothing but almost total darkness. Suddenly light flared brilliantly, and I jumped, blinded.

There was more noise, then someone yelled. They must be having a hell of a time getting the stuff through the narrow hall, I thought. My eyeballs ached. I noticed my legs were trembling. My stomach suddenly felt bad. I gagged. I hoped I wouldn't go to pieces. Time for the tooth now. I thought of how disappointed Bale would be when he found me dead in my cell; it helped a little; but still I hesitated. I didn't want to die. I had a lot of living I wanted to do first. I tried to look at the light again and couldn't.

There was a terrible din in the hall now. I thought I heard shots, and I was on my feet again, squinting through the glare. I caught a glimpse of a man backing toward the door, falling. Something was going on out there.

My eyes ached, I shut them, backed up, trying to think. A voice was

shouting nearby.

There was nothing I could do; I couldn't even tell what was happening. The voice was louder now.

"Wolfhound!"

My head came up. My code name. I tried to shout, choked. "Yes," I croaked. I jumped to the bars again, yelled.

"Wolfhound, where in hell . . ."

I had my eyes shut. "Here!" I yelled, "here!"

"Over here," the voice shouted. The racket was terrible now.

"Get back, Colonel," someone said at my head. "Get in the corner and cover up."

I obeyed. I moved back and crouched, arms over my head. There was a sharp hissing sound, and a mighty blast that jarred the floor under me. Tiny particles bit and stung, and grit was in my mouth. There was a chemical reek and my head hummed. With a drawn-out clang, the door fell into the room.

Arms grabbed me, pulled me through the boiling dust, out into the glare. I stumbled, trying to blink, and felt broken things under foot.

"Lower the lights," the voice called. The shouts were less now, and the scuffling. I heard other sounds building in the distance; shouts, running feet.

I opened my eyes again, and now it was almost bearable. Men milled around a mass blocking the passage. Canted against the wall a great box sat with a door hanging wide, light streaming out. Arms helped me through the door, and I saw wires, coils, junction boxes, stapled to bare new wood, with angle iron here and there. White-uniformed men crowded into the tiny space; a limp figure was hauled through the door.

"Full count," someone yelled. "Button up!" Wood splintered as a bullet came through.

The door banged shut, and the box trembled while a rumble built up into a whine, then passed on up out of audibility.

Some one grabbed my arm. "My God, Brion, you must have had a terrible time of it."

It was Richthofen, in a grey uniform, a cut on his face, staring at me.

I tried to smile, I was very weak suddenly. I was too old for this sort of thing.

"No hard feelings," I said. "Your timing . . . was good."

"We've had a monitor on your band day and night, hoping for something," he said. "We'd given you up, but couldn't bring ourselves to abandon hope;

then four hours ago the tapping started coming through. They went after it with locators, and fixed it here in the wine cellars. Word went out to the patrol scouts, but they couldn't get in here; no room. We pitched this box together and came in."

"Fast work," I said. I thought of the trip through the dreaded Blight, in a jury-rig made of pine boards. I felt a certain pride in the men of the Imperium.

"Make a place for Colonel Bayard, men," someone said. A space was cleared on the floor, jackets laid out on it. Richthofen was holding me up, and I made a mighty effort, got to the pallet and collapsed. Richthofen said something but I didn't hear it. I wondered what had held the meat-cutters up so long, and then let it go. Thinking was hard work, and now I was going to rest. But I had to say something first, warn them. I couldn't remember .

. .

XI

I was lying in a clean bed in a sunny room, propped up on pillows. It was a little like another room I had awakened in not so long before, but there was one important difference. Barbro sat beside my bed, knitting a ski stocking from red wool. Her hair was piled high on her head, and the sun shone through it, coppery red. Her eyes were hazel, and her features were perfect, and I liked lying there looking at her. She had come every day since my return to the Imperium, and read to me, talked to me, fed me soup and fluffed my pillows. I was enjoying my convalescence.

They had let me sleep for twelve hours before Richthofen, Goering, and several lesser lights of the various intelligence services had gathered in my room to hear my report.

They had listened when I told them of my meeting with Bale, and when I finished two of Goering's men left the room at a whispered word from him. I told them all that had happened—three times. Details that seemed unimportant, Richthofen cautioned me, might be useful; so I left out nothing.

