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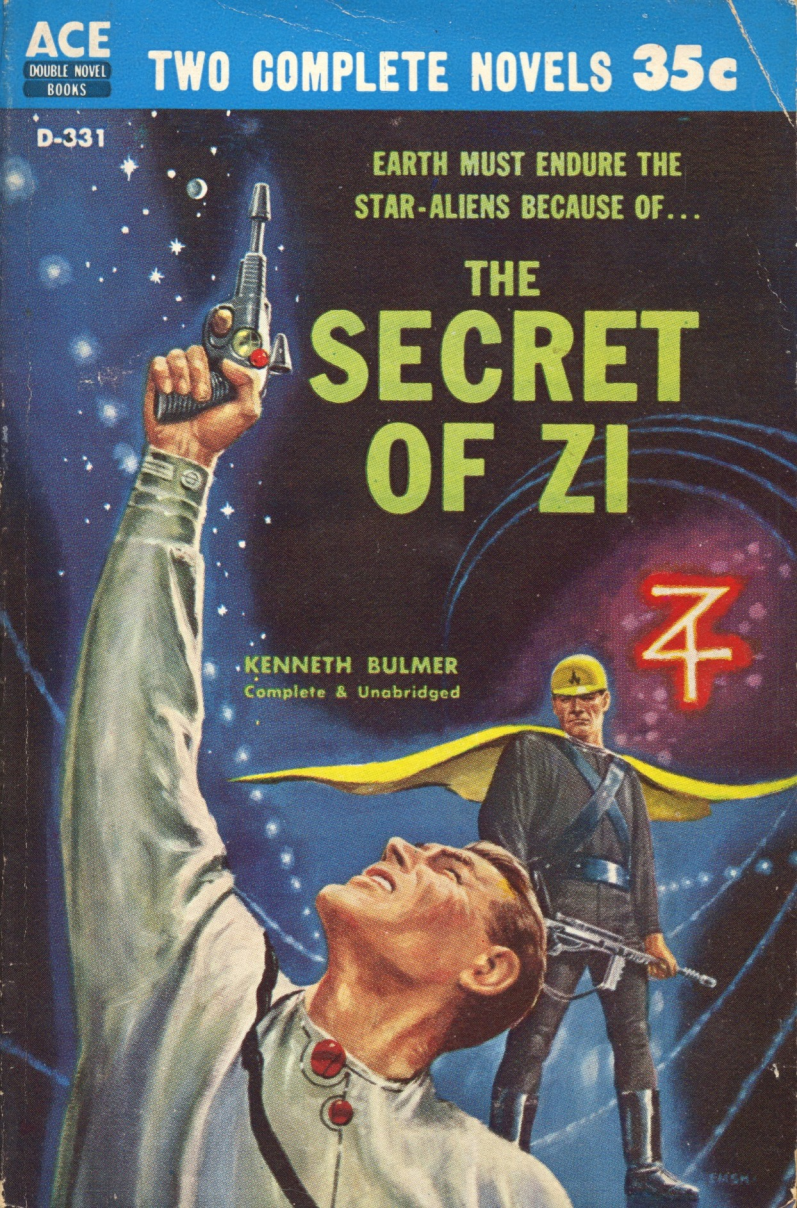
**EARTH MUST ENDURE THE  
STAR-ALIENS BECAUSE OF...**

# **THE SECRET OF ZI**

**KENNETH BULMER**

Complete & Unabridged

**Z**





## THE BEST-KEPT ENIGMA IN ALL SPACE

For something like two hundred and fifty years Earth had been dominated by humanoid aliens from the star world of Alishang. But man's spirit refused to be conquered. There was a world-wide underground planning for the day of final liberation. And there were four leaders who knew the secret that would guarantee victory—the secret of ZI.

Rupert Clinton, intelligence man for this underground, was not one of those four; yet somewhere deep in the recesses of his subconscious mind, he knew ZI's secret.

THE SECRET OF ZI is exciting science-fiction with action aplenty, when Clinton, not realizing that he possesses the forbidden knowledge, finds himself caught between his own forces, who fear that he may unwittingly give away Earth's last chance, and the aliens . . . both anxious to be rid of him, permanently.

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**Kenneth Bulmer** has been rated by *New Worlds* magazine as "Great Britain's hardest working science-fiction writer." A native of London, he has produced many novels and short stories, as well as non-fiction articles on scientific subjects.

Bulmer states that he has been reading and writing science-fiction for longer than he cares to remember, starting both while still at school in the early 1920's. During the war he served with the Royal Corps of Signals and published and edited a Service magazine in Africa, Sicily and Italy. It was while basking in the Italian sunshine that he first heard of an atomic bomb having been detonated over Japan—and thought it was just another hoax of his comrades.

He is an active member of London "fan" circles, but also includes among his hobbies model ship construction, motor racing and the study of the Napoleonic legend. His previous Ace Book was **CITY UNDER THE SEA** (whose order number is D-255).

# THE SECRET OF ZI

by

**KENNETH BULMER**

**ACE BOOKS, INC.**

**23 West 47th Street, New York 36, N. Y.**

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**BEYOND THE VANISHING POINT**

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**Printed in U.S.A.**

## CHAPTER ONE

HAD IT NOT been for the emotional shock caused by the murder, he would never have allowed himself to be trapped into driving his car on the highway at night. In an attempt at isolation that he knew would probably be futile, he had switched on all four headlamps and now drove looking from darkness into a bright dazzlement splashing the unwinding road ahead.

How long he could keep that antisocial behavior up without being stopped by a highway patrol was questionable; he was hoping with futile anger that he could reach the turn-off before they—

“Stop pretending,” he said aloud, harshly.

The highway patrol and the police had an understandable place in the reality of things. He had no wish to be picked up for a murder he had not committed; if only Sheila had listened to him! But it was not fear of the police that threatened his sanity now, nor anything that he could have given a name to if pressed by a psychiatrist.

Driving habit broke through his enforced ban and forced him to glance into the rear-view mirror. At once vertigo seized him. He was drowning in that tiny oblong of reflections. Stretching away into prolonged perspective, and ranked in undeviating lines, the road lamps seemed to be beseeching arms pulling him gently backwards into their embrace.

He caught the flicker of the nearer lamps as they rushed in blurring speed past the car, and a red, confused madness mounted to his brain. It took a compulsive effort of will to reach up and switch on the dome light. The movement broke the mirror's hypnotism; he could turn his aching neck and let his smarting eyes once more peer forward into the onrushing area of illuminated highway. He was trembling all over, and sweat lay cold and unpleasant upon him.

The automobile was a black spider unreeling on its thread of light, its four glaring eyes like pitiful antennae groping into the night. Somewhere above him black clouds massed, intermittently hiding the moon, and wind gusts prowled the turnpike and shook angry fists against the closed windows. Now that the dome light was on, it had become difficult to see through the glass. A defence against encroaching madness had brought also a new barrier against escape from that madness. Colored dots of light swam towards him from the darkness beyond his headlamps. Before he could interpret them, they had passed, gone in a silent rush of brilliance. He thought, in his confusion of anger and fear, that it had been the turn-off for Leinster. That meant that the next would be Clarendon. And in Clarendon he could use his hotel room to change his identity again. If he was extraordinarily lucky, he might reach the midnight airship.

The idea of simply stopping the car and walking occurred to him, to be immediately rejected. The whole idea was to get away, even at the enormous risk he was running, and he was well enough aware of police efficiency to know that they would pounce on any solitary pedestrian.

He was driving as fast as he dared, half-blinded by lights in wrong places. And through all his self-contempt for the completeness of his failure, he yet had sufficient control to restrain his twitching nerves from thrusting the throttle to the floor boards. He had to balance himself nicely between



too much speed, which would kill him in a smash, and not enough, which might allow either of the pursuers to catch him before he turned off this naked ridge of light.

He could still hear Sheila's shrill, hating voice, and it was easy to open his mind and let the memories come spilling in: of Sheila, standing, panting in her disheveled negligee; her husband dying on the carpet, with the fumes from the gun still stinking in the too-warm room; of Sheila again, loathing him, saying, "You'll never get away. No matter where you go, they'll find you."

And before that, his own voice, for all his training, betraying raggedly his horror, "You didn't have to shoot him."

Again he saw Frank, Sheila's husband, walking in, arrogant and assured, with the gun in his hand making very sure that he would no longer wear horns on his forehead.

The memories span the wheel of Time backwards ever faster. There was the memory of meeting Sheila, on instructions from Horner, and of making the big play for her. She had been wearing a white nylon blouse and skirt, crisp and pleated; he could see every fold as clearly now as though she were sitting in the car with him, but at the time he had scarcely noticed her dress.

And farther back still, he remembered old Horner saying, "Never forget, Rupert, that what you learn here may one day turn the scales in Earth's favor."

He remembered, too, a crystal-clear image of himself, young, fresh-faced, eager with that pathetic eagerness he could now only recognize with a cynically contradictory heart-pang of remorse, saying enthusiastically, "I understand, sir. You can rely on me."

And of old Horner, gray lips grim under the gray moustache: "You'll forget all you ever heard or saw here, Rupert. You will become an ordinary citizen until the time Earth calls upon you."

The turnpike swooped round a wide sweeping curve, and he held the car to it blindly. Farther back into the pit of memory his mind excavated, drawing pictures of flashing moments that at the time had seemed of supreme importance: of being selected for special training; of understanding just what a Double-I man was and what he might be called upon to do. And even as his mind leaped down the long corridors of memory, he struggled against that backward tread, guessing with a craven's fearful anticipation what lay at the end of that benighted journey.

The highway lamps flashed past his head now like tracer bullets. The turn-off to Clarendon and safety must lie only seconds away. But quicker than the speed of his car, quicker than the flashing wheels could carry him, the horror pounced.

It was as cold as death. In that cold lay blankness. And from that icy blankness streams of light burst and poured in a chain of fire.

His mouth was open and agape, his lungs expanded and bursting, his head flung back and his throat muscles rigid. Silently, he struggled to scream but could not. His fingers gripped the wheel to numbness. There was an awful hissing in his ears and his voice, in mental echoes alone, shrieked unintelligibly up the scale, piercing higher, octave by octave, until there was nothing but a bubbling silence that grew and swelled and burst in a silent flash of fire in his brain.

The car hit the curb, the front wheels jarred once; then it turned completely over, and smashing through splintering fencing, rolled three times and flung itself down the embankment. It lay obscenely in the darkness, its four wheels spinning under the stars.

The statistics that Doctor Eddington considered vital were those having to do with the job of a brain specialist and neurologist, with a post-operative interest on the psycho-

therapeutic level. To those fortunate enough to be associated with Doctor Eddington—including her patients—the statistics of the doctor that were vital were thirty-six, twenty-one, thirty-five. These, added to a smoothly waved crown of unrepentantly carrotty hair, and a mouth that, a complete stranger to lipstick, could raise goose-pimples on a man's spine, had created complications in the doctor's life, until it had been thoroughly understood by all that the doctor's one interest was the human brain.

"I don't know who you are," Doctor Eddington was saying to the man whose armpit-holstered gun had worn a shiny patch on his suit. "And I don't care what you want. This man is my patient and my duty is to him. You can't move him. That's final."

The man sighed patiently and tried again. He was about the same height as the doctor, but it was obvious that he was having to buy trousers with a larger waistline at distressingly frequent intervals. He had thinning sandy hair and the porkpie hat he ran continuously in circles through his fingers showed traces of hair on the sweatband.

"Now, look, doc, my partner and me—"

"Doctor, please."

"What's that, doc?"

"My name is Doctor Eddington. You call me doctor."

The second man broke in quickly. He was younger, with the freckled face and broad hands of a quondam farmer. "Sure, doctor. It's just that this man has to come along with us." He gestured around the operating theater anteroom, white, aseptic, efficient, chilling. "We understand your feelings, doc—doctor, but we can look after him okay."

"Don't talk rubbish! Do you know what he's—?"

Doctor Henderson, the senior house surgeon, gray-haired, flabby-faced, the husk of a once brilliant surgeon, harrumphed uncomfortably, and smiled placatingly. "You see, doctor,

these gentlemen are from the police. They must have a very good reason for asking this. They insisted I bring them to the patient right away."

The older policeman put his porkpie hat down carefully on a chair and visibly put on all the charm he was capable of. "My name's Grandison, doctor. It is absolutely vital that that man in there"—he nodded towards the glass doors leading to the theater—"comes with us now. We can take care of him."

Doctor Eddington didn't bother to argue it out. She knew that every second of delay might be the second that would kill the man lying in there with his skull smashed in. She walked calmly towards the theater and assistants opened the doors for her. Doctor Henderson half-raised a futile hand, and then let it drop. He looked vaguely at the two policemen.

"Doctor Eddington is a brilliant surgeon . . . remarkable. I really don't think that your police surgeons—begging their pardons, of course—could possibly better the care and attention your prisoner will receive here."

"How bad is he, doc?"

"He has multiple contusions and a number of fractures of the lower limbs, but they can be dealt with in the normal way. What Doctor Eddington is particularly concerned about is a depression of the occipital. We are not yet sure of its precise degree of extent and damage. The dura mater and the cerebro-spinal fluid have probably done their job as shock-absorbers, but in these cases there has to be—"

"Spare me the gory details, doc," Grandison said, and cut Henderson off in mid-flight. "He's been hit on the back of the head. So okay. Our skull surgeon could take care of that, couldn't he?"

Doctor Henderson might have been an old has-been, whose hands could no longer guide a scalpel with the precision of a microtome, but the semi-contemptuous reference to a "skull

doctor," coupled with the barely veiled insolence of these two policemen and his growing reliance on the judgments of Doctor Eddington, brought back a flash of the old fire. He put both hands in the small of his back and breathed deeply. "This man may be the criminal you say he is. But you are laymen and have no conception of the risks involved in what you demand. I have no choice but to refuse your request, and I warn you that if you persist and the man dies, then you will both be chargeable with murder."

Grandison looked at Henderson admiringly. "Big words, doc." He turned on his partner and nodded his head towards the exit door. "You heard the doc, Jimenez. Ring the Chief and tell him we're staying here. Tell him we're sticking to Harris like a plaster. It'll be a round the clock watch, so ask him to send along a relief."

Jimenez said, "Okay, Grandison," and went out.

"Now," Grandison said briskly, turning to Henderson and stripping off his coat. "Where's a mask and smock. I'm going in there."

"But you can't!"

"Listen, doc, and get this straight. Either me or one of my men will be on duty at all times with this Harris. Got that? At all times."

"But why?"

Grandison smiled and let his eyes scan the anteroom. Apart from a few white-clad assistants at the far end, he and Henderson were alone. He bent closer.

He said, "Just in case—under the dope, you understand—he wants to get chummy . . . talkative." Grandison stretched his shoulders under his shirt and began to unbuckle the gun harness. He took another look around and glanced through the glass portholes of the exit doors. His voice sank until Henderson in turn had to lean forward.

"Alishang," Grandison said quietly.

The old doctor's big flabby face jumped with reflexive shock. The pouches of skin tautened. But his eyes stared steadily back at Grandison. "If you'd told me that in the first place there would have been no argument." He moistened his lips with a furtive flick of his tongue. "But what have those swine got to do with—?"

"Never mind. And forget it. They've got stooges everywhere." Grandison chuckled nastily as he buttoned the neck of the smock under his chin. "We know we can trust you, doc. We haven't forgotten, down at Headquarters, what you did in the Twenty-Five."

"Ah, yes. The Twenty-Five." For a moment there was a stillness, a silence of memory between them, a moment of memory that could be shared by every Earthman on Earth. Then Doctor Henderson sighed. "I was a damned young fool then. Twenty-Five. A long time ago."

"Forty-seven years ago," Grandison said. He added, inconsequentially, "I was in the process of being born. My old man's told me a few of the things that went on."

"A damned young idiot," repeated Henderson.

"Like catching a couple of Shangs and running them through the sawmill—lengthways. "My old man said the whole interior of the saw shed was running blood."

"Red blood, like ours, Grandison."

The policeman's face started to go stiff and belligerent and hating, so that Henderson had to say, quickly, "Don't get me wrong, Grandison. I'm no Shang sycophant like that man in there."

Grandison puffed air from his lips, and smiled. "I didn't think you'd changed, doc. But you never know. You never know." He began to walk towards the theater doors. "Anyway, you've got me wrong, too," he said softly to Henderson as the doctor fell into step beside him. "Harris is no Shangsync,

either. But, knowing this, would you have sanctioned our moving him?"

"No. You'd likely kill him if you did. I gather, now, that he isn't a criminal?"

"Eh? Oh, sure, he killed this Frank Burgess all right. He'll be arraigned on a capital charge. But there are other angles involved." Grandison slapped the gun which he had placed in the smock pocket. "I'm only telling you this because you're trusted; your record is on file down at Headquarters. But you'll forget it all, now. Understand?"

As Grandison finished speaking, the theater doors opened and a smocked, masked man emerged, walking purposefully towards the doors and pushing an anaesthetics trolley. He brushed past Henderson and Grandison with a little tinkle of metal against metal from the trolley. Henderson gripped the policeman's arm.

"Perhaps I ought to mention to you—although I hate doing it, because I'm not sure—that I believe that man to be a Shang sycophant. He could have heard what you were saying."

"I didn't hear the trolley before, either," said Grandison.

## CHAPTER TWO

THE WASP Building rose from mid-Manhattan's East River waterfront, near the end of Forty-Second Street, an angular, uncompromising slab like a steel and glass book standing upright, waiting for the first page to be opened.

Two hundred and fifty years ago it had been known as the United Nations Building.

Today, it was the most hated structure in the world.

The Chrysler Building had gone, and over the area of its fall incredibly small ten and twenty story structures grew like pygmy brothers in a family of giants. Only half of Grand Central remained, like an apple cut cleanly in two. Standing majestically over the lesser monsters of the man-made forest, the Empire State Building still stood. Apart from that small area of destruction and apathetic reconstruction pointing like an accusing finger from the erstwhile site of the Chrysler, New York City presented exactly the same appearance as it had when the last decade of the Twentieth Century was drawing to its close.

The Lincoln Tunnel still possessed only five tubes; there was still a three-quarters of an hour wait to get onto the George Washington Bridge; and on the Hudson bank opposite Cathedral Parkway the piers of the Dwight D. Eisenhower bridge lay rusting and neglected; washing still blew from fire escapes in the Bowery.

And the Statue of Liberty lay twenty-five thousand feet beneath the gray rollers of the North Atlantic.

Tokyo, once the largest city in the world, had vanished, and in its place the scarred desolation left mute evidence of the holocaust that had raged unchecked for six cataclysmic weeks. There was not a single great city on the earth's surface that could not show some wound, some half-healed scar, as a permanent reminder of what had befallen humanity in that year of terror, 2025. All over the world, spreading in a delicate precision of control that was at once the despair and envy of surviving humans, the Wasp stations peppered the planet like ulcers.

But no building, no single center of Wasp authority, was



hated with the undying, implacable enmity reserved for the pile that once had been the United Nations Building.

Up until a few years ago, Terrans, when walking past the Wasp building (which they did only when completely unable to choose a different route), used to ceremoniously spit upon the paving. Wasps had stopped that, at last, by installing a roving patrol which seized any offender immediately, no matter of which sex, and administered an on-the-spot beating. The system worked. Even Terrans were smart enough to see that getting a beating for the pleasure of spitting didn't hurt the Shangs at all, but that it most certainly hurt the Earthmen. Thinking about that, Robert Ney realized that that was a typical instance of the simple methods by which the aliens from Alishang had first taken over the Earth and then completely subdued it to their wills by outright force.

Well, not *quite* completely.

He walked smartly past the two Earthmen on guard at the foot of the sloping ramp which was one of the few additions to the building. They were dressed in black breeches and tunics, crossed by leather shoulder straps. The buckles on their equipment and high boots glittered like silver. Their plastic helmets with the characteristic exaggerated peak, like some alien conception of a baseball or Mitscher cap, were a dull golden color. Their short capes were a flaring yellow. Their yellow kid gloves, this hot June day, were thrust through loops on their right shoulder. Their hands rested on pistol butts.

Ney had his usual retching feeling of impotent hate as he passed them, a horrible crawling sensation up his spine and churning in his stomach that consistently amazed him by not betraying itself to these watchdogs.

Wasps.

World Alishang Police.

Renegades.

Hated by men and despised by Shangs.

He walked past them and acknowledged their crisp salutes with an arm-cracking salute of his own that was a model for all his subordinates. He sensed their relaxation into their normal, watchful poise after he had passed, and took a tiny morsel of comfort from the fact that he could make them smarten up whenever he appeared. Somewhere deep down in his devious brain he kept, tightly shuttered and locked, his real feelings, and always he was aware of the vague horror that one day he might lose those feelings and become what he seemed to the outside world to be. If that ever happened he could always shoot himself—if he still wanted to, that is.

His office was on the twentieth floor, and the elevator girl, dressed in black and yellow nylon—a feminine counterpart to the Wasps outside—took him up without exchanging a word. She knew his floor, all right.

He turned sharp right outside the elevator and strode through the anteroom, and went into his office and threw himself into his swivel chair. Reports lay thickly on his desk. He rang for Jerome.

"Yes, sir?" Jerome was slight and stooped, with contact lenses and thinning hair and the blue stain from the ball point pen shining behind his right ear. He was a very clever man, and Ney always kept a careful rein on himself in his secretary's presence.

"Jerome, what is the latest situation on the Harris case?" He was abrupt, ignoring the report which was probably on his desk.

Jerome's eyes flicked towards one buff folder among the many, and then, almost resignedly, as though he was quite used to this sort of time-wasting procedure, said, "Harris is still in Saint Mary's Hospital, sir. The local police intend to arrest him as soon as he can be moved. I've given in-

structions that he is to be turned over to Wasp jurisdiction immediately."

"Immediately now, or immediately when he can be moved?"

Jerome did not flush, but his lips firmed down for a fraction of an instant of rebellion. Then, smoothly, he said, "As soon as he can be moved, of course, sir."

"I see no 'of course' about it, Jerome. What else?"

"His prints were on the gun, along with the murdered man's and his wife's. The woman is . . . is well, a little strange."

"Whatdyemean?"

"It's hard to say exactly, sir. She doesn't act as though her husband has just been murdered. There's a hard sort of vengeance in her; she said some pretty foul things about Harris."

"If someone had just shot your wife, wouldn't you say some hard things, Jerome?"

"I'm not married, sir."

"Oh!" Ney said impatiently. He snatched a tissue from the dispenser and blew hard. "I suppose there's no doubt that she was his mistress?"

"None at all, sir. She's denied it and is still denying it. We can't ask Harris, obviously, or the dead man. But the whole setup points to it. The neighbors' reports are all in there." He pointed at the folder.

"All right. Get me the local Chief on the line, will you?"

Jerome put the call through and Ney took the handset his secretary handed across. He breathed deeply and put on his official Wasp voice.

"This is Colonel Ney, World Police, here. This Harris. Can he be moved yet?"

The voice which answered him carried all those nuances of tone and expression that made Robert Ney feel very small

and contemptible and yet, at the same time, gave him an ever-renewed well of strength to carry on his work.

"Duryea, St. Mary's County Chief, here, sir. Harris is still unconscious. The surgeons say he won't be fit to move for at least a week. That's minimal time, sir."

"I understand. This is Wasp business, Duryea. I want Harris in our own cells as soon as possible. I don't believe that the Terran police can handle the case; there are angles. You understand that, Duryea?"

"Yes . . . *sir*," he said reluctantly.

"Good. I don't think there is any chance of his, shall we say, escaping. But I'm holding you responsible for him. I don't have to tell you the sort of trouble you'd be in if he were . . . mislaid. You understand me?"

"I understand." There was a new note in the voice in the earpiece now, a note of anxiety, of dawning fear.

"You've got a clean record down in Saint Mary's County, Duryea; I wouldn't like to see a blot on that record."

"Very good, sir."

"Goodbye."

He put the handset down before there could be any reply.

Jerome was still standing, perched on one leg, his face impassive.

"What the hell are you hanging about here for, Jerome? There's work to be done. That fool, tinkering in his garage in Dayton, blew an apartment house up and killed fifty people—men, women and children. That puts him squarely into the lap of Homicide. And that's us. I've had a word with Palmgren over at Invention Control and he's quite happy to toss him to us. The gadget the maniac was working on was completely demolished, some sort of matter converter. Palmgren was vague, but it's something that Alishang knows all about. So there's no danger there. We'll probably get him on first degree murder under the Prohibition of Experi-

mentation and Research Acts. Look into that, will you? That's all for now."

"Very good, sir." And Jerome went out, quiet, inconspicuous, and very deadly. Ney leaned back in his chair and thought about the first cigar of the day.

He tried not to think of the poor devil in Dayton as he cut and pierced the Havana and fired it up. But he could never rid himself of the oppressive feeling of guilt that swamped him every time he had to prosecute under the Research Acts. The Alishang were very sure of their dominance over Earth, but they discouraged any initiative, any basic research and experiment with savage thoroughness. The aliens who had come first in friendship, and then in morale and will-sapping treachery and finally in open conquest, desired to maintain every level on Earth just as it was. Technically, Scientifically, Economically, Agriculturally, in all walks of life, they maintained the status quo just as it had been that bright summer of 2025, two hundred and forty-seven years ago. They had handled the Earth, then and now, by keeping her perpetually in the same state of development; they could smash her at any time they willed, any time at all. Ney expelled a huge cloud of smoke and went to crush the cigar out in his ashtray; it tasted vile. Then economy, caution, fear of betraying any fraying of his nerves, held his hand poised above the tray. Slowly, he put the cigar back between his teeth and bit down. Thinking back to the Twenty-Five, of what his father and his uncles had told him, he began to feel better, and the cigar tasted more like the expensive Havana it was and less like a hank of tarred rope.

His telephone rang. No Terran in the Wasp building, however trusted by his masters from Alishang, had the privilege of a private line. Ney answered crisply.

"Bob? Meet you for lunch. The Windjammer."

"Sure, pleased to," Ney said. As he replaced the phone his face held an inscrutable look; at least, he told himself, he hoped it was inscrutable. If any Shangs could fathom what he was thinking, or any of their Wasp stooges, then he would very quickly be most unpleasantly dead.

He did not hurry going out to lunch, but he was in the Windjammer precisely as the hands of his watch were both perpendicular. The restaurant was well filled. Business men and women from the offices hidden behind the cliff-fronts rising on every hand met friends, called for drinks, found tables and talked the same supremely important trivia every office worker talks when let out for his mid-day airing. Apart from a casually contrived and yet very thorough avoidance of him, no one seemed to be aware that a Wasp had entered. The table he selected, half screened by a booth wall, gave him all the privacy he required. How many of those Terrans, cheerfully gabbing and eating, representing the higher executive portion of office workers with secure positions and money to blow on a good lunch, were, in fact, planted spies he did not know. Certainly at least half a dozen.

So that, when Raoul Palmgren joined him, there were two empty tables flanking the two open sides of his own table. Palmgren sat down with a grunt, wiped his forehead and cheeks, and patted his swelling stomach. "Hi, Bob. I'm hungry. Haven't eaten a thing since coffee break."

"If the Wasps pin another medal on you, Raoul, I'd wear padding, if I were you, just to be on the safe side."

"How's that?"

"You'd explode if they stuck a pin in you."

"Skinny runts like you always do envy a well proportioned figure. And we haven't got a lot of time."

The meal was eaten in silence. The two men presented a complete contrast: Raoul Palmgren, large, bulky, with the perfect skin and fair hair of a Viking, looking the hearty

extrovert; Robert Ney, thin dark, intense, with all the symptoms of acute dyspepsia. Neither view would have been correct.

When they had eaten they paid the bill in cash, with a little heavy banter about whose treat it was. They went through the glass doors and felt the heat on the street strike them like a physical blow after the air conditioning. But to Ney, the atmosphere had lost all stuffiness; the too easily sensed hostility to them as Wasps, the hate smoldering below the surface of every single Terran man and woman in the restaurant, stifled him in a kind of claustrophobia.

