

Regarding Patient 724

*Never try to kid a kidder.
Or kill a killer.*

Ron Goulart

The robots were harder to fool than the lizards or the humans. When he heard an android rolling toward the door of his hospital room Bernie Rolfe went bounding across the pseudotile floor. He jumped into the air-cushion bed, slipping the three folded fifty-dollar bills under his far buttock.

Seated on the windowsill, Associate Dr. Gennifer, an enormous human, gave a rumbling sigh as the money disappeared. "Damn it," he said, wiping jelly tart crumbs from his notched chin.

"Well, how are we this morning, Reverend Saboya?" asked the copper-colored android who wheeled into Rolfe's private room.

"It's three o'clock in the afternoon," replied Rolfe, who was pretending to be Reverend Francis Xavier Saboya.

The wheel-footed android rolled until he hit against Rolfe's soft bed. He then whanged his metallic side with a copper fist. "That's typical of the Gamela Territory Hospital," he said. "Build ninety thousand dollars' worth of ocular equipment into me, then skimp and stick in a fifteen-dollar watch." He made a sound like a vacuum cleaner sucking up pebbles. "Well, I hope you'll enjoy your stay with us, Reverend. Now then, how long have you been blind?"

"I'm not blind," said Rolfe.

The android looked at a pix-screen built into the palm of his hand. "You'll find a handicap easier to live with if you face up to it. Look at me . . . oops, that's not the thing to say to a blind man . . . consider me. I've learned to live with a cheap watch in my works."

Calling Dr. Nork, calling Dr. Nork, said a grid mounted high in the pale blue room.

"My problem isn't blindness," said Rolfe. "I had myself admitted yesterday at the suggestion of my bishop, because I've been seeing visions."

Fat Dr. Gennifer snorted, then reached out to take the last filbert torte off Rolfe's snack tray.

"Oh, that sort of vision problem." The android made a sound like an egg beater working on gravel. "Do you think you really need an oculist at all?"

"I don't know," replied Rolfe. "I'm entirely in your hands, you hospital people. This is all mostly my bishop's idea." He sat up, looking beyond the munching human doctor on the sill. The territorial hospital was triangular, built around a thick decorative jungle park. From his third-floor room in Ward 20 Rolfe could see, over the yellow and orange treetops, the part of the hospital which must house Ward X. The place he had to get to.

"You probably aren't even color blind?" asked the oculist android. "They just built a lot of really nice color blind tests into my elbow. I could project a few on the wall."

Dr. Mangus, report to Wilderness Therapy. Dr. Mangus, report to Wilderness Therapy.

Rolfe said, "My trouble is that while I was out fasting in the desert last week I had a vision. I witnessed a whole choir of angels up in the sky, singing hosannas."

“I don’t know much about music,” said the android. “Still that’s an unusual thing to see, isn’t it?”

“Such was my feeling,” said Rolfe. “However, when I reported it to my bishop he was less than enthusiastic. He has an inordinate fear of bogus miracles and he suggested I come here and have myself thoroughly tested before we make news of my vision public. He suspects it may simply be a hallucination.”

Nodding his head, the android asked, “Are you still seeing these angels?”

“No,” said Rolfe. “Though once in a while I do spot a cherub or two, very small ones, floating around at the edge of things.”

“Really? Do you see them clearly? They aren’t fuzzy or blurred.”

“No, they seem quite sharp.”

“Then you probably don’t even need glasses.”

Dr. Gennifer, your chocolate cream balls are ready. Dr. Gennifer, your chocolate cream balls are ready.

Grunting himself up, the enormous associate doctor moved to a wall phone. “This is Dr. Gennifer. Send those chocolate balls up the food chute to Room 302.” He patted the android’s shoulder on the way back to the sill. “I don’t think you’ll be needed any further on the reverend’s case. Don’t you have other calls to make?”

“Well, I have a couple of blind blues singers to comfort up in Ward 43,” admitted the copper-colored android, rolling back from the bed on his small, slightly rattling, footwheels. “Still, I’d hate for the Central Computer to get down on me for neglect of duty.”

