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RON GOULART

HELLO, LEMURIA HELLO

The Invisible Man spotlights the Lost Continent



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— Sheraton-Nostalgia Hotel
Manhattan, April 2022

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Chapter 1

The assassin came in and ordered waffles.

It was a warm and pleasant morning in Organic, California, the last day of April, 2022. A faint breeze was drifting in across the calm Pacific and the beach below.

The assassin was small and dapper, dark-complected and wearing a spotless white turban and a spotless two-piece white daysuit. He carried his kilgun in his spotless white briefcase.

But Jake Conger didn't know that when he served him. A lean, deeply tanned man of thirty-two, Conger was looking after their nearly empty Vegetable Patch restaurant this particular morning. His wife was over in Gomezville #2 protesting.

"Haie, sahib!" exclaimed the assassin softly when the plate was set before him. "These be the most delightful appearing soywaffles I have ever encountered. Surely Kali smiles upon my humble self."

He poured surpsub lavishly over them, cut a square and ate it with sedate murmurs of joy and small wiggles of pleasure. Then his left hand flashed into his briefcase, came out gripping his silver kilgun.

Conger was a few seconds ahead of him. He kicked up with his booted right foot before the barrel of the glittering weapon could point at any vital portion of him.

The boot toe made contact with a wrist bone. "Haie! By the numerous arms of Kali!" screamed the spotless assassin.

Spinning, sparkling, the gun went upward until it smacked one of the realwood crossbeams. The kilgun made a clicking sound and a ray of intense purplish light came flashing down out of it.

The ray touched the assassin's face. He screamed once. His head disappeared completely and his turban slumped down into his collar.

"Jesus H. Christ!" Conger took a few unsteady steps backward as the assassin's body tumbled over.

"Can we expect more of this sort of thing, Mr. Conger?" inquired a husky black skytrucker who'd dived beneath his table an instant after the weapon had emerged.

"Huh?" Conger was scanning the room for more assassins.

"Some truckers enjoy rowdy joints, but as for myself I favor a quieter atmosphere. One where a contemplative mode of—"

"I don't know, Caz." Conger watched the dead man twitch and grow still on the raw plank flooring. "I'm retired now, nobody should want to do me in."

"Used to be a government agent of the killer sort," remarked a small grey customer to her younger and larger blond husband. "I remember reading about him in Famous once. Conger the killer."

"Oh, really?" The blond young man giggled while concentrating on getting the fork in his hand to stop quivering.

Very carefully, Conger approached the fallen gun. "Never seen one exactly like this," he muttered while he scrutinized it "Too bad the damn thing destroyed him so fast, would have enjoyed asking the guy a few pertinent and probing questions. Can't figure why—"

A footstep sounded behind him.

Conger spun around, the silver gun held in his hand now.

"That's another dozen you owe me," said the tall blonde girl in the two-piece knickersuit who stood just inside the entrance.

"Jake, put that yoo-hoo gun away," suggested the small frazzled man who'd come in with her.

Conger placed the gun beside the assassin's unfinished breakfast. "I don't work for you anymore, Geer. So there's no reason for killers to keep trying to—"

"What do you want me to do?" said the rumped little boss of the Wild Talent Division. "Get a mailing list of all the freelance murderers in this halfwit country and send them a memo? Lay off Jake Conger because he chickened out of—"

"You knew about this guy?" Conger asked his former chief.

Geer jerked a thumb at the tall, pretty young girl. "She did."

"I'm batting near 1000 so far, Geer," the girl said, grinning. "So you owe me another dozen jelly donuts. That was the bet."

Geer scowled at the few patrons. "Can we have a private talk, Jake?"

"Nope," he replied.

The WTD boss came further into the place, squatted beside the headless assassin. "Imported from India, very expensive," he said while frisking the body. "Not a thing on him, not even a Banxcard."

"Guess he figured he wasn't going to have to pay for the breakfast," said Conger. "You know who he is?"

"Not specifically, but they've used a few other Indian Thugs. Always go first cabin." He stood to examine the white briefcase.

The girl suddenly clutched herself just below her left breast. "Tao Anwar . . . that's his name . . . from Katmandu . . ."

Geer sidled over to her flatfooted, nudged her near the spot she was clutching. "Don't go having one of your yoo-hoo visions in front of civilians," he advised in a whisper.

"Do you want the police?" Conger asked him. Geer shook his frizzled head. "No cops. Somebody may want this stiff in DC. I'll pix the Remedial Functions Agency."

"Collect," cautioned Conger. He seized a checked tablecloth off a sideboard, unfurled it and let it settle over the dead man.

"I trust you won't think I'm heartless or callous, Mr. Conger," said the skytrucker, "but I could go for seconds on this nearham."

Nodding, Conger walked to the galley hole and called to the robot chef. "Seconds on the #16."

"Having a bit of a scuffle out there, gov?" the bot inquired.

"Small skirmish." Conger turned to face his one-time boss again. "Wait until I serve my customers and close the place up. I can fly you over to the teleport depot. If you want to haul Tao Anwar with you, we can put him in plyo—"

"Where's Angelica?" asked Geer.

"Over in Gomezville #2, picketing a Fake Food Fair."

The blonde girl gestured at the sunlit room. "Don't you deal in fake food, too?"

"Ours is natural fake, all made from organic vegetables," he explained. "The Gomez conglom goes in for synthetics, chemicals, artificial—"

"Here's your blinking nearham, gov."

Conger carried the thrust out plate over to the trucker, who was once again in his chair. "There won't be any more incidents like this," he assured him. "Once my two friends return to Manhattan everything will settle down."

"I surely hope so. Your Vegetable Patch here has become an oasis for me as I make my tedious skytruck hauls around California North. I'd hate to think a pattern was—"

"It isn't. Look, we've been in business nearly two years and this is the first hired assassin who's ever—"

"Jake," said Geer, anxious voice climbing, "we really do have to talk with you."

"When you say organic vegetables," the girl asked, "how does that apply to the jelly donut situation? I mean, how can you make jam or powdered sugar out of—"

"Don't try one of theirs," warned Geer, new wrinkles joining the batch his face carried. "They make 'em out of soy flour and some kind of crinkly seaweed stuff and exotic tropical fruit no sane person's ever heard of. There's not a speck of real sugar in 'em. I ate three of the halfwit things the last time I was out here. Yang."

The grey-haired woman and her young sun-bronzed husband got up. She poked her Banxcard into the table's payslot, took her receipt and moved for the doorway. "Will we be reading about your upcoming killings in *Famous* and *NewsMag*, Mr. Conger? Or do—"

"I don't kill people," he told her. "That wasn't my branch of government at all." He caught Geer by the elbow. "Let's get into the office. You're screwing up our ambiance."

The blonde girl took only three steps before hugging herself and doubling up. "Angelica Conger . . . in about ten minutes . . ."

Conger halted, eyed her. "What?"

"I haven't introduced you yet," said Geer sotto voce. "She's Wizard Wells, one of our best precog agents."

"Sees the future?"

"Your wife," said Wizard, her face paling, "is going . . . to explode in . . . ten minutes unless . . ."

Conger's grip on Geer tightened. "Is she reliable?"

"About 80% so."

"87%," the girl corrected.

Conger pivoted, ran for the door. "Come on, we'll take my skycar."

"Is somebody going to explode here?" asked the black truck pilot, watching the three of them go slamming out of the restaurant. "An exploding person would be just too much, coming on the heels of this hired killer business. Basically I require a certain aura of tranquility during my meals or . . ."

The skycar hummed through the mildly polluted air, heading inland toward Gomezville #2. Jake glanced at Wizard. "Any more details?" The girl was slouched in the front passenger seat beside him, long bare legs crossed and a partially unwrapped SewdoHershey bar held between thumb and forefinger. "With most of my visions I don't get too many specifics," she said. "Although I've been improving on that score lately. With your assassin, for instance, I guessed the color of his turban and—"

"Does what's maybe going to happen to my wife," Jake asked over his shoulder, "tie in with why you barged in on me, Geer?"

In the rear seat the ramshackled boss of the Wild Talent Division was massaging his frizzled head of hair with both hands, making it crackle. "Everything ties in with everything, Jake. This is the sort of case that would give a paranoid a hardon. It's the goofiest conspiracy I've ever—"

"But why drag me in?" The outskirts of Gomezville #2 were showing up five hundred feet below. The even rows of decorative fruit trees and the pastel shock fences.

"You're still the top invisible man I've got on tap," said Geer. "Plus which you've got a knack for solving these wacky ones."

"What did you say was bothering you, another vast conspiracy?"

"Exactly. And vast is an understatement," said Geer. "Have you read *Hello, Lemuria, Hello?*"

"I'm too involved with what's going on in our day-to-day life to waste time reading garbage like—"

"It's been number one on the *Manhattan News-Times* for the past eleven weeks," Wizard pointed out while taking a bite of her candy bar. "Shoved aside *I Blew The President*, *Harlan Ellison: Man Mountain Of Literature*, *So You're Going To Commit Incest* and *Aquanetics*."

"Very impressive," Conger was scanning the countryside below. "There's the fairgrounds." He punched out a landing pattern on the skycar dash.

"What's the book have to do with Indian Thugs coming after me?"

"Well, obviously these yoohoos know you're going to work for WTD again."

"They couldn't know anything like that, it's a condition contrary to fact," said Conger. "I am officially retired, as we both well know."

"I reviewed your status with you just prior to your lending a hand on that Panchronicon Plot mess," said Geer from the backseat. "Technically you are still a WTD employee, Jake. Matter of fact, a lot of the halfwits in the Remedial Functions Agency, which is after all our parent organization, were quite favorably impressed with the way you handled the Panchronicon deal. They may even be on the verge of forgetting the colossal screwup you perpetrated whilst pursuing the Sandman matter. One or two more impressive accomplishments will assure—"

"Why Angelica? How come anybody wants to kill her, too?"

"These particular yoohoos are ruthless. They obviously figure, to be on the safe side, it's best to knock both of you off before you can come to my aid."

"Angelica is retired, too."

"Okay, but the Lemurians may not believe that."

"Lemurians?" The skycar bounced down onto a fairground landing lot. "There are no such things as Lemurians. Except in that dumb book. Don't tell me you—"

Kaboom!

Boomy! Boom!

A quarter of a mile away a skycar exploded, sending sooty smoke and jagged shards of bright blue plastic up into the day.

Chapter 2

Conger got there first. Running across the lot, zigzagging between skycars. He'd recognized those scattering fragments. It was their other skycar. The one his wife had flown here this morning.

Robot cops were already there. Five of the tank-shaped ones, forming a half-circle around the smoking debris. Two of them were spraying flamekilling foam out of nozzle-tipped arms.

"Back! No rubbernecking!" another of them ordered Conger, truncheon rising warningly.

"My wife," he said. "That's our car."

"Sympathies," said the robot cop out of the voice hole in his headless gunmetal torso.

"Sympathies not called for," said the robot with the sergeant stripes stenciled on his backside. "No humans in ship at time of explosion."

"You sure?"

"I'm built to be sure, buddy. My sensors tell me no humans in that crate."

"Then where—"

"We'll want to talk to your missus. Find out why she allowed her machine to explode in public—"

"Jake!"

He spun and saw his slim, dark-haired wife rising up from between two nearby skycars. He ran, took hold of her. "Christ, Angelica, I thought you were inside that damn—"

"Almost." She hugged him, very hard. "When I came back to get a picket sign I'd forgotten, I was pretty certain I saw someone fooling with the car. So I was approaching it carefully. Carefully enough to avoid . . . Oh, so that's the reason." She'd seen something around his shoulder.

"Angelica, we didn't expect they'd put you on their list," said Geer, approaching with a shuffling, apologetic walk. "You haven't been a National Security Office agent for years after all. The attempt on Jake wasn't as much of a surprise as this halfwit try to—"

"What attempt on Jake?" She pushed back from her husband. "What's this sugar-snarfing bastard brought down on you now?"

"Oh, an Indian Thug came into the restaurant and tried to shoot me," explained Conger. "Nothing seri—"

"I can see you're okay. How about the Vegetable Patch?"

"Once they cart the body out of there not a trace of—"

"Body?"

"This Thug fellow managed to get killed in the course of—"

"Did you kill him?"

"Nope. No, I didn't. Despite the fact everyone has taken to calling me Conger the Killer, I did not knock him off," he said, shaking his head. "Guy's gun went off while he was under it. Disintegrated his head."

Angelica sighed. "They try to disintegrate your head, they plant a faulty bomb in my skycar." She pointed an accusing finger at the frazzled Geer. "You must know the reason. Tell me."

"It's the Lemurians," replied Geer.

He briefed them in the small private dining room of their restaurant, the one where the Vegetarian Kiwanis meets the first Tuesday of every month. Geer sat at the head of the table, poking a fork at the gluten stew Angelica had prepared for all of them. "This almost looks like meat," the WTD chief decided.

Wizard was rocking slightly in her chair, unwrapping another candy bar, ignoring her lunch. "Humans can't exist without meat protein."

"That's a popular misconception," Angelica said as she served her husband a second helping. "Actually mankind would be—"

"Whoa," said Conger. "We don't want a nutritional debate, we want to hear about Lemurians."

Geer tried a small bite of his stew. He chewed the mouthful, slowly, for a half minute. "Delicious," he said at last. "Yum. Okay, here's what I know and what I suspect, Jake. First we have to discuss this cocoo named P.K. Stackpole."

"That's the guy who wrote *Hello, Lemuria, Hello*."

"That cocoo, yes," continued Geer. "If you mixed a few chunks of beef in this, it wouldn't taste too bad. All right, about nine months ago the first installment of *Hello, Lemuria, Hello* appeared in a halfwit sci fi publication called *Cosmic Stories*. An insignificant mag with a circulation of less than 900,000." Geer attempted a second mouthful. "Surprisingly, though, this damn book caught the fancy of the yoo-hoo public. Before the thing had even finished being serialized in *Cosmic*, it was snapped up by MCA-Sony Books for an advance of \$250,000. Then Opec-Random House bought the TV cassette rights for \$560,000. ITT-BOM grabbed it for seven of their nitwit book clubs, including the Illiterates Book of the Month Club, which is the one where they send a girl of dubious virtue over to your house to read the book to you and give you a free back massage along with it. Suffice it to say *Hello, Lemuria, Hello* became a multimedia smash. This despite the fact every respectable critic and a whole hellslew of noted scientists dismissed the book as so much hogwaller."

"What has all this got to do," asked Angelica, "with people trying to do away with us?"

Geer looked up from his plate and out at the afternoon ocean which stretched so calmly along the horizon. "You haven't read Stackpole's book, so I'd better fill you in on his theories," he said, eyes on a line of swooping gulls. "The book has been touted as nonfiction from the first. Stackpole claims that in prehistoric times a race of super aliens arrived on Earth from a distant planet. These alien yoo-hoos settled on a continent in the Pacific someplace, which came to be known as Lemuria." He picked up his fork, scratched at an ear lobe with it. "These Lemurian nitwits possessed incredible powers. They could, for instance, move heavy objects by will, could send their astral bodies on journeys of great distance, could control the minds of lesser creatures, could predict the future, could—"

"Nowhere near as accurately as I can," put in Wizard.

"They could read minds," Geer resumed, "and do a whole bag of other nifty tricks. There was a problem, though, in that a lot of them were nasty types. After an eon or two the nasty ones got into a frumus with the good ones and as a result the nasty ones were banished to caves beneath the earth, far beneath. The good ones, more's the pity, got tired of our planet and took off for new and distant worlds. Somewhere along about here the whole continent of Lemuria sank without a trace. Thereafter nobody heard much from the bad side of the family for centuries and centuries. These bad ones, by the way, are called abnors. Short for abnormal robots, although they're not actually robots. After a long period of apparent snoozing, the abnors got active again. They commenced sending out thought messages to selected humans, causing disasters, wars and vanishings. Turns out they're planning to take over the entire world, with the help of a secret group of human collaborators. This world conquest is going to take 'em about another fifty years and it's in full swing right now."

Conger studied his boss' frazzled face. "You shifted from talking about the book," he said. "You sound as though you're recounting facts."

"I think I am, I'm afraid I am," said Geer. "Which is why we teleported out here."

"Bringing a whole flock of killers with you," accused Angelica.

"The Lemurians can read minds," said Wizard.

"Not all the time, not consistently, but plenty well enough to be able to anticipate us now and then."

"You're with Wild Talent, too?" Angelica asked her.

"Sure, I'm their best precog. Don't like to fish for compliments, but it was my hunch which alerted your husband you were in trouble. I realize that in the midst of all this excitement it's difficult to say a simple thank you to someone who—"

"Thank you. Even though I saved myself from blowing up."

Conger rested his elbows on the table. "You're telling me this book is true? Do you have any evidence?"

"Wish I didn't, Jake." Geer frowned across at Angelica. "Would you be very offended if I borrow one of Wiz's candy bars and ignore the rest of this delightful stew?"

"A sugar freak like yourself," she said, "it's amazing you held out this long."

"I'm not exactly addicted to sweets. Only I find sweets to be . . . sweeter."

From inside her slit-front tunic Wizard produced a Bit O'Fake Honey bar and tossed it across to her chief. "Organic, California, seems a very funless spot for someone like you to settle, Jake."

"No, I find it—"

"No debates, remember?" reminded his wife. "Let's hear the rest of this Lemuria tale."

"Look," Geer said as he started unwrapping the candy with hands a shade unsteady, "I would be a happier man, I could face each day with a smile on my lips and a song in my heart, I wouldn't feel like my privates had turned to mush if this coocoo book of Stackpole's weren't true."

"Typical sugar dependency symptoms."

"But it is true," said Geer. "Every blinking word is true, this completely goofy conspiracy Stackpole outlines exists. Back in my office in Manhattan I've got several dozen fat spools of documented evidence well hidden and—"

"Why is it hidden?" asked Conger.

"Well, I can't quite trust everybody anymore," said the WTD chief. "See, these Lemurians can take over minds sometimes. They did that with my secretary. You remember Miss Lupoff? The one with the left tit, you'll pardon the expression, which didn't quite match the—"

"Anybody could have taken over her mind," commented Wizard.

"I'm pretty near certain they've gained control of lots of important government yoohoos," Geer elaborated. "They've got at least seventeen senators plus the Secretary of Parades."

"What good's he going to do them?"

"These damn Lemurians take what they can get. They can't control everybody they'd like to, not yet anyway."

"Okay, what are you doing about it?"

An abundance of new wrinkles appeared on his face. "We have a few problems, Jake. For one thing, President Fairfield still doesn't believe any of this. For another, we haven't been able to get very close to the centers of the Lemurian setup. Either my agents suffer bizarre, often fatal, accidents or they fail to come up with even a smitch of evidence or they turn suddenly into babbling idiots and have to be stowed in funny farms in obscure stretches of the Midwest. What with accidents and deaths and whole shitpots of my best people going completely bonkers, well, we aren't exactly making the sort of progress I'd like."

"He's very much afraid," added Wizard, "the Lemurians will take over the world as we know it."

"What are you asking Jake to do" inquired Angelica. "Put himself in a position to get knocked off or have his mind f utzed up?"

"I want him," said Geer, "to find the main headquarters of the conspiracy and destroy them."

Conger said, "How would I get started on something like that?"

"You can't become involved in this thing at all." His wife put her hand over his. "I go along with the president, I don't believe there's any Lemurian conspiracy at all. Geer's having the typical sweets junkie's hallucinations and delusions."

"No, somebody did try to kill me. And somebody tried to kill you," Conger said. "Whether or not they're Lemurian agents doesn't much matter right now. I'll have to stop them from making any more attempts."

"Great, that's really great," said Wizard, smiling. "It's going to be nice working with you."

Angelica asked, "Why's he need her?"

"This is a spooky one," said Geer. "I mean, spooky even by Wild Talent Division standards, Angelica. Jake's going to be a heck of a lot safer with a precog at his side. Someone to warn him about upcoming yooahoo tries to—"

"How close to his side?"

"Hey now," protested Wizard. "The future of the whole round world is in the flapping balance. There isn't time to worry about whether or not I'll be balling your spouse."

"Nobody is going to—"

"I'm taking the job," Conger announced. "Now, Geer, where do I commence?"

"First off you ought to talk to Stackpole," said his boss. "Find out what his sources of information were."

"Seems obvious. Why haven't you done it already?"

"Because we can't find Stackpole," answered Geer. "He's vanished."

Chapter 3

"You . . . you . . . not you . . . you and the bimbo . . . oh, boy, not you . . . you I think. . . not your wife . . ." The enormous woman was stationed immediately inside the open doorway of Mama Honeyball's Bistro, accepting and rejecting people from the line of customers which moved along a red ramp toward her. "You . . . you I guess . . . uck, not you . . ."

"Wait now, Mama, you can't reject me and not my spouse," a plump green Venusian lizard man was protesting. "We teleported all the way from Spokane to Manhattan to—"

"Sweets!" bellowed the massive Mama Honeyball. "This chump wants to argue."

