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SHELLBREAK

by J. W.
GROVES

IT
WAS
THE
PERFECT
NUCLEAR
DETERRENT,

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EXCEPT
FOR
ONE
FLAW

THE PEOPLE WHO KIDNAP LENOIR FROM THE PAST

make the situation sound simple: The F-shell he invented 400 years ago is now the main prop of the Rufuses' dictatorship. The Freedom Party wants the shell collapsed. What better man for the job than Lenoir, the shell's original inventor? He collapses the shell and opens up civilization to freedom and progress again. They return him to his own era. Simple.

But suddenly Lenoir finds it is not *quite* as simple as that. . . .

SHELLBREAK

By J. W. Groves

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CHAPTER ONE

AT FIRST, during those brief flashes of awareness that punctured and punctuated oblivion, even identity was not a stable thing. Sometimes there was himself and a being other than himself. And sometimes there was a period of interchange, of swaying back and forth, when neither of them was surely himself or the other.

Then, as They worked on, the fact of his own self's being slowly strengthened and grew steady until it became a certainty. He thought, and he thought he was Neals Lenoir, and therefore he was. But that stream of sense messages that builds up the self's knowledge of its surroundings still refused to cohere, to convey anything but a series of jerky, disconnected impressions not even linking causally with each other, let alone with anything that Neals Lenoir had experienced.

And what had Neals Lenoir experienced? Many, many things, it seemed. And some were important, and some were not; and some were glad, and some were sad; and the saddest of them all was that quarrel with Betty. Dearly beloved wife Betty, who even now might still be wearing that fashionable black wig that he disliked but should never have begrudged her—

They, whoever They were, did not mind Betty but they would not have him linger with her. The task of linking gibberish to sense was too urgent to be neglected. And although he would rather have gone on thinking of his wife he let Them press him. Gibberish, link-sound, sense. Gibberish, link-sound, sense. They could have gone on indefinitely; but They made the mistake of introducing along with their gibberish a concept too bizarre for passive acceptance even in his present state.

Tim truffle! This was too much. A meaningless sound with a meaning even more nonsensical than itself, and he was expected to neglect thoughts of Betty to take it seriously! Up till now he had known but not resented that communication between him and Them had all been one way. Now he strove

to throw out to Them meaningful sounds that would convey to Them how utterly he rejected this idea. Tim truffle indeed!

Although he was unaware of it his effort granted Them a little half-wry amusement. They were, after all, engaged in telling him many things: some true, some nearly true, some not so true. But, oddly, this one thing that he was rejecting was in a way the most rock-solidly truthful of all. He had known things that used to be, and now, with Betty long since dead, he would know things that were. Deception there was; and it would be many weeks before he would fully understand. But, They assured each other with amusement, indubitably he had truffled in tim—

Eventually he opened his eyes. And he knew then that somewhen in the seconds or eons since he last closed them self and space-time had fully reconnected. *They* were gone. He was lying on a couch, under a pearl-grey ceiling, and the room he was in was quiet. Not just penetrated by a few noises hushed enough to be unnoticeable, but obtrusively filled with the eerie quiet of complete non-sound.

The room was small, about ten feet by eight. At the further end of the room, on his right and out of his direct sight, a window was admitting what seemed to be dull sunlight. On his left, almost opposite to the window, was a door. Beyond that was a dressing-table with a tall mirror. On the narrow wall facing the foot of his bed hung a large framed picture.

He was awake enough now to be fully observant of his surroundings, but his brain still felt curiously numbed. He had never seen this room before, and had no idea where it was. And one section of his mind knew, sharply, that this fact should concern him. It did not, though. Instead he felt utterly placid.

It was simply in a spirit of mild curiosity that he began to pay closer attention to himself and what had been done to him. He was on his back, and there were no bedclothes over him. Someone had dressed him in what looked like a suit of grey pyjamas with red piping. And that someone, or another, had supplied him with a wristwatch. Or was it a wristwatch?

He bent his arm to get a closer look at the thing. Where there should have been numbers and circling hands there was only a disc of shimmering blue-green. He blinked, then grew

bored and let his hand fall back to his side. The thing was, after all, only a minor enigma within the greater one.

That part of himself that was able to recognise his reactions as abnormal suddenly thrust up the word 'drugged'. He considered the idea, without emotion. It was probably true. But who had done it and why? The boys behind the Iron Curtain? Perhaps, but it didn't seem likely that they would have realised yet that it would be worth their trouble. Even the government didn't really know how successful he had been with his experiments to date.

For a moment he came near to calling out for Betty, then he dropped the idea. Of one thing he could be reasonably certain. Betty was not around. He tried hard to feel concerned about that too, but still without success. And then, perversely, his very failure to feel concerned began to make him feel a little concerned. All right. He was drugged into artificial tranquillity, and that was a highly dangerous state to be in. But what could he do about it? Try to ignore the effect maybe? Try and act as if he felt normal?

Well, why not? He breathed deeply and shouted, "Hey! Is there anyone about?"

At first he thought nothing was going to happen. Then, abruptly, sounds penetrated the room, loud after the previous silence. The door was sliding to one side. Through the opening came two voices, a man and a woman's, obviously continuing a conversation already begun. The man said, "... hope the neo-hypnotic induction has been done properly. I don't trust that sort of practitioner however good his techniques."

The woman said, "Well, at least he won't have been recruited for the games. With anyone else you could never be sure."

Lenoir realised a little sullenly that this arrival was mere coincidence. Nobody had heard his shout. He lifted his head up from the pillow. Each of the new arrivals was dressed in pyjama-like garments similar to those in which he had found himself. The man was middle-aged, thin, and grey-haired. There was about him an air of being at once scholarly and yet alert to the present; like a university professor who occasionally plunges into the maelstrom of politics; or a scientist who sometimes plays a shrewd and decisive

part on a board of company directors. The woman was some twenty to twenty-five years younger than the man, well-formed, with rich, chestnut hair, and a face that was quite flawlessly beautiful. The first woman that he had seen in his life, thought Lenoir, whose beauty came close to Betty's.

And, he thought wryly, one of the few women he had seen in his life who had the good sense to stand up against the dictates of current fashion. That chestnut hair was obviously her own, and she had the good sense to display it, not cover it up with one of those deliberately artificial-looking black wigs—

He had a moment's unease. Was he being disloyal to Betty? A memory-picture came to him of his wife tugging her wig away, revealing the reddish-brown profusion beneath, and saying stormily, "Well, even you should be able to tell which is the fake and which is real." And that hadn't been the point at all, of course. Naturally he knew which was the fake. You were meant to. But he just didn't like fakery.

When he had pointed that out to her, though, she had responded sulkily, "Well, you should be able to see what lies beyond fakery." And what she meant by that he had never found out.

The man who had just come in said gently, "So you are over it? And you understand what we are saying now, don't you?"

Lenoir felt a mild prickle of annoyance at being jerked away from Betty back to the enigmatic present: and then he found himself half-rejoicing at having had such a feeling. If he could be annoyed by anything, it meant that the effect of the sedative was fading. He deliberately gave way to further annoyance in the hope of helping himself back to normal. "And why the hell shouldn't I understand what you are saying?" he snapped.

The young woman said, "Because you—" and then broke off at a gesture from the man.

He said, "Look, I don't want to throw everything at you at once. I want you to absorb what's happened gradually—"

"All I want," growled Lenoir, "Is to know where I am and what I'm doing here. Do I have to absorb that gradually?"

"I'd rather you did. Would you like to sit up and look around you, and tell me what impressions you get?"

"Seems to me we ought to have something better to do than to start playing games," said Lenoir. But nevertheless he sat up.

The room, with its door, dressing-table, and window; looked much the same as from his recumbent position. Even the sunlight seemed as dull as before; a fact which he felt, queerly, should have some significance for him. The picture, though, which had simply been an indistinct blur of colours and lines while he was lying down, now became plainly visible.

Not that that was any great gain, aesthetically. The thing was in the Victorian, picture-story tradition. When-did-you-last-see-your-father, For-he-had-spoken-lightly-of-a-woman's name. This specimen, though, was crudely executed, and its story cryptic. The central figure was a tall, slim nude. She was half-turned and crouching, as if ready to run away but seeing nowhere to run to. Her face was contorted, apparently by terror. In her hand was a flail-like weapon, dripping redly. Beneath her feet large letters announce *'The Wakie's Horror'*, and under that, in smaller script, "I saw the legendary light in the sky. But where was my child, my boy, when I needed him so?"

Lenoir blinked, not at the picture but at the title and sub-title. There was something queer about them. His eyes widened a little. Not only about them, but about him, apparently. He could read the words and understand them perfectly. But they were not written in English at all.

Something clicked into place in his memory. When the man had first spoken he, Lenoir, had understood him as saying, "So you are over it. And you understand what we are saying, now, don't you?" And that was the correct meaning of what had been said. But the actual words the man had used had sounded more like, "Sir yuuvot? En okaystan whet er syng, now, dunchuh?"

The effect of the drug in his veins was vanishing rapidly now, and Lenoir was starting to feel the shock that it had been intended to dull. He swung his legs over the edge of the couch and stood up. He found himself raging. "All right," he shouted. "So you taught me a new language while I was unconscious, did you? Well—"

And then the final blow hit him. In scrambling up from the bed he had brought himself more in line with the window; so that now he could see not only the light coming through it, but the source of that light. And the source was not the Sun at all. That luminary in its vast, high dome of blue was invisible. The light he saw was artificial light from below, reflecting from a sky that was smooth and dun-coloured, and far, far too close.

Sickness and panic set Lenoir trembling. He grabbed the man by the arm and screamed. "My God, so they've attacked already. When? How much damage did they do? What's happened to everybody? To my wife?"

* * *

New creeds, law systems, moral codes, constantly come into being, flourish into wide acceptance, then vanish. And through it all certain basic human types persist.

In a room not far away from where Lenoir panicked at the sight of a dun sky two men sat. The larger one, tall and beefy, stroked his heavy chin. Throughout history his sort have been called by many different names. Bandit chiefs, gang leaders, big-shots, master-minds. Now they were known simply as d'links. And this individual's personal name, Alk Orzon, was comparatively unimportant beside his title to that label.

The d'link spoke softly. "My information's good." He curved too-swollen lips derisively. "Samas Rufus is a slimy misbegot. But getting him what he wants gives me top connections. And that pays off in other ways besides milnpouns."

