

# Chameleon Corps

By Ron Goulart

## 1. Chameleon

THE MIDDLE ROW of view screens showed a half-dozen images of a wrecked man. Resting his palms on his backside, the Chief stopped pacing the office, "I can't buy him."

Azeler, the Junior Chief, Jerked his pale close-cropped head in agreement. "Too pathetic, not heroic."

Slouched in a dark wing chair Ben Jolson said, "Which is why you sent for a Chameleon Corps man?"

Chief Prittikin said, "Can't you sit up straight during a briefing, Jolson? After all, the Political Espionage Office should command every good man's respect."

Azeler added, "We put your file through one of PEO's personnel brains, Jolson. You're not the best man in the Chameleon Corps by any means."

Jolson's dark eyes narrowed. "For the last five months I've been in the wholesale pottery business. Then yesterday CC recalled me for an emergency mission. You're free to request another man."

"You're all that's available in these tense times," said Chief Prittikin.

"We're hoping," said Azeler, "your notorious instability won't crop up on this assignment." Jolson's slump was making Azeler uneasy and he kept absently throw-tog his narrow shoulders back. "Once on Peregrine you refused to stop playing your role. It took six Police Corps men to make you come back home to Barnum here."

"I liked that part," said Jolson. "Being the ruler of that jungle kingdom. I like outdoor work."

"Later, on Murdstone, you spent two months being a baboon," continued the Junior Chief.

"That was a mistake now that I look back on it."

"This," said Chief Prittikin, pointing at the hollow looking man on the screens, "is our problem at the moment."

"Can you become him?" Azeler asked Jolson.

"Sure. You don't want him looking that bad, though, do you?"

"Of course not," said the Chief. "That's the whole trouble."

"His name," said Azeler, straightening so much that he was standing up, "is F. Scott Cutler."

"I read about him," said Jolson. "Imprisoned on Pedra for six-and-a-half years. By mistake as it turned out. Probably a frame-up. Before that he was a rising military man on the planet of Barafunda."

"Just look at him, though," said Azeler. Cutler was sitting in a cane chair in an all gray room muttering to himself. His hands danced gently in his lap and his shadow-rimmed eyes blinked too rapidly. "That's not my idea of a hero."

Chief Prittikin said, "It's a shame so many martyrs end up looking so unattractive."

"Where is Cutler now?" Jolson asked.

"In a sanitarium near here. We brought him in secretly from Pedra after his pardon came through." The Chief reached up and punched the switch that cut off the pictures. "I can't stand too much of him. He doesn't lift my spirits."

"He's not hero material," said Azeler. "So few heroes are. That's where you come in, Jolson."

The Chief laughed with relief. "Let's look at those pictures of F. Scott Cutler at his trial." He threw another switch and the top bank of monitor screens lit up and showed an assortment of younger upright Cutlers. "He was thirty-four then. A bit weak in the chin perhaps but I could buy *that* man as a positive figure."

"I go along," said Azeler. "Jolson we want you to be the man Cutler might have been if he had aged more gracefully and not succumbed to prison conditions."

Jolson stood and came up to study the images. "Isn't there a chance Cutler will recuperate on his own? Why not wait?"

"It will take," said Azeler, "a full year and even then we can't be sure."

"A clean limbed, sturdy, positive-looking F. Scott Cutler has to appear on Barafunda by this weekend," explained the Chief.

His eyes on the moving pictures of the former Cutler, Jolson said, "Why?"

"Barafunda, as you may know," said Azeler, "still uses reactivated workers in many of its nonskilled industries."

"Zombies," said Jolson. "That's right. Cutler got in trouble, in part, because he was against the using of zombies."

"There is still a strong pro-zombie faction on Barafunda," said the Junior Chief. "The president of the United Territories is, however, believed to be anti-zombie."

Jolson said, "That's that pretty girl, isn't it? The current President."

"Jennifer Crosby," said Azeler. "Five-foot-five, 110 pounds, complexion medium, hair auburn, posture and muscle tone excellent, age twenty-six formerly President in Territory #13. She won the presidency of Barafunda at last season's Seaside Political Festival. She'll hold office for another two years."

"And you want Cutler," said Jolson "to work on this President Crosby girl. Get her to come out positively against the zombie trade."

"We know she's considering the almost immediate issuing of a proclamation against the whole zombie industry," said the Chief, striding over to his low gray desk.

"Cutler, as a now-hero and a long time anti-zombie man," said Azeler, "will have a favorable influence on Jennifer Crosby. His return to Barafunda and the attendant parades, speeches, and ceremonies will be only one of the assorted pressures that the Political Espionage Office has planned and in various stages of operation."

"This weekend," said Chief Prittikin, sitting rigidly down, "a reception celebrating Jennifer Crosby's first half-year in office will be held in the capital of Barafunda. We're hoping she can be pushed into making an anti-zombie statement at the reception."

"How tall is Cutler?" asked Jolson, backing away from the view screens.

"Two inches taller than you," said Azeler. "His weight should be about yours. It isn't of course because of his eating habits while a prisoner. For the purposes of your masquerade we'll say he weighs what you do."

Jolson frowned and shifted his position slightly. Then he grew two inches. "About right?"

Azeler, swallowing, said, "Fine. I never get used to you fellows, though." He added, "Being chosen for the Chameleon Corps must be quite an elating thing."

"I was twelve when I was tapped to start undergoing the conditioning and processing," said Jolson. "At the time I guess I was elated. My father arranged it. He was." He tucked his chin once and his face blurred and his features quivered and shifted.

Turning away Azeler said, "You are aware of our central Keystone government's reasons in this Barafunda business?"

"Sure. They want all the planets in the Barnum System to have fully automated factories and so on." Jolson checked his new face with the images of Cutler. "Automation is more functional, less expensive. Besides which, the Keystone government quietly controls two of our biggest automating outfits. Whereas, the zombie process is privately owned."

"You're not pro-zombie?" said the Chief, half-rising.

"I'm pro nothing," said Jolson. "Well? Is this what you want?"

The Junior Chief moved up to study him. "That's wonderful." He glanced at Prittikin. "A little more suffering around the eyes?"

"Yes," agreed the Chief. He motioned to Jolson. "Walk up to me and let's see how you register."

Jolson walked. "Okay?"

"Beautiful," said Chief Prittikin. "I buy it. Could you fake the chin just a bit, make it a little more positive?"

"Like this?"

The Chief popped up, patting himself on the backside. "I'm abundantly satisfied. I know this is an image that's going to sell."

"Definitely," said Azeler. "Now, Jolson, you can report to our Indoctrination Cottage for some sleep-briefing and a quick course in Cutler's voice and background. You'll be on tomorrow's rocket to Barafunda, arriving on the morning of the day after. That will give you a couple of days to work on Jennifer Crosby before the reception."

"Be sure not to get in the way of our other pressure groups," said Prittikin.

"Tell them the same for me," said Jolson. He took a last look at the still running films of F. Scott Cutler and walked to the door.

Azeler came alongside him. "I'll escort you to Indoctrination."

"By the way," said Jolson, "do you have any information on a guy named Jose Terranova?"

The Junior Chief reached for the door lever. "He's a citizen of Barafunda, isn't he?"

"Yeah," said Jolson. "When I was at the Chameleon Corps Senior Academy I used to follow his exploits. I just thought of him now. He was Baratunda's greatest romantic figure. A great operator. I admired him."

"A thoughtless womanizer and playboy," said Azeler. "He dropped from sight several years ago." He turned to face the Chief. "I'll report back shortly."

"Excellent," said Prittikin, laughing. "I'm really very happy with the way this has gone so far."

"So far," said Jolson, following Azeler into the quiet green corridor.

Jolson shook his head and poured the poisoned cup of chocolate into the dispozehole of his small metallic cabin. He was still half a day away from Barafunda and this was the third poison attempt. Not to mention the retired dentist who had taken a shot at him in the TV lounge. The Baratunda pro-zombie faction was apparently as well informed and widespread as the anti group. They already knew that the man they believed to be F. Scott Cutler was heading for their planet to do them harm. Maybe they even knew he was a fake. Either way they were trying to eliminate him.

Jolson was in his sleeping robe. He scratched himself and sat on the arm of his relaxachair and rocked thoughtfully. He, his real Jolson self, was twenty-nine now and the Chameleon Corps work bothered him increasingly. You could never, once they'd processed you, quit the CC. You could go inactive after a certain number of years. It always hung over you, though. They had called Jolson back twice since he'd dropped out of the corps five months ago. He'd never really liked it but, as Azeler's files showed in detail, Jolson had enjoyed some of the fringe activities of his work. But he was becoming increasingly interested in devoting his time and effort to being only Ben Jolson. It seemed about time.

A faint polished sliding sound came from his closet area. Jolson looked around the room. He unseamed the robe and tossed it down on the chair. He hesitated and then crossed silently and sat on the edge of the bunk. He concentrated and changed into a good facsimile of an orange, tufted pillow. Some of the Chameleon Corps men didn't like to switch to inanimate things but it had never bothered Jolson too much. In fact, it was less unsettling than being another human.

The bright closet door arced open and a fat sweat-dotted man in a blue sleep robe dropped into the cabin. He had a stun pistol in his hand and a medical kit tucked into the fat shoulder crotch between his left arm and side. He scanned the cabin and then ran into the bathroom. He came back and dropped to all fours in the room's center. "Now where in the heck is he?" the perspiring fat man asked himself. "Hiding in some other quarter of this vast ship I'll wager. Cutler's turning out to be a more artful dodger than I had at first

fancied." The fat man rose up and padded into the closet. In a second the sliding secret door sounded again.

Jolson decided to remain as he was. He spent the sleep period as the pillow.

Jolson, playing it safe, came down the disembarking ramp wearing his own face. Even so, he flinched when something was thrown at him. It turned out to be only a handful of yellow flower petals, let loose by an impetuous member of a grade school reception committee. The little girl apologized and asked Jolson for her petals back.

The crowd seemed about half for F. Scott Cutler and a quarter against, with the rest there to meet other passengers. Parked against a blue grillwork fence, was a long shiny ground car with the official seal of Barafunda on its side and roof. Jolson worked free of the crowd and moved casually in the car's direction.

There was a plainclothes driver at the wheel, stiff and straight-staring. When Jolson was clear of the assorted reception groups he let himself return to the resemblance of F. Scott Cutler. "You sent to meet me?" he called to the driver.

"For heaven's sake, get down!" called someone behind him.

Jolson turned, dropping to one knee. "What?"

The landcar blew up.

Jolson flattened, cradling his head with his locked hands. A piece of plastic bumper nicked at his elbow and a heavy fragment of tire slapped into the small of his back but that was all.

"The car was a decoy, driver a dummy," said a raspy voice. "They went for it. You've exposed yourself, though, which was a mistake."

Pushing to his feet Jolson looked at the tall, wide man who had grabbed his arm. "The President send you?"

"Yes," the man said, flicking open his dark coat to reveal the secret identification labels sewn in it. "I'm Dennis Winslow. For the lord's sake, come along with me." He swung out his hand and clamped a pair of dark glasses on Jolson. "There. Now act natural. I'm not known to the pro-zombies and we may be able to get away from here on a couple of bicycles. I had hoped to catch you while you were still on board. Cutler. but you slipped by."

They had started walking, away from the remains of the car, as the crowd hustled toward it. "I take it,"

said Jolson in his Cutler voice, "my release is not universally appreciated."

"No," said the government man. "I wanted to sneak you in without any fanfare. Orders came from Keystone itself calling for pomp and ceremony. They won't listen on Barnum. Have the idea they know how things actually are on Barafunda. Here."

Two black bicycles leaned against a striped out-building on the edge of the spaceport grounds. "Can we slip into the capital on these?"

"Let's hope to the good lord we can," said Winslow. "Hop on."

"Okay," said Jolson, running his bike along after Winslow's.

Winslow jumped onto his bike and rode through an opening in the fence.

"How far is the capital?" Jolson asked, mounting his rolling cycle.

"Don't you remember?"

"Roughly three miles as I recall," said Jolson, letting his sleep-briefing knowledge answer for him. "I've been gone for quite awhile."

"Understandable."

The countryside was free of buildings, low hills bordered both sides of the rundown road they were using. After a few minutes they passed a roadside restaurant that announced it sold frozen harkness, which Jolson's Cutler background told him was a custard made from a native Barafunda plant.

Jolson's mind was checking details and his body was intent on pedaling the bike. He jerked his head when Winslow suddenly cried out. "What?" asked Jolson.

"Into the fields," yelled Winslow, letting his cycle carry him off the roadway. He was in midair, aiming for the grass, when a blaster rifle crackled and Winslow ceased to be there.

Jolson threw himself into the high, crisp grass and rolled. He'd had a glimpse of the two landcars that blocked the road and the gray suited men running from them. Maybe they wanted him alive but he didn't feel like gambling on it.

He unsealed his suit as he edged on his side, hidden by the grass. He had gotten out of his clothes and footgear before a voice shouted, "Over there! The grain is wavering."

Jolson changed into a small compact neutral-colored rodent. He crept carefully away from his clothes, scurrying and dodging, hoping he wasn't making waves.

"What the heck," said one of the pro-zombie men. "He's stripped down to the buff. Lett all his clothes behind."

"Fear brings on strange reactions," said someone else.

"Screw you," thought Jolson. He changed himself to a local grass-colored bird and twittered for awhile. He hopped further from the men, making sure he established the idea that he was a bird. Jolson chanced a spring into the air. Nobody shot at him and he flew away in what he hoped was the direction of the capital city.

The sign hanging askew on the dirty stone building said: Welcome To The Tenderloin. Optimists Meet Every Tuesday At The Lighthouse Mission. Jolson had become a scrubby-looking dog and he was working his way through the outskirts of town. He was wondering how charitable the social welfare groups in the capital's tenderloin would be. If he walked into a welfare store completely naked would they generously clothe him or would they make arrangements to lock him up someplace.

Maybe he could slip into a secondhand clothing store and sneak a suit of clothes without being seen. The F. Scott Cutler role was too dangerous to continue with. Jolson had made up his mind to work out an alternate plan. He'd tell the Political Espionage Office and the Chameleon Corps about it after he'd done the job of getting the President to make an anti-zombie proclamation. He preferred working this way, which was one reason for his complex reputation.

He trotted along the dusty street, keeping clear of the sprawled derelicts. This close to the street the tenderloin had an intense odor he'd never noticed when walking upright in similar places.

A lopsided man with veined nose and cheeks came up and kicked Jolson. Jolson considered biting him but couldn't work himself up to it. He trotted faster and reached the comer. Across the cobblestone street was a vast secondhand clothing store with three entrances. Steamer trunks made a protective wall in front of its time-smeared windows.

Jolson crossed over and was about to sneak into an unguarded doorway when he saw a man leap out of a bar and grill named The Realms of Gold. The man flapped his arms and shuffled to keep his balance. He was tall, in his forties someplace. His coat was a few years older than his trousers and his cap was of the style that had been popular in the Barnum System when Jolson was in his teens. That hat and the way the man moved, now that he was capable of moving again, added to Jolson's initial impression. This derelict was his old hero, Jose Terranova, once Barafunda's greatest romantic figure. A prolific lover and renowned swashbuckler.



Jolson followed him. It took Terranova several minutes to work down the block and through the doorway of a hotel which seemed to be called, according to its transparent door, simply Hotel. Jolson changed into a rodent again to be less noticeable in the tattered lobby. He hurried up the swaying flower-patterned ramp after Terranova.

The old swashbuckler let himself, eventually, into room three and Jolson dived in before the door closed. While Terranova hinged over onto a military cot Jolson investigated the closet. There were no extra shoes but Terranova had a spare pair of trousers and a pullover tunic. Turning back to himself again Jolson put the old clothes on.

He stepped into the room and said, "Mr. Terranova?"

Terranova's surprise took the form of a brief grunt. "So?"

"I was a great admirer of yours."

"Good." Terranova had a large, sharp cut face with a strong, though fuzzy now, profile. His hair was too long, tangled, and grizzled.

"I'm Ben Jolson, from Barnum."

"Swell," said Terranova. "How come you have my yachting outfit on?"

"I was ambushed outside of town and lost my clothes."

"Funny kind of ambush." Terranova shrugged vaguely. "Bring my clothes back when you're through. They steal all your stuff around here anyway. I never take this casual outfit off anymore."

"I still don't understand exactly why you . . ." began Jolson.

"You said you'd heard of me before?"

"Sure. Jose Terranova. I read about you when I was in school. The time you ran off with the Princess of Condominium A. The affair with the all-girl orchestra. The time you won the twin girl prime ministers in a game of seven-up. Sure."

"I've had," said Terranova, "a little bad luck." Although it was only midday outside, the small musty room had a twilight look to it. "Take a good course in accounting. That's the secret of life. Avoid lawsuits. Don't ever sue anybody. Don't drink to excess and make a formal will. My advice to you."

"How long have you lived in the tenderloin?"

"Few years."

"Do you want to go back outside?"

"No. I've retired from all that. Too much pressure, boffing every which broad. Too demanding. I live like an anchorite now. A drunk anchorite. But all the same." Terranova looked up at Jolson. "Why'd they ambush you?"

"The pro-zombie partisans don't want me to get to the President."

"You know," said Terranova, "that girl, Jennifer Crosby. I knew her family. When she was fifteen she had a crush on me. Well, so did most all the girls on Barafunda. Jenny I knew and she wrote me letters. A nice sensitive girl. I haven't seen her for lord knows."

Jolson sat down in the single chair. "Would she still know you?"

"Jenny? I suppose if I spruced up. But I won't. Not likely."

"Look," said Jolson. "Would you mind if I borrowed your identity. I've got to talk to the girl and the identities I've been using are worn out."

"Borrow?"

"Like this." Jolson gestured at his face and changed himself gradually over to a replica, cleaned up and sober, of Terranova.

Terranova grunted. "That's a good trick." He closed his eyes for a second. "You must be one of those Chameleon Corps guys. Right?"

"Yes."

"I don't know if you can walk right in and see Jenny. Even as me. Most people don't know I'm here. They think I retired to one of my plantations. So that part's no problem. But even Terranova in his prime had to make an appointment and wait around to see a president. Except for Katy Beecher and I had to marry her."

"Then you don't mind my impersonating you?"

"No. It amuses me. If you promise to come back and tell me how you do as me."

"I will," said Jolson.

"What's her name," muttered Terranova.

"Who?"

"Carol Hammersmith. There was an announcement on the news in the bar. A cocktail party at the new zombie plant they just opened at the edge, the good edge, of the city. It's tomorrow night and this Carol Hammersmith is giving it. We were close once. Her husband is one of the Junior Prime Ministers in Jenny's government, a pro-zombie man, and also on the zombie plants' board of directors."

"I go there as you and Mrs. Hammersmith will let me in?"

"Right," said Terranova, sitting up and leaning toward Jolson. "You work on her and she can get you an invitation to the reception Jenny is having this weekend. Once at the reception you won't have trouble finding a chance to talk to Jenny."

That would be cutting it close. Still it might be the best chance he'd get. And nobody was likely to try an assassination of Terranova. "You're welcome in both pro- and anti-zombie circles?"

"Terranova took no sides," he said. "What about money? You ought to check into the Ritz-Capitola Hotel, my favorite old hangout. Get some formal clothes and lots of luggage."

"I don't have any money now," said Jolson. "I think in a couple of hours I can swipe some here and there, by switching identities around. Then pay it back when I get in touch with the Chameleon Corps again."

"Steal from a better neighborhood than this."

"Sure," said Jolson, getting up.

Terranova squinted down at Jolson's bare feet. "Sorry I can't spare any shoes. Say hello to Jenny. Let me know what happens."

Jolson said he would and Terranova dropped back on the bed. He was asleep when Jolson closed the door.

The buffet table was set up, crisp and white. Just in front of the conveyor belt in the reactivating plant's bright new anteroom. So was the bar. Jolson, as Jose Terranova, was hoping he could sprint over and grab a drink in the interval between passing bodies.

The conveyor belt went into a tube high in the pale-green wall. Far across the big crowded anteroom there was another tube from which issued new completely workable zombies.