Sweets was a bulky black man, profusely tattooed with glowing white ink. "You'd best return to Spokane, sir. Otherwise I'll have to toss you off this ramp and you'll land way down on E53 someplace and be all flat and—"

"We'll just eat and run," promised the Venusian's wife. She poked a scaly finger at one of the illustrations on Sweets' bare chest. "And there's exactly what we want, a napoleon with—"

"That's no napoleon, lady, it's a hunk of strudel," explained Sweets as he lifted one muscular arm high. "This is a napoleon over here decorating my rib cage."

"Doesn't strike me as very masculine," said the Venusian. "A grown man covered all over with depictions of pastry. To my—"

"Scram," suggested Mama Honeyball. "I've decided you're both not acceptable to my place."

The Venusian's wife tapped Sweets' stomach. "What's this, it looks absolutely scrumptious."

"Oh, that's a nougat genoise."

"You . . . you . . . you . . ." The owner had passed Wizard Wells in, but was hesitating over Conger. "There's a quarrelsome glint in your eye," she told him, "and yet I admire the devil-may-care aura. The kind of lad, I wager, who'd break a lady's heart with never a word of regret."

"Christ, she's into the romantic stuff," observed the bouncer, scowling and making the cream puff on his forehead crumple. "We're in for rough weather."

"Come on in then," Mama Honeyball finally invited Conger. "Though I'll no doubt regret it. You . . . you . . . you . . ."

"Take a whiff." Wizard sniffed in an impressive breath, causing her breasts to rise and sway. "Absolutely terrific, fresh-thawed pastry."

"They don't serve anything else?"

"What else do you want?"

"Well, for dinner I usually have a small slice of soyloaf, a side dish of vege—"

"Gung," said the large blonde girl, taking hold of his arm. "There's a table over there."

The main room of the dessert restaurant was long and low, dimlit and rich with soft shadows. The smell of baked goods, of sugar and nuts and cream was thick in the twilight air.

After sighing down into a plazchair, Wizard adjusted her off-the-shoulder datesuit and smiled, cautiously, across at Conger. "Teleportation always drains all the sugar out of my blood. So I'm really in the mood for—"

"We arrived in Manhattan yesterday. By now you—"

"Cinammon," she exclaimed, nostrils twitching. "Oh, I absolutely love that scent." She flicked on the menu scan in front of her, tilted her pretty face toward it. "Let's see. Almond torte, Babas au Rhum, Blueberry Tart, Brownies—"

"No vegetables at all?"

"Sure, here's a marzipan carrot. You can order that with or without a chocolate bunny."

"Pass." Conger glanced around the crowded restaurant. He didn't notice any obvious assassin types. Most of the patrons were intent on munching, nibbling, gobbling.

"Didn't you ever eat normal food, Jake?"

"What's normal about almond torte, babas au rhum, blueberry tarts, brownies or—"

"Your wife has had a drastic effect on you. But a few days with me should fix that."

"I'm wondering if this is the ideal rendezvous spot," said Conger. "With Geer's known fondness for sugary treats, this is an obvious—"

"Look, he can't use his office since he suspects the Lemurians have taken over his new secretary and the sixth floor custodial staff," reminded Wizard, frowning over what to order. "Besides, there are hundreds of pastry restaurants in Manhattan. So their agents will have to check off an immense list to tag Geer."

Conger rubbed at his chin. "We ought to open a branch of the Vegetable Patch here, give people some alternatives."

"Lemon custard cream puff. Yup, that sounds nifty," decided the girl. "I'll have the lemon custard cream puff for an appetizer, along with a hot butterscotch sundae. Then for the main course a rhubarb pie with honey sauce. Maybe a side order of rocky road fudge with cherry sauce. For dessert I'm torn between the gingerbread and—"

"What exactly has Geer come up with?"

Wizard shook her head. "Search me. He only told me to fetch you from your hotel, bring you here. His scrambler isn't working just right and a lot of the conversation came out in Swedish. But I caught the gist. Bring you to Mama Honeyball's at seven, he'll meet us and brief us as to the next leg of the operation."

"Next leg? I've been sitting in the Renovated-Taft Hotel for almost a day and nothing has occurred. Well, no, the air conditioning broke down and started spritzing aftershave all around. Nothing, however, pertaining to this alleged Lemurian plot has come up."

"Don't start yapping like your flat-chested wife, Jake. There's certainly nothing alleged about what these—"

"Angelica isn't flat-chested. It's simply that her bosom is . . . subtle."

"Forget her tits, the point is she's got you thinking Geer's edged over into goofiness and is making this mess all up." She punched out her dinner order on the control panel with considerable vigor. "Let me assure you that it's all real."

"Maybe so. Still, Wizard, I'm growing restless waiting to—"

"Don't be a blistering yoo-hoo!"

"She told you out, it's out you go."

"How can I go out, you halfwit, when I'm meeting two of my nearest and dearest friends for dinner in this flytrap?"

Over in the doorway, looking exceptionally frizzled in a wrinkled two-piece off-white funsuit, was Geer, dangling by his collar from the pictorial right hand of Sweets the bouncer.

"I let you in the other night," reminded Mama Honeyball, "and you ate yourself silly on jelly donuts. Challenged the Archbishop of Barsoom to Indian wrestle with you. And him with six arms. For shame."

"Aw, that nitwit holyroller was using most of his hands for praying," said the rumpled Wild Talent Division chief. "I could have beaten him fair and—"

"Come along," urged Sweets. "Else I'll have to dump you over the side of the ramp and—"

"Let's delay that a bit." Conger had left the table and was now part of the arguing group.

"See, this is one of the intimate friends I was alluding to," said the dangling Geer.

"Ah, the wild-eyed lad, is it?" Hands on immense hips, Mama Honeyball eyed the two men. "I fear if I let the pair of you get together it will be all hell that'll break loose in my establishment."

Close to his chief's ear Conger said, "This isn't turning into the most discreet of meetings."

"Can I help it if this illuminated yoo-hoo is playing pendulum with me?"

To Sweets Conger said, "Put him down now."

"I can't go against Mama's wishes, sir."

"Put him down or I'll whop you a good one between the sponge cake and the Petits Fours."

"Do as the gent requests," Mama Honeyball ordered her burly bouncer. "I'll let this disheveled rascal join you for a spell. Should he, however, take to wrestling with the clergy, it's out all three of you will go flying."

"Much obliged." Conger guided his grounded boss over to their table.

"Cinammon," said Geer, smoothing out the wrinkles in his garments and then settling into a chair. "Evening, Wiz, what are you having?"

"Well, I'm starting off with a lemon custard cream puff, with a hot butterscotch sundae on the side," the girl said. "Then a whole rhubarb pie with—"

"Whoa," suggested Conger, frowning. "I didn't rescue you from Sweets so I could hear a discussion of pastry. What have you got for me, Geer?"

Geer's eyes went wide, new and deeper wrinkles ringed them. "A lead, a good one," he said. "In fact, Jake, you won't even have time to stay here for dinner."

Disappointment touched Wizard's lovely face. "How about me?"

"You and I will remain. Jake has to handle this one solo." Geer hunched, lowering his voice. "You'll have to hit this affair in your invisible state."

"Which affair?"

"It's an awards banquet, starting in one hour over at the Sheraton-Nostalgia on Level 2 of W49," Geer explained. "The organization putting it on is known as the Crackpot Writers of America. All sorts of pea-brained yoohoos who specialize in writing about the weird, the occult, the paranormal, the—"

"Oh, that must be where they give out the Goofy," said Wizard.

"The what?" asked Jake.

She waited until her lemon custard cream puff popped out of the serve slot. "The Goofy. It's the equivalent of the Oscar, the Edgar and the Harlan. A much coveted award that goes to the writer judged the best each year by his fellow CWA members. Last year it was nabbed by Joe—"

"Never mind," said Conger. "Just tell me why I'm attending this thing."

Geer was watching Wizard commence on the cream puff. "That's definitely what I'm going to have."

"Why am I going to the Crackpot Writers of America's annual banquet?"

"Because Rodney St. Clair is practically a recluse," answered Geer. "But he'll be there tonight."

Chapter 4

Alone, and invisible, Conger attended the Crackpot Writers of America festivities.

His particular wild talent was the ability to be unseen. On his own, before he'd been recruited by Geer and the WTD, the best Conger could achieve was a modest transparency. Due to some genetic mutation, they thought. The knack for becoming absolutely invisible he acquired after working and studying for nearly two years at the Wild Talent Division's hidden training facility in New England. The transition from seen to unseen involved, in addition to the application of a complex body lotion, intricate mental control adapted from an ancient Tibetan ritual. For as long as Conger wished it, no one could see him.

"Spots, you droop, spots!" a noted Martian Scientology writer was shouting at the small circle of photographers who surrounded him on the broad marble steps of the Sheraton-Nostalgia Hotel.

"But we need you for the Instant Success Section of *Mammon*," said one of the cameramen.

"Camera lights make me breakout in spots," complained the furry catman, dabbing at his cheek with a paw. "I don't doubt there are ugly spots appearing on my fur this very instant."

"Naw, only one little bitty splotch which looks more like a map of Nova Scotia than a—"

Conger, completely unseen, eased up the marble staircase toward the gilt-framed revolving doors. He was scanning the crowd of well-known authors who were heading into the hotel, but Rodney St. Clair was not among them.

"Les see yer invites. Les see yer invites." Stationed before the vast doors, all four copper hands extended, was an NYPD robot. "Les see yer invites."

"Do you realize whom you're addressing?" inquired the leathery, curly-haired old gentleman who was in the process of frisking himself. "I happen to be none other than Dr. Steinpenzler."

"Les see yer invite."

Steinpenzler continued to explore the various flaps and slits in his one-piece midnight blue funsuit. "Surely even you have heard of my book. Nineteen months on the *NY News-Times* Blockbuster List. The only faxback book ever to give the true, note that word 'true,' account of the inexplicable, until my book, disappearances and vanishings in the vicinity of Yonkers. Yes, only Dr. Steinpenzler has solved the mystery of the Yonkers Triangle or—"

"Les see yer invite."

Conger edged around the doctor and the guard. He stepped into the revolving door, which he had all to himself and, very cautiously, spun himself into the Sheraton-Nostalgia's immense gilt and marble lobby.

Near an authentic-seeming potted palm a muscular eighty-two year old man in a three-piece docksuit was jabbing a bellboy android in its red-painted chest with his fist. "Water, I told you, water."

The android held out the glass. "Precisely what you see here before you, sir."

"Lots of water, dummy. Lots of it."

"Two glasses?"

"Naw, for cripes sake. Water. Enough water to immerse in."

"Ah, you're really after a room with a bath."

"Look at me!" The hulky old man began thumping his broad chest. "I happen to be Joe Stooze, also known as the Longshoreman's Plato."

"So you wish sea water?"

"I happen to be the author of *Aquanetics*, nineteen months on the *NY News-Times* Blockbuster List," continued Stooze. "Tonight I'm up for an award, the coveted Goofy. If I get it, I intend to dive into a tub of water as part of my acceptance speech."

"Ah, you're contemplating suicide."

"No, dummy. My book is about submerging in water. Get me? If you dip yourself in water often enough, all your troubles and traumas float away. It's like being born again."

"I doubt, sir, sitting in a tub of water would help me much. Even though I'm guaranteed to be waterproof, sometimes I suspect—"

"Listen, listen," said Stooze, "I got to go now up to the mezzanine for the pre-banquet cocktail hour, see? You get me a big humping tub of water, keep it in the wings behind the dias in case I get the nod for the Goofy."

Conger continued on his way. He walked up the thickly carpeted marble staircase to the mezzanine floor, followed the noise and the arriving guests into the cocktail area. It was a large scarlet-draped, glass-ceilinged room. He stayed near a wall.

"Honey," a green lizard man was explaining to an android bellhop. "I must have a tub of honey."

"Sir, each table will be supplied with condiments sufficient to—"

"You don't understand. I'm the author of *Bee Yourself!* A punning title, and my publisher's, not mine, but nonetheless, the book is climbing right up . . ."

Over two hundred authors, agents, publishers and editors were already in the room. They were lined up at the two robot-staffed cash bars, gathered in thick clusters on the glistening hardwood floor and nested in the room's many glass-lined alcoves.

Rodney St. Clair ought to be here somewhere. Even though he was noted for his reclusiveness, it was understood he'd appear at tonight's function. The CWA was planning to honor him with a special Goofy for his contribution to the field of offbeat writing. What the hermitlike St. Clair had done was print the original version of *Hello, Lemuria, Hello* in his science fiction magazine *Cosmic Stories*. Geer believed St. Clair knew more than he was telling about the whereabouts of the vanished author of the Lemuria book.

Conger had to locate the editor and, using whatever means necessary, find out what he knew about P.K. Stackpole.

"Oh, pardon me."

Conger stopped perfectly still. Someone had bumped into him from behind. That was one of the hazards of working in a crowded room, even when you kept close to the walls. Very carefully he allowed himself to turn around.

An amazingly lovely redhaired girl, clad in a one-piece slitsuit, was standing less than a foot from him, a bubbling glass of liquor in her deeply tanned right hand.

For an instant he had the impression she could see him, but then her eyes swung away and, a slightly puzzled expression on her stunning tan face, she moved on. Conger recognized her as Jinx St. Clair O'Rian Fairfield, the celebrated junk-fashion model. She was the daughter of Rodney St. Clair and had recently divorced the President of the United States. She'd been on the cover of *Mammon* only last week.

He watched her provocative, and partially bare, back until it was swallowed up by authors and editors. No one could see it, but he was frowning.

At least he hoped no one was seeing him. WTD knew the National Security Office had discovered a way of overcoming the invisibility trick. Certain NSO agents could actually see him. There was no reason, though, for NSO to have an agent here at the Sheraton-Nostalgia tonight. According to Geer, no one outside the Wild Talent Division was, as yet, taking the Lemurian threat seriously.

". . . Stackpole . . ."

The name came drifting out of an alcove up ahead. The invisible Conger, avoiding crackpot writers and serving robots, approached the alcove.

There was Rodney St. Clair in a low-voiced argument with a robot journalist.

Chapter 5

This one wasn't wearing a turban, which is why Conger didn't become aware of him as soon as he should have.

Reaching the lip of the alcove, Conger stopped to listen.

Rodney St. Clair, puffy face red with annoyance, puffy body decked out in a threadbare two-piece tuxsuit, was shaking a puffy fist at the cube-headed newsbot "Now you can understand why I've chosen the anchorite's life," he said. "Whenever I step into the public view I am assaulted by—"

"Hermits don't phase me, Rod," said the robot. He was a large, somewhat humanoid model with *A Time-Life Newsperson* spelled out on both his metal back and front in small silvery rivets. "I beard them in their frapping dens to get a yarn. I've got a frapping nose for news, which is why I zeroed in on you, Rod."

"Do me," requested the *Cosmic Stories* editor in his low, whispery voice, "a favor, Mr . . . what is it they call you?"

"Around the newsroom my nickname is Scoop, Rod."

"Do me a favor, Scoop." St. Clair placed a puffy hand, very gingerly, on the inquisitive mechanism's metal shoulder. "Do not call me Rod. Further, do not continue to ornament your conversation with the word 'frapping.' "

"I can't help the latter," said Scoop. "I was originally built to be a librarian and the dirtiest I can get is 'frapping.' I got to tell you, Rodney, it's a real handicap in the electronic journalism dodge not to be able to give out with a hearty f . . . well, there you are. I can't ever say—"

"One further favor," added the puffy editor, "and that is, leave me entirely alone."

"How can I? You're news-worthy, Rodney." Scoop rolled a few inches closer to the editor. "You're going to cop a Goofy tonight, you gave the world *Hello, Lemuria, Hello*. Those are heady achievements." The robot rolled even closer on his wheeled feet. "On top of which, Rodney, you possess some little nuggets of news you haven't talked about, so far."

"What . . . I have no idea . . . you'll have to stay away from me or—"

"For instance," persisted Scoop, "what's happened to P.K. Stackpole?"

St. Clair, very unconvincingly, began to scan the crowd. "He ought to show up tonight."

"No frapping chance," said the newsbot. "He's been grabbed and stashed someplace."

"Nonsense," said St. Clair, quickly. "Even in this gathering of wild-eyed and eccentric authors, you're notions are . . . nutsy."

Conger pressed against the alcove edge, eyes on the nervous editor.

"We'll shelf that," said Scoop, "and hop along to another topic, Rodney. Why was the dedication of *Hello, Lemuria, Hello* scrapped?"

A thick, whitish tongue shot out of St. Clair's mouth, and he licked at his puffy lips. "There was no dedication on the copy of the manuscript I received," he said. "Even if there had been, it's not the custom of a magazine such as mine to include such sentimental hokum as a dedi—"

"The dedication page, and three faxie copies, got lost someplace between your office and MCA-Sony Books."

"No, I have no idea what you're getting at. Until you—"

"Isn't it true Stackpole dedicated the book to none other than Amos Binky? Yes, to the nation's #1 Country & Western singer. Amos Binky, six-time winner of the coveted—"

"I'm a sci fi person," protested St. Clair. "I assure you I don't know Amos Binky from—"

"Are you claiming that the book was not dedicated to Amos Binky? That the dedication was not destroyed by you on orders from—"

"I'm saying I have nothing further to say to you!"

"Haie! Three cheers for Kali!"

Then Cougar saw him. Much too late.

The swarthy Thug assassin had already whipped his kilgun from his spotless white briefcase, aimed it at the puffy Rodney St. Clair and fired.

Roughly the upper quarter of the *Cosmic Stories* editor turned to dust, then fell away. The rest of the body toppled over into Scoop and made a hollow clang.

The assassin ran, sliding his weapon back into the white case as he fled.

Conger went charging after him.

The Indian was swift, he zigzagged through the startled crowd.

With Conger, unseen, close behind him the Thug hurtled toward an exit door.

He elbowed aside men, women, robots. He sent Joe Stooze bicycling backwards into a large plaztub of water which an andy had been wheeling in. He bowled over three prominent dowsing experts, a green astrologer and Sweden's leading authority on poltergeists.

Conger was gaining on him, not worrying about the people he was shoving out of his way. Too much confusion for anyone to notice an invisible elbow jab or a phantom knee nudge.

He reached out to close invisible fingers on the white collar of the escaping Thug.

Instead of catching hold, Conger fell.

Executing an invisible somersault, Conger landed on his backside and elbows, went sliding across the slick floor and banged into a wall.

The killer, meantime, had dashed through a doorway and gone galloping off along a corridor.

Still a shade woozy, Conger glanced back. He had the distinct impression the lovely Jinx St. Clair O'Rian Fairfield was in the process of pulling in the shapely foot which had tripped him.

The girl, though, was gazing innocently up at a gleaming crystal chandelier, innocence writ large on her charming features.

He got himself upright, without bumping into anyone.

"Too late to catch that guy," he decided inside his head. "St. Clair's dead and done for, Scoop probably doesn't know much more than I eavesdropped." Conger waited until an unexpected wave of dizziness passed before heading for a way out. "So, the next thing to do is get to New Yazoo, Mississippi."

Chapter 6

"Well, it used to," said the black desk clerk. "But then we added on forty stories, plus the skycar port, and some of the resemblance was lost."

"There's still some suggestion of a riverboat," said the fully visible Conger. "That paddle wheel going round and round out in the patio, for instance."

"I suppose," sighed the clerk. "Who's ever seen a forty story high Mississippi riverboat, though? One made of synsteel and neoglass to boot?" He rested both elbows on the floating check-in desk. "Plus which, if you want my absolutely candid opinion, we made another big mistake tying in with Binkymania. Frankly I think the Binky Vicinity Old Mark Twain Riverboat Hotel & Skylodge is too bulky a name for any respectable lodging place."

"Doesn't sound cozy." Conger leaned over the registration screen, picking up the electronic stylus.

"Daddy, let's stop all this jabber," said Wizard in an extremely cute voice as she stroked his free arm. "I'm just absolutely dying to get to our honeymoon suite. Just dying."

"Patience, patience, love." Conger signed Mr. and Mrs. James Newsome, Houston, Texas, on the screen.

Wizard leaned confidently toward the Negro clerk. "We're very old-fashioned. We hardly balled each other at all before we were married. You can understand why I'm just dying to make up for lost time."

"I can understand from a philosophical point of view, ma'am," the clerk replied. "Physiologically, though, it's tough, since I'm a eunuch. Part of the hotel policy."

"Why, that's a darn shame," said Wizard, reaching into her see-through shoulder bag for a Choco-Like Bar.

"We have an absolutely marvelous retirement and medical insurance plan," said the clerk. "You're in 39-A, Mr. Newsome. Here's your door control rod. Let me summon a bellbot. Colonel!"