“I’ll put in a good word for you.” A two-foot square door in the wall near the window made a hum. “Excuse me, this will be my pastry.”

“Would you at least like some eyedrops?” the android asked Rolfe. “I can squirt eyedrops out of my little finger.”

“No, thanks.”

“Well, God bless you, Reverend.”

“Same to you.”

When the android rolled out into the hall fat Dr. Gennifer was kneeling, puffing, at the low food-chute opening. “You could have made up a more conventional fake malady,” he told Rolfe.

“My experience has been that it’s good to be a little audacious,” said Rolfe. “Besides, we happened to have the reverend’s identification packet.”

The chute delivered a plate out to Gennifer. “This is sliced streusel roll you’ve sent up, you ninnies,” he yelled into the open food hole. “Damn it.”

Swinging out of bed, Rolfe asked, “What else have you found out about Lloyd McMaxon?”

“Did you hear me, you poops?” Dr. Gennifer was shouting into the chute through cupped hands. “Sliced streusel roll is sure not my idea of chocolate cream balls.”

Rolfe nudged the squatting doctor with his toe. “You can go into the capital of Gamela Territory and buy a hundred and fifty dollars’ worth of chocolate cream balls if you have some more to tell me about McMaxon.”

Wheezing, the fat Gennifer pushed down on his enormous thighs and got himself upright. “No, I wouldn’t blow the whole amount on chocolate cream balls. I’ll probably spread it out over jelly doughnuts, cinnamon buns, macaroon jam slices, madeleines, brownies . . .”

Rolfe jabbed the doctor’s arm with the fist holding the money. “Where have they got McMaxon?”

“He’s in Ward X, as I suggested last night. Just a moment.” Grunting, he knelt again. “I might as well eat this stupid streusel as long as they sent it.” He withdrew the plate of sliced pastry, carried it to the wide high windows.

“You’re sure McMaxon isn’t in the Prison Wing?”

“You paid me fifty bucks to find out where Lloyd McMaxon was. I did. They’ve got him over in Ward X.”

“What room is he in?”

Biting into his nut-crust cake, Dr. Gennifer said, “I still haven’t found that out. Remember I have sixty-four other patients to look after. Most of them aren’t fakes like you and I really have to work my butt to the bone to handle my case load.”

Rolfe hid the money away into a concealed pocket in his all-season shorts. “Do you have any idea why McMaxon isn’t in with the other prisoners they’re treating here?”

“Probably because they consider him a political criminal,” said Dr. Gennifer. “It’s mostly everyday crooks in the Prison Wing. This McMaxon belongs to those Uptown Commandos who plague the capital, doesn’t he?”

“So I’ve heard.” There was no need for the associate doctor to know Rolfe was with the UC himself.

Sucking his ring and middle fingers, Gennifer said, “They’re using phenylalanine in this topping instead of real rich creamery butter, but even so the stuff isn’t bad.”

Gennifer wiped his free hand on his white pullover medical smock, then raised it with fingers outspread. “I don’t have the clearance for that, to find out what they’re up to over there. Some kind of government-funded project is all I know.”

Rolfe asked, “They wouldn’t be uh . . . interrogating him . . .?”

“Heck no,” the fat doctor assured him. “Our planet of Tarragon subscribes to the Barnum System Accords, after all. You’re not allowed to go using sophisticated query equipment on a political prisoner anymore, even an alleged urban guerrilla like McMaxon.” He made his little blue eyes go as wide as they could. “Are you afraid of what he’ll say to somebody?”

Rolfe shook his head, pressing lean fingers against the paper money concealed in his shorts. “My reasons for talking to him don’t have to concern you.”

“So long as you assure me you don’t mean to do him any harm.”

“Of course I can assure you that,” smiled Rolfe, who’d come into the Gamela Territory Hospital to kill McMaxon.

Dr. Gennifer, wanted in the pastry kitchen. Dr. Gennifer, wanted in the pastry kitchen.