They walked slowly along the crowded streets, not bothering to dodge and squirm as everyone else had to do to make headway. A path opened up before them and closed in their rear. It was something they had grown used to, this royal road of progress; it lacked the cold ferocity of other ways in which Terrans showed their repugnance.

"Anything special, Raoul?"

"Condition Red. I suppose that means you'll be off on one of your mysterious jaunts again tonight?"

"You pass on the messages, Raoul, and leave me to do the worrying. You'll probably be on the Earth Resistance Council yourself soon, although I shouldn't even mention it to you; then you'll have plenty of time to worry. No special instructions?"

Palmgren was quite obviously seething with his usual desire to know just what went on in the higher echelons of Earth Resistance. He contented himself with: "Business about a murder, I'm told. Feller—"

They waited for a traffic signal and then crossed with, but not part of, the crowd. Ney had a little shock of pre-vision. "Who?" he asked, frightened that he knew the answer.

"Fellow called Harris. At least, that's what he's called

now. Expect you know about the case. Shot a guy with whose wife he'd been carrying on. Damned fool."

"I know. She's accusing him of everything, I hear, except of what he actually did."

"Really. That's what you have to expect, I suppose. Harris is unconscious, as you know. But the real problem is this—he might talk." Palmgren's face, like Ney's in the crowd mirrored only complacent post-prandial thoughts. "You see, Bob, Harris is a Double-I man."

The implications and possibilities exploded in Ney's brain. He forced himself to continue walking with that imbecilic look of surfeit on his face. "If the Wasps get hold of him, and he babbles while he's unconscious—inconvenient, to phrase it loosely." Ney thought of his morning's work. "Unfortunately, Raoul, I've just ordered him to be handed over to me, to the Wasps' Homicide Division. It's a Shang matter, now. I can't cancel that order."

Raoul Palmgren stared straight ahead. "If the Shangs get him," he said hollowly, "we're sunk."

### CHAPTER THREE

DAY AND NIGHT, night and day, at least one man sat at the bedside of the murderer Harris. Doctor Eddington, on her regular checkups after the operation, felt awkward, repelled, chilled by that implacable watch. It was uncanny, this silent, remorseless, painstaking surveillance. It smacked of the beady-



eyed poised waiting of a snake. At the slightest suspicion of a sound from Harris, the faintest movement of his lips, the smallest whistle of escaping breath, anyone in the room would be immediately hustled away from the bed by the watchdog. Crowded into a corner, with the watchdog's hoarse voice raised into a drowning smother of sound that cloaked anything the unconscious man on the bed might say, nurses, doctors, surgeons were forced to interrupt whatever they might have been doing until the spasm had passed.

Certainly, Doctor Eddington puzzled out, they weren't wanting to hear anything Harris might say. Rather the reverse. They wanted to prevent him from saying anything at all—which, when she thought about it, was rather odd behavior for the police, intent, as they were, on finding evidence on which to sentence him to death. But perhaps that wasn't the way the Terran Police operated. Perhaps that sort of evidence was inadmissible in court. Of course, with the Wasps it was different; they made up their own laws just as they liked.

She looked across at the watchdog sitting in his chair pulled hard against the headboard of the bed with Harris's head mere inches away, and could not find it in her heart to dislike the man. He was young, good looking, freshly scrubbed; not unlike the other youngster, Jimenez, and quite different from their immediate superior, Grandison. Grandison, for all his approaching baldness and stoutness, carried with him a sense of chilling efficiency. She closed the door quietly and walked slowly along the corridor.

It was annoying to have these police breathing down her neck all the time—Young Jimenez had had to be put very firmly in his place on the first night shift—but she supposed it was just one of the things that had to be borne nowadays. A little smile curled the corner of her mouth. As though she

had any experience of what life had been like in the old days, before the aliens from Alishang had come!

She knew what it was like in those days, of course, from books and films. The Shangs had made an attempt to scrub out all man's knowledge of his past along with their enforcement of the status quo, but to destroy an entire culture had been beyond even their star-begotten powers. So they had tried to put all Earth under glass. They had taken the world as it had been on that long-ago day in 2025 and said: "Halt!" And everything of progress and advancement had halted. Why, even the brain techniques were the same today as those developed by the late Brazilian school in 2003. And Doctor Eddington knew far too much about what would happen to try to conduct experiments to improve those familiar techniques. Not that she didn't interpret them loosely, when she was operating, of course . . . .

"Hullo, Doctor, you look pensive."

She looked up, smiling slightly, as Doctor Henderson fell into step beside her. He looked tired. She saw the bags and flaps of his face even more prominently displayed, and felt a quick spurt of affection for this old man who had helped her in her own career.

"I was just thinking how nice it would be to be able to experiment along the lines Vantuski was developing—"

"Doctor!" Henderson's reaction of outrage and fear was greater than normal. She quelled a quick flash of rebellion, being the one very clearly at fault.

Henderson went on, somberly, "You must not think like that, especially now. I'm no longer sure who is loyal among the staff. Anybody could be a Shangsync, just anybody." He turned to stare back the way they had come; the corridor was empty. "Unfortunately," he finished, looking at her, "that Spillersby has disappeared, and I'm certain he heard what

Grandison, the detective, was saying. And I wasn't exactly reticent, either."

"But you don't know Spillersby is a Shangsysc."

"With this sort of business only a one hundred per cent certainty is worth looking at. The slightest doubt, and you immediately suspect the worst. There is more than a little doubt here. Spillersby overheard; he has disappeared. I don't need to draw a diagram."

"What does Grandison say?"

"I'm expecting him here in a quarter of an hour. He's been to see his chief, Duryea. I anticipate action." He sighed. "But what *sort* of action is beyond me."

They walked for a moment in silence, emerging onto the sweeping balcony, fenced with glass and overlooking the marching ranks of trees sweeping up to the ridge of hills away to the northwest. It was very peaceful.

"Well," Henderson said gustily, changing the subject, "A most successful operation. That man Harris owes his life to you, my dear."

"I don't suppose he'll thank me," she said. "They'll sentence him to death, won't they?"

"Probably. Although Grandison tells me that the man killed was a Shangsysc of the worst sort. If the trial was left in Terrestrial hands, Harris might get off."

"But it won't be. Even I know that. The Shangs leave us local government; they let us run industry and all the usual functions of a people; they seldom intervene in any internal Earthly dispute, and they simply take their skimming of what we produce at the finished end of the assembly line. But just let us mess-up one of their little friends, and then see what happens!"

Henderson showed no surprise at her outburst. He took her arm and squeezed it affectionately. He could remember the time when her mother and father had been taken off to

the Wasp building in New York. After that, of course, no one had ever expected to see them again. Their expectations had materialized. If you messed about with Shangs or Shangsyscs and were caught, you were as good as dead.

To take her mind off that old grief, he said, "Against my own edicts, I'll express my own curiosity about this man Harris. I mean, he's murdered another man, a man admittedly a Shangsysc, and therefore best out of the way." Henderson laughed, shortly and bitterly. "And there speaks a civilized human being of the 23rd Century. My God, what we have become, we humans, during this alien oppression?"

"I can understand your humanitarian viewpoint with the top of my head, but I'm hanged if I can sympathize with it with my heart! I can't forget Earth's past. Not so much the greatness we might have achieved, but the individual lives—"

"Oh, Liz, come now! I hate the Shangs as much as anyone. But at least they cemented the bonds of world friendship among humans that had only just gropingly begun when they first landed."

"And that's a backhanded way of looking at it."

"So it is. But you have to make what you can out of the situations you find yourself in. A culture isn't all bad; it wouldn't last if it were. Look, we'd reached the Moon by 1975 and were all set to carry on out to Mars and Venus. And then these gigantic alien spaceships from another star landed on Earth in 1977. Well, it rather—"

"It took the wind right out of our sails!" Doctor Elizabeth Eddington's face was beginning to grow rosy. "They were all friendly and nice at first: exchanging information, telling us what it was like out there among the stars, offering to let us have one of their starships and the Negfield drive. And we fell for it! Hook, line and sinker!"

Henderson shook his head vaguely. "I suppose anyone might have done. They seem to have been so smoothly convincing. But what I was going to say was that the Earth was all set to blow up; you know as well as I do the stupid setup they had then. The U.S. and the U.S.S.R. growling and making faces at each other and acting like a couple of kids showing off to convince themselves that each was better than the other. And the rest of the world looking on and wondering how the pantomime would finish. At least, the nebulous idea of World Government was forced to become a reality when the Shangs began trading with us. From then on, of course, well, they just took over, bit by bit. It must have been very unsettling to have lived in those days."

"Very," Doctor Eddington said cuttingly. "But what about the great treachery in 2025, when they just made war and took over completely?"

"Well, it's obvious why they waited. They had lulled our suspicions and they knew our potential down to the last machine gun. And that's odd, too, when you think about it. When they started the war, we went under far faster than we had any right to. It was as though half our fighting forces were on leave."

"Or had run away."

"I don't know. We didn't run away either time in the Twenty-Fives. I didn't see 2125, but it was bloody. In the Twenty-Five—2225—I was in there with a knife and a bow and arrows I'd made at home. The Terran Police had their few guns. We made a mess of any Shangs we caught outside their bases."

Elizabeth Eddington made a snorting sound of disgust. "Sure! You made a mess of a few of them. A world-wide revolt, planned for a hundred years, and it lasted a week, then we were back under an iron repression again with over

three million casualties. And still the Shangs let us work in our old ways and produce for them to reap the benefits."

They had walked along the balcony now and were turning the corner to reach the twin flights of stairs curving down to the entrance hall. Through tall glass windows on the first landing they could look towards the main road. A low, black sedan was pulling off the highway and creeping like a beetle towards the hospital.

"Grandison," Henderson commented. "I'm worried about Spillersby. I'm too old to be mixed up in anti-Shang plots. If he heard what we were saying, and if he is a Shangsync—" He did not finish. Doctor Eddington looked at him obliquely, descending the stairs. His big body wasn't filling his clothes as it had done when she'd first come to the hospital.

"You just told me that in this business you had to assume the worst." The car had swung around on the gravel and halted before the hospital. They could look through the main doors and see it now. Elizabeth Eddington said slowly, "It seems obvious to me that someone wants to stop this man Harris from giving away a secret, or secrets. He killed a Shangsync, so that means he might be a thug for one of the undergrounds." She moistened her lips with a pink tongue. Henderson stopped sharply on the last step. His hand went out to her instinctively.

"You were with him for a considerable time, alone, before the police arrived, Liz."

"They must know that, too."

"Did he say anything?"

She hesitated, and then shook her head. Beneath the fine flame of her hair, her face was very pale and drawn. "I'd rather not say."

"I understand." He shivered. "The Shangs play rough. I know." The car doors slammed. Feet crunched the gravel.

Henderson pulled his coat straight and went down the last step.

"Here comes Grandison, and his boss, Duryea. And they're running."

## CHAPTER FOUR

"ALL THE LIVES of my command are in danger until Clinton is dealt with," Horner said flatly.

"But surely," Robert Ney said impatiently, "this sort of situation could have happened at any time. Double-I men are being trained all the time; they all know a certain amount of the preparations we are making. The whole system we've set up—the cell system that Cromwell here is so proud of—sees to it that if anyone blabs, then the Wasps can trace back the chain of command only so far."

"I know, I know, Bob." Horner brushed his gray moustache and sat back more heavily in the chair. The room rocked slightly with the motions of the swell as the tide ran out, and the air was full of the green damp odor of a tidal estuary. Electric light dispelled shadows with cunningly arranged interplays of radiance; outside, England was dark and warm under the midsummer moon. The houseboat was a mere darker shadow in the blackness along the river edge, moored with half a hundred other moldering houseboats and ancient motor torpedo boats and Thames barges.

Horner felt the tiredness and the pressures closing in on him. He looked past Ney to where Bennett sat calmly.

"So what is the special danger here, Horn?" asked Bennett, his limpid eyes and soft mouth and straight nose odd features for a cold-blooded killer with no other thought in life but the extermination of Shangs.

"The danger is simply this: Clinton—that's Rupert Clinton, his father was appointed to be Ambassador to Alishang but never got there, you remember—was being groomed by me, personally. I had him in mind for one of the most crucial positions when we . . . ah . . . when we moved."

"So he knows you, Horn, and could sing. Okay, so you move. You've moved around before."

Horner interrupted, raising his hands expressively. "Too late."

The man who sat hunched and quiet and wrapped in an all-enveloping army overcoat—a relic from days when Earth had possessed its own armed forces—moved a hand that was like a yellow chicken's foot of sinew and shrunken flesh, and moistened his purple lips with a sound like the dry rustle of a crow's wing. At once, the others sitting in the cabin of the houseboat fell silent. He pointed towards the emblem carved from ancient and smoke-blackened cork which hung, shield-like, from the low overhead.

"What does that tell us?" he asked in his vault-sweeper's voice.

"ZI," said Bennett at once.

"You are the newest member of the High Council of Earth, are you not, Bennett?"

"Yes, Cromwell." Bennett's classic features expressed nothing but polite expectancy. The others in the cabin waited with a tenseness that built up with each dramatic second old Cromwell allowed the silence to continue.

The shield was half split down the center, and black smoke marks colored the surface in umber and ochre. Deeply incised into the wood was a large, meticulously proportioned



letter Z. Depending from the center of the diagonal stroke and crossing the center of the lower horizontal stroke, a further line made a cross, hanging, as it were from the Z—ZI. The symbol that was one day to lead Earth from the tyranny of the aliens from Alishang.

"Yes," Cromwell said at last, "ZI."

There was a sighing and a shifting from the others as though some great obstacle had been passed, as though they had just emerged from a dark tunnel into the light of the upper air. Bennett sat back, puzzled. Robert Ney stepped immediately into the gap in the conversation.

"Horn's quite right. It is too late now. But the fact remains that I've issued orders for Harris—Rupert Clinton—to be brought in by my Wasps. I can't rescind that order. There must be some other way."

"I can think of a way." Bennett was matter-of-fact and cold and deadly. Instinctively, Horner raised a hand, palm outwards.

"No! Only in the last resort. I trained young Clinton and I like him. He's potentially very valuable. If we are to retain the respect of our new armies. then we can't just toss a man aside as soon as the going gets tough."

Cromwell rustled from his greatcoat. "Horner is right."

Before he could say more the electronic spy-ray on the deck outside was cut. The newcomer gave the correct answers and was admitted, bringing with him a gusting burst of damp night air. The overcoated figure straightened under the light and revealed a thin white face and two startlingly alive eyes. The overcoat was tossed aside. The man's face twitched every now and again, and his hands trembled.

"You're late, Steeger," Cromwell said hoarsely.

"I was being followed. I had to detour."

"You had no right to come at all if you were being followed, Steeger," said Bennett roughly.

Steeger blinked. "I don't think I was really being followed." He put a hand to his mouth. "Just that I might have been." He was starting to shake all over. "It's getting more dangerous every day."

"Give him a drink," Horner said. He controlled his voice and waited until Ney had rummaged in the locker and brought out the bottle. They all had a shot, except Cromwell. He lay back, wrapped in his overcoat, his thin face gray and oozing sweat continuously. Horner looked at the old man with compassion and affection. Old Cromwell was dying of cancer, but he was ninety-nine years old and refused to give up until he had seen the High Council of Earth achieve the function for which it had been designed, two hundred and fifty years ago. That design was so secret that even Bennett, an intimate of the other members of the Council, and the executor of terrible commands, because he was still young in the ways of the Council, had not been initiated into the profoundest secret the world had ever known.

Sometimes Horner felt small and old and frail when he thought of that secret and realized afresh that he was one of the only four men in the world—in the Galaxy—who knew it and what it meant. He guessed that the others—Bob Ney, Steeger and Cromwell himself—occasionally had that feeling of immense impotence. As for Steeger, the man was patently cracking up. When that happened, Bennett might find himself performing one more "function," thus becoming a member of the Four Who Knew.

Of course, Steeger, with his responsibility for all of Asia, had paralyzing problems to cope with. Horner, with Europe and Africa to look after, knew those problems, the way they could blow up and encompass in destruction all the careful planning of a decade—as witness this Rupert Clinton

affair. Robert Ney, with the Americas to look after, and Bennett, cutting his teeth on Australasia, would also be not unfamiliar with that frustrating habit of the Wasps of dropping out of the blue right into a beautiful scheme and killing it—and its participants—stone dead. He roused himself and Bob Ney put the bottle back. Ney was their inside man with the Wasps, but even a man as good as Ney couldn't be everywhere at once.

"All right, Steeger, here it is." Horner rapidly sketched in the situation concerning Rupert Clinton. He finished, "The operation was a success, but if this Elizabeth Eddington had only let our men move Clinton we wouldn't be bothered now. We've had information from the House Surgeon Henderson and from the local Terran Police Chief, that an anaesthetist called Spillersby is a suspected Shangsysc, that he overheard Henderson and a detective talking, and that he has disappeared. From that—"

Steeger exploded. "From that I deduce that the whole affair is known to the Wasps! The whole thing has been bungled, incredibly bungled! Why was any man so low down in the hierarchy allowed personal contact with you, Horner? And why was he assigned to watch this Shangsysc Frank Burgess in America if he was being groomed by you, Horner, when you are responsible for Europe and Africa? Are we all going mad, that this sort of thing is allowed to go on when there are only two more years—"

A number of voices suddenly broke in, talking loudly, blotting out what Steeger was saying. They were inconsequent, absurd remarks but they cut Steeger short.

Only Bennett remained silent.

The voices dropped. Steeger was half lying on the bunk under the curtained porthole, his whole body trembling, his face ashen, his eyes sparkling with abnormal brilliance.

"I think we had best decide what we are to do," Cromwell

said, his tones acid with contempt, "Instead of wrangling like pre-Alishang children. Rupert Clinton was trained as an International Intelligence operative. As a Double-I man he was told of our plans to overthrow the aliens from Alishang, he knows the location of at least one arms cache, he knows approximately twenty associates in International Intelligence. All very serious matters to be revealed should he fall into their hands or reveal information while unconscious. That was a very real danger, and was quite rightly handled as such by those on the spot by placing a man on guard at all times to monitor anything that Clinton might say in his delirium. However, the peril is not so great as it might be feared to be. We have had other operatives fall into the aliens' hands. In this case it is unfortunate that Horner, the Dougle-I Chief of Area, should be involved. I will add here, in parenthesis, and for the benefit of you all as well as Steeger, that I know the reasons for this and fully approve." He moved his bloodless lips stiffly. "It is the problem of Horner that must engage our full attention."

Horner said, "I was asked to put a man from my area on Frank Burgess and he was to work on him through his wife Sheila. Burgess is dead, so we'll never know the extent of his commitments to the Shangs. I . . . like Clinton; it was good training for him. But because he thought he was in love with the woman, and killed the husband, it's brought the whole plan, however unwittingly, into peril."

"He doesn't know about ZI—" Steeger began.

"Bob Ney can tell you the Wasps should have brought him in already. What he does know will add up to them."

"Not quite, Horn." Ney allowed himself to smile. "I sent a wire to Duryea telling him to hold himself ready to bring Clinton in as soon as he could be moved. That's what has saved us—and saved Horn here, so far."

Horner moved his shoulders uneasily and brushed his

clipped gray moustache. He was a man who liked to do things directly, even subversive activities. "Look," he said slowly. "Don't think I'm scared of being taken in—hell, yes, you know I am—but what I mean is, if it weren't for ZI I'd be quite happy to change identity and move on. I've had so many different covers. . . . We'll have to get Rupert Clinton out before your Wasps get to him, Bob."

Cromwell emitted his hoarse, rustling laugh.

"At last," he said bitingly, "we get some action."

"It means that Duryea and his men will be sacrificed."

"Tell them to do it. And then enroll them. ZI is nearly here." Cromwell relished the words.

"All agreed?" Horner looked around. Each man present raised a hand perfunctorily. Bennett raised an eyebrow. Horner shook his head. "Let the locals handle it, Ben. You're in charge of Australasia now, not a trigger-man anymore. Don't forget it."

"Kinda dull, though," Bennett said lazily.

"The next business on the agenda," Horner said, glancing at Cromwell, whose eyelids had closed, giving his parchment face a long, yellow horsy look, "is stepping up production of the Urals arms factory. Time is running out."

They would be talking late into the night, these five men—the Four Who Knew, and Bennett. Then they would take their private aircraft and fly innocuously back home halfway round the world to their ordinary, everyday jobs. An age of science bred a new sort of Resistance—a global underground.

## CHAPTER FIVE

LIGHTS. Strings of lights. Concussion. Wind. Fear—blazing, gut-petrifying panic. And silence and darkness.

And now he was groping upwards through veils like clinging, dewed spiders'-webs breaking through layer after layer of consciousness, back to an awareness of self.

Rupert Clinton.

Nol Nol That was danger, that name spelled disaster. He was Harris. That was it. Just plain Harris. But, he laughed weakly, startling himself, he'd lost the paddle of his boat. And the creek was a diminishing avenue of light, receding like beckoning arms, growing smaller and smaller until all blaze melted into one tiny, round, glowing eye.

A flashlight.

It threw a spot of light across his body. His body, swathed in uncomfortable clothes, was doped, strapped down, only his mind was fighting, like an animal caught in a snare. He was in a bed and this must be a hospital.

"Ease him gently, Grandison." A low voice. "Take his feet, Jimenez."

Movement. Rising from the bed, slow surging swings that brought him round to gaze at the ceiling and see the procession of dimmed lights marching past above his head. His eyes rolled. He felt sick. He made an inarticulate sound, gurgling, and the forward motion ceased. His eyes closed. He felt someone's breath on his cheek.

"I think he's coming round. Get him out of it quick, before he starts wondering what's going on. He might yell."

A low, different voice. "He won't yell much in his condition."

Movement again. Descending in rubbery, liquid oscillations that he realized must be his two bearers going downstairs with infinite caution and care. How had he got here? Car. Smash. That was it.

And then, in the same instant as he felt cool night air fan his cheek, he remembered. He recalled it all: from the time he had seen Sheila in her nylon outfit and had become blindly infatuated, only too happy to make love to her, acting, as he thought, on instructions from Horner to find out the truth about Frank Burgess; then the growing disillusionment, the shallowness of the woman, her pettiness, her extravagance, her cruelty—above all her habit of boring him to distraction. There was nothing to her. She was a husk, outwardly attractive yet inwardly—a nothing.

He remembered going to see her that last time, to tell her it was all over. He could see her pretty, vacant face now, suddenly assuming a mask of anger, of outraged vanity. That he, a mere Earthman, could wish to throw her over! He remembered Frank coming in, all the man's suspicions of the past weeks brought into the open, with the sneer on his lips and the gun in his hand. Then there was a struggle, Sheila's negligee tearing, Frank's sudden frenzy, the fear, the stark terror in his eyes as his wife took the gun and shot him in the stomach. It had not been pretty.

Sheila's blazing eyes seemed to haunt him now. She had taunted him, waving the gun, her hair almost stirring of its own volition.

"Sure, Frank was a Shangsysc; he was getting plenty of money from those alien monsters. But you had to break it up, and now you want to throw me over before I'm finished with you! Well, that's where you're wrong, Harris! Because I'm finished with you! And when the Shang police have finished with you, you'll wish you were dead—long before you are."

He could still feel the window smashing as he went through, Sheila's crazy voice still heard in his dreams screaming, "You'll never get away!"

And then the sheer insanity of attempting to drive at night on the turnpike. He could see now, in retrospect, that whatever he might have done, driving at night was the worst possible choice. Ever since he could remember the sight of lights flicking past had disturbed him. He could stand it as a passenger; he could always close his eyes. Even to drive at night could be managed only with difficulty when he was in tip-top condition; disturbed in his emotions as he had been by the murder, driving that night, he had asked for the trouble to fall upon him.

And it had come in coldness and blankness and bursts of light.

Something had happened to him when he was a child that caused this. So he had been told by Horner, although Horner had never known the truth; no one apart from himself knew what he experienced when the fits came upon him. And he could not explain what that was. Horner had just said, casually, that he had been in an accident when he was a child. It had been given to him as the explanation of why he had no father and mother and old Horner had had to bring him up as his own child.

It had been strange living a life with no knowledge of himself as he was when a child. All memories began for him when he was about eight years old. Most people, he had been told, could remember back to the age of four. But he could not explain why it should be strange; it did not affect him in everyday dealings; only when the fits came upon him, and he had become very cunning at avoiding any chance of bringing on the fits.

Except just after a woman he thought he had loved had killed her husband at his feet.



They bumped down more steps and then changed direction and he realized, swimming back to the present, that his bearers were walking over gravel. The crunch of their feet was loud in the silence of the night.

That silence shattered in the gunshots. The stretcher lurched violently. He felt no pain. He was securely strapped down. A voice said "My God! I'm shot!"

The stretcher swayed into jerky life. They were running with him. A man was gasping and groaning at his side. More gunshots sounded. Some were very loud, and he caught a reflected flash of fire from some tall, shining surface. The shininess disappeared, and he slid forward into darkness. Momentary panic assailed him; then he worked out that they must have slid his stretcher into the back of an ambulance. Somewhere more guns coughed, and an engine awoke to life. The ambulance started. Someone was resting a hand on his stretcher; he could feel it riding the swerving and lurching as the ambulance raced fast into the night.

A final fusillade, and then the ambulance was riding smoothly under full throttle. They must be on the highway. The memory meant nothing to him. He slept.

Colonel Ney, of the Wasps, paced his office fuming and swearing and hurling insults at the cringing form of Jerome. A photograph lay on his desk.

"Incompetent, bungling, slack idiots! I'll have 'em all in the penal battalions! Look at this!" He gestured at the photograph. It showed a gravel path with marks of many feet. In the center a man lay, sprawled, hat lying a few feet away, arms twisted out in unnatural positions. He was very dead.

"Duryea! The local Police Chief! Shot dead by my men!"

The impact of that would hit him later. No man who aspires to high rank in a state which prospers on evil deeds can shed responsibility for those deeds. Ney tried to ignore his

own culpability for the foul deeds done in the name of the Wasps. It was not easy. But sometimes, as now, there came a little reprieve.

"This man Harris," he raged on, "escaped—spirited away by the Terran Police—and my men do nothing. Jerome, you'll arrest every Wasp on duty there and await my pleasure with them. Now get out!"

Inside, he was full of joy because Rupert Clinton alias Harris had been rescued. He would have been even more happy if poor Duryea had not been killed. Nothing, it seemed, could be quite right and blameless in these dark days.

After the Alishang-spawned ships had reached Earth, traveling through the murky depths of something the aliens called "Negative Space"—and which had been traditionally translated by Earthpeople as "hyperspace," and which allowed them to complete the seven light year journey in a matter of weeks—it was not long before Earth and its people came to realize that these aliens had very little in the way of technology and science not possessed by Earth. Terrans had landed on the Moon in 1975; only two years later the Shangs had come, and for a time it seemed that a new world had opened its arms to Earth. The brief honeymoon was soon over.

The world was divided against itself, nation spoke anger unto nation. But the Shangs had the insuperable advantage of being one race united, so that with contemptuous ease they had infiltrated into positions of real power. They took control of the cartels, the monopolies and so tightly was the economy of Earth organized that a mere half-hundred cartels in their possession was enough to insure their full control of all Earthly processes.

They must have laughed.

Their great trump card was the negfield drive. With it they

could span the empty deeps between the stars, for they had other solar systems within their sphere of interest. On Earth they maintained a rigid hegemony buttressed by Earth people who put personal aggrandizement and fortune before thoughts of loyalty to planet. And those loyalties were nebulous in the extreme. Hungry bellies, starving wives and children count more than some vague ideas of the Earth as an entity in its own right. Planet against planet seemed as nonsensical a concept as nation against nation.

Where nature has a chance to operate under similar conditions, it is more likely than not that she will produce an end product of striking similarity, no matter what the distance between may be. Under a GO star, on a planet of approximately one gravity, with an oxygen and nitrogen atmosphere, with the succession of seasons in relatively approximate exactitude, it was not unnatural that the Shangs should be humanoid, that they should look superficially like a human being. There was nothing of the alien monstrosity about them—which was probably one reason why their conquest had been in three sharply delineated phases. From 1977, when the first landed, to 1990 they were all smiles and favors. From 1991 to 2025 they gradually unveiled their designs, crushing the working masses ever more closely into the mud that had never been far away, and taking control more and more overtly of all processes of life and economy and big business.