"At your service, suh." A humanoid robot in a white suit came shuffling over to them. He had a glistening silver ball of a head, with an impressive white moustache attached just under his light bulb nose. "I trust y'all will enjoy our fair city of New Yazoo. May I add, dear lady, that your beauty is such as puts to shame that of our most fabled of Southern belles."

"Thank you kindly, Colonel."

"Allow me, if you will, to carry your luggage up to . . . Drat and damnation!"

"Boot him in the fanny," instructed the clerk.

The gracious bellbot had locked in his bending over position, hands clutching the suitcase handles.

Whang!

"Much obliged, suh," said the Colonel when Conger's kick straightened him up. "Now if you and your lady will follow me to an up chute, I'll see you get settled into your bower of bliss."

"Don't be afraid to boot him again if he stalls," called the clerk. "He's overdue for a tune-up."

"Are you young people Amos Binky fans?" inquired the Colonel while they went wooshing up the see-through tube to the 39th level of the Binky Vicinity Old Mark Twain Riverboat Hotel & Skylodge.

"I absolutely adore him," said Wizard, fiercely clutching Conger's arm. "I have all Amos Binky's vidiscs, including the brand new one, *Pissin' In The Wind*. We're really anxious, once we get all the balling out of the way, to visit his estate and perhaps catch a glimpse of him."

"Best time for that is nightfall. That blackguard has a tremendous neurotic attachment to his late mother," said the robot. "Here we are at 39, step out if you will. Yes, he has the dear old person substantially entombed right on that gaudy estate of his. A morbid relationship, typified by his naming the entire estate Momsvilla. In plantation days, you may be sure, there was a much greater amount of taste evidenced in the South. A lout like Amos Binky would have been given a job behind a team of mules."

"Well, I still find him very attractive."

The Colonel made a metallic snorting sound. "Here is your suite, dear folks."

"How come," Conger inquired, "you aren't programmed to be more positive about Amos Binky?"

"Suh, I am one of the oldest staff members, been at this establishment since 1992." He opened the door with a passrod, bowed them in ahead of him. "I feel it in my bones, my metaphorical bones, I'll eventually be remodeled to spout drivel about that lout. Until that unfortunate day, however, I intend to speak my mind." He dropped their bags on a shelf which slid out of the wall to meet them. "The entire suite is equipped with one-way see-through walls, giving you both complete privacy and a stunning view of all the splendors of New Yazoo. Should you be of an exhibitionist nature, you can flip this toggle here and let the outside world have a glimpse of—"

"Where the dickens is Amos Binky's palace?" asked Wizard, dragging Conger toward the nearest neoglass wall.

"You'll find it some eight miles due east of here, dear lady," the robot informed her. "No doubt you can see the word 'Mom' in immense light letters floating above the young poltroon's residence."

"Yes, yes." Wizard pointed joyfully. "There it is."

"No doubt you wish to be alone." The Colonel moved toward the door. "Your room computer terminal will tell you everything you wish to know about your quarters, our fair city or any of fifty-six other topics of interest. The bedroom, if you'll forgive my mentioning it, lies beyond that maroon door yonder. Good day, suh. Good day, dear lady."

When the robot had departed, Conger took a small cylindrical object out of his suitcase and made a circuit of the room with it. The gunmetal cylinder made no sound. "Aren't any bugs." He settled into a licorice-hued lucite wingchair. "Gush."

"Hmm?" Kicking off her boots, Wizard slumped down into a floating divan and dangled one bare leg over the edge.

"You're overdoing the newly married stuff."

She chuckled. "Did I embarrass you in front of that courtly old mechanism?"

"If these Lemurians are as pervasive as Geer thinks," he said, "they may even have agents here in New Yazoo. Drawing attention to ourselves isn't bright."

The blonde spread her arms wide. "Listen, I'm an attractive person," she said. "I attract attention even when I'm mute. Besides, I'm a darn good actress. Myself, I think I did a very good impression of a dim-witted newly married young lady of the kind who'd be dippy enough to want to combine her honeymoon with a pilgrimage to Amos Binky's estate." After fetching a plyopack donut out of her bag, she eyed him thoughtfully. "Your trouble, Jake, is that that coldfish wife of yours never shows any real emotion. Or can a fanatical vegetarian be a fish? Probably not, so—"

"As I understand this assignment," said Conger evenly, "I'm the senior officer."

Wizard paused in peeling the donut. "Sure. Why?"

"From now on you'll operate the way I tell you," he said. "You'll cut down on the public displays of gush, Wizard, and you'll stop ingesting all that crap."

"Come on now, a couple of donuts aren't—"

"You're backing me up, meaning you need a clear head. Stuffing yourself with sugar and artificial junk is going to futz up your brain. Matter of fact, you've been hyperactive since we teleported in from Manhattan."

"Sugar doesn't hurt anybody. That's only propaganda put out by sourpussed people like you—"

"Geer's the one who thinks I need you, not me," he said. "You can head for home or you can stay. But if you stick, you follow orders. And get rid of that damn donut."

"This one? I can't even have one final—"

"Nope."

She, after staring forlornly at the donut, tossed it into the nearest dispoze hole. When the whirring ceased, she said, "If my brain is so lame, how come I'm such a darn good precog?"

"Beats me." He eased up, crossed to a viewall. "You didn't do very good on the murder of Rodney St. Clair. You haven't had one solid hunch about who pulled the job or—"

"Hooey," she interrupted. "Let Geer get plodding clerical types to track that killer down. I'm for the flashier stuff."

"I'm going to take a look at Momsvilla tonight and maybe—"

"Ow!" said the girl all at once.

Conger turned, saw her doubling up, shivering, clutching at herself. "What's wrong?"

"Getting a vision . . . stay away from . . . Momsvilla . . . too dangerous . . ."

He sat beside her, put an arm around her shaking shoulders. "What do you mean, what do you see?"

"He's going to . . . they've got . . . something . . . can't get it in focus . . . going to kill him . . . soon . . . maybe tonight." She slumped against his chest, her head rocking from side to side. "That's all I can get." She was breathing shallowly, mouth slightly open. "But I'm absolutely sure someone is going to make a try to knock off Amos Binky."

"How?"

She pushed away from him, straightening up. "Don't know. Very fuzzy on that."

"All that sugar you eat does that," he said. "Any idea about when?"

She took hold of his wrist. "Tonight, I'm positive. Which is why you better not go near Momsvilla."

"I have to. We can't let them kill Amos Binky, he said. "At least not until I find out what he knows about this Lemurian conspiracy."

Chapter 7

The tiny Amos Binky rattled out of the tiny skycar, flipped it over, did a handspring and popped back inside the car.

"Don't look a thing like him," said the immense woman in the flowered one-piece seniorsuit.

"Sure, it does. It's a dead ringer for him," insisted the vendor.

They were part of the long line of people which filled the graveled roadway circling Amos Binky's sprawling ten acre estate. A high see-through plaz fence kept the fans from actually setting foot on the grounds of Momsvilla. The front entry gate was guarded by two bulky young men with stunguns.

"Amos Binky, for one thing," continued the immense woman, "ain't got feathers."

"Neither does this lifelike figure," said the vendor, tapping the toy which sat on his folding display tray.

"Got feathers all over his head."

"That is hair."

"Know what I suspect? I suspect that you are trying to palm off some old Owlman toys on us Amos Binky devotees," the immense woman said. "I remember when my youngest grandson, Hobart, was real fanatic over Owlman some six years back. What you got there is an old Owlman toy gussied up so as to fool—"

"Did Owlman ever wear a gold-flecked glosuit? Did he ever . . ."

Conger, invisible once again, moved through the twilight toward the guarded gates.

"He'll be showing any minute, any minute," gasped a lank sixteen-year-old girl in a notop fundress.

Conger slowed, considering the possibility the girl was alluding to him.

"He'll come swaggering right along that path in there, the one strewn with gold pebbles," she went on, pointing excitedly, small breasts fluttering.

Her companion, another thin sixteen-year-old girl in a notop fundress, held her Amos Binky vidisc album pressed tight against her bare chest. "I can't wait, I really can't wait. I feel like I'm going to have a twitch."

"Save it, save it," her friend advised.

Conger proceeded. The day was, very slowly, fading and a faint mist was drifting along the roadway.

"He actually seems to twitch!" hollered a vendor, waving an unfurled tri-op poster in the air. "He actually seems to twitch!"

Conger glanced at the dangling poster. The goldsuited figure of Amos Binky did indeed seem to be twitching.

"We got 'em all! His greatest hits on vidisc! We got *Pissin' In The Wind!* We got *Spittin' In The Soup!* We got *Steppin' In The Cowplop!*"

"The one and only authorized bio of the King of Country & Western. *Amos Binky: Man Mountain of Music!* Yours for just \$22.50!"

The high plaz gates stood a few feet open when Conger reached them.

"A perfectly legitimate business deal," someone was crying out from behind a high hedge inside the grounds.

"Out, schmucko!" A strapping youth appeared from behind the decorative shrubbery dragging a struggling Chinese in a two-piece white salesuit. "You ain't not using the proper channels, jerko!"

"I cut corners, that's my way," explained the Chinese salesman as he was rushed toward the open gates. "Amos is passing up a good bet here, let me tell you. You let me immortalize his private parts in a plazcast and we'll—"

"Out, sappo!"

The salesman, and his samplecase, came flying out into the dusk.

Even though Conger dodged, the edge of the case clipped his ear. He struggled with himself, kept from hollering in pain.

"I've got better men than Amos immortalized." The salesman struggled upright. "I've got President Fairfield, I've got Rancee Keane the noted gun-fighter, I've got . . ."

While the guards and the bouncer were still watching the retreating plazcast man, Conger eased through the gates and started for the tomb of Amos Binky's mother. He knew, as did all those waiting fans out on the other side of the see-through walls, that the singer visited his mother's grave each and every day at sundown. Even when he was on tour, Amos Binky would teleport home for his daily visit.

The tomb was the size of a cottage, made of a series of neomarble domes, topped with the gigantic floating letters which floated high above it.

Conger positioned himself in a stand of weeping willows a few yards from the tomb's front

"Twitch! Oh, please, twitch!"

Nearly five hundred fan voices were chanting now.

"Amos, Amos! Twitch! For us!"

Amos Binky, his one-piece funsuit glowing pale gold, had emerged from an arched side exit of his villa. Over his broad shoulders was draped a goldtrimmed white cape, on his large feet were gleaming gold boots.

"Twitch! Oh, just one!"

"Naw, dang it," he shouted, turning his handsome chunky face toward the wall and the hundreds of faces pressed to it. "I sure as heck ain't gonna twitch on m'way to my Mommy's grave. Geeze, I ain't no pagan."

Whup! Whup!

Shrieking barebreasted young girls were throwing themselves against the plaz walls.

Whup! Whup!

"Ow, lookit that little bitty girl," Amos Binky muttered to himself. "She done squashed her titties somethin' awful."

The guards who'd trailed him out of the vast house stopped on the marble patio. Amos Binky continued on alone to the tomb.

"One little twitch! Please, please!"

"Dang it, I don't do no twitchin' on sacred ground. Now, hush up!" From beneath his cape the singer drew a bouquet of white roses. "Brung these here for you, Mommy."

Conger, completely unseen, went close to the slab Amos Binky was slowly, with considerable grunting and panting, kneeling on.

"Gosh darn gold buckle like to slice my tummy in two." The singer eventually achieved a kneeling position. "I surely do miss you, Mommy. Just can't seem to get used to you bein' up there with them angels while—"

"Amos," said Conger in a twangy falsetto. "Amos, dear."

Amos Binky stiffened, dropping the flowers. "Ulp," he said, staring around. "Is that you, Mommy?"

"It surely is," replied the invisible WTD agent.

The singer began to shiver.

"He's twitching! He's twitching!"

"Golly me, Mommy! What brung you here?"

"Up in Hillbilly Heaven, Amos, we see everything."

"Aw, now, Mommy, I swear to goodness, swear right on your very own grave, I really and true thought that girl was over fourteen. What I mean is, she were the dang president of my Mentor, Ohio, fan club. You can't get to be the president of nuthin' less'n you is . . . oh, sixteen at the very least. Don't that make sense?"

"I'm talkin' about *worse* things, sonny boy."

Amos Binky licked his lips. "I tell you that girl scout was really over twelve, Mommy. Somebody done falsified her birth certificate or somethin' to made me look bad. Heck, you couldn't of learnt all she knew in only—"

"Amos, I am alludin' to Lemuria!"

After tucking in his handsome head, and making several gulping sounds, Amos Binky glanced furtively around the twilight grounds. "You shouldn't ought to go bellerin' that word out loud, Mommy. 'Sides, I done quit messin' with them idiots long time ago. If you're watchin' from heaven, way you sposed to, you know that. Don't you pay no attention to all them prayers I been aimin' in your direc—"

"Don't sass your ma, boy. Tell me what I want to know."

"Golly darn, I surely am sorry. I didn't mean to back talk, it's—"

"Tell me exactly how you got involved with them Lemurians."

"You always did have a shit poor memory, Mommy." Amos Binky poked a finger into the moss at the edge of the marble slab. "Suppose up where you are there ain't no memo pads or scratch papers so—"

"Never you mind what it's like up here, sonny boy," suggested Conger in a fair approximation of the voice of the singer's late mother. "You fill me in on them Lemurians."

"I told you about this right from the start, Mommy."

"Want to hear it again."

"Wellsir, bout two years back that Chink fella come to see me. Pretended he was from the Hong Kong branch of my fan club and that he had a sixteen-year-old Eurasian girl who was just dyin' to commit fell—"

"What was this Chinaman's name?"

"You never paid no attention to me when you was alive either. If you had, I wouldn't never of had to marry Leah Belle nor—"

"His dangnab name!"

"Walter Wang. Once he got me alone, he offered me untold wealth iffen I'd go along with them, join up, be an agent for them Lemuria fellas. Heck, I already got untold wealth from my singin' and merchandise'. Did you realize, Mommy, I get 30% of ever one of them flip over skycars they's sellin' right out—"

"Give me the Lemuria details, sonny boy, and skip the brags."

"Did it all for you, lot of thanks I get. Ought to see the tacky tombs some fellas buy their moms. Anyways, I told this Walter Wang from Hong Kong, China, that a guy with thirty-seven gold records and seventeen platinum records and one made out of plutonium don't need no more wealth."

"Then why the dickens did you join up?"

"He touched a soft spot, Mommy. Offered me power. Mean to say, once the Lemurians took over I was gonna be some kind of dictator. Gonna rule the whole dang South, think of that. Wellsir, bein' the ruler of the whole dang South would mean that iffen I happen to dip ol' john into a little bitty girl who turned out to be maybe eleven or twelve, I weren't gonna have to buy off her kin or bribe a bunch of shitkickin' local law folks or—"

"Where does P.K. Stackpole come in?"

Lowering his eyes, Amos Binky said, "He don't. Honest."

"Amos, don't lie to your mother!"

"Well, Mommy, you know I been a fan of P.K. Stackpole's for years. I was always after you to buy me his books when I was a little tad. I don't much like sci fi, but that fella moves me somethin' fierce. When I read *Atlantis, Here I Come*, for example, I got all over goosey bumps an' my—"

"Do you know where P.K. Stackpole is?"

"Don't you? Sittin' up where you are, can't you see ever—"

"I want you to tell me, and also I want to know how you got him into this mess."

"I'm tryin' to, Mommy, 'cept you keep naggin' at me. After bein' a member of the Lemuria outfit for a spell I took to feelin' sheepish bout the whole dang thing. Just didn't feel right about sellin' out my own kind and kin for some alien galoots I don't even know what they look like nor—"

"So you quit?"

"Hush, be still, Mommy." Amos Binky glanced all around the darkening grounds. "Them Lemuria fellas don't exactly know that just yet. I'm sort of easin' out of my relationship gradual. What's really and truly worryin' at me, though, is that they'll find out I'm the one who done give P.K. Stackpole most of the info he stuffed in that book of hisn. See, he was visitin' with me bout the time I got myself disenchanted with the whole shootin' match. So I kinda blabbed a lot on a few occasions an' dang if it all don't turn up in that half-witted bestseller."

"You were the one who had the dedication suppressed?"

"Dang right! When I got wind he was dedicating it to me, I had to stop it. What a fool thing for him to do, 'cept he always has been kind of—"

"Maybe you decided to hush up P.K. Stakepole, too, Amos."

"There you go again, Mommy. I didn't do nothin' to him. I got no idea where he went to. But you're all the time blamin'—"

Kaboom!

Blam!

Boom!

The entire front of the tomb exploded suddenly outward. Great chunks of it came roaring into the kneeling singer, ripping and smashing him.

A stray chunk smacked into Conger's head. He staggered, stumbled into the grove of willows and toppled over unconscious.

Chapter 8

"There he is, bonehead."

"Here? Am I warm? I don't feel even a—"

"There, dimbulb, right exactly where I'm pointing."

"Ah, yes, good. I think I'm grasping him now. Yes, I have hold of a knee . . . um, no. It's an elbow. Although an elbow shouldn't bend quite this way."

Conger opened his eyes all the way, noticed the Chinese plazcast salesman crouched and holding on to one of his ankles.

"Welcome aboard, Mr. Conger," said Jinx St Clair O'Rian Fairfield in her throaty voice.

"You can see me?" He found himself sprawled face down on the gently vibrating metal floor.

"I can, ivory-dome can't."

"Um, no . . . it's not his elbow after all. Feels more like some part of the foot. Am I close?" said the Chinese as he tightened his grip on Conger's ankle. "Can you give me a bit of a hint, Mrs. Fairfield? What am I holding onto?"

"Oh, for pete's sake, it's his ankle," said the stunningly beautiful redhaired model, tossing her breasts impatiently. "And don't use my married name, I'm free of Prez now. Call me by my maiden name."

"Um . . . is it Miss O'Rian?"

"That's another married name, chowderhead."

"Then it must be, Miss St. Clair?" He smiled hopefully. "Ah, good." He started dragging Conger along the metal floor.

Throw rugs and fat paisley pillows were strewn about.

"I could walk," suggested Conger as his backside went scaping over a burlapy rug.

"That's an odd effect, isn't it, Miss St. Clair? Having his voice come out of the empty void."

"Let him walk, Yutang."

"Is that his real name or another insult?" inquired Conger while getting on his invisible feet.

"I am Jim Yutang." The salesman squinted in the general direction of the unseen agent. "Is he upright now?"

"Yes, yes," Jinx said. "You have exceptional control, Mr. Conger. Managing to remain invisible even while suffering from a mild concussion. I admire that."

"I take it your former husband, our president, let you in on the National Security Office method for seeing invisible agents."

"No, it wasn't Prez. It was Attorney General Zuber. He had sort of a school boy crush on me before he got indicted, blabbed all sorts of secrets."

"He's got a tattoo on his bum," added Yutang. "Full color drawing of the Battle of Rio and the entire lyrics of the *Marine Hymn*. According to her."

"If you'll sit in that unsightly chair over there, Mr. Conger, we'd like to interrogate you." Jinx was reclining on a pile of plump cushions, clad in a no-top hostessuit, her auburn hair tied back with a strand of seagreen cord.

"You got my name from Zuber, too?" Conger decided he might as well become visible.

"No, the WTD membership list I got from Vice President Casson."

"We got a plazcast of him," said Yutang, eyeing the now visible Conger. "Never sold. Political fandom is tough to predict. You're a strapping fellow, Mr. Conger. Maybe we'll have time to cast your pri—"

"Am I still in Mississippi?" Conger asked the beautiful Jinx.

"Not at all." She rose off the cushions, tickled a twist of thread off her bare tanned ribs. "We're up in Skynet, which I inherited from another of my husbands, Basher O'Rian."

"Is he dead, too?" said Yutang, blinking. "Everybody's going. Amos Binky, Basher O'Rian. Seems like only the other day I was reading about O'Rian in *Famous*, the Communications King they dubbed him. Struck me as looking somewhat like a toad. That is to say, a human with toadlike features as opposed to an alien who actually is a toad so to speak. Because on a planet where being a toad is considered very swank, then there's nothing wron—"

"Button your lip," suggested Jinx.

"So we're in one of O'Rian's communications satellites," said Conger, nodding. "Orbiting Earth, relaying US shows all around the globe."

"Beaming crapola to millions of twerps, right."

"When you were shaking up with Zuber and Casson," said Conger, "you maybe heard about its being a federal crime to kidnap a government agent."

Jinx smiled one of her pouty smiles. "The federal government is on the skids. Within a very short time the abnors are going to run the whole damn United States, all the world in fact."

Conger settled on the edge of the metal interrogation chair. "What'd they promise you to get you to kill your father?"

"Stepfather," she corrected. "And in reality it was a fellow named Babu Jabberjee of Ferozepore who did the job. I had no active part in the assassination, other than sending you ass over teakettle." Her smile broadened, became less pouting. "In a way, it's a real shame I can see you Conger, since I've always had a sexual fantasy about being boffed by an invisible man. Ought to be fun, fraught with surprises."

