

"You must kill Koski," the leader said. "But I'll be dead before I get there," Buckmaster replied. "What's that got to do with it?" the leader wanted to know.

Infinity's Child By Charles V. DeVet

THE SENSE of taste was always to go. For a week Buckmaster had ignored the fact that everything he ate tasted like flavorless gruel. He tried to make himself believe that it was some minor disorder of his glandular system. But the eighth day his second sense—that of feeling—left him and he staggered to his telephone in blind panic. There was no doubt now but that he had the dread Plague. He was glad he had taken the precaution of isolating himself from his family. He knew there was no hope for him now.

They sent the black wagon for him.

In the hospital he found himself herded with several hundred others into a ward designed to hold less than a hundred. The beds were crowded together and he could have reached to either side of him and touched another ravaged victim of the Plague.

Next to go would be his sense of sight. Hope was a dead thing within him. Even to think of hoping made him realize how futile it would be.

He screamed when the walls of darkness began to close in around him. It was the middle of the afternoon and a shaft of sunlight fell across the grimy blankets on his bed. The sunlight paled, then darkened and was gone. He screamed again. And again.

He heard them move him to the death ward then, but he could not even feel their hands upon him.

Three days later his tongue refused to form words. He fought a nameless terror as he strove with all the power of his will to speak. If he could say only one word, he felt, the encroaching disease would have to retreat and he would be safe. But the one word would not come.

Four horrible days later the sounds around him—the screams and the muttering—became fainter, and he faced the beginning of the end.

At last it was all over. He knew he was still alive because he thought. But that was all. He could not see, hear, speak, feel, or taste. Nothing was left except thought; stark, terrible, useless thought!

Strangely the awful horror faded then and his mind experienced a grateful release. At first he suspected the outlet of his emotions had somehow become atrophied as had his senses, and that he was peaceful only because his real feelings could not break through the numbness.

However, some subtle compulsion within him—some power struggling in its birth-throes—was beginning to breed its own energy and he sensed that it was the strength of that compulsion that had subdued the terror.

He was at peace now, as he had never been at peace before. For a time, he did not question—was entirely content to lie there and savor the wonderful feeling. He had lost even the definition of fear. No terror stow from the slow closing of the five doors; no regrets; no forebodings. Only a vast happiness as he seemingly viewed life, suffering, and death as a man standing on a cliff looking out over a great misty valley.

But soon came wonder and analysis. He looked backward and thought: *It was a world, but not my world. These are memories but not my memories. I lived them and knew them—yet none of them belongs to me. Strange—this soul-fiber with which I think—the last function left to me—is not a soul-fiber I have ever known before.*

And he knew.

I have never existed before this moment.

He could not prove it nor explain it there in the dark house of his thinking. But he knew it was true. He wondered if he had taken over the body and mind—complete with all the mental trappings—of some other being. Or whether he had been just now conceived, full-blown and with memories of a synthetic past perhaps implanted also in the minds of those with whom he was supposed to have come in contact. He did not know. He was only sure that, before this moment, he had not been.

WITH the realization came the certainty that he would not die. The force he felt within him—he was not certain whether it was a part of himself, or the evidence of an outside control—was too powerful.

The inner spontaneity gathered strength until it became a striving, persistent vital force, a will of imperious purpose. It moved him and he moved his tongue and spoke. "I will not die!" he shouted.

Some time later he grew aware that his sense of hearing had returned. He heard a voice say, "He was in the last stages about an hour ago, before he spoke. I thought I'd better call you."

"You did right," a second voice answered. "What's his name?"

"Clifford Buckmaster."

They're talking about me, he thought. Like a burst of glory, sight returned. He looked up and saw two men standing beside his bed. The older man wore a plain black suit. The younger was dressed in the white uniform of a doctor.

"He can see now," the older man said. His was a voice Buckmaster disliked.

"It looks as if he's going to recover," the doctor said. "That's never happened before. Do you want me to leave him here with the dying ones?"

"No. Wheel him into your office. And leave us alone there. My name is James Wagner. You have, of course, heard of me. I am the Director of Security."

Buckmaster still rested in his hospital bed. They had screwed up the back until he sat almost straight. In his mouth there was a slight tang and knew the sense of taste returned. When he was able to feel again he would be entirely well. Yes, he'd heard of Wagner before. He nodded.

"And I know who you are," Wagner said. "You are one of the Underground that is trying to overthrow the General. That is correct, is it not?"

Almost with surprise Buckmaster felt Wagner's words register in his mind. His implanted memories were still strange to him. But he recalled them quickly.

Twenty years before, in 1979, the great Atomic War had ended. In the beginning the two giants faced each other across the separating oceans. No one was certain who sent the first bomb across in its controlled rocket; each side blamed the other.

The methods of each were terrible in their efficiency. The great manufacturing cities were the first to go. After them went the vital transportation centers.

Striving mightily for an early advantage each country forced landing armies on the enemy's shores. The armies invaded with their hundreds of thousands of men—and the bombings continued.

The colossus of the western hemisphere had set up autonomous launching stations, so that if and when their major cities had all been bombed, their ruling bodies decimated and scattered—even if there were no longer any vestiges of a central authority—the launchings would continue.

The autonomous units had been a stroke of master planning, so ingenious that it was logical the giant of Eurasia had devised a similar plan.

BY THE time the bombs had all been used, or their stations rendered incapable of functioning, the major cities were blackened, gutted, inoperative masses of destruction. Soon the invading armies no longer received orders, or supplies of rations and arms. When this happened they knew governments they represented had ceased to exist. They were forced to live by the ingenuity of their commanders and their ability to forage. They could not even capitulate; there was no one to whom they could surrender.

Those armies with weak commanders fell apart and one by one their men died at the hands of hostile natives, or hunger.

The armies under, strong commanders, like General Andrei Koski, of the Eurasian command, carved themselves a place in their new environment.

Koski had landed with a force of seventy thousand on the east coast of old Mexico. His army was different from the other invaders only in a secret weapon which they brought with them. The weapon's appearance was simple but it carried the potentiality of destruction for a world.

