

I

The mechanical cop came roving through the ninth floor of the Plaza Hotel, swinging his electric nightstick. "Time's up there," he said as he jabbed at the inhabitant of one plastic cot and then another.

Dawn light was beginning to show dimly at the barred windows. Heavy rain continued to fall.

A lean scraggly man sat up, massaged his face with scabby hands. "I still got an hour, you dumb tin can." He pointed at the ticking meter beside his cot.

The robot flophouse cop rolled on, poking his stick into sleepers whose meter time had run out. "Time's up there. Rise and shine." He stopped beside another flopcot. "Off your ox, buddy." He repeated this twice before holstering his shock stick to grab at the fat man sprawled on the raveled thermal blanket.

From the next bed a black man in a tattered jumpsuit said, "You got yourself one for the Cadaver Service, cop."

"Time's up there," the mechanical cop told the fat man as he shook him by the shoulders. "Rise and shine."

The black man, yawning and lowering his feet to the floor, said, "Cardiac thing, I'd guess."

Two cots to the left of the dead man, Thad McIntosh awoke. He shook his head from side to side, gulped in the thick musky air of the flophouse. Thad was twenty-eight, long and lanky. Right now he was about fifteen pounds underweight, had a three-day beard and a scabby scar on his forehead. He was dressed in a pair of thin track slacks and a surplus coat from the Brazilian war of 2018. Rubbing his crusty eyes, he told the mechanical rouser, "The guy's dead, leave him alone."

The Negro grinned at Thad. "I'm glad you agree with my diagnosis of the stiff. Did you used to be a doctor?"

"Nope." Thad untied his all-season boots, which he'd fastened around his neck for the night.

"I was. It's an interesting story how I fell from grace."

"It always is." Thad put on his boots, yawned.

"No, I didn't always live on Manhattan."

"This man is deceased," announced the mechanical cop.

Thad ran a hand through his dark tangled hair, wincing whenever he came to a lump or a bruised spot.

The lean scraggly man was sitting up again. "Jesus, I don't like to be around when people die," he complained as Thad passed him.

"You came to the wrong island," said Thad.

"Who had a choice?"

The Plaza elevators still weren't working. Thad used the stairs. After three flights he found he was wheezing and panting. He halted on a landing, taking slow, careful breaths. Feeling absently into his jacket pocket he discovered a twenty-dollar silver piece. Enough for breakfast anyway. He had no recollection of why he had the money. It was his impression he'd stuck his last ten bucks into the bed meter.

The night doormen were going off duty, turning their stun rifles over to the three men on the morning shift. Campfires were smoldering all over Central Park, their smoke mingling with the gray rain and the thin light of this November daybreak.

"Maybe I should have slept in the park last night," Thad said to himself. "Then I'd have thirty this morning instead of twenty."

A Cadaver Service doublegator ship came hovering down through the heavy rain to land at one of the entrances to the park. It retracted its wings, went wheeling through raw fields and bare trees to gather up the men who'd died there last night.

"On second thought," said Thad, "I guess I'm glad I didn't."

The faxprint robot who sold the *Manhattan Times* near the ruined fountain across from the Plaza was lying on its back, cashbox ripped open, alarm bell still faintly tinkling. Thad stopped long enough to make sure the looter hadn't missed any change, then moved on.

Another CS doublegator was flying low overhead. It drifted on, landing on Fifth Avenue where there'd been a nightgang skirmish.

The rain kept on falling, cold and hard. When Thad passed Alfie's Pub in the Fifties the battered old chef robot out front said, "All you can eat, 'bo. Only fifteen smackers."

Thad slowed. The pub food wasn't that bad and fifteen dollars wasn't a bad price for breakfast, even though "all you can eat" probably meant a second slice of soytoast and an extra glass of near-juice. Thad went inside.

The familiar smell of old wood and urine. One of the stained-glass pub windows was still intact and it threw watery kaleidoscope patterns on the bare noryl plastic tabletops. About a half dozen rundown men were seated around the place. The scent of maple syrup was being piped out of the scent-valves under the beamed ceiling.

Thad walked on back to the serving counter. A huge headless robot with six silver arms presided over the food. "Hotcakes, sausage and hash browns," ordered Thad.

"Let's see the color of your money," said a voice from the speaker grid in the huge robot's stomach.

"Here." Thad held up his silver piece, gripping it tight between thumb and forefinger.

A silver palm came reaching out to Thad. "Put 'er there." A slot in the center of the hand glowed.

"Breakfast is only fifteen dollars, isn't it? I get five bucks change."

"You'll get it, buddy. Fork over."

Thad stuck the money in the slot, the hand was withdrawn. He waited a few seconds before asking, "Where's my five dollars?"

"You ordered hotcakes, sausage and hashbrowns," said the voice box. "You want those made out of soy or kelp?"

"I want my five bucks."

"Myself, I'd recommend soy."

"Damn it." Thad put his hands on the edge of the metal counter which separated him from the big serving mechanism. "Give me my damn change and . . . ow!" An electric charge came sizzling through the counter. It made Thad fling his hands up, bite down hard with his teeth. He felt a little dizzy, his left leg didn't seem quite in control.

While he was still swaying in front of the big robot, two human hands grabbed his arms. "We don't like troublemakers here, bud. Manhattan may be ninety-nine percent crooks and deadbeats, but Alfie's Pub strives to maintain its tone."

"Give me my money."

"We're on to that dodge, too," said the large gray-haired man who had hold of him. "Out with you now, and don't come panhandling around Alfie's again."

"God-damn it, you're not going to screw me out of the whole twenty."

"Out, out." The big man hustled Thad to the door, shoved him into the rain-filled morning.

Thad went dancing sideways across the rutted pavement, stumbled at the curb, fell on one knee into the gutter. He grimaced, got up, his nostrils flaring. "That's my last twenty."

A clean-shaven blond young man was standing in front of the pub entrance now. "Wait," he said.

"You another damn bouncer?"

"I have nothing whatsoever to do with this place," the blond young man assured him. "But perhaps I can help you." He put a hand against Thad's chest. "You're Thad McIntosh, aren't you?"

Thad blinked, then nodded. "Yeah. I don't know you, though. Do I?"

"I'm recruiting people for a—"

"Nope," said Thad, shaking his head. "I don't want a job. I had one of those once, plus a wife and a house in Westchester. That was back in . . . back in 2027. Three long years ago, that was. I don't want any of that anymore."

"This is only a part-time job," explained the young man. "A few hours of work at most. We'll pay you two hundred dollars."

"Two hundred dollars?" Thad took a step back on the wet street. "To do what?"

"A simple few hours of work, work in your own line."

"I was an account man with Persuasion-Tronics. You're talking about some kind of ad work?"

"More or less." The blond young man slid a hand into an inner pocket of his waterproof tunic. "Here's twenty dollars. That was what you lost, wasn't it?"

Thad reached out for the silver piece. "Yeah."

"Think of this as a bonus for an anticipated job well done." From the same inner pocket he took a blue fax card. "You know where the library ruin is?"

"Forty-second and Fifth? I've slept there quite a bit."

"There's a boarded-up soy-doughnut shop directly across. Take this card to Mr. Ferber there. He's doing our recruiting."

Thad pocketed the card. "How do you know I won't simply take your twenty bucks and wander off?"

"I know enough about you to think you won't," replied the young man. "Besides, I can always find you again."

"How can you—"

"Better get going. Mr. Ferber will be anxious to see you."

"O.K.," said Thad. "O.K., and thanks." He started off in the rain toward Forty-second Street.

II

Rain was getting into the place. It dripped down through zigzag cracks in the low buff ceiling, sizzled around the dusty light-strip fixtures. The uneven thermal floor glistened with tiny pools of water. Shaking himself twice, Thad crossed the small room and stopped before the desk against the wall. There was no one behind the desk, but a dented, old-fashioned secbox rested on the edge of a plyoblotter.

"Mr. Ferber, please," said Thad as he held out the blue fax card toward the machine.

"Wait your turn," replied the square black secbox.

There were four other men in the room, all older than Thad. There were three shaky-legged contour chairs. The fourth man sat on the wet floor, his legs forked straight out in front of him,,

Thad told the machine, "I thought Ferber was anxious to—"

"Take a number and wait your turn."

Thad noticed a numbered chit easing out of a slot in the secbox. He took it.

The man on the floor mentioned, "You can get a cup of syncaf if you ask. While you wait."

Thad turned again toward the machine. "Can I get a cup of . . ."

A vinyl cup popped out of the back of the secbox and was filled from a chrome nozzle.

"Compliments of the management."

The syncaf was lukewarm, though one of its additives caused it to give off steam. Thad carried it carefully over to a boarded-up window, then sipped at it. "What kind of job is this exactly?" he asked the man on the floor.

The man was forty-two, gray. He had two fresh gashes crossing his upper lip and the teeth he was wearing weren't his. "Not exactly sure," he said. "Supposed to require some brains. Had some once. May still. Used to be a home-book machine repairman and . . ."

Thad squatted down beside the man and stopped listening. It was a knack he'd developed toward the end of his first year on Manhattan. He drank his tepid imitation coffee, let his eyes half close. After almost two hours his number was called.

Stretching up to his feet, Thad went into the next room. This one was a little larger, equally dusty and damp. A freckled man in a pin-stripe tunic was sitting in an inflated sofa chair, a dictet unit resting on his knee. "Mr. Ferber?" Thad asked.

The freckled man glanced up. In a low voice he said, "Go on through that door on your right." As Thad went by him, the man asked, "How many more of those crumbums out there?"

Thad said, "I'm the last."

"Ah, great, splendid." The freckled man tossed the dictation machine to the floor. Rubbing the back of his neck, he said, "This kind of subterfuge always bores the . . . well, better get in there."

Thad went through the indicated doorway into another dusty, rain-damaged room. A short, stocky man was pacing the bare floor, hands locked behind him. "How you feeling, McIntosh?"

"Hungry," answered Thad. "What kind of job is this going to be?"

"It's going to be a son of a bitch," the short, dark man said. "I'm Crosby Rich."

"Oh, so?"

"You don't know me, but a lot of people do, off Manhattan," said Rich, still pacing. "Which is why we had to play all these dumbbell games with you. Would you like a sandwich? I brought a half dozen with me."

"Sure." Thad watched Rich put a stubby hand into an imitation wicker hamper on the floor. "You mean you're not interested in hiring any of these guys?"

"No, I'm not interested in hiring anybody. Except you, McIntosh," said Rich. "How about sealof on millet bread?"

"Anything's O.K."

"When'd you eat last?"

"Lunch yesterday."

"Here." Rich tossed him the plyowrapped sandwich. "I've seen a lot of descents, McIntosh, but I really—"

"Talk about the job." Thad unwrapped the sandwich, took a bite. "Lectures I can always get."

The stocky man had his hand back in the hamper. "Huh, that was the last one. Did I down five sandwiches while I was waiting for you? Huh, going to have to watch that," he said. "I'm with the Opposition Party, McIntosh, working as a sort of troubleshooter."

Thad nodded, went on eating.

"We believe neither the Republican-Democrat Party nor the Democrat-Republican Party can do much for the country. The RDs, since they've come into power, don't seem to be able to avoid a war with the South American Organization of States. We're headed right for it," Rich said. "You were a registered OP member."

"Back then," said Thad, chewing. "Before."

"So you probably agree with our positions on things. You no doubt share the goals which we—"

"Is this leading up to what you want to pay me two hundred dollars for?"

Rich sighed through nose and mouth. "Isn't your curiosity aroused at all, McIntosh? We go through all this dumbbell foolery in order to contact you quietly and covertly. Don't you wonder why?"

"Not particularly," Thad said, finishing the last bite of the sandwich. "You said you didn't have any more to eat? Tell you, Rich, after you've lived on Manhattan for a while you learn to exist in very small segments of time. To be curious much you have to think of your life as extending some way in all directions."

"I still can't understand why you gave it all up," said Rich. "You were in a—"

"Got tired of it." Thad put his hands in his jacket pockets, leaned against the dust-smearred wall with one elbow. "What do you have in mind, Rich? You hoping to rehabilitate me?"

"Yes," admitted Rich.

"Put me back on my feet, exactly where I was before?"

The OP troubleshooter shook his dark head. "Not at all. I don't really give a rat's ass about that, McIntosh. Oh, I'm curious, but I didn't come here to do you a good turn. I'm here to see if you can do one for me. In order to do that you're going to have to stop being a deadbeat for a while."