"You could close your eyes."

"Aw, not the same," said Jinx. "Can your wife see you?"

"Always, yeah."

"Pity, but then she may not be as interested in new sensual horizons as I am."

"Excuse it," put in Yutang, "but if you want to question him, I'd like to get rolling. Otherwise I'll miss my show."

"He's a rabid fan of *Calling Dr. Heartbreak*," explained the lovely model. "It'll be up on our monitors in another twenty-three minutes."

Conger glanced over at the three blank screens on the far wall. "We can wait until after the show," said Conger. "Did you also knock off Amos Binky?"

"Sexually you mean?"

"Literally, with the exploding tomb."

"Naw, that was done by one of the Lemurian abnors," the girl told him. "He put his telek powers to work and *wham!* there went Mommy Binky's last resting place."

"Very difficult feat, even for an abnor," said Yutang, shifting from one foot to another. "Biggest problem is zeroing in on target. On his first try the abnor exploded a trailer home on the outskirts of Vicksburg, second time he did in the recently elected truant officer in Indianola. Of course being way underground in those—"

"Enough gab," said Jinx.

"How'd you get me?" Conger inquired, leaning back in the uncomfortable chair.

"Well, I was a houseguest of Amos' and happened to be quite near when his terrible accident occurred," said Jinx, rubbing the tip of her thumb along the underside of her right breast. "You seemed to me a prize catch, so in the confusion I was able to spirit you away. With an assist from dimdome there."

After nodding, Conger asked, "What about P.K. Stackpole? Where is he?"

"That," replied Jinx, "is what we want you to tell us."

Chapter 9

Marshmallows were plugging out of the wall in a white parade, fast.

Wizard, making a discontented sound, kicked out a booted foot and hit the roomserv wall. "Come on, co-operate!"

Now a hot stream of neochocolate came spurting out of a nozzle immediately above the nozzle which was issuing the line of marshmallows.

"Cripes, and me without a bucket." Ducking under the sputter of chocolate, she elbowed the hotel room wall and then snatched up the ordering mike and yelled into it. "Rocky road fudge was what I ordered, not the basic ingredients. Okay?"

"Room service shuts down at ten," said the wall's voicebox.

"Not completely." She backed, dodging the chocolate and the marshmallows.

The stuff was puddling on the noryl floor, hardening into splotches of white-dotted fudge.

Finally, after the girl charged the wall and nudged it with both elbows and a knee, everything ceased spewing. Wiping warm chocolate off her thighs, Wizard retreated, leaving brown footprints on the suite floor.

She tasted a fingertip, narrowing one eye. "Not too bad, even without walnuts."

With a frustrated sigh she plumped down into a zebra wing chair, sat surveying the blobs of splashed candy with legs spread wide.

"Wonder if this'll go on our tab? Must be twenty bucks of makings strewn," she said to herself. "Maybe Jake is right, I ought to reform. I feel very guilty about this mess. In fact, if he comes back and sees the place smeared with fudge, he's going to . . . Ump!"

Another vision hit her, a surprise glimpse of what was going to happen up ahead somewhere. The pains which took hold of her were exceptionally sharp. Wizard doubled until her blonde hair swept at her sticky knees.

She was seeing an image of Jake Conger. He wasn't anywhere near Amos Binky. Instead he was strapped into some kind of metal chair and howling. A Chinese and a redheaded girl with very unimpressive exposed breasts were scowling at Conger. There was some kind of doctor, too. He got mixed up in the vision, replacing Conger and the skinny modelly girl. The Chinese and the somehow familiar doctor were staring at each other, but the doctor wasn't the correct size.

"Jake's in trouble . . . they've taken him . . . someplace else . . ."

After a moment the pictures faded out of her head, after another the pain subsided.

A bit shaky, Wizard got up and, skirting the spills of thickening fudge, lurched into the pixphone alcove. She settled in front of the phone, took a long deep breath and punched out a special number.

"Now what?" asked Geer when he appeared on the platter-shape screen. "You look like you're covered all over with fudge."

"I'm covered all over with fudge. But the point is I—"

"What sort of fudge? Are those marshmallows in your hair?"

Brushing at her hair, Wizard said, "Listen to me, I know something's happened to Jake."

"Don't tell me he blew up along with Binky?"

"Did Amos Binky blow up? Darn, I warned Jake," she said, shaking her head. "Why didn't you, for gosh sake, let me know what—"

"I only just now found out, Wiz. With things so futzed up in this nitwit office I have to get most of my information off the Eight O'Clock Puppetoon News. How come you didn't go out to Momsvilla with—"

"He wouldn't let me. He ordered me to stick here at the hotel and not eat any candy or sweets."

"Appears you've let him down, Wiz, seeing as you're covered from head to toe with—"

"I haven't *eaten* a bite. The stuff just splashed on me," she said. "Now what exactly happened to Amos Binky?"

"Mother's tomb blew up," answered the frazzled Wild Talent Division boss. "Right there, by the way, is an incident guaranteed to petrify your gunnysack. Law officers swear there's no trace of a bomb or other explosive."

"Well, obviously not. The Lemurians used their powers to make the thing go blooey and kill Amos Binky." She licked at another finger tip. "Darn, I knew I should have tagged along when—"

"Are you sure Jake didn't blow up, too? I've been huddling here, trying to figure out how to suggest to his wife that maybe Jake is—"

"He's alive." Wizard nodded affirmatively, causing three marshmallows to fly free of her hair. "I just now saw him. I had a flash, he's being held someplace up . . ." Her voice trailed off as she thought back over what she'd seen. "He's up in the air, way up. There's a girl with him . . . very skinny thing. Saw her picture someplace only the other day." She tried to snap her chocolate-covered fingers, didn't quite succeed. "Exactly! He's with Jinx St. Clair O'Rian Fairfield."

"She's not at all skinny, she's compact rather and . . . but what in the blazes is the ex-wife of the President of the United States doing with Jake?"

"Looked like she was interrogating him," said Wizard. "She's also the daughter of the late Rodney St. Clair, which ties her in with . . . *Calling Dr. Heartbreak!*"

Geer's wrinkles multiplied. "Hey, you're supposed to see the future for us, not watch yoofoo soap operas."

"That's just it, I saw a soap opera. In my vision. The darn show's someway tied in with Jake's dilemma."

After tapping his fingertips on his disarrayed desk, Geer said, "Wait, I am remembering something. Yeah, when one of Jinx' other hubbies expired, he left her a chain of communications satellites and skylabs. One of them is probably used to transmit that half-wit soaper around the world."

"You're absolutely right." Wizard stood up. "I need a shuttle. I'll arrange that. See you later."

"Be careful, Wiz. These Lemurians are a lot rougher than our homegrown yoofoos."

"Even so," she said, "I have to help Jake out. Stand by to back me up."

"What are you—"

Wizard switched off the phone, licked her thumb and went dashing out of the room.

Chapter 10

". . . why would I not love you deeply, Byron? After all, was it not you yourself who installed this new ployzene heart in my supple young body? Furthermore, dear love, do you not hold the basic patents on this artificial heart which beats within me with passionate fondness for you and you alone?"

"Actually, Melissa, I'm only listed as the co-inventor. You might just as well fall head over heels in love with Dr. Kubi Akusei of the Kyoto Garage Mechanics Memorial Hospital or the whole Third Ramp staff at the Connecticut Enclave Biomex Assembly Plant, or even with Mrs. Rachel Meech who so diligently and cheerfully transcribed my original notes and voxtyped them into a form—"

"Ah, but in all the world, dearest, there is only one Dr. Byron Heartbreak. It is you, only you, I love. Kiss me, Byron, kiss me with wild abandon."

"Not yet, Melissa. It's too soon after your lip transplant. Now if you'll disengage yourself from my knees and climb back into your bed, I'll have Nurse Jayne see . . ."

Conger had been listening to the voices for several minutes without realizing he was awake once again. The last jolt from the shockcap clamped to his skull had done more than knock him silly. He was experiencing difficulty in deciding whether he was conscious or unconscious.

". . . my own daughter cohabiting with a robot? What sort of disastrous mistakes did I make in your upbringing, Glinda, to—"

"Oh, dad, really. Norman isn't a robot, he's simply a cyborg. And all the best parts of him are still flesh and blood."

"Lord, when I think back to that night when I pulled him from the wreck of his mangled skycar . . ."

There was the soap opera over there. Flickering on all three of the monitor screens, the colors not exactly right and the people fuzzy.

Or maybe they were always fuzzy on *Calling Dr. Heartbreak*, Conger had never watched the thing before. Could be the focal character was supposed to have that bright green beard.

He spotted Yutang. The Chinese was sitting on a mound of pillows, hands behind his head, legs crossed at the ankles.

But where had Jinx gotten to?

With considerable effort, Conger turned his head far to the left and far to the right. No sign of the redheaded model.

He remembered she'd turned very pale during the final phase of the questioning.

". . . in bed with you, Wilda!"

"You saw no such thing, Vincent."

"Indeed I did, and no amount of cunning and sweet talk can persuade me I didn't see another form beneath the thermal quilt with you."

"A *form*, yes, but not a person."

"What? Is it even worse than I suspected? Have you been unfaithful to me with—"

"With a computer, Vincent. That's all."

"A computer? You mean that squabbish little terminal I gave you on the occasion of our renewing our marriage contract? Why that's absolutely disgust—"

"Oh, don't be so old-fash—"

"Blazes! Cuckolded by a gadget, made to wear the horns by a blooming hunk of . . ."

Was this the episode Yutang had been so anxious to watch? Or another one? Conger was unsure how long he'd been out.

The actors in the soap opera didn't appear as fuzzy now. They were shedding their green whiskers.

Conger risked another, more thorough, scan of the room. It sent pains flashing down his spine, but it convinced him Jinx was not anywhere in the room.

She'd come back, though, and more questions would follow. They'd hook him up to all the wires and probes and start in again.

". . . technically, Byron, you are the father of my child."

"That's absurd, Veronica, because we both know that since you've been a patient here I haven't so much as touched you any way but medically."

"Ah, but what you don't know, dearest Byron, is that I broke into the Noteworthy Persons Sperm Bank in Washington, DC and swiped one of the specimens you donated. I then inseminated myself and—"

"Veronica, I can't afford to be a father, even by proxy, at this time. You must be aware I'm being considered for a key position with . . ."

Conger concentrated. He was fairly certain he was still enough in control to turn invisible. Even though he was strapped to the interrogation chair, he might be able to use his wild talent against Yutang.

". . . tomorrow at the same time for Chapter 16, Book 42 of the never ending saga of dedicated Dr. Byron Heartbreak."

It was working, Conger was fading away toward invisibility.

The far door swung suddenly inward. Wizard Wells, stunguns in each fist, leaped across the threshold.

Yutang turned, not yet aware of who it was. "Show's not quite over, Miss St. Clair, so I . . . yikes!"

Zummmm!

The beam of Wizard's left-handed stungun hit him full in the chest and he never got beyond a half-risen position. Stiffening, he tumbled over, smacking down onto pillows, rugs and metal floor.

"Don't fade anymore, Jake." Wizard came loping toward him, tucking one of her guns into the waist of her slitshorts.

"I had a ruse worked out," Conger told her. "Was going to use invisibility to con him into thinking I'd broken free of—"

"We have to depart." She went to work on his straps and restraining bands with a pocket laserpencil.

"Ouch."

"Sorry, I've still got a little chocolate on my fingers and it makes me a bit clumsy."

"What about Jinx and her crew?"

"Crew consists of three, I stunned 'em all. Jinx I socked in the jaw."

"Efficient." He let the blonde girl help him up out of the metal chair. "I want to take Jinx with us when we leave. You do have a means for getting us off this contraption?"

"Borrowed a teleport shuttle, details will follow," explained Wizard as she guided him to the open doorway. "Why do we need to drag that skinny model with us?"

"Because she knows a little more about what's going on than we do," answered Conger.

Chapter 11

Wizard was fidgeting. "I'm not cut out for an ascetic life," she complained. "Self-denial gives me the willies. I'd honestly enjoy something sweet and syrupy right about now."

Leaning back in the skycab seat, Conger said, "Wish you'd slugged Jinx St. Clair a little harder."

"Listen, Jake, I gave her one of my best haymakers," the blonde insisted.

"Then she's got splendid reoperative powers," he said. "Comes to, grabs a shuttle and gets away from the satellite before we can get hold of her."

"You dawdled considerably in that interrogation room."

"I was somewhat shaky, yeah," he admitted.

Wizard reached over, squeezed his hand. "Justifiably so. I don't mean to chide. I only—"

"Something's not quite right about this whole business," he said. "Jinx gave me the impression that they don't know where P.K. Stackpole is either."

"Trying to con you, divert you."

Conger shifted on the seat of their robot cab. "Possibly, but they were damn persistent. Acted as though they don't have him, but would like to get hold of him and keep him from doing any more talking or writing about the Lemurians."

"Imagine that skinny Jinx giving up the White House for some drafty caves in the bowels of the earth."

"Power," said Conger. "She'd like more of it."

"Approaching Houston," announced the voxhole on the cab's control panel. "Approaching Houston."

"You're still scowling," said Wizard. "Something else bothering you?"

"Not a scowl, rather a thoughtful frown," he answered. "Yeah, I think, when I wasn't quite conscious, they asked me some questions about Gomez. Can't figure why."

"Who's he?"

"Groucho Gomez, the multimillionaire agriculture baron. Crusty old gent who owns most of the farmland in California North, and in California South."

"Oh, yes, the poor old man your fanatic wife is always picketing."

Conger nodded. "Can't exactly remember what they asked me about him."

"Maybe they only were curious as to why your wife is annoying him."

After a few silent seconds Conger asked, "How'd you manage to borrow a shuttle and teleport up to the satellite? You haven't explained yet, Wizard."

With a one-shoulder shrug, the girl said, "I had a vision, you know, and from the clues in that I deduced where you probably were. I keep up with show business, things like that, read *Mammon* and *Fame* and *Fax-Variety* all the time. So I knew the contact base for Jinx' fleet of comsats was in

San Antonio." She rubbed her back against the upholstery, spread her hands wide. "You apparently consider me gawky and bovine, but the majority of guys find me attractive. After I managed to crash my skycar inside the walls of the contact base, a couple of the fellows on the staff invited me to have a friendly drink. One thing led to another and, in under a half hour, I coldcocked the pair of them, commandeered a shuttle car and teleported up to rescue you. Hate to harp on this, Jake, but you and your wife aren't much when it comes to thanking a person for saving your life."

"Didn't I thank you when you first popped in?"

"No, nope. Nobody ever does," she said, forlorn. "Even if I weren't gifted with my mental powers, I'd be exceptional. I'm tough, crafty, bright, dura—"

"Thanks for the rescue operation," Conger cut in. "And I'm aware of all your positive qualities, Wizard. I won't even ask why you're smeared with chocolate after I suggested you—"

"An accident, an absolute accident. Not a bit of sweets have I . . . well, I did have to eat the candied cherry in my drink when I was vamping those guys at the satellite contact base or—"

"Now let's concentrate on what's coming up."

"You really think we ought to go to Hong Kong?"

"Walter Wang is in Hong Kong," said Conger.

"According to the late Amos Binky, Wang is an important man in the Lemurian organization. When I use my truth kit on him, we should be able to find out some details to pass on to Geer. Enough for him to get the President interested."

"You still give me the impression," said Wizard, "you yourself aren't completely convinced there are Lemurians lurking around."

"I believe in them, although I maybe don't see what they're doing as quite the large scale op—"

"Yow!" The girl pressed her palms against her abdomen. "Trouble . . . trouble . . ." After biting into her lower lip, she straightened. "Cabbie, set us down right now."

"Six minutes from Houston Teleport Depot, sir or madam."

"It's okay. Now, land this crate!"

Conger asked, "What's wrong?"

The skycab began to drift down through the early morning, toward the intricacy of crosshatched ramps which loomed over Houston.

"We . . . have to get out of this damn cab . . . now . . ."

"Here all right, sir or madam?"

The skycab had come to rest on a high, lavender-tinted walk ramp.

"Fine. Come on, come on." She unbuckled, climbed hurriedly out of the passenger pod and tugged Conger after her. "Take this darn cab straight up."

"Beg pardon, sir or madam?"

"Up, straight up. Away from buildings and people, quick!"

"As you wish, sir or madam." The vehicle rose swiftly up into the warming air.

"Run," advised Wizard.

He ran beside her. "What'd you see? What's going to—"

Kablam!

Wham!

Wizard wrapped a strong arm around him, dived. They hit the smooth ramp hard, flattened out.

Conger looked up, saw their skycab unraveling high above them. Its components drifted farther and farther apart, tangling with huge tattered ribbons of sooty smoke. Then the chunks and pieces began to rain down. The voxbox went plummeting by, babbling, "Sir or madam. Sir or madam. Sir or madam . . ."

"They knew we were in that skycab." Wizard sat up, brushed at her hair. "I got a glimpse of somebody . . . something . . . concentrating on us. Using . . . some kind of telek power to explode the cab."

"But they missed us."

"It . . . takes time to do it . . . like going into a trance. A lot of concentration . . . and once they zero in . . . they can't always switch . . . targets." She took a breath. "Close, though. They came darn close."

Conger stroked her back briefly. "Thanks again," he said, getting to his feet and glancing around. "Got any more hunches?"

She stood, faced him. "They're not hunches. How come you keep—"

"Probably because 'visions' sounds too mystical. What I want to know is, are they going to make another try?"

The girl pressed her eyes shut. "Not for awhile . . . they don't have complete control . . . it's sort of hit and miss. For now we're safe."

"Okay, then let's get to Hong Kong." He took her arm and they hurried along the ramp.

Chapter 12

"I am *not* a midget."

"But, Mr. Vice President, you've been widely braided as the first midget VP of the United States. Surely you—"

"Media distortion," retorted Vice President Casson.

"Are you saying then, sir, you are definitely not a midget at all?"

"I am not now a midget, I have never been a midget," asserted Casson, shaking his tiny fist at the ring of press and TV people who surrounded him in the middle of the rundown Hong Kong airport. "I am simply a short person."

"Only last week, sir, *Mammon* magazine described you as 'America's favorite mite.' Are you now—"

"*Mammon* is full of poop."

In her neoteak viewchair Wizard Wells made a polite snorting sound, then returned to gnawing on her thumb knuckle as she watched the wallnews.

"Are you telling us, Mr. Vice President, that all the thousands of midgets around the world who look to you as a symbol of the triumph of short people are—"

"Those twerps," said the angry little vice president. "Making me the Honorary Vice President of the Little People of the Free World. Such gall! If I were a midget, I'd want to be *president* of their dinky outfit anyway."

"Are you aware," inquired an Oriental newspaperman, "the latest edition of Guinness lists you as the smallest person ever to hold a federal office in America?"

"Guinness is full of poop, too. And now—"

"Will you," asked a black TV man, "tell us your official height, sir? Since you are now denying—"

"I am well over five feet tall, well over, Benton. You can see that."

"But, Mr. Vice President, we can also plainly see your built-up shoes. I'd judge those heels of yours to be about five if not six inches high."

"If I wasn't in such a hurry, Benton, I'd take off my shoes and let you folks measure me."

"Are you going to deny, sir, that *Fame* magazine did just exactly that? They measured you scant weeks ago, found you to be a total of four feet nine inches long."

"Ah, but that was lying down. The fool girl they sent to interview me, pushy dame who wrote *I Blew The President*, insisted on having what she characterized as an intimate interview. Standing up, let me assure you all, I am well over five feet tall."

"Speaking of affairs of the bedroom," asked the columnist from the *Tokyo Sun*, "is it true you are in Hong Kong for the express purpose of putting the old boots to a certain titian-haired beauty?"

"You're full of poop, Sooshiki."

"Then you are claiming, sir, your being in Hong Kong at the same time as the fabled Jinx St. Clair O'Rian Fairfield is a pure coincidence?"

"Nothing connected with that dame could be pure," said the little vice president with a chortle. "But, yes, I can tell you I came here strictly in the interest of my country. Specifically to work on trade agreements and not to futz around with the roundheeled former wife of one of the greatest presidents my country has ever had, a man who stands tall in the lexicon of—"

"He's only five feet six," put in the girl from the *Galactic Inquirer*.

"President Fairfield is tall in spirit, as I am," Vice President Casson replied. "Let me conclude this offensive, though illuminating, interview by stating I am here to see about relaxing the embargo on American-made water pistols and whoopee cushions so that once again the US dollar may—"

Click!

After turning off the wall, Conger crossed the gently swaying floor of their rented houseboat and settled into a chair near the blonde precog. "Now we know where Jinx is," he said.

"We know where she's alleged to be."

"She's here," he said. "And Casson is in Hong Kong to see her."