Carol Hammersmith exhaled warmly in Jolson's ear. "Forty-two zombies an hour," she said. Her left hand held a glass and her right was arched on his stomach. "Would you like to see the packaging department, Jose?"

"After I get a drink."

"Packaging is everything. When the zombies get decked out in coveralls with the right color scheme they can be very pleasing. Our color consultants worked that out." She shook her head and whispered, "I don't see how you could ignore me for seven-and-a-half years, Jose."

"Nor can I. But let's not talk about the past," said Jolson.

Mrs. Hammersmith was a tall taut woman in her mid-thirties. Pretty in a sharp angular way. Her hand flattened on Jolson's chest and she said, "Oh, no. Look over there. It's that damned girl from Barnum who says we bought her late father without proper authority. I'm sure she's crashed with the intention of making a scene. Come along." She caught Jolson's arm and led him in an opposite direction.

Being Terranova was interesting. Almost every woman there noticed him. They seemed, most of them, unable to keep from reaching out for him. Jolson gave them all his Terranova smile and stayed in the wake of Carol Hammersmith.

Down a dark corridor they went and into a silent room. The woman spoke something to the door and it locked them in. "Now then, Jose."

The room was filled with drawing boards and easels. "Your advertising department?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Hammersmith, reaching around behind herself. "We're hoping to get a billboard campaign into full swing soon. There's still, oddly, a lot of people who need winning over."

"How's your husband?"

"Tony? He's fine. We walked right by him just now." She narrowed one eye. "You hardly recognized me until I grabbed you, Jose." She took off her crimson dress and threw it. The dress flapped once and buckled over an easel. "You haven't forgotten everything?"

"No," said Jolson. "About that reception, Carol."

"I'll see that you're invited in plenty of time for tomorrow night, Jose. Little Jenny Crosby has to have Tony and I, even though we hold different points of view. I'll arrange an invitation for you." She moved

closer. "Well?"

"Well," said Jolson, carrying on the impersonation.

In the lobby of the Ritz-Capitola a redheaded girl jumped in front of Jolson as he neared the musical fountain. "Jose Terranova?" she asked.

The mythological figure that capped the fountain centerpiece was just starting a bass clarinet solo and Jolson pulled the girl across the mosaic floor and into a quiet alcove. "Yes, ma'am?"

"I'm Karen Witherspoon of the *Barafunda Sun-Sun*."

"Sun-Sun?"

"The *Barafunda Sun* merged with the *Territorial Sun* three years ago, you know."

"I've been on a retreat."

"I want to know all about it." The girl was lovely and fragile. She leaned against Jolson and said, "I have a mike concealed on me and if you'll agree to let me interview you I can record the entire thing right now."

"Wouldn't. . ." said Jolson.

"Wouldn't your suite be a more relaxed place for an interview? I was about to suggest that myself."

If you were Terranova you didn't have to work at all. "We're in agreement, then."

His suite, paid for with money Jolson had burgled out of four jewelry stores, a liquor store, and a delicatessen was, due to his Terranova reputation, walled with mirrors. The ceiling consisted of foot wide circular mirrors set in red plush. "Sit down," said Jolson after he'd brought the girl in.

"How do you stand on the zombie controversy?" asked the girl, hesitating between a black ottoman and a yellow love seat.

"Neutral," said Jolson. He unseamed his formal jacket and happened to glance at the far wall. He had the illusion that he had three eyes. His hand felt automatically. No, he wasn't getting sloppy. He smiled at the girl. "Terranova is neutral in all things except the field of love." Someone was in the mirror-doored informal wear closet, watching with an eye at a crack. "About you, Karen, I feel quite strongly." He took

a step toward her, then stopped. "Perhaps I'd better change first. I left my robe in the next room. If you'll excuse me."

"Yes. I'm anxious to hear the rest of what you have to say."

"And I to hear what you may have to say in reply."

In the long wide bathroom Jolson undressed and put on the robe he'd left on a wall prong. He stood near the door and listened. There was a faint murmur of talk. Which meant that Karen was a decoy, sent to distract him. The guy in the closet might not be alone either. Jolson couldn't be sure whether they wanted to question him about his sudden, for Terranova, reappearance and his possible influence on the President. Maybe Carol Hammersmith hadn't been as preoccupied as he'd thought.

He looked over at the waterproof television set on the shelf in the shower stall. He nodded and stuffed his evening clothes down the valet hole. Then he took off the robe and yanked down the TV set.

The small window of the room looked down on a Jungle decorated courtyard. Jolson checked and made sure there was no one down there in the moonlit darkness. Then he threw the set through the window, dived into the shower, swung up onto the narrow shelf and changed into a replica of the television set.

In a few seconds Karen called. "Mr. Terranova? Jose? Did you slip and fall?" Then the door was tried and opened. "Lord, Bosco, he dived."

"Dived?" a high-pitched male voice asked. "Into the bath?"

"Out the damn window."

"Three stories?" Bosco was a small dark man with a blaster pistol in each hand.

"Fear makes people do odd things," said the girl.

People were always moved to philosophy by his escapes.

"How in the world are we going to question him now? Mr. Hammersmith said Mr. Merkle's curiosity was aroused. It's possible Terranova has come back to put the screws on the President."

"We don't even know if he's anti-zombie," said Karen.

"Just because he tried to soft sell you."

"Well, let's get down and see if the poor man is still alive."

"I'm doubtful."

Jolson sat quietly on the shelf until the sounds of their departure had faded. Merkle they'd said. That was Jennifer Crosby's Assistant President. So he was pro-zombie, too.

Turning back to his Jolson self he ran into the other room and got into one of the quiet dark casual suits. The reception was tomorrow night and his Terranova disguise had worn out, too. Jolson scooped up all the money he had left and hurried out of the suite.

The capitol building, a two-story white building with turrets and cupolas and seven separate flagpoles always in use, sat behind a high stone wall. Jolson was having lunch in the Capitol View Cafe. With increasing frequency, he noticed, landtrucks and hoppers were heading for a side gate in the wall. Probably delivering props and supplies for the reception tonight. Jolson left the cafe.

Two uniformed men guarded the gate. Jolson watched a delivery man, after identifying himself, begin to unload a landtruck. Bottles of wine in wicker cases. Jolson walked on. In an alley half a block down he got out of his clothes and thought for a second. Then he changed into an unobtrusive-looking bird.

He Hew over to the capitol delivery gate and landed just behind a truck. When no one was in sight he hopped up inside. The truck was Riled with half-size white statues of, apparently, heroic figures from Barafunda's past. Jolson studied them and then turned himself into a bearded military-looking statue that he hoped would fit someplace in Barafunda's history.

The delivery man had little sense of the pageant of history and so he carried Jolson into the capitol building without noticing that he was not one of the original group. No one checked the number of statues and Jolson ended up in a second floor ballroom.

Now all he had to do was wait, then find some clothes and talk to President Jennifer Crosby. He wasn't quite sure who he would pretend to be when he did that.

It was nearly dark outside and the workmen, servants, and visitors had been gone from the room for several minutes. Jolson was on a wood pedestal near a hanging tapestry. He was about ready to change back to himself and use the tapestry for a robe. He still hadn't decided what he'd do after that and so he was hesitating.

A slender auburn-haired girl came into the room. She had a sheet of paper in her hand and a pen, knifewise, between her teeth. She checked around the room, then locked all the doors. Finding a folding chair behind a pedestal she shook it open and sat down. According to his briefing this was Jennifer

Crosby herself.

The girl crossed her legs, took the pen, and began reading half aloud from the paper in her hand. "... proclamation ... as of this date ... no more zombies ... shall cease ... gradual changeover to more ... this is my wish and ... respectfully, etc. ..." She bit her lip and then, finally, let her head nod positively.

"An unwise decision." A door stood open, the doorway framing a slight, wrinkled man. He came in, re-locking the door with his own key.

"It's no use, Nathan. I've talked to a good many people about this. I'm going to come out against the zombie trade. I'll read this proclamation at tonight's reception."

"How will that make your own assistant look?" the man asked. "Silly and foolish."

Nathan Merkle this was then. The Assistant President and the pro-zombie man behind the attempts on Jolson in his various identities.

"One of the workmen . . ." said Merkle.

"What?" said the girl.

". . . has unfortunately turned out to be a crazed fanatic who slipped in through our tight efficient security."

"Nathan?" the girl began to rise.

"He assassinated you in a most savage way before I could break in and stop him." Merkle had produced a heavy, forked crowbar from his cloak.

It was a hell of a way to introduce himself to the President but Jolson had no choice. He turned into himself and jumped from the pedestal. His bare feet skidded on the just polished flooring and he hit into Merkle sideways. He managed to get his hand on the crowbar as he and Merkle fell over.

"This has little dignity," shouted the Assistant President.

Jolson knocked him out with an elbow jammed into his chin. He unfastened the fallen man's cloak and put it on. Stepping up and clear he tossed the crowbar away. "Excuse me," he said to Jennifer Crosby.

The girl president looked at him. "You must be with the Chameleon Corps."

"Yes, ma'am."



"Thank you for saving me," she said.

"It seemed like the thing to do."

She licked her upper lip. "Is this your real appearance now?"

"Yes," said Jolson.

"I didn't know Chameleon Corps men did anything in their own guise."

Jolson said, "I just felt like trying it."

"I'll get you some clothes from one of our wardrobe rooms," the girl said. "Would you like to attend tonight's reception? As yourself?"

"Sure," said Jolson. "This job is over."

## 2. Rake

THE LUNGED STUN-ROD missed and tipped over the barmaid. Beer suds washed across the nearwood flooring and the android barmaid slithered on its back, sputtering.

On top of the long dining table Ben Jolson spun and jumped again. Two of the Monitors circled the table, both lunging. The black attache case locked to his wrist made Jolson slightly lopsided and he didn't quite land as he'd planned. He hunkered and one of the gray-cloaked Monitors sailed over him and clattered into the deep simulated fireplace.

That left only three of Dean Riding's men to dodge. The few patrons of the little tavern near the spaceport had huddled against the small bar. All the thumping had done something to the andy bartender and he kept drawing tankards of green ale and setting them up. Jolson spotted a stairway and ran for it. He had to leap up first, to avoid one stun-rod and then hunch almost into the wall to avoid another.

Blocking a blow with his attache case Jolson backed up the curving staircase. "You guys better quit now or it gives trouble."

"Surrender, Waycross," said a Monitor. "This isn't doing your academic standing any good."

"Down with the Unyoke Movement," shouted the second Monitor, pressing upward toward Jolson.

"You mentioned that before," Jolson said, getting out of the way of another blow. "I'm warning you. Go

away and don't bother me."

"You went too far this time, Waycross," said the first Monitor. "This summons from the Dean's Office is not to be ignored." He almost got Jolson's foot.

Jolson put his fingers on the snap of the attache case and said, "Remember. You wouldn't listen." He started to open it.

A little over a day before, Ben Jolson of the Chameleon Corps had arrived here on the planet Tarragon. He'd been sent on a special mission by the Political Espionage Office on Barnum, the planet that ruled all the planets in the Barnum System.

Step one had been a rendezvous, in his own person, at a coffee and gaming house near sprawling, pseudo-ivied Tarragon University.

The windows of the low ceilinged smoke-blurred coffeehouse were leaded shards of bottle glass. Fragmented blotches of colored afternoon sunlight filled the place. Jolson, loosening the coat seam on his bland civilian suit, moved through the clutter of students toward booth eight.

Tankards clicked all around. The ivory counters of Venusian bingo clacked from a curtain-hidden back room. The word *Unyoke* blocked Jolson's progress. It was on a placard, the first of a line of six that had just been raised by a group of students.

There had been trouble at Tarragon University for several weeks now. The Student Unyoke Movement was demanding concessions from Dean Riding. Jolson had been sleep-briefed on all that but it was not a major concern of his.

Horses were heard approaching and the signs dropped. Jolson worked his way forward. The horsemen passed and the signs came up. The student he was meeting was not involved with Unyoke, or with much of anything academic. He was the hell-raising son of a Barnum ambassador named Waycross. His father called him a rake and a profligate. So did the Political Espionage Office. They had a use for young Waycross. Jolson was going to impersonate him for the next twenty-four hours.

*Unyoke Immediately!* the sign that masked booth eight read. Jolson pushed it aside and found Miguel Waycross holding its stick. "You, Waycross?"

Waycross was about twenty, taller and leaner than Jolson. He wore his dark hair short with the exaggerated widow's peak most of the Tarragon men students seemed to favor. "Well," said the student, apparently recognizing Jolson from the briefing PEO's agent had given him, "I've had a change of heart, sir."

"Oh, so?" Jolson eyed the plump young man who was sitting across from Waycross stirring a jar of paint with a brush tip.

"This is Stu Marks," said Miguel Waycross. "He's been my best and closest friend since a week ago Monday."

"You mean," said Jolson, easing onto the bench next to him, "you've joined the Unyoke Movement."

"Yes," said Waycross, with an eyes down grin. "I know you were expecting nothing but a rakehell, sir. I'm dedicated and motivated now."

"A cause," pointed out Marks, "does that for you." His widow's peak wasn't affixed properly and it snapped up. He slapped it back in place.

Jolson narrowed his eyes, turned again to Waycross. "So now?"

"Stu," said Waycross. "Let me talk to this guy alone."

"Okay." Marks rose. To Jolson he said, "That's the first conservative suit I've seen that I've liked in a long time." His own outfit was orange, fringed with green.

After Marks had been sucked into the crowd Waycross said, "It's like being reborn. Lieutenant Jolson. I'm really up to here in worthwhile activity."

"Don't tell me you're even attending classes?"

"No time for that," said Waycross. "Listen, Lieutenant Jolson, I'm still willing to cooperate with PEO. After all, I owe it to my dad. I have some speeches to write. See, Walter R. Scamper himself, the grand old man of all the Unyoke Movements is arriving at the spaceport tomorrow night. I've been picked to make the welcoming speech." He grinned and then let it fade. "You will be finished with my identity by then?"

"Yes," said Jolson.

"Good. Then I'll hole up at a place I know and write away. Meanwhile my identity will ease your access to the campus. Okay?"

"I'll go there with you and you can fill me in on the small details of the setup at Tarragon University."

Waycross nodded. "You're seeing Professor Niblett two hours from now, aren't you?"

"Yes," said Jolson. "How'd you know that?"

"Oh, what with dad's reputation. Your PEO man told me most everything." He studied Jolson. "You must be over thirty."

"Thirty-two."

"Yet you can change yourself right into an exact replica of me."

It had taken the Chameleon Corps twelve years to condition him for this kind of job. "With no trouble."

"I guess you're proud."

Jolson, when CC didn't call on him for urgent assignments, ran a wholesale pottery business. "Let's go, huh?" he eased out of the booth.

More hoofbeats sounded. This time the mounts drew up outside the coffeehouse.

"Oops," said Waycross. "Dean Riding's Monitors are making a checkup. Come on." He guided Jolson toward the gaming rooms. "Back way."

In a moment Jolson and Waycross and some twenty student agitators and gamesters were running down a yellow brick alley.

The espionage people hadn't briefed Jolson about any of this.

The permanent autumn leaves were programmed to drift down when the campanile struck the hour. Jolson ducked to avoid a big one and turned down a gravel path that led toward the Science Complex. He was now an exact physical duplicate of Miguel Waycross, wearing a borrowed lemon-yellow coat and sky-blue ruffle-ankled pants.

The Political Espionage Office, they ran CC, felt it would be more efficient if Professor Niblett were contacted by someone in the guise of a student. Waycross' father had probably sat in on either a planning or a preplanning conference. Jolson, as an artificial breeze fluttered his ankles, yearned for the pottery business. Once the Chameleon Corps got you, though, you were always on call.

"Ah ha," shouted a sharp nasal voice.

Jolson halted and turned. This stretch of path was passing through a grove of real trees. Over on a rococo

iron workbench a middle-aged man, long and lank, was sneering at him. "Sir?" said Jolson.

The man, whose straight black hair was parted in the middle, fluffed his moustache. "You ignored my summons for a chat, Waycross." From the bench he picked up a pair of spiked gloves. "I must say I liked you better when you were a harmless drunken sot and hellbent rake."

The gloves flew at Jolson and he stepped aside, letting them clatter on the gravel. "Could we make another appointment, sir?"

"An appointment missed allows me other recourse," said the man. He was tugging on spiked gloves of his own. "You know the rules of the Dean's Office. First a summons, then a reprimand, then the field of honor."

Yes, Waycross was looking more and more like an unwise selection. "Oh, really?" Jolson dropped to one knee and picked up the gloves. "Well, okay, sir." This was obviously Dean Riding.

Riding had his gloves on and he went into a crouch. "Let us proceed, Waycross. I'm burning for satisfaction." He skittered across the synthetic grass and landed one footed in front of Jolson.

"Isn't this really an ideological conflict?" said Jolson. The second glove was not going on right. His thumb kept slipping into the middle finger slot.

Dean Riding snarled and feinted with a mailed left. "I refuse to upgrade the Unyoke Movement by calling it ideological." He jabbed a right into Jolson's stomach.

"Oof," said Jolson, bicycling.

"Set up card tables on faculty grounds, will you?" cried the Dean, slashing Jolson's cheek. "Hand out leaflets during lectures." Another cut. "Demand equal time on the educational channel. I'll teach you there's no equality around here, upstart."

"Well," said Jolson, not liking to bleed. He suddenly caused himself to shrink several inches. This threw Dean Riding's next swing off. Then Jolson sidestepped and elongated his right arm to about triple its length. He snapped it out like a whip and let it wind and tighten around the Dean's throat. The mailed fist slammed into Riding's temple at the end of its spin. Riding collapsed. Jolson unwound his arm, retracted it, and started running.

A few students had come up during the fight's final phase. They applauded now, then scattered.

Professor Niblett's round, ringed eyes squinted behind the Judas hole in the lab door. "I'd feel safer with

a password," he said. His voice was throaty, breaking occasionally into a falsetto.

*"Liberte, egalite, fraternite,"* said Jolson. "Is that okay?" PEO hadn't given him any passwords or numbers on this assignment. "I think the Dean may be after me. May I come in?"

The window shut and the blue door slid open. "I shouldn't ask for passwords, should I?" said Nibblett. He was a medium-sized man with curly gray hair and a rounded stomach. "After all, the keynote of the Nibblett Project is doing things right out in the open. So that anti-Barnum forces won't wonder about any hush-hush. Come in. Political Espionage wanted to call my work Project Upgrade or Tarragon Doomsday but I insisted on simply the Nibblett Project. I like to see my name on things. Your name again?"

"Ben Jolson," he said, following the professor across a large, empty classroom. The door slid shut behind them.

"That over there," said the professor, "is an old-fashioned blackboard. I write assignments on it with something they used to call chalk." He moved through the shadowy clusters of chairs to the big blackboard and picked up two erasers. Slamming them against two preselected spots he said, "Watch now."

The blackboard quivered and then rolled away. There was a corridor behind it.

"Step over the eraser trough," said Nibblett, doing that.

Beyond the corridor was a door locked with a ten finger whorl lock. Beyond that a small laboratory.

When they were shut in the professor said, "Now then. I have most of them at my home to be packed. You will pick them up there tomorrow evening at five. Is that all right?"

His ship didn't leave till ten. "Yes."

"You'll come as Waycross."

"About that," said Jolson. "Waycross' status seems to have changed in the past week." He told Nibblett about Unyoke and Dean Riding's attack.

"I never involve myself in politics, on a student level," said the professor. "However, I'm too busy to think about new faces. I'm conditioned to your being Waycross. Please don't cross me up at this stage. Be Waycross, come at five tomorrow. You know my home address?"

"They briefed me, yes."

Behind a small blackboard there was a wall safe. "I like hiding things behind these old blackboards," said

Professor Nibblett. "I've kept a sample of them here." He drew a small transparent container out of the safe. It looked like something potato salad had come in. "It elates me that I'll soon be fondly referred to as the father of upgraded germ warfare."

"And your wife will become the mother of upgraded germ warfare."

"No, I'll take all the credit," said Nibblett, unliding the container. "Watch how they work. Oh, wait. I need a rabbit. Hand me cue. From those cribs there."

Jolson selected a piebald one. "Do you have to kill him? I'll take your word."