"Only a while? Not permanently?"

"Once you do my job you can come back here and roll in any gutter you please."

"And it pays two hundred dollars."

"No, it pays fifty thousand dollars," said Rich. "To start. And if you live through it you'll get another five hundred thousand, at least."

Thad straightened, rubbed both hands through his tangled hair. "A half million? That's not bad," he said. "But it sounds like this isn't going to take only the few hours your street man promised."

"It may take the rest of your life."

"You're implying the rest of my life may not be very long if I go to work for you?"

"Yes, there's that possibility. The plan we have in mind may not succeed."

Scratching his stubbled chin, Thad asked, "O.K., what is it you want me to do?"

"Basically," replied the stocky Rich, "you have to find out the nature of something called the Hellhound Project."

"And just how do I do that?" asked Thad.

"By being somebody else," Rich told him.

III

The olive-green air cruiser flew clear of the rain and into bright afternoon sunlight. In the control seat Rich said, "I'm glad you agreed, McIntosh. It saves me from hunting down the other seven possibilities. You're the only one in the East. One fellow's out in what's left of Flint, Michigan, but we suspect the plague may have left him something of a dumbbell. The others are scattered all over the map."

"I haven't accepted the job." Thad was slouched in the passenger seat drinking a cup of syncaf. This one was hot. "I agreed to come over to Westchester with you to discuss the thing further. Long as you're going to pay me five hundred dollars merely for that, I'm agreeable."

"Look down on your left. We're flying over your old home . . . no, too late. Missed it."

Thad hadn't turned his head. "How come your cruiser says 'Olexo & Balungi, Para-Attorneys at Law' on the side and not 'Opposition Party'?"

"Because if anybody found out what we're up to they'd probably kill me before I can do anything."

"Oh." Thad drank more of his imitation beverage. "Would they include me?"

"You especially."

"This Hellhound Project is so important?"

"Apparently," replied Rich. "We've lost five OP people this year. So far all we know is the name of the operation and the fact that it's a new weapon of some sort being developed by one of the branches of Walbrook Enterprises."

"Took you five men to find out only that," said Thad. "And me, all alone, I'm going to uncover the whole story and come out alive."

There were new lines on Rich's low dark forehead. "I don't guarantee you'll come out alive," he said. "Though if you ask me you're not alive now, McIntosh. Huh, I've read up on you. An IQ of 185, a brain potential score of . . . O.K., I promised no lectures." One stubby-fingered hand reached out to punch a landing pattern. "A fellow with your abilities, though, I still don't see why you—"

"I got tired." Thad slouched further into his seat. "In fact, I have a feeling I may get tired of your job any minute now."

The olive-green cruiser drifted down through the clear sunshine, leveled and went skimming over the tops of decorative all-weather imitation pines. "Westchester Country Club Number 26," said Rich as the cruiser circled over the pink-paved landing area.

"They'll never let me in."

"The place is temporarily shut. OP is using it as a briefing depot, until the government catches on. Then we move again."

The cruiser bounced slightly twice, grew silent. The seat released Thad. Rising up, he asked, "What about food? Is there anybody around to fix lunch?"

Rich jumped free of the cruiser. "The servomechs are all shipshape," he said.

"What's today, Tuesday?"

"I think so, why?"

"Tuesday is Mexican-American style food. Each day is different, they're set that way. Do you like—"

"My tastes have become catholic in the last couple of years."

Two young men casually holding stunguns nodded at Rich from inside the main dome of the country club.

"Any trouble?" he asked, stepping inside.

"Nothing," one of them answered. "Dr. Rosenfeld called to say he'll be an hour late."

"Huh." Rich led Thad up a twisting pastel ramp.

Thad asked, "Who's Dr. Rosenfeld?"

"Your family doctor."

"From what family would that be? I never heard of the guy."

Rich stuck his thumb and little finger into a print-lock on a corridor door. The door slid to one side.

"I'll be briefing you in one of the dining rooms. You'll appreciate that."

"Don't get too feisty about my being hungry," suggested Thad as he followed the squat OP troubleshooter into a bubble-shaped room. "If I wasn't hungry I wouldn't have come to you at all."

"Then we would have gone to you," Rich assured him. "Some subtle way or other." He marched to a long white table at the end of the room. It was the only rectangular table in a roomful of round ones. All the windows in the big room were set at black. "Sit down, we'll get started."

Thad took a tin chair two seats over from Rich and, without waiting to be told, dialed a meal on the order panel at his place. "Can I get you something?"

After a few seconds hesitation, Rich said, "Not now, thanks. Turn around so you can see those monitor screens we've hung up on the wall over there."

Thad did. The second screen in a row of five showed muddy color footage of a young man, grinning, leaning against the rail of some kind of seagoing craft. The young man was lean, lanky, about the same size and build as Thad.

"Look familiar?" asked Rich.

"Looks vaguely like me. Who is he?"

"Robert B. Walbrook."

"This must be old footage. Robert Walbrook is fifty something. At least he was the last time I saw a newscast."

Rich flicked another toggle on the control rod in his hand. The picture froze on a smiling close-up. "This is Robert Bruce Walbrook I," he explained. "This film was shot fifty-one years ago, in 1979. That's Lake St. Clair."

"Where?"

"It used to be near Detroit," said the OP man.

"Detroit I heard of," said Thad. "We lost Detroit . . . when? ... about six years ago, when that plague got loose."

"Eight years ago."

"I've lost track." Thad gestured at the smiling image on the screen. "So this Walbrook would be around eighty today?"

"No," answered Rich, "he'd be in his late twenties."

"How does he work that?"

"Robert Walbrook was dying of leukemia in 1980. The family, with Robert's consent, decided to try out a new process Walbrook Enterprises had come up with. In fact, Robert was only their third subject."

"What did they do? Freeze him? That was big back then, wasn't it."

"The Walbrooks' process was much more sophisticated," said Rich. "It involved placing the subject in a state of suspended animation, while he was still alive. Walbrook Enterprises thought of the process as something akin to cryptobiosis, a cryptobiosis which would work for human beings. Actually, the process worked quite well but it cost so damn much that it never caught on."

"Cryptobiosis. That's what some of the lower life forms can do to themselves, a kind of long-range hibernation."

"More or less. I didn't know you'd have heard of it."

"A guy with my potential?"

Rich continued, "So there was Robert B. Walbrook I, youngest of the three brothers who founded the whole Walbrook Enterprises operation. Lying in a suspension vault in a facility in one of the

riot-secured sectors of Detroit. Actually the thing was in Grosse Pointe."

"When that experimental plague virus from the Flint proving ground got loose it pretty much finished off Detroit and environs." Thad's Mexican-American meal had just popped up through a slot in the banquet table. Picking up the noryl plastic utensils, he commenced eating.

"That's why OP is going to try what we're going to try," said Rich. "Something over two and a half million people died, there were three weeks of rioting, looting and indiscriminate smashing carried on by people the plague didn't kill right off."

Swallowing, Thad said, "The vaults where Robert was stashed . . . they got destroyed?"

"Right down to the ground. The two dozen bodies stored there were never accounted for."

"So nobody knows what happened to Robert?"

"Nobody we've been able to check, nobody in the Walbrook family, certainly."

Thad set his fork down, leaned back. "And four years ago we finally got a cure for leukemia."

"Exactly. So that if Robert Walbrook's body had survived they'd now be able to revive and cure him."

"Would they really want to, the family?"

"Not all of them, but the way the resurrection laws stand at the moment, they'd have to," replied Rich. "Some of the younger members of the clan would be opposed. Especially a lad named Lon Walbrook, a grandnephew of Robert I, who's making a bid for more power. See, if Robert I shows up he's still technically one of the heads of the whole operation."

Thad rubbed at his shaggy hair. "So you Opposition Party guys are going to try to convince the whole family, the entire rich powerful Walbrook family in their fortified two-hundred-acre estate in Connecticut, that I'm their long lost boy?" He laughed, locking both hands on top of his head. "Some kind of Tichborne claimant come back from the dead. Shit. It'll never work. They'd know I'm not . . ."

"Sure, looking at you the way you are now. A broken down dumbbell from Manhattan. The smell of you alone would ruin it."

Still laughing, Thad went back to eating. "When I finish here you can give me my five hundred bucks and a lift back to my rundown contemporaries."

Rich moved to the chair next to Thad. "We'll work on you before you ever have to meet the Walbrooks, McIntosh," he said. "The physical work alone will take weeks, the operations."

"Operations?"

"Facial work, fingerprints," Rich explained. "We'll have to plant some nearly foolproof caps on your eyes to fake the retinal patterns. Brainwave patterns we can't do anything about. We're not certain anybody ever got Robert I's down and filed away. Then there's the—"

"How did you come to pick me?"

"Our computers did that, using info siphoned from the national data bank. As I told you, you're one of a half dozen or so possibilities. Fellows who come near to Robert I in build, facial structure."

Thad wiped his plate clean with fold of nearcorn tortilla. "Can I order some more food?"

"Go ahead." Rich looked away. "The thing is, McIntosh, we have every reason to believe the Hellhound thing is a pretty nasty weapon. Warren Parkinson has three more years to serve."

"Who?" Thad was ordering another meal.

"Parkinson, the President of the United States," said Rich. "You know he's had two severe breakdowns since he took office. He may be in even worse shape than anyone suspects. We can't let something like the Hellhound weapon fall into the hands of a man as unstable as Warren Parkinson."

"Maybe the Hellhound Project is something harmless," said Thad. "Walbrook Enterprises turns out a lot of stuff."

"This is a weapon, and it isn't harmless."

Thad's second meal appeared out of the slot. "How long would it take to turn me into a reasonable facsimile?"

"Two months at least, that's the minimum. A lot of background info can be put in while you're asleep."

"You'll provide me a comfortable place to sleep," asked Thad, "plenty of food?"

"Sure, and we'll rehabilitate you."

"That's unlikely," said Thad. "Still, winter's not so far off. This would take care of most of my winter problems."

Rich said, "Maybe you're tired of the life over there, McIntosh. Maybe you feel . . ."

"No lectures, no sermons." After eating for a moment, Thad asked, "Suppose I turn you down. Aren't you afraid I might talk to someone?"

"Should you turn OP down," Rich informed him, "you won't remember any of today. We have a process for that."

"I figured as much," said Thad. "Suppose the Walbrooks don't accept me, suppose they see through my great impersonation? Do I still get paid?"

"If you survive, yes."

"How do we explain where Robert . . . where I've been all these years since the plague hit?"

"We have a relatively plausible story worked out. You'll be briefed on it, quite sufficiently briefed."

Giving a one-shoulder shrug, Thad said, "O.K., I'll try it. Doesn't make much difference I guess, riot to me anyway. Sure, O.K. When do we start?"

"Now," said Rich.

IV

Dr. Barney Rosenfeld took his hands off the controls of the land-car and locked them on the top of his grizzled head. "You're—you're on your own from here on, friend," he said. "The sound—sound pickups will be trained on us once we get through the—the gates." He was a moderately overweight man of thirty-six, his sand-colored hair speckled with gray.

Thad nodded, not saying anything. He was used to the doctor's backtracking speech pattern now. Directly ahead of them rose stone walls, made of the same large black and gray rocks you still saw throughout this part of Connecticut. Only these walls were higher, rising ten feet at least. Heavy gates, made of real wrought iron, barred their entry to the Walbrook estate. Just beyond the gates Thad could sense a force screen in operation. The light snow which was flickering down through the afternoon melted away to nothing when it came near the gates.

"I've got an identification plate implanted in the hood of the car," explained the doctor.

"They—they're reading it now."

"They?"

Rosenfeld tilted his head in the direction of the wall. "The security robots."

A low ratcheting sound commenced outside, the metal gates swung slowly inward. The landcar jerked, swaying slightly to the left before it started moving ahead.

"They—they've taken over operation of the car now," explained the Walbrook family doctor.

The landcar proceeded slowly along the black roadway. The force screen was no longer there. When it had gone some five hundred feet, the car abruptly stopped.

"Stick—stick one of your hands out the window, friend," advised Rosenfeld.

The car windows automatically rolled themselves down. Standing on each side of the vehicle now were robots. Each of them was man-size and dun-colored.

"Hand please," requested the one on Thad's side. He had a fine dusting of snow on his cheeks, shoulders and chest. His metal hand was ice cold.