"Too many people coinciding," the girl said. "Jinx and the Veep and us, all in the same sleazy Oriental city with Walter Wang and his Simulated Nostalgia Productions. Did you ever see any of his vidiscs?"

"Never watch much video."

"Neither have I, but from what I've been able to dig up, this Wang specializes in turning out simulations of old-fashioned late 20th Century television shows. Detective, sitcom, sci fi. Apparently there's a market for such gunk."

Conger said, "I'd like to know how deeply the Vice President is involved in this Lemurian mess. If he's one of them, it'd explain Geer's problems. Some of them anyway."

"Casson sure does look like a midget to me, despite his denials."

"His campaign slogan was 'Put A Midget In The White House.' Apparently there's been a policy change somewhere."

Wizard nibbled at her knuckle. "How come he flies instead of teleporting?"

"Got a fear of teleporting. Seems an uncle of his stepped onto a teleport pad in Seattle a few years back along with the Glenn Miller Clone Band and came out in Syracuse with a slide trombone inside him."

Wizard stood, strode to a one-way window and gazed out at the Kowloon Harbor. It was a misty evening, a few minutes beyond midnight. The lights of the other bobbing houseboats glowed faint and fuzzy. "They must know we want to talk to Walter Wang."

"Probably."

"Going to be tough getting at him."

"They'll have traps set, sure."

"That underfed Jinx can see you, don't forget."

Conger grinned. "She can only see me when I'm invisible," he said.

Chapter 13

"Some sort of frumus at the gate," said Wizard out of the side of her mouth.

Arms at his sides, staring straight ahead, Conger sat stiffly in the passenger bucket of the landvan. He was tinted a glowing shade of purple, had tufts of orangish feathers covering his head. "Getting any premonitions?" he asked, lips barely moving.

She shook her head, causing the hair of her black wig to sweep at her shoulders. "Nothing," she said. "Which doesn't necessarily mean we're safe."

"Thought you were 80% accurate."

"87%," she said. "But that only means when I have a vision, it usually proves true. Sometimes I don't have a vision at all and a load of bricks still goes ahead and dumps on somebody." She lifted her finger from the brake button on the control panel, the van started rolling again toward the gates of Wang's Simulated Nostalgia Productions studios. "That old gentleman is the cause of the trouble."

The plaz gates in the yellow walls of the studio were open wide, but blocked by a fallen-over landcycle which was tangled with an electrowheel-chair. Three Chinese guards, armed with stunrifles, were arguing with a bearded old man who was only partially clad and a plump young woman covered with blue polka dots.

"I am so, you dopey Chinks!" the old man was shouting. He was dressed in the top half of a padded space suit from the last century and a tatty pair of allseason stretchbriefs. "Look at me, look hard at the face that was once known to millions. Gaze at this once familiar tunic."

"You got to have a pass, grandpappy," repeated a guard.

"Pass? Why does Donny Trubot, Jr. need a pass?"

The polka-dotted girl said, "How about my bike, huh? It's all bunged up. The Screen Extra's Militant Take-No-Crap-From-Management-Or-Moguls Guild is going to lodge a—"

"Shut your trap," advised Donny Turbot, Jr. "You smashed into my chair anyhow, all your stupid fault."

"Like heck it is! When a SEMTNCFMOMG member is handed any crap from the biggies, boy, they don't let—"

"I'm no biggie, you dippy bimbo. I'm just a has-been, a onetime great," said the bearded old man. "If Walter Wang hadn't sent for me to serve as technical adviser for his recreation of my old *Space Devils* show, why, I'd be wasting away on the porch of the Faded & Fallen Old Broken Down Actors Home in Woodland Hills, California South."

The polka dot girl gasped, waved her hands in the air twice. "Wait a sec, hold it a mo! You used to play Capt. Rex Stately of the Star Marines, didn't you?"

"I sure did."

"Right, my grandmother still has a picture of you in your dashing uniform." She frowned down at his pale bare legs. "Wasn't there more to it?"

"Oh, the matron at the home let her dim-witted nephew play with it and he shredded the trousers. Had a gold stripe right along here."

"Yes, I remember," said the plump girl. "What a coincidence, my meeting you here in Hong Kong like this, sir. My granny was crazy about you in her long ago youth and here I am playing a Plutonian B-girl in this remake of *Space Devils*. One of a small quota of real human actors the guild forces Wang to employ. Otherwise, it'd be all andies and 'bots and—"

"You can go on in, girly," said another of the guards. "But your grandfather will—"

"He's not my grandfather," she said, impatient. "He's Donny Turbot, Jr. and he used to be Capt. Rex Stately in *Space Devils*. He's not exactly a member of SEMTNCFMOMG, but if you guys continue to annoy and bedevil him, I'm going to call our local Hong Kong grievance chairman, whose name is Fearless Flint. He's the noted stuntman and he won't take any—"

"What seems to be the trouble?" A lean Chinese in a two-piece skyblue excelsior had arrived at the gates from somewhere within the vast studio grounds. Holding on to his immaculate arm, wearing a sedate backless daysuit, was Jinx St. Clair.

"Look as monsterish as you can," said Wizard in a low voice.

The head guard told Walter Wang, "This old geezer and his granddaughter claim we have to admit him, boss, or else they'll call a wildcat strike and—"

"You Wang?" old Turbot, Jr. wanted to know.

"I am," replied Wang in a gentle voice. "You, obviously, are the great, but unfortunately forgotten, Donny Turbot, Jr. You are in excellent condition, Donny, for a man your age."

"Darn right. You aren't going to see any ninety-four-year-old space heroes in any better shape."

"Allow me to apologize for my staff, Donny. They, I fear, don't always share my interest in the past and its glories. Did you misplace the pass I sent to you at your hotel?"

"Think I must have left it in my pants pocket," answered the old actor.

Jinx glanced out through the gates. She looked at the disguised Wizard and the disguised Conger in their landvan cab and then her eyes moved on.

"She didn't tumble," sighed Wizard.

"Not yet."

"Please, let me help you back into your wheelchair," volunteered the plump polka-dotted girl extra, bending to upright the mechanism. "By the way, Mr. Wang, I'm Trina Bellweather. Right now I'm only an extra, yet I'm determined to advance to the point where I can join the Minor Players Sock-The-Bosses-In-The-Squinter & Get More Pay Guild. So you might keep me in mind for bigger parts."

"Did you apply your own polka dots?" the studio owner asked as he helped Donny Turbot, Jr. settle into his wheelchair.

"Yes, sir, from head to foot. All my own work." She flashed her slit tunic, briefly, open.

"An excellent job, Trina. I certainly will keep you in mind for better things."

"Spaceman's Luck!" shouted the old actor suddenly. "Off into the void!" He activated his electrowheelchair and went ratcheting away across the studio grounds.

Wang, disentangling himself from Jinx, went trotting in his wake.

The redheaded model, with a final glance out through the gates into the early morning street, followed at a casual pace.

When their van reached the guards, Wizard held out their expertly forged papers. "Delivering this android from the #2 Prop Lot," she told the guards.

"What production is it for?"

"Can't you tell? This is *the* purple monster for *Space Devils*."

"We don't go much for old sci fi," said the guard who was flipping through her papers.

"Our favorite genre is the hard-boiled detective show," added another guard, patting the stock of his stunrifle. "It still speaks to 21st Century man and his turmoils."

The third guard said, "Still there's something to be said for the all-singing all-dancing musical. A snappy rafter shot of a bevy of leggy chorines strutting their—"

"All in order." The head guard tossed the papers back to Wizard. "Deliver it to Studio 4, sis."

"Righto." Wizard guided their van through the gates. "Well, we're inside."

"Now all we have to worry about," said Conger, "is getting out again."

Chapter 14

Conger was invisible.

To everyone except Jinx St. Clair, and Wizard was arranging to keep the model and ex-First Lady occupied for a spell.

He stood, unseen, in a patch of dense jungle. Quietly, controlling every footfall, he moved through the artificial foliage toward the outdoor set where one of Wang's production units was about to start taping a scene.

Conger had, after turning invisible and sneaking away from Studio 4 where Wizard had left him off, made certain adjustments to one of the android actors in this particular show. Now, as the day brightened, he waited and watched.

Through the ferns and fronds at the edge of the jungle set he saw the foggy London street where *The Insidious Dr. Fang Gow* was about to commence shooting.

"Okay, human actors in position," ordered the pudgy assistant director. "Sid, what is that you're covered with?"

"Fungus."

"That's very unconvincing looking fungus."

"It's mutant fungus, remember, developed by the insidious Dr. Fang Gow in his subteranean lab beneath the teeming streets of Limehouse."

"It looks more like a Santa Claus beard that got out of control."

"Just a darn minute." A small Japanese man came stomping along the misty street, feet slapping at the damp cobblestones. "Did I sense a criticism here, Dave? Am I going to have to get on the pixie and call the Horrible & Repulsive Makeup Experts Guild?"

"Come on now, Shorty," said the assistant director. "Look at Sid feigning death there in the gutter. Does he look anything like a man who's been gobbled up by a mutant strain of fung—"

"You don't like my work because I'm a midget. That's why all you guys pick on me, find fault with every little dab of slime or blob of—"

"You aren't a midget, Shorty. Who accused you of being a midget?"

"I am, I am a midget. Why would people call me Shorty unless—"

"Just last night, Shorty, I saw Vice President Casson of the United States on the news and he's three inches shorter than you," said the assistant director. "He swears he isn't a midget, so it stands to reason you—"

"Casson is a midget."

"How about," suggested Sid from the gutter, "if I sprawl over this way? It'll look maybe better." He huddled in on himself.

"Perfect," judged Shorty.

The assistant director said, "Well, okay, we'll shoot it that way. Now then . . . Willie, you don't look well."

"I got a dose of the black plague from Dr. Fang Gow," said the actor who was stretched out in a nearby alley. "Plus a brainbox hangover."

Shaking his head, the assistant director said, "How can you expect to give a believable performance as a plague victim when you spend your nights fooling around in those brainstorm parlors over in Macao?"

"It's my only vice."

"I just hope you don't spoil the plague effect." He waved toward the outskirts of the set. "Bring the android stars in."

A husky Chinese girl dragged a slightly twitching and very British android along the misty cobblestones. "He's been very restless," she told the assistant director. "Do calm down, Sir Neville."

The assistant director scrutinized the lanky, tweedy android. "You understand this scene, I hope," he said. "You, Sir Neville Touchstone of Scotland Yard, are strolling along this vile street in London's notorious Limehouse district when all at once you see before you, gloating over his most recent batch of victims, none other than the insidious Dr. Fang Gow."

"My bloomin' mortal enemy, wot?" chirped the android actor.

"Exactly. You do a take, you can't believe your eyes. The most sinister man on the continent right here in Limehouse. Why? That's what you want to know. Is it a trap? A hallucination? What?"

"Wot," repeated the tweedy android.

"Fine. Bring the Fang Gow andy over here, Eddie."

Eddie escorted the insidious android onto the set, positioned it at the mouth of the shadowy alley. "All ready."

"Thank you so much, white devil," said Dr. Fang Gow, back bent, taloned hands clutching each other.

The assistant director, frowning, moved over to his camera robot. "We'll try for a take," he ordered. "Places, here we go. Sir Neville, you enter from beside the lamp post."

"Right you are, old bean."

"Very good, we're rolling."

Sir Neville, briar pipe clenched firmly between even white teeth, came striding along the fog-shrouded London street. When he'd taken five steps, he halted. Whipping off his bowler, he leaped into the air and clicked his heels together. He began singing, "Oh, my lass' dad is a baker and her gramp, 'e's a baker, too. And if you ever gets to Brighton, she'll show her buns to you! Oh, she's got the biggest buns in Brighton, the biggest buns in all the bloody—"

"Cut," called the assistant director. "Cease, quit!"

"I was afraid of this," said the husky Chinese girl, running onto the set to catch hold of the prancing Sir Neville. "He's malfunctioning again."

"Music hall ditties," murmured the assistant director. "Go get Mr. Wang right away, Eddie. He's the only one who can fix Sir Neville for us."

"Can't," replied Eddie. "That's too far. You're forgetting that when the studio renegotiated with our Stand Around & Fetch Guild, they agreed to limit the length a guy has to go before it gets to be a job for a member of the Long Range Stand Aroun—"

"Never mind, I'll go myself." The assistant director hurried away toward Studio 4. In order to do that he cut through the jungle set, using the narrow trail which passed a few feet from the watching Conger.

Wang would use this trail on his way back to the London set. And at one point he'd be screened from view from any of the other sets. Conger had anticipated that when he'd tampered with the Sir Neville android before anyone had arrived for the day's shooting on *The Insidious Dr. Fang Gow*.

"Very odd and unusual, my going on this way," said Walter Wang. "More often than not I'm taciturn to the point of—"

"We'll limit our chat to the topic of Lemurians," said Conger.

He and the studio owner were sharing a tree hut deep in the heart of the artificial jungle. He'd dragged Wang up here after stunning him on the jungle path. The assistant director, also felled by a stungun blast, was bound and gagged and stuffed in a native hut down below. Conger thought he had about fifteen minutes or less before they started seriously hunting for either man.

Wang brushed his fingers over the tiny truthbug attached to the base of his skull, but made no effort to remove it. "I don't usually like to discuss my connection with the Lemurians," he said slowly. "Today, however, I feel very much in the mood. Fire away."

"I want to know where P.K. Stackpole is."

"That busybody," said the mind-controlled Wang. "I wish we knew. We'd fix his wagon for spilling the beans. It's going to require a tremendous public relations effort to convince John Q. Public Stackpole's book isn't true. Always more costly to make believe you believe that something which is true isn't."

"You have no idea where he is?"

"Not the foggiest. Prophet Bill might."

"You mean Prophet Bill the Omnipotent, the governor of California South?"

"How many Prophet Bills are there?"

"Why would he know about Stackpole?"

"Bill's job was to abduct P.K. Stackpole while he was autographing copies of *Hello, Lemuria, Hello* at the Woodland Hills Book & Organic Fruit Superette. Prophet Bill, however, claims Stackpole did a no-show. We have our doubts about his trustworthiness and a probe of his mind and loyalty is in the offing."

"What about Gomez? He in with you, too?"

Wang hesitated, lips shutting tight, chest rising and falling. Finally he answered, "I know of no person by that name."

"Groucho Gomez, everybody's heard of him."

Wang was nearly panting. "I do not know any Groucho Gomez. I have never heard about him in any way."

"They've planted a mindblock," realized Conger. "All right, where are the Lemurians based?"

"Beneath the earth."

"Be more specific."

"Far beneath the earth, in the timeless caverns."

"Give me a damn geographic location, Wang."

"I do not know it."

"You recruited the late Amos Binky. On whose orders?"

"Those of my abnor contact."

"Who is he?"

"He has no name, at least none he shares with me."

"Where is he?"

"Beneath the earth."

"How does he communicate with you?"

"At times he appears to me. Here, in Hong Kong. Usually in my private offices."

"In the flesh?"

"His astral projection does all the field work."

"What does the projection look like?"

Wang's breathing became jerky and gasping again. "I don't remember."

Conger asked him, "How many agents, human agents, do you have?"

"Multitudes."

"In round numbers."

"Close to 10,000."

"Is there a list?"

"Only in the heads of our abnor masters."

"How about agents you know personally. Jinx is one, name me some of the others."

"Prophet Bill, as I already mentioned, Vice President Casson, Shiek Mawgoud Bayd Madroub, Doctor and Mrs—"

"Here he is! Stashed in this prop hut!"

Voices sounded below, crackling footsteps. They'd located the assistant director.

"It must be the work of a fiend!"

"Naw, fiends don't tie sissy little knots like this."

Conger had always taken pride in his knot ability. He stood, still invisible, and twisted the truthbug off Wang's neck.

"What an unusual setting I find myself in," mumbled the studio owner.

Conger hurried to the window of the high tree hut, climbed out onto a thick branch. Finding a sturdy vine, he took hold of it.

He went swinging, invisibly, away through the jungle.

Chapter 15

Conger jabbed out the number again, waited. "Damn, still no answer." He turned away from the pixphone.

"Maybe she's out hurling," suggested Wizard from her redwood lounger, "a firebomb into a meat market."

"What? Can't hear you with all this organ music."

"A snide remark, let it pass."

The stained glass windows of the motel suite rattled and buzzed in sympathy with the enormously loud blasts of religious music coming from outside.

Shaking his head, Conger returned to the phone alcove to try his home number once more. His wife didn't answer. After perching on a wrought iron bench, he said, "When does the music cease?"

"Doesn't."

"Maybe we should have taken that vacancy at the Kung Fu Baptist Motel instead."

"But you have to shave your head to stay there, Jake."

Nodding, he said, "Normally I keep clear of California South. By normally, I mean during the time when I lead a calm and rational life as a vegetarian restaurateur. Now I find myself in the Holy War Motel & Skylodge in the heart of Holytown."

"So? This happens to the capital of the state, since Prophet Bill the Omnipotent became governor," the blonde girl pointed out. "Since you want to query him, this is where we have to camp."

"I liked Holytown better when it was still Pasadena."

"My suggestion," said Wizard, "before we fled Hong Kong, was to wait around and snatch Jinx St. Clair. She must—"

"That woman makes me uneasy. I'd rather go up against Prophet Bill."

"I didn't have any trouble conning her, via pixphone, over to the Sheraton-Hilton-Hong Kong," said the girl. "She really believed Vice President Casson had an urgent reason for wanting her there. It ought to follow we could—"

"Myself, I feel a shade more secure dealing with people who can't see me when I don't want to be seen. Jinx is—"

Bong!

Bong!

Conger stood up. "What religious rite does that signify?"

"Think it's the doorbell;" She swung off the chair, drawing a stungun out of her tunic. At the oaken door she flipped on the spyscreen.

Geer, in an extremely ruffled daysuit, was fretting on the crimson doormat. His hair was standing straight up and he held his knobby hands pressed over his ears. "Let me in before this yoo-hoo holyroller music shatters my skonce."

Wizard opened the door. "Why are you in California South?" she inquired of her boss as he stumbled across the threshold.

Geer, avoiding a direct look at either of them, crossed to the fourposter bed and sat. He twisted, hunched, tugged a plyopack of jellyroll out of a hip pocket. "The half-wit Anaheim String Quartet squished this all out of recognition."

Conger asked, "How'd you happen to encounter them?"

"On the teleport pad in Cleveland. Yoohoo cellist dealt me a hell of a whack in the keaster with his half-wit instrument case. Heck, what a pity, all the synjam is oozing out."

"It's still eatable," said Wizard, reaching out a hand. "If you don't want it, I'll be gla—"

"Wizard!" said Conger.

"That's right, I'm fasting. You go ahead and feast."

Moving closer to the boss of the Wild Talent Division, Conger said, "And why were you in Cleveland?"

"Does seem nutty, doesn't it? Nobody in his right mind would willingly go to Cleveland. I can't imagine what the Anaheim String Quartet was doing there. Still, the nitwit reason is simple. I have to be cunning and circumspect in my movements." Geer zipped open the packet with slightly shaking fingers. "After what you reported from Hong Kong, about VP Casson being one of them, it made me even more twitchy. I don't know who the heck to—"

"You ought to go straight to President Fairfield."

"Not yet," said Geer. "We still don't have anything concrete, all we have is hearsay."

Conger told him, "You've got Rodney St. Clair dusted, you've got Amos Binky blown to smithereens."

"St. Clair's death you can explain, if you're a thimblebrain like Fairfield, as the work of a jealous rival. Lot of jealousy and backbiting amongst writers," said the frazzled WTD chief. "Binky was done in by a freak accident, for all we can prove. Nope, Jake, what I have got to have is documentation, irrefutable proof, or I ain't going to get a bit of co-operation from the chief exec."

"Could be," suggested Wizard, eyes on the mangled jellyroll, "Fairfield's in with the Lemurians, too."

"Wang didn't mention him," reminded Conger. "No, their highest placed agent in the White House is little Casson."

"So far," said Geer. "I tell you there are aspects of this thing which cause your goonies to shrink to the size of dried beans."

Conger said, "That why you 'ported out here to the West, to share your innermost fears about your private parts?"

"Um," said Geer. He took a thoughtful bite of his pastry. "First, Jake, fill me in on what your next move is."

"Prophet Bill holds a prayer breakfast every morning in the capitol building," he answered, watching his boss. "Works a couple miracles, blesses all the legislators in his party, prays for tax relief, makes a few prophecies and—"

"Ho," said Wizard, lips curling. "He's only 57% accurate. Calls himself a prophet"

"After the breakfast he meditates in a stone cell he had built next to the oval office. Then he—"

"Saw something about that on the news last year. Taxpayers wanted to know how come a humble anchorite's cell cost \$480,000 to build," said Geer while brushing crumbs off his chin.

"They had to teleport all the stone over from Israel," said Wizard. "Hence the tab."