They took the news calmly, I thought. After the others left, I eyed Richthofen quizzically. "You don't seem very surprised to learn that one of your top intelligence men is a traitor to the Imperium," I said.

Richthofen looked serious. "No, Brion, we had begun to fear something of the sort. Inspector Bale has disappeared. He has not been seen for almost a week. We missed him first a day before your signal. We feared foul play, and began an investigation; a number of interesting facts turned up, including several brief disappearances in the past, which had been unreported. With Bale chief of the shuttle service and the patrol activities, he could move about freely; no one checked on him. In fact, we had most of our information on B-I Two through Bale. He could easily arrange matters to suit himself.

"There were also discrepancies in the supplies of M-C drive components requisitioned and on hand. Your experience is pretty well borne out by our findings. We found several of his top aides also missing and collected a few

others who seemed involved in some odd bits of business."

"That's bad," I said. "I was counting on nabbing him here."

"Doubtless he feared to return, after your escape," Richthofen said. "Perhaps that will be the end of his activities here."

I doubted that. I discussed the measures that might be taken to set up some sort of monitor post in the B-I Two world, to help in eventually reestablishing order there. I felt an obligation to Brion to do that. And I also asked what was being done to bring my parents in. Richthofen reassured me that plans were well under way.

There still remained no solution to the grim threat to the Imperium. Bale was still free to raid at will; only his movement in the ferrying of supplies was impeded by the alerted M-C scouts now under Goering's direction. So far no activity had been reported.

There was nothing more I could do now, Richthofen assured me. Aside from daily visits by him and Goering, one call by the King, whom I still called General, and the soothing and exciting presence of Barbro for several hours each day, I was left alone to recuperate.

If you are good, Brion," Barbro said, "and eat all of your soup today, perhaps by tomorrow evening you will be strong enough to accept the King's invitation to sit in the royal box and listen to the orchestra at the Emperor Ball."

"Did the doctor say that?" I asked. "I thought it was just a sort of rhetorical invitation."

The King wants very much for you to come and the doctor says you are making splendid progress. Wouldn't you like to go?"

"And just sit?" I said.

"But I will be sitting with you, Brion."

"OK," I said. "It's a deal."

"I think it will be even better sitting above looking down on the lovely people," Barbro said. "It is the most brilliant ball of the year; the only time that all the three Kings and the Emperor with their ladies are there together. And it is only once in three years that the Emperor Ball is held at Stockholm. I have already been to several, so I will not mind sitting this time to watch. And we will see more." She had a lovely smile.

I smiled at her; that was the way she made me feel. "What is the occasion?" I asked.

"It is the anniversary of the signing of the Concord which resulted in the creation of the Imperium," she said. "It is a very happy time."

I was thinking. There seemed to be something I wasn't figuring out. I had been leaving all the problems to the intelligence men, but I knew more than they did about Bale.

I thought of the last big affair, and the brutal attack. I suspected that this time every man would wear a slug-gun under his braided cuff. But the fight on the floor had been merely a diversion, designed to allow the crew to set up an atomic bomb.

I sat bolt upright. That bomb had been turned over to Bale. There would be no chance of surprise attack from a shuttle this time, with alert crews watching around the clock for traces of unscheduled M-C activity; but there was no need to bring a bomb in. Bale had one here.

"What is it, Brion?" Barbro asked, leaning forward.

"What did Bale do with that bomb?" I said, staring at her, "the one they tried to set off at the dance? Where is it now?"

"I don't know, Brion," Barbro said. "Shall I call Baron Richthofen and ask him?" I liked the way she didn't flutter and look helpless.

"Yes," I said, "please do."

I waited impatiently while she got through to Imperial Intelligence, spoke to Manfred. She put the trumpet-shaped earpiece back on its brass hook and turned to me.

"He doesn't know, Brion," she said. "Already an attempt has been made to discover what was done with it, but nothing has been learned."

I had to realize that the Imperial officials still didn't fully understand the bomb's power. But I felt certain that the thing was still here in the Imperium, and that Bale would find a way to use it. He could wipe out the city, if the bomb were a big one; and I had an idea it was.

Another thought struck me.

"When do the royal parties arrive for the Emperor Ball?" I asked.

"They are already in the city," Barbro said, "at Drottningholm."