In 2025 they had unsheathed the sword, and Earth had submitted.

To many men, studying those times, that act of war had seemed nonsensical. The Shangs had everything they wanted without conquest of the naked sort. They took Earth's produce and shipped it via the negfield driven ships to Alishang. Why destroy twenty millions of humanity just to govern the remainder with an iron hand? Why destroy a million of those

a year until the final remnants realized at last just who were the masters?

That problem had one answer. And the Four Who Knew would not allow a whisper of it to pass their lips. They all carried the traditional hollow tooth filled with poison.

But the secret that the Four Who Knew carried locked in their brains was of far more importance than being merely an explanation of why the Shangs had attacked Earth.

That the aliens suspected was known. The Four extended their agents throughout the world. International Intelligence—itsself a name stemming from the times when men were subdivided against one another—as well as training and equipping underground armies against the day of reckoning, also insinuated agents into every walk of life to check on Shang activities. Murder was a common inheritance of the alien domination of Earth.

Spillersby, for instance, when he was found, would be dealt with exactly for what he was, a traitor to Earth.

The obverse of the coin operated, too, however. All men knew enough to beware of the Shangsyscs. Shang sycophants were everywhere. Double games were played as a matter of course. Thinking over the report he had had in from Bob Ney, Horner fingered his moustache and wondered just how successful they had been in evading the watchful eyes of the Shangs. Certainly, he could not have stood idly by and allowed young Rupert Clinton to go down to his death tamely and dishonorably. He owed him, and his father, far more than that. He'd been a young fool to have become so emotionally tangled with the woman. But he'd get over that soon enough. As for Frank Burgess, the murdered man, he had been a Shangsysc, and that was sufficient reason to forget him.

Horner looked up at the ZI emblem casually matched into his bedroom's cornice decoration and smiled. Even Bennett

hadn't yet realized—and only two more years off, as that doddering incompetent Steeger had been going to say. Horner's face grew grim as he contemplated the problem of Steeger.

The telephone rang. He stretched a hand from the bed. He was sleeping in this morning, so hang the routine. He answered. It was his secretary, reading a report from just one of his innumerable agents scattered throughout Europe and Africa.

"Yes?"

"This Clinton case, sir. Report in hand from Cape Town suggests that the Wasps have followed Clinton there. Request further orders."

Horner sat up, the bedclothes falling untidily onto the floor.

"Damn!" He thought about the trouble his own lapse of thoroughness was causing him, and cursed himself, condemned himself for wasting time cursing, and said brusquely, "He'll have to be taken care of. If you can't get the job done quickly and cleanly, then move Clinton again. Have you any information upon his condition?"

"Only that he is conscious, but weak. Therapy will be intensified, I'm told, and he should be walking strongly in three days. After that it's a matter for his own strength."

"Toughest young devil I've ever known," growled Horner, thinking. Then he said: "If they can't shake the Wasp, shift Clinton to the Antarctic. Okay?"

"Okay, sir."

Horner moved to replace the phone. His secretary had not hung up, and Horner could hear him breathing. Exasperatedly, he said, "Well, what is it?"

"That doctor, sir, you know, Doctor Elizabeth Eddington. She has disappeared. It is feared the Shangs have her."

## CHAPTER SIX

HE STOOD where Scott and Amundsen and Shackleton and Fuchs and Hillary had stood—not geographically at the exact same spot, but in the same segment of time cut from a different conception of what made up a world. It was a world of whiteness, whiteness and even more whiteness, until the sky bleached itself of color and painted its own whiteness over the land. That was the first time he was allowed aloft, warmly wrapped, with snow goggles, and two helpers at his elbows. In the succeeding periods on the surface, he came to realize that first impression of whiteness was completely illusionary; there *was* color here. Sensitive tendrils of pastel tints, delicate whorls of trembling illumination that broke like bubbles if he moved his vantage point.

He ate and slept and drew upon his reserves of strength until once again he was as he had been before that chaotic night ride away from a murdered man and his wife who had once been a mistress. The episode faded, as episodes will, until he came to believe that it had occurred to another man.

But soon he recalled the horror that had fallen upon him during the car ride in the night. And then the whole weight of the incident, its terror and remorse and horror, fell upon him again. Then his doctors would gentle him and talk profoundly and give him dope and tip-toe away.

Horner came to see him a week after his last attack.

The crisp military figure, with its gray moustache and crows'-feet fanning from the corner of brown eyes, did much to bring Rupert Clinton back into the present.

"Glad to see you're looking so well, Rupert."

"Thank you, sir. I do apologize. I know I was a damned fool, but, well—"

"That's all right, now. Forget it. You must get prepared for your next assignment."

"You mean—"

Horner smiled. "Look, Rupert. You are young, and the young make mistakes. It's a process of nature called evolution, growing up. If the young didn't do damn fool things and make mistakes they'd be old fogies with no life in 'em when they were thirty-five. So now just shut the mouth and open the ears. Right?"

Clinton warmed to this man, the only father-and-mother, he had ever known or ever wanted. "Right, sir."

"This is going to be difficult. I cannot tell you enough to make what you are to do make sense. But you will carry out orders unflinching. That I know."

"I . . . think I've grown up sir."

"One last word on that subject, and then we'll leave it. Any mistakes you may have made are attributable to me. I brought you up. After your people were killed, I took it upon myself to turn you into a man. God knows what divine powers I expected to possess for the task. So now you've got to remember that from now on, you're you. You are Rupert Clinton. You have an ego. Use it. All children have to make the apron-string cutting ceremony a part of their growing-up processes; I'm telling you now that you've done that."

"I understand, sir. At least, I hope I do."

Horner looked at Clinton. Then he looked away. There was the laying down of a burden in that withdrawn glance. Clinton sensed it, and mentally braced himself for the tasks ahead.

"You're going to Alishang, Rupert," Horner said.

Clinton did not reply. He was incapable of speech.

"When you arrive, you will meet a man called Alvarez. He is forty-eight years old, silver-haired, walks with a limp, wears a monocle and contact lenses. He is the Alishang agent for us there, and his cover is produce inspector at the Central spaceport. You will be working with him. Normally, you would be taking over, but . . ."

Horner stopped talking and his thoughts twined around the disability of being one of the Four Who Knew. Even with this boy, who might have been his son, there were barriers of knowledge that could not be scaled.

"Your job," he went on briskly, "will be to integrate yourself completely with the background. You will become just another Terran on Alishang during the day. But, during the evenings and nights, you will—"

Clinton interrupted, his face serious. "I'm not relieving him because of ZI, is that it, sir?"

Horner was completely cool and unruffled. "You believe this talk of ZI, Rupert?"

"I know the signs of ZI were painted up everywhere during the Twenty-Five. Very often, when a Shang or a Wasp is found down some alley with his throat slit, there is ZI carved on his forehead. That means something."

"We've discussed this before. The people of Earth had to have something they could pin their hopes to, some sign to lift their spirits. Man always cries out to God or the spirits of his fathers, anything to give him power that he feels he does not alone possess."

"Very often God answers, sir."

"Very often," assented Horner quietly. "He gave you back to me when I thought you were dead. But I cannot equate this talk of ZI with God. Do you know what ZI means?"

"No, sir. Nor does anybody, if you ask me. Oh, they've thought up all kinds of meanings from Zoroaster to the ultimate I as a cult of personality. But no one knows."



"No one knows."

"I've heard talk that a great revenge is prepared against the day, and that on that day the initials ZI will be explained to the world, and they will change into a fiery sword to sweep the aliens from our planet. Does that make sense?"

Horner passed his hand across his moustache, and then said decisively, "No, it doesn't make sense. There have been many legends in the past telling of mighty heroes laid to rest waiting to rise again on the day they are needed—Drake, Siegfried and the rest. This is just another wishful dream, I'd say, Rupert."

"And in the evenings I'm to do what, sir?"

"In the periods you are not working at the spaceport you will attempt to become a Shang. It won't be easy. But you should manage it. Alvarez will guide you there."

"Sounds interesting, if a trifle obnoxious."

"Obnoxious! Well, that's one way of putting it. The Shangs aren't fools, Rupert. You'll have to watch every move you make and triple check before you lift a foot."

"At least you taught me to speak Shang fluently."

"Just how fluently remains to be seen."

One of his doctors entered the little cubicle at that moment, carrying a glass with a ruby-colored liquid that Clinton recognized for the gunk he was supposed to drink every odd hour; the even hours it was a blue mixture.

He tossed it down, grimaced, and put the glass down, saying, "When do I stop pouring this stuff down me, doc?"

"Day after tomorrow. You've recuperated nicely here." The doctor, young and briskly efficient, glanced sideways at Horner. "May I ask you, sir, what you intend to order Clinton to do?" He coughed quickly to cover the *gaffe* "I mean, sir, physically. If he gets into a gunfight too soon, or has to go leaping over housetops during the next few days, he might have a relapse."

Horner chuckled. "I don't think he'll be doing that. He'll be sitting on his backside having a nice long ride."

The doctor said something suitable in reply, and then ventured: "I suppose no one has thought to congratulate you, sir, on the efficiency of this place? This hide-out in the Antarctic was a master-stroke, if I may say so."

"You may," Horner said frostily. "But you won't get any medals for doing it. Someone else was responsible for the planning down here." He thought of Cromwell, dying of cancer, and felt a physical pain that the old boy must soon pass away.

The doctor seemed reluctant to leave. Horner said, "Is that all, doctor?"

Clinton moved away, began to look through the tapes of the language spoken on Alishang that were racked over his bed. He selected one and began to thread it between the heads of his tape recorder. Horner began to become annoyed with the young doctor. The man stared back, and then nodded his head slightly. Horner got it and, standing up, walked across to the door and went out. "Won't be a minute," he said.

Outside, the doctor shut the door and took Horner's arm. "I didn't want to say this in front of Clinton, sir, but I'm not altogether happy about his condition. While he was delirious, he apparently rambled on at great length—oh, the usual stuff, about this woman Sheila and the murder. Not a lot about his work as a Double-I man, though."

"That's at least good. But go on, man, go on."

The doctor was considering his words. "He talked a great deal about driving a car at night on the turnpike. He evidently dredged up hidden memories, triggered by that experience when he was in an excited frame of mind."

"Well?"

The bombshell burst.

"He was talking about seeing long lines of light, marching into the night, rank after rank of them, shining as though they were tracer bullets. He didn't know what they were. But he'd seen them; it was no hallucination."

## CHAPTER SEVEN

THE CHANGE of plan did not disturb Clinton too much. He looked forward to a visit, however short, to England, and he had been told that from there he would go on the regular run to Alishang. Contemptuously almost, as though handing out largesse, the Shangs allowed the Terrans to operate a shipping line to Alishang. They provided the starships powered with the negfield drive. There was a booby-trap in all the negfield drives so that anyone without the know-how who attempted to get at one to find out how it worked would be very nastily blown to pieces.

Earth lost a lot of technicians that way. Then the orders went out, from that shady region of authority that men knew and respected, that no more men were to lay down their lives uselessly. All in good time, went the edict, we would find out all we wanted to know about the negfield drive. Come ZI day, said the masses: come ZI day. . . .

The jet-plane made a perfectly legitimate landing at London Airport, and Crawford made as legitimate a passage through the Wasp customs. Earth had no need of customs barriers any more; but the Shangs liked to keep a check on the movements of their subjects. Crawford and his compan-

ion, a stooped, middle-aged gentleman with a nose irrigated by the whisky bottle, were met by a hired car and driven rapidly to a small house in the southern suburbs of the metropolis.

Inside the house, with the front-room blinds drawn and the June afternoon stoking up the atmosphere in the rooms, the stooped gentlemen straightened up, detached his whisky nose and said, "Well, Rupert, that was a pleasant journey."

Crawfurd mentally tossed Crawfurd away and, as Rupert Clinton, said, "So you really are confident that we weren't spotted?"

"Sure of it. Wouldn't have come here if I wasn't."

The door opened. Horner turned, smiling. "Ah, Bennett, this is a pleasure. You haven't met my son—that is—Rupert Clinton. Rupert this is Bennett."

The classic profile turned to face Clinton full face. Clinton was aware of the strength, the latent power behind that handsome exterior. He extended his hand.

Bennett, taking it, scrutinized Clinton gravely. Finally, as though coming to a decision, he said, "I can see your point of view, Horn. It is a risk. But the final decision, as you say, is up to Cromwell. We meet him in an hour."

"Good. Let's have some food. The airplane must have curdled all the milk. I haven't had a decent cup of tea in hours."

They had a light snack prepared by the taciturn man who had driven them here. The hired car was parked a hundred yards up the road on a bomb site, another relic of the Twenty-Five. Once Horner and Clinton had their pipes going, and Bennett his cigar, they went out singly and wandered up the road and met at a telephone booth. The car drove up in a few moments and they entered. It was warm inside, but the windows were kept firmly rolled up. The car started.

Despite himself, Clinton had a drying-up sensation in his

mouth. Horner had told him, in carefully guarded phrases, of the legendary Cromwell. He knew him as the head of Double-I—no more—but that was an eminence of awful grandeur to a young man freshly entered the ranks of the freedom fighters.

Bennett was sitting next to the driver, with Horner and Clinton in the back seat. Presently Bennett turned 'round and said pleasantly, "Bert says there is a car following us. Big job. Four men. Could be Wasps."

The dryness in Clinton's throat vanished. Here was a situation he could deal with. Bert, the driver, increased speed. The car snaked up a hill, turned right-handed and then immediately pulled across to the offside of the road and stopped. Bennett reached under his seat and pulled out a violin case.

Horner laughed shortly. "Old-fashioned, Ben. I thought you knew that only Terran Police were allowed to carry firearms?" He spoke genially. "You're making us break the Shang laws, you know." There was an air of tight expectancy in the car.

Bennett handed Clinton an automatic and passed a second to Horner. Bert seemed to have a gun. Bennett himself fussed over a submachine gun. All the weapons were probably three hundred years old; Clinton's felt heavy and oily.

The following car swung round the corner with a quick thrust of gears, began to accelerate away to decrease the ground the driver imagined existed between him and his quarry. As the car flashed past, Bert said casually, "Local Wasps all right. I recognize that big feller up front."

"Follow slowly, and turn off as soon—ah! too late." Bennett rolled down the window on his side. "They've spotted us. Well, it's their funeral."

And then the world exploded about them. Clinton was flung violently upwards, his head caught the padding lining

the car roof, the door flew open and he fell out, all a tumble, to sprawl on the pavement. Intolerable heat smote him. Instinctively, he scrambled away. On all fours, feeling the road rough beneath, he scrabbled along and then, half-rising, more fell than ran to lie crouched against a moldering brick garden wall. He twisted over.

Standing, regarding him gravely, was a small girl, not more than three years old, dressed in a white, blue-checked frock that fell out gracefully in simple curves from her shoulders. Her hair was very blonde. She was looking at him with great interest, and her rag doll was temporarily forgotten, tucked up under one chubby arm.

The little tufts of dust that rose from the old brickwork made no sense to Clinton. It seemed to him a very long time before he heard the machine gun's noise.

Someone started to scream hysterically, a long way off.

From the corner of his eye Clinton saw the driver, Bert, running across the road. The man was a living torch. Then there was nothing else in Clinton's mind but the driving necessity of getting this little girl under cover. He groped forward, making idiotic, soothing noises, snatched her up, doll and all, and pitched himself bodily over the garden wall.

The sound of the machine gun racketed loudly and, quite distinctly, through its clamor, he heard the thud as the bullets struck the brickwork. Any minute now and the Wasps would be here in person. He thought of Horner and Bennett, and knew there was nothing he could do for them now that they couldn't do themselves. The child claimed all his attention.

She was begining a little whimper now, as if the game had suddenly turned a little too rough. Clinton could see a fiery glow reflected from the house front and gleaming in the windows. Even as he looked, one large window disappeared in a smother of glass and splintering woodwork. The car was burning like a torch; the Wasps must have rolled a thermite

bomb or something similarly deadly under it. Only then did Clinton recognize the fact that perhaps Horner and Bennett had not got out of it alive.

He raised his head cautiously over the wall, trying to keep in the flickering shadow of a straggly privet bush. The machine gunner was walking stiffly, the gun thrust at an awkward angle against his hip, striding down towards the burning car. Another man was just leaving Bert's blackened corpse and, gun in hand, was running swiftly towards the house. Clinton drew his own weapon and shot the man.

The machine gun sprayed everything; but Clinton, the child under his left arm, was running in a duck waddle towards the side passage of the house, unbending as soon as he had the angle of wall between him and the gunner, now fleeing down towards the back garden. Behind the house, a wooden tool shed, with a door sagging from one rusty hinge, was the obvious place to put the child. Then Clinton paused. The Wasp, rounding that corner, would spray everything with bullets. That wooden planking would be riddled. The child was rapidly becoming an embarrassment. The open French windows this sunny June afternoon provided the answer. He put the child down gently, forced a gay smile for her and, patting her little bottom, said, "Now run in there and find your mommy." She ran off at once, and Clinton heard a sudden whimpering screaming begin and die, and guessed the woman had never thought to see her child again.

He pushed other people's problems from his mind. He had to deal with a Wasp stalking him with a submachine gun.

The Wasp played it clever. He put the gun barrel around the corner and cut a swathe of death stomach high through a full ninety degrees, the angle between the fence and the back of the house. Had Clinton remained where he was, he would have been cut in two. In that moment of time between saying a mental farewell to the child and the appearance of

the machine gun, he leaped up and balanced himself precariously upon the open French windows. Now he gave a horrible choking gasp and, for good measure, hamming it up, fired a shot into the garden turf.

The Wasp fell for it. As he came 'round the corner in a rush of black and yellow, plus the ready machine gun, Clinton shot him. He dropped, the gun skidding across to pulp a beautiful little tree lupin, thickly covered with yellow blooms. Their scent cut through the stink of cordite.

The block of ice that had encased Clinton's mind since the moment the action had commenced, began to thaw at the corners. He was suddenly aware that he had killed two men. That they were Wasps should have been enough to have exculpated him in the eyes of anyone whose good opinion he sought, but he couldn't rid himself of the odd notion that they were just like himself, each probably with a wife and child. The shakes ran over his body, punished him, and left. He swallowed, walked across, and picked up the submachine gun. It might be useful in dealing with the other two Wasps.

Clinton put into operation some of the things he had been taught by Horner. He went carefully back up the side passage and reconnoitered. The road seemed full of cars and Wasps, and it was obvious that at any moment they would be boiling down that passage in search of their comrade. A handful of sporadic shots sounded; that meant that Horner and Bennett were still on the run. Clinton swung on his heel and ran down the passage, threw the submachine gun across the dead body, and carried on, over the rear fence and so out into the parallel street. He walked briskly away.

It had been some time since he was last in London, and today his only contact point was the house where he had been taken from the airport. He felt secure enough in thinking that the Wasps had no idea of his appearance; after all, he argued, they must have had the house under observation for a con-



siderable period and were waiting for a good haul before they struck. Then too they would make their arrests away from the house so that it might again be used by the unsuspecting Double-I men. But he had to go back there.

After a carefully casual walk, he arrived back at the suburban street, tired and thirsty, just as the long June day was thinking about turning over and going to sleep.

He was studiously careful in his approach.

He was wasting his time.

Where the house had stood was now only a blackened shell.

There were no inquisitive people standing gossiping at street corners and in friendly doorways; there was no apparent interest whatsoever in the ruin. The street was quiet. Too quiet. Clinton walked past the house as though bent on an errand, glanced casually at it, and then went on and turned down the first available turning. For the first time he began to feel worried. Here he was, alone in London, stranded, without a single friend to whom to turn for help. There was no way of regaining touch with Horner now; he made up his mind that he would have to put into effect the escape plan he had learned a long time ago during his early training. He would have to get out of London and go down to the school in Sussex, making suitable prior contacts, and from there wait until he could contact Horner again. He refused to sanction any thoughts that Horner might be dead.

Walking with an aimless briskness towards the local railway station, he contemplated ridding himself of the gun. There was a chance, however slight, that he would be picked up by police or Wasps on any stupid charge, and to be found carrying a gun would be a death sentence alone. . . even if that gun wasn't the weapon which had pumped bullets into Wasps.

The school in Sussex was his rendezvous point when in England, a means of regaining touch with International

Intelligence. The man and woman who ran it were brave, with a type of bravery that Clinton could understand and yet of which he could still feel fear. It was a trifle too cold-blooded for him although Double-I men were, by the very nature of their business, traffickers in cold-blooded heroism quite out of the ordinary person's conception. He wished he had a contact in London; he did not relish finding his way south to the Downs. But the cell system was so finely organized that a man might meet another every morning on the commuters' train to the city and never know, even till the day he died, that the other was also a member of International Intelligence. Old Horner had mentioned that a certain man had devised the system and was inordinately proud of it. Now, Clinton began to see the obverse of the coin.

He dropped into a small restaurant, one with the old coffee machines regurgitating on the counter and with plastic-topped tables, and islands of condiments. He ate quickly, and came out of the restaurant with an automatic check of the street. No one seemed to be following. He set off for the station.

He bought a single ticket to Brighton and found that he could either take an up train to London Bridge and from there cross to Victoria—and so take the last fast train down—or he could wait at this station for a slow stopping train that would deposit him in Brighton a few minutes before midnight.

"Relics of the pre-Alishang days, mate," the ticket inspector told him. "We can't put any new stock on, and when we want just to replace stock that's worn out them Shangs sniff around as though we were building a secret weapon."

"Do I look so hateful of Shangs, then?" asked Clinton.

The inspector looked at him quickly. "They've been at it again, 'round here, I hear. Blew up a car and then went and blew up a house. Looking for a feller, they tell me." He

studied his fingernails. His head was bent and quite defenseless to a sudden blow.

Clinton laughed. "If they ask questions—as they will—I'm sure you won't know anything."

The inspector raised his eyes to Clinton's. He was thin and stooped. Thin hair was plastered ineffectually over his scalp, and his eyes were weak and watery. He had a straggly mustache much stained by tobacco and his clothes were old and shiny. His face was expressionless.

"Why should I know anything, mate? I'm just an Earthman. I can't help them Wasps, now can I?" He laid a thin finger alongside his nose. "Course I can't, because I don't know anything. All I know is that ZI is coming."

The train came into the station at that point, and the closing doors sounded like an artillery barrage along the platform. Clinton walked through the barrier and caught a door just as a girl was swinging it vigorously closed. He turned and shouted, "Thanks. Guess you're right, mate."

He settled back into the compartment, which was empty, and considered afresh his chances. If all Earthman were as helpful as that, then his only fears were from the Wasps. The Terran Police would be happy to play the game as their local citizens dictated, or so Clinton believed.

The night darkened steadily until lights outside began to flash with demanding attention, forcing themselves on his tired brain with insistent power. He closed his eyes at once. He could not afford to fall into one of his fits again. He dozed. When, by the light of the electric lamp above the sign he saw the name WAGSHOTT HEATH, he alighted and walked slowly along the platform, gave up his Brighton ticket, and said to the porter,

"Station master about?"

"He's gone home, this hour of night. Can I help you?"

"Yes. Tell me where he lives, will you. Oh, and save that ticket for him. He'll want it."

The man's reactions in the indifferent light were not lost upon Clinton. His mouth opened and then shut. He slowly extended the ticket to Clinton and said, "You'd best take it yourself." He told Clinton the address.

The house was two-storied, brick-built and lightless. Clinton knocked. Long-long-short-short. Short-short.

Light glimmered fractionally above the door, and through the transom Clinton saw light and shadow writhe along walls and descend to shine through the leaded door glass. He leaned against the frame, feeling his tiredness seeping through his bones. He hoped that Horner was all right. He couldn't envisage a future which did not include his boyhood mentor. He thought of the doctor in the Antarctic base telling Horner not to let Clinton get into any gunfights, and the memory was sourly amusing. He knew he would not ordinarily feel as beaten as he did now; he had not been told the full extent of the injuries he had received in the car smash, but they must have been extensive by reason of the length of his convalescence and his heady weakness now.

The door opened. He braced himself.

The station master was wearing a red velvet dressing gown and held his right hand in his pocket. The bulge was revealing, but then, Clinton would expect such a man to carry a gun. Double-I men never knew what the night-time knock at the door might summon them to. Or to what treachery they might open.

"My name is Crawford," Clinton said. "I have to go to school. I need your help."

The man lifted his upper lip, stirring the black mustache and revealing yellow teeth. "I've heard of you, Crawford. Come in." Clinton obeyed and stood in the tiny hall. "Yes," the station master went on, his voice level and suddenly,

shockingly, full of hate. "I have heard of you, Crawford and have been waiting for you. As a good Double-I man it is now my duty to kill you."

He took the gun from his pocket and pointed it at Clinton.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

THE PART of her old life that Doctor Elizabeth Eddington missed most was the fresh-every-day challenge of repairing the human brain, of taking injured egos and, by whatever means easiest at hand, molding them and their bewildered owners into responsible citizens. A grandiose conception, she had often thought, and in conversation with Doctor Henderson had expressed her own fears that she was attempting too much, was trying to take over God-given powers never meant for the feeble minds of men.

Henderson pooh-poohed the idea. "Oh, no, Liz, the more we can understand about the human brain and mind the better fitted we are as a race to live in the face of hostile nature." Which, as they agreed after laughter, was just another grandiose conception. Especially with the aliens from Alishang everywhere.

But that, of course, had all been in the old days.

Now, Elizabeth Eddington was forced to watch human brains out of control of their guiding minds, was compelled to sit idly by and see men and women gripped in every stage of madness, and know with bitterness that she could do nothing to ease a moment's pain.

But, far worse even than that, was the macabre pretense she must maintain that she, too, was just another madwoman.

She had protested at the idea when Doctor Henderson had first suggested it, and he had said, "Well, at least it'll give you first-hand observation, Liz."

"But we don't *know*," she persisted stubbornly. "We don't *know* Spillersby gave us away. We don't *know* that anyone apart from ourselves really *knows* I was with Harris when he was rambling in delirium."

"No matter, Liz." Henderson had regained much of his old fire and decision under the pressure of events. "Your life is in danger. You must disappear." And so, here she was, taking the place of a poor girl who had died in the St. Mary's Hospital, committed to a lunatic asylum. The very idea of hiding in such a place seemed on the surface crazy; yet only a few minutes thought showed that with the peculiar advantages their profession conferred upon both Henderson and Elizabeth, such a hideout was a perfect camouflage. No one would think to look into an insane asylum, and Liz could be got out easily once the danger had passed.

That was the theory. Standing with one hand holding cold iron bars, and staring down upon a concrete courtyard where a few poor wretches walked lackadaisically, Liz hoped fervently that it would work out in practice.

Rupert Clinton's reactions, for all his tired and beaten body, were spasmodically swift and shocking. The station master had made a mistake. He should not have spoken before the gun was safely out of his pocket and aimed at his potential victim. Clinton swung his foot and the toe of his shoe slapped hard against the station master's wrist. The gun circled lazily in the air. Its thud, when it landed upon the carpeted floor, was surprisingly loud.

Again the station master played it wrong. Clinton let the

man dive first for the gun. When he went past, Clinton rabbit-chopped the back of the man's head. That finished the episode.

Sighing, Clinton picked up the gun, checked that it was really loaded, and slipped it into his pocket. He looked down at the station master. The incident had been so swift and deadly that no sound disturbed the night from the house's upper story, and Clinton supposed that the wife was still soundly asleep. He took an ankle in each hand and dragged the man into the first door in the corridor.

He did not put on the light. He found a curtain cord, ripped it loose, and bound the man's hands. His handkerchief, balled into the mouth and left loose, should serve as a gag until Clinton had the forthcoming interview along the lines he wanted.

He refused to think why a Double-I man had received instructions to kill him. That, he would find out.

When the station master had recovered consciousness, Clinton showed him the revolver. He said, "I suppose you realize that you tried to kill me. I shan't hesitate to use this on you if you don't tell me what I want to know."

The man's eyes rolled above the makeshift gag; but there was no fear in his face. Clinton pulled the gag away.