"I know. But this bit of info—hell, it just sounds crazy." The name of the man who answered was Lem Frack. He was short and thin. A narrow, blue-red scar ran from the corner of his left eye down across his cheek. It was an expression of pure vanity, that scar, a needlessly retained blemish that over-advertised and so cast doubts on his would-be air of tough lawlessness; and so symptomised, too, that difference between him and the bigger man that ensured that he would always be the underling; for ever one of the d'link's 'boys'.

"You a scientist?" Orzon asked.

"Hell, no. You know I ain't. But—"

"So you just by luck happen to know what scientists can do and what they can't?"

Frack squirmed, but persisted. "No. But hell, everybody knows about who was really paid for Ironglas's experiments and why—"

"Maybe. But maybe this is just one of those times when everybody knows wrong." The d'link spread his hands wide. "Supposing the Rufuses really used that loot to back Ironglas's crazy experiments, instead of putting it in their own pockets?"

Frack gaped. "Why should they do that?"

Orzon rubbed his chin. "Maybe they just felt like acting honest for a change. Or maybe they reckoned it would pay better in the long run."

The little man shrugged. "All right. If you say that's the way it is, that's the way it is."

"Now don't get me wrong." The d'link's tone was sharp. "I'm not saying it is that way. Just that it might be. And if it is, knowing about it would do us more good than it would do the Rufuses. So it's going to be your job to check. Diplomatic-like."

"I'll check."

"Diplomatic-like, I said. Don't go asking him straight out, or anything silly like that."

The little man looked aggrieved. "Have I ever behaved that stupid? I'll just chat him, find out who he is and what he knows."

The d'link chuckled. "Be even more diplomatic than that. Find out who he ain't and what he don't know. That'll tell us who he is and what he does know without us even having to ask."

* * *

Back in the room with the pearl-grey ceiling Lenoir was swaying slightly on his feet and shaking frantically the other man's arm. The man did not try to break his grip or restrain him, but simply waited quietly for him to recover himself. After a few seconds common sense prevailed, and Lenoir

sobered a little. "All right. It was a shock, but I'm over it now. But when did they attack?"

"When did who attack?" asked the young woman.

Lenoir stared at her. "Who? Russia. China. The reds, anyway. Who else?" He turned towards the open window. "Funny, I don't remember developing my F-shell to that point. To where it could be used as a universal air-raid shelter, I mean." He put a hand up to his head. "I must have been ill."

The man was looking at him with quiet sympathy. "You've got it all wrong, you know. You haven't been ill. And nobody has attacked anybody as far as I know."

Lenoir grunted, bewildered. What the man told him could be true. But if it were that very fact opened up other possibilities almost as horrifying.

Wherever he was, he was a long way from home, and he had been brought here against his will. And he had been taught another language under hypnosis, something that as far as he knew was impossible to the science of his own country. And yet, somehow, the apparently obvious explanation didn't fit. Everything here was strange; but there was something, he didn't know quite what, that smacked of familiarity too much for him to conclude that he had been kidnapped by a foreign power. "This is England, isn't it?" he said.

The man looked non-plussed. "It's level five of section twelve—"

"But of where?"

"Of the City, of course. Where else?" the young woman burst in. Obviously seething with impatience at all these questions and answers she went on snappishly, "It's why you are here, not where you are, that's important. You're here to make amends for that wicked invention of yours, the F-shell."

Lenoir's lips twitched. So that was it. There were still huge gaps in his memory and understanding but things did seem to make a little more sense. What was the name of those people? The committee of some-number-or-the-other. He'd forgotten their proper title, having taken it for granted that they had been either disbanded or suppressed.

What little he had read about the movement, though,

had inclined him to a sneaking sympathy with it. All the same, this was going a bit too far. "Now look here," he said stiffly. "Whether I've been ill or not, I've obviously suffered a period of amnesia. If during it my invention has been abused, I deny that I have any responsibility—"

He let the disclaimer dribble off into nothingness. For one thing it sounded unendurably pompous, even to him. And for another—well, although he often tried to deny it he did, deep inside, believe that a scientist had some moral responsibility for the way his inventions were used.

He began again. "A totally impervious force-shell is not a weapon, and can't be used as one. It is a purely defensive device. I don't know how the present emergency arose, but immediately it is over the shell can be collapsed and that will be that."

The young woman's voice rose almost to a wail. "But that's just the point—"

"Wait!" The man half-shouted the command. As the young woman cut off he went on, "This has got to be broken more gently. It's bound to be a shock to him, and you can see the sedation has nearly worn off."

The young woman said, "It's going to shake him, sedation or not. But tell him yourself if you prefer it."

CHAPTER TWO

THINGS SEEMED to be getting more mysterious instead of less so. "Tell me what?" demanded Lenoir shakily. Guesses about extreme pacifist groups and foreign powers slid out of his mind. Their going reduced everything to sheer, blank mystery once more. "Tell me what?" he demanded again.

"Let's start again from the beginning," said the man slowly. He lifted a hand, and flapped it vaguely. "I'm Hart Durag," he said. "And this is my daughter Liram Durag."

Reflexes with a lifetime's ingraining behind them started Lenoir off. "How do you—?" Then, "What the hell do I care how you do?" he demanded angrily. "I want some explanations."

"I'm trying to give them. Look—what do you know about the concept of simultaneity?"

"Simultaneity? What the hell's that got to do with anything?"

"A lot. Even in your time simultaneity was beginning to be suspect. Accept the idea that by now we know it has no stable, objective existence. That the nature of its existence is determined solely by a subjective frame of reference."

The words simply did not seem to convey anything. Then, jolting the roots of Lenoir's sanity, clues emerged. Not from the seeming double-talk about simultaneity and objectivity, but from minor, glossed-over, linking phrases. 'Even in your time...' 'That by now we have determined...'

Lenoir's mind slid back a minute or so to find the familiarity that he could not then identify, that had told him this was his own country. The new language was the clue. It wasn't foreign. It was his own tongue, altered, grotesquely distorted.

Tim truffle. He'd heard the words and rejected them as meaningless. But they weren't meaningless now. Just non-sensical.

He glared first at Durag and then at his daughter, and said almost accusingly, "Time travel!"

Hart Durag nodded slowly. "This is five hundred years in the future. The year 2505."

"And the shell?"

"Has been up continuously for four hundred years."

He didn't believe it, of course. Every last scruple of common sense rejected the idea. And they'd never get him to believe it, not with fifty fake F-shells outside the window, or a hundred phony, futuristic languages jammed down his throat—

Not shells or languages, perhaps. But what can memories do? Memories of a time of half-existence; of a time of transition. Memories of a being other than himself, who had to be where he had been. Who had to be when he had been—

Lenoir became aware that Hart Durag was walking to the window. "Come over here a minute," the man said. Lenoir went. As he came close to the window Durag pressed a button and the single transparent sheet slid upwards for half its depth.

Twenty-first century urban traffic had been the noisiest thing in human history. The sound that now came in through the open window was just a whisper by comparison. But somehow it was unmistakably the whisper of a packed, busy city. Lenoir came right up to the window.

Over everything swelled the dun-coloured inner side of one of his F-shells. The city itself started twenty or thirty storeys below him and soared above until it reached the shell. It was a city of towers, each one thick, but rod-like in overall effect because of its incredible height. Every tower looked as if it had been used as an anchor-point for web-building by brobdingnagian spiders. And darting purposefully in all directions through the webbing were hundreds of black ovoids.

Lenoir blinked, and stared more intently. The towers weren't really so rod-like. They looked more like those totem poles that the American red Indians used to venerate, except that each separate design up the length of a tower was not a carved animal figure or sacred symbol but a change in architectural style. Topless Norman towers crowned by apexless pyramids crowned by functional concrete-and-glass blocks crowned by perhaps fifty or sixty other outer variations in structure, none appropriate, none original.

Lenoir shuddered. He was willing to admire the colossal engineering feat involved in keeping such a city standing at all. But he would admire nothing else.

Durag spoke. "Are you satisfied now that this is the future?" He pointed out of the window. "Shell-scrapers weren't built half so high in your time. Mobilways are new. And your taxis kept to the ground."

"Only up to the point of impact with each other," said Lenoir. But it was more of a wisecrack-and-show-you're-not-afraid reflex than a genuine attempt at one of those rather pedestrian jokes which Betty had made it point of honour never to laugh at.

He began to feel as if someone had taken away his bowels and left a cold stone there instead. He still wanted to disbelieve in time travel. But it was becoming obvious that he wasn't going to be able to. He swayed his head slowly. Well, if he had to adjust even to that idea, then he had to, and that was all there was to it. He pushed the thing down to

that level in his mind where accepted, no-longer-to-be-wondered-at data were filed.

He went on to try and make sense of the rest of what Durag had just told him. The meaning of 'shell-scrapers' was obvious. Indeed, the word was more apt and accurate than 'sky-scrapers'. And the webbing between the shell-scrapers would be mobilways. Paths or roads connecting the towers. And the black ovoids would be taxis.

Liram came up beside him. "One thing is a whole lot different from your time," she said. "No private vehicles. So much easier to trace your movements if you have to spend money on public transport every time you go anywhere."

"Is it?" said Lenoir vaguely.

"The party doesn't officially adopt that explanation," said Durag. "We are prepared to accept that space restrictions within the shell may have made the abolition of private transport necessary, but—"

Liram interrupted her father ruthlessly. "There's something else you ought to see," she said, and pointed slightly to the left. Lenoir looked in the direction indicated. A mile or two away the shell-scrapers began to lose height as the shell curved down towards the ground. Right at the end of what was almost an open lane stood a single building, short enough to be hardly a tower at all.

The city, he now noticed, was thickly spangled with lighted signs of one sort or another. But this building was crowned with the most outstanding of them all; plainly visible even at this distance. The centre of the sign was an enormous bronze-coloured circle that glowed fiercely. And the outer part of it consisted of a dozen or more glittering, jet-black spirals that swirled out from the circles to thin away into nothingness about three diameters from the edge of them.

"Recognise the symbol?" said Liram abruptly.

"It's the sign I used to represent the field-shape formed by the sub-molecular aspects of my machine," said Lenoir. "The basic units of which my overall field-shape is the unified expression. But why is it shown in lights on top of that particular building?"

"Because that's the Hall of S.O.P."

"And what's the Hall of—?" Lenoir broke off the ques-

tion, his newly-acquired language-training catching up in time to make it unnecessary. The Hall of Shell-Origin-Point.