A small cone extended itself, with a raspy click, out of the robot's palm. A tiny blue light at the cone's end scanned the tips of Thad's fingers. The robot let go, saying, "Agrees."

A second later Dr. Rosenfeld's robot repeated the procedure and said the same thing.

The car windows shut, the machine rolled ahead.

"That—that was to check our finger—fingerprints, friend," said the doctor.

"I figured."

Dr. Rosenfeld had his hands back atop his head. "They—they like to be able to see your hands."

Thad was scratching his crotch with his counterfeit fingertips. "I think I'm going to have to make a few

changes around the old homestead," he said. "A half century hasn't made Johnny any less of a fuss-budget." That last word was one which had been current fifty years before.

"You—you can't talk . . ." Dr. Rosenfeld stopped, remembering who Thad was supposed to be. "Yes, friend, you can certainly talk to J.P. about that. Although, as I've told you, the world hasn't improved—improved measurably since you were alive last. There's even more need for security today."

"I suppose Johnny is up to his ass in government work still," said Thad.

"I—I believe so, yes," answered Rosenfeld, watching Thad through slightly narrowed eyes. "Though I'm only one of several—several family doctors and I'm not in on any family secrets."

After the landcar climbed two low hills the buildings became visible—a complex of six enormous white saltbox-type houses, connected by see-through tunnels.

Stretching away behind the houses were acres of real trees, maples and birches, all bare and thin in the cold light.

"Johnny's expanded a lot, I see," said Thad. "In my day we made do with only one house, the farthest one on the left, and about thirty acres."

"Fifty years of nothing—nothing but success can—"

"What are those new saltboxes Made of?"

"Walbrook nearwood I imagine."

"Since my time," said Thad. "I've got a lot of new products to get myself filled in on."

Their car was jerked off the roadway into a wide circular clearing beside the big square house Thad was pretending to remember.

Two more robots, chrome-plated this time, helped them out of the landcar. "House One, please," said the robot who took Thad's arm.

"We should be taken in to see your—your brother now," said Dr. Rosenfeld.

"Looking forward to it." Thad allowed himself to be guided to the door of the first house.

In the foyer of the big white house a large blond man stood. "You're the alleged Walbrook, huh?"

"You're not kin." Thad turned to the doctor. "I thought Johnny was ready to see me."

"This," said Rosenfeld, "is—is Mr. Gunder, with the United States Government."

"Agent Lyle Gunder," the large man amplified, "with the Total Security Agency. I serve as a liaison between Walbrook Enterprises and the Government. I screen people." He strode up to Thad. "Before you go any further I'm going to run a few tests on you."

"What—what's this all about?" demanded the doctor, "I conducted—"

"The old guy himself ordered it." Gunder jerked his head at Thad. "You'll have to come to House Two. By the way, what was your favorite vegetable as a kid?"

"Crooked-neck squash." Thad began to roam around the white room. "All the pictures have been moved."

"What was the name of your favorite stuffed toy when you were three?" asked the big TSA agent.

"Doggie," said Thad.

"Which knee did you—"

"Don't let them wear you down, Unc." A tall, smiling young man came in through a side door. He was about Thad's age and looked something like Thad, the altered, worked-over Thad. But he was thicker and there was a difference about the upper part of his face. "I believe in you. Purely on faith, since I wasn't even born until long after they stuck you on ice."

"It wasn't ice," corrected Dr. Rosenfeld.

"I know, Doc," said the young man. "I'm Lon Walbrook, Unc." He clutched Thad around the shoulders. "Bob II's boy. You remember my dad, don't you?"

"A shadowy little boy," said Thad. "He used to like to suck on the tips of felt markers."

"That sounds like Pop for sure, Unc. Except he's less shadowy now," said Lon. "He's really developed balls in the last few years. He's down in South Amer—"

"Stop hugging this alleged great-uncle of yours," said Gunder. "I've got to get him over to the research rooms right now."

"Is this any way to treat the walking dead, Gunny?" Lon stood back while Gunder led Thad away

toward another door. "I'll see you again up in J.P.'s lair later, Unc. I'm afraid you'll find poor Gramps hasn't held up as well as you."

"I've had a lot more rest," said Thad.

Lon laughed. "I can see I inherited my sense of humor from you, Unc."

"What was your best subject in junior high?" asked the large Gunder. He opened the door and stepped through.

"Paddle tennis." Thad followed the TSA man down an orange-tinted plastic tubeway.

Dr. Rosenfeld brought up the rear, saying, "I'm—I'm still darned if I can see why you have to—"

Gunder grabbed open the door at the tubeway's end. "Why the hell are you here?"

When Thad stepped into the domed anteroom of House Two, he saw a lanky, sandy-haired man smiling tentatively at him from far across the room.

The man held a bulky plyofolder tight against his chest. "Hello," he said across the hollow distance. "Hello, I'm . . . uh ... well, hello, Father."

Thad grinned, walked over to the tentative man. "You must be my boy, my son Alex." He reached out a hand to the fifty-five-year-old Alex Walbrook.

"Yes . . . uh . . . that's who I am, Father." He shifted the folder up toward his armpit. He lost control and it dropped, flapping, scattering microcards. "Sorry . . . uh . . . this is all rather awkward, isn't it? Encountering my own father again after so long . . . and ... uh . . . here you are younger than I am." He started to bend toward the fallen materials.

Thad caught his hand and shook it. "It's good to see you, Alex. You've turned out well."

"Oh . . . uh . . . I really don't know, Father," said the son of Robert I. "If you'd been around . . . uh . . . I think I might . . ."

"Get that crap gathered up," said Gunder, joining them. "What are you moping around down here for anyhow?"

On his knees, Alex replied, "Well, Lyle, I was . . . uh . . . I was in the files."

"There's an extensive amount of information filed here in House Two," said Dr. Rosenfeld. "Several—several file rooms down that blue corri—"

"Enough chitchat," said Gunder. "I want to get this guy in where we can check him out real good. Fingerprints, eye patterns, the works."

Alex rose lopsidedly, leaving most of the tiny file cards on the plastic mosaic floor. "Well, I'm ... uh . . . happy that you're back, Father."

"So am I." Thad patted the lanky man on the shoulder.

"Save your hugging and kissing until we figure out who this guy is for sure."

"You . . . uh . . . ought to remember, Gunder, that I'm . . . uh . . . part of the Walbrook family."

"Uh . . . oh . . . uh . . . really?" chuckled the TSA agent.

Thad took hold of Gunder's arm, pressed. "Let's take our tests."

"I feel this is redundant," said Dr. Rosenfeld, trailing the two of them toward the wide yellow door of the test rooms.

During the next hour six machines, two robots, three human lab technicians and a Negro-tinted android examined Thad. After that, Gunder asked him to wait in an alcove off the enormous gray metal test lab.

"This is quite a setup," remarked Thad as Gunder slid the accordian door shut. "Built it just to run me through?"

"We can do a lot of things down here." The blue accordian door closed tight.

Thad slouched in a rubber chair, watching the gray unadorned ceiling. He rubbed at his naked backside.

About ten minutes later Gunder returned. "Come on out here, buddy."

Thad strolled barefooted back into the larger room, followed Gunder around assorted mechanisms.

"Show this thing your hands again." Gunder jerked a thumb at the large tank-shaped machine which had tested Thad's fingerprints and palm patterns earlier.

Swallowing, Thad thrust both hands into the waist-high slots. He hoped the Opposition Party

technicians had done as good a job as Crosby Rich claimed.

The tank whirred, hummed, then made a faint whistling sound from someplace around back.

"Well?" demanded Gunder.

"Perfect match," said the speaker grid of the machine. "This man and Robert Walbrook I have identical prints."

With lips pressed tight together, Gunder took a deep breath. "Then why did you want to check him out again?"

"Well, actually he has a fascinating life line. I'd predict he's going—"

"Oh, shit." Gunder jerked Thad's hands free of the machine.

"Do I pass?" grinned Thad. Gunder turned his back, gathered up Thad's clothes from a nearby chair top. "So far, buddy. So far, but I got a lot more tests in mind for you." He threw the clothes at Thad.

"Some you won't even be aware of."

"Sock," said Thad.

"What?"

"You left one of my socks on the chair there."

Gunder snorted, went striding away.

V

Thad, Lon and Dr. Rosenfeld moved through nearglass tunnels and saltbox houses, finally reaching House Six.

A chubby pink man with an aluminum right arm was awaiting them at the second-floor landing, shuffling almost imperceptibly on the thick flowered carpeting. "I am Badjett, sir," he said to Thad.

Lon asked, "Badj, aren't you going to hug the prodigal?"

"I am only in my very early fifties, Mr. Lon," answered Badjett. "Therefore I never had the pleasure of serving Mr. Robert I. Come this way, sir."

Lon followed. "We're all going to call on Gramps."

Badjett raised his left eyebrow. He stopped in front of a real oak door, inserted a metal finger in the keyhole. The door swung inward.

The first person Thad saw was not old John Phillips Walbrook but a slim young girl. She was standing beside a high window, a dark girl with long black hair. The glare of the declining sun on the snow outside made a blue haze all around her. When she turned to face Thad he couldn't see her clearly, yet he knew there was something special about her. The way she held herself, the way she moved toward him.

"Uncle Robert," she said in her gentle voice. "We're all so very glad you've returned to us." She was about twenty-four and very pretty, in a quiet, delicate way.

"Company manners today, Sis?" laughed Lon. "This is my sister Jean-Anne, Unc. What are you calling yourself of late, Sis? Have you gone back to Walbrook?" He patted Thad on the shoulder.

"You're in luck today. I stayed home from Walbrook Enterprises to greet you and Sis is here between marriages. It's too bad Dad couldn't get back from South America in time."

"Won't you come this way, Uncle Robert," said the lovely dark girl. "Grandfather is very anxious to see you."

"This is her lady act, Unc," said Lon. "Fools all and sundry until they—"

Thad took hold of Lon's arm just above the elbow and squeezed. "I suggest you adopt a respectful silence in the presence of your elders."

Seated in front of an empty fireplace was a bent old man in his eighties. He sat far forward, holding tight to the arms of his soft black chair. "We still haven't been able to do anything about age," he said to Thad. "I have a whole lab full of halfwits, overpaid halfwits, working on the problem."

Lon said, "Defense work pays better."

"We even have halfwits in the family now," said J. P. Walbrook.

"It's good to see you again, Johnny," said Thad down at the old man.

"Is it?" The old man studied Thad's face. "If only I . . . well. So you're back, Bob? I apologize for imposing even more tests today, but . . . Dr. Rosenfeld's told us most of your story, and of course I had it thoroughly checked by my security people. Still, I'd like to hear the details from you."

"Dr. Rosenfeld knows more than I do," began Thad. "Apparently—I don't quite know how yet—I woke up when the rioting destroyed the vaults in Grosse Pointe. I have a feeling a couple of other guys who were stored there did, too." He shook his head, which was now a good replica of the real Robert I. "From then on until a few months ago . . . well, I'm not very clear. I must have wandered around from place to place, not knowing who I was."

"Yes," said the old man, "we were always afraid of that. The storage affecting the memory cells of the brain."

"Only temporarily, fortunately," said Dr. Rosenfeld from behind the old man's big black chair. "He began to remember who he was five months ago and—"

"I went to a doctor," said Thad. "I was living in a ghetto area known as Cleveland, when I started getting glimpses, pieces of memory coming back. I knew a doctor who was working with the down-and-outs, a man I could trust with what I figured might only be some kind of delusions."

"Fortunately," said the doctor, "the doctor was a man I know."

"All those conventions you hit do pay off, Doc."

"This colleague contacted me," continued Rosenfeld. "I began to do some checking, finally went out to Cleveland myself. I told no one in the family at first. I wanted to be relatively certain this young man was actually Robert B. Walbrook I. As you know, Mr. Walbrook, I made numerous tests before I even—"

"Yes, I saw all that material, Rosenfeld," cut in J.P. "And, Bob, what about the leukemia?"

"You remember we didn't know what all the side effects of the pseudodeath process would be. Johnny," said Thad. "There seems to have been a total remission."

"That's true, as I reported to you," reminded the doctor.

"Glory be," said Lon, "a miracle. And we're not even certain Walbrook Enterprises had anything to do with it."

"You and your sister can leave us now," ordered the old man in a slow voice. "You as well, Doctor."

When the three were gone Thad sat down on the floor in front of the fireplace. It was a characteristic Robert I posture.