"All right, mister station master. Who told you to kill me?" He pushed the gun into the man's teeth and felt the metal grate on bone. "And if you yell I'll smash all your teeth out. Just talk softly. Well, who?"

"Orders." The man's tones were deadly, filled with the loathing men had when they talked of the Shangs. "Special instructions from area HQ."

Clinton knew then that he was stymied. The cell system ensured he could get no further back than that. This man took his orders; how they got to him was a mystery.

"Reasons? Good Lord, man, you knew I was a Double-I man. You must have been given a reason to kill me."

"Just that you knew too much for your own good."

"But I was coming to you for help. I'm a Double-I man, dammit! Why should they give orders for *me* to be killed?"

"You ought to know! You're a traitor! A rotten slimy little Shangsysc. That's what I guess."

Clinton waggled the gun. "Brave words, feller, when I could kill you like that."

"I'm a Double-I man."

"So am I!"

"And I've received orders that you are to be killed because you know too much. What more can I say?"

"No, you're right." Clinton stepped back, his face gray with fatigue. "I can't think right. Look, pal, I tell you I don't understand this at all. I'm not a traitor! That's impossible! Why, only today I killed two Wasps—"

A spring twanged above his head. A creak. Floor boards easing under the strain. Footsteps padding across to the door. The groan of a door opening. A sliver of yellow light down the stairs.

"Henry! Henry! What's going on down there?"

A high, imperious, demanding voice. The station master visibly wilted. Impossibly, Clinton felt himself smiling.

"Oh, no," he said. "The brave Double-I man, fighting for Earth, is a henpecked husband. That beats all."

"Henry!"

"Well," Clinton said sympathetically. "You'd better say something. Only," he added, waggling the gun suggestively, "it had better be the right thing."

The station master tried twice before he got out recognizable words. "It's all right, my love. Just a friend on business."

"Friend? Business? This time of night? Henry, you're up to your tricks again. I suspected that bottle wasn't what you said it was. I'm coming down."



"Nol" The station master's voice rang clear and true. Clinton heard the naked fear in it and was aware of the man's love for his wife, whatever her arrogance of nature and disposition might be. He couldn't fight against that. He couldn't battle against an honest man doing a job, called in the middle of the night to kill another man who, hours before, might have called him friend. Clinton knew he was beaten.

"Listen to me, Henry," he said, speaking softly and putting as much intense sincerity into his words as he could manage. "You get a message back through HQ and the chain of command. I'm no traitor! I'm a good Double-I man, working for Earth. Tell 'em I'll make contact again and I want fair play. I want a hearing! Right? I'm off." He went to the door and slid it shut. Through the crack he whispered, "My regards to your charming wife, Henry."

An angry and yet half amused shout answered him. But Henry wouldn't raise the alarm. His wife was descending the stairs and the stranger in his house was armed.

Clinton shut the front door behind him and went at a brisk trot down the path and out into the road. He set off towards the village of Wagshott, and the next contact he carried in his memory. The beauty of the system of using the railway as an underground was that he couldn't be traced by the Wasps. Even if they suspected him at the station where he had boarded the train, even if the oldster with the mustache and rheumy eyes and shiny clothes gave him away, they could search all of Brighton.

Then he halted abruptly, one half raised foot waving stupidly in air. It was no use going any further here! Henry would by now be on the telephone. A few well-chosen words, and the rest of the little Double-I cell here would be ready for him. He put his foot down slowly and cursed. The only consolation he had was that his message might be passed

along. If he tried to talk to the next man now, they'd be ready and, still under orders to kill him, would do so. Oh, sure, they'd pass his message along then.

But by then he'd be dead.

He walked slowly along the lane, with the rustle of trees loud in the night silence, and the hesitant babble of a stream bordering the lane running a counterpoint of music to his thoughts. Late June? No, must be July by now. He'd been losing track of time. With a giant moon just rising over the Downs, silvering all the trees and roads and rooftops, it was difficult to believe that he was a hunted man, fleeing from too-ready guns.

He'd best find some shelter for the night and sleep on his problems. If a car or truck would conveniently drive past now and give him a lift, he could be in any one of a dozen hamlets in time to find a hotel. The thought of clean sheets and soft mattresses, with a steak and a bottle of beer for food, almost made him break into a run. Well, it was a good chance. He'd just have to keep walking until he picked up a lift.

This part of the world hadn't changed much in a thousand years, apart from petrol stations and railways and paved roads; but even those symbols of modern life seemed, somehow, to become mellowed and gentle, a part of the landscape. Certainly the advent of the aliens from Alishang had been felt here in these villages nestling in the Downs with only the mildest of shocks by comparison with the devastation and terror of the industrial centers. That was all to the good, of course, and one of the reasons for International Intelligence locating their English rendezvous here. Clinton didn't know where the school was, of course. His contacts, who had proved singularly uncooperative, would have directed him there. He trudged on and waited with surprising patience the arrival of his lift.

It did not come. He walked right into the ambush long before his sleepy wits were aroused to any sense of danger.

"Grab 'im, George. Ah, that's it. Get those guns in his pockets."

Clinton struggled, then relaxed as hands jerked his arms behind his back. He felt the strength in the sinews, and knew that he did not yet have all his own strength back. "What's going on?" he demanded angrily.

"Now wouldn't he be surprised!" A general laugh followed this obviously witty sally, and Clinton estimated that at least five men were gathered about him now in the tree-darkened lane. They had chosen their site well. He could not see their faces clearly, and their coats and trousers were dark and merged with the hedgerows. Another form thrust itself close up to him and a flashlight shone in his face.

"Damn and blast!" The girl's words shocked him. He struggled again and felt those sinewy hands tighten excruciatingly on his arms.

"Just you bide yerself, then, when you're being talked to."

The girl said angrily, "It's not him. It's someone else."

"Someone else?" The whispered words traveled the rounds of the men, their deep voices burring with the inexplicable wonder of that. "Who is he then?"

"Never mind who he is," the girl said peremptorily. "The question is, where's the Wasp?"

"Ah. Where is he, is right!"

Clinton's head felt as though it were rising on jets to soar and ride among the stars. His stomach churned horribly. He cleared his throat, and said, "D' you mind taking some of that pressure off, pal? I'll pass out in a minute."

The girl said something, and the pressure slackened. His back and ribs felt as though they had been bludgeoned.

The girl's flashlight flickered across the road, blinked off

and on and off. "Bring him into the ditch. We'll wait."

She sounded terribly efficient and tough and just a wee bit, a mere breath, nervous, Clinton decided. So long as he wasn't to be killed right away, he was quite prepared to go along with these people. At least, if they intended to keep him prisoner, they'd have to feed him. At that, he perked up. They all bundled back into the ditch, and a rough bandage was lashed around Clinton's mouth. He spat it out and said to the girl, making it fierce, "I'm not in the mood to be gagged. I won't shout out. Just let me go to sleep." He yawned, and made sure she could see him, a mere black blob opening in a blob of white. "Wake me up when you've killed your Wasp and then we can all go home."

She gave a little gasp and Clinton repressed his smile.

That had got home. Then she rallied.

"You know," she said, still nettled enough to be angry: "You're lucky to be alive."

"I know. I don't know that I'd call it luck, though. Now, if you don't require my help in this Wasp affair, I'll just shut my eyes and doze off—"

Clinton had no need to fake his tiredness. He was asleep before he'd finished talking.

## CHAPTER NINE

FROM THE cold came blankness, and from the blankness streams and rivers and avalanches of light, bursting over him in silent eruptions of fire. He screamed. And, screaming, he awoke.

He was lying on straw, with a roof over his head. A yellow glimmer of a lamp throwing shadows at flat angles across the cross-beams and rafters above, very eerie, told him he was in the loft of a stable. He was shaking all over and sweating, and his eyes saw, superimposed on the friendly gloom of the stable beneath the flickering rafters another picture, a picture of lines of light all moving away towards some invisible point. He fought his panic, a grim, lonely struggle that, in his weakened condition, demanded reserves of spiritual energy that left him, when the spasm passed, mentally numb and emotionless.

"You feeling all right, now?" The voice was low and controlled, familiar, and comfortingly friendly.

"Sure," Clinton said. "Just dandy." He recognized the voice now; the momentary lapse of identification had come from the fact that the last time she had spoke it had been in anger and bewilderment.

"You were screaming."

"I'm all right."

"Words. You were shouting something about lines of light—"

Clinton put out one unsteady hand and pressed down, forcing his shoulder up and feeling the sickening surge in his head as his body moved. He blinked, trying to focus her in the dim light, seeing only a chestnut halo and the dark sweep of eyelashes. The rest was hidden behind a blue handkerchief, all but the enormous, shining eyes.

"Forget what I was saying. Who are you?"

"I . . . don't think I'll tell you yet. You're very weak. I've brought hot broth—"

"Hot broth!" Clinton put his head back despite the stab of pain and laughed. "Hot broth from a masked female murderer! Don't get your roles mixed, please."

He saw her stiffen up, saw the quick rise and fall of the blue handkerchief as she breathed an angry curse.

"You don't seem to realize that you've been unconscious for a day. Lying here, moaning and groaning and screaming; it's been no picnic, I can tell you. Quite obviously you've been sick, only just recovered. Your head is red raw at the back, the hair all scraggly where there is any. Have you escaped from a prison hospital?"

Clinton bypassed all that. She had not given any indication of surprise or annoyance when he had called her a murderer. He said, "You did that Wasp business, then?"

She shook her head. "No. We've been waiting every night now for two weeks. He has to come that way soon. When he does—"

"So it was no accident I walked into the ambush."

"No. We thought you were just an unfortunate late night traveler, and were all ready to dump you safely where you wanted to go when you passed out. The revolver and automatic also showed you weren't an ordinary citizen. So, I had to bring you here. And now you're going to drink this broth, if I have to hold your nose and pour it down."

"All right," said Clinton, meekly.

That set the pattern for the succeeding days. He was astonished and alarmed at his own weakness; the crack on the head must have been far more serious than he had supposed. He asked the date, and when the girl told him, "August the Fourth," he simply refused to believe it. She had to bring up a copy of the *Times* to convince him. He read eagerly, pushing aside the unpleasant fact that he had lost a month somewhere—and it wasn't since he'd landed in England, either.

The *Times* was filled with the usual Shang-inspired rubbish. Reports of increased food production keeping easy pace with the growth of population so that not only was there never

any fear of the shortages that had plagued mankind for most of his history, but the Shangs were able to absorb huge proportions of every produced article. The Earth, even after nearly two hundred and fifty years, had not yet replenished the human stockpile to the fantastic and dangerous heights it had reached just before they came. The system was rolling along in much its usual way, except that every major policy decision now had to be triply-approved by Shangs. No man now decided what he or his brethren would attempt to achieve upon the face of his own planet.

The girl persisted in wearing the blue handkerchief. It would have been absurdly simple to have reached up and pulled it off. Somehow, though, the idea repulsed Clinton. He owed the girl enough as it was without being gratuitously ungrateful and insulting. He had convinced her that he was not a criminal lunatic escaping from a Terran Police hospital; but she was astute enough—and it really needed very little observation and deduction—to see that he was not just an ordinary member of the Wasp-cowed public.

He realized that she must be a member of a Terran underground; but she couldn't belong to the group centered round the school and the station master, otherwise she would have settled his business by now. The conception of another resistance movement against the Shangs coexisting beside the one Clinton had known of all his life seemed, superficially, amazing. A few moments sober thought showed him that it was inevitable. The secrecy surrounding his own organization debarred many would-be members. Other men with determined wills would set up Wasp-killing outfits. It followed.

He read the paper every day after that, and asked for the earlier ones, the ones immediately following the brawl when the car had been set on fire. The papers did not mention that. It would have been impossible for them to have done

so, for if they had, then the editors and subeditors and reporters and typesetters and printers—and even the paper boys—would have been taken out and shot along the ditch around the Tower. No Terran believed the Press or Radio or TV any longer. Word was passed by word of mouth.

When Clinton had been idling, as he put it disgustedly, in the stable loft for a week, he caught the girl's wrist as she set down the empty plate and determined to find out all he could of the present setup. He felt a strange sort of kinship for this slim girl with the chestnut hair, enormous eyes and dramatic—and somehow pathetic—blue handkerchief.

"Look, what-ever-your-name-is, I'd like you to tell me just what goes on." He laughed. "I can promise you that I won't reveal any of your secrets." He released her wrist, and said meaningfully, "I killed two Wasps the day you found me."

"I know." Her words surprised him. "You rambled on about that, too. I know very little about you, but I trust you." She sighed, and made herself comfortable on the straw. Warm sunshine slanted through a dormer window in the roof and fell across her jodhpurs and lime green sweater. "It's very simple, really. This Wasp comes from Lewes. He visits a girl in the village upon whom he has forced his attentions. There has been little trouble around here for twenty years; now we feel that we ought to take care of this one vile man. We have measured the risks and are ready to face the consequences."

"Hum. You don't know what they are likely to be."

"No. But we can guess. My father will not stir a finger now." She was visibly distressed. "He is . . . not as antagonistic towards the Shangs as I could wish."

"Shangsyc?"



"No!" She drew away and her eyes blazed at him in the sunshine. "He was out in the Twenty-Five."

"So were a lot of people."

"I respect my father, and his views, even if I do not share them. What I am doing is without his knowledge. But down here in the country we are still an almost feudal, a personality-centered culture. My father would once have been called the Squire. The men look to me."

"What's your name? Can you tell me now?"

"Diana." She hesitated, and then added, "Diana Fortescue-Ewart-Napier."

"The Honorable, I suppose?"

"Yes. Does it matter?"

"Not any more. All that matters in the world today is one's feelings about Earthpeople as people and as kinsfolk in face of the Galaxy. . . if you see what I mean."

"I do. And you? Can you tell me *your* name?"

This time it was Clinton's turn to hesitate. He could revert to his role as Crawford, or even further back to Harris, or further back still. He stared at the girl. Then, slowly, he raised his hand and, gently, tenderly, removed the blue handkerchief from her face.

He stared for a long time.

That she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen he doubted, but the aliveness, the piquancy, of her features affected him profoundly.

He said, simply, "Rupert Clinton."

Her red lips moved, parted; she smiled.

He said, "And now my life is in your hands."

"It's safe, Rupert," she said. Something new had come into her face as she spoke, something that Clinton vaguely realized was tied up with any woman's feelings towards a bird with a broken wing that she has tended and fed and seen back to health and strength.

"Well," he said briskly, deliberately breaking the spell the warm afternoon under the eaves that had enshrouded him in. "Well, now we see about your Wasp. And then I must move on."

That night Clinton went out with the little hunting party, carrying his own automatic, scrupulously clean, and with Diana carrying the station master's revolver. They drew a blank. The other men of the village accepted him because their Squire's daughter vouched for him. The next day they talked desultorily, and Clinton stretched his legs around the courtyard, with Diana standing casually in the gateway, watching. When he walked up to her, stretched his arms, stamped his feet and felt the blood flow tingling along them, he knew he was just about back to full strength. It was a wonderful feeling. Diana helped in the creation of that feeling, too.

That was the night they caught the Wasp.

He walked along the road a few minutes from midnight, leaving his car parked in the hedgerow and heading directly for the girl's door. When they had finished with him, and a couple of the men, wearing gloves, were starting the car to take him away to dump car and all in the abandoned quarry, Clinton halted them. He took out his knife and, carefully, in the light of Diana's torch, carved letters in the Wasp's forehead. The blood shone redly.

ZI.

No one said anything. They all understood.

But how much did they understand? Clinton wondered, cynically, if the hope dwelling in every man's mind at thought of what ZI really meant had any foundation in fact. Horner didn't think so.

They walked slowly through the warm night, thick with stars and redolent with hedgerow scents, and said low-voiced good nights as the men one-by-one departed for their

cottages. At last, only Diana, Clinton and a gangling youth were left. He said "Good night," and turned, his tall figure black against the stars, down a narrow lane.

A hoarse voice shouted. A sputtering of shots threw vivid fire across the road. The youth gasped horribly and fell with a thud that was lost in the crunching run of a man's footsteps.

"All right! You! I can see you! The game's up."

Without conscious thought, Clinton had seized Diana and bundled her into the ditch. He lay half across her, scarcely conscious of her softness pressing into him, staring up wildly into the night. The footsteps grated closer. A torch swung, the glare passing low over his head. He ducked.

"I know you're there! Come on out, and save me shooting you in the stomach." The flashlight waved back.

Clinton remained motionless. Silence. Then soft footsteps, just loud enough for him to guess the Wasp was creeping closer. The torch went out. Wild thoughts thronged Clinton's head. Had this all been an elaborate trap? Had the Wasps known that one of their number was due to die this night and had let him go to his death, willing to allow that so that they could trap the Earthmen responsible? It was an old Wasp trick. A pebble grated at the very edge of the road.

How many men up there?

Carefully, hardly breathing, Clinton raised his head.

His eyes were still accustomed to the starry night even after the brief blindness of the torch. He hoped that the Wasp had blinded himself more thoroughly. He could see nothing. And then—was that a dark form there against the stars between those two trees? No. Yes. It was!

The darker patch seemed to swell, to blot out the stars. There came the chink of metal. One man? Clinton had no sure way of knowing, but he had to take the chance.

Without a sound he lifted the gun over the edge of the ditch and held it squarely on the advancing form.

What he thought about as his hand squeezed the trigger he did not know. Then everything was lost in the bellow of the gun and the flash of fire that stunned his eyes and left him momentarily blind.

Right after the explosion he was up, over the edge, flinging himself forward to crash upon the dark figure and bear it down in a weltering smother of arms and legs.

Tacky wetness was warm on his hand. The man was like a bundle of old clothes, tossed out for refuse collection. Someone was breathing in great stertorous gasps, like the pumping of a steam engine. It was only when he heard Diana's quick footsteps and her anxious voice that he realized that the gasping was his own.

"The only one, Rupert," she was saying. "Are you all right?"

"Yes." He struggled to his feet, feeling the dead man's body fall away and flop onto the road. "Yes. I'm all right. But he isn't. He's dead."

Diana's voice was cool and controlled, yet through her shell of composure Clinton detected, with an ease that should have told him more than it did, that she was worried, scared, a small frightened girl.

She said, "What do we do now?"

"Do?" Clinton said, bending and grasping one limp wrist. "Why, toss him in the ditch." He began to drag the body across the road. "Then forget him."

"But we can't, Rupert. Don't you see? We can't just leave him; the Wasps are sure to find him. And when they do they'll massacre the whole village."

Hard on her words there came ringing through the night the sound of hoarse official voices, the flare of torches and the approaching stamp of booted feet.

## CHAPTER TEN

COLONEL ROBERT NEY, Homicide Bureau of the World Alishang Police, straightened his impeccable black and yellow uniform and entered the office of General Kane, wondering if this summons was the final one. When you played a perilous double game, fighting for the ideals of a free Earth while pretending to bow before the alien might of the Shangs, any summons might be the last. He presented as calm and cool an exterior as he could. It was probably just a routine matter, something to do with the canteen committee or other foolishness.

"Ah, Ney. Job for your department. Right up your alley."

General Kane, area superintendent of the Wasps, could have posed for the portrait of the perfect fighting man in any past generation. Tall, broad shouldered, hair just tinged with modish gray at the temples, keen eyed and alert, he could have ordered the charge of cavalry brigades, directed aircraft in an attack upon a continent, hurled armies of men to die in mud and blood-soaked trenches, or issued the orders that would herd a million Terrans into concentration camps. In any age, it seemed, there was occupation for men of his stamp.

"Job, sir? Homicide business?"

"Not really, Ney. This is prevention of murder instead of its detection. This fellow Harris. You remember the case?"

Your men killed the local Police Chief and Harris got away. Damned poor show."

"I remember, sir." Ney kept his voice perfectly steady. A maelstrom of emotions battered at his mind.

"Well, we've now had information—a Terran friendly to the order, you understand—that someone was talking a little loosely when detectives came to arrest Harris. You will recall, no doubt, that it must have been by the connivance of the local police that Harris escaped?" His heavy irony was painful; it was not funny.

"You can't run a country without trusting someone, sir."

"I am aware of that. This report says that two doctors, Henderson and Eddington, were involved. Eddington has disappeared. Henderson was questioned, mildly, but maintained complete innocence. A lie, of course. Now, he, too, has disappeared. The only lead is that another report speaks of irregularities in a lunatic asylum about fifty miles away. There may be a connection; the two traitors were working on diseases of the brain; Harris was a brain case. Your job, Ney," Kane paused meaningfully, "is to find the two traitors. You're handling it because it is a chance to redeem your department in the eyes of the Shangs and also because it is business affecting the so-far unsolved Harris case. There's a lot more to it than appears. I know it. I feel it in my bones." He chuckled throatily. "And you know what that means."

Ney permitted a half-smile to curl the corners of his mouth. Oh, sure, he knew what one of Kane's bone-feeling spasms meant: more torture, more arrests, more shooting parties. "I know, sir," Ney said respectfully. "You have a hunch that will work out another victory for the Wasps."

"Too right, Ney. And you're in on this one from the beginning. Get to it!"

Standing under the stars with the night breeze rustling

the trees of a leafy English lane and with a young girl standing defiant beside him—while sprawled on the gravel lay the dead body of a Wasp, still warm—Rupert Clinton had to make a decision that tested every moral fiber in him, a decision that he tried to strip of all emotion and all cold calculation.

Calculation told him that it was his duty not to become involved with this petty local fracas but to leave at once, while there was still time, and make a break for freedom. Emotion thundered at him so that he could not desert the girl standing vividly close to him. Time was running out too fast. He could not, in that thrilling instant of peril, make up his mind.

So he did the only thing he could do.

With a heave and a grunt he snatched up the corpse, flung it in a clumsy fireman's lift over one shoulder, and ran fleetly across the road and onto the grass. Soundless on the soft underfooting, he fled down the road towards the house. He didn't even bother to call Diana to follow.

For a wild moment he thought he would outdistance his pursuers. Then, gradually, the clamor and tumult, as the Wasps advanced steadily down the road, faded and was lost in the murmur of the night. The glow of their flashlights dwindled against the sky.

She was running behind him, now. They turned into the gateway and, willy-nilly, crunched across the gravel drive.

"Where—" she gasped out, "Where are you taking him?"

"Well." He had breath for no more.

"I've got his gun and flashlight. Unless they see the marks in the road and the blood—"

"They will."

Clinton's heart was hammering now, and the blood pounded in his ears. But he had rounded the back of the house, past

the outbuildings, and was making for the decaying wooden cover over the unused well in the back courtyard.

"No good, Rupert," Diana was panting out. "That's the first place they'll look. If they don't find him, they can't prove anything; we might have a chance then."

"Where . . . else . . . then?" Lights were beginning to dazzle him now, sparks fired from his protesting brain.

"Inside the house. Priests' hole, I'll show you."

It seemed an age to Clinton before they had crept quietly, so as not wake Diana's father, through the rear door, up a single flight of stairs and halted before a paneled angle of wall. "Quickly," Clinton said. "We don't want blood everywhere."

The paneling slid back under Diana's fingers. Clinton went straight into the black hole and then blinked as she switched on the flashlight. It was a small space, dusty, bare, cobweb patterned. He bundled the corpse in and stood up, feeling the twinge down his back and shoulders, and gulped in musty air. "Whew. Quite a run. Now what?"

In the glow of the flashlight her chestnut hair gleamed like an aureole. She flicked the light about the priests' hole. "Only one thing for it, Rupert. You'll have to hide in here, too. If the Wasps find you covered in blood and with no explanation why you're here and no reason to be, you're a dead man."

"I suppose this funk hole is safe?"

"Quite. This is an old house; it keeps its secrets well." They were both regaining their breath now, their unsteady panting quietening, the fresh difficulties they faced beginning to loom largely in their imaginations. Diana went on speaking determinedly, with a little tip-tilt of her chin that, even then, brought a quickly-smothered smile of amusement to Clinton. "They aren't likely to find this hiding place provided you keep



quiet. It's a family secret that hasn't yet got into all the guide books."

"Food? Water?" Clinton looked over the hiding place that might, for all he knew, be his tomb. "I might be in here a deuce of a long time."

"I'll see to it."

How long they had before the Wasps instituted the inevitable house-to-house search that would follow the murder of two of their men, Clinton didn't know. Pretty fast, he reckoned. Even though the Wasps couldn't find the bodies, they would know two men had disappeared; they'd search in the hope of uncovering something to use as a clue, however small. And they might not be too choosy just what they did do. He gave a little grimace and looked down on the dead Wasp.

As soon as Diana returned, he said gruffly, "You know, if this Wasp and I are discovered here, it means both you and your father will be shot. It might be better if we pushed on. I could find—"

"Idiot!" She was genuinely angry. Two spots of color burned in her cheeks. "You'd be captured in no time at all. And you'd draw unwelcome attention to the village; I still have a responsibility to them, and I'm not having you mess it up. See?"

He did not reply in words. An insufferable longing compounded of loneliness, hatred of continual violence, and need for comfort, swept over him. She came into his arms almost as though she had been impatiently awaiting it. He kissed her.

And as they stood, astonished at what had happened, with the corpse lying sprawled in the corner, a clamorous hammering boomed up from the front door. The Wasps had arrived.

Clinton released Diana, forcing himself to think about the peril they were in. It was difficult, with the imprint of

her lips still warm and sweet upon his own. He stepped back into the Priests' hole and motioned imperiously to her. "Shut the damned door and act the innocent, my sweet. And don't get caught!"

The angles of her her face changed, the lips tightening up and the eyes going bleak. She blew him a kiss. "I won't. And keep quiet!"

The door slid shut.

Only then did Clinton realize that he had no light.

At first, it did not bother him too much, apart from that initial qualm that rippled down his body at thought of being shut up with a corpse in the darkness. It might not have been so bad had the corpse not achieved that status by Clinton's own hand.

He was annoyed to discover that his hands were trembling. Angrily, and with an edge of unacknowledged fear stirring, he struck an old-fashioned wooden match. Part of his training had always been to always carry a shilling, a pen-knife and a piece of string. Why those three objects he did not know. To them, however half humorously, half seriously, he had added a box of matches. In the cup of radiance, the dead man's face leaped out at him like your own face seen by the light of a match in a mirror at night. He dropped the match.

"Stupid idiot!" he grumbled, but immediately struck another. The man had been well fed, with dark hair thick on his neck and temples, and with strong bristle just bruising the skin around his chin. The mouth looked slack and foolish. Thankfully, his eyes were closed. *Its* eyes, Clinton corrected himself, and shivered. At once he brushed his hand around, thinking that it was draughty in there. He wasn't fooling himself. The match went out.

The third stick was in his fingers, pressing against the box, when sanity caught up with him. He was going to be in

this coffin for a long time; he might need light later. The matches wouldn't last for ever. He managed to push the match back into the box without spilling any though his fingers seemed numb. He'd just have to sit it out.

Toilet facilities existed down at the far end, an opening in the brickwork connecting with the house system. He took a sip of water in the darkness, just dipping his lips into the bucket. The water was warm.

Smell? Surely, he couldn't be smelling yet? Impossible. The body was still limp, probably; rigor mortis wouldn't set in for a time yet. The corpse couldn't be smelling yet—impossible! Clinton sniffed uneasily.

Then every sense came alert. Feet tramped past on the landing, going towards the back quarters of the old house. He watched the sliding panel carefully, waiting for a betraying crack or chink of light. If light shone in, then he couldn't have light at night inside. He waited, tensed up, as the noises receded. Nothing showed through the door. Pleased with the minor victory, he sat back. But had he been looking at the sliding panel? Suppose he had twisted 'round when he'd drunk? Suppose a light had glowed through a chink from the panel at his back while he had been staring hypnotized into the darkness in the wrong direction? He cursed himself for drinking, for losing his orientation, and began to crawl towards the panel to check.

He touched the dead man's face.

Not to cry out, to keep his tongue gripped between his teeth, was as cruel an agony as any he had known. Something wet dripped onto his nose. He raised a shaky hand, felt it vibrate against his forehead, slimy with sweat. He opened his mouth, releasing his tongue, and drew in a great gasping breath.