The shell-origin-points that he had created had been small enough to be enclosed in a boot box; but then he hadn't, or didn't remember having, ever developed a shell large enough to enclose a whole city. But even one that size shouldn't need a hall to contain its origin-point.

Interested now he peered harder at the building. The sign, intermittent in action, flicked off, leaving the hall a black silhouette against its dun background. With just the shape of it stark before him Lenoir noticed something new. "Hey!" he said. "That place looks all skew-whiff, somehow."

"It's partly wrecked," said Durag.

"It's badly wrecked," said Liram with a spurt of anger. "And," she added fiercely, "that was *not* the work of the True Freedom Party."

Lenoir looked at her, amazed. "Did I say it was? And who the blazes are the True Freedom Party, anyway?"

"We are. And you might hear later that we were responsible. But whatever people say it was the Direct Action for Freedom Party who did it, trying to collapse the shell by smashing the origin-point mechanism with explosives. They failed of course. But what they did do was lose the movement hundreds of thousands of votes."

Lenoir said, "They tried to collapse the shell by destroying the origin-point with explosives? But that was a damned stupid trick. If they'd wrecked part of the S.O.P. producing apparatus but not all of it they could just as easily have locked the shell into place permanently."

Durag said sternly, "Of course they could. That explosion was worse than stupid. It was criminal." He paused, and then went on, "Formerly there was just one organisation, the Freedom Party, dedicated to obtaining its ends by democratic methods. Then that crowd of hot-heads decided that things weren't moving quickly enough. They formed a sub-group demanding direct action. And the methods they started to use were such that it has now become necessary for us to dissociate ourselves entirely from them."

Lenoir looked from the man to the girl and back again, slowly. There crept over him a sense of flatness, a feeling of utter let-down. Damn it, however much he resented having

been dragged forcibly away from his own era, he was still a time-traveller catching his first glimpse of futurity. This should be a time of excitement, of high adventure. Instead he had been treated to some grumbles about the effects of his F-shells, had been shown a few new but not very exciting mechanical tricks, and had caught glimpses of the final shape of some half-described and rather dull-sounding social developments. And now he was being dragged into a political squabble of the type already staled by a thousand differently named and dedicated causes long before he was born.

He turned abruptly and went and sat on the edge of the bed. Liram spoke accusingly. "You aren't even interested!" she said. "You don't even want to know about the evil things your filthy invention has brought on us, the d'links and the games and the satisfied vote and all the rest of it."

Durag spoke curtly. "You can hardly blame him for that, can you?"



The two men and the young woman who sat watching the flat disc from which a slightly tinny voice was issuing were physically at the other end of the city away from Orzon, and socially at the other end of the scale away from any d'link. Whether they were also morally at the other end of the scale from one was very much more a matter of opinion.

Undeniably, though, the aims of the majority of them have won approval in many places and many times through the centuries. To preserve the way of life that had served them and their forefathers so well. To maintain those forms of democracy that still remained as a heritage to their people. And to keep aloft a shield that had for a long time stood successfully between those people and their enemies.

The slightly tinny voice said, "... the things your filthy invention has brought on us, the d'links and the games and the satisfied vote and all the rest of it..." A male voice replied curtly "You can hardly blame him for that, can you?" The girl leaned over and turned a knob. The microphone went dead.

"That's all for now," she said. "In fact that's all I propose to get unless some trouble crops up."

The taller of the two men said, "Why? Wouldn't it be better to keep a watch on them all the time?"

"It takes bulky apparatus to bug a modern, well-proofed room," said the girl. "And if they once realise we're doing it the whole plan falls through. Better not risk it. We know things are going on the right lines."

The other man spoke in a slightly whining tone. "Do we know? Did you hear how that Durag creature keeps nagging him? I wouldn't do anything for anybody who nagged me like that."

"You aren't he," said the girl curtly.

The first man said, "They've got him to admit to himself that he's travelled through time; but they've still got to persuade him to agree to collapse the shell for them."

"They'll do it," said the girl rather wearily. "They aren't fools. If they were there would be no need for all this."

The second man whined again. "We know they aren't fools. That's just it. That Durag girl particularly is one of the clever-clever type. I don't trust her."

The girl said coldly, "It's not too late to drop the whole idea and put things back the way they were."

The second man fingered his lower lip. "I—I didn't mean that."

"She knows perfectly well you didn't," said the first man contemptuously. He turned slightly towards the girl. "This had better be a success. We shall have to hold another election eventually. And then we shall need those satisfied votes, every last one of them."

"We'll get them," said the girl. "Remember, if your heads roll, mine rolls with them."

The prospect did not seem to worry her overmuch. Nominally, at least, the man was superior to her in rank and social position, and something in her tone; a hint of too much independence, too much self-possession, roused resentment in him. He snapped, "All right. But don't you forget it." He waved his forefinger at the flat disc. "And mind you get this first part over quickly, so that we can get on with what we want to do with him ourselves."

"The tape's already going out," said the girl. "He'll be getting it before long."

CHAPTER THREE

THE SILENCE in the room at the Durags' flat dragged on and on while Lenoir glared at his defender. What was it that he couldn't be blamed for? For not wanting to talk about those obscurely named evils; or for having caused them? He decided to defend himself against the greater charge first, and said, "Can you name a single one of the troubles that you suffer from now that wasn't in existence before my shell went up?"

"No," said Durag.

"Then why hold me responsible—?"

"That's what I'm trying to tell you. Nobody does." Durag glanced at his daughter, then added with a smile, "Or at any rate, I don't. The point is, though, as a result of your F-shell, man is turned in on himself. There's nowhere to expand to, no excitement or adventure left except in crime and vice. And so those two things grow steadily more attractive and powerful year by year."

And the do-gooders were even bandying that one around before this shell went up, thought Lenoir. He said hotly, "No escape? No adventure? And you've got the secret of time-travel?"

Durag sighed. "The secret of it is about all we have. Ironglas spent twenty years of his life and several grants of billions of milnpouns laying the foundations of the scientific theory of simultaneity manipulation. And all he and the teams of men he trained to carry on after his death have succeeded in doing is to effect one single exchange of psychic and physical equivalents between your time and ours."

"One single exchange—?" Lenoir's eyebrows went up. "Of course I—I remember now. Remember bits of the journey here, I mean. Someone had to go in my place. Had to not-be in my place, so that I could be in his; if that's the right way to put it."

Durag smiled sympathetically. "There isn't any right way to put it, really. We need a new vocabulary. But until we've

developed it we'll have to make do with what we've got. Let's simply say that the space-time continuum won't tolerate an imbalance, and before we could get you here we had to find a volunteer who would go back in your place. Fortunately it wasn't difficult."

Lenoir said, "Who was this volunteer?"

Durag smiled briefly. "Would it mean anything to you if I gave his name?" He went on speaking more slowly and thoughtfully. "Don't worry, though, about any effect he might have on events in your time. We've planned that when you go back you will be returned to the precise instant at which you left. Naturally, you will retain memories of all you did while you were gone; but to observers in your era still immersed in the normal temporal flow the period of the exchange between you and your replacement will be so short that they won't be able to detect it."

"All right. But why hasn't somebody come back here from the future to affect events occurring now?"

Durag twisted his lips. "Frankly, we've often wondered. But there's no way to find the answer to that except by waiting till we get there."

Lenoir nodded. Probably there wasn't. Time-travel was so new to him that he had not yet had time to think out a thousandth part of its implications. That was to be expected. He couldn't exactly claim that F-shells were as new to him as time-travel; but he hadn't yet had time to think out a thousandth part of the implications even of them.

An F-shell is not exactly a material thing, although in effect it acts as one. More accurately it is a completely enclosed, continuously maintained, ovoid of repellent force; theoretically infinite in power at what Lenoir termed the speed-centre of the shell—or what ordinary beings would call the middle of the wall—but falling away to virtually nothing a few centimeters away. Anything enclosed by the shell when it is created is unaffected by it; but is completely cut off from any effect exerted by an outside object or force except all-pervasive gravity. Cut off, even from another F-shell created within its vicinity, since no one shell could penetrate another.

To cover properly anything spread out on the surface of the Earth, as a city would be, the lower half of the shell had to penetrate the ground; but since the penetrating surface

is extremely thin, comes into being at all points simultaneously, and is totally rigid, there is no need to fear dangerous seismic disturbances. And once created an F-shell, like a magnetic field, requires no further power to maintain it. It simply continues to exist until it is deliberately collapsed by manipulation of the origin-point mechanism.

When he had started to develop the things Lenoir had envisaged their being used among other things as perfect air-raid shelters against nuclear bombs, but he had certainly never expected this result. And yet, with the wisdom of hindsight, he knew now that he should have thought of it as a possibility.

He could imagine past governments feverishly arranging for the entire population of the country to be 'evacuated' to this and similar centres 'in the event of an emergency'. He could imagine them, meanwhile, spending larger and larger slices of the ever-growing national income on the research and development necessary to arrange for the complete recycling of food and air and water inside the shells. He could imagine one of those governments, faced with a sudden worsening of its international situation, panicking, ordering all its people into shelters, switching on the shells, and then—

And then what? Inside an F-shell you were cut off completely. So how could you know whether or not the government has issued orders to switch off again? How could you know whether or not the bombs had already fallen? How could you know whether or not the enemy rockets were still poised ready to dart in as soon as you let your guard down, or whether or not the outside of your shell had been booby-trapped so that by the very act of collapsing it you would shower on yourself the horrors you had been sheltering from?

Oh, such fears wouldn't last for ever, of course. But in the decades that they took to ebb, use and custom would creep in to take their place. And, more solidly real in effect, interests that were vested deep in the maintenance of the new *status quo* would germinate and then grow powerful. And so the plans which had been made for rejoining the rest of the world, already vague, would become even vaguer, and the date set for collapsing the shell would recede ever further into the future.

Lenoir sighed. "All right," he admitted glumly. "Perhaps my invention has landed you in a bit of a mess. But just what do you expect me to do about it?"

* * *

Crooks and ruling cliques continuously exist. There is, however, a third class of groups that does not continuously exist; but which, if crooks grow too powerful or ruling cliques too corrupt, can always be relied upon to emerge into being.

In a room roughly equidistant from the home of the Durags and the headquarters of the local d'link, three men sat round a low table. The eldest of them, Toms Petries; long of limb and body, and having dark hair and eyes, drummed with bony fingers on the edge of the table. "It may seem that the action was a rather futile one," he said. "But it wasn't. If the plan was going to develop properly it was essential that the movement, united or divided, should have this time-traveller."