"A demonstration's not a demonstration without it," explained the professor. "We kill a rabbit now, but in the long run we save millions of lives."

"Pro-Barnum lives."

"That's the side we happen to be on." Nibblett caught the rabbit by the ears and dropped it on a black-topped table. The open container stayed on a white metal table several feet away. "Watch now. Attention. Forward march."

Little black dots began pouring over the lip of the container. They marched in pairs down the leg of the white table.

"Attack the rabbit," ordered Nibblett, clapping his hands.

The dots trooped across the buff flooring and up the leg of the black-topped table. The rabbit hopped to the edge. Then shot off and into a corner of the room. Calmly the little dots marched down to the table and then broke into two flanks and surrounded the agitated rabbit.

"Charge," cried Nibblett.

The dots surged ahead, swarmed over the spotted animal. The rabbit cried out once, then toppled back. In under thirty seconds it was dead and glowing faintly green.

"Retreat to your container," ordered the smiling professor. When the giant germs had marched home he closed them in and put the container again in the wall safe. "That's how they work."

"Intelligent germs?" said Jolson.

"Smart enough to drill, do the manual of arms if need be, and carry out simple commands. They can't be counteracted in any way at the moment." He paused and his head bobbed. "Warfare takes a step ahead

today. Or rather four-and-a-half weeks ago when my six years of work culminated in success."

Jolson moved so he wouldn't have to look at the dead rabbit. "How do I transport them back to Barnum?"

"They like to go on trips. I'll deliver you six containers of them tomorrow and verbally give you instructions to pass on to PEO." He shrugged and lines jiggled under his eyes. "You can carry them in an attache case."

"Will they obey me?"

"They are conditioned to obey any pro-Barnum authority."

"They can tell who's pro and who's anti?"

"Loyalty wasn't that hard a thing to program them for."

Jolson left in a few moments. He had to remain Waycross in the corridors of the lab complex because a heavysset, wide young professor was looking at him funny and took to following him through two levels.

When Jolson had shaken free of the possible tail he put his hands up to his face and changed to a less controversial one.

Nobody was supposed to know Jolson was staying at the Urban Manor Hotel, which made the visit of Professor Gurney Tishamingo the next day unsettling from the start.

Tishamingo, who was the big, wide guy who'd eyed Jolson yesterday in the Science Complex, showed up at the door a half hour before Jolson was to leave for Nibblett's home.

Jolson was using his own appearance now but it still upset him to have Tishamingo open with, "Ben Jolson?"

"Who are you?" Jolson asked, not moving away from the door.

"I'm with the University. Professor Gurney Tishamingo. Department of Agricultural Psychiatry."

"All our plants are in good mental health." Jolson began to close the door.

"It's about the Nibblett Pro)ect," Tishamingo whispered.



There was a growing lack of security on this mission. "Yes?"

"Inside I'll explain."

Jolson let the big man in and made the mistake of turning his back for an instant. His view from the glass wall of the room was dotted with stars of pain. Gurney Tishamingo had jabbed a needle into his left buttock. "Some explanation," said Jolson, toppling over. He was paralyzed now, going rigid.

"Nothing permanent," said the professor. "You Chameleon Corps boys are tricky. That shot'll keep you as is for several hours. Long enough for us to get the stuff from old Nibblett."

Jolson couldn't respond.

The wide Tishamingo hoisted him up on the bed. "No use tying you. You CC boys can slither out of bonds like snakes." He punched Jolson's shoulder in a comradely fashion. "I notice that puzzled expression frozen on your face. Never trust those Political Espionage boys for current reports on the lay of the political land. What you don't know, Jolson, is that today Ambassador Waycross has bolted and gone over to the anti-Barnum side. The side I'm on. This whole thing with his son was a setup so we, the anti-Barnum boys, could get those smart little germs with a minimum of trouble."

It had long ago seemed like too much trouble to Jolson.

Mounted police were galloping toward the spaceport. It was after eight now, a sharp chill night.

Jolson was still a little stiff in the joints. He'd confirmed the snatch. Professor Nibblett had handed over the germs to the real Waycross, thinking he was Jolson, promptly at five.

If young Waycross was really going to welcome Walter R. Scamper at the spaceport there might be a chance to catch him and get the germs back.

The paralyzing drug hadn't knocked him out for as long as Tishamingo had intended. Jolson's system, after all the years the Chameleon Corps had worked on it, tended to be unpredictable like that.

A makeshift platform stood near the dome-shaped restaurant closest to the gate. Three hundred or so bright clad students were circled around it already. Against the night Jolson saw that the ship that must have brought Walter R. Scamper was unloading its passengers.

Just climbing up on the simulated wood platform was Miguel Waycross, in a formal orange pullover and buff knickers.

Jolson was tired of roundabout action. He ducked into a thick clump of decorative brush.

"We have the right," Waycross' amplified voice was saying, "to put up card tables wherever we choose. Academic life isn't all studies and duels. No."

Jolson shucked his clothes, shook himself once and turned into a gigantic black eagle. He flapped up into the night. He rose high and circled.

"There is nothing as important," continued Way-cross, "as the right to hand out leaflets. Right?"

Jolson swooped and caught up Waycross in his talons. He flew to a more remote gathering of trees and shrubs back of the spaceport and dropped Waycross from a height sufficient to stun him.

He landed next to the groggy student and changed back to himself. He took Waycross' clothes and put them on.

Waycross woke up, shivered, and said, "I thought you Chameleon Corps guys were in favor of free speech."

"I'm against spies and guys who give me unsolicited shots in the ass," said Jolson. "Where are the damn germs?"

"No," said Waycross.

"I'll drop you again. From higher up."

"When you put it that way," said Waycross. "My friend Marks has the stuff. He's waiting near here, at the Cock 'n' Bull Tavern. I was going to take a flight out at ten. But I had to welcome old Walter R. Scamper." He frowned. "You spoiled that pretty well."

"Sure," said Jolson. He knocked Waycross out with a right to the chin and rolled him under a row of yellow rosebushes. He shook his head and changed his appearance. As Waycross again he headed for the Cock 'n' Bull.

He found Stu Marks well enough and got the attache case. The black case even had a handcuff setup and Jolson decided to hook it to his wrist. As he was stepping out of the tavern four of Dean Riding's mounted Monitors reined up in front of the place.

"Not at the rally, eh, Waycross?" cried one, drawing a sword-like stun-rod.

Jolson swore and dived back into the tavern.

So now he was halfway up the stairs. "I'd advise you guys to back off," he told the Monitors. "The only weapon I've got is unfortunately pretty deadly." He hesitated, turned and ran on upstairs. He ducked into a half-open door, hoping they wouldn't make him use the trained germs.

Jolson crossed the half-empty storeroom and shoved up a window. He put the attache case handle in his mouth and jumped out on a slanted roof. Behind him three Monitors dived into the storeroom.

He catwalked a gable and ducked behind a chimney. He got the student outfit off and switched back to the eagle. The handcuff slipped off his wing tip but he had the case in his big beak. He rose up before the first Monitor reached the chimney.

Back at the spaceport the rally had turned into a riot. Jolson retrieved his clothes from behind the brush and becoming himself, quickly clicked the germ case to his wrist.

In his coat pocket was a ticket on the ten o'clock flight to Barnum. He used it.

Because of the trouble the ship took off a half-hour late. In the cocktail lounge after the spaceship had risen, a thin, freckled man next to Jolson at the small bar put down his glass and asked, "What do you think about this student Unyoke Movement?"

Jolson shifted the case of germs to a more comfortable position on his lap. "Hell," he said. "I never think anymore."

### 3. Copstate

CERAMIC OWLS, toppling in the next room, woke him. Ben Jolson elbowed himself carefully up off the low, round bed. The long brunette girl was still half-asleep, and he touched her gently on the shoulder. "Easy," said Jolson.

The girl muttered something in code, sat up awake. "Did I hear owls falling?"

A half-dozen more clay owls—they came six in a box—fell off their shelf in the storeroom. "Somebody's stumbling around in the stock," said Jolson. He found his plyrobe and a blaster pistol.

From the room beyond the bedroom someone sang, "I'm going to move way out on the outskirts of town."

Jennifer put her palm flat on her bare stomach. "Is that a password he's trying?"

"The Political Espionage Office is still using numbers for signs and countersigns." He put his fingertips in the fingerholes in the door and it slid open.

"You have a lot of owls in here," said the man the storeroom lights showed. He was in his mid-thirties, plump, with a shaggy moustache, a flowered suit, and his silver bowtie undone. "They could all be done away with in a flicker of time. An instant." He snapped his fingers and a small square sandwich fell out of his sleeve. "I can't, without consulting retrieval, tell you right off what this particular type of owl, this particular type of very ugly owl, can be wiped out with. We could easily End out and deliver a fatal amount, eliminating the owl problem you have."

"I don't have a problem with them," said Jolson. "This is part of my ceramics warehouse you're in, right next door to my home. I'm in the ceramics business, wholesale."

"Even if you were retail, I wouldn't buy an owl," said the man. He found the dropped sandwich, bit at it. "Lovely, lovely. Deviled ham, teleported from the Solar System." From a flapped pocket in his yellow-and-red suit he took a flask of green wine. "The wine is delightful, too, a green from our own Barnum System. Not up to this planet's product but a good try, a near miss." He finished the sandwich and sipped wine.

Jolson studied him. "You're Dr. Yollando Seacroft."

"Exactly who I am," said Seacroft. The flask slipped from his hand. He dived and saved it from the stone floor. "You're Lieutenant Ben Jolson of the Chameleon Corps."

Jolson's pistol swung up slightly. "Oh, so?"

"Take a nice look," said Seacroft. "You're going to be . . ." he began, stopped to drink the rest of the green wine, located a jug of red in an opposite pocket, "going to be me. This is a red, a synthetic claret made from seawood on Murdstone. Murdstone synthetic claret is much underrated. My purpose, my purpose this evening, as opposed to my daily routine purpose as an expert of weaponry. My purpose. Lieutenant Jolson of the Chameleon Corps, is to enjoy myself. I'm drunk at this very moment."

"I noticed."

"It's a gourmet drunk. Mostly imported wines and spirits," explained Seacroft. "And all these little sandwiches. I have a whole pocket full of them. If you drink and don't eat, it plays havoc with your stomach. As a man of science, I know what I'm talking about."

"How did you know about me?"

"The food in that place your Political Espionage Office stuck me was dreadful, dreadful," said Seacroft. He teetered, righted himself by catching at a shelf in the big storeroom. Another six owls fell and broke.

"I have nothing against androids, but they can't cook. The near-veal rollatini at that detention station is mostly god-awful, and they served frozen dumler beans. Frozen, if you please." He sat down suddenly on a crate of broken owls.

"Who told you about me?"

Seacroft ruffled his moustache with his thumb knuckle. "My moustache is full of hot sauce. From an earlier snack. Excuse me." He rubbed at his face in increasingly slower motion, then toppled back off the crate.

Jolson watched the weapons executive sleeping for a moment. "Jennifer," he called, "get Head Mickens on the phone."

"I'm right here," said a voice from the bedroom.

"He's right here. Just came in the front door," said Jennifer. Wearing a yellow shift, she stepped into the storeroom, followed by the Head of the Political Espionage Office on Barnum.

Head Mickens had prickly black hair, a sharp, sad face with hollow eyes and a high, lined forehead. He was patting his left side. "I have to take something and then we'll talk."

Jennifer found a push broom and started sweeping up fragments of pottery and clay. "A new assignment?" she said to Jolson.

He nodded, looked at the Head. "I thought you said autoanalysis cured you of pill-taking?"

"That was my hypochondria they cured. This is for my hay fever. Do you have any idea what the pollen count is out there in Keystone City tonight?"

"140," said Jolson. "Why is this drunken weapon-maker asleep in my storeroom?"

Head Mickens located a plaid spansule and swallowed it. "Things got out of hand, Ben. Dr. Seacroft voluntarily agreed to aid us, and I had one of our best PEO men escort him to that little complex of detention cottages we have out on the outskirts of Keystone. Our agent and Seacroft unfortunately stopped in at a wine-tasting on the way. As a result, Seacroft was told much too much about the Chameleon Corps assignment we have in mind. On top of that, Seacroft became angry with the robot chef at the cottage. Managed to use one of his weapons on the andy guards, and all their screws melted. He escaped through the commissary dishwashing room. He stopped to talk with several servomechanisms about his intention of calling on you. Which is why I scooted over here."

"Where are you going to send Ben?" asked Jennifer Hark.

Head Mickens pushed his cheeks. "Boy, my sinuses. These sinus headaches are twice as bad as the imaginary headaches I used to have. The assignment, the impersonation, is right here on Barnum this time."

"Where?" Jolson moved across to the brunette and took the broom away from her.

"Well," said Head Mickens. "Well, remember, Ben, you have to do a certain number of assignments for us each year. There's no quitting the Chameleon Corps, even though you're semi-retired now."

"Okay, where?"

"In Lampwick Territory," said the Head, sneezing.

Jennifer said, "That's a terrible place. Full of that military junta's troops and the largest civilian police force in the Barnum System and all those militiamen and women volunteers. Lampwick Territory is a police state."

Head Mickens smiled sadly at the girl. "I wish you'd come back to work for us, Jennifer. You were one of our best agents."

The girl shook her head. "No. I'm not in the same position as Ben. I can quit. And I did, after that business on Esperanza last year. With all the dead people."

"I knew being buried alive would unsettle you," said the Head. "Still, it couldn't be helped. As Ben knows."

Jolson said, "I'm to impersonate Seacroft and go into Lampwick Territory. Why?"

"I always feel better," said Head Mickens as he up-righted a carton and sat on it, "explaining assignments in my office. Nonetheless, since Dr. Seacroft jumped the gun, I'll outline it now." He sneezed twice, shook his head to clear it. "Two days from now at the Sousa-Meller Palace Hotel in the capital city of Lampwick Territory, which is called Sousa-Meller City at the moment, there will be a convention of police and military men."

"Sousa-Meller," said Jolson. "He's the boss of the junta, isn't he?"

"Yes. After that rash of coups last summer he took over. As you know, Lampwick Territory is our best source of certain kinds of vegetable oil, and so the central Barnum government doesn't wish to break completely with the Sousa-Meller regime. Nor do we want to invade unless it's absolutely necessary. We have, therefore, to be cautious. One of the things the Political Espionage Office quietly encourages is anti-Sousa-Meller propaganda. That brings us to your job, Ben. You're to go into Lampwick Territory and bring out the manuscript of a novel. It's been arranged for you to be contacted at the hotel during the

convention. The Seacroft masquerade is a perfect one for getting in and out of the territory and in and out of the hotel."

"A hotel full of soldiers and cops," said Jolson, "doesn't seem like the best setting for passing around a bootleg book."

"In Lampwick no place we pick is going to be ideal," said Head Mickens. "The manuscript will be microcarded, of course."

Jolson's left cheek hollowed for an instant. "PEO must be in contact with this writer Myron Woolmer."

"Yes," said Mickens. "Not with him exactly, with his representatives. Woolmer was a leading Lampwick diplomat in the days before the juntas. He's been in hiding for several years, waiting for a chance to return to power. Meanwhile, he writes political novels. The one smuggled out of Lampwick two years ago. *The Sword and the Fist*, was a best-seller all over the Barnum System of planets. At least in those places where they still have books."

"That novel didn't topple the Lampwick's government," said Jolson.

"Books can't do everything. Propaganda takes time, too," said the Head. "This second novel is supposed to be a thinly disguised attack on Sousa-Meller. It will have considerable propaganda value."

Jolson said, "Woolmer's publishers are right here in Keystone City, aren't they? What happened to the man they must have sent in after the manuscript?"

Head Mickens rubbed his nose. "PEO isn't an errand boy for big business," he said. "Though, as a matter of fact, they did send a representative in and he was never heard from again."

"You ought," said Jennifer, "to risk Ben's life only on important things."

"How long do you expect this to take?" Jolson asked.

"The contact will meet you at the convention," said the Head. "You'll be sleep-briefed on the signs and countersigns. He will, when things look safe, pass you a microcopy of the book. Dr. Seacroft is scheduled to spend two days at the convention, demonstrating the latest riot-control weapons from his company, Seacroft Control. You get the book, pop it in a safe pocket, sell a few weapons and come home."

"How'd you get Seacroft to cooperate?"

"We offered him a case of vintage wine. It's enroute now, being teleported from Earth. Something called New York Burgundy."

"Ben, you shouldn't go in there with all those cops and soldiers," said Jennifer. "Head Mickens, here's Ben with the ability to change shape, to impersonate anyone. And you're using him as nothing more than a literary agent."

"Easy, Jennifer," said Jolson. Once you had been processed by the Chameleon Corps, you could not quit. Though CC had allowed Jolson to half-retire and run his ceramics business, he was still on call to the Political Espionage Office. "Okay, I'll see you tomorrow, Head."

"Not until after ten," he said. When Head Mickens gathered up Seacroft, the doctor awoke and offered them all red wine and sandwiches.

The blind man dropped all his busts of Sousa-Meller when the first lady patrolman hit him with her stun-rod. The busts were fist-size, made of a low-grade plaster, and they smashed when they hit the tile sidewalk in front of the Sousa-Meller Palace Hotel. Another green-uniformed lady patrolman, with arms like balloons, frisked the stunned peddler. "No seller's permit," she said. "As we suspected."

The third of the four lady police surrounding the blind man said, "And look at this." She held up an intact Sousa-Meller bust and pointed to its lack of a tax stamp.

The fourth lady stunned the blind man again, telling him, "Keep still."

"Ladies, dear ladies," said Jolson. He was wearing a candy-striped green suit, a butterfly bowtie and carrying a large sample case of weapons. He looked now exactly like Dr. Yollando Seacroft, reeled slightly just as Sea-croft usually did. He rested his suitcase, started to pick the blind peddler up. "So inefficient. The Seacroft stun-rod, with self-extender, is much lighter. Much more efficient. I suggest you see my booth inside." He had the blind man up on his feet.

"Screw off," whispered the peddler. "You're messing up the tableau."

"We're staging a mock arrest," explained the lady police officer with the balloon arms. "For the benefit of the news media. Let me say, by the way, that you're much handsomer than your mug shots. Why don't you drop that bum and we'll do retakes."

"Forgive me, forgive me, you lovely ladies of the law," said Jolson. He turned the peddler loose, retrieved his sample case and pushed through the crowd around the hotel's revolving door.

The lobby glittered as the sunlight, coming through the stained-glass windows, caught the brass buttons and gold braid and medals of the conventioning policemen and soldiers. Jolson had a difficult time picking up a bellhop.



"Dr. Seacroft, isn't it?" asked a gray-haired man in a gray civilian suit. "I'll take your suitcase. I'm Eames, the bell captain."

"No uniform?"

"It gets too confusing. You have no personal luggage?"

"My baskets and hampers of gourmet items will be delivered within the hour," Jolson told him. "I never bother with clothes and toilet articles. If you'd take the sample case right to the display room on the mezzanine."

"Why don't you come along," said the bent Eames, taking hold of the sample case. "They've given you one of the nicer booths in the display hall. Ooof, that's heavy."

"I'll take it then."

"No, no," said Eames, more bent. "Can't let the andies take over. Bellhops are no good if they can't tote." He moved away, toward a curving ramp with a gilt ornamental railing.

Jolson frowned at the little gold figures holding up the lamp balls which decorated the railing. "I never saw wood sprites with moustaches and beards before."

"They're supposed to be representations of our President-General, Umberto Sousa-Meller. All the art work in Lampwick Territory didn't make the transition to Sousa-Meller gracefully."

"The stained-glass windows came out not bad," said Jolson as they climbed.

Eames glanced up at the dozen colored-glass portraits of Sousa-Meller. "They used to be religious figures. Most of them already had beards." His thin voice added, "25-22-11-13-24-7-11."

Jolson, still watching the Sousa-Meller portraits, replied, "21-8-18-11-8-8."

Eames groaned under the weight of the sample case. He said, "Be in your booth in a half-hour and I'll slip the microfile cards to you. It's a giant of a book and there are two cards. Microprinting is still primitive here. Your booth is third from the left as you enter."