This way lay straight to a breakdown. Here he was, a perfectly sane, level-headed, healthy and tough specimen

of humanity allowing himself to become overwrought because he was imprisoned in a coffin with a corpse. Although, come to think of it, was he sane? He certainly, even now, wasn't back to one hundred percent fitness after the accident. And level-headed—for the very first time Rupert Clinton began to consider just what it was in this dread he had of moving lights, this fear of seeing lamps rushing brilliantly by.

Always before he had evaded the question in his mind, putting it off, assuming a mere hallucination. But of course, when he thought about it, like this, sitting in the dark, he began to realize that it couldn't very well be hallucination. He didn't know what it was—perhaps just a ruptured blood vessel in his brain, or perhaps a growth? Sitting in the blackness he grappled desperately with the problem, forcing himself to think of the one thing that might help him keep his sanity. From one horror he was forced to seek refuge in another; it was a ghastly sort of balance.

Balance. Like the time he had been driving along the turnpike, fleeing from Sheila and her dead husband, balancing his speed against his blindness in the light. Lights, flickering past, one after the other, receding in chains of brilliant dots. . . .

Light burst in on him abruptly, and a grating noise brought him upright, his mouth open in a soundless scream.

"All right, young man. You're safe. It's not the Wasps."

Clinton looked stupefied past the glow of light from the flashlight and vaguely made out the outlines of a tall man. He blinked and shaded his eyes with trembling hand.

He had to swallow twice before he could say, "Who are you?"

The flashlight beam whisked past him and centered on the dead man.

"Ho-hum. A stiff, eh! No wonder you weren't keen to pass the time of day with our visitors."

Clinton was waking up. "You must be Diana's father."

"You know, son, you're right."

"You. . . know, then?"

"Know? What, about Diana and her female Scarlet Pimpernel stunts? My dear feller, I wouldn't stop her for worlds, even though I think she's getting a little too old for this romantic rubbish now. Time we people started to adjust our thinking to changed conditions."

Clinton was remembering things now, odd references by Diana, a reluctance to speak of her father. He recalled her vehement denial that the old man was a Shangsysc. Clinton wondered. He essayed a probe, forgetting his horror of the dead man in the corner,

"You condemn me for killing this man?"

"But no . . . not condemn—deplore. After all, he is a man. Like us, you know."

"He's a Wasp."

"Wasp. Hum, yes. Red-flag word. Say it and you evoke an immediate, unthinking response. Have you ever thought that these men of the Wasps may think that *they* are right, that *they* are the repository of Earthly culture, that *they* look to the future, and your sort are the barbarians, those who hold Earth back from Galactic citizenship?"

"So you *are* a Shangsysc," Rupert Clinton said, a lifetime of inherited, indoctrinated and automatic repulsion forcing his reflexes along the only paths open to them. He had never known any other way of thinking, and circumstances now did nothing to make him suddenly and atypically change his mind.

The shadow that was Diana's father humped around, settled to the floor, and the light was extinguished. The absolute blackness rushed back.

"Don't want our friends nosing around here, do we?" The tone was light, conversational, an accompaniment of silver cutlery and tea trays and fragile china. "Shangsyc. Another red-flag word. Do you actually feel the adrenalin pumping into your bloodstream when you hear these words? Wasp. Alishang. Shangsyc." The shadow breathed gustily. "All you young fellers are the same. Pavlov's dog-sort of response."

"Your kind of talk sounds unpleasant to me. Even if you are Diana's father."

"Good grief, son. You don't have to be respectful to me just because an accident of nature made me the father of a damned attractive girl. She goes her own way, as you'll have noticed. I like to keep tabs on her, though." The voice dropped its imperiously hectoring manner, then hushed. "Can't talk loudly. Your pals are wandering around. Won't hear us if we speak quietly. Well built, these houses. This one especially."

"Why did you have to come here?"

"My dear feller! I don't want my daughter hauled off to be shot. Not on your life." He chuckled throatily. "Saw you dragging a body in here, didn't know if he was dead or drunk. But I guessed you'd need a little company. Seems I was right." Something tinkled and sloshed. "Here, take a swig of this."

Clinton stretched out in the darkness, found the bottle and took two fiery mouthfuls. It was good whisky. He handed the bottle back, and something of the macabre situation was borne in on him as Diana's father said, "Bung hol Bottoms up!" Gurgling noises followed.

"You were implying that ideas of fighting for Earth's freedom were wrong, were—"

"Not quite. Not your way. Not the way of violence."

"The Shangs are pretty violent in their own cute little way."

"So they are. But a people can have their own way without resort to violence. China absorbed its conquerors. Haven't you heard of passive resistance?"

"Heard of it?" Clinton said with contempt. "Didn't we try it? Didn't we employ all the psychological tricks of non-help, objective and subjective humiliation, playing dumb, passive resistance? I don't know how many millions lost their lives. I don't suppose anyone does. When you're arguing with people who don't mind how many of your folk they destroy; when they can marshal millions of dumb slaves into working for them so your passive resistance crowd have all that extra inertia to buck; when they are, quite literally, inhuman, all your neat little tricks are shown up as shoddy thinking."

The dark, heavy shadow stirred, the slither of clothes loud in the darkness, the sound of breathing oppressive, as though pressing down from all sides. The little room was growing stuffy. The old man said in his raspy voice, "All this nightly banditry and shooting and sabotage weaken Earth. We've got to find a *modus vivendi* with the Shangs. You talk about 'Freedom for Earth'—just what do you have in mind?"

"It's obvious, isn't it?" Clinton felt puzzled, angry. Outside, the quietness of the old house lay gravelike upon his consciousness. He had expected more thorough search than this from the Shang-inspired Wasps. A kernel of the truth began to swell slowly, imperceptibly, in his mind, like the first flicker of flame heralding an all-consuming fire.

"We've got to fight for Earth because we are of Earth; it's as straightforward as that. What's happening out there now? Why are they so quiet?"

"It's not so simple as that. Quiet? Maybe they're gone."

"No." Clinton stood up unsteadily, pushing his hands out as though he would support himself on the blackness. "No, they're not gone. Diana. They're asking Diana where we are

. . . foolish . . . should have thought—" His voice ceased.

From below stairs, sounding clearly through the still air and the paneled door, a scream knifed in at them, a scream that was chopped off even as it reached the full stretch of lung power.

"Diana," Clinton said. "Diana. They're torturing the truth out of her."

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

EVERYTHING seemed to be going wrong, and troubles and problems were piling up like massing thunderclouds, so that when Horner and Ney landed and went into the houseboat's close and friendly cabin they were disturbed just a little more than they relished by the bad news about Cromwell. Steeger, shaking like a dancing dervish was there, happy that he didn't fancy this time that he had been followed. Horner, his broken arm strapped in surgical efficiency to his side, brushed past Steeger, the level icy words of contempt and condemnation on his lips unuttered, and crossed at once to the curtained bunk.

Looking down on Cromwell, Horner tried not to think what it would mean to the old man if he didn't last the two years.

Of course, once he was dead, it wouldn't matter; but it was in the fitness of things that the leader, the man who had carried on so brightly the torch of Terran resistance, should last out these few hurrying years to see the end.



Thinking of old Cromwell, with his yellow birdlike claws for hands and his scraggy, corded neck and patient, indomitable will that, like Moses, had planned and fought for his people and seemed now to be debarred from entering the promised land, Horner was aware that his affections for Cromwell must in great part be the same affections as animated young Rupert Clinton in his regard of Horner himself. That was the way life maintained the thread. The flame of spiritual affinity, handed down irrespective of family or race or color—that was the great force that drove and sustained and uplifted the human race.

And now it looked as though, at one stroke of time, Horner was to be deprived of both the adjacent links of that chain. Cromwell was gradually losing his bitter rearguard struggle with the disease that tore at his body, and Rupert Clinton through treachery was a man marked for death. He thrust his concern for Clinton and Bennett from his mind and forced himself to forget the battle and the running and the fear when the car had exploded into flame, to ignore the flight and the eventual, cautious re-emergence into his old job, and drove his energies into dealing with the present situation.

A nurse was there, a pale wisp of a girl with fine blonde hair peeping beneath her starched white cap, and a trim, no-nonsense figure. She probably had a gun stowed about her somewhere; only members of Terran Underground could be allowed here, and the thought brought a rush of regret and self-doubt. Must all Earth's strivings to be free depend on the use of force? He sighed. It seemed they must, until the Shangs had been forced away from Earth, back to their planet of Alishang. The girl looked unsmilingly at him.

"You may talk to him. But do not excite him. He is very weak."

"All right," Horner said. He pressed Cromwell's wasted

shoulder, not caring to meet the eyes and see the dim light that now animated those once fierce fighting lanterns of the man's soul. The whole frame was woefully wasted and shrunk. It comes to us all, he thought, one day.

Ney drew him back. "We can't tell him about Bennett and Clinton, not in his condition."

"I suppose not. I haven't heard a word from Bennett." He put both hands into his pockets, bunching his fists. "That house was supposed to be safe. A hundred per cent cover. Yet the Wasps appeared almost as though they'd been waiting. Bennett seemed quite confident. He had a young arsenal there, but the Wasps countered everything we could do. I cannot believe that Clinton escaped; the last I saw of him he was running into another house with four Wasps after him." The whole thing flared up again in Horner's mind, once more chilling him with that dead dull feeling of impending age and decrepitude and inefficiency.

Steeger fussed about, quite obviously oblivious to the murderous thoughts that thronged Horner's brain. Even then, Horner could not find it in his heart to condemn the man completely, to write him off out of hand. He fretted over the realization that, with Cromwell in his present condition, he would have to make the decisions about Steeger.

"Well, how are things going now?" asked Steeger. "Time's coming up, eh? Time's coming up." He rubbed his hands in an ecstasy of anticipation.

Robert Ney turned away from Cromwell's bunk, his own dark rapt face carved as though in mutual suffering with Cromwell. "Not so loud," he said.

Steeger nodded and chuckled and bobbed his head towards Horner. "If poor old Cromwell dies, then you'll be taking over, Horn. How do you take that, eh? Feel important? We all carry a big—" He paused and looked about, licking

his lips. "We all carry a big secret, you know. Have to be careful who we tell."

Glancing casually at the indifferent nurse, who was doing tucking operations to Cromwell's bedclothes, Horner said, "That's true, Steeger. Why don't you sit down and relax? We'll be starting the meeting in a moment."

"Meeting." Steeger wandered towards a chair. "Responsibility, you know. Great responsibility."

"Sit down, for God's sake!" said Ney.

"Surely, surely," Steeger answered. He was still smiling, Horner saw, and again he felt that web of frustration that even here, in Earth's high councils, there had to be that personality clash, that enmity and misunderstanding that had plagued mankind for far too long. He talked to Cromwell, trying to find strength in that withered husk, trying to find there the power to carry on and appear calm and reassuring.

He was immensely relieved, and immensely astounded, when the photo-electric eye was cut on the desk, and Bennett breezed in.

Bennett looked fit, if a trifle drawn and dark about the eyes, and the bandage he wore round his head added a raffish air to his phenomenal good looks. He was smiling, exuding charm and that force of his personality that seemed to surmount obstacles by not admitting that they existed. He seemed almost studiously to be acting the bright, crisp, young and up-and-coming executive.

"Sorry I'm late, my plane acted up over the Timor Sea, and I had no wish to share the sharks' dinner as a prime part of the menu. How are you, Horn?"

"Busted arm." Horner started at Bennett. "Why didn't you let us know you were safe? Here we've been wondering and worrying—"

"Sorry about that, Horn. Things happened fast, even after

the fight. I suppose I figured I'd be here before; didn't realize the next meeting was so far off. Everything all right?"

"No. Everything is not all right; Cromwell's in a bad way. He's getting weaker."

Bennett was lighting a cigarette. He paused now, and the lighter flame glowed steadily, the illumination accenting his strong features and liquid eyes in a startling mask of light and gliding shadow. "Cromwell," he said, the cigarette between his lips barely moving. He lit up and took a long, satisfying drag. "Cromwell. I suppose it had to . . . hell, that's bad. I'm sorry."

"You've always been an extra on the council," Ney said, turning with his tight, intense smile. "A sort of supernumerary. I hate like hell to think of what you must be imagining, but don't bank on anything."

"I . . . I'm not sure I follow . . ." Bennett began.

Steeger chuckled, low and splashily, like a drain. "You'll be surprised, my boy. I can tell you—responsibility—"

"Suppose we begin?" Horner said harshly.

"You were lucky to get away," Ney said.

"Too right," Bennett said, and laughed.

After Horner had seen Cromwell and the realization had sunk in that he might, in a very short time, be the actual as well as the temporary leader, he had felt a vacuum in his bowels. He wanted to turn somewhere, anywhere, for support. He could count on Bob Ney; the man was fine-tempered steel throughout, except for his brain, which was ice and fire, and his heart, which tortured him with the responsibilities and stigmas of his job with the Wasps. Steeger could be counted out. The man was a broken reed. So it was that Horner felt a great relief at seeing Bennett again, a tidal wave of emotion that, if he had checked it, he would have seen to be out of all proportion to its causes. And Rupert

Clinton, upon whom he had been building the future, was now a hunted fugitive—if he weren't already dead.

He turned on Steeger now, his face betrayingly smooth to those who knew him, only the reflex clenching of his fists a revealing sign of his anger.

"Steeger, why did you issue the orders that Clinton was to be shot on sight?"

Steeger fought back with equal fiery anger. "Why? Surely, man, it's obvious, isn't it? After what you'd told us about him, what he knew, his father dying in space like that and the boy running about, all unknowing, running about like a burning fuse—"

Bennett followed the byplay in fascination.

"I only said he had the information," Horner rattled back. "I didn't say he knew. Your action was precipitate."

"My God! I like that! Here I take charge and avert a nasty situation when you and Bennett were helpless, Cromwell dying, and Ney shut up in the Wasp Building. The trouble is, Horner, you're too fond of that boy; you take too many chances. I made the decision and everything would have been perfectly all right, except that your bungling English fools let the boy get away."

"I'm thankful they did. I know that boy. I told you, he is destined for great things. What he knows will be valueless anyway in two years."

"Two years is a long time."

"Not when you've waited two hundred and fifty!" Horner hated this sort of scene, but he had to go on. "You're callous and frightened, Steeger! You've lost your sense of proportion. And you've no heart."

"All right, all right," said Ney soothingly, but soothing words were scorched to nothing by unleashed passions.

"You can't talk to me like that!" Steeger was flaming.

"You're incompotent, bungling, scared silly!" Horner was

openly shaking now, his face pinched and ugly. "I loved that boy like a son. And you give orders he is to be shot on sight like a dog—"

A horrible gargling rattling gasp stuttered from the bunk. Everyone whirled. The nurse swooped like a cat taking kittens from water.

"Please, gentlemen! Mr. Cromwell is becoming excited. If you'll keep your voices down. No, it's too late. He wants to know all about it. Now."

Horner stilled the others with a peremptory gesture. He was still riding the wave of his own anger. He crossed to the bunk and looked down, and his anger drained. He smiled.

"It's all right, Cromwell. Nothing important. We have good news for you, in just a moment." He looked at the others, and singled out Steeger. "You'd better report."

Sulkily, Steeger said, "Recce ship dropped out of hyperspace right on the button. They were there. Safe."

Cromwell's lips fluttered. Horner bent. He strove to hear, but nothing intelligible came from those bloodless lips. He straightened, pressed Cromwell's shoulder again, and went back to the center of the cabin.

"Good. Now, you, Bob."

Robert Ney began slowly. "Two items: one, I've had orders to find the two doctors who treated Harris—that is, Clinton—after his accident. I can do it, too. They're hiding out in a lunatic asylum only about fifty miles from St. Mary's Hospital. I suppose they thought it was a good idea. General Kane sniffed them out pretty fast. Now I have to arrest them. I don't think he suspects me and that this is a test, but it could very well be. I'm not boastful, but I sincerely think that my use to our organization is enough for me to be able to sacrifice these two doctors, even if I don't sleep very well at nights."

"We understand, Bob," Horner said gently. The tensions

of anger partially drained from the cabin under the impact of business. Ney made a grimace, and went on speaking, moving his hands together, palm to palm, as he spoke.

"The trouble is that the girl, Doctor Eddington, may have heard some of Clinton's ravings. We don't know."

Steeger interrupted. "She'll have to be eliminated."

This time, they all took it as a suggestion of policy. There was nothing in it, now, of hysterical reaction to extreme pressure. If the girl knew too much, then either they took her where she would be safe—Antarctica, say—or she was eliminated.

She could not be allowed to be questioned by the Wasps, particularly by General Kane.

"And the other item, Bob?" Horner asked.

"Had a note in from Palmgren of Invention Control. You know, by the way, he's getting more and more fed up with the job. I can't tell him it's only two more years; we may have to replace him. And that may not be easy. Anyway, he's rounded up a gang—Good Lord! No, I mean, he has rounded up a group of Terrans working on suspended animation. Their idea was to crawl into a cave and wake up a thousand years ahead when things might be different from what they are today."

"They will be," growled Horner. He brushed his gray mustache, his eyes bright on the quiescent bulk of Cromwell on the bunk. "Suspended animation, hey? I suppose he turned it over to the Shangs?"

"Had to. They were well aware of what had been going on." Ney let out a breath. "I wouldn't mention it but for the fact that it was almost exactly the same method as Doctor Ghananamba used. Which proves a point, like history repeating itself."

Bennett put a hand to his bandaged head. His keen eyes darted from one speaker to another. His face wore the closed

in look he adopted whenever these associates of his talked this cryptic shorthand, referring to a secret that he knew, one day, he also would possess. Until then, he must remain a junior member. His eyes reluctantly strayed to the bunk where old Cromwell was dying of cancer. Then he glanced back at Steeger, and withdraw his gaze from the room. Two chances. The day might come sooner than he had expected.

Robert Ney sat quietly looking at Horner. There was a strong bond between these two men. Each, in his time, had had to do many things that were sickening; they had come through much mental suffering and searching self-analysis, that left them hating themselves, into this cabin aboard a houseboat moored in one of England's forgotten riverways. Now they were having to face the knowledge that the responsibility for all Earth's future, the responsibility for the success planned by men long dead, was falling squarely on their shoulders. Horner took a long breath, slapped both hands down on his knees and said brightly, "Nothing happens to those who expect it to happen; we've got to take decisive action. The suspended animation thing can be left as it is. Ghananamba wouldn't thank us for making him superfluous." They chuckled, slyly. "Bob, you'll have to drag your Wasps' feet a little on Clinton until we've had time to frame a break out. I hate to suggest this, but the other doctor—perhaps he could be . . . you understand me . . .?"

"I understand, Horn. A filthy business." Ney looked up at the smoke-blackened wooden shield, split down the center, the carved letters ZI deeply incised by men long since decently buried, or shot by the Shangs. "I understand. I'll get the girl out; Raoul will see to that. Henderson may have to be taken in. I'll see that he doesn't suffer."

"I can't say, 'Good,' Bob," Horner said, "but I shall be



thinking of you." He glanced at Steeger. "What ships have you available, and what crews, Steeger?"

Steeger said at once, crisply, "There are three shipping lines operating out of Asia. All crews have been approached, with a hundred per cent satisfaction. They will be ready on the day."

"That's fine, Steeger. Bennett?"

"Two lines from Australasia. So far one is complete; the other has three Shangsys crews. They will be taken care of as soon as you tip me the time. We can then put in friendly crews. The shipping line bosses themselves are firmly for Earth."

"I know Bob's position. Six lines, about eighty per cent friendly. European and African, eight lines, ninety per cent friendly. They, too, will be a hundred per cent when the day dawns. That gives us three hundred and twenty ships. The armies of free fighters will have to be briefed very thoroughly, and as late as possible."

Bennett was sitting back now, looking at Horner with a little frown. Slowly, as though not quite sure of the propriety of what he was about to say, he said, "I've gone along with this sounding of interstellar shipping lines, and postulating the number of ships and men we can put into space on a quick seizure of spaceports. But—but I would like to know the answer to one question."

"Maybe, Ben," Horner said cautiously.

"It's a truism to say you can't invade one solar system from another. I mean, interstellar war is a fiction; logistics would be incredibly enormous. Even invading a culture lower in the evolutionary scale would demand supplies carried over light years of fantastic proportions. The Shangs infiltrated us, made friends, wormed their way in and took control; only then did they feel strong enough to invade. I suppose they're now advanced on us in science and technology,

even if they weren't far ahead when they fought." Bennett stabbed a sudden finger at Horner.

"I can't see the validity of going ahead on a plan that envisages the invasion of Alishang; you don't just want the ships to keep them out of the Shangs' hands." Bennett was deadly serious now. "I'd like to know a little more of our plans. All I can see before us is a colossal failure!"

## CHAPTER TWELVE

HENDERSON had been forced to seek sanctuary in the lunatic asylum; the Wasps had only twisted his arms a little, but the old man's fragility had weakened under the strain. He was older now, shrunken and gray, and his big face drooped in fleshless folds of skin. Liz wondered where it would all end.

Grandison was waiting in the hall.

Liz recognized him at once, despite the disguise.

"What . . . what do you want here?"

The portly detective this time betrayed himself by twirling a battered felt hat in his fingers. The same nervous gesture that could not conceal his chilling efficiency.

"Nothing serious, doc—Liz. Nothing serious at all. You're coming with me. Pack at once. We leave in ten minutes."

"Is it—?" Liz could not finish.

"Yes, they're following up. We leave at once."

A thought occurred to Liz. "What about Henderson?"

"You mean Smith? He's staying here."

"Yes. Yes, I mean Smith." She spoke dully, hating subterfuge. "But why? If the Wa—if they are coming here—?"

"That doesn't concern you. My job is to take you away, fast." Grandison, for all his efficiency, was wilting at the edges. He was clearly frightened, Liz saw, and the knowledge did more to unsettle her than anything else.

"I cannot leave," she said firmly, "without Smith."

"Look, Liz!" Grandison was pleading now. "It's our lives! Please come. Please!"

"No." Liz firmed down her mouth. "I'll pack. And tell Smith, Grandison. We'll go together. I'm quite sure you can arrange that with the asylum."

Grandison acknowledged defeat. His eyes were furtive. "All right! But for God's sake, hurry!"

As Liz ran across the hall and back to the stairs, Grandison said, "And God help the boss! They'll guess, they're bound to guess!"

When Liz returned, carrying a case in her hand, Doctor Henderson had been called over from the male wing and was waiting, pale and indifferent, with Grandison. Apart from these, the foyer was empty. No one else wished to become involved; it was transparently obvious what was going on. They went towards the doors.

"Late," Grandison was saying. "Late. Oh, damn and blast it all. Late. Hurry up, there!"

The doors opened. Uniforms crowded it. Black and yellow.

Grandison pulled out his gun and pulled the trigger twice before the slugs hit him. He still stood, a calm, remote look on his face. He said quite clearly, "As an Earthman I spit in your faces; I die doing my duty."

Then the machine guns cut him to pieces.

The Wasps ran across the foyer's tiled floor, knelt beside Henderson and Liz. Grandison's two bullets had done only

fifty per cent of their work. Henderson was dead. Liz still breathed. The bullet had missed her brain, at which Grandison had fired, knowing that at least she deserved a clean death. It had gouged out a piece beneath the right ear. She was unconscious. The Wasps lifted her and began to walk out of the door.

"A colossal failure, Ben?" Horner said. He rubbed his eyes and then extended his arms, stretching. "That's what we are dedicated to avoid. God, I'm tired! Hey, how about a drink, Bob? Steeger?"

"Surely." While the drinks were being arranged, Horner studied Bennett. The younger man, with his clean-cut features and hard, eagle look, sat composed and waiting for a reply to his question. Very deceptive, those handsome features of Bennett. He killed Wasps with a cold, loving ferocity. Horner knew, of course, that he couldn't be told the truth. Only the Four Who Knew possessed that; and the Four were all still alive. But, perhaps, a few hints. Bennett was brilliant; he might stumble upon the answer, although that was almost as unlikely as the answer itself.

"I'll admit, Ben," Horner began carefully, "that if we merely envisioned seizing the interstellar ships allowed to Earth by the Shangs, cramming them with troops and then blasting through hyperspace and invading Alishang—well, we wouldn't get far. That's not it. Only part. The men transported by the hyperspace ships have a vital job to do; a job that the assault training carried out in secret will prepare them for. They'll have to fight. They should enjoy that, fighting real Shangs."

"A real treat for them," Bennett said. "It's seven light years to Alishang, and you send these three hundred and twenty ships there, loaded with troops—troops, mark you, armed with conventional weapons only. Oh, sure, we've 200

millimeter howitzers and midget submarines with guided torpedoes and rocket launchers and tanks; you can't just suppress an entire planet's manufacturing resources, the task is too vast. But we've no nuclear weapons, no guided missiles, nothing that the Shangs need worry about. We're an army equipped with sword and lance, man!"

"I know. And I know that it is seven light years away that we must fight our battles." He chuckled, grimly. "All the world awaits ZI. They imagine that it is some great popular uprising, a sort of gigantic Twenty-Five. They expect us to fight the Wasps and Shangs on Earth. I was talking to Rupert about it. 'A flaming sign in the sky to sweep the aliens from the world,' he said. Archaic, though, and useless."

"Agreed." Bennett was hunched forward now, bright eyes fixed on Horner. "But the distances, the logistics—you can't support the army, even supposing they effect a beachhead."

"Alishang has four moons, none as large as Luna, but all sufficiently of a size to maintain a garrison. Imagine those four moons manned by men from Earth!" Horner's eyes, in the glow of the lights, were shining with a fanatic's zeal.

Bennett moved impatiently. "A wonderful conception. If," he added sourly, "we had weapons to reach the surface."

Steeger started to say something, but Ney cut him off sharply. "Let Horn handle this."

"Look, Ben," Horner said reasonably, "I could easily just say, 'Trust us. We have thought of everything. The plan we have, the secret, takes care of all eventualities.' But I'm trying to put your mind at rest by telling you as much as you must have already reasoned out. The trouble is," he added fretfully, "we really need more than just four to hold the secret. With one of the members in the Wasp Building, too much strain is imposed."

Horner broke off as a gargling grunt came from the bunk. A yellow hand appeared on the wooden edge, trembling,

straining. The nurse appeared silently from her corner, fussed, and when Cromwell had been quieted, withdrew.

"We had to appoint a man not in the secret to the council to take the strain of Australasia off Steeger's shoulder's. Only four." Horner glanced over at the dim bulk of Cromwell. "I wonder whether or not we might waive that rule, now, and tell Ben everything. After all, ZI is close, we've nothing to lose now—"

"No!" Steeger was vehement. "It's against tradition!"

"That for tradition!" interrupted Ney. He jerked his head towards Cromwell. The old man's spirit seemed to be pressing in on the cabin, peering down at them in the reflections from lamplit walls. "I say tell Ben! One way or the other, it doesn't really matter." Ney's face was dark with passion. "And it would give us a feeling of unity again."

"Planning has been pretty intolerable, recently," said Bennett mildly.

"No!" Steeger said flatly. He had lost all his shakes, all his fluffy panics, all his semi-incoherent ramblings of speech. He sat erect. "No," he said again, not looking at Bennett, keeping his face turned towards Horner.

"But why, Steeger? Why? It's only a little way off. Two hundred and fifty-one years we've had the secret," Horner said.

"The last two—" Bennett began. Then he stopped. His eyes went to the old, smoke-blackened ZI shield hanging from the ceiling. He put one hand to his face. He looked frightened. "Twenty-two seventy-four," he said at last, as though reciting a prayer.

"So that's one secret no longer," Ney said. He sat back in his seat with satisfaction.

"This is the situation, Ben." Horner said. "We usually make a little ceremony of it, but this time—"

A voice that spoke from an unfilled grave croaked through

the cabin. They all flinched, and whirled to face the bunk.

Cromwell had raised himself by some prodigious effort of will. Sweat streamed down his dessicated face. His eyes were enormous and preternaturally bright. His two hands, side by side, clawed the bunk, pressed against his chest, holding his thin body up with visible effort.