Acting under previous orders from his government, Koski began moving northward, and was soon cutting a swath a hundred miles wide up the west bank of the Mississippi. By the time he reached the southern border of Minnesota he realized from what he saw on all sides, that for all practical purposes the war was over. His only choice now was to find a means of survival for himself and his men.

When Koski reached Duluth he circled the city. Almost miraculously it had escaped the bombs. Its population was only a little over two hundred thousand, and Koski still retained nearly fifty thousand hardened fighting men.

However, Duluth, Koski found, was governed by Earl Olson, an ex-brigadier and a man equally as strong as himself. The city was fortified, and garrisoned by a force of well trained civilians who would fight to their death to defend their city and families. And they were well led by Olson.

Koski knew he could, capture the city if he decided to, but the price would be too dear. He moved on along the lakeshore and took over the city of Superior. Here he entrenched himself solidly and set up an efficient military government.

By law every woman in the city still capable of bearing children was forced to take two husbands, at least one of which must be a Ruskie, as the invaders were called by the natives. In this way Koski insured a plentiful supply of children, most of whom would be loyal to him.

A bonus of ten thousand dollars was offered to any woman from the outlying districts who would move to Superior and take two of its citizens in marriage. After the first hesitation, the girls and young women and widows flocked in from their barren farms and hamlets.

By the end of twenty years the city had grown to near one hundred fifty thousand.

Duluth in the meantime grew to three hundred thousand. Earl Olson ruled absolutely, but wisely and well. Between the two cities an alert truce held through the years and mutually advantageous trade flourished.

Koski, in his city, held all authority in his own tight grip, administered by his former officers and backed by the undeviating loyalty of his soldiers. His rule was stern and when necessary, bloody. It might have been bloodier except for the threat of intervention by Colson.

THERE ARE always men who fret under the hand of tyranny and the Underground had gradually risen until it grew into a powerful organization. Its demands were for a representative government chosen by vote of the people. This, of course, Koski refused. As a consequence, the Underground formed an active resistance, with the avowed purpose of killing Koski. A retaliatory blood bath was prevented only by the threat of intervention by Olson, who had many friends in the Underground, especially his brother-in-law, Lester Oliver.

But right now none of this seemed very important to Buckmaster. Not important enough for him to bother answering.

"Answer when you're spoken to!" Wagner roared.

For a moment Buckmaster deliberated riot replying. Just how unusual was the difference he had discovered in himself? Could he be hurt by someone like Wagner? He decided to wait until later to put it to the test.

"What do you want me to say?" he asked.

"I'm going to lay my cards on the table," Wagner said. "I want you to come over to our side."

Still not very interested, Buckmaster asked, "Why should I?"

"I think I can give you some very good reasons. In fact, unless you're a bigger fool than I think you are, I can convince you that it is the only wise thing to do. Because of your relatively smaller numbers, the Plague has caused havoc in your Underground."

"Yes," Buckmaster answered. "But we will have a vaccine before long." He knew this was purely bluff.

"Possibly." Wagner pulled his cheeks up but his eyes remained chilled and cold. He had the trick of

smiling mirthlessly. "But even if I were to grant you that, we estimate that already nearly half of your organization is dead from the Plague. There will be more before you can do anything. The rest we can hunt down at our leisure. So you see, even if we let you live, you'd soon be a man without a party."

"We could start all over again if we had to." The first signs of feeling came back with a twinge of pain at the tip of the little finger on his left hand.

"I doubt it very much."

"What would I be expected to do?" Buckmaster asked.

"Simply this. Go back among your former comrades and act normal. But let me know what they're planning. In time we'd get them anyway, but with your help, the job will be easier—cleaner, let us say."

"In other words, you want me to act as the Judas ram?"

"Call it what you like," Wagner's eyes narrowed. "Just remember that you've nothing to lose."

"And after?"

"You can name your own price. Within reason, of course."

"And if I refuse?"

"WAGNER LAUGHED. It wasn't necessary for him to answer. Buckmaster had seen the results of Wagner's sadism in the past. Whatever else might be mystifying to him he knew one thing: The instinct of self-preservation was still as strong as ever. He did not want to take the chance that the extraneous will he felt within him would be strong enough to combat what Wagner would try to do to him.

"Let's say I agree," he said. "What comes next?"

"Can you move your limbs yet?" Wagner asked.

Buckmaster flexed his fingers and lifted his arms. "I believe I'm strong enough to walk," he said.

"By the way," Wagner inquired, "have you any idea why you didn't die?"

Buckmaster shook his head.

"Well, no matter. Lie back and relax. Now look into my eyes. Concentrate on the right one."

Buckmaster knew what was coming now. Mind contact!

Subtly he felt the first tentative probe of Wagner's thought antenna. One part of his brain accepted it passively, but another part used the probe as a bridge.

Wagner's thoughts seemed unguarded. Buckmaster easily read everything there. He had to hide his surprise at what he learned. Things that Wagner, by no process of logic, would ever reveal to him. Reflections concerning the Plague. Remembrances of snatches of conversation with the General. Wagner's relations with women. Sex occupied many of his thoughts. The fear of Olson was there, in spite of Wagner's brave words earlier.

Then Buckmaster read about himself in Wagner's mind and was certain something was wrong here. He saw that Wagner had no intention of ever letting him live, no matter how useful he might be. There was death for himself as soon as that usefulness was over.

"Damn it," Wagner cursed, "relax. Let your mind open up to me. Are you deliberately trying to get yourself back in trouble by being stubborn?"

Then he knew. The contact had been one-way. He had read Wagner's mind because Wagner had not realized he could do it, and had not thrown up a guard.

Cautiously Buckmaster let fragments of careful thoughts escape. The moment he lowered the barriers of his mind he felt Wagner's power beat against him, wave upon wave. The sensation was frightening.

Wagner seemed satisfied. Buckmaster could read very little in his mind now.

"Done," Wagner said. "Now, one last warning. Don't try to double-cross me, or you'll regret the day you were born."

Buckmaster's choices of action were very few. He doubted that he could make it but at least he should try to get to Duluth.