At the doorway to the domed display room, Jolson took back his suitcase and said, "Fine. Take it easy." He handed Eames his chargecard, and the bent man slotted himself a tip with his pocket slotter.

The domed ceiling of the vast room was decorated with glazed tiles of graded shades of green and blue. Real palm trees were planted at frequent intervals in the earth-colored tile floor. At the booth nearest his, a high-breasted black girl was demonstrating an aerosol nerve gas on a caged mouse. Three Lieutenant

Colonels of the Lampwick Army and four Sergeants of Detectives in the Municipal Police were watching. After each spraying, the mouse would appear to die, but then would rise up and skitter around the cage, holding its forelegs up in a cheese-asking gesture.

"My," said the black girl. "It's supposed to kill him dead, graveyard dead, with one puff."

Two of the three Lieutenant Colonels shook their heads in sympathy. The other said, "Too many kinks, too many kinks, miss." He noticed Jolson. "Ah, at last, Dr. Seacroft."

Jolson bowed, teetered, smiled, and gestured up at the sign over his booth: SEACROFT—A WEAPON FOR EVERY NEED. "Open for business in one moment, dear friends. Dear friends and potential customers." He swung his case into the booth, jumped over the counter after it. He opened the case and took out a bottle of white wine. "Domestic blanc from Esperanza, made out of kelp but delicious. Especially good with fish, game birds, and protein loaf. Wonderful with soy cakes. Candlelight and soy cakes, Esperanza blanc for two." He uncorked the bottle with a corkscrew attached to his watch chain. Drank from the bottle.

"His only weakness," said one of the policemen.

"Now then, gentlemen, and you as well, miss," said Jolson. He drew a bright-yellow nightstick from his sample case, touched its handle. The nightstick flew across the big room, dodging palm tree boles and booths. It whacked a Technical Sergeant across the skull and flew smoothly back to Jolson's hand. "That was at one, low gear. In high, he'd be knocked to the ground and stay there for thirty minutes or more."

"We need stronger stuff out my way," said another of the policemen. "We're from Ghetto 25A. You know that part of the country?"

Jolson told him, "There's a wonderful curry house there. Absolutely delicious food, absolutely delicious. Right near your alien relocation camp. Yes, I recall 25A fondly from many previous conventions." He sipped at his wine.

"We don't," said the 25A policeman, "like to kill them out there. We like to stun them good."

"Exactly," said Jolson, eating a tuna sandwich. "Seacroft has—and I'm selecting at random from a wide array—*this*, for instance." He held up a small capsule with his free hand. "Watch now." He flicked the capsule into the air. It rose, whirring, then dived at one of the Lieutenant Colonels. Attaching itself to his neck, it made a slight coughing sound. The soldier collapsed to the tiles. "He'll be asleep for half-an-hour." The capsule detached itself and flew back to Jolson's thumb and forefinger. "For riots after dark it comes equipped with night lights."

"You shouldn't," said the 25A sergeant, "have demonstrated on Colonel LeFanu. He's in J2, the intelligence wing."

"Gentlemen, miss," said Jolson, "a demonstration against a mouse, or even a rat, is not much. Our problem, your problem, is not mice, or even rats, but rather unruly people. Let's be honest, honest and upright. A Seacroft demonstration of product deals, almost always, with realities."

"They mean," said the black girl, "you should have used it on a waiter or a bellhop. Not LeFanu."

Jolson started on a kelp sandwich, brushing crumbs from his moustache. "Anybody can stun a waiter. Seacroft can stun Lieutenant Colonels."

"I was intending to put my lunch on his chargecard," said another soldier. "I'm Lieutenant Colonel Kownoofle, specializing in counter-insurgency. I admire your ingenuity, Dr. Seacroft, but I wish you hadn't incapacitated my lunch partner."

Handing him a near-salami sandwich, Jolson said, "You must try to understand the civilian mind, Colonel—Lieutenant Colonel."

In the doorway now appeared a lean, bald man. "Filth and scum!" he shouted.

"Isn't that that radical guy from Keystone City?" one of the policemen said.

"Dr. What's-his-name, the protester," said the 25A sergeant.

"That's Dr. Sedric Tenbrookes," said the black girl. "Author of *The Joy of Electronic Brain Implantation*. Best-selling self-help book last year."

The 25A sergeant said, "That's right, Tenbrookes, protester and troublemaker. They shouldn't have let him sneak in."

"Brutes and beasts!" shouted Tenbrookes. "What is it you have built here? A sty, an abattoir, an enclave of bums. This is nothing but a copstate." He sailed into the nearest display booth, followed by a dozen younger men who seemed to be with him. They disrupted the display. Threw tear-gas dispensers in the air, scattered stun-grenades, trampled on pocket lie detectors and self-snapping manacles. Clouds of gas and deterrent powder rose, spread. From all around the vast domed room, police and military men began to converge on the Tenbrookes group.

Behind the growing disturbance, framed in the doorway, Jolson spotted Eames. The bent bell captain shrugged, mouthed the word *later* and withdrew. Turning to the black girl, Jolson said, "Care to duck down in the comparative safety of my booth until this is over?"

"Might as well." She brought her caged mouse with her.

Lampwick Territory was in the midst of a waltz craze, and most of the policemen and military men in the Sousa-Meller Palace Hotel's glass rooftop ballroom were waltzing. The night was a smoky gray color because of some riots in Ghettos 12, and 13. Jolson was dancing with a red-haired girl who was the sales representative for a portable indoctrination-unit company. Jolson was drinking red wine, waltzing slowly, and eating a processed-cheese canape. "That's fascinating, entirely fascinating. Miss Peterman."

"Actually there are all sorts of places you can attach the questioning unit," she said in her small, polite voice. "Considerable Beld testing has convinced us the testicles are best. And we always recommend them in our brochures and instruction manual."

"Where did you say your booth was? I believe I must have missed your display. Miss Peterman."

She smiled. "We never display our units in public. Or give demonstrations. We're strictly mail order."

"Fascinating, nonetheless." Jolson danced the thin girl toward the arched doorway, trying to locate old Eames. The bell captain had implied he'd make the delivery of the microcards here at the ball.

Miss Peterman said, "We make bigger units as well. We have a nice mobile inquisition-unit. Easy to park and no trouble with spare parts. All solid-state."

A tray of ale schooners went by, and Jolson reached for one. "The ale, the humble Lampwick ale, though often maligned in many of the more civilized areas of our planet, is actually quite good, my dear Miss Peterman. It has, it has a tangy, nut-like flavor and it refreshes without filling."

"Dear me," said the bent man carrying the ale. It was Eames.

"Doubling as a waiter?" Jolson asked. He and the girl stopped waltzing and faced the downcast Eames.

"Let me tell you an interesting thing about this ale, sir," said Eames. "I'm afraid this anecdote is too ribald for young ladies, miss. Though I'd hate Dr. Seacroft to miss it."

"Excuse me a moment, Miss Peterman. As you know, food and drink lore fascinates me."

"A fine quality in a man," said the thin girl.

Jolson moved toward a palm tree with the anxious Eames. "Yes?"

"Quick. 25-22-11-13-24-7-11. Do you have an answer?"

"21-8-18-11-8-8," answered Jolson. "I told you this morning."

"That's what I was afraid of," said Eames. "I just handed the manuscript over to the real Dr. Seacroft."

"Seacroft?"

"He was down in the Earth-style restaurant on the second floor, dining with Lieutenant Colonel Kownoofle and Lieutenant Colonel LeFanu. When he went over to look at the pastry cart, I slipped by and put it in his pocket. He himself put a cream-filled chocolate cupcake in the same pocket Just afterward."

"Great," said Jolson. "Is he down there still?"

"No. He and the two soldiers and that girl whose nerve gas doesn't work all headed off to visit the chateau of the Possibilitarian Brotherhood."

"A monastery?"

Eames said, "That, and a winery. They bottle the Possibilitarian Brothers Wines. Seacroft is a gourmet drunk, you know."

"And loose from the detention cottages again," said Jolson. "Okay, where is the chateau?"

"About a mile from here. Just go north on Sousa-Meller Promenade and then left and uphill at Tower Hill Road," said the bent bell captain. "Be cautious, as there's more violence than usual tonight. According to the eleven o'clock news, the riot count is up."

"Give my apologies to Miss Peterman," said Jolson. He moved quickly and carefully through the dancing officers and out the rear exit.

The lady patrolman hit him first. Two blocks from the convention hotel, on a crowded stretch of mosaic sidewalk.

"Hey," said Jolson, rubbing the side of his head. He was still looking like Seacroft.

"Don't get excited," said the chubby blonde lady. "Just a routine clout. Let's see your identification papers."

While Jolson was getting out his fake ID packet, a militiaman came up and hit him up beside his ear.

"You're still using that outmoded nightstick?" Jolson asked when his head cleared. "I'm in weaponry myself and we have a new nylon billy that's much more efficient."

"He giving you trouble, Idabelle?" The moonlight turned the militiaman's uniform purple.

"Why, this is Dr. Yollando Seacroft," said Isabelle, studying the chargecards and birth certificates. "We have your photo up in our meeting room. I'm sure sorry I bopped you so hard. I really should have recognized you."

"Coming up from behind as you did, you can be forgiven."

"We have a little weaponry fandom unit going." She handed back the false papers. "You're one of our idols. Along with Bascom Lamar Taffler, the inventor of Nerve Gas No. 414."

"I'm flattered, flattered beyond words, my dear Idabelle. Now I must be off on an important errand."

Three blocks further along, a retired parachute corpsman hit Jolson with a riding crop, and then two Street Marshals whacked him with clubs and asked for his papers.

"Glad to oblige, gentlemen."

"None of your civilian insolence," said the old parachutist.

"How many jumps did you make?" Jolson asked him, while the Street Marshals studied his ID'S.

"That information is still classified."

"You say you're Dr. Yollando Seacroft?" asked one Marshal.

"My papers do, gentlemen, and I must agree."

"We just now returned from escorting Dr. Seacroft to the Possibilitarian chateau."

"I knew I'd seen you two fellows before." Jolson smiled at them. "I hate to admit it, but I'm lost again. Could you re-escort me?"

"Suspicious," said the second Marshal.

"While we're talking," said Jolson, "let's refresh ourselves." He slowly drew a bottle of Lampwick port from a coat pocket.

"Suspicious," said the other Marshal.

"Well," said Jolson. He pivoted, jumped behind the parachute man and pushed. As the old man galloped unwillingly ahead into the two officers, Jolson swiped his riding crop. He skirted the tangle of off-balance men, pausing to swing out with both the wine bottle and the weighted crop. He ran as the three collapsed on the pavement. Jolson found the nearest alley a quarter of a block away and dived into it. He ran two blocks by way of the alley and then slowed and came out on a quieter, less frequented street.

Across the way Jolson noticed that the door of a ten-story apartment building was standing open. He crossed over, entered and began searching for a place to get some new clothes.

"Yollando," said a voice above him. "Dad said you were in town."

Up on the next landing, grinning down on the gilt-windowed lobby, stood a small, high-foreheaded man. Pale, with straight blond hair. He was wearing a pullover gym suit. "Yes, I am," Jolson said.

"It's me," said the young man. "We met at the last convention."

"Of course."

"That's okay," the young man said. "I know nobody ever remembers me. It's Dad who's the memorable one. Why wouldn't he be, with his face up every place."

"You're Sousa-Meller's son?"

"Sure. Honey Sousa-Meller," said the blond man, smiling. "I'm the Poet Laureate of Lampwick Territory. Come on up and have a drink, Yollando, and I'll read you a batch of my latest stuff."

"Splendid," said Jolson, finding the circular stairs that led up to the President-General's son. "You have an apartment here?"

"This apartment building is my home. The whole building. I need privacy when I write. Being Poet Laureate, I have to do about one epic poem a week, and I don't have to tell you that takes concentration. You can't have people waltzing in the next room or having two dozen of their friends in for a wake upstairs."

"Don't your servants make noise?"

"No servants. The whole building is automatic," said Honey Sousa-Meller. "I was coming down now to see why the front door is on the fritz. I was trying to work in my studio. I have six studios, actually. It all depends on my mood and subject matter. I was on the second floor composing an epic poem about proposed cuts in municipal bus service, and I heard the door buzz itself open."

"I imagine," said Jolson, "being Poet Laureate and related to the President-General, you can move about pretty easily. Myself, myself I've been having a series of rather amusing encounters built around the showing of my identification papers."

"I noticed the welt rising over your left ear. As a matter of fact, nobody remembers me. So I always carry a set of ID papers in case of an emergency. I even have a set with me now." He pointed to his right hip.

Jolson hit him with the weighted riding crop, tied him up with the gym suit and put him in the closet of the nearest poetry studio. He found a suit of clothes, dark and conservative, and changed into them. He concentrated, leaning against a dictadesk. His face blurred, changed. He left the apartment building as Honey Sousa-Meller. He was only hit once more the rest of the way to the monastery.

The man in the sand-colored robe lit a cigar and rested an elbow against the incense burner. The bowl of incense tipped and burning grains fell out, starting the sleeve of his robe to smoldering. "Oops," said the man, who had introduced himself as Brother Sheldon.

The salesroom had thermal carpets on the floors and walls, so Jolson rolled the Possibilitarian Brother against the nearest wall until the sleeve stopped smoking. "Where did you say my friends were. Brother Sheldon?"

The tall, broad man stooped to pick up the spilled incense. "Down in Wine Cellar Six with Brother William. He's showing them the new corking android we have." He shook his head. "All these wine fumes around here make me tipsy, Mr. Sousa-Meller. I'm woozy half the time. I'm sorry."

Jolson caught the brother's singed elbow and helped him get upright. "All in a good cause, as Dad often says about your enterprises. Brother Sheldon."

"He does? That's pleasant to hear," said the robed man. "We deal in the possible here. Try our very best and no more. Where's my cigar?"

"In the incense tray."

"So it is," said Brother Sheldon. "I'm relatively new here, Mr. Sousa-Meller. I used to work at our infirmary in Ghetto 25A, specializing in blows to the head. That's a nasty welt, by the way, you have. Hold my cigar and I'll look after it."

"No need. Brother Sheldon," said Jolson. "I heal quickly. If you'll show me to the proper cellar."

"I shouldn't be smoking this cigar—with my stomach. One of those kelp cigars from Barafunda." He sat



on some gift-wrapped cases of wine. "Claret is the worst. I walk by those barrels of claret, and it's like a nightstick over the ear. We have a brewery near here and I tried to get assigned there. You have to accept the possible, though, unpleasant as it usually is. Why don't you go on down the stairway beyond the liturgical curtain there. You can't miss Cellar Six. They're all numbered."

In the stone corridors below the salesroom of the chateau, Jolson stopped. From around the first turning, voices sounded.

"The bouquet is fascinating, truly fascinating, my dear Brother William," said the voice of the real Dr. Seacroft.

"I should caution you, Dr. Seacroft," said a soft nasal voice, "we think of our Possibilitarian Brothers rose as a fitting companion, when properly chilled, for certain types of shell fish. I wouldn't advise drinking it with a chocolate cupcake."

"Only wine snobs," said Seacroft with his mouth full, "need to be so rigid, Brother William."

Jolson noticed three tarnished metal hooks in the dark stone wall. On one of them was hanging a wine-spotted Possibilitarian robe. Jolson eased across the corridor and got into the robe.

Tottering into Cellar Six, he said, "Forgive me, I'm still a bit woozy." He was now a replica of Brother Sheldon.

"Join us," invited Dr. Seacroft. He had chocolate crumbs on his moustache and a bottle of pink wine in his right hand.

Standing around a large ice bucket were the two Lieutenant Colonels, the black girl, and a Possibilitarian Brother. "I'm afraid I must refuse," said Jolson. "Though many things are possible, sampling is not at the moment one of them." He smiled at the nerve-gas girl, tripped and knocked over the ice bucket. He tried to catch his balance by grabbing Dr. Seacroft. The weaponry man toppled back into a rack of burgundy bottles, and Jolson elongated his fingers and shot them into Seacroft's coat pocket while his body masked the action from the others.

"Possibly," suggested Brother William, "you had best return upstairs, Brother Sheldon."

"Yes," said Jolson, stepping up clear of the fallen Dr. Seacroft. Jolson now had the two microcards of manuscript beneath his robe. He bowed, weaving slightly, and left the wine cellar.

The next day he was back in Keystone City. Himself again.

## 4. Masterpiece

THE BLACK MAN pointed at the enormous ear and asked, "Do you think you can do something like that?"

"If I have to," said Ben Jolson.

The black Booker McCrystal had converted one of his tin desk chairs into a temporary easel. He gestured at the large color print, this time pointing with one sharp elbow. "Here, you understand, we see only one section of a larger, terribly larger, painting," he said. "The original mural is, of course, over in Zombada Territory and is frighteningly large and covers endless wall space in a home for retired commandos. It's entitled *Poetry Crushed Under the Boot of Radical Liberalism.*"

"That's poetry's ear there?"

The Political Espionage Office agent said, "I assume so." He flicked through the half-dozen other color prints behind the one of the painted ear. "I don't seem to have any other ears. Yes, this looks like a poetic ear, now I study it. Rather delicate and receptive. Because of the terribly enormous scale Despojo used for this mural you can't actually see the boot of Radical Liberalism in the same segment with the ear." He stood back from the mural fragment. "Actually I imagine the ear should be tilted over this way if it's being stepped on. Well, Lieutenant Jolson, you'll be sleep-briefed on the aesthetics, as well as the politics, of your assignment."

Jolson, a tall, lanky man in his early thirties, was slouched in an aluminum butterfly chair. "Is Despojo the man PEO wants impersonated?"

McCrystal was tilting the ear to different angles. "This is all rather like some horribly immense jigsaw puzzle." He turned and grinned a straight thin grin at Jolson. "Yes, we have Simeon Despojo in a detention station here in Ordem Territory. We've agreed to exchange him with the government of Zombada Territory. When I say we, Lieutenant, I mean the government of Ordem. Since I work for the government of Barnum I'm here on Tarragon purely in an advisory capacity." He grinned again. "I presume the Chameleon Corps is dreadfully exciting and stimulating."

"Then DespoJo is one of the six men who are supposed to be exchanged for the kidnapped Ordem Secretary of Propaganda?"

"Have you heard about that kidnapping way back on our home planet of Barnum? I sometimes feel this planet of Tarragon is frighteningly remote." The black PEO agent took a color blowup of a fist from the bunch propped on the chair. "Despojo does quite frighteningly nice work for a weekend painter."

"What's he do the rest of the time?"

"He's a terrorist," explained the Political Espionage man. "That's the reason he was captured and detained

in the first place. Despojo is horrendously active in a Zombada group calling itself the Border Killers Phalanx. His specialty is strangling. You'll be sleep-briefed on all that."

"When was Despojo caught?"

"The Ordem Border Army brought him in three months ago."

Jolson asked, "Once I'm Despojo and back in Zombada, what does the Political Espionage Office want done?"

Carrying the first painting up under his arm, the black espionage man walked back to his copper desk and sat on its edge. He placed the mural fragment on top of the desk. "This is a frighteningly good photo to get from a concealed camera."

"The assignment?"

McCrystal smiled. "I can never quite get used to the idea, which I find monstrously stimulating, that you Chameleon Corps agents can actually change your appearance at will. Imagine a lean, lithe, and alarmingly handsome fellow like yourself turning into this big shaggy bear of a muralist Despojo."

"When I do," said Jolson, "what does PEO want done over in Zombada?"

"Yes, we must get down to business, mustn't we?" McCrystal's grin left his face. "Despojo is in the midst of doing another ominously gigantic mural in Zombada. His capture halted that. The title is ... where's that memo? . . . Yes, *The Nymph of State-Oriented Reasoning Leading the Free Citizen's Mind Out of the Morass of Radical Tendencies.*"

"Do you have pictures of that one?"

"No, that's too difficult. But doesn't it sound alarmingly interesting?" said McCrystal. "I imagine you'd like to have an advance peek, since you'll be finishing it up. Well, PEO can sleep-brief you on the technique and after that you'll have to extemporize."

"Where is the work in progress?"

"Ah, now we move closer to the nub of the assignment and the reason we haven't been able to get a look at this particular mural," grinned the PEO agent. "Despojo is doing his mural in Zombada's State Psych Center in the capital city. We're very anxious to have someone get inside that place."