I felt my heart start to beat a little faster. Bale wouldn't let this opportunity pass. With the three kings here in the city, and an atomic bomb hidden somewhere, he had to act. At one stroke he could wipe out the leadership of the Imperium, and follow-up with a full-scale assault; and against his atomic weapons, the fight would be hopeless.

"Call Manfred back, Barbro," I said. "Tell him that bomb's got to be found fast. The kings will have to be evacuated from the city; the ball will have to be canceled."

Barbro spoke into the phone, looked back at me. "He has left the building, Brion," she said. "Shall I try to reach Herr Goering?"

"Yes," I said. I started to tell her to hurry, but she was already speaking rapidly to someone at Goering's office. Barbro was quick to catch on.

"He also is out," Barbro said. "Is there anyone else . . ."

I thought furiously. Manfred or Hermann would listen to anything I might say, but with their stags it would be a different matter. To call off the day of celebration, disturb the royal parties, alarm the city, were serious measures; no one would act on my vague suspicions alone. I had to find my friends in a hurry; or find Bale . . .

Imperial Intelligence had made a search, found nothing. His apartment was deserted, as well as his small house at the edge of the city. And the monitors had detected no shuttle not known to be an Imperium vessel moving in the Net recently.

There were several possibilities; one was that Bale had returned almost at the same time as I had, slipping in before the situation was known, while some of his own men still manned the alert stations. A second was that he planned to come in prepared to hold off attackers until he could detonate the bomb. Or possibly an accomplice would act for him.

Somehow I liked the first thought best. It seemed more in keeping with what I knew of Bale, shrewder, less dangerous. If I were right, Bale was here now, somewhere in Stockholm, waiting for the hour to blow the city sky-high.

As for the hour, he would wait for the arrival of the Emperor, not longer.

"Barbro," I said, "when does the Emperor arrive?"

"I'm not sure, Brion," she said. "Possibly tonight, but perhaps this afternoon."

That didn't give me much time. I had to get out of here, do something. I jumped out of bed, and staggered. Barbro stood up quickly and put out her hand to steady me. "Are you sure you are strong enough to get up, Brion?"

"Here I come, ready or not," I said. "I can't just lie here, Barbro. Maybe I can think better if I get outside. Do you have a car?" I was fumbling at my pajama buttons. I had to have some clothes. I started for the closet.

"Yes, my car is downstairs, Brion. Sit down and let me help you." She went to the closet and I sank down. I seemed always to be recuperating lately. I had been through this shaky-legs business just a few days ago, and here I was starting in again. Barbro turned, holding a brown suit in her hands.

"This is all there is, Brion," she said. "It is the uniform of the Dictator, that you wore when you came here to the hospital."

"It will have to do," I said. I didn't bother to be shy about stripping and pulling on the wrinkled clothes in front of Barbro, and she didn't act coy; she helped me dress, and we left the room as fast as I could walk. A passing nurse stared, but went on. I was dizzy and panting already.

The elevator helped. I sank down on the stool, head spinning. I rubbed my chest; it was still sore from Beau Joe's attentions.

I felt something stiff in the pocket, and suddenly I had a vivid recollection of Gaston giving me a card as we crouched in the dusk behind the hideout near Algiers, telling me that he thought it was the address of the Big

Boss's out-of-town headquarters. I grabbed for the card, squinted at it in the dim light of the ceiling lamp as the car jolted to a stop.

"Tegeluddsvägen 71" was scrawled across the card in blurred pencil. I remembered how I had dismissed it from my mind as of no interest when Gaston had handed it to me; I had hoped for something more useful. Now this might be the little key that could save an Empire.

"What is it, Brion," Barbro asked. "Have you found something?"

"I don't know," I said. "Maybe just a dead end, but maybe not." I handed her the card. "Do you know where this is?"

She read the address. "I think I know the street," she said. "It is not far from the docks, in the warehouse district."

"Let's go," I said.

We turned away from the reception desk and headed for a small side entrance at the end of the hall. It was a long trip, but I was getting over the dizziness. I had to pause to rest at the door, then made it to the curb. I sat on a stone bench under a linden tree and waited. In less than a minute Barbro swept around the corner in a low-slung red cabriolet. I got in and we swung east, moving fast.