“Maybe they can clear up the chocolate cream ball confusion.” The enormous doctor started for the exit.

“Find out what room McMaxon is in,” said Rolfe. “And how I can get in to see him.”

“I’ll give it a try.” The fat doctor held out his fat hand. “How about fifty bucks up front?”

“O.K., but get me some results by tomorrow.”

Dr. Gennifer got the bill wadded into a tight trouser pocket just as Nurse Clumm came shuffling into the room. “You’re doing fine, Reverend,” said the fat doctor from the doorway. “I’ll drop in on you again tomorrow.”

“Up and around, eh?” said Nurse Clumm. She was a ninety-two-year-old lizard woman cyborg. “Central Computer doesn’t have you down for Up&Around yet, Reverend. Pop back into bed.”

Rolfe sat on the edge of the bed. “Ever work over in Ward X?”

“Couldn’t tell you if I had,” replied the old green-blue lizard woman. “Now let’s get your pulse and temperature.” She pressed his wrist with a scaly thumb.

“I thought maybe . . .”

“Open up,” requested the nurse. She jabbed the forefinger of her metallic right arm into his mouth. There was an oral thermometer built into the finger.

Six of them ringed Lloyd McMaxon’s wheelchair. Dr. Trollope, the middle-aged neobiologist lizard man who headed the Anthropomorphic Tactics Center of the Gamela Territory Hospital; Surgeon General Sheldonmayer, the small wrinkled-up human who had something to do with the territorial government; Combat Nurse Wordsmith, a lovely six-foot-tall blond with an always-flushed face; and three cat men in ill-fitting floor-length medical smocks.

By stretching, McMaxon, a plump blond man of thirty, could see over their heads and watch the late afternoon sky from his tenth-floor window.

“Would you like to check the latest X-rays of your foot?” the brownish-green Dr. Trollope asked him. He had a sheaf of black pictures under his arm.

“No.” McMaxon decided to look at Combat Nurse Wordsmith, who reminded him a little of Elena.

“You’ll be on your feet again in no time,” said the lovely blond nurse.

Keeping his wrinkle-rimmed eyes aimed at his white boots, Surgeon General Sheldonmayer said, “Uh . . . what exactly does no time indicate? I mean . . . uh . . . how long before this fellow . . . uh . . . can go sweeping through Peralta Territory and visiting doom on our prickchinking enemies, who even now . . .”

“We’re all very happy about the way your foot is mending so nicely, Lloyd,” said Dr. Trollope. “What’s even better, your volunteer job for the Anthropomorphic Tactics Center is coming along at a much more rapid rate than we’d anticipated. I should say you’ll be primed and ready in another few short days.”

“Uh . . . ready to spread justly-deserved destruction on our jiggle-boned opponents across the border?”

“Yes, sir,” the lizard doctor told the surgeon general. “Lloyd, I’d like you to meet some of the other chaps from ATC. Here are Dr. Gowdy, Dr. Pagsilang and Dr. Tchiv-veblen. Come to take a friendly gander at you.”

“How do you do,” said McMaxon, automatically holding out his hand.

“Wait,” cautioned the lizard. “Dr. Gowdy can shake your hand and so can Dr. Tchiv-veblen. Dr. Pagsilang, however, hasn’t had his final booster.”

“I’d just as well skip it, too,” said the cat man in the middle of the trio of cat-man doctors.

“That’s what I said. Dr. Pagsilang can bypass.”

“I’m Dr. Tchiv-veblen.” The middle cat man rested his furry cheek against his shoulder so he could read his name tag. “Oh, I seem to have slipped into Dr. Pagsilang’s robe by mistake. Here, Phil.”

“That’s O.K., Burt, we can change back in the barracks wing,” said the calico-colored Dr. Pagsilang.

“No, I don’t like to wear other people’s things. It makes me feel crawly.” Dr. Tchiv-veblen began unzipping his long white smock.

Dr. Gowdy asked, “How did you break your foot, Mr. McMaxon?”

“Escaping,” answered McMaxon.