"Stop," old Cromwell said. "Stop." He fought for breath. "Horn, come here." A slow gasping indrawn breath. "Do not tell . . . Bennett. I know." His purple tongue rasped against his bloodless lips. "Horner, come here. Bennett must not know the secret."

Then he fell back exhausted into the bunk.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE SLIDING PANEL refused to open.

Rupert Clinton battered it with his fists, pressing in desperation at its smoothness in an attempt to open it. Gone for him now was any thought of the rights and wrongs of killing Wasps. Gone was any thought of his duty as a Double-I man, which told him he should break away from this little local fracas and take up again the problems confronting him in the wider world.

He could hear, ringing over and over in his mind, that single, agonized scream. What they might be doing to Diana. . . .

"Here. Let me."

Diana's father leaned past him, his shoulder pressing in hard leanness against Clinton. A click. A faint, barely audible squeak. The panel slid aside.

Clinton was out into the corridor, running down the stairs long before his brain and scheming mind had caught up with his impulses. The house was in darkness. A single strip of light glowed beneath the door of the lounge.

"Aliens come barging in here from the stars, telling vicious types of men what to do, messing up our lives, torturing girls . . . ." Clinton was mumbling in a low, harsh monotone to himself as he raced down the stairs. He was aware, in some remote, detached part of his mind, that he must be insane. The ordeal of being confined with a corpse, coming on top of all the other ordeals and trials he had been through these past months, must have unhinged his mind.

Not that he cared, right now.

The automatic, fully loaded, was in his right hand. His left grasped forward for the door knob. Then he paused. No sound penetrated now from the room within.

He knelt quickly, hearing his knees crack, and peered through the keyhole. Brightness blinded him. When he could see, the room seemed empty. He swiveled his eye and head, trying to peer round corners. A man's leg and hand. The hand holding a club. Black trousers with yellow stripes.

Very good. The other side. Back of a chesterfield. No one—yes, the flicker of a man's face smoking a cigarette. The face vanished. The cigarette, held in one negligent hand, took its place. Very good.

His training as a Double-I man was coming back now, beating down the black tide of anger welling from his emotions and channeled past his higher brain centers. Now his mind was taking over; being committed, it began to think.

He had forgotten Diana's father. He wouldn't help, anyway. At least two men. More likely more. No more screams,



so Diana had fainted. Time. Just a little. Time to trick them.

He went quickly to the front door, eased it open, the chain was wrenched off—and peered cautiously out. At first he could see only black branches and leaves stabbing the stars. Then gradually things became clearer. He could see no obvious guards. He leaned farther out, looking along the wall.

The oblong of light, crossed by the window frames, lay warm and mellow on the grass. No shadow moved in that patch of light. Very good. He'd been bodily through a window before; he knew the trick.

Back to the lounge door. On a side table a vase of flowers. Pick them up, toss them aside, heft the vase. Suitable.

Back to the front door. Clinton took a deep breath, lifted the vase in his left hand and hurled it full force against the lounge door.

Then he sprinted outside, shut the door as quickly and as quietly as he could, and sprang down towards the lighted window.

He remembered to keep his eyes half closed, his arm up, head down, breath sucked in and held, rest of the body limp, as he went through the window. Glass, wood, metal smashed, splintered and buckled around him. He landed a fraction unsteadily, let his left leg carry on bending and went over with it, his left arm outflung along the carpet. His right hand, with the gun, seemingly of its own volition, was up and pointing, and the gun went off twice, deafeningly.

He squeezed the trigger twice more, to be on the safe side.

Both Wasps had their backbones shot through.

Clinton saw Diana.

She was stretched out on her back across an armchair, a wisp of silk around her waist her only covering. Her hands were bloodless. The cords around her wrists were barely

visible in the ruff of skin and flesh around them. Her eyes were closed; but she still breathed, long, slow breaths that tightened up all the skin along her sides. Her chestnut hair was hauled back from her face, and the hand that gripped that hair was thick and coarse, with black hairs of its own sprouting along the fingers.

Clinton looked at the hand. He followed the arm along, came to a singlet, followed a thick curve of shoulder to a reddened neck and so, at last, looked at the man's face.

The face was that of a yokel, a country bumpkin, a man who could be told what to do and then shown how, even before you did it yourself. His eyes were enormous. The look of terror on his face should have filled Clinton with horror; but he could feel nothing but an overwhelming joy at that sign of abject fear. Clinton held the gun on the Wasp. He walked forward four paces and brought the gun down in a slashing stroke that flayed the Wasp's face.

Only then did he shoot him.

He stepped back, panting as though he had run ten miles without halt. Bile rose in his mouth, gagging him.

No other Wasps in the room. Probably more outside. Have to hurry.

He bent and, slipping out his knife, rapidly cut through the ropes holding Diana's feet. Cutting those around her wrists was an awkward job and he drew blood twice before the ropes fell free. She was completely out, a limply unresisting body in his arms. He lowered her into the chair.

Before he could make another move, footsteps sounded from the garden path, and two men stumbled in. They were not wearing Wasp uniforms. Clinton had the automatic centered between them as they stood blinking.

"Fight," gasped one. "Down in the village." Then they saw what had been happening in the room.

The other stretched out his hand, not believing. "Miss Diana?" he quavered.

"Make it snappy," Clinton said curtly. "There's work to be done. First of all clear those Wasps out of it. Dump 'em in the quarry—"

"I don't think that will be necessary!" said the voice from the doorway.

Clinton turned slowly, expecting at any moment to feel the tearing impact of bullets chewing at his side.

The Wasp who stood there, negligently cradling the machine gun, personified a type in Clinton's eyes: tall, broad shouldered, lean legged, rangy. He had a craggy face, with two deep creases running vertically down his cheeks, one on each side of his nose, light-colored eyes, slightly protuberant, almost maniacal. Dressed in a crisply smart black and yellow uniform, he was a prime specimen of a World Alishang Policeman.

Inevitably, Clinton tried.

Even as he dived across the warm, naked body of Diana, he triggered his last shot before the automatic spun out of his hand, his arm going numb with the sledge hammer battering of the shot. The two men from the village were cut down in their tracks.

And, as inevitably, he failed.

He dropped short of Diana, rolled from her legs, seeing them receding like luminous marble columns above his as he fell flat on his back on the floor. His right arm was useless. He squirmed over onto his side, moving like a rat in a trap, struggling to reach the gun with his sound left hand.

"I wouldn't if I were you, sonny boy."

He stared up at the Wasp, standing over him, booted feet thrust arrogantly wide apart. Through the arch thus formed, he saw Diana's father walk in the door, cradling an ancient shotgun in his arms.

A chance, then!

Clinton reacted correctly. To give the shotgun a chance, he rolled waspishly, hooked his arm around the Wasp's booted feet, heaved with muscle-cracking desperation.

The Wasp crashed down. Through the sudden thunder of blood in his ears, Clinton heard the parallel beat of running feet. Friends or foes? He did not know; he had to deal with this one, writhing like a tiger on the floor. Clinton cracked the edge of his left hand down on the side of the Wasp's jaw. He felt something snap. For a moment he wasn't sure if it was hand or jaw.

He heard Diana's father saying something. "This must end. This disgrace cannot be borne under my roof."

Clinton, panting, peered upwards through the hair fallen over his forehead. The unconscious Wasp lay loglike at his feet. Clinton stared; then went mad with fear.

Diana's father, mumbling about shame and disgrace and trouble-making, was clumsily pointing the shotgun. He worked the hammer mechanism, his face alight with an inner conflict that told Clinton too truly that at last the mind behind that smooth facade had at last broken free of its moorings, was adrift on the sea of insanity. He pointed the gun, held now quite steadily, at Diana, and as Clinton surged upright, pulled the trigger.

And in that instant of strained rising from the floor, the unconscious Wasp, snatched up by muscles quite beyond any physical restraint, was hurled by a frenzied Clinton directly into the bellowing gun.

The upper part of the Wasp's body disappeared.

Clinton didn't know what he was saying. He was shouting and sobbing and beating the old man with impotent fists. Fearfully, he turned to look at Diana. Blood shone on her naked body. The Wasp's blood? Clinton didn't know. In a spasmodic revulsion of feeling, he dropped the unconscious

body of Diana's father, flung himself on his knees beside the girl, and saw with an unutterable feeling of thankfulness that the girl was still alive.

Then, in noise and savagery, the Wasps charged in a solid phalanx through the shattered window. He fought them, then, like a wild beast.

He tore with teeth at their jugulars. He kneed them in any groin that came too close. His knuckles dripped blood. He was shouting. His face was alight with the despairing joy of a man who has traveled beyond all normal problems, until he has come face to face with the final meaning of existence. He had met his moment of truth; and, knowing the outcome, could still struggle out of a simple desire not to go down without attempting to utilize all his manhood.

But, as it must, the end came, Rupert Clinton was tapped on the head by a gun-butt and fell asleep on the carpet at the feet of the woman who had seduced him from his duty.

The Wasp leader nursing a shattered kneecap in foul-mouthed agony, was vengeful.

Before he passed out from the pain, he said, "It's him all right. Harris. The tip-off was okay. Now he's being sent to Alishang, along with this woman of his. Let the Shangs work them over."

And when the news was brought, via channels, to the houseboat moored in an English river, Horner straightened up from the bunk where Cromwell lay dying.

Cromwell is slipping away without telling us what he means about Bennett so we cannot trust our shadows, he thought. And the girl, Elizabeth Eddington, has been taken by the Wasps. Now Rupert Clinton, too, and the girl he's mixed up with, have been captured.

Rupert carries the secret that can destroy Alishang—or Earth—locked in his brain, unknowing. And the doctor,

Elizabeth Eddington, has heard enough to form the clue to get the secret out.

"We've only just begun to fight," said Horner softly. "We've only just begun."

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

AFTERWARDS, Rupert Clinton knew, he would recall the journey to Alishang and remember its glories and terrors. He would see again, with clearer sight, the slow procession of stars and the incandescent splendor of the sun. He would feel once more the shackles of gravity fall away, and again he would experience that frightening—and yet so funny—loss of perception and orientation that attacked a man in freefall.

Knowing all these things did not make them true.

Rupert Clinton went to Alishang stuffed into a cell aboard a hyperspace starship. The only stars he saw were those that sparked before his sight as his captors callously struck him about the head to move the faster. The odd feeling that troubled him came merely from fear and hunger and light-headedness. And the incandescent sun that glowed upon him was the spotlight that gave him no rest by day or night.

He understood quite clearly that this was merely the overture to the treatment he would receive once he had made planetfall. On Alishang there awaited him only a prolonged and painful death.

Which suited him right down to the ground.

He could not explain that feeling; he wondered if he would be shaken from it before they landed, or if he would still be moved by the same emotions the day he finally died. He had assumed, as soon as he had regained consciousness, that Diana was dead. She wouldn't have been important to the Wasps, and so they would have killed her. So that gradually made it clearer to him why he felt the way he did.

He thought of Diana only once after that. He saw her clearly, trimly erect, standing by the courtyard gate, her lime green sweater and jodhpurs vivid against the old wood, smiling at him as he stamped his legs to get the blood running through his veins again. Sensations like that piled up. They stamped a moment out of time, dropped the shape and feel and smell of the incident into your mind and fastened it there, immovably. That was how he would remember her; not as he had last seen her, sprawled bloody and naked in the chair, with her unconscious father at her feet.

And after that brief backward glance, he did not think of her again until it was forced upon him by necessity.

He supposed this calm acceptance of what might befall him was not that of a martyr in atonement; rather was it a break-out of masochism, engendered by self-hate and self-repugnance, a suppuration of the buried knowledge that he failed all around, had brought to death friends, and had put into greater danger the widening ring of contacts spreading from that enormous blunder in the manor house in Sussex.

Whatever it was, it made little difference to him now. He was never sure when they made planetfall. It could have been at any time during the weeks that passed, between being marched into the starship and being marched out again. He assumed that the Shangs wouldn't waste time.

He might have gone on like that, a walking zombie,

callously indifferent to his own fate, if he hadn't been forced to see and hear the girl.

Marching in close-packed ranks of Shangs—strange, how he had at last met a genuine alien and how little the meeting now meant, how trivial that awe-inspiring thought of alien confronting alien had become—down the ramp with the bodies pressing in on him so that he could see nothing beyond but a segment of blue sky far above, he heard the English words cried out in pain and anger. Not fear. He liked that brave note. Not fear.

Of course, it wasn't Diana. How could it be?

"Take your hands off me! I can walk out alone!"

Clinton squirmed, trying to see past the bodies of marching guards, trying to find a cranny in the moving ranks.

"Hullo, there!" he called. "Who are—?"

A Shang reached out, casually, clipped him alongside the ear. Head ringing, Clinton fell back into step with the aliens surrounding him. He'd bitten his tongue and the flash of pain stimulated him. Damn these aliens! The attempt to see, to contact, the girl had been his first independent action in weeks. It marked a turning point.

Rupert Clinton had been meticulously trained to live on Alishang, to pass himself off as a Shang. There had been only the eager fun in it before, the desire to please old Cromwell and Horner, his guardian. It had all been very genteel and academic, except for the unarmed combat, of course. Now, he began to take a more personal interest in it.

He looked at the Shangs. They were so ordinary appearing that it was almost funny, until you remembered. One had a receding chin, a couple had bulbous noses, another bags under the eyes, while the Shang who had struck him was wall-eyed—just like men. This was a fact which as Clinton evaluated it, just made them that much more dangerous.

He had never bothered much with the various cosmic



theories broached to account for the decided similarity between earthmen and aliens from a star seven light years away. The theory which started that, under similar conditions, evolution would produce a similar product, seemed to him as valid a point of view as the theory which stated that, at a time long buried in the past, a vast Galactic civilization had sprawled among the stars, only to come to ruin and final break-up, leaving scattered fragments of itself to grow up in ignorance of their mighty past upon their isolated chips of worlds.

Maybe. Realizing where he was, understanding that he was walking on soil that had never come from Mother Earth, breathing air that had never wafted over the familiar fields and seas he knew, seeing by the light of another Sun, Clinton gradually drew his scattered senses together and began again to think like a human being.

That, in itself, was a first-magnitude task. Earth was seven light years away. Incredible! To his mind, the world where he had been born, the world that had contributed its stint of atoms and molecules to build his body, was now no larger than one of those atoms. It had shrunk, receded into blackness, was less even than the tiny dot of light that was the Sun. You just couldn't appreciate those concepts; they shriveled the heart in your breast. Clinton walked stolidly on, and as he walked he began to think and to plan, but he would not think of Earth and his past life, and he refused to hope.

The manner of his reception to Alishang ways, and his rapid incarceration, followed a familiar pattern. He tried unavailingly to see again the Earth girl who had screamed. There was an air of bustle, of expectancy, about the Shangs in the spaceport buildings. Clinton saw many different uniforms, and now that he was taking a note of these things again, he began to recognize many from the charts and pages

of notes that old Horner had briefed him on in the days when . . . Anyway, he recognized the Shang organizations.

Alishang itself appeared much like Earth. Gravity was perhaps a trifle less; it made little difference however, and should not betray him. The air smelled sweet and fresh. The sky was blue. Birds—or some alien form of winged life—sang in the upper currents. This could have been a good world. Then Clinton paused in his thoughts. To the Shangs it *was* a good world. Sobering, that reflection was, he thought.

To those of the aliens who spoke to him in their own tongue, Clinton returned an idiotic obtuseness, a carefully calculated play at pretending he did not know the language. He could not recall having used it previously; he might well have said something in answer to a query before he'd got his wits back, but by their irritated manner and quick calling in of a Shang who spoke English, he guessed that at least that was a secret he had kept.

Once he had been placed in a small, temporary lock-up, they left him alone for an hour. The room was plastered, wooden-doored, with a single electric light hanging from the bare ceiling. A single, wooden three-legged stool was its sole piece of furniture. Clinton sat down. He realized that he was wearing a pair of blue slacks and a blue shirt, open at the throat. Leather sandals on his feet felt slightly itchy against his bare soles. That was all his clothing.. He began to mull over his situation, vaguely wondering why he had been brought to Alishang. It was not unknown—important men had been taken to Alishang before. Usually there had been some good reason, some reason out of the ordinary and beyond the powers of the Wasps on Earth or their local Shang masters to deal with.

So he was an important person, was he? Why, he had no idea.

The door opened and three men came in. They were

Shangs, well-fed, arrogant, smooth and moving with a brisk purpose that told a suddenly watchful Clinton that they meant business and were used to having their own way.

He did not get up.

One spoke in Alishang. "Get up! You are coming with us."

There was over-bearing authority in his voice, an assumption of its power to command instant obedience. Clinton just sat.

The second man—Clinton had no thoughts of oddness in thinking of these aliens as men—moved forward, leaned down and caught Clinton under the right armpit. He jerked upwards. Obediently, Clinton rose.

The alien said, "You must come with us, Harris. We wish to ask you questions." He spoke English.

"Why not ask the questions here?" Clinton said.

No one bothered to reply. The third man took Clinton's left arm, and together they went from the room.

For some odd reason, Clinton felt impelled to bid a mental good-bye to that room. He had sat in it a matter of an hour; yet he thought quite rationally, "I shall never see that room again."

What he expected in the way of alien architecture and town planning and any of half a hundred matter-of-fact details of ordinary living, he did not know. He was in a curious state of exalted disinterestedness, where everything that happened to him had the quality of a dream experience and could not touch any part of his inner being. He merely awaited what would happen; he expected nothing.

At any rate, the road outside the spaceport buildings looked ordinary: white concrete, edged with blue-green grass, and a tiny, starred flower of purple petals. The road was a two-lane highway, and the center was partitioned by a series of upright white posts, each with a red reflector. The sun struck glints of ruby fire from the reflectors between

itself and his observing eye. The car was normal, too; Clinton reconized it as a current model Earth-type saloon. Of course, the Shangs skimmed worldly production; they would have Terran cars and refrigerators and radios and all the paraphernalia of good living. Transport in the negfield driven starships was cheap enough, too; commodities wouldn't cost a lot here, especially when the Shangs never paid Earthmen.

They entered the car. A Shang sat on each side of Clinton in the rear seats, the third sat beside the driver. The car moved off. As they rolled along, Clinton caught a glimpse of a second car following them; then his car had straightened up on the highway and the car following them was lost.

There was little traffic about. All the vehicles that passed were obviously made on Earth. The drive went on for two hours. In that time they passed two garages and a clustering group of gray-and-green houses. No sign of a town broke the flat horizon of trees and green fields. Agriculture, too, seemed nonexistent.

It was like driving in an immense park.

No one spoke in the car. The confinement was subtly nerve-shattering; it was like the silence of a master before he chastises his pupil. Clinton recognized the psychological pressures being put on him. His mind, which had withdrawn itself from the outside world of reality, now spurred by that brief, angry exclamation from an unseen girl, spoken in English, began cautiously to think about what lay ahead. The Shangs had been after him on Earth—that much he knew. Horner had sketched in a few of the details. But his guardian's attitude had changed markedly, almost impossibly, since he had visited him in the hidden base in Antarctica. Something must have happened there; Horner must have been told something—by that young doctor, probably—that had made him change his mind about sending Clinton to Alishang.

But Clinton was *on* Alishang now. *Force majeure* had

moved Horner's hand. And there was that other puzzlement of why the Double-I men had received orders to kill him on sight.

Rupert Clinton slowly came alive, sitting there in the back of a Terran-made car, speeding along the broad highway over an alien planet. He had gradually awakened to what might have been going on around him while he had recuperated in the manor house in Sussex. Had the station master relayed his resentful message? Did the man's superiors, and eventually Horner, now know that Clinton was entirely innocent of any reason to be shot down in cold blood?

Clinton's head was buzzing. He had a quivery feeling that perhaps it didn't matter how overtly innocent he might be because the Double-I men would kill him out of hand the moment they caught up with him.

The car turned off the road. Clinton completely missed any roadmarks or signs of where they might be, so completely had he been engrossed in his own turbulent thoughts. The car stopped.

Herded out, with that same firmness that brooked no argument and no delay, he was marched briskly into a long, low, white stone building, taken into a small room and thrust into a chair. He looked around, still wrapped in his own thoughts, taking in his surroundings with only faint interest. What he was finding out in his mind had more impact—now that it was too late—than any alien posturing around him could ever have.

It seemed to him that if the Double-I men were right—and he, from his own experience, knew them to be seldom wrong—then there must be a very good and solid reason for them to want him dead. That he did not know the reason, did not enter the argument. International Intelligence had not existed for two hundred and fifty years of underground

activity without learning to be right about most things it touched.

He had been ordered to Alishang; Horner had been told something by the doctor; he had then been diverted from going to Alishang, and been told he was to meet Cromwell, the leader. And then, when an accident had prevented that—had put him outside the immediate jurisdiction of International Intelligence—the order had gone out that he was to be killed on sight.

And the doctor who had been with him when he was in his deepest moments of unguardedness, when he was unconscious—that doctor could have heard anything. He had been talking in the hayloft, he recalled.

There was only one answer; but, more than that, there was only one thing he could do.

As the Shang in the white coat came towards him, the hypodermic in his hands a gleaming sliver of light, Clinton came to his decision. He must kill himself. It was the only thing he could do.

It was quite clear. For the safety of Earth, for Earth's eventual salvation, Rupert Clinton must die.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

"RUPERT CLINTON must die!" Steeger fairly spat the words. Old Horner pressed his hands to his head, leaning his elbows on the table, and could not reply.

Robert Ney walked slowly up and down the short length of the houseboat's cabin and knew that he hated it, hated its curving mahogany walls, hated the low overhead, hated the soft lighting, hated—most of all hated—the untidy bunk with the sheet covering the still and lifeless form of Cromwell.

After Steeger had spoken there was an unusual hiatus, a gap in the orderly progression of things. Ney had only just returned from seeing about a precipitate and typically Latin uprising against the Wasps by the bolas-twirling gentlemen south of the border. The cabin had been tidied up in time for this hastily convened meeting. The blonde nurse's unconscious body had been lodged at her own hospital. It was hoped that she would live. They all knew, standing there with Steeger's words falling like pebbles into still water, that they could not linger here. The echo, the widening impact of Steeger's hoarse words, and what they meant, spread and broke like little waves of unreason on the shore of sanity.

Ney paused in his slow pacing and put one hand on Horner's shoulder. He did not say anything, because there was nothing to say and because he couldn't have uttered human words just then, anyway.

"Well?" Steeger prodded, standing straddle-legged against the rising and rolling movement of the houseboat. "Well, what do you have to say, Horner? Do you agree?"

"Clinton had nothing to do with this." Ney gestured round the cabin, his arm jumping as though released from unnatural strain. "Someone . . . someone . . . came in here like a crawling murderer and killed Cromwell." He looked at Steeger, not seeing him. "But it wasn't Clinton."

The storm brewing outside in the leaden sky tested its strength against the scraps of boats lying in the dull back-

water. It sent rolling water hills in hurrying procession, rocking the boats in an increasing agitation.

"Maybe not Clinton here," Steeger said. "Someone murdered Cromwell. But Clinton's on Alishang, with the secret." He shivered. "We must deal with him first. Do you agree?"

Horner lifted his head. His hands remained balanced in the air before him, forming a cup where his face had lain. In that position he seemed to be proffering something, a sacrifice, a gift. He did not appear to be aware completely of his surroundings. "Agree, Steeger?" he said at last. "Agree?" His face was gray, as gray as his mustache, as gray as his eyes. His lips, bloodless, wrinkled, moved a little, rolling distressingly one against the other. "Where do you think Bennett is, at this moment?" He moved his head from side to side as though suffering from a stiff neck. "So much killing, so much death. I thought I could last through, could take anything that came my way in following my duty, but Cromwell, murdered . . . But I can, I suppose. I can." His eyes flicked to the scuffed brief case lying on the table, meticulously positioned before him.

"I can take anything. But that I would have to order the death of my son—no, Rupert's not my son by biological fact, but he is as much my flesh and blood by emotion and training and affection as any spirit born of my loins—that I would have to order him killed, ruthlessly, with my eyes open, to be shot down in cold blood without so much as a word, a gesture of explanation, of atonement."

Steeger went straight on. Ney knew the man was scared, was mean-spirited, was all the things that he himself was frightened of becoming. But at least the man was following his duty, as he saw it, of a high council member of the government of Earth. He was consistent.



Steeger said, "What do you mean, you've already ordered it? Bennett? He's in Sydney, isn't he?"

"No. Bennett is on his way to Alishang."

Horner saw his hands cupped in the air before him. He pulled them smartly into his sides and stood up. He staggered with the movement of the boat. "Storm coming," he said. He looked closely at Steeger, thinking back to the friendships that had existed, the old familiarities, the old enthusiasms. Work and strain and continuous pressure twisted a man's thinking, and sometimes you weren't absolutely sure just where you wanted to go, and you hesitated, and were suborned along pathways that you had no right whatsoever to be anywhere near. "That's right, Steeger. Bennett, under his cover as an exporting manager, is en route to Alishang. As soon as he arrives he will take over the machinery that is already in motion to silence Rupert Clinton." He straightened his spine, fighting his tiredness, fighting his disillusionment. "It's very simple, really."

Ney allowed himself to relax a trifle, to withdraw that careful, anxious watch over old Horner. Probably, there had been no real, acute danger; but. . .

"I still don't like it," grumbled Steeger. "You know we never got a good hold on Alishang—"

"Good Lord!" Ney said, annoyed. "What do you expect? A full-blown underground on an alien planet seven light years off? What with the shipping lines held down to a minimum with the few ships parsimoniously allowed us, strict supervision of all travel to Alishang, and even stricter control of Earthmen there—really, Steeger, you can't expect to set up a secret organization just like opening a new shop."

"I know all that." Steeger was not one to back down in an argument. "Here on Earth we have the cell system, developed by Cromwell from work already done by his predecessors. We have thousands of men and women organized, trained,

ready and waiting. Under an alien domination it was inevitable, easy and right that an underground should develop. But on Alishang—"

"Precisely. We have our undergrounds on Earth because conditions call for them. Occupation by superior forces almost always brings to life opposing bodies formed in secret. It's amazing what can be got away with if the people are on your side. Our underground with worldwide networks, jet aircraft, and secret bases in Antarctica is quite normal to us, but it would have been an eye-opener to those old underground fighters of the Terran internicine wars." Ney was warming up, now. "So, that's all true. But on Alishang you have a stable culture, their well-known life of pleasure, with a few Earthmen allowed there to carry on the business of importing and to do a tithe of manual labour. Okay, so you try to start any underground on the scale we're used to—any sabotage, and where do you get? Dead! And quick!"

"All this means," Horner broke in fretfully, "is that Bennett has gone to do the job himself."

"Not necessarily, Horn. There *are* agents on Alishang. Alvarez—"

"Oh, yes, those. I doubt if they'll want to move that openly. Especially when they are aware that things are brewing up."

"Emergency!" Steeger said. "What do we train them for, teach them to speak Alishang?"

"Emergency," said Horner. "Listen to that wind." A gust struck the boat, heeling it over. The tide flowed in strongly, lifting the houseboat to float free of its restraining mud.

Steeger stared at his two associates. Then he nodded meaningfully at the bunk. "What about him?"

Immediately, Robert Ney took control. It was something he had to do, something he owed Horner. "Just let me sniff around. I'm supposed to be a detective, and this is my job.

We don't know why Cromwell was murdered in just these circumstances." He smiled a grimace of distaste. "You'd think they'd have been waiting for us. If they could find this place—"

"I don't think it was the Wasps," said Horner.

"No? Well, maybe you're right. I suppose, really, you must be. Anyway, we can't meet here again, and we'd better clear off quickly. You'd better fly back to London, Horn. I'll make an excuse to see you there in a couple of days. Steeger, you've a hell of a lot to do. I suggest you return to Shanghai at once." He gestured round the cabin. "Say good-bye to the houseboat . . . and Cromwell. Horn is the new leader. We'll await your orders, Horn, on the new meeting place. Right?"

"Right, Bob." Horner walked across to his outer clothing and began to shuck on his zippered airman's suit. "I'll wait your contact. Probably meet up again as a council in Africa. Nice and quiet there, still."