There were few cars on the streets of the Imperium's Stockholm. Ownership of an automobile had not become a national mania, a caste-mark. We roared across a bridge, continued on into Kungsgatan, cut around an immense green limousine under the bridge, and angled across Stureplan towards Humlegården. An excited policeman blew a whistle, and a trolley jingled a bell indignantly, but we were picking up speed again.

For four days I had idled in bed while somewhere the bomb lay waiting; and now I was forced to leap off on a wild hunch, because there was no time left. If I could have contacted Manfred or Hermann, even checked on the Emperor's arrival time, we could have planned this, prepared for emergency; but now there was only this, a wild dash and a fervent hope that we were right, and not too late.

We squealed around a corner, slowed in a street of gloomy warehouses, blind glass windows in looming brick-red facades, with yard-high letters identifying the shipping lines which owned them.

"This is the street," Barbro said. "And the number was seventy-one?"

"That's right," I said. "This is fifty-three; it must be a block or two farther along."

"Sixty-nine there," Barbro said. "The next one must be it, but I don't see a number." The car eased to a halt.

"Let's get out," I said. I stepped out onto a gritty sidewalk, shaded by the bulk of the buildings, silent. There was a smell of tar and hemp in the air and a hint of sea water.

I stared at the building before me. I couldn't make out any identifying

number. Barbro went around the car, walked a few feet farther on, came back.

"That must be the one, Brion," she said. "The next one is seventy-three."

There was a small door set in the front of the building beside the loading platform. I went up to it, tried it; locked. I leaned against it and rested.

"Barbro," I said. "Get me a jack handle or tire tool from your car." I hated to drag Barbro into this, but I had no choice. I couldn't do it alone.

She came back with a flat piece of steel eighteen inches long. I jammed it into the wide crack at the edge of the door and pulled. Something snapped, and with a jerk the door popped open.

It was dark inside. We went in and I pulled the door shut behind us. A stair ran up into gloom above. A side door opened from the short hall onto a vast space piled with crates. What we wanted must be up the stairs. That would be quite a climb for me. Barbro gave me an arm, and we started up.

We went three flights, a few steps at a time. I was soaked with sweat, and thought seriously about losing my dinner. I sat down and breathed hard through my nose. The hard work helped to keep my mind off the second sun that might light the Stockholm sky at any moment. We went on.

Five flights up, we reached a landing. The door we faced was red-stained wood, solid, and with a new lock. It looked like maybe we were on to something.

I tried the steel bar again, with no luck. Then Barbro went to work with a long pin with a large sapphire on the end of it. That was no good either. I looked at the hinge pins. They didn't look as good as the lock.

It took fifteen minutes, every one of which took a year off my life, but after a final wrench with the steel bar, the last pin clattered to the floor. The door pivoted out and fell against the wall.

"Wait here," I said. I started forward, into the papered hall.

"I go with you, Brion," Barbro said. I didn't argue.

We were in a handsome apartment, a little too lavishly furnished. Persian rugs graced the floor, and in the bars of dusty sunlight that slanted through shuttered windows, mellow old teak furniture gleamed, and polished ivory figurines stood on dark shelves under silk scrolls from Japan. An ornate screen stood in the center of the room. I walked around a brocaded ottoman over to the screen and looked behind it. On a light tripod of aluminum rods rested the bomb.

Two heavy castings, bolted together around a central flange, with a few wires running along to a small metal box on the underside. Midway up the curve of the side, four small holes, arranged in a square. That was all there was; but it could make a mighty crater where a city had been.

I had no way of knowing whether it was armed or not. I leaned toward the thing, listening. I could hear no sound of a timing device. I thought of

cutting the exposed wires, which looked like some sort of jury-rig, but I couldn't risk it; that might set it off.

Barbro stood behind me. "Brion," she said. "You have found it!"

"Yes," I said. "Here it is; but when does it go up?" I had an odd sensation of intangibility, as though I were already a puff of incandescent gas. I tried to think. We had to get this thing out of here.

"Start searching the place, Barbro," I said. "You might come across something that will give us a hint. I'll phone Manfred's office and get a squad up here to see if we can move the thing without blowing it."

I dialed Imperial Intelligence. Manfred wasn't in, and the fellow on the phone was uncertain what he should do.

"Get a crew here on the double," I yelled. "Somebody who can at least make a guess as to whether this thing can be disturbed."

He said he would confer with General Somebody. I yelled some more, but after all, who was I to this bureaucrat? Even here they had a few.