The old man continued watching him. At last he said, "You can have your old rooms in the first house again." He held out his hand. "Welcome home, Bob."

VI

It was two days before Thad got a chance to prowl. Christmas Eve and everyone seemed preoccupied. From the window of his suite in the original house he could see the snow falling heavier down through the darkness, swirled by a harsh wind. He left his floating see-through chair and hurried across the room.

Only silence in the hallway. He moved quietly sideways out through the doorway. So far none of the material on Walbrook Enterprises he'd been given to go through had contained one mention of the Hellhound Project. Today all the microcards and wordspools had dealt with the pharmaceutical division of Walbrook.

Since they wouldn't bring any defense and weaponry material to him, Thad decided he'd go looking for it on his own. He got safely down to the foyer. He could hear the kitchen robots now, laughing and rattling, joking with the imported French android chef.

Thad let himself into the tube tunnel leading to House Two. He'd seen Gunder take off in a family air cruiser at twilight, so he wouldn't have to worry about the bulky TSA agent.

The blue corridor leading to the file rooms was dimly lit with hanging twists of lightstrip. Seasonal music was flowing out of the tiny speakers planted along the floor.

"Very festive," said Thad. He pushed open a door marked File Room A.

It was long and narrow and smelled of metal. Two walls were made up of metal-doored cubicles. At the rear was a row of retrieval machines and six four-legged microreaders.

Thad had been briefed by OP on how all these mechanisms worked. He located the central index box, which was built into the wall behind the retrieval machines. Squatting, since the control panel was set in low, he studied the face of the box. *The Hellhound stuff may not be stored in this room*, he thought to himself, *but I should at least be able to find out where it is.*

He was reaching out for the punch-buttons when something touched the back of his neck.

"Nobody should work on Christmas Eve."

It was Jean-Anne, dark and pretty, standing with one warm hand outstretched. He grinned up at her. "You move very circumspectly."

"I guess I do. I saw you heading this way from my room," she said. "I wanted to invite you to see the tree get trimmed."

"Aren't all the trees trimmed by now?"

"We always leave the one in the living room here in House Two for tonight," said the girl. "It's an old family custom."

"Relatively old," said Thad, starting to get up.

Jean-Anne slid a hand under his arm. "Let me help you, Uncle Robert."

"Hey," said Thad. "Even though I was born nearly eighty years ago, I'm not really feeble."

The girl let go, smiling. "You're my great-uncle, though," she said. "I can't help thinking of great-uncles as venerable old souls. A lifetime of conditioning."

"I'm probably one of the few youthful great-uncles around," admitted Thad as they left the file room.

"Word is getting out, by the way, about you," said Jean-Anne. "Inquiring people from the Conglomerate News Network, the *Fairpress* and *Time-Life* have been knocking at the gates."

"All to be turned away?"

"Oh, yes. Grandfather doesn't like interviews of any kind and you . . . well, you he wants to handle especially carefully."

The living room was lit only by globes of pale orange light floating up near the domed ceiling. In the center of the room stood a six-foot-tall Christmas tree, its strong pine smell filling the big room.

Thad asked, "One of ours?"

"Yes, a Walbrook nearwood longlife tree," answered the girl. "You can tell by the smell, too piney to be real."

"I haven't gotten to our lumber business yet. Also, I can't find anything on the defense . . ."

Christmas carols started up in the far corner of the room. Three tank-shaped, chest-high robots whirred across the room to circle the tree. One robot carried a basket stuffed full of tinsel, another long twisting chains of realistic-looking holly and the third a carton of nearglass bulbs.

"I thought we were going to decorate it," said Thad.

"No, Grandfather always thought children got too exuberant and noisy with jobs like this," said the girl. "So he had these servos built to take care if it. They've been with the family almost as long as I can remember. We can sit on the sofa there to watch."

"Careful, careful, children," warned one of the robots as they passed the tree. "Don't come too close, don't touch."

"Very cheerful." Thad eased down onto a see-through sofa filled with blue-tinted water and restless tropical fish. "How long have you been with the family?"

"This time?" She sat close to him, both knees tight together and pointed toward him. "Oh, something like six months. Every once in a while I get married and then later I come home." She folded her arms under her small breasts. "A very dull chronicle it makes. Tell me about . . . what was it like, being asleep all those years?"

"Tinsel last," said a robot as it began to twine holly on the pine-scented tree.

"It was simply like that," he said, "like being asleep."

"Did you dream?"

Thad thought. "No," he said finally.

Jean-Anne hugged herself tighter. "How awful. It *is* like being dead."

"The next best thing," he answered, grinning. "Do you get much involved in the various family enterprises?"

"Me? Oh, some, but I—"

"Hum." Badjett had drifted into the room. He coughed again, his glistening metal hand shielding his mouth. "We have had word that Mr. Robert II will arrive shortly."

"Good," said the girl. "It'll be nice to have Dad home on Christmas. He's almost always someplace else on holidays."

Badjett's pink face was turned toward Thad. "Mr. John suggests you join him in House Six for a short business meeting in one half hour, sir. Mr. Lon and Mr. Robert II, fresh from his tour of South America, will also attend."

"Won't my son be there, Badjett?"

"Mr. Alex is not often invited to these meetings, sir," explained Badjett. "His restlessness sometimes annoys Mr. John."

"I see," Thad said to the cherubic butler. "O.K., I'll be there."

A little over a half hour later he was in the study of J.P. Walbrook. A new fire was going in the fireplace. You could still see the Walbrook Enterprises monogram on the pseudologs. The old man sat as he had the last time Thad had seen him, clutching tight to the chair arms as though he were afraid of pitching over onto the floor.

Lon, holding a steaming cup of rum grog, was strutting back and forth in front of the high windows. "Pop's coming home for the holidays, Unc," he said when Thad entered. "It will be very gala. Maybe we can have one of the robots festoon him with mistletoe." He squinted through a window at the darkness. "Looks like the festive red and green lights of his air-cruiser fast approaching now."

J.P. asked, "How are you coming with your backgrounding, Bob?"

"Considering I have to fill myself in on fifty years, not bad," Thad answered. "I haven't come across anything pertaining to our defense business, though. Since that makes up such a hefty part of—"

"We'll inform you on that aspect soon," promised the old man. "In fact, we may get into some facets of our government work tonight."

"Now you're back in the fold, Unc, maybe you can help cure Gramps of the habit of holding these meetings of his right before dinner," said Lon.

"We used to have them before breakfast," said Thad, remembering something he'd learned during his long days of OP processing.

Lon made a slurping sound over his cup. "Just so I don't miss the plum pudding tonight."

The door opened. A tall, thin man, bald and slightly stooped, walked into the room. He was shrugging out of an all-season flying jacket. "Good evening, Father."

"You've been informed of the good news," the old man said. "We've located Bob, after all these years."

The bald man took three steps in the direction of Thad. Then he shook his head. "This man can't be Robert Walbrook I," he said.

VII

The old man was out of his chair, pacing the room in a slow, crooked way. Thad was no longer there. Stopping near the high windows, J.P. reached out one knobby hand to touch the glass. "The winters get colder each year," he said. "What do you mean by what you said, Robert?"

His bald son hesitated. "I merely lost control of myself, Father." He was standing, slightly bent, with his back to the fireplace. "You know, travel shock, the holiday tensions . . . I blurted out the first thing which came to my mind when I saw him."

"You were a small boy when Bob had to be put away," reminded J.P. He slowly turned. "Stop tapping that mug against your teeth, Lon."

"Sorry, Gramps." Lon had taken the old man's chair and was sitting in it sideways with his legs

swinging over one arm of it. "Family squabbles always excite me."

"What makes you say he isn't Bob?" the old man asked his son.

Placing his palm against his forehead and then sliding it up onto his scalp, Robert II said, "I don't know exactly, Father. There's something about him . . . I'm not certain, but he struck me on first glance as being . . . well, not a Walbrook."

"Doesn't have our thoroughbred look, huh, Pops?"

"In a way that is what I mean, yes."

J.P. coughed a dry cough. "You don't imagine I allowed him to come here without looking into everything first?"

"No, I'm aware of what was done by way of investigation," answered Robert II. "I went over all the memos and videograms you sent me, Father."

The old man's head was ticking up and down as he watched the whirling snow. "He checks out on every point. We've gone into the story and it all turns out to be true, the wanderings, the time in Cleveland. And Dr. Rosenfeld ran an incredible number of checks on him before bringing him here to us. Fingerprints, retinal patterns ... everything matches."

Robert II said, "According to Dr. Rosenfeld."

"That hulking Gunder has also made numerous tests," the old man told him. "That is in addition to the independent checks I had made."

"Many things can be falsified," said Robert II. "Most of Uncle Robert's detailed medical records are lost, it seems. So we have no real proof."

J.P. insisted, "It's much harder to fake his memories, his attitudes, the way he walks and talks. It's all as I remember him."

"From fifty years ago, Father, from another century."

"You'll find, should you reach an age comparable to mine, Robert, that the early years of your life become clearer rather than dimmer as you reach this end of your life."

Robert II rubbed his bare head again. "You'd like this to be him," he said. "You've missed him, all these years . . . while he was in the vault and afterwards when we thought he was dead."

"Yes, I've missed Bob," admitted J.P. "There aren't many like him around anymore. But, Robert, I've never made a decision or a judgment on emotion. This man is my brother and—"

"So you're going to take him completely into the fold, Gramps," said Lon. "Let him help you run things."

"Yes, I am," said the old man. "That's only fair. It was what Bob and I agreed on back then when he submitted to the pseudodeath business. It's what the law says is fair."

Robert II said, "Certainly, Father. Let's, however, be cautious . . . let's be absolutely certain he is Robert B. Walbrook I."

"I am certain."

"Lyle Gunder is running his own check, using all the Total Security Agency facilities, Father. Nothing will be lost if we wait for the results of that."

"What do you mean, wait?"

"I think Pop means we can still toss a few fatted calves Unc's way," suggested Lon. "We ought to hold off, though, on letting him in on all the family secrets."

"Yes, exactly," said Robert II. "I think that would be an excellent approach to the problem, Father."

"I don't see Bob's return as a problem." The old man pressed his fingers to the dark glass of the window. "Very well, Robert. We'll be, to please you, a bit more cautious than we have been."

"Thank you, Father."

VIII

They didn't try to kill Thad until two days later.

Just after lunch Thad was in his suite of rooms in House One, working in the small den which had been Robert Walbrook I's. Old J.P., as well as Robert II, had provided him with more background

material. Several cartons of micro-cards, bundles of fax copies, but still nothing at all about Hellhound.

His television set out in the living room suddenly turned itself on. "Ladies and gentlemen, the President of the United States."

"My friends," said Warren Parkinson in his nervous voice, "there's nothing to get excited about. I really only . . . well, I like to talk to the American people now and then. And as President of the country, not to mention being Commander in Chief of the armed forces, I have a perfect right. I mean, I can come on and say hello there to my people any old time I want. Well, actually . . . one thing is sort of bothering me. I keep hearing talk about my health ... what was it Mr. Reisberson of our illustrious *Washington Post-Star* called me? 'A nervous twitch,' I believe. 'That nervous twitch in the White House,' I believe is how he put it . . ."

Thad strolled into the living room, tried to turn off the set. It wouldn't allow that.

"I mean," continued the President, licking his lips, "I only last week had a complete—really head-to-toe—physical. I'm—and here I'm quoting the Surgeon General himself—I'm 'shipshape'. Look, I even brought you copies of my X-rays and my electrocardiograms and my brainwave recordings to look at. Well, admittedly the old brain does show a slight . . ."

Thad's phone rang. "Hello?"

The dark lovely Jean-Anne showed on the small square screen. "Care to take a walk, Uncle? Or are you glued to the President."

"A walk would be fine, my child."

"Oh, am I still addressing you as though you were venerable? Forgive it. I'll see you out behind House Two in five minutes."

On his way downstairs Thad encountered Alex Walbrook on the staircase.

"Oh . . . uh . . . hello, Father," said the lanky man, attempting a smile. He had his arms full of bundles of fax memos, neatly tied. "I was just . . . uh . . . coming to talk with you."

"What about, Alex?"

The son of Robert I shrugged his narrow shoulders. "Nothing . . . uh . . . important. It can wait if you—"

"I promised Jean-Anne I'd take a stroll with her," said Thad. "Drop in later."