Steeger, after a momentary hesitation, crossed to his own suit, began to put it on, fumbling. In silence, the two men went out. In the silence, Robert Ney was left with the dead body of Cromwell.

He looked down on that wasted yellow face for the last time. Then he exhaled a sigh and did what he had to do.

A half an hour later, he walked briskly through the darkness towards his airplane. As he climbed in and began to check the controls in an automatic reflex, he reviewed what he had discovered. He sat there, waiting, thinking that no Wasp would have done the murder just like that. He knew, didn't he? He knew how Wasps thought. Horner had taken Cromwell's scuffed brief case with him; the other records had not been disturbed, and had been taken away by inconspicuous Double-I men. Wasps would have ripped the whole houseboat to pieces. Money had gone—that might

mean something. The nurse, struck down, remembered nothing.

Ney sat there in his airplane, waiting, thinking; then the glow began to suffuse the sable sky.

He looked through the canopy. A single shaft of fire ascended from the muddy river, painting the rushes and flats a lambent orange. The sky was stained with color, putting out the stars and flushing everything with rose. He could hear nothing of the roar and crackle of the conflagration, but quite clearly in his mind he could see the bunk and the still form of Cromwell and the leaping flames dancing and closing in around him.

When the houseboat was a glowing coal, and not until then, did Ney make any move to start his engines. He pushed the split oaken shield with its incised ZI more firmly down behind his seat. As he took off he was thinking that it had been a fitting funeral pyre for old Cromwell.

Ninety-nine years old, fighting against approaching death to last out the two remaining years and see the fruition of a dream. That, surely, had been a natural impulse? Just to live long enough to see a lifetime of effort at last rewarded? And then, just at the last, to be struck down by an unseen, cowardly hand. At least, the old man was beyond all worries and cares now, all Earthly problems.

A fitting funeral pyre, one suitable for the Viking spirit of the man, now launched upon the dark river in his special boat wrapped in a winding sheet of flame.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

WITH THAT slowly matured but instantly hardened resolution in his mind, Rupert Clinton jumped upright from the chair.

For the good of his own soul, for his own selfish ends so that he could sleep nights, he must die. Whatever unholy secret it was that he possessed, a secret that he recognized now he must have buried in the inner recesses of his mind, he had no living consciousness of it. But he felt absolutely certain that it could blow apart all the work that his guardian Horner and Cromwell, the leader, had put in over whole lifetimes of devotion.

And, he'd been trained as a Double-I man, hadn't he? He knew about these things, about killing people quickly and quietly. Well, then, he ought to be able to kill himself that much more efficiently.

As for Diana and the girl who had been brought with him here aboard the spaceship, they must take their own chances—if they weren't already dead, as, surely, they must be. He felt sure they would approve of his decision.

The white-coated Shang appeared in no way upset by his sudden movement. The hypodermic glittered balefully. Clinton stared around him, quickly, furtively, like a fox sniffing the hunting morning.

"Stand quietly, Harris," the Shang said peremptorily.

Clinton didn't bother to reply. The room was square, yellow-walled, without windows and with purplish-blue fluorescents above that flickered badly. There was a narrow door through which he and the Shang had entered. There

were two folding doors opposite, shut now, and with a new and shiny lock gleaming mockingly up at him.

No way out, then, except past the Shang.

Clinton sprang. His feet pressed the floor, his heels lifted and his arms raked forward. After his first spasmodic plunge, he had not moved; he was standing ridiculously poised on his toes, half crouched forward, both arms fatuously extended.

He was glued to the floor.

"That's better, Harris." The Shang approached quite calmly. With a shock like that of breaking ice Clinton realized that the Shang's manner was that of a doctor or nurse cajoling, jolly along, tactfully handling a difficult patient.

But he couldn't move!

"That's right," the Shang said. "Just a little stasis field to hold you steady while we roll up your sleeve . . . so . . . and then we pump this in—just a prick—that's right. Now relax, take it easy, that's better, relax . . . relax. . ."

Clinton heard that meaningless mumble and then he realized that he was on his back, staring up at a white ceiling. The next thing that occurred to him was that he was ravenously hungry. A voice, outside, it seemed, his own head, said, "He's coming round. Strap him up."

Quick efficient hands looped him with leather bands. The touch of those swift impersonal hands summed up the horror of it all to Clinton. Since landing on Alishang there had been no violence, There had been no brutality, no threat or hint of torture. The Alishang's way was just calm methodical routine, an almost bored following of custom. He had been taken from the spaceport, brought to this place, doped, and now, in coming-to, was methodically being restrained in case he should become awkward. The chilling mechanics of it all scared him most of all.

The voice—why had he thought of it as coming from

outside his own head? Did voices, then, normally sound inside his head?

He recalled, as through a vague and pressing mist the feeling, the touch, of voices inside his brain. It was as though he had been listening, half awake, to a gramophone record and had awakened with the melody irritatingly lodged in his mind and stubbornly refusing to depart. But what that melody was, what the voices meant, he did not know.

"Swing him off the table. That's it. Dump him on the bed."

The movements followed accurately. Clinton found he could bend in the middle, could flex an arm against the leather thongs. He slumped on the bed and rolled onto his side. Now he could see the room and the Shangs.

There were three of them. He felt that the first must be one of those who had come to fetch him in the car; the second was the doctor with the white coat who had given him the hypodermic; the third was different.

As a boy, Clinton had been shown examples of great paintings by Horner from his guardian's hoarded collection, the last depository of the world's treasure house of art. Before the Shangs had finally overrun the Earth, men had collected the finest of their treasures, representatives of the culture of three thousand years, and hidden them against the day they could once more grace the galleries of the museums of the world. He thought of some of the lesser works he had seen now. He thought of the Kings, stiffly caparisoned men in hose and doublet, or half-armor, or in pseudo-classic robes, with the Garter encircling one plump leg. He thought of the long-since dead great of the world, carved from marble, enshrined in oil, staring down at him with disdainful eyes. He could see their curved noses, their lips which, at once thick and sensual, were yet thin and firm and arrogant. The consciousness of power—perhaps that was the greatest single

fact of existence and knowledge shared by all those men who had ruled over other men.

This Shang had all that. Clinton did not for one moment believe that the alien was a King; the conception was archaic. But the outward physical symbols of that spiritual understanding that a single man—by Divine Right—ruled, sat upon this alien and set him apart from all others that Clinton had ever known.

The melancholy of power stamped the alien's features.

All during the brief interview that followed, this alien remained silent. It was as though he could not bare to sully his mouth with words, and so he graciously allowed only his mind to work for him for his greater glory.

"Rupert Clinton," the doctor said. "You have been very co-operative. We hope that the next session will be even more rewarding."

That they knew his name meant little. Dying, he would cheat them yet. The problem was, how was he to manage to kill himself?

"You are not surprised we know your true name?" That was the big bulky man who had been in the car.

Clinton licked his lips. They were speaking English. That might mean they still hadn't probed him with their truth drugs and their techniques for stripping a man's skull off his brain to the point that they knew he could speak Alishang. Well, it was a small point, a very minor cutting of losses in the face of overwhelming defeat.

His silence was needling them. The thick man said sharply, "We have found out a great deal, Clinton. We know a number of your associates. General Kane will be greatly pleased to act on orders now being transcribed to him." The alien's face indicated that he was giving up this silky line of high-flown talk. Clinton now expected the bludgeon. "There is a block in your mind, Clinton. We have skimmed



your memories, but we need to know more. You will now tell me what I want to know."

Still Clinton did not speak.

The alien went on, holding himself to that prearranged plan of smooth authority that brooked no failure. "You will tell me, now, what these lines of light mean to you. Why are you frightened to remember beyond the time you saw them?"

Clinton said, moving his lips painfully, "If you can make me speak under your drugs, then you can find all that out yourself. I don't know."

The thick man said, "Why do you think you were brought here, Clinton? We bring prisoners to Alishang only if they have information of the utmost importance. We have the evidence of others that you spoke of the lights when you were so badly damaged that you might have died. If you cannot answer our questions then we must, by drugs and other means, bring you back to death's threshold again." His smile was quite empty. "Then you will remember."

"Lights," Clinton said. "Highway lamps seen from a car when I was frightened, just before I crashed. How can they be of such importance that you bring me across space to ask me questions about them? What's special about me, anyway?"

"Special, Clinton? Nothing, apart from the trouble you were causing on Earth to our men."

Clinton couldn't believe that. He tried again. "You know that my friends tried to kill me. You have found out the information I have on Earth underground. But you imagine there is more, you dream up fantastic notions—lights—and are so frightened that you must dig deeper and deeper to uncover threats that just don't exist."

"The elaborate pains taken by your friends of Earth to keep you from talking, to shield you, and then, when you were beyond their jurisdiction, to kill you, convince us that

you know a great deal more than you think you know. More trouble was taken on your behalf, and more trouble was caused by you, than would have been the case in anyone not of supreme importance to the rebellious elements of Earth."

"And," the other alien said, "we are going to drag that information out of you if it kills you."

The kid gloves were getting sweaty, Clinton noticed.

A buzzer sounded and the thickset alien grunted angrily and disappeared from Clinton's sight. When he returned, his face held a look unfathomable to Clinton. He thought, in that instant, that alien expressions were not necessarily the same as humanity's.

"Something new and vitally interesting has just come up," the alien said. "Records on the line." He was speaking now directly to the regal Shang. "Sir, the name of an ambassador from Earth who disappeared in space without trace about twenty years ago was Rupert Clinton."

The kingly alien stood up. He spoke for the first time, receding from Clinton's view. His voice was as flat and cold as a serpent's hiss.

"Rip open this alien's mind—to the foetus!"

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

As soon as the regal alien had left, the double doors whooshing together behind him, the two remaining Shangs began a rapid conversation, speaking Alishang. Clinton caught disconnected fragments.

" . . . seems to think the job's easy . . . deep down . . . mind will probably—no, certainly—give way . . ."

The other voice, from the thickset alien. "You'll have to do it, and hang the Earthman's mind. You heard what His Excellency Targanna said . . . must be important. . . ."

"No good here . . . equipment for primary study only."

They moved towards the door. Clinton strained to hear more and heard only, "Shift him as soon as we can."

The doors whooshed together again. Clinton carried out a perfunctory check of his leather bonds, and realized that he would not break out of them. These aliens were no TV villains, who invariably tie-up heroes carelessly. Clinton was tied-up, and tied-up he would remain until someone untied him. He lay back, made himself comfortable, and tried to plan what he would do when he was released.

The stasis field that had held him paralyzed was brought into operation again. Standing on feet he did not know he possessed, with the portable field generated from the metal-boxed contraption running on rubber wheels, he was placed on the platform and wheeled, stiff as a board, through the doorway. They unloaded him, and, as soon as the power cut, when he staggered and would have fallen, they led him the last few steps into the waiting car. There must have been some inkling of his purpose, perhaps the overriding rhythm of his brain picked up by the Shangs. They had given him no chance at all to kill himself, or to do anything silly and force them to shoot him.

The car started with a scattering of loose gravel from its tires, and Clinton had the feeling of dream sequences being repeated. There was even the same glimpse of a second car following.

He sat in the back, between two guards, the leather bands gone from his ankles and only loosely connected between his wrists. The aliens evidently understood the problems of

blood circulation. The car debouched onto the highway, picked up speed, and headed straight into the dawn.

Dawn! Clinton was alive enough to feel surprise. Then his hunger came back and woke him up even more, so that, when the car halted and a quick conversation ensued between the driver and another Shang outside, he leaned forward. He was thrust back. Immediately thereafter, the rear doors opened. The Shang on his right pulled down the two folding seats facing the rear and a girl was forcibly helped in. She bent her head entering, and was curtly told to sit on the far folding seat. There was an unexpected air of strain in the air; the Shangs spoke sharply, as though unsettled. Clinton did not look at the girl.

When the second girl was likewise thrust in and abruptly ordered to sit on the second folding seat, Clinton found his emotions, his thoughts, his entire being in a roaring turmoil. Through the thunder of his own wild fancies, he heard a Shang outside say, "Car broke down. Most odd. Damned slipshod Earth workmanship, I suppose."

Clinton just sat, staring with head bent, staring at the two pairs of trim slacks, one on either side of him. He could see the brown leather sandals, a glimpse of white skin, and the blue linen slacks. Four times. Four legs. Two girls. He could not raise his head.

"A nuisance; but we can cope," a Shang said, the words drifting in remotely.

Clinton's head and neck and entire body ached. A jailer? A woman guard along to look after the Earth captive? Hardly. She would not be dressed in the same way as her charge. Who then?

Diana?

That second car that he caught glimpses of from the corner of his eye, that car had been carrying the captive Earth girl he had heard cry out descending from the space-

ship. Had it—could it—have been carrying Diana also? Tremulously, Clinton decided that he could bear to raise his head, that he could stand the shock that lay before him. He lifted his head, but the light dimmed and died as the car entered one of the landscaped forests.

Something uncurled in Clinton. A glow began in his stomach, drowning his hunger, stilling his unlooked-for wild elation, sending the blood pounding in his body and shrilling a warning in his ears. He flexed his hands, moving on the seat in the darkness with only the green gloom beyond the moving windows to show him the shadowy shapes around. He smelled danger.

The car stopped. Jerkily. A voice raised outside. The driver said, in Alishang, "The rope! Across the road!"

Shots sounded. Glass smashed. The two guards drew guns, and the one on the off-side opened the door and jumped out. Glass rained in an avalanche on the other side, and the Shang sitting on Clinton's left hand said, "Ulp!" and coughed blood. He toppled forward and slid emptily down the car door.

The girl moved instinctively aside. A car engine revved maniacally behind them, and a machine gun cut loose. Clinton said, fierce and low, "Get down!" The two girls sprawled to the floor. In the strong, pungent blood smell Clinton drew in the sweet, warm scent he knew. So it was Diana. Why hadn't she spoken? No time for that now. Had to get out of here. He reached out and slid the gun from the dead Shang's fingers. He peered from the opened door, where the Shang had jumped out. The alien lay dying in the white dust of the road. Clinton looked back along the road.

A car had halted a dozen yards off. Shangs were spraying bullets from it into the woods bordering the road. This Terran trap, then, had misfired. He thought he caught a

glimpse of figures running in the woods, but as soon as the machine gun ceased fire, silence fell. Noise echoed from the other side, where the driver and his comrade were firing heavily. The assaulting party had been disposed of, this side, Clinton surmised, by the surprise appearance of the following Shang car. The girl, not Diana, leaned over and said, "Are we being rescued?"

"I doubt it," Clinton said, not looking back. "An attempt to finish me off, most likely." Putting it into words like that made it appear ugly. The girl breathed deeply, leaning on him, but there was no fear in her voice.

"I suppose they'll kill this girl, and me, too."

Someone threw a grenade. The car shook.

"Why?" Clinton said. The hand holding the gun shook.

"I really don't know."

The whole course of affairs seemed wrong to Clinton. That he should be put out of the way, he could understand, but that International Intelligence should wish to kill these girls as well smacked of twisted values. He made up his mind.

Looking back to make sure the Shangs were fully occupied—in the dimness under the tunnel of trees everything appeared blurred—he jumped out, his hands still bound by thongs, the gun awkward in his fist. He crouched, shouting back at the girls. Without question, they followed.

Doubled up, they sprinted across the road and flung themselves into the woods. Only when they were a dozen yards into the woods, already stumbling and pitching over creepers, did they relax and fall to a rapid trot. Clinton fell full length three times, his tied hands wrenching together. But he kept the gun. He could see now that Diana was in a state of shock; but at least she had power over her own voluntary actions, and she obeyed him or this strange Earthly

girl without question. He felt a profound wave of pity for her engulf him.

Running deeper into the woods, and telling the girl to free his hands, he knew that feeling was not pity. Diana had never had need of pity; now, least of all. It was far stronger, far more potent, this feeling he had. The job of untying him was finished by the time they had run clear across the woods. Coming out from the fringes of trees, they saw, immediately below, a narrow road, white under the sun. "Too busy fighting it out to catch us," he panted. In that quick glance before bolting, he had seen the white-haired man; he certainly was without a monocle, but he was too far away to see clearly if he had been wearing contact lenses. But if Alvarez had ventured so far into the open as to stage this daylight attack, first sabotaging the girls' car to get them all in one vehicle then the Double-I men must be desperate. The job had been smoothly planned, and that unexpected arrival of the second Shang car with the machine gun must have been shattering to the Terrans. The Shangs had played it very cleverly indeed.

"What do we do now?" the girl asked, patting her hair.

Despite himself, Clinton smiled. The feminine gesture could not be cowed, even by the most outrageous events. He cupped his palm under Diana's face. She smiled at him and said, "Hullo, Rupert. Father's about; I think I'll make some tea."

"Do," said Clinton unsteadily.

"You know her?" The girl looked sympathetically between them. "I've been trying . . . she'll come 'round by degrees." Her face was drawn, strained. "It's a mess."

"A short time ago I was contemplating ways and means of killing myself," Clinton said gravely. "Now, with you two along, and a measure of freedom, I don't think I will."

"That's good," the girl said practically. "I'm sure we'll get along better than I would alone."

"Hum," Clinton said. "Childlike trust or deep psychology?" He stared at her, hard. "Name?"

"Elizabeth Eddington. You may, under the circumstances, call me Liz."

"I'm—" he began.

She said, smiling, "I know: Harris."

"Harris. I see. Harris what?"

"All I heard you called was the murderer Harris!"

That shook Clinton. He rubbed his chin, took his eyes away from the empty road and studied this girl, dressed like Diana in a thin blue shirt and slacks that did things to their figures that were barely decent. "So you heard I was a murderer? Well, that part of it was wrong. I didn't kill the woman's husband. She killed him herself. But—"

"But," she interrupted, "don't you think it would be a good idea if we all sort of moved along, instead of standing here exchanging pleasant chitchat?"

"I'm waiting. I'm innocent of that murder to which you refer, but I shall commit a murder shortly." He pointed. "There—see?"

A car was driving along the road, leaving a fine white plume in the hot air. Clinton realized suddenly that it was a fine day. He was not sweating, but everything around him was sharp and fresh under the hot sun. Liz said, "I see."

"Get out on the road and stop him. Do you speak Alis-hang?"

"Yes, but—"

"Show him your leg."

"In slacks? But perhaps the Shangs don't—"

"Stop him!"

Liz stopped the car simply by standing in the road with her



hands raised. The car halted and the Shang inside put his head out and said, "What's the trouble?"

Carefully, so as to avoid unnecessary staining of the car, Clinton shot him. He tumbled the body out and then dragged it into the woods. He came back, breathing hard. Liz was very white, her pallor vivid below her hair. Diana smiled, staring at the car. He got in behind the wheel.

"Come on. Help Diana. That poor chap's lack of suspicion is a good sign. We want to put as much distance between us and them as possible, though."

As he finished speaking, another car passed them.

"See what I mean? This is obviously a little-used secondary road, and yet eyes are everywhere. If that driver remembers us and this car—" He let in the clutch.

The pattern of their days thereafter followed closely the pattern of that first act of violence. They found maps in the car and worked a fair fix on their position by the way they were folded and the penciled route-line sketched by the dead man. Small towns were scattered all over the area; these they at first avoided. Only when, after a number more carefully arranged holdups had clothed them in smart Shang outfits, and fed them leanly on the gay contents of picnic baskets and had provided them with money, did they venture to stay at an hotel.

They brought an inconspicuous car, holding their breath over their credentials, which showed Clinton and Liz to be honeymooners. Immediately thereafter they slowly made their way towards the capital. Clinton was beginning to question some of his most cherished beliefs. Living like this, like criminals on the run, did nothing to help him. The girls, whose Alishang daily improved, understood that Clinton had been trained to work on Alishang, and they took this to mean that he expected to go on living on the alien planet. He warned them that there were very different areas on the

globe, completely unlike this Earthly paradise in which they now prepared for the future.

Liz was marvelous with Diana. Diana responded, and very soon it was Clinton and Diana who were the honeymooners not Clinton and Liz. Liz said, "I never did have much time for men. When they saw me they all seemed to want one thing."

Clinton acknowledged that Liz was just about the most luscious female he had ever seen. But beside Diana, it was no clear-cut feeling, no quite inevitable choice.

Liz told him that she had been the doctor who had straightened out his skull and by listening to his ravings, had thereby been put in danger of losing her life. "The Shangs kept asking me what you'd been saying. They knew you had some vitally important information, and they were worried by the Earthpeople's attempts to silence you. I couldn't tell them anything. All you babbled about was strings of light."

"Just like you did in the hayloft, Rupert," said Diana.

"I don't even know myself." Clinton told them what he knew, filling in the meager details. He said, "We're on our own, Diana, Liz. There is no underground to whom we can turn. We must act like criminals."

"Always on the run, Rupert?" said Diana.

"No!" He was angry. "No. We are an invading force from Earth. We attack. We take what we want, and live well."

Between them, they had run the gamut of so many emotions that the right responses to new stimuli were difficult. The day Liz found a compact in a dead Shang woman's handbag was a bright one for her and Diana, yet there were dead people—admittedly alien, but still people—lying in the wreck of the car. It was a question of viewpoint. That they could continue to live was the most important fact of all.

They moved about the country, and by this time they

made very sure, whenever they took money, that the evidences of the holdup were buried deeply. The girls had to continually be reassured by Clinton that the easy way they could travel, without hindrance and checkups, was a way of life on Alishang, and that the strict supervision of Earth did not apply here. The Shangs were a pleasure-loving people, indolent, hedonistic to the nth degree, and by taking what they wanted from their subject worlds, and by maintaining a strong army of mercenaries and self-seeking scientific staffs, they were able to live off the fat of many lands and solar systems.

Very often, in the months that followed, Clinton and Liz discussed his mental quirks and problems. Clinton was understandably intrigued by the strange secret he possessed. He could not imagine what it might be. Liz sought to unravel the inner recesses of his unconscious, sure that most of his nervous insatibility and sudden fretful lapses from grace could be traced to that shattering traumatic experience of his childhood. It was therapy for her as much as her patient.

At first, the beauty of Liz was a mere background accompaniment to the violent actions in the foreground of Clinton's life. But, gradually, the allure of her, the sheer overpowering womanliness of her began to drown him; then the old magic of simple propinquity played its usual subtle part. Yet through it all he was sensitively aware of Diana, fighting to be once again the vital and buoyant sprite he remembered so well.

It would have been a very strange *ménage à trois*, if it hadn't been for Clinton's humorously old-fashioned ideas. One day, in a small hotel in the shadow of gigantic, orange-red mountains, with the ground rippling in gentle, soothing waves so that the trees sighed in the calmness, Diana said seriously. "We can't go on living for ever like this." Liz nodded emphatic agreement.

Clinton wanted to say, "As soon as we get back to Earth, we'll be married." But he couldn't; they *both* had a claim on him now. "Let's worry about that when we get back to Earth," he said at last, unable to condemn his own weakness.

"Dolt!" Diana said. "I mean *how* do we get back? We might go on tramping round Alishang for the rest of our lives, stealing when we are in need, doing and accomplishing nothing. That's no good to me; perhaps you and Liz might be happy like that." She shook her head. "Not me. And I don't think any one of the three of us was cut out to be a failure."

"No. And we won't be." Clinton rustled the map on the bed. "Look, here is a large town, a sector capital, a space-port. Now, if we make friends with the right people, we can buy a passage to go sight-seeing—the Shang grand tour."

"I see," said Diana. "Holidays on Earth, eh?"

"That's right," Liz said. "Only it'll be one-way."

"Back to Earth. I suppose," Diana demanded, "that you two know what tomorrow is? I wouldn't have known, but I had more things to catch up on in my blank period."

"Tomorrow? Let's see—Thursday, isn't it?"

"Tomorrow is the anniversary of our landing on Alishang."

"A year!" Clinton was bemused. "So it is. A whole year." He looked at the Alishang calendar on the wall. "This confounded Alishang year mixes me up. Don't even know when it ends."

Liz said, "Three months' time, I think."

"That's right," Clinton said, flicking the calendar over. "Three months' time is the New Year. That'll be 2274, won't it?"

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

"I WOULDN'T worry about Steeger, Horn," Ney said authoritatively. "Now that ZI is so close, he's rallied himself to the understanding that, by golly, it's here!"

"But when we tell him about Bennett—" Horner smiled faintly at Ney's studiously authoritative manner. Good old Bob Ney! He's still trying to heal over the wound left by Clinton's loss. "I still find it incredible . . . and dismaying."

"So do I." Ney glanced up at the photo-electric tell-tales. Outside, the African sky over their new headquarters was dark with clouds, and the air was full of moisture. "Here he is now."

As Steeger walked in, shivering in the sudden warmth, and exuding a tingling odor of the out-of-doors brought into a smoky room, Horner said casually to Ney, "We'll have to tell him that Palmgren is the new man. He might—"

"Palmgren?" said Steeger, looking up, half out of his flying suit. "What about him?"

"Palmgren is to be the new member of the high council, Steeger. He'll join us, and become the fourth of the Four Who Know. I trust you've no objections?"

"No. No objections." Steeger flung his suit into a corner and crossed to the liquor. "Need a little pick-me-up. This means, I suppose, that it's been proved beyond all doubt that Bennett got killed on Alishang?"

Ney raised an eyebrow at Horner. Horner said, "Not quite, Steeger. You might say that the person we knew as Bennett died on Alishang. Poor old Alverez and his group were badly shot up. Bennett died with them."

Steeger drank gratefully. "It's bad, I agree. What news of Clinton? Nothing fresh?"

"No. Nothing fresh; if he's dead or alive, we don't know."

"Well, what's this heavy atmosphere of mystery?"

Horner, feeling every millisecond of his age crushing on him like a pile of rocks, said, "Bennett is still alive. Only Bennett isn't—never was—Bennett. The person we knew as Bennett is a Shang."

A girl in silver-spangled tights slid laughing and disheveled down the crystal antigrav chute and pirouetted among scurrying robowaiters, jeering up at her companion. He gave a merrily menacing shout and dived down the chute, clutching for the girl. Giggling, she evaded him and disappeared into the throngs of whirling, cavorting dancers about the soaring central columns. Music buffeted the scented air. Giggle-gas balloons popped everywhere. Globes of light dangled from the hazy ceiling, and every tiered balcony was crowded with tables and chairs, filled with riotous, frenzied diners and dancers. Wine flowed in cataracts of color and bouquet, wine that had been shipped in from ten subject planets and four subject satellites.

"There's our man," Clinton said, and draped his scarlet cloak across his left arm. Liz and Diana put up their masks. Diana's body was encased in skin-tight golden scales, hypnotizing, demure. From the waist up, Liz wore transparent black nylon, through which her flesh glowed at once cool and warm; from the waist down she wore an immense, bouffant skirt billowing, rippling in everchanging colors. The girls were quite stunning, yet prudishly modest compared with those around.

"He looks like an ugly customer, Rupert? Can you trust him?" Diana laid a hand on his arm.

"I think so. We're moving in the smart set of Alishang society now, darling. No one trusts anyone. But I think friend Matras can be handled . . . *with* the right currency

to speak for us." Clinton smiled. "Gambling isn't quite the same here as it is on Earth."

"You skinned him yesterday," Liz said with satisfaction.

Clinton walked up to the shipping line owner, and smiling, greeted him. Matras nodded his head in acknowledgment. He was indeed, as Diana had said, an ugly customer. For a Shang, he was bulky. His mouth would have been handsome, like the rest of his face, had the lower lip not been so full and curled and repulsive. That was his misfortune. Clinton wondered idly why the man had never bothered to have the plastic surgeons trim it. Perhaps Matras just didn't realize. Some people were blind in these matters.

"Come to let me win my losses back?" Matras asked.

"If you care to hazard a game," Clinton replied, casually. Matras's money had certainly been a handy addition to the payroll Clinton had stolen on his way to this very restaurant. On Alishang, crime was almost non-existent; the parasitic higher classes had no need of it; the lower levels had no inclination and no brains for it. Petty law breakers were punished with a savagery that was not human.

The role of master criminal ill-suited Clinton, but he played that part with all the force and verve of his character. The girls supported him, as, he thought, no other women could have done. He had no fears of discovery as he stood talking to a shipping magnate in the city's largest, most exclusive and most abandoned restaurant. Just to enter those closely guarded portals demanded a poor man's wages for a year.