"When does the Emperor arrive?" I asked him. He was sorry, but he was not at liberty to discuss the Emperor's movements. I slammed the receiver down.

"Brion," Barbro called. "Look what's here."

I went to the door which opened onto the next room. A two-man shuttle filled the space. Its door stood open. I looked inside. It was fitted out in luxury; Bale provided well for himself even for short trips. This was what he used to travel from the Home line to B-I Two; and the fact that it was here should indicate that Bale was here also; and that he would return to it before the bomb went off.

But then again, perhaps the bomb was even now ticking away its last seconds, and Bale might be far away, safe from the blast. If the latter were true, there was nothing I could do about it; but if he did plan to return here, arm the bomb, set a timer and leave via the shuttle in the bedroom-then maybe I would stop him.

"Barbro," I said, "you've got to find Manfred or Hermann. I'm going to stay here and wait for Bale to come back. If you find them, tell them to get men here fast who can make a try at disarming this thing. I don't dare move it, and it will take at least two to handle it. If we can move it, we can shove it in the shuttle and send it off; I'll keep phoning. I don't know where you should look but do your best."

Barbro looked at me. "I would rather stay here with you, Brion," she said. "But I understand that I must not."

"You're quite a girl, Barbro," I said.

I was alone now, except for the ominous sphere behind the screen. I hoped for a caller, though. I'd better get ready for him. I went to the door which leaned aslant against the rough brick wall outside and unlatched it,

maneuvered it into place and dropped the pins back in the hinges, then closed and relatched it.

I went back to the over-stuffed room, started looking through drawers, riffling through papers on the desk. I hoped for something, I didn't know what; something that might give a hint of what Bale planned. I didn't find any hints, but I did find a long-barreled twenty-two pistol, and a tiny thirty-two, tucked away under clothing in a dresser drawer. The twenty-two was a revolver, loaded. That helped. I put it in my pocket and tossed the automatic under the couch. I hadn't given much thought to what I would do when Bale got here; I was in no condition to grapple with him; now I had a reasonable chance.

I picked out a hiding place to duck into when and if I heard him coming, a storeroom in the hall, between the bomb and the door. I found a small liquor cabinet and poured myself two fingers of sherry.

I sat in one of the fancy chairs, and tried to let myself go limp. I was using up too much energy in tension. My stomach was a hard knot. I could see the edge of the bomb behind its screen from where I sat. I wondered if there would be any warning before it detonated. My ears were cocked for a click, or a rumble from the silent grey city-killer.

The sound I heard was not a click; it was the scrape of shoes on wood, beyond the door. I sat paralyzed for a moment, then got to my feet, stepped to the storeroom and eased behind the door. I loosened the revolver in my pocket and waited.

The sounds were closer now, gratingly loud in the dead silence. Then a key scraped in the lock, and a moment later the tall wide figure of Chief Inspector Bale, traitor, shuffled into view. His small bald head was drawn down between his shoulders, and he looked around the room almost furtively. He pulled off his coat, and for one startled instant I thought he would come to my storeroom to hang it up; but he threw it over the back of a chair.

He went to the screen, peered at the bomb. I could easily have shot him, but that wouldn't have helped me. I wanted Bale to let me know whether the bomb was armed, if it could be moved. He was the only man in the Imperium who knew how to handle this device. I thought of holding a gun on him, and forcing him to disarm it; but I had learned that that only works in the movies. He could easily be fanatic enough to set it off instead, if he knew his plot had failed.

I watched him. He leaned over the bomb, took a small box from his pocket, and stared at it. He looked at his watch, went to the phone. I could barely hear his mutter as he exchanged a few words with someone. He went into the next room, and as I was about to follow to prevent his using the shuttle, he came back. He looked at his watch again, sat in a chair, and opened a small tool kit which lay on the table. He started to work on the metal box with a slender screwdriver. This, then, was the arming device. I tried not to breathe too loud, or to think about how my legs ached.

Shocking in the stillness, the phone rang. Bale looked up startled, laid the

screwdriver and the box on the table, and went over to the phone. He looked down at it, chewing his lip. After five rings it stopped. I wondered who it was.

Bale went back to his work. Now he was replacing the cover on the box, frowning over the job. He got up, went to the bomb, licked his lips and leaned over it. He was ready now to arm the bomb. I couldn't wait any longer.