Conger suddenly took hold of Geer's narrow shoulder. "You're avoiding something," he accused. "Before I tell you how we plan to get at Prophet Bill and quiz him, you explain your real reason for being in Cal South. Now!"

Geer stared down at his scuffed boots. "Whenever I feel guilty I can soothe myself back into somewhat of a sanguine mood with an infusion of sweets. A nice fat fig newton right abou—"

"What the hell are you guilty about?" Conger tightened his grip.

"Our man should have been more watchful," Geer said, carefully. "Actually, though, he isn't a WTD man. He's with our parent agency, the Remedial Functions Agency boys. Still they have a rep—"

"Angelica," cut in Conger. "It has something to do with her. That's why I can't get hold of her."

"When you put it that way, Jake, I have to . . . well, yes."

"What happened to her?"

"We . . . um . . . don't exactly know," replied Geer. "She just doesn't seem to be around any more."

Chapter 16

"No, honestly, I really do like the food."

"Posing as a customer, sneaking in here and pretending to gobble up—"

"Believe me, Conger, you people converted me, I swear. It's the honest to gospel truth," said the burly black man. "I'll down an order of nearham right now if it'll—"

"Just fill me in on what happened to my wife, Caz." Conger commenced another angry, agitated circling of the private dining room of his Vegetable Patch restaurant. "You've been dropping in here for weeks. I thought you were a little too swish to be a real skytrucker. I should have—"

"Hold off, Conger. The sissy stuff was part of my disguise," said the black Remedial Functions agent. "Based it on a real life skytrucker I tailed once up in New Seattle. Guy was suspected of smuggling massage robots in from—"

"Why don't you two fellows quit your sparring," said Wizard, who was watching the Pacific grow darker and darker as the day died. "We hopped up here, and abandoned our regular mission, Jake, so you could—"

"This is part of our job," Conger told the girl. "There's no other reason for grabbing Angelica."

"There are a whole stewpot of reasons," countered Wizard. "Could be the carnivorous folks in the neighborhood ganged up, or possibly some bakers who—"

"Okay, Caz, give me some details," Conger said to the black agent.

"I really feel wretched about this, Conger," he said, then glanced across the twilight room at Wizard. "Is that too prissy a word? Gee, I don't like to think I'm coming across as—"

"Where'd you see my wife last?"

"I mean, I've had three perfectly fine marriage contracts, with three perfectly straight women. No one's ever questioned my mascul—"

"My wife." Conger leaned and placed his hands palms down on the table.

"Originally I only dropped in here now and again, looked around and sent on a report to Manhattan and DC," said Caz. "Once you started working on this new assignment, I was instructed to keep a closer eye on your wife. Make sure nobody attempted to abduct, assassinate or otherwise harm her. Therefore, Conger, I've been tagging after her whenever she left here. I'm a very good tracker, and to follow someone unobtrusively when you're tailing them in a skytruck really calls for—"

"Where'd you lose Angelica?"

"It was this morning, over in Gomezville #1."

"Another vegetarian commando raid," remarked Wizard, folding her arms.

"This was a rally actually," continued Caz. "I'd guess they had close to a thousand people turn out to hear some prominent vegetarian activists lecture outside one of the big Gomez supermarkets. Anyway, I parked my truck, followed your wife afoot. I mingled, applauded at the right spots, purchased a frozen carrot on a stick, all the while keeping your wife under surveillance. Midway

through the second speech a skirmish started up nearby. In retrospect, I'm certain it was staged to distract me. At the time I was mostly concerned with keeping myself from getting bopped on the head by a very heavy sign with stylized vegetables decorating it. Someone else, while I was guarding my head, tripped me and I fell over into a lugbox of fresh strawberries. Well, once I got myself all sorted out, Conger, I noticed immediately your wife wasn't where she had been. She'd been standing up close to the speakers' platform, very attentive. Now she was gone."

"Obviously you checked around."

"Of course. I searched the whole crowd on foot, asked some discreet questions. Investigated refreshment stands, washrooms, so on. Nothing," said the RFA agent. "One other thing bothers me. Don't get angry about this, will you?"

"Continue," invited Conger.

"This morning, when I was taking my leave after a delicious hearty breakfast of fakebacon and glutencakes, I was able to hook a little bitty tracking bug on your wife's tunic without her being aware."

"I don't find that offensive." Conger leaned closer to Caz. "How come you couldn't use it to locate her?"

"There's what unsettles me. The darn thing quit sending. Once I was on my feet again there was no signal. She was gone, the signal had stopped."

"Mrs. Conger's a former NSO agent," reminded Wizard. "Could be she became aware of the gadget and dumped it."

"Angelica might do that," admitted Conger. "She'd never, though, leave our restaurant to run on robot staff for an entire day. We have to assume she didn't go anywhere voluntarily."

"No, she was taken," agreed Caz. "Taken by someone with equipment sophisticated enough to fritz my tracking bug."

"Gomez," said Conger.

"You think?" Caz blinked. "I suppose a powerful agbiz mogul might take action against agitators, yet somehow—"

"His motive has nothing to do with agriculture," said Conger. "Groucho Gomez is tied up with this whole damn conspiracy."

"I might be able to pix DC," said Caz, "and thus get some backup agents out here. We could try to search the whole Gomezville #1 facility in—"

"Take too long," said Conger. "I'll find my wife myself."

"Starting where?" asked Wizard, concern on her face.

"Where she was last seen," he said.

Chapter 17

"Yummy yummy," said the robot.

"I know, I know," said Wizard, "but I can't."

"Involved in some sort of misguided and cockeyed fad diet?" inquired the robot pushcart.

"Well, I'm trying to cut down on sweets," the girl replied, dragging one foot slightly as she passed along another aisle between floating displays of baked goods.

"Have you tried our new Gomez Tastirich Pudkakes?"

Wizard's nose wrinkled. "Pudkake? Doesn't sound exactly appetizing."

"Tell that to the computer over in advertising," said the cart. "To him it's a catchy name for a syncake which is 42% neopudding and 58% non-nutritive wheatlike flour, fakeshug and eggies."

"Pudkake suits it perfectly," said Conger. "Let's get to the produce area, dear, and then on about our business."

"Oh, darling, do let me linger in the dessert sector of this nifty Gomez Hypermarket a bit longer. I absolutely love to sniff all the fresh-bake smells."

"How about this?" inquired their robot shopping cart. It elevated its rear end, sent a swirl of tinted gas out of a small exhaust tube. "Recognize that?"

Bending slightly, Wizard sniffed. "Texas oil?"

"Woops, wrong mixture. There. Take a whiff of that."

"Ah, brownies," said the girl. "Fresh from the oven."

"Brownies with neonuts and realistic raisins, Took a team of our Gomez techs here in Gomezville #1 five and a half years to perfect that scent. Now we can slosh it all over our chocolike baked goods and—"

"Dear." Conger took hold of Wizard's bare arm. "We really must be going along."

Sighing, the girl told their cart, "We are in sort of a hurry. Lead on to the produce."

"You want candy produce? Where all the fruit and vegetables are made of marzipan or—"

"I'm afraid he wants the real thing. You know lettuce, cucumbers, dull things like that."

"Lettuce?" the cart said, halting. "Wait a mo, don't prompt me. I think I know what lettuce is. It's . . . I'm getting it. Green stuff, right?"

"Sounds right, yes."

"Don't believe we have any lettuce in this store. You might try our Hypergrandiosemart over in Gomezville #2. They go in more for those exotic food items, cater a lot to off-planet tastes."

"We'll settle for something else," said Conger, impatient.

"Off we go to the produce department." Their cart rolled rapidly along the chill aisles, passing row on row of Gomez products. Each container and packet bore a portrait of Groucho Gomez

himself, a sturdy white-maned old man with an impressive tan. On most of the labels his deepset golden eyes seemed to follow you as you passed.

". . . move rocks. Why not?"

"Who'd want to do that? What's the good of moving a rock?"

"With only your *mind*. That's impressive."

"Why? You got a rock here, you move it there. So?"

"The whole thing is awesome."

At the edge of the produce wing of the mammoth market dome two young men dressed in pale yellow two-piece nose outfits were arguing across a parked cart.

"You could get a shovel and do that, with a lot less strain. I'll bet summoning up the mental power to move even a fair size boulder puts a heck of a strain on you. Give you a hernia."

"How can a Lemurian get a hernia? They don't even, so far as we know, have sex organs."

"That's only Stackpole's opinion."

"Who should know better than—"

"Beg pardon." Conger halted beside their cart "You fellows know Stackpole?"

Both young men turned to stare at him.

"Are you active in Lemuriadom?" one inquired.

"Lemuriadom?"

"Quite obviously not," concluded the other.

"He might like to join."

"Why? So he can move rocks around?"

"Lemurians can do a lot more than that." The young man reached into a slash pocket of his nose outfit. "I'll give you a free copy of our fanzine, *Lemuria Calling*. It explains everything. We meet in the Kiwanisdrome every other Thursday for lunch and an exchange of occult anecdotes."

"Try to make it." Tossing the folded amateur magazine into their cart, Conger moved on.

"Sounded promising at first," said Wizard.

"Just fans."

"How about that green material on shelf 26A?" asked their cart. "Anything like lettuce?"

Wizard squinted. "I'm afraid that's only the feather duster they use to clean the shelves."

"One can but try," said the cart.

"Well, I had to make it believable."

"We were in that joint near a half hour."

"Which makes it believable." Bent from the waist, Wizard was stowing their purchases in the bin section of their rented landcar. "Didn't that cart smell good? Exactly like homemade brownies."

Conger was leaning with his back against the car, scanning the large night parking area. "Enough decorative trees over there," he said. "I can use them for cover. Drift over there, turn invisible."

The girl said, "Okay, and I'll frequent the other shops in the mall here. Avoiding anything even remotely resembling a sweet."

"Give me a couple hours. If I'm not back, drive away from Gomezville #1," Conger instructed. "Then you can—"

"Hold off, Jake. You don't show up, that's going to mean they've done bad things to you. I don't intend to blissfully cruise on out of—"

"You are, Wizard. You'll leave this Gomez-controlled town, get clear and then contact Geer."

"Why? To arrange a touching little memorial service for you?"

"I'm pretty sure Angelica was taken inside one of the Gomez buildings," he said, looking again toward the night woods. "There's a big administration dome in the heart of town. A logical place to start searching."

"A logical place to get your backside put in a sling, too."

"I want to find my wife. I've already told you you didn't have to tag along on this—"

"You forget, Jake, I'm assigned to protect you and to warn you of upcoming danger," she reminded him. "I have to tag along."

"Two hours." He touched her hand, then, cautiously, moved away and toward the trees.

Chapter 18

A door opened.

A voice invited, "Come in, Mr. Conger, and we'll talk."

The invisible Conger stopped moving. He'd been able to penetrate to an inner level of the administrative building. None of Groucho Gomez' guards or staff could see him.

Until now.

The white door on his left swung all the way open. Groucho Gomez stood there, staring out at him.

"You look exactly like you do on your labels," observed Conger.

"Better," said Gomez. "I spruced up in anticipation of your dropping over, made myself a shade younger and taller."

Letting that pass, Conger inquired, "You can see me, huh?"

"Perfectly." The agriculture tycoon nodded his handsome white-thatched head. "I'm an exceptional old coot. Do come in, I have several matters to discuss with you."

Conger accepted the invitation. The office was all white, contained nothing but two white slingchairs. "Such as my wife?"

"She's one of the topics we'll get to, yes. Any preference as to which chair you occupy?"

"None."

"Good." Gomez settled into the chair nearest the wall, crossed his long thin legs. "Sit, sit."

Conger sat. "Is Angelica here?"

"She is."

"Why?"

"Several reasons. Chief among them the fact they were intending to kill her."

"They?"

"The abnors."

"Shouldn't you be using we then?"

"I'm not an abnor," the old man assured him.

"You seem to be implying you took my wife into some sort of protective custody."

"Exactly, they can't touch her here." Gomez rested his tanned hands on his knees. "My other reason for bringing your wife here was, Mr. Conger, that I wished an opportunity to talk to you."

"Using Angelica for bait."

"You might say that. I could, in case you hadn't realized, have easily abducted you as well. This way strikes me as a more interesting one. At my age, I enjoy working out various stratagems."

"Can I see her?"

"Quite soon. First there's something you might do for me."

Conger said, "You're not an abnor, not a Lemurian agent. What side are you on?"

"I'm on the side which is going to wipe out the abnors, keep them from taking over the world."

"It's really that serious."

"It is," said Gomez.

"Who taught you how to see an invisible agent? Couldn't have been Jinx since she's on the opposing team."

"I'm chock full of special abilities and wild talents myself, Mr. Conger. Had I used them all in my cover business, I'd control even more of the state than I do."

Conger frowned. "Your whole agricultural empire is a cover? For what?"

"For my real work," the old man answered. "As to what I'd like you to undertake, Conger . . ." He swung an arm out, gestured at the far wall.

A large section slid back, revealing a view screen. On the screen was a vidpic of the San Francisco Bay and its crisscross of Golden Gate Bridges. The camera went zooming in, concentrating on an island in the bay.

"You're obviously aware of what that is," said the old man.

"Sure, Alcatraz Ultimate Security Penal Island."

"Erected in 2008 on the site of the earlier and abandoned prison, at a time when California North decided to try locking up criminals again," said Gomez, watching Conger and not the pictures of the prison island. "That was shortly after the series of unfortunate incidents at the annual Non Incarcerated Murderers convention in Frisco."

"I know all about Alcatraz. What's it got to do with the job you want me to handle?"

"Ever see this man?"

The island dissolved, replaced by a still shot of a dreamy-eyed, puffy-faced man in his late twenties.

Conger studied the picture. "Sure, I've seen him before," he said, thinking. "He's got a wild talent, but we were never able to recruit him. He kept favoring a life of crime. Name is . . . yeah, Bulldozer Braff."

"One of the most powerful teleks in the country, in any country for that matter." Gomez' head bobbed up and down. "The young fellow can, using only his impressive mental powers, move tons of stone, metal, what have you . . . in a matter of seconds. Unfortunately, as you mentioned, he chose to devote this substantial ability of his to stealing banks, armored skyvans and the like. At the moment he's serving three consecutive life sentences for murder. In a moment of high temper he lifted up the Mark Hopkins Hotel and dropped it on a judge he was annoyed with. Squashed the judge and also did away with a considerable bunch of people who were attending a 20th Century beercan fanciers meeting in the ballroom of the hotel at the time."

"Too bad his talent couldn't have been funneled into—"

"It's going to be."

"Oh, so?"

"We're going to acquire Bulldozer Braff's services," Gomez continued. "I won't go into the details of how we're going to utilize him just yet, except to indicate he's going to be damn useful to me. It has to do with my plans to halt and destroy the abnors. Were there enough time I wouldn't employ Bulldozer at all. And, had I even a few safe weeks, I'd pull strings and have him paroled."

"Paroled after a cluster of murders?"

"You're forgetting how powerful Groucho Gomez is in this state," Gomez said. "The situation, however, isn't one allowing for any delay. So you teleport to Frisco tonight, bring back Bulldozer as fast as you can."

Conger rose up off his chair. "This is the favor you want?" he inquired. "I walk into the toughest prison in the United States and spring this telekinetic murderer?"

"You catch on fast." The old man grinned, golden eyes flashing.

"Any hints as to how exactly I do it?"

"I know about your achievements in the Wild Talent Division. You've done excellent work. Outwitted a wacky US president, traveled in time, brought back the dead. You'll be able, I'm more than certain, to improvise an excellent plan for extracting Bulldozer Braff from the Alcatraz Ultimate Security Penal Island."

"Simplest thing is for me to contact WTD and have them get the Federal prison Board to—"

"I need Braff here no later than tomorrow morning, Mr. Conger. Tomorrow morning early. The FPB, even if your estimable chief, Geer, could persuade them to act sensibly, couldn't possibly do anything for days and days. I know them."

Conger said, "The price for letting my wife go is Bulldozer?"

Shaking his impressive head, Gomez answered, "Not at all. What you have to realize is this, Mr. Conger. Until the abnors are stopped, your wife's life, not to mention that of sundry others including yourself, isn't safe. She has to stay here until they're crushed."

"And for some reason Gomezville #1 is a safe hideout?"

"They can't touch us here, no."

"Can I see my wife now?"

"Certainly." Gomez waved his hand, live vidshots of Angelica replaced the portrait of the imprisoned telek.

After watching his wife's image for a few seconds, Conger said, "I meant see her in person, up close."

"Once you return with Bulldozer."

Conger strode over to the seated Gomez. "No, I see her now. Talk to her. Otherwise Bulldozer Braff can rot at Alcatraz and you and your plans, whatever they are, can go piss up a rope."

Gomez steepled his fingers, gazed up at the WTD agent. "All right, you can spend some time with your wife before you embark." He got up. "I'll take you to her."

Chapter 19

"Oh, that's only Stackpole," said Angelica.

Conger, fully visible now, said, "P.K. Stackpole, the guy I've been hunting across the length and breadth of America not to mention in the mysterious Orient?"

"Stackpole," repeated his dark-haired wife.

They were in a large white-walled modestly furnished parlor sort of room. From behind a sturdy sofa a rustling noise had come.

Conger walked over, put a knee on a cushion of the sofa and peered behind it. "You're P.K. Stackpole?"

"You got me, I give up." Stackpole was hunkered back there, knees tucked up, arms wound protectively around his head and neck. "You NSO?"

"What?"

"You look more like FBI, or possibly Federal Police. Doesn't much matter. I surrender." He was a small, slim man. Bearded and in his late thirties.

"Actually I'm with, part-time only, the Wild Talent Division," Conger explained over the back of the black sofa. "I have been searching for you, but not to make an arrest."

"They all pretend that, to soften me up." He untangled his arms slightly, tilted his head to study Conger's face. "You could very well be a Venusian, cleverly disguised. They're after me, too."

Angelica joined her husband. "Jake, it's best to ignore him. Since I arrived here, I discovered Stackpole is vigorously paranoid. From what I've been able to learn about his diet, it's mostly caused by the excessive quantities of carbohydrates he—"

"Change my diet she tells me," put in the cowering Stackpole with a bitter laugh. "That'd be the day. Give her a chance to poison me."

"See, you won't get much out of him, Jake."

"Is she a Venusian, too?" asked the author of *Hello, Lemuria, Hello*. "You're a team maybe? What's it like being a lizard person? I want to do a piece about it for the *National Intruder*. Need an angle, though. Have you been bothered by poltergeists lately or had a premonition about—"

"Is he here for the same reason you are?" Conger asked his wife.

"Apparently so. Gomez is allegedly protecting him."

Conger asked the author, "How long have you been here?"

"Who wants to know? If you're FBI, FP, or RFA you already know. Don't think I'm unaware of the broadcast unit you planted inside me when that government agent posing as Dr. Ricardo Curtis in Poughkeepsie performed that allegedly necessary operation on me last year. Turned me into a walking radio station. Good evening, all you governments spies and toadies, this is P.K. Stackpole broadcasting to you out of my colon and—"

"If anybody had a bug planted in or on you, Stackpole, I'd have found you long before this."

"Gomez has had him here for a couple weeks," said Angelica. "To keep the Lemurians from destroying him."

"Lemurians, ha!" said Stackpole from behind the sofa. "It's the Atlanteans who are really after my skin. I didn't pull any punches when I exposed those babies in my book. I know, you see, exactly where their sunken city sank. Well, you must have read my article in the Crackpot Writers of America's annual about the subject. Was called *I Had An Out-Of-Body Premonition About The Whereabouts Of The Lost City Of Atlantis*. Wowie, the fanmail which poured in after that hit the stands. One elderly lady in East Moline wrote to tell me she cured her fractured hip by placing a copy of my article against her backside. There's what writing's all about, bringing joy and happiness to your readers, giv—"

"Did Gomez," Conger said to his wife as she sat down next to him, "outline to you the job he wants me to carry out?"

"Nope, he only hinted he had a task calling for a crackerjack invisible man." She took his hand. "Want to defy him?"

"I'll do the job. I have a notion it'll help resolve all this Lemurian business."

"Lemurians, small potatoes!" remarked Stackpole from his hiding place. "The ones we really have to look out for are the Plutonians. Those guys are vicious and most so-called authorities claim there's no life on Pluto. Ha! Not only did the Plutonians tap my pixphone, they tapped my teeth. Every time I open my mouth they know about it on Pluto. No doubt you've encountered my article, *Sinister Forces Took Over My Teeth*, wherein I explain everything. Nearly won a Goofy for that one. Should have got one for *Hello, Lemuria, Hello*, but instead they hand it to that imbecile, St. Clair, simply be—"

"Stackpole." Conger looked behind the sofa again. "Did you have other sources for your book, besides Amos Binky?"