At the toll bridge across the arm of the lake he bought a ticket. Nobody bothered him. He breathed easier as he rested against the iron railing waiting for the gate to open; then stopped breathing as a tall man—one of the Ruskies—leaned over beside him and said, "It won't work, friend."

Buckmaster tore up his ticket. Strangely, there was a sense of relief. The force—the presence within

him—whatever it was, wanted him to return to his friends. It didn't compel him, it used no coercion. It merely presented good reasons for doing so. He could do more good there than by fleeing, it suggested. And, so strongly as almost to blot out all other emotions, was the implanted desire—an urgent, compelling command—to stay and kill Koski.

As Buckmaster started back, the thought struck him: Was he merely a pawn being moved by this inner power? Did he no longer have freedom of action? Was his will still his own?

WAGNER was annoyed to receive the summons from Koski. He fumed inwardly as he mounted the stairs to the General's second floor receiving room. It was always humiliating to be summoned like a common officer when he was in fact the ruler of the city.

Koski had slipped badly during the past few years but Wagner knew better than to put the old figurehead out of the way. He needed the power of that prestige until he had made, his own position impregnable.

Originally Wagner had been an unlettered lad from the steppes. When he had been made Koski's orderly, he had used his native cunning and slyness to ingratiate himself with the old commander. Soon Koski had made him his personal adjutant. From that advantageous position of trust it had been relatively simple for him to use his insidious talents to secure advantages for himself.

During the process of organizing Superior's government Wagner had used his influence to get his own adherents appointed to key posts. By the time Koski began to succumb to the ravages of senility, Wagner held the most powerful position in the city—that of Security Administrator.

By now Koski was so far gone that, he did not even realize he did not rule; that the city's functions had come under the control, direct and indirect, of Wagner.

"You wanted to see me, Sir?" Wagner asked.

"Yes," the General answered, the shaggy hairs of his eyebrows meeting in a frown. "Have the doctors found a remedy for the Plague yet? It has gone so far now that soon the manpower we must have for the Campaign will be threatened."

"Not yet, Sir, but they are within sight of it." Wagner was always careful to keep the scorn he felt from his voice. The old dodderer was useful and must be pampered—for awhile.

The General still clung to his dream of the Campaign. His ultimate plan, from the time he had taken over Superior, had been to use the city as a base from which to spread his rule, until he had control of the entire continent—in the name of the mother country, of course. He had never let himself see that it was but a dream. He was certain that he would find other pockets of his fellow-men who, like himself had set up autonomous governments. With their aid he still, hoped for an ultimate victory over the enemy. This would always remain enemy territory to him.

"If we don't stop the Plague before it spreads to our own men, I'll be forced to use the Weapon," Koski growled. His great bony features had lost all power of expression except their habitual scowl, but his voice was still deep and vibrant. "I'll kill every man, woman, and child in the country!"

Wagner had to admire the will to destruction that still rode the old man. He may have weakened in his mind but he had never softened. And the Weapon? It was the one secret that Wagner had not been able to learn.

"Yes, Sir," Wagner agreed. "If you should ever feel the need to use the Weapon, I ask you to remember that my only wish is to be of aid to my General."

Koski's washed blue eyes grew crafty. "I fully realize that. But I will need no help. You may accept my compliments and withdraw."

Wagner muttered a soft oath under his breath as he bowed humbly.

"AS YOU can see, I didn't die," Buckmaster said. The two chairs in the small room were occupied by the men he faced. He sat on a steel-framed bed.

"No." Lester Oliver was thoughtful. "I'm wondering why you didn't. Do you have any explanation?"

"Only something that you wouldn't understand, unless it happened to you," Buckmaster answered. "I couldn't explain it."

"Try." Oliver spoke softly, but Buckmaster knew that behind that softness Oliver hid a bulldog tenacity.

Carefully, patiently Buckmaster told about the Force, trying to make them sense it as he had.

"You feel then," Cecil Cuff, the other man in the room, said, "that you're in the grip, of something over which you have no direct control?" "Yes:"

"Are you certain that it is not the contact Wagner imposed on you?" "It came before Wagner was present," Buckmaster replied.

Cuff turned to Oliver. "I know he believes what he is saying," he said. "But it's obvious that his mind has been tampered with. If we let him live, we'll be taking the risk that the General and Wagner are getting at us, through him."

"That's right," Oliver answered.

"I think he should be killed," Cuff said.

Oliver was thoughtful for a long moment. "What do you think, Clifford?" he asked gently. He always called Buckmaster by his first name.

Buckmaster breathed deeply. "Naturally I want to live," he answered. "But from the viewpoint of the Underground, I suppose Cuff is right."

"You say that you feel that this Force is a protective one," Oliver said. "Does it seem to you that perhaps we couldn't kill you—that it would prevent us?"

Buckmaster searched for words to express, his thoughts. "I feel," he said, "that it won't let me be killed. It seems that I have a mission to fulfill, and that it won't let me die—at least not until I accomplish what it desires. However, I feel also that it will, or can, do nothing concrete to prevent my being killed. It will probably aid me by convincing you that it would be better to let me live."

"Do you feel that its purpose might be much the same as ours, and that it will attempt to convince us of that?" Oliver asked.

"Something like that," Buckmaster answered. "At least the urge to kill Koski is so strong within me that I know I would not hesitate if I had the chance, even if it meant my own life."

"Would you attempt to stop us if we tried to kill you?"

"No."

Oliver closed his eyes. He was silent for so long that it seemed he must be sleeping. But Buckmaster knew that Oliver's brain worked with lightning speed while his body reposed. Oliver was the most intelligent man he had ever known. He was head of the Underground solely because he was the fittest man for the job.

FINALLY Oliver spoke. "We'll come back to it later," he said. "Did you learn anything that might help us, Clifford?"

"I learned that the Plague is spread by contact—only after the first symptoms show themselves. I read that in Wagner's mind before he realized that I was reading his thoughts."

"That will help. You say you made contact before you became *en rapport* with Wagner. Can you control what you let him learn through you?"