I pushed the door open, and Bale leaped upright, grabbing for his chest, then jumped for the coat on the chair.

"Stand where you are, Bale," I said. "I'd get a real kick out of shooting you."

Bale's eyes were almost popping from his head, his head was tilted back, his mouth opened and closed. I got the impression that I had startled him.

"Sit down," I said, "there." I motioned with the pistol as I came out into the room.

"Bayard," Bale said hoarsely. I didn't say anything. I felt sure now that the bomb was safe. All I had to do was wait until the crew arrived, and turn Bale over to them. Then we could carry the bomb to the shuttle, and send it off into the Blight. But I was feeling very bad now.

I went to a chair, and sank down. I tried not to let Bale see how weak I was. I leaned back, and tried breathing deep through my nose again. If I started to pass out I would have to shoot Bale; he couldn't be left free to threaten the Imperium again.

It was a little better now. Bale stood rigid, staring at me.

"Look, Bayard," he said. "I'll bring you in on this with me. I swear I'll give you a full half share. I'll let you keep B-I Two as your own, and I shall take the Home line; there's plenty for all. Just put that gun aside . . ." He licked his lips, started toward me.

I started to motion with the gun, squeezed the trigger instead. A bullet slapped Bale's shirt sleeve, smacked the wall. He dropped down into the chair behind him. That was close, I thought. That could have killed him. I've got to hold on.

I might as well impress him a little, I thought. "I know how to use this pop gun, you see," I said. "Just a quarter of an inch from the arm, firing from the hip; not bad, don't you agree? Don't try anything else."

"You've got to listen to me, Bayard," Bale said; "Why should you care what happens to these popinjays? They've kidnapped you, sent you off into danger, and offered nothing in return except a scrap of paper. Don't you see they're all using you, making you a tool in their game? They've filled you full of rubbish about the glorious Imperium. Well, I propose to bring it down with raw power; the power of that bomb. I can use power as well as the next man; and I'll share it all with you. We can rule as absolute monarchs . . ."

Bale went on, but I was thinking. Why indeed should I fight for the Imperium? I wasn't sure I could answer that. I only knew that I believed in its high purpose, and its decency, and the courage and élan of its people. I had wanted something that I could give my loyalty to without reservation. I had given years of my life to the service of my own country, back in the sickly twilight world I came from. I had seen the shabbiness, the pettiness, the trivial venality, and I had tried to believe in my service in spite of what I saw. In the end I had resigned rather than go along; and the granite walls of the Embassy chancery could not have looked down on me more coldly than my ex-colleagues on the day I left them. I wondered if I were merely dramatizing myself; but nothing could change the facts that I remembered; the duty I had tried to do, and the ease with which the little crooked men had prevailed.

Here I found men like Winter, who had died without hesitation when he saw that his duty demanded it; Richthofen and all his crew, who had ridden a hay-wired rig into the horror of the Blight, to keep faith with a man from another world; and Barbro, the incomparable . . .

You could laugh at them if you wished, a cynical laugh at gaudy uniforms, and hereditary titles, and pomp and ceremony; the laugh of the smugly unillusioned at the bright romantic; but no one could laugh at the officers who had charged with sabres into machine-gun fire at the attack on the palace, or the women who had stood their ground behind them.

I didn't have to explain; I didn't have to apologize. This world of the Imperium had won my loyalty, and I would fight for it to the death against a narrow maniac like Bale.

" . . . take one moment, and we're off. What about it?"

Bale was looking at me, with a look of naked greed. I didn't know what he had been saying. He must have interpreted my silence as weakness; he got up again, moved toward me. It was darker in the room, I rubbed my eyes. I was feeling very bad now, very weak. My heart thumped in my throat, my stomach quivered. I was in no shape to be trying to hold this situation in check alone.

Bale stopped, and I saw that he suddenly realized that I was blacking out. He crouched, and with a snarl jumped at me. I would have to kill him. I fired the pistol twice, and Bale reeled away, startled, but still standing.

"Hold on, Bayard, for the love of God," he squealed. He saw that I was still alive enough to kill him. I raised the pistol, aimed again and fired. I saw a picture jump on the wall. Bale leaped aside. I didn't know if I had hit him yet or not. I was losing my hold, but I couldn't let him get away. I fired twice more, peering from my chair and I knew it was the light in my mind fading, not in the room. Bale yelled; I saw that he didn't dare to try for the door to the hall or the room where the shuttle waited. He would have to pass me. He screamed as I aimed the pistol with wavering hands, and dived for the other door. I fired and heard the sound echo through a dream of blackness.