"Why?"

"Because their Psych Center also quarters Zombada's Unconventional Weaponry Wing."

"And they're working on something Ordem Territory wants to find out about."

"Not only Ordem, but us, Barnum," explained the black man. "You see, while our planet Barnum supervises, unobtrusively, the activities of all the planets in the Barnum System, we don't always initiate all the advances made. The Political Espionage Office has learned that a Dr. Reisberson of the Unconventional Weaponry staff is working on something monstrously important."

"What?"

"We don't know exactly," said McCrystal. "Which is why we're jumping at this frighteningly fortunate opportunity to plant somebody over there."

"That's it then?"

"Yes. Impersonate Simeon Despojo. Work on his unfinished masterpiece in the Psych Center and find out Dr. Reisberson's secret."

"Do you have any more details?"

McCrystal was feeling things atop his desk. "I presume sleep-briefing will give you everything else, all the minutiae. Oh, I do have a photo of Mrs. Despojo you might want to see. Here it is."

"His mother?"

"No, his wife." McCrystal held up a tri-op photo portrait of a tall, willowy, blonde girl of twenty-five. "I suppose you'll have to perform certain domestic functions, such as sleeping with the girl. Quite astoundingly pretty, I'd say. Monstrously devoted to Despojo, too, so far as we can determine."

Jolson reached out and took the photo. "Wives are harder to fool, with an impersonation."

"That's why I told the Chameleon Corps to send one of its horribly best men." He smiled a thin straight smile at Jolson. "I'm sure you'll succeed."

"I'll do my horrible best," replied Jolson.

Jolson scratched his crotch and then his beard. He wrinkled his broad, flat nose and frowned at the pale-green interior of the air bus. He was a burly man now, round shouldered and hairy. "Mother of goats," he said, rubbing his big knobby hands together. "I'm impatient to be home and back at work."

Across the aisle a small, thin young man with long, straight hair sighed and smiled. The air bus had been in flight less than an hour and wouldn't land in the Zombada capital for another two. "If we're lucky the Territorial Security Office won't take more than half-a-day to debrief us."

"Mother of pigs," said Jolson. "I'm anxious to see Nana, too." He had the ability to change shape at will, to impersonate anyone. He was now a replica of the guerrilla muralist. The young man across the way would be Aldo D'Arcy, Public Relations Director for the Border Killers Phallanx and one of the five other prisoners being exchanged along with Despojo. Nana was Despojo's blonde, willowy wife.

The slim D'Arcy hopped over and took the seat next to Jolson. "You know what your trouble is, Simeon?"

"Mother of waterfowls," said Jolson. "My only trouble is I'm three long months behind on my masterpiece at the Psych Center."

"Your trouble is you're too sentimental," said D'Arcy. "It shows in your work as well as in your life style. For instance, your recent mural *Aspirations of Youth Impaled on the Barricades of Dogmatic Liberalism* is really much too sweet. Especially for an artwork gracing the Juvenile Interrogation Headquarters."

"Mother of goats," said Jolson and shrugged.

"You're also one of the most sentimental stranglers and muggers I've ever worked with."

"Mother of oxen, Aldo. Being an artist and a killer isn't the easiest thing."

D'Arcy continued, "You're especially too sentimental where Nana is concerned. Why do you take her back after what she's done?"

Jolson scratched his beard once again. "In me you have a big talent coupled with a big heart." The Political Espionage Office hadn't mentioned anything that Nana had done.

"Since I know how sentimental you are about her, I haven't killed Nana yet."

Jolson scowled and took hold of one of D'Arcy's thin arms. "Mother of bees, you'd kill my Nana."

"I haven't yet," replied D'Arcy. "Though, in my opinion, she's a threat to the Border Killers Phallanx. Even you, with your sentimental artist's eye must see that, Simeon."

"How a threat?"

D'Arcy held up a small hand. "It's not that she's sleeping with Esalensky, since he's trustworthy. It's not even that she's sleeping with MacQuarrie, because he's believed to be harmless. Agreed?"

Esalensky was the Zombada Territory's Assistant Minister of Finance. Jolson didn't know who MacQuarrie was. PEO's briefing hadn't mentioned that Despojo's wife was having affairs with them. "Perhaps," said Jolson.

"I might even," resumed D'Arcy, "allow her affairs with Cassiday, Tatman, and de Lanza. Since they're all in the service and hence dependable. Agreed?"

Jolson grunted.

"But I think she's going too far in sleeping with Walden Thurman."

"Walden Thurman, too?"

"Forgive me, Simeon. I thought you knew."

"I knew about Esalensky, MacQuarrie, Cassiday, and de Lanza," replied Jolson. "I suspected Tatman. Walden Thurman, though, the man who is second in command of the State Assassination Office. . . . That's a real surprise, Aldo. Mother of goats."

D'Arcy said, "You know very well that Thurman would like to see the Border Killers reorganized, Simeon."

"Yes, yes," said Jolson, who had never heard that before.

"He'd like to be rid of both of us," said the small commando. "Our return by way of this exchange must gall him. In his position, all Thurman has to do is obtain an Assassination Certificate from his chief and then he can arrange the death of anyone he pleases. As yet, I don't think he'd dare try to use one on us." D'Arcy leaned back, letting his little blue eyes click shut. "I didn't get a chance to tell you this before I was captured, Simeon. The stew was poisoned. Definitely."

Jolson said, "The stew was poisoned?"

Eyes still closed, D'Arcy nodded. "A rare off-planet poison that would have left little trace. Your death would have looked like just another case of enervating black fungus and no one would have been the wiser."

"Enervating black fungus," repeated Jolson.

"There's no use trying to prove it." D'Arcy looked now at him. "She'd only claim it was airborne contamination."

"Yes, she probably would."

"See, Simeon, you still feel sentimental toward Nana. One look at your big, mushy, artisan's face tells me that."

"Love is strange."

D'Arcy continued, "Now about the pudding."

"The pudding?"

"Yes, the pudding wasn't poisoned," said D'Arcy.

"You were wise to bring it in for testing. It did smell as funny as the stew, but it wasn't poisoned."

"Ah," replied Jolson.

"But the meat pie was." The small commando stood. "I'll go back to my seat and nap. May I give you a bit of advice, Simeon?"

"Mother of wildlife, do."

"Don't let Nana pack your lunches anymore. Eat out." He smiled. "We'll have a meeting tomorrow or the next day and plan new terror. In the meantime, reflect on what I have told you."

"I will," Jolson assured him.

The long, naked blonde said, "Well, that wasn't as bad as usual."

"Mother of owls." Jolson rolled over and sat up in the round bed. "You've been married to Despojo for five years and still you doubt his capabilities?"

"Six years," corrected Nana.

"Whatever." Jolson jumped from the bed and began dressing.

The lovely Nana brought her bare knees up and hugged them. "You're a great muralist, Simeon. Be satisfied with that."

"I must cut our reunion short, Nana. After the debriefing last night I was told I must drop all other activities and finish my mural at the Psych Center as soon as possible."

"I know," said DespoJo's wife. "Be sure and take along the lunch I packed for you."

"I don't need it, Nana."

"But, Sim, it's all your favorite dishes. Stew, meat pie, and pudding."

"Maybe I could take a little pudding."

The lovely, naked, blonde Nana leaped suddenly off the bed, ran, and grabbed Jolson. "Oh, Sim. Why do you put up with me? You great bear-like craftsman, you know I am unfaithful to you."

Jolson tossed her long, fair hair. "Big love overlooks small mistakes."

Nana hugged him tighter. "And you can forgive Esalensky, MacQuarrie, Cassiday, Tatman, Lickty, and de Lanza?"

"Lickty? How'd he get on the list?"

"I forgot to tell you," said Nana. "He dropped by our house twice while you were imprisoned." She reached up and tugged at his beard. "I wept often when I thought of you there in prison in Ordem, you great caged lion."

"Lickty?"

"Yes, Lickty."

"Why did the head of the State Critics Circle want to talk to me?" asked Jolson. He made a growling noise. "Is there some criticism of my new mural? Mother of stallions, Lickty himself approved the rough sketches and the color comps of *The Nymph of State-Oriented Reasoning Leading the Free Citizen's Mind Out of the Morass of Radical Tendencies.*"

Nana tugged randomly at his bristly beard. "That's not the title anymore, Sim. Lickty says it is now called *The Goddess of State Discipline Pulling the Mind of Free Man Out of the Swamp of Pseudo-Liberalistic Thought.*"

Jolson moved out of her embrace and slammed a big fist into his big palm. "Mother of grouts, who dares to tamper with the title of DespoJo's newest masterpiece?"



"Lickty."

Jolson snorted. "I'm going to the Psych Center now. At once."

"Wait, take your lunch."

"I'll eat in the center cafeteria." Jolson stalked from the bedroom.

Eight wide doors cut into the mural. Jolson came through one, carrying a container of canned paints and with a roll of sketches in his hip pocket. The unfinished painting covered three walls of the huge octagonal reception area room. Near another door a large nearwood desk was placed. At the moment two sergeants in the blue-and-gold uniform of the Zombada Territorial Police had a thin, red-haired young man bent back over the desk. The young man's bare feet were kicking at the admissions android. "Mother of goats, Despojo cannot work with all this going on," shouted Jolson as he dropped his paint, brushes, and sketches on the floor.

The android, who was finished all over in a single shade of dull silver, came quietly across to Jolson. "Welcome back to the State Psych Center, Mr. Despojo," he said. "We'll have this poet committed in a moment."

"Which poet is that?"

"Hard to tell with him upside down I grant you," said the admissions android. "He's Jordan N. Gordon, one of our leading light industry poets. Until he went mad."

"I didn't hear, being in prison." Jolson knelt and began prying up paint can lids with a square-tip knife.

"Oh, he only went mad this morning," explained the silvered android. "Lickty decided."

"Lickty?"

"The State Critics Circle read Gordon's latest sonnet in the *Light Industry Review* and concluded he was dangerously insane."

"The sonnet is a difficult form." Jolson looked up at the mural and then at the rough color sketches he'd found in Despojo's studio. "Mother of baboons, who has been tampering with my masterpiece?"

The red-headed poet broke loose from the two sergeants and somersaulted to the floor. He spun and shoved the light desk into them, then ran for one of the eight doors. The door he chose opened a moment before he reached it and three burly literary critics came up a ramp from the center cafeteria. "Ah, the mad poet," remarked one of them.

Jordan N. Gordon stopped and backed up. A critic dived and tackled him. The poet kicked him in the face with both bare feet and was up and free again. He ran for another of the eight doors.

"Oh, too bad," observed the admissions android. "That's the door to the Unconventional Weaponry Wing and it is always locked."

The red-haired poet yanked at the door handle and the door did not give. By then the two policemen and the three critics had caught up with him.

A fourth critic appeared from the cafeteria ramp now. A slight, wrinkled man of fifty. He smiled at Jolson, watched the struggle for a moment, then walked over to Jolson. This was a man he'd been briefed on. Morris Lickty of the State Critics Circle.

"Turn this way, Simeon, and look straight at me," said Lickty.

"Mother of sucklings, what sort of welcome back is this?"

Lickty's lips pursed and he nodded slowly. "Your eyes, especially the left, have a definitely slightly crazed appearance. Stick out your tongue."

"My tongue's not crazed."

"Stick it out."

"There."

"Ugh. What a fat shaggy tongue," said Lickty. "Put it away, Simeon." He hid his small wrinkled hands behind him and tilted his little head to study the completed sections of the giant mural. He repeated the word "Ugh" and walked off, to exit through another door.

"Oh, too bad," said the android.

"What?"

"Obviously Lickty sees dangerous tendencies in your mural," observed the android. "Being fond of you and your work he hopes you will be able to repaint the offensive portions of this work as soon as possible. Otherwise, he might decide you're unstable or unhinged. Which might mean a spell of time spent up on our Political Neurotics floor."

"Mother of goats," replied Jolson and started up a work ladder.

Jolson woke up flat on his back with a fat lady sitting on his chest.

"Feeling better?" asked the fat lady, who was wearing a nurse's tunic and smoking a soybean cigar.

"Mother of grouts, why are you perched on Despojo?"

"You were having a fit in your sleep. Fuzzy." She swung off him and dropped to the floor.

"Who gave you permission to walk into Despojo's private home and jump upon him?"

The fat nurse chuckled and exhaled soy smoke. "You're in the goofy bin. Fuzzy. Get your bearings. This is the Political Neurotics section of the Psych Center. The order to pick you up came in last night. You, and some art materials to help while away the hours, have been here since the middle of last evening."

Jolson noticed the buff-colored metal walls and the gray water-filled plastic cot he was lying on. "Mother of hyenas," he said, rubbing his right arm. "Someone has administered drugs to Despojo's painting limb."

"All legal," answered the nurse, puffing. "Lickty took another gander at your mural last night and danced a jig. Angry. More liberalistic than ever, he thought the work. Figured you were cuckoo in the upstairs and ought to be tossed into the wacky ward here for awhile." She patted his bare chest. "You're a virile looking rascal, I'll say that for you. I'm a fool for a man with an abundance of body hair. You've even got it coming out of your ears."

"My wife?"

"Is fine and sends her love." The fat nurse pointed with her cigar toward a table next to Jolson's cot. "She even packed you a lunch to bring to the loony farm."

"My attorney?"

"He's over in the next ward. Turns out he's goofy, too," the fat nurse told him. "Cheer up. You've got a swell roommate. Whistling Andy Burden."

"Who?"

"You must have heard of Whistling Andy Burden, the wandering environmental folk singer. He went wacky about a week ago."

Jolson turned and saw a lanky, blond man stretched out on another cot near the far wall. "He's awfully

quiet for a roving minstrel."

"We have to keep him dopey at night. Otherwise it's nothing but whistling and complaining till the wee hours. Daytimes he's not bad. Even fun, as you'll see. Breakfast in half-an-hour. Unless you want to dig into that nice food package your wife fixed."

"No, Despojo will wait for the official breakfast." The nurse opened the room door with her fingers in a whorl lock. Jolson heard it lock itself after she left. He watched the sleeping Whistling Andy for a moment, then lay back and watched the low, buff ceiling.

Whistling Andy Burden said, "Fortunately they allow me to keep my 12-string guitar."

Jolson, sitting in a rubberoid chair and finishing his soy lunch, said, "Despojo has heard enough environmental folk songs for now."

The lean, narrow Whistling Andy said, "I'll just do you this one medley of garbage disposal ballads and call it quits, Simeon."

Jolson grunted and rubbed soy crumbs out of his beard.

Whistling Andy said, "This one is called 'New Sewage in the River Talking and Whistling Blues.' The *new* in the title refers not to the sewage but to the fact that this is a *new* version of this particular song. If you've heard it on my popular cassette version or seen me do it on the 'Uncle Pollution Boys & Girls Hour' you'll notice right off this *new* version has more pungency in its lyrics. Not to mention more whistling." Whistling Andy ran a callused thumb down across the strings. "Doc Reisberson told me he thought this version was a good hundred percent more effective. Oh, I woke up this morning (tweet) with sewage running (tweet tweet) by my . . ."

"Dr. Reisberson?" interrupted Jolson. "Dr. Reisberson of the Unconventional Weaponry Wing?"

". . . door (tweet). Oh, I woke up (tweetly tweet) this. . . . Well, yes, that's him, Simeon. Don't go breaking in that way. I mean to say, I wouldn't jiggle your elbow whilst you were painting some epic figure. . . . This morning (tweet) with lots of sewage running (tweet) by my . . ."

"How did Reisberson hear the new version?"

". . . door (tweet). Well, Simeon, it turns out he's an admirer of mine and is aware I'm no crazier than he is and that this is a trumped up situation I'm in."

"And so?"

"He invites me down to the Unconventional Weaponry Wing afternoons and I render him a few tunes," said Whistling Andy. "Uninterrupted. So I told (tweet) my loving mama (tweetly tweet), mama, we can't live here (tweet) no . . ."

"Exactly where is this wing in relation to us?"

". . . more (tweet). About directly under us. Leastwise, so it seems. A couple of Doc Reisberson's smart young technicians come and get me every afternoon right after Meditation. There's garbage (tweet) in the river, mama, garbage (tweetly tweet) in the deep blue . . ."

"Each afternoon?"

". . . sea (tweet). 'Cept Sunday. They got the poor guy working on some fiendish new weapon six days a week down there," said Whistling Andy. "So he more than welcomes a spell of folk singing, uninterrupted folk singing. Oh, there's garbage in the river, sweet mama (tweet tweet), garbage in . . ."

"What exactly is Reisberson working on?"

". . . the deep blue sea (tweetly tweetly tweet). I'm not right sure, but I think it's got something to do with hay fever."

"Hay fever?"

"Doc's figuring a way to give every man on the enemy side a severe and unremovable case of permanent hay fever," said the lean folk singer. "Now if you've ever had a touch of hay fever in the spring or in the fall—or if you've heard, as most folks have since it's sold eight million TV wall tapes, my 'Sneezing and Crying at the Height of the Pollen Season Blues'—you know that permanent and incurable hay fever will disrupt an army and be no fun. One of these days (tweet tweet), pretty mama, there's going to (tweet tweetly tweet) be garbage all over ..."

"He's working on this hay fever producing weapon right under us, huh?" Jolson rocked once in his chair and poked a big thumb floorward.

". . . me (tweet). Yes, far as I know. He keeps all his notes in a little tin box."

"How do you know that?"

"Well sir, because once he was locking the notes and such up when I was brought in for my daily conceit of, uninterrupted, music. Doc Reisberson made a little joke about how he couldn't even trust his favorite performer these days. Well, there was (tweet) so much garbage, it come floating (tweetly tweet) . . ."

"Small tin box?"

". . . through the door (tweet)." Whistling Andy let go of the neck of his guitar and held his hands about twelve inches apart. "About this size, Simeon. A tin box about this size. There was so much garbage, mama, it (tweet) was coming . . ."

"Black box?"

"(Tweetly tweet) through the door. No, gray. Sort of slate gray. He keeps it on a glass shelf right above his desk. Well, I tried (tweet tweet) to get off running, but there . . ."

The locked door of the room unlocked and the fat nurse entered, smoking a fresh soy cigar. "Hello, Fuzzy. Hello, Whistler," she said. "Andy, put aside your lyre and come along."

"What to?"

"This is your day for vibra therapy."

"So it is." Whistling Andy leaned his guitar against the wall. "I'll finish up the song for you later, Simeon. If you'd care to hear it."

"I would," said Jolson. "I'd even like to learn it."

The voice of the Meditation leader was coming out of a speaker grid under his cot. Jolson massaged his bearded cheeks and frowned at the door. The meditation period was nearly over and Whistling Andy hadn't returned. Jolson had figured it would be relatively simple to take the folk singer's place on this afternoon's visit to Dr. Reisberson.

The Meditation leader's tin voice cut off in the middle of a metaphor and the room door unlocked and opened. It was not Whistling Andy Burden. It was a tall, middle-aged man, wearing a doctor's smock and carrying a groutskin medical bag. He had blond hair and an upturned moustache. "How are you today, Simeon?"

The door closed behind him and Jolson replied, "As well as can be expected, doctor."

The blond man laughed. "Ha, fooled you. So much for your artist's eye and keen perceptions. It's just as I told Nana." He yanked off his wig and half his moustache.

Jolson sat up on his cot. "Walden Thurman?" This face he remembered from his Political Espionage

Office briefing. Thurman of the State Assassins.

"There." Thurman got the rest of his false moustache pulled free. "You misjudge Nana, Simeon."

"Oh, so?"

"She may be unfaithful," said the assassin, "but, let me tell you, she won't divorce you."

"That's a comfort."

"Therefore the only way to free her to marry me is to get rid of you," said Thurman, who was nearly bald without his blond wig. "And look here." He produced a vellum document from the medical bag.

Jolson took the stiff paper and scanned it. "Official Kill Certificate . . . authorizes bearer to assassinate party listed below . . . Simeon Despojo, crazed artist.... Admit bearer anywhere to carry out this official mission ... see back for other conditions. Well."

"You don't have to read the rest of it, Simeon," smiled Thurman. "Suffice it to say, I'm going to do you in, officially and legally, and thereafter take Nana for my own."