"I believe I can, but I can't be certain."

"If you could be certain, we wouldn't have to kill you," Oliver said.

"You would be taking a chance," Buckmaster replied.

"We can't afford to take any chances," Cuff said. "He—"

"You're forgetting one thing, Cecil," Oliver interrupted. "As things stand right now, we're a lost cause. The Plague has killed many of our best men. The only thing that keeps Koski from staging a blood-bath is his fear of Governor Olson in Duluth. And pretty soon he won't have to fear that. We have only to lose another key dozen and Olson will have no friends here to aid."

"May I offer a compromise?" Buckmaster asked. "As matters stand now, our only chance of winning freedom from Koski's savage rule is to kill him. And to do that we will have to kill Wagner first. Am I correct?"

"Yes." Oliver raised his head. "What do you have to suggest?"

"Let me try to kill Wagner. If I succeed our cause will have taken a big step. If he kills me first, then you've lost nothing more than if you'd killed me yourselves."

After a barely perceptible hesitation Oliver nodded in agreement.

For the rest of the day Buckmaster improvised a simulated course of action to let seep through to Wagner whenever he felt a probe. He kept his mind blank otherwise and was quite certain that he carried on the deception well. He caught nothing from Wagner in return that was not deliberately let through. He suspected that his own control was as good. Though he had not had the practice at this that Wagner had.

Toward evening he improvised a crisis. The Underground was plotting something big, he transmitted. He made the need for action imperative and asked for a personal interview. At first Wagner demurred. He wanted Buckmaster to stay on and give first hand reports. Buckmaster gave hints in return that he was suspected by the other members, and indicated that he must leave while still able to. Finally Wagner agreed.

"You realize the risk you're taking, coming with me, Cecil?" Buckmaster asked.

"I do," Cuff said with his unchangeable reserve. "But you'll need my help."

Buckmaster wished he himself could remain as cool. His own, nerves felt like wires that had been drawn too tightly.

Cuff was tall and robust, with a pessimistic outlook on life.. He seemed to sit back and watch life and its peoples as a spectator, willing to fight ruthlessly for what he believed was right, but never expecting to discover anything fine enough in his fellow men to hope for anything better from them. He had touched the borders of an existence that was mean and hard and dirty and he had long ago despaired of finding anything else. Yet there was nothing apathetic about his personality. Life's illusions were gone, but its fascination remained.

"I DIDN'T think you trusted me too much," Buckmaster said. Cuff acknowledged the statement by nodding his head. "I believed that you might be under Wagner's power. Wagner is a brute trying to break us. On this trip you're going to make your own heaven or hell, and if you've got the courage to face it, I'll back you up."

In the Administration Building the girl at the information desk told them, "The Director will see you in a moment." She led them into a waiting room.

Three hard-faced men, all wearing black shirts, came in. They had the mark of killers about them.

"Stand up."

They checked Buckmaster and Cuff for weapons. None was found. All five took the elevator to the sixth floor.

Wagner was seated at his desk waiting for them when they walked into his office. He smiled his mirthless smile. "I see you brought company," he said. "We'll get two birds with one stone."

Buckmaster knew then that there was little use trying any further deception. Wagner knew. If he were able to squeeze through just a short ten seconds the job could still be done. The three bodyguards stood a few yards behind them.

"I have something here that will interest you," Buckmaster said. Slowly, unhurriedly, but wasting no motion, he unbuttoned one flap on his shirt and reached a hand inside.

He peeled back the long strip of adhesive tape covering the cavity below his ribs. He pulled out the small single-shot derringer concealed there. He aimed from the waist and put the bullet into the middle of Wagner's smile.

The smile cracked, and the crack became a shatter, spreading in all directions. Buckmaster saw the trap then. He had shot at a reflection of Wagner. It had been a cleverly arranged mirror deception.

Cuff turned to run through the door they had entered. But Buck-master was so certain any attempt to escape would be in vain that he did not even move. Cuff found the three guards blocking the doorway.

Buckmaster watched Wagner enter from opposite the cracked mirror. There were two more of his bodyguards with him.

When the guards closed in Cuff struggled until they spun him bad against the wall where his head

crashed with a dull crunch. All the fight went out of him and he slumped in the arms of the men who held him.

Two of the guards held Buckmaster's arms.

"A couple of fine birds," Wagner said as he stood in front of them.

Cuff straightened with an effort of will and shook his head until his vision cleared. He leveled his glance at Wagner. "You're a mongrel cur," he said unemotionally, "licking at the General's boots. He'll throw you another scrap for this day's work." Both he and Buckmaster knew that he sealed his own fate with the words. The one thing Wagner could not tolerate was ridicule, worse in the presence of his own men.

Buckmaster caught the hard flat explosion in his face and pain in his eardrums as the gun that appeared in Wagner's hand went off.

As he watched Cuff slump he knew the man was beyond torture. He suspected that this was what Cuff had wanted. He had taken the easy way out.

Buckmaster leaned his shoulders back and then with sudden violence pulled his arms free from the guards' grip. He slapped Wagner across the mouth with his left hand and brought his right fist around in a short arc that crushed the bone in Wagner's nose.

He made no resistance as the guards grabbed him and twisted his arm cruelly behind his back. The hurt from Wagner's shattered nose brought a bright glister of pain into his eyes.

"That was a mistake," Wagner said, the depth of his anger making his voice soft and husky, "I'm going to make you whine like a dog."

THE GENERAL was suffering the tragedy of a strong man whose mind was turning senile—and who realized it. Only the two alternative objectives remained virile; the Campaign and, that failing, the Weapon. The Weapon gave him his only solace in times of trouble. Now, going down into the basement of his house, he sought it out again. Letting himself through two thick concrete doors, which he opened with a key that he wore about his neck at all times, he entered the room that held his potentially terrible secret.

The outer contour of the Weapon was a rectangular frame of rough lumber. Inside was a metal box, and in this reposed a semi-glutinous mass of liquid. Nothing more. On the shelf above rested a bottle of aqua fortis. Quite simple substances—apart. Together they could spell the destruction of a world.