“Mr. McMaxon is an urban terrorist,” the lovely warm-looking nurse explained. “He and his fellow Uptown Commandos—correct me if I misinterpret your views in any way, Mr. McMaxon—believe in

overthrowing our territorial government by force and violence and replacing it with a neosocialistic ruling committee. Is that about right so far?"

McMaxon nodded. "Yep."

"My zipper's stuck, Burt. Couldn't we forget about switching?"

"Not on your life. Come on, tug the thing."

"Mr. McMaxon's guerrilla friends and he have been bombing government buildings, destroying central heating systems, derailing monorail trains, kidnaping key officials . . . anything else?"

"Assassinating policemen," added McMaxon. "And we have a hot-lunch program for senior citizens."

The lovely nurse snapped her warm-looking fingers. "I forgot the most important part. The Uptown Commandos also commit robberies to finance their other works. It was while running away from one such that Mr. McMaxon fell and injured himself."

"Well, pull it off over your head then."

"Don't jerk at the hem, Burt. I don't care for people pawing my garments."

"You were subsequently captured then, Mr. McMaxon?"

"That's right, yes." McMaxon went along with all the UC rules, but he believed Bernie Rolfe, who was still on the supermarket copter pad when he tripped over the robot boxboy, could have come back for him. Well, maybe McMaxon was too critical of him because Rolfe had been seeing Elena just before she quit the movement.

"Don't pull so hard, Burt. Now you've got it crumpled and gathered around my throat and face. I might smother."

Dr. Gowdy gave McMaxon a tentative pat on the arm. "Considering your political viewpoint, I think it's terrific of you to volunteer to help the government this way."

"They promised to drop the charges against me if I did this," said McMaxon. "You may not know it but committing a robbery to aid a political cause is a crime punishable by death in our territory, especially during wartime."

"Oh, really?"

Watching his white-booted toes, the surgeon general said, "Uh . . . if this fellow didn't play ball with us . . . uh . . . he'd be standing against a wall about now . . . uh . . . waiting for blaster rifle beams to come sizzling at him and burn enormous gaping and fantastically painful holes into his person."

"Don't clutch like that, Burt. You're pulling out great tufts of hair."

"You should pay better attention to whose robe you go gadding about in."

Dr. Trollope took a step toward McMaxon. "Have you been having night sweats or stool problems, Lloyd?"

"No, sir."

"Uh . . . what difference does that make? . . . uh . . . I mean . . . uh . . . a compact and deadly human weapon like this fellow . . . uh . . . who cares about his bowel movements?"

"We're also trying to answer many questions which aren't of a military nature during these experiments," said the brown and green lizard.

"O.K., Burt, it's off. Here."

"We'll leave you now, Lloyd," said Dr. Trollope. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Well, you might see if I can have more vegetables at meals. I'm trying to give up meat."

"I'll take care of that," said the lovely combat nurse.

McMaxon nodded at all of them, then guided his chair over to the windows. He was at the pseudo-glass, watching the tangle of decorative jungle far below, before the last doctor was out the door of Room 724.

The enormous Dr. Gennifer sat himself down on the edge of Rolfe's air-filled bed, causing Rolfe to rise up high. "I'm not much of an artist," said the fat doctor.

"Where were you yesterday?"

"Central Computer had you down for a day of fasting," replied Gennifer. "I don't like to be around for things like that." He unfolded the sheet of paper he'd pulled out of a side pocket in his medical tunic.

"Apparently the food chutes didn't know you weren't going to be stopping in here yesterday. They sent you a half-dozen blueberry turnovers."

"Did you keep them?"

"In my bedside cabinet."

Chuffing off the bed, Gennifer bent, with a groan, and opened the cabinet. "I only see four."

"I ate two."

"That isn't right when you're supposed to be fasting."

"I'm not really sick at all, remember? I'm in here under false pretenses. My real purpose is to contact Lloyd McMaxon over in Ward X. I'm bribing you to help me."

"Don't keep reminding me of my venality." The enormous doctor grabbed a turnover with each hand.