"You can have Nana right now." Jolson swung his legs over the side of the cot.

"Of course I can. As soon as you're dead and gone," said Thurman, stroking the groutsldn of the bag. "I've been trying to get the State to okay a certificate on you for months. Ever since the moment I met Nana and fell head over heels in love. Finally, Simeon, you played into my hands. Painting that god awful liberalistic mural down there."

"You touched it up," said Jolson, "to make it look that way, didn't you? While I was gone and before Lickty had a good look."

Thurman nodded. "Let's get on."

Jolson abruptly elongated his left leg until his foot smashed into Thurman's knee hard. The assassin jumped, dropping his bag. Jolson retracted his leg and hit the floor. He was across the room in a second, catching up Whistling Andy's guitar by the neck.

"Come now, Simeon." Thurman's balance was almost regained.

Jolson swung the guitar like an axe and it thunked into Thurman's nearly bald head. The assassin faltered and Jolson swung again. The man sighed and fell across the water-filled cot.

Fifteen minutes later Jolson was in the corridor. He looked exactly like Walden Thurman now, down to the fingerprints he'd used to open the whorl lock. He carried the groutsltn bag and the kill certificate. The document was altered now, with some of Despojo's art materials, and contained the name of Dr. Reisberson as victim. That would get him safely in and out of the Unconventional Weaponry Wing.

Booker McCrystal pushed the gray tin box to the edge of his desk. "Let our scientifically trained PEO people fool with what's in there," he said, with a thin grin. "I have a sinus headache as it is." He bobbed his head twice at Jolson. "So you used this Walden Thurman's person and an altered certificate to penetrate the weaponry section of that place? Then you overpowered Dr. Reisberson, snatched his secret files on the new weapon, assumed his appearance and walked blissfully out of the Zombada State Psych Center?"

Jolson was himself again, slouched and lean. "More or less."

"I imagine you had all sorts of other monstrously exciting adventures getting yourself back safely to us in Ordem," said the black Political Espionage agent. "I wish I wasn't so awesomely busy and could take the time to listen. Let me say simply that PEO considers your mission a complete success."

Jolson got up. "There are still a lot of people locked up in that Psych Center for no good reason."

McCrystal grinned. "I assume so. It's horribly unsettling to think about. Still, Lieutenant, that wasn't your job." He patted the tin box. "Getting this was your job. Now you can return home to Barnum, knowing you've succeeded once again. Perhaps someday you'll be asked to do something more about the horribly depressing conditions in Zombada. Let's hope so, shall we?"

Jolson left the office without replying.

## 5. Sunflower

THE CHILDREN came running across the tabletop toward the official car, bent low and zigzagging to avoid the blaster rifles that were starting to crackle. Plain-tuniced guards dropped from the running board of the intensely black landcar and trotted toward the oncoming kids, firing pistols into them. Only one young boy survived to reach the car carrying the Deputy Territorial Governor. The boy left the cobble roadway, threw himself toward the dome over the scrambling deputy governor. The boy, about sixteen, lean, and light-haired, hit the protective car dome spread-eagle. At that instant he exploded and took the official car with him. Black metal, clear vinyl, flesh and bone erupted and flowered above the spot in the parade where the official car had been forced to halt.

"Once again?" asked the chubby, partly metal man on the far side of the table. His metal hand rested on



the rewind button of the triop projector.

"Three times is plenty," said Ben Jolson. He was a lean, slightly slouching man in his mid-thirties. Outside the bow windows hundreds of straight green trees rose up.

"Did you get a good look at that seventeen-year-old blonde girl?" asked Clinton Wheeler-Woolsey. He pointed at the now empty top of the carved coffee table with his real forefinger. "She came strutting right along here, took out three of the Jaspas Provisional Government Army troopers when she exploded. Such a nice little ass on her. What a shame."

Jolson left the pin-stripe love seat and turned his back on Wheeler-Woolsey. The trees were full of blue squirrels. "Why do you want another Chameleon Corps man here on Jaspas?"

"This briefing is intended to explain all that, Jolson," said the Political Espionage Office field man. "Sit back down and pay attention."

Facing the plump espionage agent, Jolson said, "Get to my assignment then."

Wheeler-Woolsey snatched up a triop spool from atop an upright piano, using his fine metal fingers. "I bet you have it in for me because I'm a cyborg, part machine."

"No, Clinton. I have it in for you because you got PEO to spaceship me out here from Barnum to spend half a day with you in your portable office watching atrocity movies."

Wheeler-Woolsey jammed the new spool into the silver-plated projector. "You'll see how handy an office you can drive around is. I may just save your bacon in the field someday," he said. "Anyhow, I don't see where you get off criticizing me for liking to watch that pretty little Suicide Kid. I hear you had an affair with one of our best lady PEO agents."

"Former agent." Jolson clenched one bony hand and moved toward the plump man.

Wheeler-Woolsey jumped back, unscrewing his metal hand. He snatched a different one from a clutter of them on top of the piano. "Stay back, Jolson. This new hand is a stun-gun aerosol."

Jolson kept coming. "Oh, so?"

The PEO man cried, "I warned you." He pushed at a blue rise on the new hand. The hand whirred, rose up, and pulled him with it to the piano where it began playing the bass part of "The Maple Leaf Rag." "Oh, you. Put on my piano-playing hand by mistake. Well, look smug now, Jolson. Sooner or later all you tricky Chameleon Corps boys come to dust."

Jolson grinned a quiet grin and flicked on the triop. "Who do you want impersonated, Clinton?"

Following the motion of his piano-playing hand with bobbing head, Wheeler-Woolsey said, "Several people, probably. You'll see one there in a sec." He turned off the hand, hesitated over which one to screw on next.

"No more weapons," suggested Jolson. "Let's get on with the briefing." The three-dimensional image of a rundown pub formed midway on the table. The ornate wooden doors of the pub ripped open and a big rumped man dressed in several shades of tweed came out backwards. He trundled, flapping for balance, fell flat on his back in an oily gutter.

"Hold it there."

Jolson touched the freeze button and the rumped man stayed on the tabletop, still and wide spread. "Who is he?"

Wheeler-Woolsey finally chose a hand wearing a white groutskin glove. "His name is Mig O'Bunyan. Heard of him back on Barnum?"

"Poet, isn't he?" Jolson bent closer and studied the miniature man.

"Political poet, yet. I'll sleep-brief you on him and his works. He's very prolific and fond of self-quotes."

"Where is he now?"

"We have him at an alcoholics hospital run by Seventh-Day Adventist robots way out in no place. There will be no trouble about your using his identity for a few days." The plump agent reached a file folder off a knickknack shelf.

"Why Mig O'Bunyan?"

"I'll explain. We've got a big mess here on Jaspar. Or maybe it's several messes. Myself, I favor the one-big-mess theory. I'll explain."

Jolson caught the file the PEO man tossed him. "I've heard about the Suicide Kids. What else?"

"This planet, Jaspar, is composed chiefly of five territories," said Wheeler-Woolsey. "All run from here, from Oldcastle Territory. There's a lot of light industry in the territories, considerable agriculture, pretty good fishing trade. There are quite a few of these theme-suburbs around and about. You know, where the residents decide to live around a motif: South Seas, Martian ruins. Old West, etc. The Provisional Government is, well, Jolson, it isn't the kind of government Barnum would like to see here. Even though we control the planets in the Barnum System, we don't want, for various reasons, to oppose the Jaspar government at this time." He rubbed his stomach with his gloved metal hand. "Tyranny and oppression

have degrees. The Provisional Government isn't as bad as it could be. Certainly there's a lot of suppression of truth, arbitrary jailing, even a goodly number of political executions. And the army rides around on horseback a lot and tramples things. All this has led to a sort of growing resentment among the people on Jaspar. The young folks in particular are getting increasingly unhappy. These Suicide Kids, to take one example, obviously aren't happy."

"I'd noticed," said Jolson. "How many of them have killed themselves this way?"

"God, it's gone over the hundred mark," said the PEO agent. "A hundred that we've verified. Nearly thirty public officials have been assassinated by Suicide Kids in the last six months and twice that number hurt. There may be many more explosions they've caused that we simply aren't sure about." His artificial hand rubbed his chin. "We suspect, Jolson, that there may be hundreds of kids joining the Suicide Kid movement. At least, a lot of young people in the teen years and early twenties are wandering off."

Jolson had opened the file folder. "Who's recruiting the young people?"

"We don't know for sure. You're aware that Jaspar may be the oldest civilized planet in the Barnum System? Yes. Before Barnum ever colonized Jaspar there might have been great cities here. One or two of these ancient cities may still exist out in the wilds somewhere. It's possible that's where Wilbur Daniel Slack has gone."

Jolson closed the folder. "Back on Barnum they told me you guys here had a simple impersonation that should take a week at most to clear up. Now I've been here almost a day and I don't even know what the problem is."

"It's complicated." Wheeler-Woolsey pointed at his gloved thumb. "One, the Suicide Kids are a growing threat to the stability of the Jaspar government. Not to mention that a fad like this could well spread to other planets if it's not checked. Two, a professor from this territory's largest university has vanished and is believed to be organizing an army of rebel young people. His name is Wilbur Daniel Slack, but the kids seem to call him Sunflower."

"Why?"

"We don't, as yet, know that either." The PEO man stroked the hollow between two fingers. "Wilbur Daniel Slack was the head of the Cyborg Research Department at Oldcastle Territory University. He was working on an explosive device which can be easily implanted in enemy casualties on a battlefield. A device that can be detonated directly or by remote control. It turns them into booby traps, human bombs."

"That's what these Suicide Kids use?"

"Right, Jolson. Or something damned similar, according to our analysis of remains and fragments," said Wheeler-Woolsey. "We think Sunflower has gone berserk and is raising a multitude of young assassins to

overrun Jasper. Eventually he might try to upset the whole Barnum System."

Jolson said, "You've already had one Chameleon Corps agent out here for a month working on this. What's he found out?"

Wheeler-Woolsey touched his middle finger. "Three, Chameleon Corps Major Eduardo Bronzini hasn't reported to me or any other Political Espionage Office rep for nearly two weeks."

"PEO on Barnum told me there was a lead and Bronzini started on it. What was it?"

"Major Bronzini, and you'd expect a CC man of forty to be able to take care of himself, was sent into the Timbrook Foundation. It's a psychiatric institute in a suburb near here. We believe someone in there is working with Sunflower, is acting as an informant for him and the Suicide Kids. A lot of government people go there for therapy. In fact, key people from all over."

"I've heard of the place. Who was Bronzini posing as?"

"An aging actress named Dolly Louise Huffacker."

"That's right," said Jolson. "Bronzini likes to work in drag."

"Since he has the ability to change into anyone, the Major sees no reason to limit his impersonations to the male sex."

Jolson shrugged again. "So you want me to go into Timbrook as Mig O'Bunyan?"

"Exactly. He's in the same therapy group that Bronzini infiltrated."

"But you want more than news about Bronzini."

Wheeler-Woolsey replied, "Even if you can't locate the Major, Jolson, please try to find out where Sunflower has his stronghold and what's behind the Sunflower business, the Suicide Kids, the whole mess. You are authorized to follow up any leads you uncover, though I hope you'll check in with me when you can."

"Do you know whom Bronzini was watching at the foundation?"

"We don't. He was sent in to nose around, listen."

Jolson nodded. "Okay."

"You'll do your best, won't you? Even though you don't much like me."

"Sure," grinned Jolson. "Want to shake on it?"

"Wait till I change my hand," said Wheeler-Woolsey.

"I feel like a new man," said the lemon-yellow dwarf.

"Oh, for goodness sake," sighed the brownish lizard-man in the check suit, "here we go again."

The oval room was big and dim, with six imitation fireplaces spaced evenly around it. There were thick brown rugs on the floor, round, oval, octagonal, all with barely perceptible floral patterns. Ball lamps glowed on small marble-topped tables.

"Perhaps," said Dr. Timbrook, the therapist, "Deemler can tell us why he feels like a new man." He was tall and shaggy, wearing an eight-button white suit.

"Skip it," said the dwarf. "He spoiled it all."

"Honestly," said the lizard-man. "I'm dreadfully tired of hearing about you and your midget lady friend week after week."

"I'd like," put in Jolson as he lit a vegetable-base cigar, "to ask you, Burrwick, to shut up and let this baim speak his piece." Jolson was now Mig O'Bunyan, chubby in his too tight blue linen suit. Perspiring, his gray-black hair in small ringlets. Vegetable cigars and marijuana pills in all his pockets, along with manuscripts, uncashed checks, letters. Jolson had the ability to change shape at will, to impersonate anyone, anything.

The lizard-man crossed his legs and snorted. "You and your silly brogue or whatever it is. You don't really have Earth origins. Admit you live in the Barnum System, on Jaspur, you silly poetic nitwit."

"I winna deny my humble origins, ye gritt green limmer."

"Fleshies," said the silver-plated android sitting next to the therapist. He was humanoid in appearance, bright as chrome, wearing a canvas shift and sneakers. "Boy, you fleshies make me laugh for sure."

"Our very own resident *deus ex machina* has spoken," said the lizard-man. "All you need, 26X, is an overhaul. I think letting androids into our therapy sessions is a dreadful notion."

"You're nothing but a faggot," replied 26X.

The dwarf said, "All you guys are fairies, except for Mig O'Bunyan. I heard about how he's always balling some broad." He grinned suddenly at the only girl in the room. "Excuse it, miss."

"No, that's okay." She was a lovely blonde, straight and slim. "It's all, you know, grist for the mill."

"Who is this dame, anyhow?" Jolson lit a fresh cigar. "And what happened to that goofy actress bimbo?"

"I'm actually simply sitting in, Mr. O'Bunyan, Just this once. My name is Daisy Anne Currier and I'm a journalist."

Jolson scratched his rumpled head. "Are you the same broad who interviewed me when I won the Murdstone Prize for literature?"

"No," replied the lovely girl, smiling. "Though I must tell you, Mr. O'Bunyan, that you're one of my favorite revolutionary poets."

"See, see," said the dwarf, bobbing on his ottoman, "they all go goofy for that guy."

The slim blonde girl reporter changed ottomans and sat next to Jolson. "I sense a sexual undertone in most of the talk."

"Ay, miss," he replied. "I hae nae seen it otherwise. Everyone here is honest, and when you're honest you have to talk about sex. It canna be otherwise."

"Could I ask you, Mr. O'Bunyan, if your own poetry has a very strong sexual undercurrent?"

"You bet it does," said Jolson. "You take my recent ode, *On First Looking into the Gilbert & Bennett Nail Factory Strike*, Why, I gie ye my .. ."

"They're not listening to me any more," complained Deemler.

"This upsets you?" asked Timbrook.

"Well, of course it does, you nitwit."

"How come," asked 26X, "old chubby the poet doesn't recite for us tonight? Is that a breakthrough?"

"What about that, Mig?" the therapist asked Jolson.

"I winna deny I feel gritt changes in myself of late." Jolson exhaled vegetable smoke. "Still I have to admit I was planning to recite a little something to cheer up that old actress broad, Dolly Louise Huffacker. I've carried the thing about for weeks. Where is that old dame anyhow?"

"Let's hear the poem anyway, chubby," said 26X.

" 'Tis nae for your tin ears."

"Anyway," said Deemler, "I feel like a new man."

A heavy old man had been sitting all this time in a far corner. He was broad shouldered with short-cut hair and a crisp white moustache. "I'd like to put in a word about now," he said.

"Go ahead. Major General Portola," said Dr. Tim-brook.

"I think the problem here is too much talk, not enough action."

"You always say that," said the yellow dwarf.

26X's eyes clicked from the Major General to Jolson, then away. "Have you stopped drinking synthetic brandy, Mig?"

"Nae likely," said Jolson. "Ye ken weel, ye dour devil, 'tis a muse to me."

"Um," said the android.

"Nobody has even mentioned my obsession yet," said the lizard-man.

"How is it?" asked Deemler.

"Oh, about the same."

"He's obsessed with carving statues," Deemler said across to Daisy Anne. "Of a lizard he's in love with. A girl lizard, I guess."

"Well, of course," said Burrwick. "I've created nineteen of them. Life-size in marble."

"You're quite a good sculptor, Burrwick," said Dr. Timbrook.

The lizard-man lowered his head. "I suppose."

26X said, "Say, Dr. Timbrook. I've been wondering."

"Yes?"

"I just got to wondering why Dolly Louise Huffacker used to wander so much around the whole Timbrook Foundation here. Is that why she isn't with us anymore?"

"No," said the therapist. "I wasn't aware, 26X, that she did. Why did you bring Dolly Louise up?"

"My thought processes aren't like yours."

"Yes, I know."

26X went on. "Yeah, she used to roam through the resident-patient wing and beyond. Ended up sometimes in that old storeroom beyond the rec field. Those buildings been there longer than you even, Dr. Timbrook. I wonder why she was interested in those old mental health files."

"And what do you think?"

"Not sure," said 26X. "Except maybe the old girl had a burning curiosity about something in the past."

"I've even had the impulse to make statues twice life-size," said the lizard-man. "Oh, by the way, I'm moving to the country."

The therapist said, "You've made a decision about it then."

"He had to," said the dwarf. "When he brought in the marble for his twentieth statue, the floor of his flat collapsed. I saw it on the news."

Dr. Timbrook said, "That's all the time for tonight. I'll see you all next week. Good night."

"Maybe I don't feel like a new man after all," said the yellow dwarf.

"Mr. O'Bunyan," asked Daisy Anne, "would you grant me an interview?"

"I canna refuse," said Jolson. "Only a smaik would. I must run a wee errand first. I'll meet you in an hour at Wild Irish Red's Earth Pub, my favorite haunt."

"Oh, lovely," said the girl reporter.

"Ay," replied Jolson. Out in the long, plain brown hall he moved free of the scattering of group-session



members, turned down an empty corridor. Using the floor plans he'd been given during his Political Espionage Office sleep-briefing, Jolson headed for the storehouse beyond the recreation area.

When Jolson was three steps short of being two short corridors away from the rec area, he was jumped. He came around a shadowy turn and 26X grabbed him. "I thought so, fleshie," said the bright android. He knocked Jolson to the dark floor with a heavy fist.

Jolson moved his head and small flakes of rust fell on him. He made a yawning inhalation and blinked. A pool of water, rainbowed with oil, lay next to his right hand on the metal floor. He felt now dials and knobs pressing into his back. He was sitting on the floor, propped in a corner. "Faith! If I am na clean bumbaized," he said to 26X, who was seated in a dented metal chair opposite him. "And losing some of my well-known affection for apparatus."

"The smell." 26X tapped his metal nose.

"Beg pardon?"

"You look like Mig O'Bunyan," said the android. "You act like him, talk like him. I imagine you even have his fingerprints and retinal patterns. You Chameleon Corps guys have been fixed to be able to do that. Right? You went wrong on the smell, buddy. I've sat around Mig some long time, weeks and weeks." He touched at his bright nose again. "Originally I was built to be a security guard. I developed too much individuality, and instead of sending me back to the shop, the organization I worked for allowed me to come here for treatment. A fleshie conceit, but I play along since it allows me to serve our cause much better. You Just don't smell like Mig O'Bunyan."

Jolson massaged the back of his neck. "What about the Chameleon Corps agent who came in here before me?"

"Long gone."

"Dead, you mean?"

26X laughed. "Not exactly. See, I was programmed not to lie. It can be a real handicap in dealing with you fleshies."

"Where is he?"

"Someplace else." 26X smoothed his rough tunic. "You, though, will stay here for a while. This here is an abandoned solitary cell. When things modernized, it was abandoned. We're directly under the file rooms, which is why I gave you the hint during the therapy session. To lure you here, you know."

"You're working for whom—Sunflower?"

"Not Sunflower directly, no," replied the android. "I have other reasons for what I do. I'm going to be helpful to you, CC agent. I'm going to tell you that I do odd jobs for a contact in Estruma Territory. Know where it is?"

"Estruma is about two hundred miles west of us," said Jolson, putting his palms on the metal floor. "One of those theme-areas, where the citizens vote for what sort of milieu they want. Right now most of Estruma is cowboys and Indians, based on the Old West of Earth."