The second man, slightly younger than Petries and inclined to plumpness and baldness, nodded complacently.

The youngest of the three, whose name was Kris Bartor, snorted half-angrily. Red-haired, it would be his nature to be impatient all through his life. And as yet he was not even restrained by what slight sobering influence maturity would eventually have. "But the Rufuses know he's been taken," he protested. "And they don't seem all that unhappy."

"Why should they?" Petries' finger-drumming quickened. "The Rufuses are making the dangerous mistakes that we want them to make. The mistake of thinking that we have not identified Neals Lenoir, and the mistake of thinking that we do not know how time-travel is accomplished."

Bartor smiled, albeit wryly. "All right. But given that the time-traveller had to be used, why should the True Freedom people have him first?"

The plump man, whose name was Jem Kennings, said, "Why not?"

"Why not?" said Bartor hotly. "Because he obviously should be ours first, that's why not. We're supposed to be

the Direct Action people—the people who do things instead of just talking about them.”

Petries said, “We can do our share of talking.”

Kennings intervened hurriedly. “Do you think the True Freedom crowd will be able to get the shell open, now that they’ve got Lenoir?”

“They might,” said Petries judiciously. “At any rate they’ve got to be allowed to try. Better to have the shell collapsed by our—uh—hated rivals, than not at all.”

Young Bartor grinned. “I suppose you’re right.”

Kennings chuckled. “Oh, come now. You mustn’t give in quite so easily as that. You’re the discontented, rebellious member of the party. Remember?”

Petries smiled faintly. Bartor stuck out his lower lip. “Yeah. And don’t let anyone fool you. I really *am* the discontented, rebellious member of the party.”

“That’s fine.” Petries broke off his finger-drumming abruptly. “And if it’s any consolation to you, I fully expect the True Freedom people to fail with Lenoir. And then, when the time is right, we shall be able to force him into our camp however much of their propaganda against us he has swallowed.”



Unaware yet of the existence of crooks and government and a revolutionary party, Lenoir found his verbal defensive powers fully stretched by one angry young woman. “What do we expect you to do about it?” Liram demanded angrily. “That’s a stupid thing to ask. It’s your shell, isn’t it? You’re responsible for its being there.”

Durag interposed smoothly, “Look, Lenoir are you sure you feel up to all this at the moment? As soon as that sedative that was used on you begins to wear off all you are usually fit for is sleep.”

“I’m all right,” said Lenoir. It wasn’t altogether true. He had been aware for some time of growing exhaustion, but the flurry of emotional shocks to which he had been submitted had prevented him from paying real attention to it. And even now that Durag’s question had drawn it to his notice he went on fighting it determinedly.

"I'm all right," he repeated. "Look; I suppose I've been brought here to collapse the shell. But how do you know I can? How am I even going to get at the controls of the S.O.P. if the government is dominating things as you say?"

"The first government that put the shell up was afraid of the psychological effect that being locked in would have on their people," said Durag. "So they started the custom of having the controls of the S.O.P. on display to the public. A sort of 'The-Key's-in-the-door' illusion. And that custom's been kept up."

Lenoir nodded, frowning. "I don't know how things actually went after my time, of course. But if all my ideas were carried out, even that wouldn't help much."

"It wouldn't, normally," said Liram. "Luckily, some members of our party are quite good at burglary." She crossed to the corner of the room and stared intently at the wall. A panel slid aside and she plunged her hand behind it. She came back to Lenoir carrying a small, red article. "The key-pack," she said.

Lenoir took the thing and examined it closely. It was a flat seamless box, about six inches by four. In the middle of each scarlet side was a small, semi-spherical indentation. Along the top were six studs, three blue, three green.

Lenoir's hands shook just a little. Perfect! He could remember clearly that right from the moment he had first begun to develop his F-shells he had been rather nervous of the use they might be put to if some unauthorised or even criminal groups managed to get their hands on them. So he had designed deliberate, unnecessary complications to be incorporated in the controls. This box he recognised as one of them, made to his design. In effect it was both a part of the origin-point mechanism, and a key. Without it any attempt to achieve a shell-collapse would be a failure.

"Well," he said, "I know what this thing is and what it does. So that gets over another point that was worrying me. It's a fair assumption that the rest of the controls will still be familiar to me."

"No real reason why they shouldn't be," said Durag. "The shell's been up a long time, so the origin-point was constructed soon after your death."

'Soon after—' Lenoir gave a little shudder of distaste.

Time-travel made available information that he would much rather not have. He spoke hurriedly before anyone could be tactless enough to mention a date. "I'm still not clear why you need me," he said. "Surely someone of this time knows how to operate an origin-point?"

Liram shrugged. "Are the Rufuses likely to make it that easy to lose the satisfied vote? When they came into power practically the first thing they did was to limit training in origin-point operation to themselves. It's the only useful skill anyone of them has."

Durag said gloomily, "And anyone who tries to discover how to cause a collapse is liable to finish up recruited for the games."

Lenoir began to feel irritated. The Rufuses. The games. Both spoken of with easy familiarity, and without a word of explanation to him. This was something likely to run him into difficulties if he wasn't careful; people's taking it for granted that he knew more about various subjects than he did.

Growing up in a culture people absorb by what is almost a process of mental osmosis a million and one details of the local mores and their own physical surroundings; and by the time they are adult those details have sunk into their unconscious minds to a level where they are taken for granted, like laws of nature. No such adult could achieve sufficient empathy with someone pitchforked out of a completely alien world into their own to realise how utter and complete his ignorance was.

It wouldn't do any good, though, to nag about that. He would just have to accept it, and frame every question carefully, and keep on questioning the answers, until he was sure he had things right.

CHAPTER FOUR

HE STARTED to do so as best he could, and gradually he began to build up a more-or-less clear picture of the political set-up in this era. Nobody knew now whether this was the only shell, or whether there were several. In either case, this

shell was quite autonomous, and was, theoretically, still a parliamentary democracy. Elections were still held, opposition parties still tolerated, and even free speech still allowed. However, the cabinet which had been in power when the shell went up had arrogated to itself a number of powers for the duration of the emergency; including control of the mass-media of communication.

With these they and their successors had managed to whittle away the ordinary powers of parliament. Although it could still, legally, turn the government out, that was a hopeless task in the present set-up. And it had no controls at all over the introduction of new legislation, or of appointments to high office, and tended to remain prorogued for years at a time.

This had left the government the power to create and bestow a number of nice, juicy sinecures; which in turn had led, in slow but inexorable succession to the re-emergence of nepotism and then to the return of the 'ruling-family' system.

In the early days of the Rufus rule the True Freedom Party, barred from the TV screen, had tried to carry on propaganda work by handing out and sticking up printed material; concentrating their attack mainly on the scandalous misuse of the taxes, that went mainly into Rufus pockets. For the last century, however, even that means of disseminating their views had become illegal. It was still not actually against the law to be a member of the party, but it was increasingly dangerous. The Rufus family was not above the use of the old-fashioned frame-up. Which was probably why, Lenoir concluded, he had been allowed to meet only two members of the party so far. The less people he knew the less people he could betray.

Nowadays, although it still did a certain amount of circulation of print the party's hopes were mainly centred on his, Lenoir's, getting the shell open for them illegally. "We've got to gain the satisfied vote if we're going to win the next election," said Liram. "And once the shell's open we can be sure of it." She lifted her head suddenly, then added exultantly, "Who wouldn't vote for us, once he had seen the glories of the outside, and knew what the government had been depriving him of?"

Her tone was such a contrast to any that she had previously

used that Lenoir stared. She blushed a little and gave him a half-smile. "Didn't you know I felt like that? Why do you think I go on with this work?" She paused, then added, "Is it true that out there is a bowl of glowing blue that curves over your head, and golden light that pours down in great shafts?"

"Sometimes," said Lenoir absently. "But seldom at weekends. And never in Manchester."

They stared at him blankly. He didn't mind that. His second ponderous little effort at humour, like the first, had slipped out only half-intended; more of an exercise in stiff-upper-lip-keeping than anything else. But because it was so very much the sort of thing he had once indulged in the act of creating it let loose in his mind a flood of memories of Betty, her nose held between thumb and forefinger, or screwed up into an exaggerated sniff, as she brought out the good-natured but sarcastically laboured "ha-ha-ha" with which she invariably greeted the worst of his jokes.

A swift, fierce surge of home-sickness flooded him. Suddenly his cool, rational decision to accept what had happened to him and to go on from there was swept away, and all this talk of centuries-old shells and subtle tyrannies became hopelessly irrelevant to anything that really mattered. Afraid that his face-muscles and tear-glands were going to make a fool of him in front of these two strangers he jerked himself to his feet, tossed the scarlet key-pack blindly on to the bed, and went quickly over to the window.

What am I doing? he thought wildly. Why am I talking to them like this? Ordinarily. Conversationally. I ought to be threatening them hell if they don't take me to this damned time-machine of theirs and restore me to where I belong.

After a second or two the gust of passion spent itself a little, and sanity began to return. Nobody would have gone to all the trouble to bring him to this time if they intended to let him go back immediately merely because he demanded it. And as for forcing them—what could he do?

He didn't even know what the time-machine looked like or where it was, or how to operate it. If he were fool enough to try some desperate, million-to-one chance, like grabbing the girl, say, and threatening to kill her if he wasn't

returned, they would have the knowledge and means to trick him out of his advantage in any one of a thousand different ways without giving him what he wanted.

Without turning his head he spoke, his voice half-choked. "You—you don't know what you've done to me. You took me away at the worst time of all. Betty, my wife, and I had just quarrelled over a damned wig. And then I was gone, before I had time to make it up or tell her I was sorry—"

"A wig?" said Liram sharply. "What colour was it?"

"It's too early to worry about that," Durag snapped.

Even with his back to them, and through his daze of misery, Lenoir realised that his words had somehow caused a moment of tension between the father and daughter. And why the hell should the colour of Betty's wig have that effect? He shook his head slightly. He didn't really care. Ignoring the girl's question he said huskily. "You're both taking it for granted that I'll help you. But why should I, after the way you treated me? I didn't ask to be brought here like this."

There was a short silence, then Durag said gently, "It was a cruel thing to do. We realise that. Our only excuse is our own desperation. And I will be honest with you; if you don't choose to help us there is nothing we can do about it. Our only hope is that as a man of conscience you will want to when you understand all that has happened as a result of your invention."