I wasn't out for more than a few minutes; I came to myself, sitting in the

chair, the pistol lying on my lap. The screen had fallen over, and lay across the bomb. I sat up, panicky; maybe Bale had armed it. And where was Bale? I remembered only that he had dashed for the next room. I got up, grabbed for the chair again, then got my balance, made my way to the door. There was a strange sound, a keening, like a cat in a distant alley. I looked into the room, half expecting to see Bale lying on the floor. There was nothing. The light streamed through an open window, and a curtain flapped. Bale must have panicked and jumped, I thought. I went to the window, and the keening started up again.

Bale hung by his hands from the eave of the building across the alley, fifteen feet away. The sound came from him. The left leg of his trousers had a long stain of blackish red on it, and drops fell from the toe of his shoe, five stories to the brick pavement below.

"Good God, Bale," I said. "What have you done?" I was horrified. I had been ready to shoot him down, but to see him hanging there was something else again.

"Bayard," he croaked, "I can't hold on much longer. For the love of God . . ."

What could I do? I was far too weak for any heroics. I looked around the room frantically for an inspiration; I needed a plank, or a piece of rope. There was nothing. I pulled a sheet off the bed; it was far too short; even two or three would never make it; and I couldn't hold it even if I could throw it and Bale caught it. I ran to the phone.

"Operator," I called. "There's a man about to fall from a roof. Get the fire department here with ladders, fast; seventy-one Tegeluddsvägen, fifth floor."

I dropped the phone, ran back to the window. "Hold on, Bale," I said. "Help's on the way." He must have tried to leap to the next roof, thinking that I was at his heels; and with that hole in his leg he hadn't quite made it.

I thought of Bale, sending me off on a suicide mission, knowing that my imposture was hopeless as long as I stood on my own legs; of the killer shuttle that had lain in wait to smash us as we went in; of the operating room at the hideout, where Bale had planned to carve me into a shape more suitable for his purpose. I remembered Bale shooting down my new-found friend and brother, and the night I had lain in the cold cell, waiting for the butcher; and I still didn't want to see him die this way.

He started to scream suddenly, kicking desperately. He got one foot up on the eave beside his white straining hands; it slipped off. Then he was quiet again. I had been standing here now for five minutes. I wondered how long I had been unconscious. Bale had been here longer now than I would have thought possible. He couldn't last much longer.

"Hold on, Bale," I called. "Only a little while. Don't struggle."

He hung, silent. Blood dripped from his shoe. I looked down at the alley below and shuddered.

I heard a distant sound, a siren, howling; whoop, whoop. I dashed to the door, opened it, listened. Heavy footsteps sounded below.

"Here," I shouted, "all the way up."

I turned and ran back to the window. Bale was as I had left him. Then one hand slipped off, and he hung by one arm, swinging slightly.

"They're here, Bale," I said. "A few seconds . . ."

He didn't try to get a new hold. He made no sound. Feet pounded on the stairs outside, and I yelled again.

I turned back to the window as Bale slipped down, silent, his tie fluttering gaily over his shoulder. I didn't watch. I heard him hit-twice.

I staggered back, and the burly men called, looked out the window, milled about. I made my way back to the chair, slumped down. I was empty of emotion. There was noise all around me, people coming and going. I was hardly conscious of it. After a long time I saw Hermann, and then Barbro was leaning over me. I reached for her hand, hungrily.

"Take me home, Barbro," I said.

I saw Manfred.

"The bomb," I said. "It's safe. Put it in the shuttle and get rid of it."

"My crew is moving it now, Brion," he said.

"You spoke of home, just now," Goering put in. "Speaking for myself, and I am sure also for Manfred, I will make the strongest recommendation that in view of your extraordinary services to the Imperium you be dispatched back to your home as soon as you are well enough to go, if that is your wish. I hope that you will stay with us. But it must be for you to make that decision."

"I don't have to decide," I said. "My choice is made. I like it here, for many reasons. For one thing, I can use all the old clichés from B-I Three, and they sound brand new; and as for home." I looked at Barbro:

"Home is where the heart is."