The Dictator himself, had given Koski his instructions long before, back in the homeland.

"General," you are being sent with an army, but its purpose is to protect your Weapon, and to bring it into a position of maximum effectiveness, rather than to fight. You fully understand, I hope, that if you ever have to use it, your mission will certainly be fatal to yourself?"

"I understand, Sire," Koski answered. "I am thankful for the honor you have done me."

"Your mission is to carry the Weapon to a central location on the North American continent. I believe you have the force necessary to accomplish that."

Koski nodded but said nothing. "The component ingredients of the Weapon I know no better than you yourself. It was developed at the Institute. Its special faculty is its ability to free hydrogen from the moisture in the air, and to start a chain reaction. The physicists tell me that it will sear most of the continent once it starts reacting. About the only spot that would be spared are the dry regions, and maybe not even those. Just one thing you must remember—do not use it unless you are certain that the war is definitely lost. Do you understand the importance of that command?"

"I do," Koski answered. "But wouldn't it be better to use it as soon as possible? The lives of my men and myself would be a small price to pay for victory."

"True, except for one big question," the Dictator replied. "The explosive is so deadly that it was impossible to experiment. There is no such thing as a little bit of it. Consequently we are not certain of its effects. We expect, and hope, that it will dissipate itself as it spreads too far from its initial explosion point, but we cannot be certain. It is possible that, once released, it will devastate the entire world. You see now why it must be used only as a last resort?"

Many times since Koski had gone over that conversation in his mind. Had the war been lost? Neither

side had come through with functioning governments. Therefore, what course should he take? Perhaps the invaders even now ruled the homeland. Would he gain, or would he lose the last chance for ultimate victory by setting off the explosive?

During the rare moments when his mind cleared, Koski realized the small chance the Campaign would have. At such times the Weapon beckoned. He knew then that the Campaign would never be completed in his lifetime. Wagner, however, was a very good man, with all the ideals of his country. He would carry on.

It needed only a slight variation in the trend of events, to tip that scale one way or the other. Even now the General held the bottle of aqua fortis in his hand—undecided. The fate of the world teetered.

"You aren't so pretty anymore," Wagner said.

"Neither are you," Buckmaster answered through battered, bloody lips. He wondered where he found the strength to keep taunting Wagner. He could feel that his face was a lumpy mess. One eye was dosed and blood, running down into the other, kept blinding him. Every muscle in his body ached from the pounding it had taken, and he suspected that his left arm was broken. He sagged in his bonds.

Wagner, he knew, was deliberately gauging the punishment. He meant to torture him to the verge of death, but he did not intend to let him die without further torment. Buckmaster wondered how much more he could stand.

Long ago he had despaired of any help from the Force. He had felt nothing since the torture started. It was evident that it couldn't do anything, or would not, to stop this orgy of sadism. And he knew that any subtle attempts to divert Wagner from his sadistic pleasure would be useless.

Wagner had all the instruments required for refined torture here. It was evident that he had used them many times in the past. He strapped Buckmaster's wrists to a waist-high wooden rack.

"You'll be pleased to know that I have made a thorough study of the human anatomy," Wagner said. "Therefore, when I begin cutting off your limbs, one joint at a time, you won't have to worry. I'll see that you do not die—and also that you retain consciousness. I wouldn't want you to miss the exquisite delicacy with which I perform the operations. You'll be a basket case when I get through."

Wagner picked up a short scalpel with an edge honed to a fine, razor sharpness. "This is a delicate little experiment that I find very effective," he said.

He lifted Buckmaster's right index finger and cut deeply through the flesh of its tip. The intense acuteness of the sensitive nerves made the agony unbearable. Wave after wave of shock sensations struck at his nerve fibers as the blade traced a raw red path through another finger-tip.

Sickness gathered in his stomach and retched up into his throat to gag him. He sucked in great gulps of air until at last he could stand no more pain and welcome oblivion blanked him out.

He returned to consciousness to find Wagner still there—waiting.

"Tsk, tsk," Wagner chided. "So you're not so tough, after all? And just when it was getting interesting."

This time Buckmaster did not have the strength to defy him. He was beaten. He prayed that Wagner would tire of his pleasure before he had to stand any more. He wanted to go out still a man, and not a broken hulk, tearful, pleading, begging for mercy.

"I think you're ready for something a bit more subtle," Wagner said. He concentrated his gaze on Buckmaster's eyes and slowly, cruelly built up a mental strain. The mind contact still held. Buckmaster realized that Wagner had been keeping this until he was too mentally whipped to fight back.

He was surprised then to feel that he fought off the pressure with little strain to himself. Still lurking there in his mind, was the Force, quiet, hardly felt, but virile, with a sense of dynamic quiescence potency! Hope came where all hope had been dead.

Something within him throbbed like electricity, and he sent a bolt of mental energy at Wagner's head.

The shock of the emotional concussion brought blood bursting from Wagner's nostrils and eye sockets. A red tide poured from his lips. His head dropped loosely and Buckmaster knew that Wagner was dead even before he fell from his chair.

Buckmaster sat astounded at the demonstration of power. He sat for a moment listening to the, inner voice that sent up its answers to his silent questions. No, it hadn't been able to help him before. Its power

was not physical. No, it could not help him escape. From here he was on his own. The only satisfaction he received was the closer entity he had found between himself and the Force. It seemed to him now that it did not come from the outside. Rather it was an essential part of himself. Or, more exactly, he was a part of that Force.

Buckmaster worked his wrists backwards in their thongs until he forced the leather straps over the bases of his hands. Thus he was able to bend his wrists. Slowly, painfully, he brought up his right leg until his foot rested next to his right hand. The left foot next. Once he almost lost his balance. But at last he stood with his feet straddling his hands.

He exerted all the strength of his leg, arm, and trunk muscles. The pain from his broken arm was a sickening thing but slowly the leather bands began to tear loose from the rivets that held them. A last mighty exertion and he was free.

Wagner had a private elevator. Buckmaster entered and went to a ground floor. He walked out of the building through a tradesmen's entrance into a dusky alley.