Lenoir was regaining fuller control of himself now. He was still bitter enough to reject contemptuously Durag's appeal to his conscience; but he had the sense to realise almost calmly that his only chance of salvation lay with these people.

"All right," he said gruffly. "We'll postulate provisionally that I'm a man of conscience. Now let's get on with the briefing again."

"Come away from that window and sit down then," said Liram in a tone that Lenoir recognised, with slight astonishment, as briskly maternal. So, he thought wryly, the naughty little boy has been coaxed out of his tantrums, and now we hope he's going to behave sensibly, eh? As he turned he caught Durag's eye for the moment, and correctly interpreted the look it was giving him. You aren't being fooled by any naughty little boy stuff, he thought. You knew this was going to happen, didn't you? Oh well—

He walked back to the bed and sat down on it, more than glad of its support under his body. Liram, meanwhile, had picked up the key-pack, which he had dropped, and walked across to the invisible little cupboard which had seemed to open before just because she stared at it. She stared again, and once more it opened. She put back the key-pack, and took out a long strip of grey plastic.

"Have a look at this," she said.

Lenoir took it from her and stared at it. On one side of the strip were three pictures, natural-coloured and fully-dimensional. Each was a reproduction of a human head, three-quarter profile. The man on the left was puffy-faced, with round, wet-looking lips, and small, deep-set eyes. Liram pointed downwards at that picture as Lenoir looked at it.

"That's Navel Rufus," she said. "The eldest of the three brothers who are ruling now."

Lenoir nodded, turned his eyes to the centre picture, then blinked. If Liram had not specified three brothers he would have taken this one for a woman. A chestnut-haired, pretty, but rather unpleasant-natured woman with a sulky mouth and selfish, hard eyes.

"That's Samas," continued Liram.

"Those two do most of the actual governing," commented Durag. "Burt Rufus, the youngest, is a different type altogether and largely ignores affairs of state. And if half of what we hear is true Navel and Samas don't have much to do with affairs of state either. They put on the front show, but they are really pushed around by Yurli Cardell."

"And who's he?" said Lenoir, looking up.

"Not he, she," said Liram. "She's chief of the leos."

"Leos?" Once again Lenoir's new memories supplied him with an answer. "Oh, I know. Law Enforcement Officers." He searched around, found an almost-archaic term that was still comprehensible. "The police."

"In a way," said Durag. "But don't judge them by the police of your time. They're more like the Rufuses' personal bodyguards and general bully-boys."

"And their chief is a woman?"

"Not so surprising as you seem to find it," said Liram acidly. "One of the very few ways we have advanced since your days is in the matter of sex equality."

"Glad to hear it," said Lenoir.

Durag said dryly, "You know, my dear, I don't think I'd put Miss Cardell forward as an argument for sex equality, if I were you."

Liram bit her lip and flushed. She said to Lenoir, rather sullenly, "We know of at least four murders she committed or had committed to help her on her way to the top."

"Nice girl," said Lenoir. He looked down again, at the third picture. The face had a certain family resemblance to the other two, and it had the same lines of hard selfishness about it. But it was firmer, and carried an expression of alert vitality that the others totally lacked. In it, too, the middle brother's prettiness had emerged again, but hardened into true male good looks.

"This I suppose is Burt," said Lenoir. "What sort of a man is he?"

"A drunkard, a lecher, and a bully," snapped Liram. "And the sort that indulges in crazy violence at everyone's expense but his own."

"I'm afraid that's not altogether an unjust description," began Durag judiciously. "But—"

"But nothing," interrupted Liram with almost irrational fury. "It's all true." She turned to Lenoir. "Do you know what he did once? He had a taxi converted so that it could be controlled manually, and he drove the thing everywhere, terrifying people; until one day when he was drunk he dived too near a mobilway and killed a child."

"After which he gave the thing up." Durag pointed out gently. He sighed. "This is an age of cruelty and easy violence. Yet, oddly enough, driving that taxi was practically the only dangerous participator sport that Burt Rufus could indulge in. He's as much a victim of the shell as the rest of us. In a free, open society he would have made a good explorer or astronaut."

"But in any sort of society he would have made a bad legislator, eh?" said Lenoir.

"In any sort of society he would have made a bad anything," said Liram angrily. "If it weren't for the fact that it would mean you'd never get home I'd like to see him stranded for the rest of his life in the twenty-first—"

Durag's head jerked up, and he glared at her. Liram

broke off, gulped, then began again hurriedly. "But never mind that now. We'd better explain to you about the—the new legislation we propose to bring in, and—"

Durag sighed. "Don't bother now, my dear," he said wearily. "It's far too late. Mr. Lenoir isn't that much of a fool."

A knot of cold rage, violent enough to overcome his exhaustion, had formed in Lenoir's stomach. Durag was right, he wasn't that much of a fool. The girl's naïve attempt to cover up had only highlighted the revelation made by her slip of the tongue. "So you're depending on it that I'll help you because I'm a man of conscience, are you?" he said. "It seems to me that you're putting a hell of a strain on my conscience."

"Yes," said Durag humbly. "I'm afraid we are rather, aren't we?"

It was too submissive a reply to satisfy Lenoir's mood. He needed an excuse to break loose, to rant and bully. He found himself hoping that the girl would speak again, but wisely she said nothing. Durag said softly, "Don't make the mistake of a too hurried decision. It is nearly sleep-period, and you are tired. Very very tired. You ought to sleep for a few hours, too, then you will be in a better condition to think this thing over properly."

He was tired. Terribly so. The fatigue poisons in his blood were dragging at his muscles, blurring his vision every now and then so that the figures of Durag and his daughter squirmed and twinned themselves. Are they still working the hypnotic trick that they used to teach me the language, Lenoir wondered. But if they can do that, why don't they use it to get what they want about the shell?

Perhaps it's against their principles to force a man to obey them over anything too important. And perhaps, now that I come to think about what the girl said, I wasn't hypnotised or taught the language by these people at all. I need to think this over.

There were, he realised forcibly, a hell of a lot of things he needed to think over. But he wasn't going to be able to do it properly with these two around. "I think I will sleep for a little while," he said. "Then I'll be able to see things more clearly."

He laid back and swung his feet up on to the bed. Durag and his daughter accepted their dismissal. The man nodded and turned towards the door. The girl said, "All right. See you later then," and followed her father.

As the door moved smoothly across behind them Lenoir rolled over and came to his feet again. Now perhaps he could sort out properly the tangle of new impressions and ideas that had been crammed into his mind; and arrive at his own decisions. He shook his head violently, driving back the fog of sleepiness, and started to walk up and down.

Another surge of desire for home and Betty swept through him, but he drove it down. The thing that he had to face up to was, did he accept the True Freedom Party at the evaluation they put on themselves? And if he did, to what extent was he really a man of conscience? And what, if anything, was he going to do about the information that Liram had accidentally let him have?

She had said that if it wasn't for his, Lenoir's, being unable to get home as a consequence, she would like to see Burt Rufus stranded back in the twenty-first century. Which meant, of course, that it had been the youngest of the Rufus brothers who had been used as what Durag called the 'psychic and physical equivalent' in the temporal exchange. So; either Burt Rufus was in league with the Freedom Party—hardly credible since they wouldn't then have needed a time-traveller to help them—or the real developers and controllers of the time-machine were the government; the more logical conclusion anyway considering the enormous expenditure in the manpower and money that the development of the thing must have entailed.

And what chance is there, thought Lenoir resentfully, that the government will use their machine to send me back in time if I help their enemies to overthrow them?

He frowned. His head was still too muzzy for really clear thinking. He felt that touch of intellectual queasiness that tells a man that there is a fallacy in his reasoning; but though he checked his thoughts and conclusions again he could not spot any illogicality. Certainly, if the True Freedom Party became the government they would presumably get control of the time-machine, but—no, that wasn't where he went wrong.

He rubbed his eyes. They were stinging and gritty. It would do him good to splash his face in cold water, if he could find any. There was no source of supply in sight, but there should be one somewhere handy, if this were indeed a bedroom. He remembered how Liram had opened a small cupboard behind a panel simply by looking. Well, it was worth a try.

CHAPTER FIVE

HE WAS glaring at his third panel, experimenting without result to see if the thing were operated by will-power, when a slight rise and drop in the background sound level told him that the door had been used again. He swung round. Liram was staring at him curiously.

"I thought you'd be asleep," she said. "What are you doing?"

He jerked his thumb towards the panel. "Trying to open this."

She came over and glanced at it. It glided away, revealing a small pile of neatly folded garments. "It's keyed to my retinal patterns. Most things that need to be operated personally are controlled by retinal patterns these days."

Lenoir nodded. He could understand the reason for that. Retinal patterns are even more individual than finger-prints, and far more difficult to fake.

"I'm sorry if you were inconvenienced," Liram went on. "We'll have your patterns fed to the control computer tomorrow, so that you can work things around here."

"Don't apologise for not having arranged everything just right," Lenoir said dryly. "I can see that it would have been difficult to fix such things ahead before you'd had me kidnapped."

She looked at him sharply, but made no answer to that. "What were you looking for, anyway?" she asked.

He told her. She smiled. "Oh, if you only want to stay awake a bit longer, try this." She handed him a pill-sized white sphere. "Break it under your nose and inhale."

He took it suspiciously. Obviously, from the way she had

the thing ready, she had come in here with the intention of using it on him. What for?

Briefly the thought crossed his mind that though he had learned something about this era he was totally ignorant of the current sexual mores. Then he chuckled mentally. Why flatter himself? Forceful personalities remained true to themselves no matter what the mores were. Whatever went or didn't go these days, monogamy, polygamy, polyandry, free-love, strict chastity, Liram was the type who would settle for nothing less than a true soul-mate, probably in a union that was practically all soul and very little mating. He was in no danger whatsoever.

He crushed the sphere, sniffed, and fought a desire to sneeze as the fumes hit the lining of his nostrils. The urge passed, and he found the girl had been right. Temporarily at least he was fully awake and alert again.

"Thanks," he said, "But why didn't your father give me this?"

She twitched her lips. "We argued about that. I thought he should, but he didn't agree. That's why I've had to slip in here without his knowing."

Lenoir remembered the submissiveness with which she had accepted correction from Durag earlier. He felt a mild surprise. "Parental authority seems to have grown stronger since my time," he said.

"Parental authority?" She sounded amazed. "My father can give me orders only because he holds a higher position in the party than I do. And even so, there are times when I use my own discretion."