"Before we go through to the rooms, Dascobar," said Matras. "I have to meet a man, all purely business. Perhaps you would care to join us in a drink?"

"Charmed," Clinton said. He smiled. Matras did not wish to lose sight of his prey, especially when that prey had proved itself tougher opposition than he had expected. They

moved to an antigrav shaft and were wafted upwards to alight on a thinly-railed balcony, swaying high under the roof. Mists and scents swirled below, and looking down was an experience exciting vertigo and immense exhilaration.

Those antigrav shafts were adapted from the negfield drives of the Shang starships. Clinton felt a queasy unease at the thought of being so near a closely guarded Shang secret. Wine spurted in controlled measures from delivery tubes.

Drinking, keeping up a flow of bright conversation, Clinton reviewed his next moves. They had nearly enough money. Tonight, with luck, should see the balance in the kitty. Tomorrow, tomorrow, he decided, they'd book three passages for a sight-seeing tour of Earth. Then—tally-ho for home.

The man who joined them was clad in the purple of the Shang Space Guards. He and Matras immediately fell into an acrimonious wrangle. Clinton listened awhile, and then, satisfied that it was a mere business deal, he turned his attention to his surroundings.

Diana was vivacious and gay, laughing, her eyes sparkling and her cheeks hot. Her hair, Clinton saw disapprovingly, was silvered and gold-dusted. The natural glory of that auburn mass was hidden. But against the flame that was Liz, Diana seemed a teen-age giggler. Around them people laughed and shouted and drank and played idiotic, supremely funny games. This was a palace of the gods. This was a nirvana for those starved for color and spectacle, a val-halla where those worn out by the day's hard duress and business worries could relax and give themselves up to sybaritic luxury. And all of it, Clinton thought savagely, was built upon the sweat and misery of enslaved planets like Earth.

That wasn't quite true, of course. But the contrast between places such as this restaurant and the hovels of the Terran



poor stuck in his throat. The Space Guardsman was talking more freely now, and they were drawn into the talk.

Eventually, they veered round to the Guards' favorite topic—spacewar. Clinton assumed the mental mask of Dascobar, a good Shang. "But surely, captain, spatial war is impossible? We all know it. No other planet could invade us."

"Of course not, while the Spaceguards stand duty."

What Clinton did not dare say, Matras boomed with a belly-laugh of mockery. "Even without you young popinjays, no one could invade Alishang! The distances are too vast. To put an army on a planet from an extrasolar source, and then to keep that army fed and provisioned and ammunitioned—the logistics would strain all my fleet; yes, and the fleets of half my competitors, too."

"We smashed Kooralie," the Guardsman said, vexed. "And Earth and Sha'durango. We landed invasion forces, and—"

"And then lived off the land. But can you imagine any of the planets you mention sending an army to invade us—"

The Guardsman laughed. "Those whipped curs! Why, they couldn't even make a landing. And if they did, they'd have no weapons of our calibers, no missiles, no nothing. And you've just said they couldn't supply themselves; they've no shipping. And, even if they *had* a thousand starships, they would be insufficient." Very cocky, very flamboyant, was the space captain.

It nettled Diana. "So Earth and the others could never invade?"

Clinton looked at her sharply. Her face was smiling and radiant, but he didn't like the set of her mouth. He decided to get her out of this quickly.

"You want it proved to you, madam?" The Guardsman's greedy eyes had seldom strayed from Liz once he had seen her beauty. Now he stared arrogantly at Diana. "Why, even

the public Central Library can give you that information."

"Thank you, captain," Clinton said, standing up. "I think my wife is a little unwell—excitement, you know." He winked. Liz put a hand on Diana's arm.

The Guardsman sat back, baffled. Matras, his thick lips slobbering, his fat face wreathed in smiles, said, "Oh, good, Dascobar! Congratulations!" He was beamingly fatuous.

Liz let her stole drop lower around her shoulders. "Think I'll wait around; there should be some fun later."

Clinton couldn't argue. Anyway, Liz could take care of herself. Girls built like that usually can. He got Diana out of it somehow, through the noise and confusion and flashing limbs, promising to return to give Matras his revenge. Everything had gone over Diana's head. She submitted to being taken out, sat silently in the cab flitting over the city's lights, and said not a word as they entered their hotel room. Then she said, suddenly, "I didn't like that space captain. Too brash. I hope Liz clips his wings. And I didn't like the way he looked at me. This damn gold sheath is too tight, anyway." She looked at Clinton, puzzled. "But why was old Matras so happy to see you leave when he wanted revenge? And what was he babbling about?"

Clinton said, "I told them you weren't well."

"So?"

"I suggested, delicately, that you were pregnant."

"You—did—what?" The tape recorder, although small, made an enormous sound as it flew past Clinton's head and shattered against the door. He laughed and seized her and showed her he meant what he said. Only when Liz came back, very late, very flushed, very excited, did he recall what the space guardsman had said about the public Central Library.

Liz was babbling about meeting a most marvelous Shang who, for a change, was a gentleman. "Not like the usual

Shangs, at all, Diana. You know, I think—but that's impossible. Not with an alien—not with a Shang!"

Thoughts and memories began to clip into a patter in Clinton's mind as the girls prattled on. As he was going to bed, methodically checking his gun, he thought it over. As he finally dropped off, he made up his mind to visit the Central Library and try to find out the secret of being Rupert Clinton.

The next morning, Liz said, "I don't like it, Rupert. Suppose a librarian wants to know why you're snooping around this old Rupert Clinton accident?"

"I'll be careful. You've made up your mind then?"

"Yes. We'll wait. But don't be long!" Diana said.

Laughing, Clinton rode by flitting cab to the center of the city, paid off the cab some blocks from his destination, chillingly aware of just what he was doing, and allowing his Double-I training to take over. The Central Library encompassed four blocks, a colossus of stone and marble, glass and plastic. Riding up in the lift, he made a quick calculation on their current financial position. Operating on a shoe string in haunting the Shang night-spots, they must either leave tomorrow, or spend more time "earning" fresh money.

The librarian, a gentle soul with contact lenses, was courteous in putting the facilities of the library at Clinton's disposal. He spent an hour in his cubicle, pressing buttons for general information, glancing perfunctorily at the reading matter and pictures thrown up on the screen. Casually, he pressed for data on ambassadors.

The ambassadorial system was an archaic hangover maintained by the Shangs as a sop to their consciences, and also as a convenient method of having a whipping boy on call to transmit their orders with the weight of native fear. Clinton went through the ten subject planets, carefully,

realizing fully that anything he might call for would be monitored below. He could not just dial for 'Rupert Clinton, Earth Ambassador.' Shortly after doing that a squad of Shang police would surely enquire after his business—and urgently!

An hour later he was scanning the Terran lists. The average length of residence seemed ten years. The current incumbent had taken up his post in 2270, and the man before in 2260. The man before that had arrived in 2251 and his predecessor had taken over in 2240. Clinton paused.

The names meant nothing to him. He knew that of the present Ambassador, Perring, but there was an odd one year hanging unexplained. He dialed to check on that and found the ominous warning glowing on the screen before him.

### RESTRICTED

It was time to think. He knew his father had been an Ambassador; the kingly Shang had said so. The name of Rupert Clinton did not appear on the lists. That could mean only that his father had never taken up his post, and Clinton knew that he had been lost in space. Half an hour later he had checked through accidents in space and again that RESTRICTED sign mocked him from the screen.

He went at it again through starshipping statistics and again came full tilt against RESTRICTED covering the short period from early 2250 to late 2250. Somewhere in that period of time his father, en route to Alishang, had been lost in space. Clinton tried four other possible leads and every time was balked. He sat back, noticing the lapse of time, wondering if his continued interest in a single fact of history was having repercussions down below. For all he knew a Shang police squad was on its way for him now.

The marvels of the machine he was using were lost on him. If he wanted information on any subject he had merely to dial for it. The key groupings by subject were there in

the instruction manual. In the vaults of this mighty building, millions of facts were recorded magnetically, electronic circuits flamed into brief life, and what he wanted to know was thrown upon the screen.

Rather everything *except* what he wanted to know.

He tried again. He recalled Matras's indignation over some Shang thief who had broken out recently. The case had attracted attention by its rarity. What was the fellow's name? Ah, yes—Gurnala. Clinton dialed. The details of the case and the grisly fate of the prisoner flashed on the screen. Clinton noted the reference numbers, checked back and dialed for a list of criminals. The name of Clinton stared back at him, in strict Shang alphabetical order.

He reached out and then withdrew his hand. That way he was sure to alert the hidden watchers. That they were there he felt sure; the itchy feeling down his spine had been growing stronger, minute by minute, until it demanded all his will power to remain seated. He thought desperately, trying to find a way through, over, or around this impasse.

The words someone had said a long time ago floated back to him now. "No culture, Rupert, is entirely bad; it wouldn't last if it was."

He smiled, decided, and dialed.

He found it under 'Rescue Operations, subsidiary, children.' He read quickly, and the more he read the more he knew he had walked straight into the Shang trap.

Date: Fifteenth May, 2250. Subject: Rupert Clinton, son of Rupert Clinton, Earth ambassador to Alishang. Starship 'Queen of Austerlitz' sustained severe damage to negfield drive necessitating emergence from hyperspace into spacetime normal. All crew and passengers fatal casualties. Rupert Clinton Junior launched in Lifeshell, Child, Mark III. Picked up ten days later by

Terran starship 'Navarino'. Child was on last reserves of air and auto-fed food. Distress signals picked up on—

The report then went into technical details of wavelengths and equipment used. Clinton noted down the spatial coordinates of the rescue and then at once cleared the screen and set up another report at random.

He stayed in the cubicle, feeding in information to the screen, always at random, trying to obliterate the interest he had had in the Clinton child, and feeling the hot breaths of the Shang police on his neck every second. It took a great effort of will power not to jump up and dash from the library. It was as tough a quarter of an hour as he had ever spent. He thought of the dead Wasp in the Priests' hole, and shuddered in remembered horror.

So all the people aboard 'Queen of Austerlitz' had died, save the child they had managed to thrust into one of those tiny lifeshells. Then the child had been picked up ten days later, when its distress call had been recognized.

Who knew what the child had experienced, what its baby eyes had seen during that time when it had floated, lost in the night of space? Who could tell which way it had been going, how much space it had covered, just what had happened during that time? That sort of experience must have been shattering, must have been traumatic.

No wonder he couldn't remember anything about it.

At last, Rupert Clinton stood up, switched off the library screen, and went downstairs. The gentle old Shang librarian hovered around him vaguely. Clinton sensed the man's uneasiness. He asked if any phone calls had been made for him.

"Dascobar?" The contact-lensed eyes would not meet his. "No, I don't think so." A check of the robophone revealed no incoming calls for any Dascobar.

"Thank you." Clinton went out into the sunshine. He felt

hot and sticky. The slightest thing, he thought, would upset him, make him sick. He was on the verge of collapse; he was frightened for Diana, and for Liz.

As soon as he reached the hotel he told Diana, "We're moving. Get packed. Where's Liz?"

"That boy friend from last night called up. She's having a drink now—"

"Get her up here, fast!" Clinton blazed. Diana phoned. Clinton was jumpy. He told her what he had discovered. "That hedge of restricted notices was put there to see just how determined a person had to be to find out more about Clinton. The way I found out was through a loophole, but the Shangs are too thorough, too meticulous, to leave genuine loopholes."

"A trap, then?" Diana was quite composed. She was a different woman from the one who had come to Alishang.

"Yes, a trap. And I had to walk into it to find what I wanted to know." He held her shoulders, looking at her. "But I was wrong. I had no right to involve you and Liz in more danger when we were on the verge of going home. Where is Liz?"

"Nonsense! We're in this together. And however old and tired that may sound, it still means something to me. See?"

"I see." He kissed her and then released her just as Liz came running in. "And now, get packing. We're on the run!"

Liz said, cutting over their explanations, "I'm on the run, you mean! That Lothario wants me to take a nice quiet little jaunt with him to far distant lands. Huh! I've had experience of his type back on Earth. One-track minds." She flung her coat on the bed. "What's the excitement?"

They told her. Her face had lost its smile, but she was as determined as Diana, and refused to allow Clinton to blame himself. Then she chuckled.

"It's a pity we're leaving. Lothario owns a space yacht. Wants to take me off, away from it all. I'd just like to take him for a ride in it. Boy, wouldn't that be fun!"

"Wonderful," Diana said mockingly, tossing things into a case. "A long romantic cruise. Just the two of you, with all of space to play in."

"He's the most handsome man I've ever seen," Liz began hotly, and both Clinton and Diana laughed at her abrupt, stammering confusion. Then Clinton sobered. He stood rigid, a gaudy orange and green doublet hanging creased in his fists.

"You know, Liz darling, you are rather beautiful, you know. Enough to be able to turn a simple Shang's head. You could 'vamp' him into taking you aboard his space yacht for promised fun and games and soar almost anywhere." He lowered the doublet. "Negfield?" The query was diamond hard.

"Why, yes." Liz was puzzled. "I don't think you could persuade him to chance the trip to Earth."

"No. Somewhere else." Clinton flung a look of apology, a self-confession of weakness, at Diana. "Liz, ring him now and start vamping! Lothario is now working for Earth!"

So that, when that afternoon a simpering Liz was escorted by a peacock-strutting Space Guardsman in his purple uniform, he was met by the gun muzzle and grim determination of Clinton. They stood by the spaceship, towering and silver, and Clinton looked and looked and could not believe.

The Shang smiled with cold self-assurance.

"Hullo, Clinton," he said. "Took me a deuce of a time to find you. But I add, through your little lady friend's trap. Didn't expect to see your old pal Bennett, did you?"

"Bennett," said Clinton, dazed. "A Shang!"



"My dear fellow! An Earthman, a Double-I man working with you. Now let's get off this alien planet, shall, we?"

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

"WE'LL GET AWAY, of course, provided the Shangs don't catch up with us. Then they'd shoot us out of space like targets in a gallery."

The space yacht ran smoothly through hyperspace, every minute defying various weighty laws of space-time and appearing not the whit troubled by them. Clinton held his gun on Bennett; both the girls wore guns strapped to their waists. A puzzled atmosphere of waiting smelled in the ship.

"Why don't you give in, Bennett?" demanded Clinton. "Why keep trying to put yourself over as an Earthman? None of us believe you. And, anyway," he finished with somber regret, "if you were a Double-I man, you'd want to kill me just the same."

"Look, Rupert, how can I be a Shang? Didn't I get blown up with you and Horner in that car? Aren't I on the high council of Earth?" Bennett's tones lacked the bite, the desperation, the sheer force of conviction that they should have possessed if he were an Earthman; and yet, wouldn't they have been drivingly pleading if he was a Shang? Bennett's façade had crumpled.

And everywhere that Liz went in the control cabin, Bennett's eyes followed her like a sick spaniel's. Clinton

thought, with ugly satisfaction, "He's got it. He's got it bad. And Liz is the right bitch for him. Shang!"

Bennett tried again. "The Shangs'll knock us cold."

"And that doesn't make you afraid?" asked Liz.

"Of course. I'm scared silly. But there's not much I can do with your guns on me, except talk."

"Brave man," said Clinton admiringly. "But we shan't kill you unless circumstances force it. I've had a bellyful of killing. God, I hate Shangs! But I've satiated my desire to kill them. I wish . . . I wish . . ."

"Yes, Rupert?" Bennett said eagerly, and cringed quite involuntarily as Clinton's gun jabbed forward.

"Why don't you admit you're a Shang?"

"We'll be coming out of hyperspace any minute now." Bennett checked his controls. The radio lay smashed. "A Shang?" He checked the controls again. His hands were unsteady. Moisture filmed his skin, beaded on the wrinkles in his forehead. "If I said I was a Shang you'd forget your petty scruples and pull that trigger."

"We need you to run this boat. Can't you see, Bennett, it's a matter of *knowing*? It twists in my guts. The thought of you, sitting with Horner and Cromwell. . . ."

Bennett's body folded. The yacht came out of hyperspace. Bennett's face was mashing the chrome of the control board. His shoulders shook. Great racking, tearing sobs burst from him. It was embarrassing. Clinton felt hot shame flood him. He had no time, in that supreme instant, to take in the glory of space flaming about him. Bennett had completely broken down.

The man's handsome face, ravaged by his emotions, lifted. His hair fell over his eyes. Diana and Liz and Clinton stared at him, the guns suddenly childish lumps of metal in their hands. Bennett's tear-streaked face, swollen, lumpy, quite

shockingly, and for the first time, human, filled their attention.

"Yes!" he said. "Yes! I'm a Shang! A Shang! But I've lived on Earth for years. Best part of my life. And I mean the best part. I had a job to do. I did it. I did it damn well." He was shuddering great indrawn breaths now. "I had to find out what ZI meant. I had to penetrate to the high council and find the secret. And I would have—I would have."

Someone said, "A miserable spy."

Bennett laughed. "A spy! Sure, that's me, a spy. I would have spied well, too. But . . . but something wouldn't let me go on. I couldn't take it any more. You wouldn't understand. Not an Earthman. You wouldn't see how the sly business sickened me. I killed Wasps; they were only Earthmen, at first. And then, then I thought of them as my enemies."

Liz said, "A simple case of transferred emotions."

"Not so simple," Clinton said. The feeling of embarrassment crippled him. No man—Earthmen or Shang—should have to bare his soul like this. "Why did you break down, Bennett? What did we say that got to you?"

"Cromwell," Bennett whispered.

"Cromwell?"

"He was dying. He *was* dying, you understand? You believe me? I had to do it; he stood in the way. The secret had to come to me. For God's sake say you understand!"

Clinton's reactions came back, filled his mouth with bile. "We understand. You murdered Cromwell; is that it?"

"Not murdered . . . only nudged."

"Nudged! Nudged! A scheming Shang spy, murdering the Terran leader, and you patronizingly say nudged."

"I'll do anything. Anything. You've seen how I feel about Liz. That was the finish. That was the last ounce that

killed the jets. I'll repay. Anything. Atone. Only I must be able to live with myself again."

Clinton might have done any number of things then. He thought of the trail that had started when he had fled from Sheila and her dead husband, Frank. It had led a long and tangled path to this space yacht among the alien stars. He took Diana's arm. He smiled at Liz. "I need to check space awhile. I'm looking for something all tied up with what Bennett has been telling us."

He thought of that long, twisted trail. He remembered what Diana's father had been saying, of there existing different values in the Galaxy, more humane, understanding ways of treating the clashing conflicts of human and alien relationships. Bennett's breakdown was quite genuine; if Liz was convinced of it, then that was good enough for Clinton. It could prove a starting point for a new beginning. "Liz, darling," he said. "Talk to Bennett, will you?"

He watched them go out, Bennett stumbling as though under a five gravity load; Liz wearing a new, strained, apprehensive little smile that wrenched his stomach. Was she going out there with Bennett as a doctor, a scientific prober of his mind ready to strip and evaluate what she so coldly found? Or was she going, for the first time in her life, warmly, as a woman?

Around them space was empty. Ali gleamed, a beckoning dot. "Nothing here, Diana," Clinton said into the stillness. "We must search closer to the sun. When Liz has found Bennett some self-respect again, we'll jump through hyperspace nearer to Ali."

"Whatever you're looking for, Rupert, you'll find it."

"I'm only just beginning to understand what I *am* looking for."

Diana came close to him. "Whatever it is, I think you began when you chose to understand Bennett, to believe that

he desires friendship with Earth people." She had no hesitation in finishing. "And whatever it is you're looking for, Rupert, always remember that I'll be here, with you, when you find it."

"Thank God," Clinton tenderly, "for someone like you."

## CHAPTER TWENTY

ON THE morning of New Year's Day, 2274, the tiny starship popped from hyperspace. The negfield engines slowed to a steady silence, the ship orbited Solterra once, and then made a perfect and unobserved landing on the night side.

Two hours later Steeger pushed through into the African headquarters and headed for the liquor. With a glass in his hand he turned to face old Horner, Robert Ney and Raoul Palmgren, and said, "All there. And so, ZI dawns."

"At last." Horner, still sitting stiffly upright, still brusque and gray, felt the wave of emotion go over him, recognizing it for what it was. This was the last time. The Four men—the Three Who Knew and the fourth, who was to be inducted this night—found seats around the oak table. The walls were mostly covered by maps and charts and photo enlargements of Alishang's moons. The ceiling light was restful. The carpet was thick. Air conditioning made a lazy, restful background lullaby.

Easy enough to guess what Palmgren was thinking. He

eased his big bulk, smiling with pleasant, nervous apprehension.

Robert Ney said softly, "And so ZI dawns. At last, at long last, Earth can fight back for freedom."

"Big words, Bob," said Horner. "Words that have become almost meaningless over the years. Who, now, really believes there is such a thing as abstract freedom? Who would willingly hazard his life for any hazy idea?" He smiled, not tiredly, but as a man smiles who through infinite patience at last sees his goal, and with quaking awareness realizes that he must now perform in fact all those deeds he has rehearsed and dreamed in secrecy and stealth.

"I believe Earth has had a raw deal," Ney said stubbornly. "And so do you and the rest of the council, and so do the free fighters waiting to board the starships."

"Now they're going to have their chance to prove it when they start fighting on the moons of Alishang."

Horner looked up at the old smoke-blackened ZI shield and chuckled. It was a somber little sound. He busied himself as reports and orders flowed into the recording machines. Soon they would induct Palmgren. There was no rush—now.

At last they got to it.

There was no hurry over this. This had become a ritual over the centuries. No man was lightly told the greatest secret in the galaxy. When a man was told, a little grandiloquent morale-building was not out of place.

Old Horner cut through all that this night.

"You know what the emblem we use stands for, Palmgren. ZI. You can see the Z, with the I a single upright stroke falling from the diagonal and crossing the lower horizontal? Well, that means something else beside ZI. Something quite else."

Palmgren, his robust Viking's laugh silent was serious and attentive.

"There's a little story that is told on these occasions," Horner said. His own thoughts went back to the time when Cromwell had inducted him. A long time ago. Oddly, a disturbing thought of Rupert Clinton obtruded itself. He sighed. Palmgren was a good man, one of the best. It was no use wishing that fate could reverse itself. He roused himself.

"Briefly, when the Shangs began to take over Earth in their second phase, the phase where they gradually tore off the mask of friendship, there were men who saw the inevitable. They recognized that Earth could not fight Alishang here on Earth. They knew—and get this, Palmgren—they *knew*, through their own horse-sense and their computers, that the Shangs would eventually subdue Earth. So they determined to arrange a surprise for them. They saw at once that the only way to conquer the Shangs was by putting them in the same position *vis-à-vis* Earth as Earth would shortly be *vis-à-vis* them. They decided to carry out their own invasion."

At this Palmgren began the usual remonstrance. "But you can't invade an extrasolar planet without tremendous reserves, starships, supplies—the logistics . . ."

Normally, the initiate was allowed to go on. Horner remembered his own indignant denials, and Ney's careful analysis proving that invasion would demand supplies just not possible for a starship fleet to carry, a starship fleet, that is, currently possessed by Earth.

Now, Horner cut Palmgren off politely. "The picture was this, Raoul. Earth had no starships, no method of shipping supplies through hyperspace in quantities that would materially affect the battles consequent upon invasion. The Shangs made very sure we never did have such a fleet. So, the men of Earth in those days decided to use ordinary rockets."

"Impossible!" Then Palmgren fell quiet. He was beginning to realize that this was the Secret.

"Men worked for twenty or more years. They constructed huge ships, ferried out on space platforms and satellites and constructed in space. This was kept from the Shangs; we could control our own industry in those days, you understand. They worked hard. Many men sacrificed their lives so that the project should go through. Gigantic carriers without power were built. They were stocked from the arsenals of the world. All the hate that had existed between nation and nation, and which had led to the piling up of vast arms reserves, now played an ironical part in the ultimate freedom of mankind. A-bombs, H-bombs, banned cobalt bombs, guided weapons, missiles, huge quantities of smaller armaments, plus food, clothing, medical stores, supplies were stored. There was enough for an army of ten million men for a period that might run into five years. A tremendous amount of material."

"And all," Ney burst out, completely unable to control himself, his eyes blazing, "all ferried into space."

"All ferried by ordinary rocket into space," Horner nodded. "No faster than light drives were available to mankind. So mankind used his native ingenuity and guts and found a way around the problem—as he always has and always will." Horner was gripped now by the magnificence of that old dream; it had power, always, to make men drunk on its own grandeur.

"But that is not all. Do you recall, Palmgren, that research which was being carried out by a misguided group into suspended animation?"

"I remember. I had to turn it over to the Shangs. Invention Control is a stinking sort of job."

"They were working along lines that had already been covered. Hormones from bats. A certain doctor Chananamba



had developed successful techniques for putting people to sleep, in suspended animation, and then keeping them in that condition for a considerable time." Horner smoothed his moustache. "There were many volunteers."

"You mean that men, too—?"

"Men—and women. The great rocket ships were filled with fighting men, all armed, lying in long ranks, all asleep, all awaiting the day of awakening."

Palmgren licked his lips. Horner smiled and leaned forward. "We are not crazy, Palmgren. This is the secret which has been kept for over two hundred years. The keeping of it has been easy, sometimes. And sometimes difficult. There was a man called Bennett; Cromwell, our leader, knew, even in death, how to keep a secret. But there has been an unbroken chain of men, knowing, connecting you directly with the planners of the great armada."

"And then what?"

"And then, when everything had been done, the armada was started on its long fall through space. Rocket tugs built up the speed. Oh, a pitiful speed, when you compare it with the flashing superlight speed of the Shangs! A crawling, almost hopeless, plodding sort of gait. Starting with only a few miles a second, and then, gradually, as the atomic jets fired against their loads, growing, piling up, increasing, pushing faster and faster. Only ten thousand miles a second would have done the job, but we managed to pile up more than that—"

"But at those speeds, with deceleration as well, equal time, Alishang—seven light years. *Seven light years!*"

"Seven light years," echoed Ney. "And time."

"Seven whole light years." Horner sat back. "The great day was reached at last. The truly stupendous armada set off. The day was January the fourteenth, 2021. More or less. An approximation only, it took weeks to move the

whole twenty years of preparation. And then, four years later—"

"The Twenty-Five! The first Twenty-Five."

"Only four little years between the fruition of a dream and the event that could have smashed it forever."

Palmgren was stunned, as they all were at thought of the work, the devoted preparations, the secrecy, the opening of the hate-filled arsenals of the world. He licked his lips again. "But it would take years, hundreds of years. The planners would be dead."

"It was calculated that it would take two hundred and fifty-three years to reach Alishang."

All eyes, including Palmgren's, drawn by sheer physical attraction, turned to the battered ZI shield.

Horner said softly, "Not ZI, Palmgren-74."

"This year," Robert Ney echoed. "2274."

There was a quiet, hushed waiting after that. It was as though they were all remembering the history of the years, the devoted men and women, the blood that had been shed, the dark times with the brief, lurid flicker of the Twenty-Fives slashing through like lightning strokes. The misery and the squalor, the traitors and paid agents, the cowards and all the untold and unsung heroism that had gone to make up that waiting time of two hundred and fifty-three years. The time that must, by all the laws of celestial astronomy, wait until that silent, ghosting Armada from Earth could cross the gulfs of space and bring, at last, man's retribution upon those who would seek to conquer and enslave him.

They went into details, at last, speaking quietly, unemotionally. The whole concept was so vast that any declamations after the fact had been made known would have been worse than superfluous. They would have been like ants beating their chests in face of the coming avalanche. What

those men of the past had planned, that would come to pass.  
It was written in the stars.

And, seven light years away, a spaceyacht came out of hyperspace. Bennett and Liz stood very close together. Clinton and Diana, waiting for what they might find in the deeps of space, were aware of a warm, friendly atmosphere in the ship. They stared out into space.

And then Rupert Clinton knew the meaning of the rushing streams of light he carried as a memory buried in his mind since childhood. And he knew, too, that he would go with those swarming lines of light, riding down onto Alishang with the men of Earth. The long waiting was over, and the patient dark could yield up its ancient secret.