"I'd like to, yes," said Alex. "I hardly get to see you. They don't allow me into many of the . . . uh . . . top-level meetings, you know. And they . . . uh . . . they're going to keep you . . ." He turned the sentence into a cough, closed his mouth on it.

"Going to keep me what?"

"I ought not to . . . but . . . uh . . . you are my father, after all," said the lanky Alex in a low voice. "I'm not supposed to . . . uh ... know this, but I find things out. It's been decided to keep you out of the . . . uh ... top-priority things until . . . uh . . . until everyone is satisfied."

Thad grinned. "So the Gunder view of me is shared around the old homestead?"

"Not by me, Father," Alex told him. "But I'm afraid . . . well, you'll be wanting to get to Jean-Anne. You're sure it . . . uh ... won't bother you if I pop in on you later?"

"Not at all," Thad assured him.

Jean-Anne was already outside when he got there. She wore an all-season hiking suit of black and scarlet, a small scarlet cap on her head. "I like to walk up through the woods, up toward the hills over there."

"I think I'm up to that."

"Let's proceed then, Uncle." She took his hand, leading him away from the complex of saltbox houses.

The day was chill and clear, the thin sunlight tinting the snow a pale yellow. "Our President seemed particularly twitchy today," remarked Thad.

"You've been away. He was almost serene compared to the—" "I'm a little unsettled by the fact we're doing so much work for the government," Thad said. "With a guy like Parkinson in charge. By the way, I still haven't been given very much about the defense end of Walbrook Enterprises."

"You're not supposed—" began Jean-Anne. She took her hand out of his, touching her fingertips to

her cheek.

"Not supposed to be told?"

The girl looked away. "Will you allow me to tactfully change the subject, Uncle? I'm sorry."

"Sure," Thad said. Increasingly since he'd been here the idea of trying to get information from the girl bothered him. The Opposition Party might not like it, but there it was. He began talking about other things.

When they were ten minutes into the oaks and maples a crunching sound commenced off to the right.

"Don't let it bother you," Jean-Anne said when she noticed the turning of his head. "It's Chambers Twenty-six probably."

"And who's he?"

"Or it might be Chambers Twenty-five. Grandfather has two of them stationed in this part of the forest," she explained. "Robots, as you might imagine. It's an old-world touch really, they're gamekeepers. Designed to look after the wild life and keep off poachers."

"Do we get many poachers?"

"Not since I can remember. Mostly Chambers Twenty-five and Chambers Twenty-six take care of feeding the squirrels and birds in the winter. Occasionally they shoot a rat."

The crunching grew louder. All at once Thad's back began to feel strange, as though he had a big X drawn between his shoulder blades. He glanced over his shoulder. "Down!" he shouted as he pushed Jean-Anne over into the snow.

The big robot's first shot missed Thad, sizzled the dry bark off a dark oak trunk.

Thad was on the ground, rolling away fast in the snow.

The robot had a blaster rifle built into its right arm. The weapon crackled again. The snow two feet to the left of Thad melted, splashing him with great drops of boiling water.

He kept on rolling, got up and dived around behind another thick oak.

"Stop it, Chambers!" Jean-Anne was crying.

Hunched low, Thad went running through the trees, circling over the hard-packed snow. He got himself behind the big slow-moving mechanism. The robot wore a thick red Mackinaw, and nothing else, over its chrome-plated body. And for some reason a pair of earmuffs were stuck on its thick head.

Thad shinnied up a tree directly to the rear of the thing.

The gamekeeper must have heard that. It began slowly to turn.

Thad was in the air, hurling himself toward it. Both his booted feet slammed hard into the robot's back.

There was an enormous clanging thud. The gun-hand went off once more, burning up brush, splashing hot snow. Then the big gamekeeper tottered, toppled forward.

Thad went for mechanism's head, jumping up and down. Cracking and smashing sounded beneath his boots.

Chambers, whichever one this was, gave a flap of the arms. A smell of burning plastic began to spew out of his ears.

"Uncle Robert," said Jean-Anne. "You can stop, he's . . . dead or whatever you call it with machines."

Thad had driven the machine's bright head far down into the hard snow. He stepped back and away, wiping at his face. "Don't tell me that bastard mistook me for a poacher."

"I can't understand what happened." She was still kneeling in the snow where he'd shoved her. She held out a slender hand to him.

He stood watching her for a few seconds before helping her up. "Somebody," he said.

"What?" She brushed away snow.

Thad shook his head, saying, "Probably a malfunction. Yeah, I'm sure that will turn out to be the

explanation. We'd better get inside before the other one makes a try."

"Other one?"

"You told me there were two of them, Twenty-five and Twenty-six," said Thad. "Which one was this?"

Jean-Anne turned her face toward the sprawled mechanism. "I can't tell now," she said.

IX

The paramedical robot handed Thad back his clothes. It gave a negative shake of its ball-shaped head before rolling out of the white metal room.

"Bend over a little further," suggested Dr. Rosenfeld. "Urn, yes, everything—everything seems to be just—just fine, Mr. Walbrook."

"They wouldn't have been able to plant a mike in there without my knowing." Thad straightened up, began dressing.

"You—you're not supposed to say anything relevant until I give you the key phrase," the grizzled physician reminded. "Yes, Mr. Walbrook, you're in the pink of condition. That's the phrase." He slipped off his synthskin glove and crossed to let the wall sanitizer work on his hands. "And don't get overconfident about where and where—where not they can hide a bug on you or your clothes. Obviously—obviously somebody out there on the estate is suspicious of you."

"O.K., we can talk now." Short, stocky Crosby Rich of the Opposition Party came into the examination room eating a kelpdoughnut.

"I'll attend to my other patients." When Dr. Rosenfeld was out in the corridor Rich said, "A dumbbell. So they tried to knock you off, huh?"

"Yep." Thad seamed his tunic. "Rosenfeld tells me you've been doing a good job fooling the Walbrook tribe," said Rich. "Where'd you screw up?"

"Wait now," said Thad. "If somebody is suspicious I'm not the real Robert, why not simply call my bluff? Unmask me in public, in front of old J.P."

"If they figure you for a spy, they may want to get rid of you quickly and permanently," said Rich. "I'm not sure."

"It could also be there are Walbrooks with purely personal reasons for wanting to do me in."

"You said, in the report Rosenfeld smuggled out, that Robert II accused you of being a fake."

Sitting in a white metal chair, Thad said, "Yeah, that he did. I get the impression the old man talked him out of the notion."

"Robert II would like you to be false," said the small, dark OP man. "Before you showed up there was only one rickety old dumbbell between him and complete control of the whole works."

Thad said, "And this Total Security guy, Gunder, is still checking up on me."

"We know about Gunder. So far all the pieces of your phony background that we planted are holding up." He took an angry bite out of the kelpdoughnut. "There is one thing, though. Gunder's been able to get a lead on some old medical records of the authentic Robert I. These include things like a brain-wave recording."

Thad poked his tongue up under his upper lip to produce a popping sound. "Then I should get out of there soon as I can."

"We may be able to sidetrack Gunder. But a little swiftness wouldn't hurt," said Rich. "Haven't you got anything on the Hellhound Project?"

"Not as much as a mention," answered Thad. "I gather from Alex that there's a gentlemen's agreement to keep most of the security stuff away from me until I've proven myself."

"So they still don't quite accept you as the real thing."

"The old man does. It's Robert II who's plugging for second-class status for me I think," said Thad. "Alex calls me 'Father'."

Rich finished the doughnut. "I only eat these things when I'm in a tense situation." He wandered over to a blank metallic wall, leaned with his back against it. "Rosenfeld tells me the girl was with you when the

gamekeeper tried to pot you. Did she maybe set you up?"

"No," answered Thad.

"You sure?"

"She could have been killed herself. The damn machine was shooting all over the place."

Rich watched him for a few seconds. "Keep remembering Jean-Anne is your grand-niece."

"I know who she is."

"Living with all your loved ones over the holidays has mellowed you, McIntosh," Rich told him.

"You're not the crusty son-of-a-bitch I dragged out of the lower depths of Manhattan a couple of months ago."

"You turned me into sweet-tempered Bobby." Thad left his chair to walk toward the small OP man.

"Don't worry about my judgment being screwed up, Rich."

"O.K., O.K." Rich held his palms toward the approaching Thad. "Get back to the estate now and get us some results. You may—"

"I know," cut in Thad. "I may not have all that much time."

Nodding, Rich repeated, "You may not have all that much time. We aren't certain what Lyle Gunder and his Total Security boys may come up with. Besides . . ."

"Somebody out there may try to kill me again."

X

The second attempt came the following day.

Early in the afternoon Badjett tapped discreetly on the door of Thad's den with his aluminum fist.

"Beg pardon, sir. Mr. John would like you to join him."

Pushing aside a fresh bundle of micrographs, Thad stood. "Sure, O.K."

Badjett entered, holding out an all-season hiking jacket. "I think this will be suitable, Mr. Robert I." "Suitable for what?"

"Since the day is so mild, Mr. John is in the mood to spend some time out-of-doors, sir."

"I didn't know Johnny ever went out where he couldn't control the temperature." He allowed the cyborg butler to help him into his coat. "Where do I find him?"

"He will await you at the snow-car barn," replied Badjett. "You know where that is, I trust."

Thad grinned. "Yes, I do, Badjett. Just this side of our private lake."

He went downstairs, seaming up the jacket. Instead of heading immediately outside, Thad ducked into the connecting tunnel. *Old J.P. must have something pertaining to the Hellhound in his study*, he said to himself as he jogged through the tinted tube. *Now's a good time to look.*

Thad made it through House Two and halfway along the seablue-tinted see-through tunnel linking it to House Three.

Then a loud rapping commenced on the wall of the tube.

Slowing, Thad looked to his left. Alex was out there, an awkward smile touching his lean face.

"Father," he said.

Thad couldn't hear him but he could tell what Alex was mouthing. "Yes, what?"

"J.P. is . . . uh . . . waiting for you down there." He pointed one gloved hand back. "I . . . uh . . . just ran into him and he . . . uh . . . asked me to see what was keeping you." Alex' breath made fuzzy puffballs on the other side of the tunnel wall.

"I thought he wanted me to meet him in his study." Thad returned to House Two and let himself out into the day. By then Alex was gone.

The snow was soft underfoot, slightly muddy in color. The sun felt warm in the hazy afternoon air. Beside the big peak-roofed red synchwood barn the old man was standing alone, bent and resting one knobby hand against the barn door.

"I've had them warm up my snowcar," said J.P. "If you'll help me in, Bob, we can get started on a little ride."

The vehicle had narrow noryl skis on its underside and was the size of a small landcar. It had two

passenger cockpits, both open and unshielded. "One of our own designs I see," said Thad as he boosted the old man into the rear seat. "Where to?"

"Nowhere in particular, Bob." The old man buckled himself in. "It's the feeling of swift movement and rushing air I enjoy."

Thad took the control seat, eased the snowcar out of the shadowy barn. He guided it along level ground, paralleling the wide, frozen lake.

"I wanted to talk with you, Bob."

"O.K., do."

"If you've been feeling that I don't quite accept you or trust you," said the old man, "please try to understand it isn't because ..."

The entire rear-end of the snow-car exploded. Jagged shards of plastic, twisted metal struts, chunks of the compact engine went splattering through the air. The controls seemed to jerk free of Thad as the remains of the machine careened down toward the ice-covered lake.

Thad grabbed the release on his safety belt, jumped up onto his seat and flung himself clear. He hit the slushy snow on his left elbow and knee. His ankle wouldn't work the first time he tried to rise.

After three tries he got himself upright. He spun, went running toward the lake.

The snowcar hung in the air between the snowy ground and the lake. Its backside was nearly gone, a black sooty tangle trailing streamers of harsh blue smoke.

The old man, still strapped in, was slumped far to the left.

The vehicle hit the ice, bounced twice and went skidding in dizzy arcs. The sun-warmed ice groaned, began to crack.

Thad dropped down on his stomach, started to work his way out across the ice of the lake.

The snowcar was moving more slowly. It stopped entirely some thirty feet from the shore.

Reaching the thing, Thad carefully pulled himself up by the runners.

J.P. was alive, but a fragment of the exploded car had torn a wide gash across the back of his head.

Thad ripped him free of the belts, hefted the old man out of the snowcar.

The ice cracked further, with a great wrenching sound.

Flat out again, Thad dragged J.P. back toward the white shore.

"I don't," murmured the old man. "I don't . . . understand."

"Understand what?"