Lenoir smiled faintly. "Like now, for instance?"

"Like now." Liram passed her tongue across her lower lip. "My father doesn't want you awake because he doesn't want you to answer the telephone yet. But I think it's better if you do."

"Answer the telephone?" After her conspiratorial build-up the disclosed reason for it seemed so prosaic as to be anticlimactic. He'd had so little time to sort things out in this era that he hadn't even thought about telephones; but of course they'd have them, in some form. He started to look round the room for an instrument. "But who'd be ringing me up? Who knows I'm here?"

He continued to look around the room. She stared at him, then gave a short laugh. "Oh dear, I'm sorry. I keep forgetting how different things were where you came from." She grabbed his left wrist and lifted it. "Here."

He stared down at the blank-faced wrist-watch-like thing that he had noticed when he first woke up. "So that's a telephone. How do you work it?"

She showed him. The blue-green disc was in fact the top of a shallow cylinder. Round the upper part of the outer side of it were two groups of markings, one consisting of the letters of the alphabet, and the other of the five words 'send', 'receive', 'private', 'general', and 'disconnect'.

"Put your finger over 'disconnect'," Liram instructed. "You'll feel a little knob. Push it round to 'receive', and then 'general'."

He did as he was told. For a second nothing happened. Then the image of a girl's face appeared. She was staring straight at Lenoir, breathing softly. Apparently she had just finished talking.

Lenoir said, "Well, well. So that's who was ringing me. Who is she, anyway?"

"Yurli Cardell, of course," said Liram.

"You mean to say she's the head of the local police force?" Lenoir stared harder. There is no law of nature that says that police-women may not be young and glamorous. He'd seen a few in his time who proved that. But all the same this girl was the last one that he would have picked out of a crowd as being the chief officer of the leos, and a ruthless killer to boot. Her hair, which fell to her shoulders, was deep-waved and auburn, and either natural or clever enough an imitation to seem so. Her eyes were a blue that would certainly have set men thinking of summer skies, if anybody but he had ever seen such a thing. And her features were completely perfect. In all ways, in fact she was flawlessly beautiful . . .

Lenoir chopped the thought off. That was the second time that he had used that rather trite little phrase to himself since he had been precipitated into this century. Two flawless beauties. And he had met only two women. A disconcerting suspicion crept up on him. Beauticians had had four hundred years in which to improve their art since his time. And the

mere fact that a girl like Liram should use their services was significant. Her crusading spirit would keep her free enough of personal vanity for her not to bother unless such a thing was completely conventional, like washing yourself or combing your hair had been in his time.

He grimaced. Being married to a flawless beauty in a world of ordinary women had been ego-boosting and good fun. But a world, or an F-shell, full of flawless beauties would be downright monotonous.

The picture at his wrist disappeared suddenly. "Wait," Liram said. "It's a tape. They've been sending it out to you over and over since they lost you. I want you to know what it's all about."

Lenoir looked down again. Yurli Cardell reappeared, still staring, it seemed, straight out at him. "This is for Neals Lenoir," she said. "We know that you have been kidnapped by one of the two so-called freedom parties. I wish to give you solemn warning that any slightest activity on your part in support of the illegal aims of either of these organisations will earn you a sentence of death, to be passed on you in your absence and carried out instantly when you are arrested."

Lenoir growled, "I know you said democracy was a farce these days, but surely that's going too damned far?"

"They can do it," said Liram.

Yurli Cardell paused. Her voice grew sterner. "Don't be fooled Lenoir, by memories of how easy escape was and how many places there were to run to in your days. The shell is small by your standards, and no man, no man at all, can get out of it. We shall find you when we want you."

Then she smiled. "The government does appreciate though, that you have been put to great inconvenience in being dragged through time like this without your consent. In compensation it has placed to your credit at C.B.S. the sum of two million milnpouns. You are a rich man, Lenoir. But you can't spend a single milnpoun so long as you remain a stooge of the freedom people."

"Milnpouns being units of money, I suppose?" said Lenoir. "But why can't I spend them, if I have some?"

"They'd trace your whereabouts immediately, wouldn't they?" said the girl impatiently. "Keep quiet. She speaks again in a minute."

Lenoir wasn't too interested. "You know," he said half-jokingly, "somebody should have told me what was going to happen. I could have invested a few hundred and willed it to my future self. I'd have made quiet a packet."

Liram, as usual, treated what he said with deadly seriousness. "That sort of packet wouldn't be much good now," she said. "And anyway, however the money came to you the government would still be able to trace you if you tried to spend it. The government or anyone else, for that matter, if he was ready to make a small bribe. The officials of the Central Banking System are about as corrupt as everybody else in this era." Then she added irritably, "Oh do keep quiet. She has started talking again."

She had. When Lenoir started to listen once more Yurli Cardell was in the middle of a sentence. "... foolish to be deceived by their propaganda. True democracy depends on continuity of government. True freedom depends on the restraint of extremists who would turn that freedom into licence. True happiness for the common man depends on—"

Almost of its own volition Lenoir's thumb had turned the controlling knob. Yurli Cardell's face disappeared. "The more things change the more they stay as they are," Lenoir quoted. "And that includes lines of propaganda."

Liram offered no objections to the cut-off. "She repeats the cycle again in different words several times," she said. "Threatening you, offering you a bribe, appealing to your patriotism, then threatening you again."

"Does she indeed?" said Lenoir. "You know, I don't mind being sentenced to death in my absence. That could happen to anybody. But she ought to have more consideration than to occupy my line all the time. Supposing I need to make a private telephone call?"

"Oh, that would be all right," said Liram comfortably. "Private calls to or from any individual take precedence. General calls are automatically cut out for as long as necessary."

"I'm relieved to hear it," said Lenoir solemnly. Then, tired of baiting so unresponsive a subject he went on with genuine seriousness; "But I'm still puzzled. If the government doesn't want the shell collapsed, and in any case could collapse it themselves if they did, why bring me here? Don't tell me it

was done as a piece of pure scientific research. I'll never believe it of that mob."

"They've got a use for you. They want to guard themselves against the danger of losing the shell by having another smaller one erected over the controls of the main one. Since the inner shell's controls would have to be inside it-too, nobody would ever be able to get in to collapse either shell."

"But why not destroy the present controls? The shell would be locked into position until some part in the S.O.P. apparatus wore out, which probably wouldn't be for centuries."

"Smashed controls can always be replaced. And there has always been more than one adult Rufus around in every generation, and not one of them could ever trust another. But if the controls were locked away in a miniature F-shell they would be out of reach of everybody."

Lenoir opened his mouth, nearly blurting something else out. Then he held back. Until he was more sure just whose side he was on, it might be useful to keep certain information private. So he said, "And I suppose the brothers dare not let any scientist from the present day study the shell enough to be able to make a small one?"

Liram nodded. "That's right." Her face went pink. "Do you know what the Rufuses think about you?" she asked indignantly.

"No."

"They think they can blackmail you. Make you agree to erect the smaller shell by refusing to use the time-machine to send you back until it's done."

Lenoir blinked, then smiled at the girl. He said, "So you've come in here without your father knowing about it to demonstrate to me that the government will kill me if I help you, make me a multi-millionaire and send me home if I help them. Just as a point of interest, why did you bother?"

She looked at him with astonishment. "Why, surely even you will resent being treated like that. If you are half the man you ought to be this will make you more determined than ever to help us."

For the first time since he had met her Lenoir ventured to touch the girl. He patted her gently on the shoulder. "I'm sure you're a good daughter," he said. "Very dutiful and devoted and all that. But just the same I can't help suspecting

that you must be quite a problem child to your dear old dad." He caught hold of both of her shoulders and turned her towards the door. "And now you'd better be on your way. Your pill will run out soon, and I've got some sleeping to do."

He had no real intention of going to sleep after she had gone. No sooner had the door closed than he went across to the bed, sat down on it, and forced his mind to tackle the problems that faced him. However, although the inhalant was still keeping him awake the first keen edge of his alertness had begun to fade again. At the end of five minutes he came to suddenly and realised that he had not been thinking at all, but had drifted into a pleasant state of drowsiness.

He swore, jerked himself to his feet, and began to march to and fro across the room. He managed to stay aware of his surroundings rather longer this time; but the achievement did him little good. His mind went on scrabbling after that fallacy; but he realised more and more that he wasn't going to find it while he was in his present state. Before long he started blanking out on his feet; and getting slapped back into consciousness by suddenly finding himself stumbling and nearly falling.

"Hell," he told himself. "This isn't going to do any good at all. I might as well have a sleep, if this is the best I can do without one." And still grumbling he crawled onto the bed.

He woke to a state of vigour and mental alertness equal to anything that he remembered from the old life. And he knew instinctively, without benefit of clocks, that the process had taken only a few hours. Silently he paid tribute to the drugs of the twenty-sixty century. Unlike their predecessors they obviously took back no more than they gave.

Slowly he sat up and turned so that his legs were over the edge of the bed. The short sleep hadn't only been refreshing, it had also been light enough to allow his mental processes to continue. He now knew the answers to two problems that had been worrying him before he slept. First, the fallacy that existed in all the talk about killing him or not letting him use the time-machine. And second, the limits beyond which he was no longer a man of conscience, but a self-server concerned strictly with his own benefit.

The fallacy was so childishly obvious that his only excuse

for not spotting it before was that since he had realised its existence he had either been too exhausted or too busy listening to Liram Durag or Yurli Cardell. Now he had not only spotted it, but had realised what developed logically from it. Nobody aware of who or what he was would dare kill him or prevent him from using the time-machine to get back. And the same reasons that ensured that they would not dare to do that ensured something else too. They ensured that Neals Lenoir was the most powerful man alive in this era. That he held in his hand the ability to wreak destruction more complete than could be achieved by any conceivable combination of A, H, or Cobalt bombs.

And that fact answered his second problem, the degree to which he could feel morally entitled to serve his own ends. He could not, ever, use the power that was his. His conscience would never be able to endure it. Short of that, though, he did not feel that he owed any great amount of consideration to anybody in this era. Particularly, he did not see that he owed a duty to any one side in the current political rivalries. His sympathies might be with the True Freedom Party—assuming that it was all it claimed to be—but it was the government that controlled his means of getting home. And although they would not dare finally to refuse him the use of those means, they were likely to co-operate the sooner with anyone who co-operated with them. And so, co-operate with them he would. And at the earliest possible moment.