"I'm reminding you of what I paid you to find out."

Tossing the paper to Rolfe, Gennifer said, "Have a look."

Rolfe brushed pastry flakes off the thin sheet of paper. It was a rough architectural plan. "Why do I want a drawing of the hospital food center?"

"See the red dot."

"It's marking the pastry kitchen. Damn it, Gennifer, can't you . . ."

"Wait now." The fat doctor located another drawing in another pocket. "This is the companion piece."

Rolfe studied the new sheet of paper. "This is the floor Ward X is on, huh?"

"Exactly. I had to spend over half of what you've given me to get it," said Gennifer as he finished the first turnover. "Notice the little broken blue line I've put on both drawings. That's your route."

Rolfe followed the line with his middle finger. "From the food center to the pastry kitchen, then across to the wing over there by way of the food delivery ramp. From there . . ."

Dr. Busino wanted in Cryptobiosis. Dr. Busino wanted in Cryptobiosis.

"From there up through the food chute to the Doctors' Mess on the tenth floor."

"The chutes over there are somewhat larger, so you'll have no trouble ascending."

"You've got me ending up in someplace labeled . . . I can't make out the word."

"Kennels."

"Kennels?"

"Where they keep the animals."

"Animals for what?"

Gennifer shook his head, scattering powdered sugar from his cheeks. "It would take a good deal

more than the teeny-weeny bribe you gave me to buy so much information, Reverend. They must be using the animals for some of their experiments in X.”

“O.K., so I pay you three hundred dollars altogether and I end up in a dog kennel.”

“They’ve got all kinds of animals there I think, not only dogs. Twice a day, or possibly thrice, a jitney-load of experimental animals goes into Ward X. The process is automatic, no live personnel involved. There is a late evening delivery of animals to be used the first thing the next morning. Should you be able to conceal yourself aboard that specific jitney you’ll end up at the spot I’ve marked with a green cross.”

“There’s no green cross.”

“Oh, that’s right. I got called away to perform a knee operation before I finished annotating. Here, I’ll show you.” The enormous doctor poked at the floor plan. “There’s the Pre-Test Room.”

“You still don’t know which room McMaxon is in?”

“There are only a dozen or so patients in all of Ward X, far as I’ve been able to find out. Even if you have to hunt and peck, it shouldn’t take you all that long to nose him out.”

“O.K.,” said Rolfe. “What do these orange blotches on the map signify?”

“Disregard those, it’s some filling from an apricot horn.” replied Gennifer. “But do trace the yellow line. There’s your exit route. By way of the scrap disposal system.”

“I’m supposed to get out with the garbage?”

“It’s the best escape route I could arrange, unless you want to wait around all night in Pre-Test and ride back on the empty robot jitney after your talk with McMaxon.”

After his talk with McMaxon Rolfe wanted to get out of the ward, out of the entire hospital, as soon as possible. The Penultimate Council of the Uptown Commandos had decided McMaxon, like his nitwit girl friend Elena, wasn’t reliable enough. He couldn’t be left in the hands of the territorial government. Even if the government men were following the rules of the Barnum Accords, McMaxon might decide to give them information. Rolfe had told the council he might be able to get McMaxon out of the hospital and back to them, but they’d voted, seven to three, to take the simpler course. “I’ll use the chute,” said Rolfe.

Surgeon General Sheldonmayer was speaking to his boots. “Uh . . . far be it from me to violate the mollycoddling conventions of the prickchinking Barnum Accords, Patient 724 . . . uh . . . can I call you Lloyd?”

McMaxon rolled himself a few feet back from the view. The noon glare, bouncing off the jungle park, made his plump pale face glow orange and yellow-green. “Sure, General.” He and the wrinkled little military medical man were alone in his Ward X room.

“Uh . . . Lloyd, it would be a nice gesture if you’d tell us all you know about the rumpsplitter organization you’re affiliated with . . . uh . . . names of all the membership, addresses, pixphone numbers . . . any fiendish plots they’re cooking up.”