"The gamekeeper," he said. "The gamekeeper . . . malfunctioned. Now the snowcar. It's not . . . typical of Walbrook products. Not at all. I—" He passed over into unconsciousness as Thad got him safely onto solid ground.

XI

"Ever been down here before, Unc?"

Thad was sitting next to a window of the private Walbrook auto-jet. It was early morning outside. "Back in the Twentieth Century," he answered. "It wasn't New Rio then, of course."

"All the wars of liberation here pretty much finished off this part of Brazil," said Lon. "New Rio they built on top of the ruins, proving there's hope for all of us. Right, Sis?"

In the seat next to Thad Jean-Anne said, "I'm starting to have doubts that applies to you."

Lon laughed. "You've been in New Rio before haven't you, Sis? On your first honeymoon as I recall, or was it the second? Were you in any shape to get an impression of—"

"Go sit up with the robot again," Thad told him.

"Don't let our sibling kidding annoy you, Unc." Lon shuffled along the thick airship carpeting to the door he'd just come through. "I came to tell you we'll be landing at our Walbrook field in fifteen minutes. Cheer up, Sis."

"I have," Jean-Anne said to Thad, "mixed feelings about this jaunt, Uncle."

"I'm glad you're along. Being alone in Brazil for a week with Lon—"

"Oh, I enjoy being with you." She smiled a quiet smile. "It's simply that Lon has a way of ... well, I do

know why Grandfather wanted me to accompany you."

"Probably wants you to act as a bodyguard," said Thad, watching the girl's profile.

"Yes, he's been terribly worried since the snowcar accident last week." She locked her hands together, hooked them over one knee. "I know they couldn't find anything wrong with the snowcar or with Chambers Twenty-six."

"It was Twenty-six and not Twenty-five then."

"Yes," she said, frowning. "Don't make it a joke. I'm worried, too. You could have been killed ... twice. And Grandfather as well, the last time."

"These accidents have had one positive result," Thad told the girl. "Johnny has finally taken me completely into his confidence."

"Yes, he appreciates you saving his life. He's grateful and he's not going to let them—" She stopped herself, then said, "I don't know if you'll be happy about what you're going to learn down here."

"I have to know everything Walbrook Enterprises is up to, including this . . . what's it called again? . . . Hellhound Project."

"Yes, that's the name."

"What is it?"

"You'll see when we get to the lab complex outside New Rio," said Jean-Anne. "Can we talk about something else now, please?"

"Sports, literature, the theater? I'm still fifty years out of touch, but—"

The girl put her hand on his. "I'll tell you about the last time I was in New Rio."

A vast strip of formal garden stretched between the lab complex and the rim of the enormous one-way dome which shielded it. There was a jungle brightness all about, intensely green palms, scarlet blooms, great tangles of purple vine. Yellow butterflies flickered high above, multicolored birds called from the branches of high, twisting trees.

Lon laughed, stretching up his arms. "This is what I call a slice of the good life, Unc."

His eyes on the distant cluster of gray domes which made up the Walbrook lab complex, Thad said, "It's greener than Connecticut. Now, when do we get a look at the Hellhound?" They'd beet/ here nearly a half hour, Lon giving them a leisurely tour of the grounds.

"No rush, Unc," said Lon. "Life in South America is paced differently, you know. I'll bet, Sis, you found it even took longer to pick up—"

"I'd just as well go inside." Jean-Anne was holding on to Thad's arm.

"In due time," chuckled her brother. "I thought we'd have a little refreshment out here." His fingers snapped.

Rustling sounded behind them. Thad spun, shaking free of the girl.

It was a silver waiter robot, rolling toward them with a serving tray. The robot had a black mustache.

"Mustache is my idea," said Lon. "Latin touch, Unc."

"Very sophisticated."

"This is real coffee." Lon took two cups off the tray, handing them to Thad and Jean-Anne. "It's still legal in Brazil. Sorry I can't serve you anything harder, Sis."

"You're much too jolly," the dark girl said. "What do you—?"

"Nothing, Sis, honest. It's simply that New Rio excites me." He took the third cup and dismissed the robot. "Carry on, Joaquim." He made an urging gesture with his hand. "Come on, folks, try this great authentic coffee." When they did, he nodded happily.

Jean-Anne began to frowh. She moved to the edge of the mossy path, pushed some high yellow ferns aside. "Lon, these lab animals must have gotten loose."

"Oh, really?"

In a small clearing three chimpanzees were huddled together near the bole of a tree.

"Probably only decorations." Lon slurped at his coffee.

"No, they aren't. See, they have ID tabs on their ankles."

"Huh." Lon beckoned Thad. "What do you think, Unc? Are these lab animals or what?"

Thad joined the others. "They look frightened."

"How can anyone, even a chimp, be afraid out here in this Eden?" asked Lon, laughing.

The chimpanzees grew more agitated now. They held on to each other, pushing back against the tree.

"The trouble with them," observed Lon, "is they know what's been happening to their buddies. So we're not going to get a pure surprise reaction. However . . ."

Thad felt something was approaching, but he didn't see or hear anything. Then, for an instant, he saw three tiny flashes of light over the clearing.

The chimps separated, began trying to climb up into the tree.

One of them got as high as the lowest branch. It gave a chattering scream, fell to the ground clutching at itself. It died in midair.

The other two chimpanzees fell. They twitched for only a few seconds, evacuated and died.

"Oh, damn you, Lon." Jean-Anne hit against him with one clenched hand. "Damn you." She turned, went running away from them.

Thad nodded at the dead chimps. "What did it?"

Lon replied, "What else? The Hellhound."

XII

The middle-sized man was holding it between thumb and forefinger. "I'm justifiably proud of it, my boy," he told Thad.

They were all in an oval room deep within the lab complex. The walls were tinted the same soft blue as Dr. E. Jack Nally's one-piece lab suit.

Thad walked a few steps closer to the black doctor. "So that's the Hellhound."

Jean-Anne, pale, was leaning against a work table. "That's one of three types, isn't it?"

"Very good, dear girl," said Dr. Nally. "You're showing a much keener knowledge of our activities these days."

"She's between husbands, Prof," said Lon. "She's got more time to use the other end of her body." Thad narrowed his eyes, studying the tiny copper-colored object in the lab director's hand. "Looks like a gnat."

"Yes, doesn't it," agreed Dr. Nally. "A harmless little gnat." He let the tiny object roll down into his pink palm, closed his fingers over it. "Yet it is one of the most deadly antipersonnel weapons ever devised, if I do say so myself."

"How does it work?"

"This particular model seeks out body heat," explained the amiable Dr. Nally. "In the demonstration you recently witnessed outdoors, my boy, a few adjustments were made, to make certain it sought out only the monks."

Jean-Anne said, "That was most thoughtful."

"Don't be so peevish, Sis. There was something in the coffee to give you temporary immunity to this particular model."

Dr. Nally tossed the Hellhound, caught it. "What you see here, my boy, is a perfect, micro-miniaturized, antipersonnel missile," he said to Thad. "This particular model, to repeat, seeks out its victims by their body heat and then delivers a lethal shot of quick-acting nerve poison. Death usually supervenes within fifteen seconds." "Kills with a sting," said Thad.

"Similar to a sting, but much more deadly," replied the black Nally. "Incidentally, on this new, improved model we're running about eighty-five percent effective on kills."

"Hey, that's fifteen percent better than the earlier model, Prof."

"Yes," smiled the lab head. "I'm sure it will be more than satisfactory to the Multi-Pentagon in Washington. They almost accepted that last model, until I talked them into renegotiating the contract and coughing up another quarter billion. I think everyone concerned is going to admit it was worth it, more than worth it."

Thad asked, "This is for battlefield use only?"

Dr. Nally's eyes clicked in the direction of Lon before he answered. "This one is, yes. You understand, our own military personnel will be rendered immune to the Hellhounds. I have a miniaturized antimissile device, a spray-on repellent and an oral repellent."

"That was what I spiked our java with, Unc," said Lon.

"Can I see the anti-Hellhound stuff?" asked Thad.

"Shortly, yes. I think the antimissile device, while costlier, affords the best protection," said the black scientist. "As I'll try to demonstrate in a moment. Now, admittedly, an enemy might come up with a countermeasure of his own. However, in wars such as we've been having lately the enemy has usually been of a simple, uneducated sort. It isn't immediately likely they'd come up with anything to stop us. And should they, or their allies, why we can then—"

"There are other types of Hellhound?" asked Thad.

"Yes, my boy."

"How do they differ?"

Lon said, "Wait until tonight, Unc. I'm arranging another little demo for you and Sis over at our tower offices in the heart of New Rio. Can you make it?"

"I'll make it," said Thad.

Thad walked into the tower room an hour after sunset. The sky above New Rio was a dark blue still, the lights of the vast city were starting to snap on. New Rio was a multilevel city, its buildings linked by a crosshatch of ramps. The lights illuminating the twisting, circling ramps flashed on and off, in soft pastel shades. Political slogans glowed on the sides of government buildings.

"Who was your fifth-grade Ceramic Therapy teacher?"

Thad saw Lyle Gunder, the large blond Total Security agent, rocking in a mosaic chair in a dark corner of the Walbrook Enterprises office. "Miss Cooper," he answered.

"Aha!" Gunder bounced out of the chair. "Caught you, it was Miss Santos."

"Only for the first part of the semester. Miss Santos ran off with a potter."

Gunder sank back into his tile rocker. "You're absolutely right," he admitted. "Be smug while you can. I've got hold of Robert B. Walbrook I's complete medical dossier, which we originally thought was lost when Detroit and environs went blooey. It's being faxphoned down here to New Rio. Care to submit to a few little—"

"Hold off on the inquisition, Gunny." Lon was standing beside a long tin desk on which sat a television receiver.

"Why this twilight test?" Thad asked him.

"Only following Gramps' wishes," smiled Lon. "He wants you to be filled in on everything, Unc."

"This is a whopping mistake on the old coot's part." Gunder grunted out of the chair. "What was your favorite book when you were ten?"

"The Beasts of Tarzan." Thad inclined his head at the TV screen. "Some kind of private view, Lon?"

Lon laughed. "You can bet your keaster on that, Unc. Very private."

Gunder stalked to the door. "I'm going to watch over at the TSA building. We've got our own spy camera watching. Don't say I didn't warn you." He left the two of them in the dim room.

Thad asked, "Is Jean-Anne coming?"

"Sis claims she's still unsettled by Doc Nally's little monkey act this afternoon," said Lon. "If you ask me, I think she's going to sneak out of her rooms at the Zombador Hotel and cruise the bars. She's got a great fondness for lowlife saloons and—"

"What do you want me to see?"

"Another Hellhound test," replied Lon. "But of a different model."

"I heard this afternoon," said Thad, "that there was more than one version of the thing. How is this one different?"

Lon touched the side of the receiver. "Much more sophisticated, Unc."

A picture blossomed on the screen. It showed a public square, fringed with artificial palm trees, filling up with people.

"This is over in the workers' part of New Rio," explained Lon. "Our man will be speaking at a street rally in a few minutes. Though with these Latin bastards you find a very cavalier attitude toward getting started on time." He picked up a sheet of faxpaper. "Doc Nally and I figured we'd do these guys in order, the way they are on the list."

"What list?"

Smiling, Lon dropped the paper into a drawer of the tin desk. "We have the names of a dozen men, most of whom belong or are suspected of belonging to a left-wing organization they call the South American Organization of States. Two of them are here in Brazil, one in Peru . . . and so on. Gunder's buddies made up the list and our beloved President Parkinson approved the final version and gave us the go-ahead on this whole field-test operation."

Thad crossed to the desk. "Wait now," he said. "I'm starting to get—"

"Right you are, Unc. Walbrook Enterprises is now in the assassination business."

"Who the hell authorized that?"

"Gramps, Dad and me," the smiling Lon told him. "You were still wandering around in the wilderness when everything was set up and O.K.'d, Unc."

"Johnny never would . . ."

"Sure he would," said Lon. "We're talking about a two or three billion dollar contract here. Oops, there's Quartel, Top of the list and considered very dangerous to the best interests of the United States in Latin America."

"I'm not going to let you—"

"Much too late to stop, Unc."

The viewing unit showed a crowd of three hundred people in the square now, waving and shouting as a stocky man of fifty was lifted onto the back of a landtruck. He greeted them with both hands held high over his head.

"The old Hellhound should catch up with him in another few minutes," said Lon. "One of TSA's boys is supposed to release it the minute Quartel shows."