"You'd like to know, wouldn't you? Then you'd round up all my informants and contacts and put them in concentration camps. When I wrote *The Boy Scout Handbook Of Out-Of-Body Experiences*, you guys even locked up my voxtypist. You can find out more about that scandal in my *The Government Is Building Concentration Camps Again And You, The Taxpayer, Are Footing The Bills*."

"He'll continue like this," mentioned Angelica.

"Not going to get anything out of him. We might as well go elsewhere."

"He'll only follow. Doesn't trust me, yet he doesn't like being alone."

"Alone," said Stackpole. "So long as there are witnesses around, the government won't try anything."

"Might as well take my leave," said Conger. "After I bring off this chore, I'll be back."

"It's dangerous, isn't it? What he wants you to do."

"Moderately so," said her husband. "There are risks."

"You don't have to do it"

"I know. I'm going to, though." He stood, pulled her up to him. "Glad you're alive and well."

"I feel the same about you, Jake. Keep it that way."

"I hear you whispering up there," said the huddled Stackpole. "I know you're most likely planning a new sort of assault on me."

Conger kissed his wife and left.

Chapter 20

"You look very nebulous," said Geer. "Don't tell me you're going the way of Agent Zilber, who got himself stuck halfway between his normal and his lycanthrope state and—"

"It's fog," Conger explained to the frazzled face on the pixphone screen. "There's a lot of it in the room because the air system is malfunctioning. Besides which, you're supposed to be able, as head of the Wild Talent Division, to see all your invisible agents."

"So I am, you're absolutely right. All these worries of late, it's addling my wits. Where's the fog coming from?"

"We're staying at the Top O' The Bridge Hotel here in Frisco."

"The nitwit hotel atop Golden Gate Bridge #4."

"#5," said Conger. "What did you find out?"

"I'm going to look elsewhere," said Wizard from her plexichair. "Seeing him munch away on that wedge of neopecan pie makes me—"

"What about Bulldozer Braff?" Conger asked the pixphone.

"He's on the island for sure," answered Geer, forking a hunk of syrupy pie into his mouth. "They've got him stuck in the Absolutely Maximum Security Wing. Floor plans coming up. There."

"That's a menu from Mama Honeyball's," said Conger when printed matter appeared on the screen.

"So it is, forgive me. Had the half-wit thing clutched in my mitt when they chucked me out of there earlier this evening because I was, in a euphoric moment, Indian wrestling with the ambassador from Ganymede. Ever Indian wrestle with a guy who's all tentacles? Makes for—"

"Show me the god damn floor plans, Geer. I'm on a tight schedule."

"Here it is. Speaking of which, why don't you let me manipulate things from here. I still have enough pull to get Braff off Alcatraz, on a hardship leave, by early next—"

"Gomez claims there's not enough time," put in Conger. "What's that room next to Bulldozer's cell? Does that say *Magician's Quarters* on it?"

"Does." Geer forked in more pie. "The only way you can prevent a powerful telek like Bulldozer Braff from simply teleporting himself out of there, or contrariwise teleporting the whole darn prison off to Utah, is to keep him hypnotized. They found drugs don't do it, so they hired an old-time stage hypnotist known as the Great Zambini."

"Okay, I've got the layout memorized. Outside of the forcewall and the live guards with kilguns, there aren't many problems."

"Don't ignore the dogs."

"Aren't any dogs on this plan."

A finger came in and brushed a speck off the floor plan. "Got a pecan on them. See them now? Four live dogs roaming the corridor directly in front of Braff's cell, all of them graduates of the Westport Vicious Dog School. They're killers."

Conger said, "How about Groucho Gomez? Did you check on what I asked you about?"

Geer's wrinkle-wracked face reappeared on the screen. "How'd you come up with the hunch, did Wiz help out?"

"No, but he gave out a few hints. So what did you get out of the Fed Archives?"

"At first everything came out up and up, Jake. Since you were suspicious, I triple-checked, then ran everything through a veracimeter here in Manhattan. Know what that costs? \$1403 per minute. Which is why nobody uses it much."

"The upshot?"

"You were correct, there is no such person," said Geer. "Every fact on Groucho Gomez was fed, illicitly, into various archive computers late in 1999. Prior to that neither Gomez nor his alleged old California ancestors existed. A very fancy job, by the way, expensive, too. Almost fooled us."

"I suspected as much."

"Who is the guy then?"

"Only guessing at the moment. Maybe I can answer you sometime after the prison break," said Conger. "What else have you got for me on that?"

"Can you be at the Marina Redoubt & Yacht Club by eleven P.M. Pacific Rational Time tonight?"

"Sure, it's not quite ten now and the Marina is close by."

"I learned by diligent probing that a hydrobarge will depart for Alcatraz at eleven this evening. Aboard will be a media crew from the *Time-Life* organization, headed up by an investigative robot known as Scoop."

"Encountered him in Manhattan," said Conger. "No trouble working the invisibility trick on his type of mechanism. I should be able to stow away on the barge."

"Scoop has considerable prestige, especially in a liberal state like Cal North," said the rumpled WTD chief as he concluded his pie. "They let him go almost anywhere." He paused, knuckling his chin. "We're getting extremely unorthodox, Jake."

"That's the only fun in this line of work." Grinning, Conger clicked off the phone.

Wizard had left her chair, was roaming the circular room and kicking at the balls of mist which swirled along the floor. "Some agents I've worked with consider me fun."

"Rightly so." Conger headed for the door. "You can drop me at the Marina, then go back to Gomezville #1. I'll be showing up there with Bulldozer Braff in tow around about midnight."

"Yep, I know."

"You do?"

"Had a premonition few minutes back," the blonde girl said.

"I wasn't aware."

"Good news usually isn't as painful."

"Everything is going to go smoothly, according to what you saw?"

"Yes," she answered. "Keep in mind, though, I'm only 87% accurate."

Chapter 21

"Isn't that how you got this job?"

"No comment."

"You're denying, Chas, you're a nephew of the governor of California North?" persisted the cube-headed moderately humanoid robot.

"No comment," said the young barge pilot, staring straight ahead into the fog.

"Fess up, Chas. I have a whole file on you stored right . . ."

Thump! Thump!

". . . in here."

"One thing I'd like to comment on." He guided the hydrobarge across the dark choppy waters of Frisco Bay. "I'd be pleased if you'd stop calling me Chas. Nobody does. I find it absolutely appalling."

"What do your friends call you?"

"Chucky."

"Fine with me, Chucky. You'll find me an amiable interviewer," said Scoop, the *Time-Life* robot

"The last poor sap you interviewed ended up getting disintegrated at the hands of a crazed Hindu," said the pilot.

Scoop's eyes produced a pronounced clicking when he blinked.

Click!

"Who was that? My last interview, in Juneau, Alaska, about two hours ago, was with Osgood Janetara, the professor of Applied Aquanetics in the—"

"Rodney St. Clair," said Chucky. "I was alluding to Rodney St. Clair, the brilliant editor who was done to dust. All because you hounded him, turned the spotlight of your cold scrutiny onto his—"

"Rod? That had not a thing to do with me, Chucky. A disgruntled contrib is how the cops figure it." Scoop signalled to one of his accompanying robot cameras. "Get me some footage of Chucky. Might use it as BG."

Chucky warned, "I'll sue."

As a camera rolled across the deck for a tighter shot, the invisible Conger hopped silently clear.

Leaning against the misted barge rail, Conger glanced out a plaz window at the thick bay fog.

"Read your constitution, Chucky. Your unc must have a copy around his office. A newspaper has the right to gather footage on anyone. Freedom of Media Amendment, 2009." The robot reporter thrust his cubic head closer to the young pilot "Aren't barge pilots usually five foot six? Or doesn't that rule apply to nephews and other near relatives of Governor Jarvis?"

"I am five feet six."

"Your files list you as being a mere five even, Chucky."

"Opposition lies."

"This job is a plum, too. Good pay, plenty of fresh air. Lots of normal-size men would go for a soft job like this one."

"What are you accusing me of now," said the angry young man. "Let me get this straight before I pix my attorneys. Are you alleging I'm a midget, like our dippy Vice President?"

"Calm down, Chucky. I'm only trying to get at the—"

Hoot! Hoot!

"Alcatraz Dock #3," announced Chucky. "Everybody disembark." He smiled to himself.

"I smell a story in you, Chucky. Midget kin of superlib gov lands cushy job. Yeah, make a nice forty or fifty secs on the Six O'Clock Puppetoon News. Might even be worth ten secs on the Eleven O'Clock Humanoid News. I'll mull."

"I hope the fog rusts your fanny," called Chucky while the newsbot and his four piece staff climbed off the boat.

Conger followed the quintet.

The barge's docking ramp arched over the fogged water to touch a plaz-coated wedge of pier. Six guards with stunrifles stood at the edge of the pier, watching the arriving news team.

A seventh guard, armed with a silver kilgun, was stationed near the foot of the ramp. "Welcome to Alcatraz, folks," he said. "You'll notice, since we're a humane prison in spite of the reputation we have in the distorted media, I am the only one with the capacity to kill or maim."

"You better not try to kill or maim any *Time-Life* machinery, Eddie, or you'll find lawsuits piling up around your—"

"Nobody calls me Eddie," the guard told Scoop. "I'm known solely as Edward."

"Really? That indicates a certain lack of warmth on the part of your peers, Edward."

"We're humane here on the Rock, not warm," answered Edward. "May I see your ID packet, please?"

Scoop's front popped open.

The guard's kilgun swung up, aimed at the opening.

"Only my IDs, Edward." With a misted metal hand Scoop extracted the packet and passed it to the guard. "You're somewhat short for a guard. Isn't the official height minimum in Cal North prisons five feet eight inches?"

"That's exactly how tall I am. In fact, a shade over the minimum," said Edward. "Let's see now . . . you're Scoop and these other guys are Flash, Hildy, Boke and XX206-13J."

"Boke's the still camera, XX206-13J is our zoom vidcam. Otherwise you've got it right, Edward."

"Sorting out robots on a foggy night isn't easy."

"Especially with your eyesight, eh, Edward?"

"What's that remark supposed to mean?"

"How many fingers am I holding up?"

"Listen, do you guys want to tour Alcatraz or not? The Deputy Warden is waiting. Matter of fact, it's way beyond his bedtime."

"Lead us to him, Edward."

The guard, keeping his kilgun in his hand, stepped aside. "March up the blue ramp to Gate 6. There'll be two more guards there to take you on to the DW."

The robots went up the indicated ramp. The unseen Conger climbed after them.

Thump!

Thunk!

Thun!

Katslump!

"Most unusual, most unusual," said the Great Zambini as he stepped out of his room into the blank grey prison corridor.

A short distance down the corridor lay four huge dogs. Each was on its side in an attitude suggesting sudden sleep.

Zambini was a tall, polished man with a very thin and intensely black mustache. He approached, carefully, the sleeping animals. "Prince?" he said. "Lobo? Satan? Billyboy?"

The killer dogs snored.

"Awake, awake," Zambini urged, snapping his fingers over Lobo.

"Walk backward," suggested a voice.

Zambini stiffened, straightened. "It's happening. Exactly as it happened to the Amazing Emerson and the Magnificent Steranko. I'm going blooey in the noggin, hallucinating. After so many years of crossing betwixt illusion and reality I—"

"Very quietly," said Conger's voice, "back into your rooms."

"Pretty prosaic run-of-the-mill voice for a hallucination. Unfamiliar, too. One expects siren songs or high-pitched chattering or the well-known voices of loved ones and friends. This, however, is a very humdrum sort of—"

"Come on." Conger put an invisible arm around Zambini's neck, hauled him into his rooms.

"Visual and physical manifestations. Won't the Incredible Dr. Nerf the Ghostbuster be excited when I tell him about this one," said the hypnotist "That is if they don't toss me into the Mental Problems Wing."

Conger kicked, softly, the cozy room's door shut. He sat Zambini down on a sticker-decorated wardrobe trunk. "I want you to break whatever spells you've got Bulldozer Braff under."

"Impossible!" said the hypnotist at the nothingness the voice was coming out of. "I signed a loyalty oath when I took this job. Besides which, you have no idea how long I was out of work before I fell into this. If I weren't a nephew of Governor Jarvis, I wouldn't even have—"

"You can do it as a volunteer," said the unseen Conger. "Or with this on your neck. More painful with a control bug, but it's up to you."

An ugly-looking little lump of black metal materialized in front of Zambini's face.

"I really can't break my vow. What will Uncle Bosko think? How painful is that anyway? What I mean is . . . Yow!"

Conger slapped the control device to the hypnotist's neck, where it swiftly attached itself. "We'll go now to Bulldozer's cell. First you'll hypnotize his two guards and then you'll unhypnotize Bulldozer. After which he and I will teleport out of here."

"As you command, master."

Chapter 22

"Of course if s a head of lettuce. You're simply not used to seeing one with legs."

"Won't do." Groucho Gomez rose up from behind his boomerang-shaped lucite desk, made a shooin' motion toward the advertising man and the girl in the unacceptable lettuce costume.

"We're due to start taping the lettuce spot early tomorrow, sir," persisted the clean-cut young executive. "Hence, I 'ported here from the Hollywood Sector so late this evening to—"

"This dancing head of lettuce is unacceptable." Gomez pointed toward an exit. "I have something more important to attend to now, Gillis."

"What's the old gent saying?" inquired a muffled voice from within the huge hollow head of lettuce.

"He says nix, Rita."

"Huh?"

"No is what he says. You're not believable."

"How many damn heads of lettuce can do the splits?" demanded Rita.

"You'd best start auditioning again," Gomez advised his advertising man.

"We've done a good deal of testing already, sir, via Intrudovision. Six out of ten viewers selected Rita here over the five other dancing lettuces."

"Proving that I know more about lettuce than the average viewer." Taking the young man by the arm, Gomez hurried him to a doorway out.

"Am I pointed the right way?" asked Rita, her voice plaintive and echoing. "The eye holes in this damn thing are out of whack. One of them is way over under my armpit somewhere."

"Allow me." Conger, completely visible once again, left the floating sofa where he'd been impatiently sitting and took hold of her by one of her leaves. "Watch out for the coffee table."

"I could teleport botha dem right outa here," offered Bulldozer Braff. "Whisk dem home ina twinklin."

"What's he talking about?" the advertising man asked as Gomez propelled him into a hall.

"Pay no attention. He's an old servant who's gone a bit dippy. You get home to Hollywood and come up with a lettuce which is both real and talented."

"Well, okay, sir."

Conger led Rita into the hall and closed the door. "I thought the fate of the world hung in the balance, Gomez. We wasted almost an hour watching that poor girl dance."

"Should we, as I am confident we will, save the world, the Gomez empire will have to continue," the old man said, returning to his desk. "We can't stay at the top by allowing unbelievable produce to appear in our commercials."

"She has great gams, dat dame," said Bulldozer. "You miss quiff when youse are locked up on da Rock and hypnotized to boot."

"My impression," said Angelica, who was sharing the sofa with her husband, "is that it's you, Gomoz, who's gone around the bend. This whole procedure is completely wacky."

Gomez coughed. "First off, Conger, let me congratulate you on successfully obtaining Bulldozer Braff for us."

"He done a swell job," agreed the telek. "An oncet I was out me trance, it was a cinch ta teleport da both of us right smack here to dis joint."

Wizard was by herself, sprawled in a wingchair and nibbling unenthusiastically on an apple. "There's been a heck of a lot of neck risking going on of late," she said. "Are you going, at long last, to explain?"

"I am, Miss Wells."

"Will you include," asked Conger, "an explanation of who you actually are?"

Gomez chuckled. "That will be included in my remarks, yes. Although, especially since there are women present, I won't give you a look at my real persona."

Leaning forward, Conger asked, "What we're seeing is a projection?"

"A mental trick, Conger," the old man replied. "Similar to, though considerably more sophisticated than, the methods you employ to convince people you're invisible. And my illusion was mastered long before there was even a Tibet."

"What are you then, a renegade abnor or—"

"Not one of them, no. I . . . well, I was left behind when the benevolent Lemurians migrated elsewhere. Left behind in a sort of trance state because—"

"Dem trances can really futz youse up."

". . . because I was ailing and not expected to survive. Certainly I was not up to a space journey," Gomez continued. "My people laid me to rest in a cave which was far from those where the dormant abnors resided. Instead of expiring, I simply slept, hibernated. Centuries passed, and more centuries, millennia rolled by. Then a very short time ago, for what reason I'm not certain—perhaps something inside me warned me of what was happening—I awakened. I was no longer ill, the nap had restored me. Therefore, after doing some mental probing as to the state of the world and how I might best serve it, I began to concentrate on moving the considerable quantity of rock which sealed my hidden cavern. Problems of that sort require an exceptional amount of strain and concentration."

"Geeze Louise," observed Bulldozer, "I coulda got youse outa dere in a jiffy."

"You'll have, Bulldozer, an opportunity to display your particular talent very shortly."

Conger said, "You became Gomez, made millions, so you could fight the abnors?"

"It's my cover," he replied. "My people, both the good and bad members of the race, resemble some undersea creatures of your world. Creatures most of you consider loathsome. In order to move freely in this world, I needed a disguise. By the time I emerged from my cavern, the abnors were already well along with their plans to take over your entire planet."

"What have you been doing about stopping them?" Wizard wanted to know.

"For a good many years, for most of this century, I concentrated on thwarting them, on putting stumbling blocks in their path," said the old man. "Since Stackpole's book appeared, the abnors have stepped up their plans. What's called for now is the destruction or expulsion of the whole lot of them. They have to be stopped before they go any further."

"How?" asked Conger.

"One of the things I've been doing here for years, with the help of a topnotch and absolutely trustworthy staff, is develop weapons. Weapons powerful enough to stop the abnors. My final move was to be an invasion of their caverns. When I assumed they'd be taking several more decades before their all-out attack on your world, there didn't seem to be any rush. Now I'm afraid we have to move at once." He stood, jabbed a tan finger in Bulldozer's direction. "You're going to help us enormously."

Bulldozer squinted at Conger. "Is dis legit? Or is dis a scam?"

"He's on the up and up," answered Conger.

"Okay, den. You can count on me."

Chapter 23

A portion of the wall of the underground lab had been slid aside. Technicians in tan one-piece worksuits were hurrying packing crates and unfamiliar weapons through the white wall onto a steeply slanting downramp.

"I could," offered Bulldozer, "move all dat junk fer youse in one lump."

"This equipment has to be carefully attached to the Mole," said Gomez.

"The what?" asked Angelica, who stood beside a lab table with her arm around Conger's waist.

"I've dubbed my underground attack vehicle 'the Mole,' " the old man explained.

"Trite."

"Ah, but the public loves the tried and true, Mrs. Conger, when it comes to names. Although in this case, granted, the public won't ever hear of the Mole or its work against the abnors."

Tinkle!

Kerash!

Conger pulled clear of his wife, spun and ran across the lab to where the crashing had originated. "Let's see what . . . is that you, Stackpole?"

"Maybe yes, maybe no." The small author was ducked behind a workbench, a lab smock hooding his head and shoulders. "You're the FBI agent, right?"

"Wild Talent Division."

"Sure, I remember you, the disguised Venusian. How's your green scaly wife?"

"Stackpole!" Gomez came striding over to them. "I've had two of my men hunting for you."

"See?" the author said as he emerged some from under the apron. "I told you they come stalking after me day and night. Dedicated killers following in my footsteps, intent on—"

"Do you want to come along on this sojourn?" Gomez asked him.

"You're not getting me out in the open, no sir. Out in the open it only takes one expert sniper, or a pair of just so-so snipers, to punch your ticket. Then it's curtains. Unless you happen to believe in reincarnation. Maybe you read my piece in *Asimov's Fortune Telling Magazine*. A chilling thing called *Large-Chested Starlet Has Out-Of-Body Experience Which Proves She Lived Before And Had Big Breasts Then, Too!* A heart-warming article, gave new hope to thou—"

"We don't intend to get out in the open, Stackpole," said Gomez. "We're going underground, deep underground."

"Sure enough, plenty of you'd like to get Stackpole under the sod. Not only all you government toadies, but the minions of my five former marriage partners. Once Stackpole's dead and gone all the contract breach fees and fines stop getting paid, but they don't take those things into consideration. They hound—"

"We'll be confronting Lemurians," said Conger.

Stackpole rearranged his protective apron, scrunching in on himself. "Up close? You think I'd give those babies a chance to grab me? Not blinking likely. And you know who they're in cahoots with? The Frozen Nazis. Bet you weren't aware all the Nazi bigwigs Adolph Hitler put into the deep freeze back in the last century have been thawed out. Sure, see my two-parter in last month's *Odd Times*, entitled *Here's A Microwave Threat They Didn't Tell You About*. Boy, once those Lemurians join up with the Nazis and all my wives' attorneys, they'll make mincemeat of me."

"You wrote a whole book about the abnors," said Gomez, scowling. "A book which precipitated a good deal of our present troubles, I might add. I should think you'd want to encounter them first hand."