Shaking his head, McMaxon said, “I have a certain loyalty to the Uptown Commandos, General, even though I’m going along with this experiment.”

“Uh . . . I admire your pig-headed dedication to your cause, even though the cause is full of beans,” said Sheldonmayer. “However . . . uh . . . I was hoping you’d change your mind when I made it . . . uh . . . crystal clear to you exactly what you can expect from those guerrilla comrades of yours. Uh . . . as an example of how they treat their people . . . uh . . . look what they did to . . . uh . . . this Elena somebody or other.” The wrinkled man held four small photos toward McMaxon.

“What?” He rolled across to take the little color pictures.

“Uh . . . these aren’t the best photos I’ve ever seen. The Territorial Police are trying out some reconditioned photojournalism robots and . . . uh . . . the tugmutton things jiggle too much . . .”

McMaxon looked at the top picture, then tried to stand up on his broken foot. “Christ!” he said, stumbling and falling to his knees.

“I thought you’d given up slapping patients, Sheldonmayer,” remarked Dr. Trollope as he came into the room.

“Uh . . . don’t be a plugtail, Doc.” With McMaxon on the floor the surgeon general found he was looking directly into his eyes. He moved away.

The green-brown lizard physician strode quickly over to help McMaxon back into his wheelchair. “You mustn’t be overanxious, Lloyd. Plenty of time to learn to walk again. Ah, what are these?” He took the photos as McMaxon, paler than ever, went slumping back into the bright metal frame. “I’d say a severe case of drowning. Notice the bloated condition of the body . . .”

“Yang!” McMaxon made his chair roll close to Sheldonmayer. “When did they find her?”

“Uh . . . yesterday afternoon.”

“Where?”

“You . . . uh . . . should have studied the entire set of pics. There’s one in there which, despite its fuzziness, gives you . . . uh . . . a good idea of the location.”

“Yes, here we go.” Dr. Trollope had shuffled through the pictures of the dead Elena. “You’re right, Sheldonmayer, the quality of the photos isn’t that good.” He brought the picture close to his scaly face. “Yes, this is obviously the lagoon in the Generalissimo Vurmo Memorial Park.”

“I thought it was simply the Generalissimo Vurmo Park,” said tall, lovely Combat Nurse Wordsmith. She had a white rabbit under each arm.

“No, it’s been the Generalissimo Vurmo Memorial Park since last Tuesday,” said Dr. Trollope. “Tuesday being the day the generalissimo was assassinated.”

“I should really keep more up on current events,” sighed the warm-looking nurse. “What with my top secret duties here in Ward X and a full and well-rounded social life I just—”

“Who killed her?” McMaxon asked the wrinkled surgeon general. He knew Elena was to have gone to the park with Bernie Rolfe on the night she disappeared. Rolfe had told him she never showed up there. No one had seen her since.

“Uh . . . who do you think? . . . look at the way she’s tied and at . . . uh . . . the marks on her neck, there . . . a typical urban guerrilla mode of killing.”

“I hadn’t noticed those neck marks or the ropes,” said Dr. Trollope, going through the pictures of Elena’s body once again. “You’re right, Sheldonmayer. This complicates my original theory of simple drowning.”

Nurse Wordsmith cleared her lovely throat. “What about the bunny rabbits, Doctor?”

McMaxon was breathing slowly through his mouth. He frowned at the nurse. “I don’t want any pets.”

“These little rascals aren’t pets, Lloyd,” said the lizard doctor. “If you can postpone your business with Lloyd, Sheldonmayer, we’ll get on with our test.”

“Uh . . . yes. I’m as anxious as you are to . . . uh . . . unleash this human weapon on our enemies across the border.”

“Lloyd,” began Dr. Trollope, “we believe you’re just about ready, after the initial series of treatments and tests, to function for us in a paramilitary capacity.”

“You want to try me out on the rabbits?”

“Right you are.” The lizard doctor beckoned the nurse nearer. “According to the last virulence rating on you, Lloyd, you are now a fully-functioning carrier of Anthropomorphic Tactics Center’s synthetic virus RS-036-Strain 14.”