A hint of a smile puckered the corners of his lips. "I'm sorry Liram," he murmured, "If I'm not half the man you think I should be. But then, who *could* be half the man you'd think he should be?"

CHAPTER SIX

HE FORGOT the girl again and frowned. Despite everything the future remained pretty uncertain. And somewhere in the shell there should be archives where the things that were yet to happen to him after he got back home were on record. His frown deepened. The idea was queerly repulsive. An un-

certain future might have many disadvantages, but it was still decidedly preferable to a certain one. Nothing short of absolute desperation was ever going to drive him to look at those records.

Just what was he going to do now, though? The best answer, really, was nothing for the moment. Just play along with his present host and hostesses, keeping them satisfied by not definitely refusing what they wanted but somehow avoiding any real activity in their interest.

Host and hostess? To what extent were they really that, he wondered, and to what extent were they gaolers? It was one of the first things he must find out.

He got to his feet, and noticed something that he had missed up till now. Somebody had been into his room while he slept. Beneath the garish nude with the blood-dripping flail—*The Wakie's Horror*—a tall panel had been slid aside and locked in that position, uncovering a complete set of toilet facilities. Gratefully Lenoir made use of them.

As he cleaned himself he realised that he was hungry. His mind began to turn, setting his mouth watering with anticipation, towards the thought of breakfast. As he walked to the door he wondered briefly whether it was going to open for him or whether he would have to wait until his retinal patterns had been programmed into it. Apparently, though, it had simply been set to activate as anyone approached it from the inside of the room. It let him out without hindrance.

He found himself in another, larger room, probably the main living-room of the Durags' flat. There were chairs and a table. There was a thick-piled, wall-to-wall carpet. And there were panels that he now recognised as concealed cupboards all round the walls.

The simpler kinds of furniture were designed to maximum efficiency a thousand years ago, and fashion changes are pendulum swings rather than progressive steps. Lenoir found that most of this stuff actually looked old-fashioned to him. He went and sat on the nearest chair to wait until one of the Durags showed up.

In his new position he was half-facing the wall that he had walked out from. It was broken by four doors, the one he had come through and three others. At first he noted the fact quite idly; but as he sat there, waiting and waiting while

nobody came, he found himself speculating about those other three doors. Two of them would lead to bedrooms, Durag's and his daughters. But was the fourth one just the entrance to another room, or did it lead right outside the flat?

It might be possible to find out. Common sense said that most doors would open freely from the inside but respond only to approved retinal patterns from the outside. If that applied to the street-door of the flat then an experiment to discover whether or not it would yield to let him out would give him a pretty good idea as to how much of a prisoner he was.

He got up and went over to the doors, and stood in front of them in turn. Three did not budge. Fair enough. Bedroom doors shouldn't open that easily. Then he passed along to the fourth. It disappeared sideways immediately, letting in a pervasive flood of city-murmurs. Beyond it was a stretch of brown-coloured path that curved sharply towards the outer wall of the tower.

A glimpse of a dun-coloured shell-wall told Lenoir that there were no further barriers between him and the relatively open air. He stepped back hastily, and the door closed again. Well, that was reassuring, anyway. Unless his opening of the door had tripped an alarm somewhere? He tensed, and waited apprehensively; but nobody came running. After a few seconds he relaxed.

Too restless now to sit down again he wandered over to the window of the room. A few feet below his eye level a mobilway ran past, close to the wall of the building. It was broader and sturdier-looking than he had realised it would be from his distant glimpse of its fellows through the bedroom window. By craning his neck he could see where it joined the spur path that led up to the flat. As he was straining to see that much a taxi flitted by on the further side of the mobilway, followed immediately by another. He lifted his eyes, looked right out into the city, and realised that the place was fully alive. The mobilways were scattered with black dots that could only be distant people, and ovoid taxis were darting everywhere.

The realisation set him eyeing the street door again. He hadn't planned to escape from the Durags just yet. Indeed, now that he came to face up to it, he actually didn't want to

escape from the Durags just yet. He tried to tell himself that that was because he wanted breakfast so badly. Honesty, though, forced him to admit that there was more to it than that. He didn't want to escape because he was afraid to escape, and his duty to himself demanded that he should ignore that and get away as soon as a really good opportunity presented itself.

Still, though, he found himself reluctant. Outside that door was the unknown, a world as alien to him as the London of the twenty-first century would have been to a stone-age man. He turned back to the window, looked up at the falling curve of the shell. "I, a stranger and afraid, in a world I damn well made," he misquoted softly.

And then a spasm of anger tensed his diaphragm. And whose fault was it, now that he came to think about it, that the world out there was so strange? If Durag had been able to teach him the language under neo-hypnosis then he could equally well have imparted other ordinary everyday knowledge the same way. Enough of it to make moving around in the twenty-fifth century comfortable and safe even for a complete stranger. He hadn't done so. And that threw an entirely different light on the business of that open street door.

It isn't consideration, thought Lenoir furiously. It's contempt. He calculates that he won't need locks and bolts to keep me here. Just fear.

Lenoir swung away from the window. If those cupboards weren't locked, or if he could force them open without benefit of the right retinal patterns, he was going to do some stealing. All the milnpouns he could lay his hands on—he didn't know what they looked like, but he would surely recognise money if he saw it—and as much food as he needed. Then he would go. And if he couldn't get the cupboards open then he would go anyway, empty-handed.

When he did go out through the street door he was empty-handed. And the mood he was in made the Durags' prudence in keeping their property locked up and safe from robbery a further grievance against them. Yet as the door of the flat closed behind him his nerves quivered. There was no way he could get back in again now. And, well, just how did you go about finding the government so that you could give yourself up to it?

He told himself that he was a fool. What the hell was he worrying about? He didn't have to find anything, only let himself be found. The government needed him, badly. Every leo in the shell would be alerted to look out for him, and any strangeness, any queer ignorance that he displayed would just make him easier to trace. And as for his breakfast, who, having gone to the trouble of bringing him five hundred years forward in time, was going to let him starve to death once they had got him here?

He spent the next ten minutes making and reacting to discoveries about this era. The mobilways really were mobile ways, made up of differently coloured strips travelling at varying speeds nicely graduated to make it easy to get in to or out of the fast moving centres, or to change over to strips going the opposite way. Some such development had been pictured so often in prophetic fiction that he had a vague feeling that reality was cheating, palming him off a cliché.

The towers, which might have made up by being somewhat less of a cliché, rather disappointingly didn't seem to be towers at all when viewed from a mobilway. Provided that you didn't look up you seemed to be passing through a city of ordinary ground-level buildings. And he still held it against them that none of those buildings showed a spark of originality in design. Each one was just a tasteless copy of an old, out-moded style. When he coupled their quality with that of the picture in his bedroom, it occurred to Lenoir that if his education had concentrated more on the humanist and less on the scientific side he might by now be ready to help bring the shell down simply for what it had done to artistic taste.

Even, he noticed, where things had not actually got worse in that respect, they had certainly not got better. Five hundred years hadn't been long enough for civilisation to outgrow advertising, or to tame its obtrusiveness noticeably.

When the novelty of his surroundings began to wear off a little he decided to settle down on the slowest strip of the mobilway, next to the brown stationary edge, and just let it carry him along until something happened. It was the easiest thing to do, and it would give him a chance to study at his leisure those advertisements which were suspended above

the rail at the edge of the way. He had long held the theory that once a civilisation had developed to the point where it used advertising then the nature and quality of that advertising would be a pretty good guide to the nature and quality of the civilisation itself.

The signs he passed during the next ten minutes bore out his theory. They were brash, gaudy, and crudely boastful. And though luminous at all times they were somehow triggered to flash up into extra brightness at the passing of a traveller, so that it would have been difficult to avoid paying attention to them even if he had wanted to.

D. MACBREAST—NEO-HYPNOTIST—BAD HABITS ERADICATED—TRAINING FOR ALL CAREERS—That one was accompanied by a picture of a toothily-grinning father-figure that made Lenoir happy to be orphaned. **CALL A TRANSLIS TAXI FOR SUPER TRAVEL—**How did you go about calling a taxi these days. Did you still raise a hand and yell 'Hey!' and watch it sail by? And come to think of it, why should you want taxis at all, if you had mobilways? Quicker, perhaps. And lazier. **DANLAY'S FURNISHINGS—WALL'S HIGH CLASS SPECIAL EATERIE—BRATE'S FREE GIFT SCHEME—**

There came a sign that made him look twice, then step over on to the stationary strip. **GARDING'S NICETIES—BETTER FOR YOU THAN ORDINARY FOOD AND TWICE AS NICE—GET THEM HERE—**

Beneath the sign was something that looked like a conventional vending machine of his own time. Through the transparent front he could see stacks of coloured cubes and cylinders. Their nature was completely unidentifiable, but suggestion and the state of his stomach combined to make them look appetising.

Acutely aware of his lack of money, he nevertheless began to search over the vending machine to find out how you operated it. There was no sign of a coin slot, but he found something else, a small fly-poster that had been stuck across a smooth, blank panel situated at eye-level. Most of the paper or whatever it was, had been scratched away, but he was able to make out a few words. '... government ... happen to taxes you pay? ... scandalous ... Ironglas ...'

Freedom propaganda, obviously. Lenoir frowned. Were

these feeble, trivial tricks the best that the party could do without him to help them? He shrugged. Whether it was so or not didn't matter now. He was done with all that—

"What are you doing?"

The question, abrupt, and spoken in an authoritative tone, made him start and swing round. He became aware of a peaked cap, a dark uniform, and a pair of cold, grey eyes that were sweeping the machine behind him. What these eyes were looking for was quite obvious. Lenoir felt thankful that the Freedom Party poster had so self-evidently been there for a long time.

"No," he said. "I'm not sticking illegal propaganda around."

"So I see. Luckily for you."

Lenoir hesitated, then, "You're a leo, aren't you?" he asked.

Two dark eyes stared at him in stark surprise. "It would look like it from my uniform, wouldn't it?"

"That's just the point. I wouldn't know. You see, I'm Neals Lenoir."

The leo's somewhat thick eyebrows went up. "Rather eager to have your name taken, aren't you? I haven't even asked for it yet."

"But you don't understand. I'm Lenoir the—"

Lenoir broke off. It was a chilling moment, in no way relieved by the hard, suspicious look in the leo's eyes. Ever since he had heard Yurli Cardell's broadcast he had been taking it for granted that everybody in official circles would know who and what he was. Yet it seemed that the law-enforcement officer did not.