Keeping his good arm in front of his face he staggered around the corner and into a drugstore and reached a phone booth without being observed. He put in a call and crouched in the phone booth for the ten long minutes it took Oliver to come for him.

"Two weeks aren't very long to get you well, Clifford," Oliver said, "but I'm afraid it's all the time we have. I'm sorry."

"You did your best," Buckmaster answered. "At least you've got me pretty well patched up."

"The last reports were that the police have drawn a ring around this district, and that they're closing in."

"Do we have any way but?"

"I hate to have to say this," Oliver said slowly. "But the rest of us can get out—if we don't take you with us."

BUCKMASTER had expected this. It seemed that he had known from the beginning that he would never live to see the end of this adventure.

"It's all right. Is there anything can do to help?"

"No. They won't stop us if you aren't along. You're the man they're after. If there were any way I could help you by staying, I'd never leave. But I'd only be captured with you, and nothing gained."

"Of course I understand." Buckmaster rested his hand for a moment on the old leader's shoulder. "Don't feel badly about it, Lester. The men need you. You owe it to them to get out if you can."

Oliver gripped his hand. "Before I go I want you to know how grateful we are for the help you've given us. Without Wagner the General won't be nearly as hard to handles. And one other thing: I don't want you to hope too much, but there's still a chance we may be able to get you out. I'm trying a long shot. So if someone comes for you, go with him. In the meantime, keep your chin up."

They shook hands again. Buck, master surmised that Oliver was trying to give him something to cling to while he waited for the end. Then he was alone.

Three hours later Buckmaster spotted the first of his executioners: One of the Ruskiies that walked with studied unconcern across the street.

Almost at the same time he heard a rap on the rear door of the apartment. He drew the gun Oliver had left with him and walked slowly to the door. "Who is it?"

"Oliver sent me for you," the voice on the other side of the door answered.

"Come in with your hands up." Buckmaster flattened himself against a side wall and shoved his gun into the ribs of a tall young man.

"Who are you?"

"My name is August Gamoll," the man said. Somehow the name was familiar. He should recognize it, Buckmaster thought. Abruptly he did.

"What are you trying to do?" Buckmaster asked harshly. "Make, a small-time hero of yourself with this grandstand play?"

"Not at all," Gamoll answered. "I'm the long shot Oliver mentioned."

"You're lying."

"Then how would I know what Oliver said?"

"It may be a lucky guess. Why should I trust you?"

"Mainly because you have no choice. What have you got to lose?" He was a cool character.

Buckmaster shrugged. He hated this playing it blind, but the fellow was right. "O.K.," he said. "You might as well take your hands down. Let's go."

They went down the stairs. At the rear exit Gamoll looked out. He wore no hat. The wind from the alley fluffed the hair on the side of his head.

"All clear," Gamoll said. "Make a dash for it. When you get in the carriage lie low. Now!"

The die was cast, Buckmaster decided. He'd play it to the hilt now, all or nothing. He sprinted across the dirt of the alley and jerked open a door of the carriage. He threw himself inside and hugged the floor.

Soon the carriage began to roll. When they had travelled about a half block it stopped. Buckmaster drew in his breath. This was the critical point. If Gamoll could bluff his way through now the rest would be comparatively easy.

"Give me an escort, Captain," he heard Gamoll say. "I don't want to get tied up here. I understand there's going to be some shooting soon."

"That's right, sir," a crisp military voice answered. "It's best that you get out fast. I'll send one of my men with you."

The carriage started forward again. A half-hour later it stopped once more.

"You may get up now," Gamoll said. "We're going inside. Stay close to me."

BUCKMASTER was not surprised when he alighted and found himself near a side door to the General's private residence.

"I don't get all this," Buckmaster said. "You've had me here for six days now, and I've only seen you twice. Why should the General's son be hiding me?"

"Quite simple. I don't like his methods, or his government, any more than you do. Oliver knew that when he sent his message to me asking for help."

"Do you mean to say that you'd help us kill your own father?"

"As to that," Gamoll said, "if you'll notice, my hair and eyes are brown."

"So?"

"Koski's eyes and my mother's are blue. You probably know that it is genetically impossible for two-blue-eyed people to have a brown-eyed son."

"Then you're not his son?" Buckmaster was silent for a minute. "That's why you took the name of your mother's other husband," he mused.

"If you remember, when the law was passed that each woman must have two husbands, the General set the example by marrying a woman who already had a husband. He knows that I am not his son biologically, but I am legally, and I have full inheritance rights. He was too smart—as well as legally exact—to disown me."

"That means you'd automatically become the government head if the General died?"

"Yes. But you're wrong if you think that I am doing this from any selfish motive. If I succeed, I'll institute a democratic form of government at my first opportunity."

"I'll wait until I see it," Buckmaster answered cynically. "But if it's true, are your ideals strong enough to help us kill him?"

For the first time Gamoll seemed uncertain of himself. "Why is it necessary to kill him, especially now that Wagner is dead? We both know that Wagner did the actual ruling. And the General is an old man, without much longer to live. We'll win if we do no more than stand by."

"He must die—and soon!" Buckmaster exclaimed; surprised at the vehemence of the words. So vital had been the command, that he knew what he had said was true: Koski *must* die, in the very near future. Though he himself was not certain of the need for such urgency.

"I suppose I understand," Gamoll said, a trifle uneasily. "You have to act in self-defense: If you don't kill him, he will probably be able to kill many more of your men before he dies. But try to see his side. He

is the representative of a Cause that is just—to his way of reasoning; so right and so just that he will do anything to advance it. Whatever we may think of him, his conscience is clear. I only ask you this: If you can see your way clear to attain your ends without killing him, will you let him live?"

For another nine days Buckmaster stayed with Gamoll. He had nothing to occupy his time. In idle curiosity he went through the books in Gamoll's library. The young man owned many good books.

Before long Buckmaster's idle browsing turned to an intent search. For the first time he began finding clues to the mystery that rode within him.