Thad shook his head. He asked, "How do you know it will find him? Him specifically?"

"This model is considerably more sophisticated than the battlefield version," said Lon. "It can be set to go after one specific person. You do that, Unc, by feeding in a lot of info, including brainwave patterns and such like. What it adds up to is there's only one person in the world who matches the total picture the little Hellhound has been fed. It won't give up till it finds that person."

Thad didn't say anything. He rested his fists on the desk edge, leaning toward the small screen. Quartel had begun to speak to the crowd.

"Eventually this version of the Hellhound will bring Walbrook Enterprises a lot more revenue than the military one," continued Lon. "Sometimes we go six months or even a year Without a significant war, but annoying politicians are always with us. You came back from the dead at exactly the right time, Unc. Walbrook Enterprises is on the rise once . . . hey, there he goes!"

Quartel's body was quivering. He doubled, clutching himself, silently screaming. Then he pitched off the truck and was hidden by the crowd.

"Just like the chimps," said Lon.

XIII

Jean-Anne walked close to the edge of the sea-blue ramp. Down below was an intricacy of walkways. In the night-black sky above the tallest tower fireworks were erupting. Great splashes of yellow, scarlet and gold. "They aren't celebrating anything. The current president of Brazil just likes fireworks. It happens every night at this time," she said. "Why did you want to come out for a stroll, Uncle?"

Beside her, Thad said, "It's a little tougher for anyone to overhear us outdoors. Let's keep moving."

"Why are you afraid of being overheard, Uncle?"

Thad said, "For one thing, because I'm not your uncle."

She turned her face toward his. "No, I didn't think you were." "You didn't?"

"You're very good at it, and I know you've got Grandfather and the others convinced," the girl said. "But you simply are not a Walbrook. I can sense you don't have the inner coldness and ruthlessness we all carry around."

"Even you?"

"Me especially," said the girl. "Lon's right about me. I'm really a very mean and destructive—"

"I have a different opinion," said Thad. "And later on we'll go into it in detail. Right now, Jean-Anne, there's something else which—"

"There was some other kind of test tonight, wasn't there?" she asked. "I know it was something even nastier than this afternoon . . . because of the way Lon insisted I shouldn't miss it."

"Yeah, it's worse. They're testing it on people."

"People?" She slowed, took hold of his arm.

"Tonight, on a man named Quartel. He was—"

"Yes, I heard it on the news. They said it was a heart attack."

"It was a Hellhound. A variation capable of seeking out a specific person."

"Father and Lon," she said. "They . . . I don't know. I didn't really know about . . . all about this Hellhound Project until we got down here."

"Lon has a list of another eleven men they want to use it on," said Thad. "I'm going to get that list. Then I've got to get all the information I have to the people I work for."

Jean-Anne asked, "Who are they?"

"The Opposition Party," he answered.

The girl nodded her head up and down slowly several times. "Yes, they're not a bad bunch." She moved her hand down his arm and took hold of his hand. "Why are you confessing . . . no, that's not exactly the right word . . . why are you confiding in me?"

"Because I'm going to have to give up my Robert Walbrook I identity now and get out of Brazil fast."

Jean-Anne said, "You could do that without seeing me."

"O.K., I like you, Jean-Anne," he said. "I wanted to—"

"Listen, how are you going to get out of New Rio and away?" "Contact a guy down here for transportation out."

"Don't," she said. "I'll take you back to the United States..I can borrow an aircruiser out at the family field and—"

"No, it may not be safe."

"I want to," she said. "Or don't you trust me?"

"I trust you."

"Then we'll do it," said the dark-haired Jean-Anne. "How long is it going to take you?"

"Give me two hours."

"Fine," she said. "I won't pack, since Lord knows who's watching my hotel. I'll visit a few bistros and slip away to the field. Meet me in Hangar Six." She stopped. "I suppose it's proper for a niece to kiss her great-uncle in public."

Black Dr. Nally trade a fretful noise. "I can't say, my boy, that I fully approve."

"You don't have to approve, Prof." Lon was seated at a long off-white lab table. "You work for Walbrook Enterprises, which is me."

"I assumed we were going to stick to the authorized list."

"This will make it a baker's dozen," said Lon. "I've just obtained, with considerable effort and ingenuity, the real medical records of my dear uncle. So now you have but to assist me in programming this little Hellhound."

"I can't possibly—"

"You will, or you'll be out on your tail, Prof. We don't need you beyond this stage."

"If I assist you, my boy," said Dr. Nally slowly, "I expect to be—"

"I'll put you on my list of especially nifty people," Lon assured him. He chuckled down inside himself.

"After we get this thing ready I want you to wait about an hour before activating it."

"Surely you don't need to worry about an alibi."

"No, no. But I want to be around when this gadget comes for dear old Unc. I've never seen one work up close."

"Ah," said the black scientist. "Yes, that will be interesting. Be sure to make very careful observations."

"You can bet your butt I will," Lon said. "Now let's get to work, Prof."

XIV

The robots let Thad in without any trouble. He stepped into an ascension tube and was carried up to the tower office. The fireworks were still going on in the clear black sky. A huge Brazilian flag, made of bursts of colored tire, was rippling above the towers of New Rio.

The blue, white and green of the flag were reflected on the tin desk as Thad approached it. The list was in the drawer where Lon had dropped it that afternoon.

Thad made a copy with Lon's portable copier, which was sitting on a corner of the desk. He was folding the thin page into an inner pocket when he heard the gentle whoosh of someone rising in the tube.

There was a private exit on the other side of the room. You could only use it from inside. He sprinted to that and pushed out into the night. The narrow ramp connecting the tower to the nearest walkway was tinted a pale orange.

Up in the night a patriotic tableau was exploding.

Thad started to run.

"Hold it!" shouted Lyle Gunder. Stopping, Thad turned toward the approaching Total Security agent. "Marisue McClean," he said. Gunder held a stungun aimed at him. "What?"

"The name of the girl I was in love with back in the second grade," said Thad. "Just remembered."

"What were you doing up here?"

"I own the place, remember?" Gunder said, "If you were Robert B. Walbrook I, you would. But we both know you aren't."

"Do we?"

The large blond man grunted. "We will pretty damn quick," he said as he pushed the gun to within a few inches of Thad's chest. "The medical dossier on Walbrook I has come in. If you don't mind, I'd like you to come on over to the local TSA lab for a few simple tests."

"First thing in the morning," said Thad, grinning.

"First thing now!" Gunder prodded him with the stungun.

Thad dropped to the ramp. He brought his head up straight into the big agent's groin.

"Yow!" The weapon leaped from Gunder's fist.

It was light enough to break through the invisible force barrier protecting the ramp. It went spinning, sparkling as various kinds of light hit it, down and down through the interlacing of ramps.

"You son-of-a-bitch," said Gunder, bent over.

Thad hit him twice more, fighting in the style he'd picked up during his years on Manhattan. He hit Gunder once again.

The large agent's knees jabbed into the ramp surface. He swayed, fell toward the edge. He bumped hard into the unseen guard screen and that slammed him over in the opposite direction. He fell on his left side, his body gradually straightening out into a sharp-angle sprawl. Thad left him and ran again.

Dr. Nally yawned. He shook his head, squinting at the tiny Hellhound on the white table before him. Then, frowning, he glanced up from the table. He sniffed at the air in the room as he looked at the air-conditioner outlet above him.

Then he fell forward onto his work.

After some thirty seconds a figure, wearing a Walbrook Enterprises gasmask, entered the room.

Nudging the slumped and snoring black doctor aside, the figure began to make some adjustments in the Hellhound, using equipment drawn from a flat tan briefcase.

A few moments later the figure produced a second Hellhound missile from the case. That tiny missile was also worked on.

When Dr. Nally awakened fifteen minutes later there was again only the single Hellhound on the table before him. He listened to his voxwatch. After it told him the time, he said, "I'm not taking enough antisleep pills, obviously. Have to up the dosage."

He picked up the miniature missile, carried it to a window and released it.

XV

It started to rain. A warm, slow rain. Lon ducked under the plywood awning of the cafe, poking a finger into the squat Brazilian. "What do you mean, simp?"

"Very sorry, senor," apologized the man. "I lost her."

The rain formed glistening balls on the see-through awning. "Where? Where was she last?"

"As I told you, senor, she vanished somehow out of the Passaro Grande Club up on the twenty-third level," explained the Walbrook Enterprises security man. "That was nearly an hour ago. I returned here to watch her hotel across the way." He had thick, spiky eyebrows, which he raised now. "Perhaps she is with your venerable uncle, Senor Rob—"

"No, she's not. Or rather, I don't know if she is- or isn't. Your associate who was watching Unc is equally good at keeping track of people and he's lost him."

"I am truly sorry, senor."

Lon stepped back out into the warm rain. It was over an hour since he'd left the Walbrook Enterprises labs. By now the tiny Hellhound was in flight, seeking out its target. "Damn, I wanted to watch."

The fireworks were still going on, despite the weather. The sky above the intricacy of ramps was full of blurred bright flowers of fire.

Lon decided to go up to the Passaro Grande and ask his own questions. Maybe he could find out something that simp from security hadn't.

He passed a row of vendors, a stand selling lifetime flowers, a coffee cart and one fat woman peddling bootleg sugarcane.

Lon slowed a few feet beyond the last vendor. A very odd feeling was developing in his shoulders and across the back of his head. He looked over his shoulder, frowning.

"Oh, Jesus!" he said.

He could actually see the thing coming for him. Tiny as it was, he saw it droning through the soft, falling rain.

He began to run. "That bastard Nally."

Lon had the impression he could hear the Hellhound, too.

His foot suddenly slipped on a water-slick stretch of ramp. He fell. "That bastard Nally set me up . . ."

Scrambling upright, he ran again.

But the Hellhound was almost on him.

Lon made a dive, trying to get off the ramp. The unseen protective screen stopped him. "Oh, Jesus, Jesus!" He tried to climb up the invisible wall.

That was where it caught him. Three feet off the ground, hands clawing at nothing.

Lon dropped to the ramp and the rain began to beat down on him.

Up in the black sky more flowers blossomed.

XVI

The aircab stopped, hovering, four feet above the mud. "Would you mind leaping out, *senor*?" the driver asked Thad. "This is as close as I like to get to all that filth." "I'm used to it." Thad paid the fare, went down through the bottom hatch. He gripped the edge of the opening, swung back and forth a few times and let go. He landed on a length of nearwood planking stretched between two scrapshacks. "You don't wish me to wait, do you?"

"No, I'll get another cab out." Thad was sure he hadn't been followed down here to the poverty sector of New Rio, beyond the elevated part of the city. Still it was safer not to leave the cab hanging up there.

"Good luck to you, *senor*." The craft whooshed upward through the rain.

The shack on Thad's left was made of the sides of old freezers, topped with a roof ripped from a war-surplus tank. Beyond it, lopsided cartons and the doors of junked aircabs. A one-legged man was relieving himself against its wall.

Thad walked, tightrope-style, along the plank, jumping to a warped airplane wing that served as a link between the next shacks. Mud splashed up when he hit. A rat, water-soaked, lay dead beside the wing. Thad continued through the cluster of a thousand shacks and huts. The rain tore at him, causing him to lurch against a fence of nearwood scraps. Up ahead, across a bridge of large-size soybean lids, stood the shack he wanted. It was made of the parts of three gutted robot jukeboxes, all strips of silver and gold paint and circles of scarlet and green light. The roof was a thatch of chrome tubing.

Thad knocked on the door just above the speaker grid.

After a moment the bright door inched open. "What do you have to say to me?"

"Otenta chavenas do chiz tepido,"

Thad said into the dimness of the hut.

"I think that's the password."

"What else would it be?" He pushed into the scrapshack. "Where's the phone?"

The old woman who'd opened the door was holding a shining new blaster pistol. "You better say the password one more time."

"Otenta chavenas do chi, tepido."

"Yes, that's it." After holstering the weapon in the wide belt wrapped round her one-piece dress, the gaunt woman crossed the floor to thump a bare foot on a batch of chrome. "What do you think of this place, by the way?"

"A little flamboyant maybe."

"It suits me." She lifted the chunk of flooring and fetched out a pixphone. "The only thing I don't like is the rats. They ate my last phone, or at least they carried it off to their lair. Or nest. What do you call a rat's—?"

"Could you wait outside while I make the call?"