"Very good recitation, fleshie." 26X got out of his chair. "Yeah, if you should ever chance to get out to Estruma look up Tim Hootman, who teaches Earth Literature at the college there. If you like me, you'll like Tim." He laughed once more. "Can you guess why I tell you all this secret stuff?"

"Because you plan to kill me."

"Not me exactly, fleshie." He rested one alloy hand on his hip. "No, I'm Just going to leave you in this cell. It still works some, though not quite perfect. It's an old machine they've neglected. It's good enough still to keep you here until you starve or something. Soundproof, restraining, therapeutic. You'll have a fine old time."

Jolson pushed himself suddenly up and tackled the android. 26X fell back into a dial-filled wall.

"Now, now," spoke the cell in a soothing but raspy voice. "There is nothing to be violent about. Calm down, relax." String quartet music began to play.

Jolson covered the android's face with both hands, and slammed his metal head against bulbs of light- and black-ridged dials.

"Can things be so bad?" asked the soothing voice of the cell. "Don't thrash so. Sit down comfortably and enjoy yourself. You're listening now to Feuman's Murdstonian Dance #203."

The thick door of the cell made a grinding noise. It then swung inward. A slim blonde girl dived into the room, skidding slightly on the slippery floor. "Hold on, Mr. O'Bunyan." It was the lovely Daisy Anne Currier, and she held a portable diamond-bladed saw in her right hand.

"Why are we speaking in so many different voices?" asked the old cell. "Identity crisis perhaps. Please sit down and relax, won't you?"

26X rose to his knees. Jolson backed, grabbed the saw from the girl. "Let me," he said.

"I figured there'd be trouble. I got this from my landcar." She was breathing heavily, in gasps.

26X lunged, but an easy chair rose up through the floor before he could reach Jolson, and its back whacked him hard under the chin.

"Try this nice comfortable chair," suggested the room, "while I play a waltz."

Jolson sailed over the fat chair, caught the tottering android, spun him. 26X bounced into the wall, and when he rebounded, Jolson went for his control box with the buzzing diamond saw. In under two minutes he had the android inoperative.

"Calm," said the anxious cell. "Please. I must caution you that I am now forced to introduce a pleasantly scented tranquilizing mist to your environment."

Jolson stepped free of 26X, took Daisy Anne's hand. "I winna forget this." He pulled her and they ran from the cell.

"I'll drop my intense, scatter-brained girl journalist pose if you'll get rid of that brogue or whatever it is," said the girl.

"You're with PEO?"

The girl nodded as they hurried. "26X was talking about Estruma Territory. I overheard. You'll be going there next, won't you?"

"Yes," said Jolson. "And I'll need a new identity for there."

"Clinton Wheeler-Woolsey will have one and he can sleep-brief you with Estruma data."

"Tomorrow I'll go see him."

"What about tonight?"

"Tonight we're going to Wild Irish Red's Earth Pub."

Jolson said, "Whoa," to his grout. The animal discontinued galloping, trotted, stopped in front of the Holy Grail Saloon. Swinging out of the saddle, Jolson tethered his brandy-colored mount to a hitching rail and glanced around him. Stonyville, the county seat of Estruma Territory, was a hot, dusty little town. All laid out in straight lines, eight blocks square and false fronted. Men, horses, cows roamed the flickering streets, and a warm wind sent dirt and dust and clumps of feathery weed balling through the narrow streets. Stonyville was in the middle of miles of flat, dry country, far from the ragged mountains that made up part of the border between Oldcastle Territory and Estruma Territory.

"What in hell is that you rode in on?" asked a lean, whiskered man in Old West clothes. He was sitting in a wooden chair in the shade of the Holy Grail's big hand-painted sign.

"A grout," said Jolson. He was now Will Mendoza, wide and weathered. His face broad and dark, his nose looking once-broken and reset. He appeared to be about twenty-six or seven, whimsical, but quick to anger.

"Doggone," said the man, digging at his grizzled whiskers. "It done got six legs on it."

"They all do," said Jolson. "Less you find a sport now and then." He pushed his dusty wide-brimmed black hat up from his brow. "Right now I'm looking for the Mayor of Stonyville. I hear as how they're looking for a new sheriff hereabouts."

"They found the old one."

Jolson walked up into the shade. "They did?"

"Yep, I hear tell everybody figured as how the sheriff had been bushwhacked out near the university and buried somewheres. But danged if he didn't come riding into town on a borrowed horse a couple hours ago. Fit as a fiddle, said he'd been off on a case."

"Well," said Jolson. "I'm glad for his sake. 'Cept I was figuring to get hired for the job and now it looks like I'm out of work." Jolson decided he shouldn't have spent that extra day with Daisy Anne after his second talk with Wheeler-Woolsey.

"Hey," called a tall, smooth man from the doorway of the saloon, "are you Will Mendoza?"

"Yep, I am."

"I'm Mayor Ridge Morphy. I got your resume from the telegraph office 'bout an hour ago," said the man. "Come on in here for a spell. Will."

Jolson's grout-riding spurs jangled as he strode through the Holy Grail's swinging doors. Immediately inside the doorway, two burly men with chair-leg clubs jumped him. Jolson pivoted, stretched his left arm a few extra inches and caught the club of the burliest man. He wrenched it away, elbowing the man at the same time in the stomach. Ducking the swing of the other club, Jolson dropped to his knees and used the borrowed club to trip the second attacker. When both men were in half-down positions, he gave each a knockout chop.

Across the big wooden room, from in front of the long bar, a moustached gunslinger called out, "Draw, Mendoza."

Jolson glanced toward the Mayor, who'd taken a chair at one of the saloon's round, bare tables. "Is this intended as an ambush?"

"No, a job interview."

Jolson drew his Old West-style blaster and shot the slower rising pistol from the hand of the gunman at the bar. His shot also took off half the feathers of the stuffed owl over the cash register. Jolson had been sleep-briefed on gunfighting the day before. "What sort of job?" he asked, bolstering his weapon and crossing to the mayor's table.

"Sit down," said Mayor Morphy. "You handle yourself pretty good. Will." He held a two-page telegram in his fingers. "Says here in your resume you cleaned up Suburb #414 on Murdstone three years ago. Cleaned up Western Village on Barnum two years ago. But there's a lapse last year when you didn't clean up anything. How come?"

"I took a year off to travel." Jolson adjusted his black hat and sat in the one empty chair left at the table. "I hear as how you maybe don't need a new sheriff after all."

"Ain't that a laugh," admitted the Mayor. He touched a thumb to the fat, curly-haired man seated next to him. "This is our old sheriff. Breezy Balmer. Breezy, this here is Will Mendoza."

"Howdy," said Breezy. "You're a pretty tough jigger."

Jolson said, "Has either one of you fellers got a job to offer me?"

"We do have a position to offer you. Will," said the Mayor. "It's a little tougher than being sheriff, which is why we put you to the test just now. I hope you didn't mind us setting three of our toughest waddies onto you."

"Nope. I don't mind shooting somebody now and then and a little violent horseplay. Long as we get, - sooner or later, around to talking money."

"Now, what we got in mind. Will," said the Mayor, "is for you to become president of Estruma College."

Jolson puckered his mouth, narrowed his eyes. "I didn't come all this way for no desk job."

Breezy Balmer laughed, slapped at his knees with his pudgy hands. "Don't worry about that. There ain't no desk no more."

"Breezy means," said the Mayor, "that a few of the students out at Estruma College got playful and

burned the former president's office down."

"While he were in it," roared Breezy.

"Don't go on so, Breezy, or you'll give Will the wrong idea." The Mayor signaled to a spangled barmaid. "We made a mistake on the last president we hired for the university. Will. We got an academic feller."

"You're of the opinion a gunslinger would be better?"

"You know how kids are these days," said the Mayor. "Course we ain't got nothing like those Suicide Kids that are giving the cities trouble." He knuckled the tabletop. "Knock wood. But we got a little discord."

Jolson said, "Discord is one thing. I don't hanker to get set on fire."

The Mayor assured him. "A feller of the capabilities you just demonstrated. Will, you can handle this little old university."

The barmaid brought three glasses of beer.

"Tell me," said Jolson, reaching his glass nearer, "a little more about the troubles you been having out there."

"First let me explain." The Mayor sipped his beer. "Folks in these parts take to our life style right easy, and before long a raucous Old West feel gets hold of most everybody. Life at our university is natural going to reflect this."

"They all wear guns," put in the sheriff.

"Yes, the boys do," said the Mayor. "Only a few of our coeds go in for guns."

Jolson persisted. "What are they making trouble about?"

"Well, it's not only that they're fighting each other," said Mayor Morphy. "They're also sort of riled up at most of the faculty."

"Situation boils down to this," said the Mayor, waving for another beer. "We got a radical bunch of students and a more conservative bunch of students, plus some in the middle. I'd calculate as how some fifty percent of our riots grow out of showdowns between the liberals and the conservatives."

"It's sort of like cattlemen and shepherders," said Breezy.

The Mayor continued. "Also now and then the Provisional Government sends in troops. I will say they support our life style by sending in only cavalry. Still we don't take kindly to the PG settling our local quarrels."

"Tell him about old MacStone," said the pudgy sheriff.

"Well, this MacStone is an old-timer in these parts. Here before the suburbanites and the commuters. He's a real cattleman. Got himself three thousand acres to the south of the college and been raising grouts for I reckon thirty or forty years. He employs something like two hundred hands out on his spread, and every danged one is crooked as a snake and mean as a bobcat."

Jolson asked, "And they been raiding the university, too?"

"Exactly," said Mayor Morphy. "Old man MacStone don't like young folks at all, and he hates anybody with more than two dabs of education, and he figures as how the university is actual on his land anyways. He's plumb scornful of local and territorial government."

Jolson raised his hat brim, scratched his weatherworn young chin, spat toward his left boot. "Let me see if I got this straight. You want me to run your college out there, and I got to watch out for wild students and the whole danged Provisional Government and some wildass galoot name of MacStone who got two hundred gunslinging waddies on his payroll. Each and every one of the above-mentioned folks is just plumb crazy about shooting and killing and smashing and burning. Is that about the setup?"

"A pessimistic view, but near true, yep," said the Mayor.

Jolson fiddled some more with his hat and his chin. "We ain't talked salary."

"How's \$1000 a month sound to you?"

"Make it \$1500," said Jolson. "One month in advance right now."

"Well, okay. You come highly recommended. Shake."

They shook hands. "You got yourself a new college president, Mr. Mayor," said Jolson.

"You're right smart," laughed Breezy. "Getting paid in front. At least you'll get to spend some of the cash before they run you out."

Jolson finished his beer, declined a second. "In my wanderings I've heard tell of a jigger named Tim Hootman who's hooked up with your college outfit. Will I meet him out at the campus?" Tim Hootman was the contact 26X had mentioned.

Breezy chortled. "You might even trip over him."

"He means," said the Mayor, "that Tim Hootman is the nickname of one of the two teaching machines we got."

"Well, now. He's got quite a reputation, for a machine. I'd still like to have a chat with him."

"Won't do much good," said the Mayor. "During one of our most recent shooting matches at the college, he got all shot up by stray gunfire. We ain't had a chance to get him repaired as yet."

"Oh," said Jolson.

Jolson tossed his carpetbag on the brass bed and reached for a coin. "Much obliged."

"Oh, don't tip me," said the bent old man who had showed him to his temporary room at the Faculty Club. "I ain't no bellhop or desk clerk. I'm Sylvan DeBrunnis, Ph.D., head of the Theology Department. Some of that Liberal Bunch shot up my classroom, and I'm earning a little grub money here at the Faculty Club till tempers cool some."

"I hear tell about some controversy on the campus," said Jolson, taking off his black sombrero and burnishing its brim with his wrist. "Is it of a religious nature?"

"It's more an ideological fracas. See, the Liberal Bunch comprises about twenty-five percent of the student body. They're led by a big galoot name of Big Bob Oldenberg. They got a list of complaints longer than your right arm. Chief one is they want more Western Studies courses and they want rodeo riding and bulldogging to give credit toward a degree."

Jolson sat in the one wicker chair and rested his booted feet up on the bed. "How's the administration feel about that?"

The old man giggled. "That's you. President Mendoza. It's up to you, see?"

"What I mean," said Jolson, "is I don't fancy getting shot or set on fire. Where did my predecessors go wrong?"

"They tried to be moderate," said the old theologian. "Two presidents back, I forget the jigger's name, he gave in halfway to the Liberal Bunch. That only riled up As Is."

"Who's that?"



"As Is, they believe everything ought to be like it was. They go along with a little of this Old West stuff, but they keep howling for fancy things like mathematics and engineering and some highfalutin' thing called humanities."

"Who runs As Is?"

"Slick young hombre named Danny Huddler. Looks like a cardsharp or a faro dealer to me."

"Let me say again I'm much obliged to you, prof," said Jolson. "Now I'll take me a bath."

"No more hot water till tomorrow." He shuffled backwards to the door. "Anything else I can do?"

"I was wondering where they stuck that Tim Hootman teaching machine after he got filled with lead."

"Like to tinker, do you?"

"Well, six guns ain't the only tool I'm handy with, let's say."

"He was dumped back of the little fake livery stable on the next street, over on the Sawdust Trail," said the old man. "Something funny about that there mechanical dingus."

"Such as?"

"Seems like a good many of the young folks he worked with," said DeBrunnis, "would just up and wander off. Quit school altogether like."

"Ever hear of a jigger named Sunflower?" asked Jolson.

"Nope. Never." He shrugged his round shoulders and left.

Jolson ate at the free-lunch counter in the Faculty Saloon and then went and searched the livery stable. There was no one there, but he found enough unused tools to use on the big gray teaching machine he discovered in the narrow backroom of the wooden building. Old West designs had been drawn on the surface of the square, man-sized machine in paint and chalk. Cactus, ox skulls, six shooters, sombreros. Jolson figured the Hootman machine must have given out recruiting information for Sunflower. There might be similar recruiters at other small colleges. He expected that on this machine's information tapes somewhere there might be a clue.

He was sitting on a new sawhorse and had the back of the machine just off when blaster fire started up

outside. Hoofbeats mingled with the shooting, as shouts of, "Full-time rodeo or else!" began.

Ducking out the rear door of the stable, Jolson headed for the commotion. Students, most of them in Old West outfits, were running toward the Quad.

"Another showdown," shouted a pretty cowgirl.

Jolson caught her arm as she went by. "Ma'am."

"Let loose of me, stranger." Her slim fingers angled toward the pistol in her fringed bodice. "Who might you be anyways?"

"Well, now, I might be most any open-face stranger asking for a kind word," said Jolson. "But, in point of fact, I'm Will Mendoza, the new acting-president of this here school."

"Gosh dam," said the girl. "Is that a fact. Right proud to meet you." She dropped the hand away from her breasts and offered it for shaking. "How can I help you, Mendoza?"

"I'm curious about the shooting," said Jolson. "I'd like to know what it's about, prior to stopping it."

"It's Big Bob Oldenberg and about twenty of his Liberal Bunch, shooting up the Quad," the girl said. "They want the rodeo started again and more Western-oriented courses. Didn't anybody tell you about our troubles afore signing you on?"

"Yep, but I'm still trying to get the factions sorted out." The Quad had two dozen young men on grout and horseback riding around it, shooting off blaster pistols and waving pro-rodeo signs.

From down Purple Sage Lane a new group of young men came trotting. Grim-faced, wearing quieter clothes. "Now them is," explained the coed, "the As Is gang. That's Danny Huddler on the pinto grout. Got hisself all dressed up like a tinhorn."

Huddler was pale, wearing a swallow-tail coat, striped pants tucked into fancy boots. Before Jolson could ask anything further, a third pack of riders galloped into the Quad. They'd come riding hard along the Sawdust Trail.

"Bad medicine," said the girl. "There's old man MacStone, with the Estruma Kid and, looks like, fifty of them shifty-eyed waddies from the MacStone spread. That Estruma Kid is sort of decorative looking, though, ain't he?" She indicated a handsome man in his late thirties. He wore pale gold-colored cowboy clothes and a gun belt with two gold-mounted guns. "You know what they say old man MacStone pays him?"

"Nope."

"\$100 a week. Plus room and board."

"Hot dog," said Jolson. "Excuse me now." He left her and walked carefully into the Quad area. He dodged charging riders, pivoted to avoid a falling conservative, and climbed onto the pedestal of the cast-iron Indian. He drew his gun and shot Big Bob Oldenberg's sign out of his hand, then he shot off Danny Huddler's flat, black tinhorn hat. "Boys," he announced through cupped hands. "I'd like to make a policy statement if I might."

The Estruma Kid, with a left-sided grin, rode toward the statue and stopped his mount near Jolson. "Your shooting ain't bad," he said. "Like to try your luck with me?"

"Kid," said Jolson, "how much you making with MacStone?"

"\$150 a week."

"I'll pay you \$200 to teach here."

"Don't rag me now," replied the Kid. "Who are you anyhow?"

"Folks call me Will Mendoza."

"Son of a gun," said the Kid. "I'm glad I didn't draw on you."

The students were beginning to slow down, to guide their mounts over toward Jolson and the Estruma Kid.

"I'm also," said Jolson, "the acting-president of this here institution."

"No shit," said the Kid. "\$200, huh? For what exactly?"

"We're going to add a course in gunfighting and Old West firearms," Jolson told him.

Big Bob Oldenberg, a wide, blond young man, said, "You are? Well, if that's the case I guess I won't kill you for shooting my protest sign."

"Wait now, Mr. Mendoza," said the bare-headed Danny Huddler. "I don't know as how I go along with this compromise."

"Now just a minute," shouted a bushy old man. "Nobody's doing nothing without it's okay by MacStone."

From the direction of Stonyville now a hundred mounted Provisional Government soldiers came. "Ain't going to be no more palaver now," observed the Estruma Kid. "Here comes the cavalry to horn in."

By the time Jolson got the blue-uniformed cavalry negotiated out of their fighting mood it was nearly sundown. He returned to the Tim Hootman machine as twilight was filling the now quiet campus. Only the occasional nickering of a horse was heard, mingled with distant guitar strumming and a little yodeling.

Working by an old-fashioned electric lantern, Jolson located the teaching machine's information tapes and then got the thing repaired enough so he could monitor them. He tried first a nonsched-looking spool, and after he ran it through once rapidly, he played a section back at normal. Then Jolson knew where the kids were being sent.

Synthetic tumbleweed came rolling through the warm morning. Jolson, mounted on his grout, was galloping across the dry, flat land and heading for the Joshua Territory. Far to his left sat flat, jagged bluffs, yellow, orange, and earth brown. The air was sharp and clean and Jolson did a little yodeling, a knack he'd acquired during a sleep-briefing.

As he rode on, Jolson became aware of hoofbeats coming up far behind him. He looked back and saw a fat horseman approaching. "Whoa there." Turning half in the saddle, Jolson thumbed back the brim of his dark sombrero and then lowered his hand to rest over the butt of his Old West blaster.

The approaching rider was Sheriff Breezy Balmer. He waved his hat in the air. "Howdy there, you old wad-die," he called. "You sure travel like a bat out of hell, Mendoza."

"Yep, I do indeed. You want me for something?"

"I don't want you for nothing but companionship."

"I'm heading southeast, on college business."

"Okay by me," said the sheriff. "I'm heading to pay a call on old man MacStone."

"Thought his spread was up to the north."

"It is. I'll part company with you at Devil's Fork. That is, if you ain't against me sharing the wasteland with you."

"Nope." Jolson started his grout to galloping again. After a bit he said, "I was thinking. Breezy, that no strangers couldn't come through these parts without you'd know about it."

"That's for sure a fact. You interested in somebody in particular?"

"Might be a friend of mine passed through here recent."

"What's he calling himself?"

"I ain't sure," said Jolson. "His actual name is Bronzini. I don't reckon he'd be using it."

"Nope," said the pudgy sheriff. "Don't know nothing about any such." They had ridden down into an arroyo, and just beyond a great pile of rock and boulders they came upon a fallen-in shack and what looked to be the entrance of an abandoned mine. "Hey, now, look at there."

"Old broke-down house," said Jolson. "What about it?"