"Nope, I've pretty much exhausted the Lemurian fad," said Stackpole from under the apron. "I have some new theories on the Yonkers Triangle I'd like to exploit in a boo—"

"You'll be safe here then," Gomez told him. "We'll go without you."

"Safe? That's rich. Nobody's safe in this modern world of ours. Even if the alien creatures from other worlds and the hired assassins and the marital lawyers don't get you, there are household accidents. You could slip in the bathpit and crack your skull. Speaking of which, did you see my article in the *Intruder* few weeks back? *I Fell Off The Toilet Seat And Had An Out-Of-Body Experience*. Beautiful, mystical sort of . . ."

Gomez and Conger left him in his latest hiding place.

Chapter 24

The vehicle sitting in the tunnel was enormous, as large as two skyliners. It was earth-color, underscored with heavy treadwheels.

Watching Gomez' technicians climbing aboard, Angelica said, "I still think it's wacky."

"Most jobs I do for the WTD are," her husband reminded, putting his hands on her shoulders.

"This really isn't your job any longer, Jake. Gomez can burrow into the ground without you—"

"I have to go along. To see how it all finishes up."

"Likely to finish up with those alleged abnors doing you all in. I wouldn't like that."

Conger said, "We should survive the expedition. Wizard hasn't had any premonitions to the contrary."

"I don't believe she's ever had a real premonition, good or bad. Her head's full of nothing but visions of sugar plums."

"She's rumored to be 87% accurate." He grinned, then kissed her. "At any rate, it's time for me to embark on this journey into the bowels of the earth."

"All right." She touched his chest, backed away until she was leaning against the tiled wall of the man-made tunnel. "I'll wait."

"Shouldn't take long," said Conger. "According to Gomez, there are less than a hundred abnors dwelling down under Mt. Shasta."

"I'll wait," repeated Angelica.

"Geeze, I'm gettin dat droppin in a nelavator feelin in me guts," complained Bulldozer.

"You shouldn't," said Gomez, who was settled in the seat next to the driver of the Mole. "My technicians designed this craft to go fairly deep beneath the ground."

Bulldozer shrugged. "Aw, could be only da aftereffects of bein mesmerized a couple years."

The telek and Conger were sitting side by side immediately behind Gomez and his driver. Wizard was slouched in a seat against the rear of the metal-walled cabin.

"Very fancy tunnel," she remarked now, peeling a banana.

Through the side portholes and the wide, tinted front window you could see the immaculate yellow tiles of the tunnel sides.

Gomez said, "Always go first cabin."

"How come the abnors let you get this far?" asked Conger.

The old man said, "By expending considerable mental effort I've been able to keep them from destroying it. The effort's been such of late, I might add, that I really think my business judgements

have been affected. I let ITTIBM beat me to a merger with SouthAm Sinfruit. One more reason to get rid of the abnors."

"Plan to continue being Gomez after this?"

"For a time. I enjoy it, Conger, and there are several fascinating deals pending."

"Be a good idea," Conger advised, "if you didn't use pesticides so lavishly on your produce and didn't put so many synthetics into your processed foods."

"You're very sentimental for a government agent," said Gomez. "When this is over, remind me to explain cost accounting to you."

"Is anybody's ears ringin'?"

"Nope," said Conger. "Not mine."

"Cripes, for a mo dere it sounded like Big Benny goin off inside me nogin. Maybe I got de bends or sometin."

"We're approaching the incompleated section," announced the driver. He was slowing the forward roll of the Mole.

Gomez turned, resting an elbow on the back of his chair. "Our calculations indicate the abnors are ensconded in caverns which lie some fourteen miles directly ahead. Because of the urgency, Braff, there isn't time to move the earth and rock between us."

Bulldozer nodded slowly. He rose half out of his padded chair, squinted out through the wide front window. "Should be a cinch."

The Mole was stopped dead now. A few yards beyond its nose the tiles stopped, a few yards further the tunnel ceased. Nothing but solid rock faced them.

Bulldozer relaxed into his chair, scratched at his armpit. "Now, gents, dere's two ways ta do dis job," he said. "I kin chuck da rock aside, in udder words dig de tunnel wit me mental powers an send da scraps off inta da ocean somewheres. Or, whichud be quicker, I kin teleport dis contraption we're travelin in from here ta da cave youse is headin for."

"The only problem I see with teleporting is this," said Gomez. "Should something happen to you, Braff, we might have no escape route."

"Dere is dat, yeah."

Conger eyed Wizard. "What do you think?"

The girl swallowed a final bite of banana. "Teleport," she advised. "Nothing is going to happen to him."

Bulldozer's prickly eyebrows hoisted. "How's dis broad know dat?"

"It's her wild talent," explained Conger. "She can see into the future."

"No kiddin? Geeze, youse an me could work some great capers, sis."

"I'm spoken for," said Wizard, tucking her knees up under her.

Gomez suddenly made a low moaning sound. "Going to get rough," he said. "They know we're here." His knobby tan hands gripped the arms of his chair. "I have to concentrate on keeping them

at bay. It's going to mean I won't be able to hold onto my present persona, I'll have to revert. Please excuse me, gentlemen and Miss Wells."

"Tink nothin of it. Make yourself as comfortable as . . . Holy shit!"

Gomez had changed back to his real self.

Chapter 25

He did resemble an undersea creature, but one that had been beached for a long while. He was like some sort of man-size squid, dry and leathery, with scaly limbs dangling from his bulb of a body. The eyes were tiny and yellowish, the mouth round and lipless. "I suggest," said this new Gomez in a shrill, piping voice, "you teleport us to the caverns in a hurry, Braff. My driver will give you the co-ordinates so you can locate exactly the—"

"Naw, I don't need nuttin like dat," Bulldozer, looking away, told the Gomez creature. He thumped his chest. "Me instink guides me."

"Then you'd—"

Rumble!

Karunch!

The Mole commenced shaking, with increasing violence.

The walls of the tunnel shook, too. Squares of bright yellow began popping free, clacking together, smacking down on the underground vehicle.

"The abnors are causing a quake," said Gomez. "I'm trying to hold it off, but . . ."

"Should have anticipated it," said Wizard. "Darn."

Karumble!

Pang! Pang!

Tiles were raining down on the metal hull of the Mole. Rock was starting to crumble and tumble.

"Nobuddy panic," advised Bulldozer, shifting in his chair. "I kin handle dis." He folded his puffy hands over his lap, shut his eyes. "All of youse hole tight."

The Mole seemed to hum. The hum grew louder, swallowing the clatter of the collapsing tunnel walls.

"Holy cow!" remarked Wizard, eyes going wide.

They had moved elsewhere. The Mole was resting now on a wide floor of stone. Arches of jagged rock receded in every direction. The light was thin, emanating from floating milky globes which bobbed up near the black ragged ceiling of the caverns.

One of Gomez' tentacles swung out, grabbed a microphone from the control panel. "Get the kilbeams into position. They'll be coming at us any time."

"Is that you, Mr. Gomez, sir?" asked a voice out of the panel.

"Yes, it is, Milman. Now do as I ordered."

"Right, sir," answered Milman. "Very good, sir. All beamguns extended and ready."

"Stand by then to . . ."

Conger frowned. Gomez' piping new voice was fading, dimming down to silence. The cabin was blurring, that milky light from the caves outside came pouring in, surrounding him.

Kill him!

Pain zigzagged through Conger's head, pain in the form of urgent words.

Kill Gomez!

Breathing got very tough, thousands of spikes were filling his lungs.

You must kill him!

He fought against the command, thrashing in his seat. He didn't know, wasn't sure he could hold out by himself. They were going to take him over, control him.

Kill him now!

Maybe if he did what they wanted, the pain would stop, the commands would stop throbbing through his brain.

Conger stood. "Wiz," he managed to say.

The girl jumped, caught hold of him. "Jake, what the heck's wrong?"

Strike her! Kill her!

"I . . . they . . ."

Wizard put her arms around him. "Gomez, they're doing something to him!"

Gomez lifted a tentacle, touched the shivering Conger. "Yes, trying to take him over and use him against us. I should have kept part of my mind alert for just—"

"Die!" The driver had yanked a pistol from his tunic pocket, lunged at Gomez.

"Scram," suggested Bulldozer.

The air popped, the driver was gone.

"One ting after anudder," said the telek. "Your flunky'll cool off in Cleveland."

"Cleveland?" asked Wizard, arms still holding tight to Conger.

"I send da poor jerk home to his widded mudder. She ain't laid eyes ona guy fer ten years," explained Bulldozer. "I maybe am a killer, but I got me tender side."

"How'd you know about his mother?"

"Me instincts never—"

"You can let go," said Conger. "It's passed, it's over."

The girl looked into his face. "Sure?"

"Yeah, sure." He gave her a hug, disentangled himself. "They almost got me."

"You're safe now," said Gomez. "I'm using a part of my mind to screen us from any further tries along that line. Should have done it before they went to work on you two."

"Cripes," exclaimed Bulldozer. "Dere's one a dem. An he's even uglier den our boy."

An abnor was drifting out of the shadows some two hundred yards ahead of the Mole. It was larger than Gomez, glowed with a faint greenish light.

"Going to try . . . to destroy . . . the Mole," warned Wizard, clutching at her middle.

"Ain't gonna do no such ting." Bulldozer glared at the abnor.

The creature vanished.

"What'd you do?" asked Gomez.

"Popped him over to China, dropped him in de Mongolian tundra." Bulldozer smiled. "I drop lotsa guys I don't like in da tundra."

"Not efficient enough," said Gomez. "Let my guns handle them, they're designed for that purpose."

"Jus tryin to help."

"More of them," said Wizard, dropping to her chair and pointing.

A half dozen of the abnors were visible now.

They moved closer, floating a few feet above the rocky cavern floor. Each clutched an odd-shaped silver rod.

"Fire on them! Before they can use those weapons!" ordered Gomez into the mike.

"Is that you again, Mr. Gomez?"

"Damn it, Mihnan, fire!"

"We had a little trouble here in gunnery, sir, when Malzberg went berserk for a bit. Getting all cleaned up now, though, and—"

"Fire!"

Even inside the cabin you could hear the sizzling sound of the kilbeams as they knifed through the darkness. The guns mounted on the Mole sought out the abnors.

Zunnnng!

The cabin hopped. A shaft of light from one of the abnor rods had hit the Mole.

The kilbeams hummed again. Bluish dust, glowing dimly, flicked down through the shadows of the cavern. The six abnors were no more.

Wizard hunched in her seat. "They . . . they're . . . something's going to happen . . ."

Gomez said, "They're retreating, the rest of them."

"Ships," said Wizard. "They . . . have ships."

"I wasn't sure of that," said the creature which was Gomez. "But you're right, Miss Wells. I can sense it now, the abnors have built spacecraft."

"Dey gonna take a powder?"

"Looks like they realize," said Conger, "Gomez has the weapons to destroy them if they stick around."

"Up above . . . inside the mountain," said the girl. "It's . . . going to open . . . they're . . . going to . . . go."

"There. They've gone," said Gomez.

Wizard sighed, relaxed. "Far away."

Gomez began to change, the alien creature faded. In less than a minute the massive, white-haired old man was again in the chair. "Yes, they've left the Earth. For good I hope."

"Hooray for our side," said Bulldozer.

Chapter 26

"That's real. Aye, that's a real one."

"Sprayed, though."

"How else discourage the rampaging and ravaging bugs, missy?"

"There are numerous ways," Angelica said to the robot servant. "I'll send you a booklet."

The bald-headed servo bowed. "I am chagrined at not being able to serve you, missy." He rolled on with his basket of real and imitation fruit.

"Can we depart?" Angelica asked Conger.

"Shortly," he said. "The celebration shouldn't last much longer."

They were in one of the smaller ballrooms at the Gomez headquarters. A large white room with a dozen or so people gathered in its center and as many servos circling them with food and drink.

"We are free, aren't we?" she asked.

"Sure, the Lemurian menace is over."

"They really went away?"

"To another planet system apparently."

"And Gomez is one of them, too?"

"The last of the good Lemurians, yeah."

"I'm breaking training." Wizard joined them with a donut in each hand. "Only for this Victory Over The Lemurians party, Jake."

"You were helpful down there," he told her.

"Oh, you would have held out against them," she said. "Not like that dopey driver who had a weak mind."

"Maybe so, but still—"

"Have you reported to Geer yet?" the blonde girl asked.

"Only a preliminary report, to the effect the abnors are gone."

Wizard took a bite from her left-hand and then her right-hand donut. "Lots of loose ends, going to be tough proving a lot of this."

"We have documentation, Miss Wells." Gomez, a glass of white wine in one tan fist, came over to them. "The Mole took pictures of everything that happened underground. I'll turn copies over to Geer and he can show them all to the president."

"President Fairfield's very sceptical." Wizard sampled each donut again. "Very cynical, especially since Jinx dumped him. I doubt pictures alone are going—"

"Perhaps I can arrange to call on President Fairfield," said Gomez.

"Who's dat?" asked Bulldozer, who'd been chatting with one of the technicians, turning.

"President Fairfield," said Wizard. "Mr. Gomez is considering visiting him in—"

"Aw, save yerself a trip, Groucho." The telek's eyes flickered and shut.

Spang!

Crackle! Crinkle!

A robot and his tray of neotato chips fell over as the president, clad only in a towel, materialized too close to him.

"Me aim's a little off."

"The Secret Service is supposed to keep me safe from any of this sort of . . . oh, hello, Gomez." President Fairfield readjusted his towel. "Are you responsible for this unusu—"

"Bulldozer Braff teleported you here to Cal North, Mr. President," explained the old tycoon. "A misunderstanding. We'll whisk you right back."

"Hold on," suggested Conger. "This is an apt time to fill the president in on the whole Lemurian business."

"I was in the middle of a session with my 5-Minutes-A-Week Exercise Machine," said Fairfield. "If I don't pop right back I—"

"Want I should get de machine for youse, Prez?"

"Besides which," said the president, "the whole Lemurian rigamarole is a figment of a poor demented civil servant's fevered and overworked mind."

"Geer's overworked," said Conger, "but he's not at all crazy."

"Not in this instance anyway," added Angelica.

"The Lemurian threat really existed, Mr. President," said Gomez. "I intend to send you film which will show beyond—"

"I'm surprised to see a man of your reputation falling for this Lemuria fad, Gomez," said President Fairfield, fiddling with his towel. "It's possible you've slipped over into senility since we met at my last swing through your fine state. Which is another reason the Congress must do something about passage of the Senile & Doddering Citizens Bill which is now before—"

"The Lemurians are real," said Gomez.

"Nonsense, I had the whole thing dug into when Geer came babbling to us with the yarn. Why, even my diminutive Vice President investigated the—"

"He's one of them," said Wizard.

"Eh? Are you accusing a fine and loyal, albeit little, American of being a—"

"Him, your ex-wife, Walter Wang," said the girl.

"Wang, too? Impossible. I love his films. I told the Smithsonian to order all the episodes of *The Insidious Dr. Fang Gow* for me. That man really has a way with fungus and—"

"We've been tangling with a complex conspiracy," said Conger.

The president glowered at him. "Jake Conger, isn't it? We had you to the White House for the last Easter Egg Roll as I recall. You're the young fellow who helped oust my predecessor, that nutsy President Bisbiglia. I owe you and the WTD a good deal, Conger, and yet I must say I'm stunned to see you parroting the worst kind of nonsense out of some insipid P.K. Stackpole book."

"Who's that? I'm not here, whoever it is." From behind a row of stacked chairs came the voice of the author of *Hello, Lemuria, Hello*.

Conger put his hand on the naked shoulder of the President of the United States. "Listen to me," he said. He then gave Fairfield a concise account of everything which had occurred since Geer had arrived the other morning in Organic.

When he finished the president said, "An interesting yarn, young man. Full of plausible detail, and I wouldn't put it past Jinx. That is, were there a Lemurian conspiracy, she'd join it. Simply to spite me. Once that vixen went to bed in our White House bed with one of the groundskeepers merely to annoy me. I don't know if you've ever slept in a bed which was littered with cut grass and dried leaves, but—"

"Speak up," requested Stackpole from his hiding place, "I think I can use some of this in an *Intruder* piece."

"Why are you being such a yoohoo, Mr. President?" said the exasperated Wizard.

"You sound exactly like Geer." Fairfield shook his head. "This is all ridiculous. I'll thank you to arrange transportation for me back to DC. I could also do with a pair of trousers." He frowned at Gomez. "Really, Gomez, to try to make me believe that a fine old Californian like yourself is actually a creature with tentacles . . . it's ludicrous."

Conger's left eyebrow raised a fraction. "Gomez?"

"Yes, I think so. Ladies, if you'll excuse me." His body shimmered, grew transparent. Then the real Gomez was floating there. Leathery body, yellow eyes, dangling tentacles.

"Yikes!" said the president He fell over backwards, hitting the smooth floor a half second before his towel.

Chapter 27

Conger ran along the morning beach. Sand and pebbles crunched beneath his feet. Reaching his starting point, he halted. He swung up onto one of the black boulders which dotted this stretch of shore. Unfolding the plyotowel he'd left there, Conger wiped his forehead and then the back of his neck.

"Against my better judgement," said the voice of his wife.

Conger turned, saw Angelica coming toward him, walking barefooted over the yellow sand and carrying a portable pixphone at arm's length. "A problem?" he asked her.

"He swears, no. With Geer, though . . ." She shrugged, tossed the phone up to her husband. "No new assignments. Promise?"

"Not unless the fate of the world is at stake."

"He always claims that." She turned her pretty back and went up the hillside to their restaurant.

"That last loop was the one that did it," said Geer. His face was very pale on the saucer-size screen. "Tell your lovely wife never to throw a pixphone, Jake. The jog down the cliffside was unsettling enough. Should have closed my eyes, except I hate to miss—"

"What is the object of this call?"

"What's that behind you? Ocean?"

"Pacific, as usual."

"Calm. Looks very calm. Maybe I'll retire to Cal North some day. Not too close to your yoo-hoo town. Someplace where a man can get a civilized bit of pastry or—"

"How are you progressing?"

"That's what I called about, Jake," said the Wild Talent Division chief. "You'll want to know how this whole goofy affair ended up."

"Been three days since the president was out here. No news out of anybody so far."

"Those half-wits in the White House, the ones left after he dumped all the Lemurian agents, decided to keep a very heavy lid on this." Geer poked his fingers into a front pocket. "I had a maple bar on my person someplace, I'll keep talking while I search for it."

"You're telling me none of the details of this mess will ever get out?"

"Not if Fairfield can help it."

"How's he going to explain the departure of Vice President Casson?"

"The usual excuses about bribe-taking, forgery, theft. It's always easy to dump a VP, Jake."

"He finally does believe we had a Lemurian problem?"

"Gomez scared him so much his nuts almost ended up as earmuffs." Geer located a part of a maple bar, began nibbling at it. "No, he's now a true believer and he authorized a roundup of all the suspected agents. There's a possibility most of them can be rehabilitated."

"Including Jinx?"

Many new and interesting wrinkles formed on Geer's face. "We have a loose end there. Nothing serious, nothing to make your pecker resemble a dejected noodle, but a bit of unfinished business for sure."

"Isn't she going to be arrested? Christ, she set up her father for assassination, helped blow Amos Binky to kingdom come, kidnapped me and had me tortured by a—"

"Can't find her."

"Can't find her?"

"Nowhere. She was reported boarding a teleport pad and bound for someplace in the Mongolian tundra. From there we—"

"Mongolia? That's where Bulldozer sent that abnor. Jinx is likely to team up with the only extant Lemurian abnor left on Earth."

"Calm yourself, Jake. What can they do? Anyway, we're not absolutely certain she—"

"Okay, we'll see. What about Bulldozer? Is he back on Alcatraz in a trance?"

"No, the president commuted his sentence to two years of rehab therapy in Topeka. I'm hopeful the guy will join WTD when he's let loose. Anybody who can move tons of rock and the president would be a real asset to us."

Conger said, "I'm going to slide off the rock." Tucking the pixphone up under his arm, he dropped to the sand.

"That wasn't so bad. What are those seagulls doing over there?"

"Mating." Conger started climbing up the hillside. "Anything else to tell me?"

"There is one other item," said Geer slowly.

"Which is?"

"Oh, it's only that Wizard Wells sends you her best wishes."

"Give her mine."

"Jake," said Geer in a lower voice.

"What?"

"She's very fond of you, Wiz is."

"Good, I like her, too. She's a terrific precog."

"I honestly think," continued the WTD chief after a cough, "you could have . . . um . . . you know. You and her. You might have . . . know what I mean?"

Halting half-way up the hill, Conger brought the phone screen around so he could look into Geer's frazzled face. "Sleep with her? Is that what you're talking about?"

Geer nodded. "Exactly. You could have, Jake. Why didn't you?"

Conger grinned. "I don't work that way," he said. He clicked off the phone, put it again under his arm and continued uphill.