McMaxon said, “Anybody I touch gets it?”

“Uh . . . we intensely hope so, Lloyd.” The surgeon general reached out to nuzzle the nearest rabbit. “Uh . . . I confidently look forward to the day when we have a hundred or . . . uh . . . two hundred RS-036 carriers roaming the countryside of Peralta Territory, spreading . . . uh . . . fatality and pestilence in their . . . uh . . . wake.”

“Touch one of the bunnies,” suggested pretty Nurse Wordsmith.

McMaxon hesitated.

“The first time is always the most difficult.” Dr. Trollope smiled with his thin scaly mouth.

“Here goes.” McMaxon missed the rabbit on the first grab and his hand smacked Nurse Wordsmith’s right breast. “Excuse me.”

“Don’t blush. It’s an understandable mistake. Here, I’ll hold this bunny out closer to you.”

McMaxon gingerly rubbed his palm along the soft furry back of the right-hand rabbit.

“In the case of human beings,” pointed out Dr. Trollope, “we expect a longer period of time before the disease takes effect. We can’t have them pitching forward the minute you shake hands or pat them on—”

The white rabbit screamed once, stiffened and died. It quickly turned an oily black color.

“Uh . . . very good.”

Nurse Wordsmith puckered her lips, looking for someplace to drop the dead rabbit. Its mate took advantage of the girl’s distraction to leap free of her grasp.

“Uh . . . the cunning fellow is making a break,” cried the wrinkled little surgeon general, zigzagging around the room after the hopping rabbit.

“Toss that one in the dispozhole under the bed,” suggested Dr. Trollope. He had his scaly hands locked behind his back and was chuckling happily. “Our RS-036 works even better than I anticipated. I can hardly wait until we smuggle you across into Peralta Territory for some field tests.”

“On people?”

“That was part of our agreement, Lloyd,” the lizard doctor reminded him. “You know, we all have to do things we don’t think we like. Why, not a day goes by—”

“Uh . . . the little jigger’s got out into the corridor.” Surgeon General Sheldonmayer dived out the partially open door of Room 724 after the leaping lab rabbit.

“Shall I fetch the frogs next?” asked the lovely nurse.

Dr. Trollope scratched his chin, making a dry raspy sound. “Let’s bypass the frogs and get right to the dogs.”

“I have to kill dogs, too?”

“Only two or three.”

“What kind of dogs?”

“I don’t actually know. Do you, Nurse Wordsmith?”

“A cocker spaniel and two Venusian huskies.”

McMaxon said, “I had a cocker spaniel named Sparky when I was a kid. He ran off after an ice-cream vending robot and we never saw him again.”

“It’s unlikely this is the same cocker. And, as I was just saying, we all have to . . .”

“I caught him!” The wrinkled little Sheldonmayer trotted back into the room, clutching the white rabbit by the ears.

Rolfe arrived in the Doctors’ Mess smelling of nut bars and *petits fours*. He’d had to crouch in a pastry kitchen storage cabinet for an hour before the associate pastry chef Dr. Gennifer had bribed thought it was safe for Rolfe to make his way across the food ramp. It took Rolfe ten minutes to climb up the metallic ropes dangling in the narrow shadowy chute.

He caught the edge of the delivery slot—it was marked “10” on the chute side—and eased its sliding panel open a half inch.

He heard crunching in the dim room beyond.

“Uh . . . I hate going into the capital for those *junta* press conferences . . . uh . . . it’s so prickchinking tedious . . . By the . . . uh . . . time an eight-man *junta* explains itself . . . uh . . . hours elapse,” a faint tired voice was saying.

“I kept your tray on the hot plate, sir,” said a robot serving boy.

“Uh . . .”

Hanging in the food chute, Rolfe waited. It sounded as though the man with the weary voice was munching crackers, meaning he was probably only on the soup course.

“Uh . . . I don’t suppose Nurse Wordsmith is still up at this hour . . . uh . . . must be close to midnight.”