"I thought I saw the flash of a rifle barrel in the mouth of that shaft," said Breezy, low voiced. He gave Jolson a sudden shove. "Hit the dirt and get to cover."

Jolson left his stirrups and saddle and landed on hard ground. He started to run for the rocks.

Breezy came running after him, and before Jolson reached cover the fat sheriff had smacked him over the head with his gun butt. "I fooled you for sure," he chuckled and hit Jolson again.

Jolson slept through the explosion. He knew there had been one when he saw the rocks and dirt and fragments of timber that blocked the entrance to the mine shaft. He was inside the mine shaft, about a thousand feet back from the debris. He coughed dirt out of his mouth and sat full up. Two very thin streams of daylight were getting in through the blockage.

Jolson's left leg buckled under when he stood. He massaged it, gritting his teeth, and finally he was able to walk. He studied the rocks and dirt. There looked to be several tons of the stuff corking him in. Breezy Balmer apparently wanted him here permanently.

Backing away, Jolson reached under his shirt for his truth kit. He opened it and took from it a small palm-size torch. He slipped the kit away and clicked on the little light. "Might as well take a look at the rest of this hole," he said.

A few thousand feet into the narrow rocky shaft he noticed something on the wall. He swung the beam of the torch. A vinyl tag was screwed to the stone. It read: *Frimac Fakes, Inc. The Best In Pseudo-West Props. When reordering specify Fake Mine Shaft #1137.*

Jolson nodded and continued on down. Another thousand yards and he tripped over a dead man. The man wore only a suit of red long-Johns. He'd been shot and was at least two days dead. It was Breezy Balmer. Kneeling briefly beside him, Jolson said, "The real Breezy. So it must have been Bronzini himself who bricked me up."

He walked on and in a few moments came to a door. This was dull metal and had EMERGENCY EXIT stenciled on it. Jolson hesitated, then pushed at the handlebar. The door swung open and he saw late afternoon desert outside.

Staying in shadows, Jolson removed his sombrero and flipped it, cartwheeling, out into daylight. Nothing resulted. "Okay," he said and left the prop tunnel. The rear exit let out on the other side of the boulders. "Bronzini isn't being thorough enough. Fortunately."

Jolson sat on a rock for a while and rubbed at his sore spots. Then he whistled, with his tongue against the roof of his mouth. At some distance his grout made a snorting sound and then, cautiously, came trotting around to him. "Howdy," Jolson said to his mount. He swung into the saddle and rode on, aimed at Joshua Territory. He saw no more of the false Breezy Balmer.

Jolson pulled his pack-carrying robot out of the quicksand and shouted, "I can see you don't watch me on television." He got the round, six-armed mechanism back on the jungle trail.

The voice grid on the robot was clogged with wet sand and rotted leaves. In a moment it scooped it clean and replied, "No, sir. How would that have helped?"

"Two reporters came up to me just yesterday in the lobby of the Joshua Territory Ritz and asked, 'Aren't you Alfred Gerald Mowgli?' I replied, 'You bet your ass I am. I'm Alfred Gerald Mowgli, the noted electro-journalist.' Each of these two twits had recently viewed 'The Dilemma of Hockey.' "

"Which was what, sir?"

Jolson got all the luggage and camera cases and supply packs brushed clean and back into the robot's many hands. "Well, you dumb peckerhead, that's one of my recent teledocumentaries. I'm famous for the frigging things."

"Exactly how would a show about hockey have kept me from getting immersed in a quagmire, sir?"

Jolson, who was a tall, broad black man now, yelled, "It was my earlier teledocumentary you should have seen, you boob." He gave the robot a forward-sending kick. The Hootman machine tape had told him Sunflower was headquartered in a ruined ancient city in the jungles of the Joshua Territory. Jolson took on a new identity to come into the jungle in question. "The show was entitled 'The Shame of Our

Swamps.' At the time a lot of critics said I'd hit my peak. How could I top it? What would I do next? In fact, even yesterday those reporter boobs in the hotel lobby asked similar questions. What's the famed Alfred Gerald Mowgli up to?"

"You told them?"

"Bet your ass," yelled Jolson. "I'm out here gathering material for my new teledocumentary, which I'll call 'The Shocking Truth About Ruins.' Archeology explained and shown simply and with grace. It'll do better than 'The Crisis in Whittling,' and that teledocumentary of mine got ratings that were stunning. Eight hundred million people watched it. Plus a hundred million lizardmen, six million cat-people, and roughly eight hundred thousand zombies."

"Well, I don't watch much television, though I've carried a lot of sets. I used to work with a mover."

"Good for you, peckerhead," yelled Jolson.

Two young men stepped onto the trail fifty yards ahead of them. Each had a blaster rifle aimed at Jolson. "We couldn't help overhearing you," said one. He was taller and thinner, wearing a tattered buff-colored coverall.

"I must admit I've been chided now and then for talking loudly," roared Jolson. "However, I believe one of the chief tasks the Good Lord—if you tuned in on my teledocumentary, 'Our Mounting Religious Crisis,' you know all about it already—set for us is to communicate. Make ourselves heard as well as seen, exchange ideas, trumpet thoughts far and wide. Who the crap are you guys?"

The taller, thinner young man lowered his rifle and moved closer. Sunlight from the midday sun flickered on him as he walked beneath the thick-leafed trees. "Well, this will probably strike you as a coincidence, Mr. Mowgli, but we're archeologists, too. We're looking for the ruins of a lost city of sun worshippers."

"Son of a bitch," cried Jolson, rubbing his broad black nose. "Are you two fellows the entire party?"

"No, sir," said the other young man. He had a plump face and a reddish moustache. "Lloyd failed to mention we're only assistants to someone who is, in our humble opinion, a swell archeologist. Perhaps you've heard of her. Dr. Maggie Mezzarow."

"Is that old bimbo still alive? Jesus, she must be ninety."

"Ninety-one," said Lloyd.

Joslon shouted, "The old dame knows her ruins, but she hasn't got much stage presence."

"Alfred Gerald," said a thin old voice. "Still a loudmouth." A small, chubby old woman in a tweed

coverall shuffled out of the foliage. She had an aluminum cane to help her walk, and a hunting pistol in her freckled right hand. "I told you at that Relics Convention on Murdstone thirty-six years ago that you were a bright child but you should learn to shut up. Still true." She stumbled and fell over sideways into a tangle of passion flowers.

"Let's let bygones be bygones, you crusty old broad."

Lloyd rushed to aid the fallen archeologist. She seemed to rise out of the vines just a second before his helping hand got a grip on her. "Are you okay. Dr. Mezzrow?"

"Fit as a fiddle," replied the old woman.

"Hey, Maggie, why don't we team up?" shouted Jolson. "I'm ruins-hunting, too."

"For another of your dreadful television shows, I imagine," said Maggie Mezzrow. "Very well, Alfred Gerald, you can join us, but you must try to be still sometimes."

Jolson jogged down the trail. "I'll sit at your goddamn feet in abject silence, Maggie." He whapped the old woman on the back. She apparently had a truth kit, similar to his, strapped beneath her left arm.

The robot was shaking him with six hands. "Wake up, sir, but be silent."

Jolson sat up. The tent canvas was lightening, and cold dawn air was whispering in. Jolson glanced around his tent. "What is it?"

"I overheard them plotting," said the machine softly. "The two boys and the old lady. They already know where the lost city is, the ruins and all."

"I figured as much."

"You did? Did you also figure they're planning to lure you into a remote place within the ruins and sink you in a bottomless pool?"

"Not the specifics, no," said Jolson. "But the intent, yes."

The robot sat back from Jolson's sleeping bag, rung its three pairs of hands. "You act as though you want them to try this."

"Seems like the fastest way to locate the lost city of Jirasol," said Jolson. "The guy who told me about it only had enough information to put me in the general vicinity. I was hoping to run into some guards, which is what these folks are."



"You're not quite the buffoon you pretend," observed the round robot.

Jolson jerked out of his sleeping bag and began doing knee bends. "Two dozen of these each morning and you never grow old," he said in a loud voice. Lower voiced, he added, "When we move out today you hang back, wait here. I may have some stuff for you to carry out."

The tent flap rattled and Dr. Mezzrow, fully clothed, squinted in. "Quickly, Alfred Gerald. We've made an amazing find while you were still snoozing. You'll never guess what we've located."

"I can't come till I finish my exercises," shouted Jolson. "I want to live a long, healthy life."

Stone suns were carved on the faintly yellow stone wall. The vines and ferns and mosses of the deep jungle mingled thickly with the vines and grain and fruit carved into the now half-fallen wall. Through the thick forest Jolson noticed other walls and tiered buildings.

Dr. Mezzrow spiked her cane into the loamy ground in front of the high wall. "Seems to be part of a temple, wouldn't you say, Alfred Gerald?"

"Bet your ass," said Jolson.

The old woman moved to an opening in the ancient wall, a low, square doorway. "Why, look. There appears to be a stairway leading downward. More of this old building must exist below ground. Lloyd, you and Bobby stay out here. Alfred Gerald, hand me one of those hand torches and we'll have ourselves a look-see."

As Jolson stepped up to the old woman, six bright-scarlet birds fluttered up from the jagged top of the broken wall, flapped striped wings. "Better let me go first," he yelled. "Your old bones may not be up to navigating what we find in there."

"Very well, Alfred Gerald," said Maggie Mezzrow. "You enter first and I'll light the way for us."

Jolson stepped down into darkness. Then the light came following and showed some fifty wide steps angling sharply down and then turning, their end unseen. He climbed downward. There was a chill dampness as they went lower, and he sensed water somewhere around a bend. Jolson got three steps ahead of the ancient archeologist and then stumbled. "Son of a bitch," he said. He guarded his head with his hands and balled down a dozen hard steps and around the turn. There was an alcove and a flat circular place with what might be more steps dropping further underground.

"Alfred Gerald?" called Dr. Mezzrow. She sounded to be still where she had been when he began his

tumble.

Jolson groaned once. He flattened against the carved stone of the alcove, drew his pistol from beneath his tunic.

"You dumb spade, did you crack your head or something?"

Jolson stayed quiet. The old woman's booted feet shuffled closer; her metal cane clacked. The light of the torch quavered closer. When Dr. Mezzrow appeared, Jolson jumped and gave her two quick side-handed chops beneath the ear.

The old woman gave a hollow sigh and doubled up. The torch spun up and away from her dropping body. Jolson caught the light, keeping his pistol aimed at her. She made a rumped smack and stretched out on the stone floor. Jolson listened. No one else was coming from above. He got the old woman's hands behind her and tied them with the belt from her coverall. Then he hefted her and continued down. The next fifty steps ended on a wide stone shelf. There was no one here. Over the edge of the shelf there was still, dark water.

Jolson propped Dr. Mezzrow against a stone pole ornamented with carved climbing vines and flowers. He slapped her wrinkled face gently. "Bronzini, Bronzini," he said. "Wake up and let's talk."

The old woman's left eye clicked open first. "Alfred Gerald, what are you up to?"

"Bronzini, you can talk now or after I give you something from the truth kit," Jolson said. "I can use my own kit or the one you're carrying."

"Okay, Jolson," said the old woman. "It is you, huh?"

"Right, Bronzini."

"I got a tap on that nitwit Wheeler-Woolsey's office," said the Chameleon Corps agent. "But you didn't check in with him this time and I had to guess."

"You were Breezy Balmer?"

"I was. I didn't want to kill you. Just keep you out of the way for a while. You escaped from the mine shaft pretty fast."

"Why'd you kill the original Breezy Balmer?"

Bronzini shook his old lady head. "I didn't. That was that old bastard MacStone and his sidekick, the Estruma Kid. I happened to stumble on the body. When I learned you were coming as Will Mendoza, I

decided to double as the sheriff."

"Why have you quit being on our side?"

Bronzini said, "Well, Jolson. Well, I wasn't quite accurate and truthful in Riling out my original forms. You know, I didn't join the Chameleon Corps until I was twenty, not like you."

"So?"

"Before I became a CC agent I lived with a girl out here. We had a daughter. When I got this assignment, I figure I ought to look my daughter up. Mother's dead and I've been out of touch."

"Your daughter has joined up with Sunflower?"

"That's right," said Bronzini. "Those bastards at the Timbrook Foundation guessed I was a fake and who I really was. Then that snotty android, 26X, he told me about Marina. That's her name, Marina. A pretty girl, shy."

"How old?"

"Nineteen."

"You ignore her for twenty years," said Jolson. "Then you up and decide to kill people because of her."

"You're not forty yet," said Bronzini. "And not a father. You don't understand."

"Has Sunflower turned her into one of those Suicide Kids?"

Bronzini shook his head. "Not yet, see, Jolson. That's what they're holding over me. If I don't keep working for Sunflower, he'll implant one of those damn bombs and talk her into killing herself for the cause. The bastard has got some kind of power, some charisma."

"Who is he?"

"He's Wilbur Daniel Slack, just like they told us."

"Where is he?"

Bronzini nodded his gray head. "A half mile from us. That's the rest of Jirasol, the ruins of the ancient city. He's got three hundred or more kids living there with him and a hundred mercenary troops."

"What were you supposed to do with me?"

"Sink you in the sacred pool. I'm sorry," said Bronzini. "He's got a half dozen fake groups roaming the jungle on the lookout for any intruders. You came in this way and hit my team. I've been here doing this since I left you in the shaft."

"Okay," said Jolson. "You can give me more details while we're going into Jirasol."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm going to see Sunflower," said Jolson. "You're going to take me."

"He'll kill Marina if I turn against him."

Jolson said, "No, we'll stop him. We'll save her and the rest of the kids."

"How?"

"I haven't worked that out yet."

"You expect a lot on faith, Jolson."

"Or," Jolson told him, "I can drop you in the pool and come up out of here as Professor Maggie Mezzarow."

Bronzini said, "I want to get her out of there. You promise me you can save Marina?"

"I promise you I'll try."

"Okay, I'll help," said Bronzini. "Who are you going in as, not this spade?"

"No, as Lloyd or Bobby," said Jolson. "Whichever one comes down here to investigate first. I'll tie him up and leave him here until this is over."

Jolson untied Bronzini and gave him back the light. "You knew I wasn't a dame, huh?"

"Yes," said Jolson. "You're too masculine to be quite convincing."

"Damn," said Bronzini. "That's what those bastards back at Timbrook said."

The vast tower room was ringed with arched window openings, each grilled over with a cross of twisted

metal. Blazing suns were carved into the dome ceiling. From up here the remains of Jirasol could be seen. Heavy, blocky buildings, all stone, partially immersed in the richly green and scarlet jungle now. A single black bird balanced at one of the window arches, pecking in at a quarter of a sandwich sitting on a plastic plate just inside the grillwork.

The oval stone floor was crowded with machines. Portable computers, kidney machines, surgical robots, simulators, retrieval bins, a soft-drink unit, and jumbles of entertainment gadgets. Unfinished sandwiches, half-empty vinyl cups of milk and root beer sat on machine tops throughout the tower.

Wilbur Daniel Slack blinked when Bronzini pushed Jolson into the room. "What?" He was a small, fragile-looking man of nearly forty. Thinner now than in the photos of him in the PEO files. He had tousled, graying blond hair, and his blue eyes were pained and pale.

"I ran into a couple of kids on the way up here," said Bronzini. "They told me they were bringing this repaired data machine up here. I took it since I was headed for you anyhow."

Jolson, who now resembled a man-high white-enameled data-storage unit, rolled nearer to Sunflower.

"Why were you coming in here?" Slack asked.

Bronzini said, "To report on a successful mission."

Slack shook his head and began to get out of the metal chair he was in. "I'm at work, dictating some memos. Didn't my guard tell you?"

Bronzini, who was still old Maggie Mezzarow, nodded. "I figured this was important enough to intrude. So did your guard."

Slack ran his tongue over his cracked lips. "Now listen. This may strike you as an odd question. But who are you exactly?"

"I'm Ed Bronzini."

"You don't look it."

"Chameleon Corps, remember?"

Slack patted the tarnished top of a research machine and found a cluster of red pellets. "You don't realize the pressures that go along with my position." He raked four pellets into his palm and licked them into his mouth. He blinked again, inhaled with his teeth wide apart. He looked more closely at the machine top. "Oh, darn." He hopped around the unit and went to a refrigerator. Yanking open the door, he grabbed a beaker of yellow liquid and drank from it. Hurrying back to his chair, he took four more red pellets. "I got

the sequence wrong. It's supposed to be yellow stuff first, then red stuff." He yawned, blinked. "Yes, well, hello there, Bronzini. What is it?"

"I encountered the new Chameleon Corps agent while on patrol in the jungle," said Bronzini. "He's been taken care of."

"Chameleon Corps?" Slack made a sideways slicing motion with his hand. "I've got too damn much going around in my head, Bronzini. Coordinating all this, directing the ultimate salvation of this planet, being the philosophical leader of so many nice young people . . . it wears a man down. You can't shirk a calling, a vocation . . . but the strain is apt to tell. I got stuck in surgery last night until way after midnight. I didn't actually check a clock, but I'm pretty sure it was that late at least. I was implanting." He made a circle with his thumb and forefinger. "I love these young people, Bronzini, and I have no trouble getting girls to act as nurses. Well, you have to keep after them to wash their hands and faces before surgery, but they're sweet and cooperative otherwise. I can't, though, train these damn kids, not one of them, for surgical work itself. Too much trouble, they think. Same way at the university. Thank god, I got into research. Right?"

"Is my daughter," asked Bronzini, "still okay?"

Slack rubbed the circle of fingers across his dry mouth. "Who is she?"

"Marina, my daughter."

"Yes, of course," said Slack. "Stop picking on me. She's fine. As long as you keep doing nice things for Sunflower, he'll see she comes to no harm." Slack got up again. "Remember she volunteered to join me. She was tired of the kind of world your sort had made for her. She loves Sunflower and what he stands for." He opened a cabinet and took up a pillbox. "This is something some of the kids gave me. They all love me, all believe in Sunflower." He fingered out two blue spansules. "These stabilize the effects of the other stuff I have to take. Having a vocation, a destiny to fulfill is a fearful responsibility, Bronzini. You can go now. Goodbye, good luck. Take the rest of the day off."

Jolson rolled closer to Sunflower's chair as Bronzini departed the tower.

"Accuse me of things," said Sunflower, swallowing the spansules and washing them down with sour milk. "That doesn't taste too good. Accuse me and it's them anyhow. That's the problem. You do it for them and it's all right and they're happy and they say they like you. Put together exploding people and it's fine when it's for them but not when it's for me." He sat again and reached for a hand-dictating mike. "You have a conscience and they criticize you. Now, when I'm doing something good and the kids like me, they don't understand. No, it has to be all right and the strain is okay. Yes, that's right. You couldn't become a leader of something like this and be wrong. Right? Yes, it's okay. I should take better care of my things. No, I'm Sunflower. That's the important thing, to have taken on the name of this dead-and-gone religious leader, to assume the name of this philosopher of the ruins. Certainly it stands for something." He frowned at the mike, rubbed it on his chin. "I never feel good anymore. Not at all. Well,

that's to be expected. When this is over, when they're not in charge, then I'll feel okay. When the killing stops, the strain will stop. The way working for them had to stop." He stood, then sat again. "Stop it now. Things are going along fine. Didn't the Chameleon Corps man say he'd done something admirable? Something or other." He rose and walked to the arched window where the black bird was still pecking.

Jolson rolled up behind him through the clutter. He changed to himself and got an arm-lock on Sunflower. He tugged the frail man's pistol from his waist holster. "Okay, Slack," he said.

Sunflower twisted his head to look back. "You're like all these kids here. Not dressed, running around sloppy. I try to tell them it's not enough to have convictions, you have to have some style."

"Bronzini," called Jolson.

The Major returned. He held a pistol aimed at Sunflower. "Here's your clothes, Jolson. That's one disadvantage of doing machines."

Jolson slowly spun Sunflower around and let him go. He caught the coverall the Major threw and got it on. "Now we'll get to your communications center. Slack, and call in some help from the Political Espionage Office and the Provisional Government."

"You're going to make me halt my work here?"

"Yes."

"You don't seem to realize how important I am," Sunflower told him. "You don't realize how important I am to young people."

"But I do," said Jolson.