His first clue, he thought, was a passage he read in a physics book entitled, "The Limitations of Science," by Sullivan: *Research has changed our whole conception of matter. The first step was the experimental demonstration that there exist little electrified bodies, very much smaller than a hydrogen atom, called electrons. Measurement was made with the result that the "whole" mass of the electron was found to be due to its electric charge. This was the first indication that the material universe is not the substantial, objective thing we had always taken it to be. Matter began to thin away into the completely spectral thing it has now become. The notion of "substance" had to be replaced by the notion of "behavior".*

He passed readily from physics to the more fertile field of philosophy with the groping statement of Voltaire: *I have seen that which is called matter, both as the star Sirius, and as the smallest atom which can be perceived with the microscope; and I do not know what this matter is.*

He pursued this quest readily with the philosopher Schopenhauer and passed almost imperceptibly into metaphysics: *I will never believe that even the simplest chemical combination will ever admit of mechanical explanation; much less the properties of light, heat, and electricity. These will always require a dynamical explanation.*

If we can ferret out the ultimate nature of our own minds we shall perhaps have the key to the external world.

Let us say, then, that repulsion and attraction, combination and decomposition, magnetism and electricity, gravity and crystallization, are Will.

Will, then, is the essence of man. Now what if it is also the essence, of life in all its forms, and even of "inanimate" matter? What if Will is the long-sought-for, the long-despaired-of, "the thing-in-itself"-- the ultimate inner reality and secret essence of all things?

Buckmaster perceived that these men were catching glimpses of something which they called Will, Order, Thing, Absolute, and other names but which were all very probably the same thing—and also that which he sought. Eagerly he read on.

His next clue came from Bergson: *Thought may begin with its object, and at last, in consistency, be driven, by the apparent necessities of logic, to conceive all things as forms and creatures of mind.*

Quickly he passed on to Spinoza where he found a wealth of food for thought. *Is the body merely an idea?*

Is all the mentality that is scattered over space and time, a diffused consciousness that animates the: world? There is but one entity, seen now inwardly as mind, now outwardly as matter, but in reality an inextricable mixture and unity of both.

Eternal order . . . that betokens the very structure of existence, underlying all events and things, and constituting the essence of the world.

Substance is insubstantial, that it is form and not matter, that it had nothing to do with that mongrel and neuter composite of matter.

Bruno said: *All reality is one in substance, one in cause, one in origin; mind and matter are one.*

Descartes' conception of a homogeneous "substance" underlying all forms of matter intrigued him for a time, and he wrestled mentally with the classic quotation, *I think, therefore I am.*

Berkeley wrote: *A "thing" is merely a bundle of perceptions—i.e., classified and interpreted sensations.*

Hegel: *The Absolute, transcending the individual limitations and purposes, and catching,*

underneath the universal strife, the hidden harmony of all things. Reason is the substance of the universe.

Leibniz: *Although the whole of this life were said to be nothing but a dream, and the visible world nothing but a phantasm, I should call this dream or phantasm real enough, if, using reason well, we were never deceived by it.*

FOR A TIME Buckmaster left the philosophers and read poetry. He found germs of what he sought in some of them, as Goethe's, *The force which draws the lover, and the force which draws the planets are one.*

He found it beautifully in a stanza of Wordsworth's.

Something

*Whose dwelling is the light of the setting suns,
And the round ocean, and the living air,
And the blue sky, and the mind of man;—
A motion and a spirit, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.*

In the main, however, he found in the poets that the grains of wheat were too few amidst the chaff and returned to philosophy.

Most of these excerpts, he felt, were clues to the enigma of himself. He knew that these great minds had touched on the very mystery that puzzled him. Once again he felt on the verge of *understanding*. Did he have all the pieces? Could he fit them into the pattern, if he but knew how? Or must he need to learn more?

Suddenly he found the explanation in a book of essays by, the incongruity of it struck him as ironical, an anonymous writer. He read:

For a time, during the middle ages, the theory that all the world, and even the universe, were figments of one giant imagination, swayed the thinkers of the world. The intellect in which this imagination centered was focused in one Man, and one man only, in the whole of existence. That man was the one man who "thought." All other men, all other matter, were but imagined props with no actual existence. That man is the one who "thinks!" "You"—and only "you," the person who is reading this—the whole world. It does not matter what your name might be. It might be. . .

Clifford Buckmaster knew then the mystery of life, who he was, and why. He no longer concentrated, but his eyes read on: *At first glance it would seem that there is a concerted conspiracy to avoid acknowledging this fact. Learned men, acquiring wisdom, come to the brink of the great discovery, and then deftly skirt it, blinding themselves to its evidentness. However, on second thought the reason is obvious. The theory is anarchistic; it carries the seeds of its own futility. If they were ever to admit the truth of it, all reason for everything—their very discovery, their very thoughts—would be futile. So they refuse to recognize it.*

Your obvious question is, How can I tell you this? Who am I—the writer of this essay? The answer is quite simple. I am merely a figment of your imagination, as is everything else about you!

At last he knew. His first sensation was one of awful, empty solitude. He was one creature—alone. Alone in a universe!

He was an entity living in a dream world. All about him were the figments of an imagination—presumably his own. And even knowing, he still had no control of events—like a dream that cannot be halted or changed. The people about him were automatons, in fact they possessed no actual substance. Even his own body was but a figment—but he could be hurt! He had experienced the most acute pain, and very probably he could be killed.

He had, however, little time to brood on it. At that instant in his reflections Gamoll jerked open the library door and walked in.

"The worst has happened," he exclaimed. "The security police have caught Oliver."

"What can we do?" Buckmaster still could not regard Gamoll, or Oliver and his friends, as

nonentities.

"I hate to say this," Gamoll said, "but you'll have to get out. I may be able to help Oliver escape, but I'll be powerless if they learn that I'm connected with the Underground."

"They probably wouldn't hesitate to kill you also," Buckmaster said.

"That wouldn't be too important, if my dying would accomplish anything," Gamoll said. "But the Underground's only hope seems to be my keeping clear."