"You can talk in front of me. I've got a top clearance with the Opposition Party."

Picking up the special phone, Thad punched out the number Crosby Rich had given him. In a moment the stocky man's face appeared on the small rectangle of screen. "I've got something for you," Thad told him.

The old woman was squatting in a corner, hunting cockroaches with her thumb.

"Good, because a dumbbell thing has happened here and I'm not sure what it means."

"What?"

"Give me what you've got first." Thad told Rich what he'd found out about the Hellhound.

The OP troubleshooter said, "Little teeny-weeny missiles, huh? That's a bitch of an idea."

The woman cleared her throat.

"They've already used it once down here," continued Thad. "If you've heard about the death of a guy named Quartel up there yet, it was the Hellhound that did it. And they've picked eleven more targets." He took out the list he'd swiped, read the names to Rich.

"You've got to make this all public. That should discourage them until the whole operation can be closed down."

"Isn't there . . . didn't you say there was some defense against the Hellhound?"

"Yeah, but I don't have it. They've got that stuff stored out at the Walbrook Enterprises labs."

Rich had picked up a kelp brioche and was about to take a bite. "Hey, it occurs to me," he said, lowering the roll, "maybe this dumbbell thing that's happened here ties in."

"You haven't told me."

"Dr. Rosenfeld has disappeared, been gone nearly a day," said Rich. "When we checked out his offices we found someone had snatched—"

"My medical records?" asked Thad, his hand tightening on the pixphone receiver.

"Exactly. Do you—?"

"Holy Christ! They're going to send one of those Hellhounds after me."

"I thought you said you drank some repellent?"

"That oral stuff only protects for an hour or two."

"Well, they could simply be—" Thad hung up, spun and ran for the door.

"Bad news?" asked the old woman as he plunged out into the rain and mud.

The doors of the pillbar snapped open and a fat man in a wrinkled tourist suit came tottering out. He stumbled, one knee splashing down into a water-filled pothole. His suit pockets rattled, a beer-bottle-brown container of capsules hopped out to go bouncing and then rolling along the rainy street.

Thad had reached the end of the poverty belt and was in the strip of specialty saloons which rimmed the elevated core of New Rio. He hit again the summoning button on the aircab box screwed to the noryl front of the bar. It was now eleven minutes since he'd talked to Crosby Rich.

"Come here, come here," the fat man told the rolling pill bottle. Thad turned, hurried over to the man. "Let me help you." He retrieved the container, placed it in the fat palm. "Can I help you to your vehicle?"

"That would be a gracious gesture, sir," said the fat tourist as he straightened up. "I can tell by your appearance you are not a footpad or a—"

"Where is it?"

"Where is it?" While he thought, the fat man absently uncapped the pill cylinder and shook two orange and black capsules into his hand. "This is a prewar antibiotic. Can't get it in the States. Makes me feel good all over . . ."

"Is it a landcar or an aircruiser?"

"One of those, yes," replied the dazed pill-freak. "Here's the tag for it, right here." He reached into his coat pocket, causing tiny bottles and boxes to cascade out and fall to the wet street.

Thirteen minutes gone now. Thad scanned the night around him. He saw only heavy raindrops. No sign of a minute Hellhound missile. He thrust his own hand into the man's pocket. He located the round plastic parking tag. "Wait right here, I'll bring it."

On his hands and knees the fat man was gathering up his scattered pills. "I'll take a handful of these blue ones while I'm awaiting your return, sir. Very good for chills and fevers, in case I come down with—"

The man was renting a black and silver aircruiser. It was decked on the top level of a five-level automatic parking tower around the corner from the bar. The tag admitted Thad to the upper floor.

He climbed in, started the cruiser and flew away into the dark. Fifteen minutes had gone by.

The cyborg watchman scratched at the platinum side of his head with three silver fingers and two of flesh. "This is sort of embarrassing, Senor Walbrook," he said. He was standing in the doorway, of the main Walbrook Enterprises lab building, looking out at Thad.

The night rain was falling heavily, rattling down through the branches and leaves of the decorative gardens. "It's important I get in," Thad said. Twenty-two minutes.

"I realize that, and I know you are now one of the head men in all of Walbrook Enterprises," said the cyborg. He rubbed at the curly-haired side of his head with his copper hand. "The thing is, senor, I've no authorization to admit you. I'm certain it's simply negligence on someone's part, but I—"

Thad swung out and hit the man twice on the jaw. He'd selected a spot which was flesh and bone. The watchman sighed. His real eye and his noryl plastic eye clicked shut simultaneously as he collapsed to the floor.

Thad took the man's keys and admittance tags away from him before he'd settled into his final slumped position.

The room containing the anti-Hellhound materials was at the far end of the building as Thad recalled. He was nearly there when a door slid open. Dr. E. Jack Nally stepped out into the corridor and yawned.

"Oops," he said when he saw Thad. "Now, Mr. Walbrook, let me assure you I had absolutely nothing to do—"

Thad pushed him aside. The anti-Hellhound room was three doors farther on. Twenty-nine minutes.

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Dr. Nally behind him. "There it comes."

Thad broke into a run, looking back over his shoulder. A tiny flash of copper seemed to be floating down the dim corridor, patiently, toward him.

He hit the door, dived into the room. The heavy door should stop it. What had Nally said about how the damn things worked indoors? Would it wait outside for him, or get in here somehow?

He sprinted to the wall cabinet where the spray-on anti-Hellhound repellent was kept, jerked the door open. The cabinet was empty.

Thad took a quick deep breath, then began to search the room.

"Here we go," he said aloud.

The container was resting on a small table in the corner. He caught it up, sprayed repellent over himself, liberally. Next he located, in another cabinet, the locket-type device Nally had shown them in the afternoon. Thad hung it around his neck, flicked it on.

A faint pinging sounded above him. Thad looked up to see something emerge from the air-conditioning outlet. It was the Hellhound.

It came diving straight down at him.

He dodged.

The tiny missile swerved, kept dropping toward him.

Two feet short of his face it halted, fluttering. It dropped suddenly to the floor.

Thad, absently stroking the talisman around his neck, stepped round the Hellhound. He went out into the hall.

Dr. Nally was still there. "How does this affect my future with Walbrook Enterprises?" he asked.

XVII

The door of Hangar Six stood half open and pale yellow light was spilling out onto the field from inside the wide turtleback building. Big raindrops glowed yellow as they fell through the slice of light.

Jean-Anne hesitated on the threshold, peering into the hangar. There were two tan aircruisers inside, but no sign of any field personnel, human or robot. She ran her tongue over her lips once, then crossed into the building.

"Guess I'll have to rely on my own mechanical gifts to get one of these things ready to go," the dark-haired girl said aloud.

"That . . . uh . . . won't be necessary. I'll handle the . . . uh . . . technical details, Jean-Anne."

"Uncle Alex." The girl turned.

The lanky man was behind her, immediately to the left of the entry way. He held an olive-colored blaster pistol in his right hand. "If you'll get into that second ship, the . . . uh . . . one against the far wall."

"What are you doing in New Rio?" She didn't move.

"Looking after my own interests," Alex replied, smiling his inadequate smile. "As far as your father and . . . uh . . . old J.P. know I'm delivering some unimportant messages to various . . . uh . . . Latin American subsidiaries."

"Well, fine," said Jean-Anne. "And why are you lurking around this hangar with a gun?"

"Get into the ship now," ordered Alex. "I want you in there."

"How'd you know I was coming?"

"Oh, I . . . uh . . . I'm very good at finding out things," Alex told her. "It's one of the advantages of being visually uninteresting. Quick, inside."

Jean-Anne walked over to the designated aircruiser, climbed up into the passenger compartment.

"What exactly do you have in mind?"

"Another . . . uh . . . accident."

She lowered herself into a chair. "You mean you're the one who tried to kill us with that damn gamekeeper robot?"

"I'm . . . uh . . . very good with things mechanical," he answered. "Though your dear father never bothered to notice that. Yes, I fixed the robot so it would kill you. And I tinkered with the snowcar."

"Neither one worked quite right, though," said the girl. "Which is typical of you, Uncle Alex."

He positioned himself in the cabin so he could watch the front entrance of the hangar. "Tonight's little . . . uh . . . cruiser mishap will succeed," said the lanky man. "Just as Lon's accident will."

"Lon? What have you done to Lon?"

"I . . . uh . . . have done nothing directly," said Alex. "It's the Hellhound I was able to fool with." He gave a thin laugh. "I must admit . . . uh . . . I indulged in a little irony there."

"You sent a Hellhound after him?"

"That's where the . . . uh . . . humor comes in. You see, Lon was intending to use the Hellhound on Robert I," he said. "We're a wonderful family really, aren't we?"

The girl clasped her hands tightly together. "Why are—?" She didn't complete the sentence.

"Yes?"

"I was going to ask you why you're doing this, but I guess I know."

"Yes, I simply want to . . . uh . . . control the whole thing," answered her uncle. "All these years that's . . . uh . . . been my notion. I've been patient, but the return of Robert I has forced me to act a bit . . . uh . . . sooner than I intended."

"I thought you were glad to have your father back?"

"My father's dead," said Alex. "Once, a long time ago, I would have been . . . uh . . . happy about a return. But he left me there too long, too long alone with all the rest of them."

"But he is alive," said the girl.

"No, Robert Walbrook I is dead. He's been dead, really dead and not just pseudodead, for eight years. When the plague hit Detroit I . . . uh . . . saw in it an opportunity to put myself one step closer to complete control of Walbrook Enterprises. I sent immunized . . . uh . . . agents into that chaos while the plague and riots raged. They made absolutely certain no bodies remained in the storage vault."

"You could have your own father killed?"

"He could leave me alone with them," said Alex. "Yes, I can do whatever I have to do. I know what . . . uh . . . all of you think of me. But now . . . uh . . . very soon it won't matter anymore. I was going to wait a while longer. But there was a danger that this imposter would be unmasked by Gunder or someone else. Then . . . uh . . . the real fate of my late father would . . . uh . . . come to light."

Jean-Anne let out her breath in a sigh. "You've got this aircruiser rigged?"

"Yes, it will take you up and then . . . uh . . . explode. Leaving only a feeble old man and your father between—"

"What do you mean, it will take *me*? Where's—?"

"Safely dead by now, I trust," replied Alex. "I sent a second Hellhound after him, using his real medical records to feed it."

"You killed him, too?"

He swung out and hit the girl a sharp blow below the ear with the barrel of his gun.

"Now to open the hangar all the way so that dear Jean-Anne can begin her flight," Alex said. He stepped backward out of the tan ship.

Something caught hold of his feet and hauled him abruptly down. Then the pistol was chopped out of his hand.

"Poor Alex," said Thad, catching the lanky man's arm and twisting it behind his back. "You screwed up again."

"It didn't kill you?"

"Not quite, no."

"How'd you get in here?" Alex asked.

"Back way."

"You suspected I . . . uh ... was here?"

"Nope," said Thad. "But the way things have been going lately, I decided to be cautious."

Jean-Anne woke up and asked, "Are you alive?"

"Yes, I eluded the Hellhound."

"Am I going to explode?"

"No," said Thad. "This is the other cruiser."

She shifted in the passenger seat, rubbing at her neck. "Where's Uncle Alex?"

"Flat on his back down in the hangar."

She looked out at the darkness they were flying through. "Where are we going?"

"Back up to the United States."

"Aren't you going to turn Uncle Alex in or something?"

"I think the important thing is to get out of Brazil."

"Is Lon dead?"

"I don't know. From what I heard while I was sneaking up under that cruiser, I guess he must be."

She hugged herself. "Uncle Alex was right, we're a marvelous family."

"Some of the individual members are O.K."

The girl asked, "What are you going to do now?"

"Talk to the Opposition Party guy who hired me, give him the rest of the information I have."

"That'll make for busy days for Walbrook Enterprises and the Parkinson Administration," said Jean-Anne. "Then what?"

"Then what for me, you mean?"

"Yes."

"I'm not sure."

"What were you doing before you became my great-uncle?"

"Living on Manhattan."

"Oh," she said, turning to watch him. "You're not planning to go back there, are you?"

Thad shook his head. "No, I'm not," he said. "Maybe I'll see what other jobs OP has to offer."

She smiled. "Good. What's your real name?"

"Thad McIntosh."

"Not a bad name," Jean-Anne said. "Can you get your own face back now?"

"So they told me."

"I'd like to see that."

"O.K.," he promised.