“Only twenty past eleven, sir,” replied the serving mechanism. “I believe the young lady flew into the capital to attend a masked ball at the Department of Agriculture. I saw her going toward the descend chute two hours ago dressed as a sack of organically grown wheat and wearing a domino mask.”

Carefully Rolfe shifted his grip. He was holding to a cable with his left hand and to the delivery opening rim with his right. Someone had spilled soymayonnaise and for an instant his right hand went sluicing across the edge of the opening.

He hung there in the food-scented dark for twenty-five minutes, flexing and shifting every few minutes.

“How about another one of these *babas au rhum*, sir?”

“Uh . . . too many *babas* and I . . . uh . . . get a pain.”

“You ought to see a doctor.”

Five more minutes passed, then the tired man left the dining room.

The robot cleaned up, turned out the last of the overhead light strips and shuffled out.

Rolfe waited a full minute longer before opening the panel full wide and swinging into the large darkened room. He dropped to the long serving table below the opening. His foot squished on something soft and spongy, which he figured must be a *baba au rhum*.

He jumped to the floor, edged across the dining room, listening. From far off came the noise of a robot falling down. There was no other sound.

Rolfe had gone over his plans again while hanging in the food chute. Once he found McMaxon he had to quickly give him the impression he’d come to get him out of there. Be friendly and then, when McMaxon was off guard, use the coil of plastic cord he’d swiped back down in the second-floor supply closet. With Elena it had been simple because she’d believed him to be interested in her. Meeting him in the park that night had seemed romantic to her. Well, there shouldn’t be any trouble convincing McMaxon they were still friends, comrades in arms.

As he was about to leave, Rolfe noticed a side door marked Meal Coordination. He worked the door open. The compact computer built into the wall was a low-grade one, simple-minded, and it told him what he wanted to know without any protest. Lloyd McMaxon was on a vegetable diet, which he was served at six, twelve, and five. He was in Room 724.

The animal jitney was on automatic. Rolfe found it sitting in the kennel area, already loaded with the five animals scheduled to go into Ward X. Rolfe had brought a meat patty and some synthcarrots in his pocket, but the animals in the trunk-size jitney wagon were all sleeping a drugged sleep.

The lock on the barred rear door was simple to open. Rolfe was still getting himself huddled in a corner, covered with two shaggy albino squirrels and a long-haired goat, when the jitney made a clacking sound and commenced to roll.

It rolled by a human guard who was asleep at the force screen entrance to Ward X proper. The jitney automatically broke the invisible screen, which ceased its low sizzling for the ten seconds it took the wagon to roll across the wide threshold. The guard did not awaken.

Once in the dark Pre-Test Room Rolfe nudged the snoring goat off, slipped out of the cage.

The corridor which held rooms 721-726 was empty and silent, except for one hanging speaker grid which was making a soft high-pitched clucking.

Rolfe, running on tiptoe, headed for the door of 724. He listened at the door, then tapped gently and went in.

“Who is it?”

This was McMaxon all right, sitting up in his bed in the moonlit room’s center. “It’s me, Lloyd. It’s Bernie.”

“Bernie Rolfe?”

“What other Bernie do you know who’d go through all this to get you out of here?”

McMaxon didn’t answer.

Closing the door at his back, Rolfe eased closer. “I know you may be a little annoyed with me, Lloyd. For leaving you at the market. You know, though, what the Uptown Commandos feel about such situations.”

“Sure, I know.”

“Everything is going to work out now,” said Rolfe. “Because here I am. We’ll get you out of here with no trouble.”

“I appreciate that, Bernie, I really do.”

With his left hand, the one farthest from McMaxon, Rolfe reached out the looped cord. “I’m glad you’re in such good shape, Lloyd. I’m glad you’re reacting this way. I had a moment when I thought maybe . . .”

“We weren’t still friends?”

“Right,” said Rolfe. “But we are still friends, aren’t we?”

“Sure, we are,” said McMaxon in the moonlit darkness. “Let’s shake hands on it, Bernie.” •