Slowly, almost unobtrusively, a vision rose up before Buckmaster's eyes. Gamoll's features clouded, became vague, and were gone. In his place stood the General. In the General's hand was a bottle, and before him a wooden frame, holding a metal box with its lid open. Buckmaster realized that what he was seeing was happening in some other part of the building. He could see cement walls in the room in which the General stood. Probably the basement, he thought.

Within him the Force commanded! He must get to the General, and kill him. The world was on the brink of disaster. And time was running out.

GRADUALLY the whole composite vision vanished and he saw the handsome features of Gamoll again. He knew what he had to do now.

"I'm leaving immediately," he said.

Closing the library door behind him he walked unhesitatingly down a long hallway. To either side of him, painted on the walls, were murals, depicting peasants in the fields, harvesting grain. Idly he observed the painted figures as he walked, with his brain chilled and numbed of almost all emotion. The painted figures possessed as much reality as anything else about him, he thought disinterestedly.

He walked down steps and across an inner courtyard, his legs moving stiffly, lifelessly.

He continued up the steps on the far side of the courtyard, his mind shutting out everything around him except the door ahead. When he reached there he stopped. Here, he knew, he was at the crossroads. He could move straight ahead through the door, or he could walk around the house and enter the basement through the back. That was the longer way, but probably the safer.

And the Force urged the second choice.

A mood of black frustration swept over him and some perverse stubbornness of his human nature rebelled at this supine abnegation. He knew that he was going to die, and his one last defiant act would be to die in a way of his own choosing. He walked straight ahead.

As he opened the door and stepped into a long green-carpeted room he found himself facing three guards. They held guns and the guns were all aimed at him.

Even before he observed that the guards were firing, he felt the killing slugs enter his body. He knew the bullets had reached vital organs and that he was about to die. Within him he felt the Force, angry and rebuking.

He felt a wrench at the core of his body structure—and he was walking — walking — endlessly — down a long corridor. On the walls to either side of him were the figures of harvesters painted on yellow murals. His body was alive and vital. He walked on, through a doorway and out into a courtyard before he realized what had happened. The Force had turned time backward! He was once more on his way to shoot Koski. He was exactly the same as he had been the last time but with the addition of his memories of having been shot. And the silent warning that came to him never to expect another second chance. That could not be repeated.

This time when he came to the fatal door there was no surge of rebellion and he did not hesitate. He walked around the house until he came to the basement entrance. Cement steps led downward. Two guards were waiting for him there. One guard fell as Buckmaster fired, but he knew with a terrible certainty that he would not be able to kill the other in time to save himself.

The guard's bullet crashed into Buckmaster's diaphragm and his body jerked once but it did not stop its determined pacing forward. Buckmaster fired again but even as he did he felt a second bullet enter his body. It pierced his heart and he knew that he was dead. With dimming vision he watched the guard fall over on his side as his own bullet found its mark.

Even as Euckmaster realized that the bitter fever of life was over for him he knew that his body

would not stop. Without any directive from the brain it was using the last of the suspended energy in its blood and muscles to walk forward, driving with an awful exertion.

On he walked into the cement lined room. The General stood there, oblivious to the noise about him. The hair on the crown of his head parted violently as the bullet from the gun in Buckmaster's hand hit its mark.

The gun became a weight too heavy for Buckmaster's lifeless fingers and dropped to the floor. The last spark of life flickered for a brief moment where it had fled in some inner recess of his brain and he felt the Force for the last time. Two words it spoke. "Well done," and he knew that at last his job was finished. Now he would return home!

BUCKMASTtR had reasoned it well, considering his natural limitations. But the truth he had discovered was, like most truths, only part of a greater truth.

In the far reaches of infinity, beyond the outermost boundaries of space, a thought-voice spoke. "Am I going to die?" it asked.

"Not now," a second entity answered. "The crisis is past."

"Will the sickness come again?"

"Not this particular form of malevolent psychosis," the second entity replied. "But perhaps you had better tell me all the facts you know so that I can advise you about the future."

"My project, I still believe, was magnificent," the sick entity began. "From the energy of my essence I materialized a world of infinitesimal creatures. I gave them time and space, and built a background of a universe for their wonderment and speculation. They dwelt on their world, lived their lives, and made their tiny, though admirable, advances as they saw their destiny. And then, suddenly, when all seemed beautiful, something went wrong, and I was ill unto death. What did I do that was not right?"

"I believe you made your mistake when you gave your creatures free will. They developed their malignancies, as well as their admirabilities. When they developed a malignancy of such virulence that they were in a position to destroy themselves, you made yourself vulnerable to death, through them. The shock of that devastation to you would have killed you. Tell me, were your creatures aware that they were figments of your mind?"

"Some grasped inklings of it, though none were certain. One, a Baruch Spinoza, came as close to the truth as it was possible, for their finite minds. He wrote: *We are the flitting forms of a being greater than ourselves, and endless while we die. Our bodies are cells in the body of the race, our race is an incident in the drama of life; our minds are the fitful flashes of an eternal light. Our mind, in so far as it understands, is an eternal mode of thinking, which is determined by another mode of thinking, and this one again by another, and so on to infinity.* That was magnificent. While others who caught inklings of the truth believed that I was an ultimate being, he realized that I, too, had an ultimate being whom I worshipped."

"Also, if he had been able to perceive how close you were to death," the second entity said, "he would have realized that you were mortal, which no ultimate being can be."

"How were you able to circumvent the disaster that so nearly befell me?"

"I sent a segment of my own mentality into your conceived world. I gave it a name, implanted a memory of a past into its mind, and that same memory into the minds of those creatures with whom it was supposed to have come into contact, in its past. Through that segment I was able to destroy the awful potentiality, as well as the creature who controlled it. The secret now rests with the dead."

"Is there any chance of a similar recurrence?"

"That chance will always exist as long as you persist in allowing your creatures to have free will. I would advise you to destroy it."

For a time the patient was silent. "No," it said finally, "without that free will their existence and my entire project would be futile. I will let the free will remain and bear any consequences."

"That, of course, is your own choosing," the other said.

And so man kept his greatest possession.

THE END