He felt another gust of despair. So many, many new things that he could not know about. So impossible for a citizen of this era not to take it for granted, sometimes, that he was knowledgeable when in fact he was ignorant. Yurli Cardell had sent her message to him alone. Perhaps that fact implied conditions that he knew nothing about. It could be that he was putting himself in the government's bad books just as much by telling an ordinary leo what was going on as he would have done by opening the shell.

"Look," he blurted desperately. "Could you tell me how I can get in touch with Miss Cardell?"

"You've lived all your life in the shell, and you don't know

where the Government Centre is? Something badly wrong with your memory, isn't there?"

Panic touched Lenoir fleetingly as he realised that the leo had one hand up to his belt, gently fingering something there. Surely it couldn't be a gun? Unthinkingly Lenoir took a step backwards. The leo's hand jerked upwards. Between the man's fingers a thin, grey tube poked out.

"Don't try it." The leo's voice was harsh. "You'd have to get outside the shell itself to escape now."

"I—I wasn't trying to escape."

The leo seemed coldly disinclined to believe him. "What's been happening to you?" he demanded. "Did you have a feeling that you were playing children's games? Or performing some ordinary act, like mixing drinks? And did you get queer visions and wake up to find you were doing something vastly different?"

Surprise drove out every other emotion. Lenoir gaped. "Good Lord no. Why should I?"

"What's your name?"

"I told you. Neals Lenoir."

"Where do you live?"

"I'm staying with—" He hesitated only for a moment. To blazes with it. He'd decided he had finished with them, hadn't he? "—with the Durags."

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE LEO's hand dropped back towards his belt. The tube disappeared. Lenoir, still bewildered, realised thankfully that he had successfully passed some sort of test. Indeed, the leo's manner was relaxing so much now that the man seemed almost friendly. "I suppose you've been to have a few unwanted memories removed?" he said. "And the neo-hyp made a botch of it; swept out a lot of linked stuff as well?"

"That's it exactly," said Lenoir gratefully.

The leo grinned. "Teach you to go to a proper practitioner next time, won't it?" Those uncertified quacks may be cheap but they're not very reliable. And they contain the bigger

percentage of recruiters." He stroked his chin. "If I were you I'd go home."

Lenoir shivered. Go home! If only he could. But the leo would be meaning the Durags' flat. And that was the one place he did not intend to go. He groped for an excuse.

"Well—uh—it's rather a long way. And—and I'm hungry."

The leo was quite amiable now. "I see." He leered knowingly. "And are you wanting an ordinary eaterie, or a high-class, special one?"

Lenoir scarcely hesitated. "Oh, a high-class, special one." After all, he thought desperately, if I'm going to eat at all I might as well eat the best. If I'm going to eat at all. Hurriedly he added, "There's one difficulty, I'm afraid. I've—I've left my money at home."

The leo chuckled, entering thoroughly into the joke of Lenoir's accidentally obliterated memories. "You've left your retinal patterns at home? That was being extra forgetful, wasn't it? even for a man in your state?"

Retinal patterns! Of course. Even in the twenty-first century the system of debiting and crediting through banking houses had largely replaced transactions in actual cash. A method of transmitting identification instantly to some central clearing house, and computers that could immediately adjust the accounts of each of the parties to a particular piece of business, would allow things as unhygienic and easily lost or stolen as notes and coins to go right out of use.

No wonder Liram had insisted that anybody could easily be traced if the would-be tracer had access to the Central Banking System's records.

"Oh—uh—yes. Retinal patterns." Lenoir grinned ruefully. "I'm paying for going to that cheap man, aren't I?"

"You certainly are," agreed the leo. "Look, would you like me to show you the way to a special eaterie, just in case you forget?"

"I'd like nothing better," said Lenoir.

The leo chuckled. "Come on then."

Now that he knew the man would be expecting him to be ignorant of some of the simplest things Lenoir lost all his embarrassment in the leo's company. Even when he had to be shown where to find the level to level escalators that

linked the mobilways he passed it off simply as a good joke against himself. Five mobilways and six escalators away the officer stopped and pointed. "In there," he said amiably. Then, after flapping his right hand in a half salute he wandered away.

Lenoir stood still for a moment, looking. The building he had been taken to was a sort of inverted ziggurat, growing larger above him step by step until right above his head it shut out most of the dun sky like a huge umbrella. As he stood there a stout man strolled past him, along the brown spur-path, and through the door of the building. A couple of seconds later he was followed by a slight, thin-faced little man with a scar down his cheek.

Lenoir looked at the scar with mild astonishment. Apparently convention limited the use of cosmetic surgery to women. As the little man went out of sight, however, Lenoir forgot him. The empty state of his own stomach was providing him with something much more urgent to think about. Determinedly he followed the two men down the path and through the door.

Once inside the building he stopped and stared. Restaurants should vary from each other, and change with passing time. But surely basic features should always remain common to them all? This place didn't seem to have any of those basics. The seats, tip-up armchairs, were arranged in rows, all facing a blank white wall. There were no tables, not even pull-down flaps at the rear of the chairs in front. And the people already seated had not been supplied with any kind of eating utensils; necessary, surely, even in the unlikely event that it was now fashionable to eat off your lap?

Half of the seats were already full, and there was a constant dribble of people into the others. The place was filled with the susurrations of a hundred conversations. And over everything there was a general air of eagerness and excitement that seemed unnatural at the anticipation of nothing more than a meal, however high-class. For a moment Lenoir wondered if he had come to the wrong place. But where the leo had left him there had been only one spur-path.

A burly man walked over, holding a small box by a handle that jutted from its side. He pushed the box in front of Lenoir's face. Lenoir stared down at him. There was a wide,

dull band of metal across the top of the thing, and below that was a fine-meshed grille.

Bewildered, Lenoir said, "I'm—I'm told that this is an eaterie. I can get a meal by using my retinal patterns—"

He realised immediately that it was a stupid thing to say. It was as if he had gone into a restaurant of his own era and said, "I am told I can get a meal in exchange for these pieces of paper and metal discs."

The burly man showed symptoms of an irritability checked this side of violence only by the fact that Lenoir was a paying customer. "Look," he growled, "I got no time for funny stuff. Are you ordering, or ain't you?"

"I—uh—"

Lenoir felt an elbow poke gently into his ribs. A husky voice spoke in a lofty manner. "Some people just don't seem to have no sense of humour at all, do they?"

Lenoir turned his head. The scarred-faced little man who had preceded him into the eaterie was now standing by his side. Before Lenoir could say anything the little man snatched the box away from the burly one and held the thing in front of his own face. He stared at the blank strip and spoke into the grille. "One sculp and fry, with beans," he said.

Then he turned and held the box up to Lenoir. Lenoir did what seemed to be the safest thing. He stared at the blank strip. "One sculp and fry, with beans."

Scar-face nodded, returned the box to the eaterie employee, then gripped Lenoir by the elbow and began to steer him towards the seats. "You ain't been to this high-class eaterie before, have you?" he asked.

"No," admitted Lenoir cautiously.

The scar writhed as the little man grinned reassuringly. "I'm Lem Frack," he said. "I could see you was looking worried, that's why I thought I'd edge in and tell you not to be. Oh, sure, your lingo says upper-ten. But this is Orzon territory, and as you'll know I'm one of Alk's chief boys. I can vouch for it he's all right. He's got his pull with C.B.S., of course; but he don't go in for ret-checking for the black. Drives paying customers away."

So, thought Lenoir, my accent reveals that I'm upper-class. But Alk Orzon, whoever he is, doesn't check the retinal patterns transmitted from here to Central Banking System in

order to blackmail people who patronise the place. Nice to know. But I'm supposed to have come in here for a meal. What the blazes am I doing that would enable anyone to blackmail me?

The little man kept a firm grip on Lenoir's elbow and steered him to a couple of vacant seats slightly off centre but quite close to the blank, white wall. As they went Lenoir looked around at the growing crowd. More than half of those present were men. They seemed to run either to beefiness and ruddy complexions or the kind of slight figures and sallow, pointed face that he associated vaguely with race-course touts and their ilk. A substantial minority of the seats, though, were taken by women. And—yes, he'd been right. Too much flawless beauty could be decidedly monotonous.

Frack almost pushed Lenoir down into a seat, and sat down himself. Then he lifted his telephone and concentrated on that. As far as Lenoir could tell the thing was turned to a general news broadcast. After a minute or so Frack turned the thing off.

"Nothing in the paper these days, is there?" said Lenoir with sham facetiousness.

The little man said, "Huh?" then gestured towards his wrist. "Oh, you mean that. I thought some early results from other areas might be in. But it's just the usual crap about they might hold another election soon." He shook his head slowly. "We should be so lucky."

Although Lenoir had resolved that he was done with present-day politics he felt a faint flicker of interest. Why should anybody like this tough, cynical-looking little brute consider it lucky if another election were held? It was difficult to imagine him either as interested in getting the shell collapsed, or as favouring and supporting the current establishment.

"Another election, eh?" said Lenoir slowly. Then, making the question as casual-sounding as he could, "Whom would you vote for if they did hold one?"

Frack chuckled softly, jerked his elbow into Lenoir's lower ribs again. "Who would I vote for? That's good that is. That's rich." He chuckled again.

Lenoir shifted slightly away from the invasive elbow. Apparently, without in the least trying to be funny he had some-

how made a successful joke. Well, it made a change from the more usual, directly opposite situation.

Frack settled more comfortably in his seat. "Wonder if anyone ever is twirp enough to really go voting?" he said.

Lenoir probed cautiously. "I suppose a few cranks do."

"I suppose so." The little man grinned and nodded towards the wall in front. "Anybody with any sense, though, all they'd want to be is a satisfied voter."

"A satisfied voter?" Lenoir digested the phrase for a moment. Then, suddenly, the words acted on his mind like the push of the final button in a computer programming. He had badgered the Durags with questions right through their explanation of current politics; but even then he had been haunted by the feeling that there must be things that he had failed to understand properly. Now a score of odd scraps of information, of apparent discrepancies, that had previously simply been suspended data in his mind clicked together and patterned themselves into one of the missing answers. "Is that what the satisfied vote is really about? Anybody who doesn't actually vote against the government is counted as being a supporter of it?"

"What else?" Frack looked at Lenoir with surprise that gradually changed to something that was almost awe. "You didn't know, did you? You really didn't know even that simple thing." Then, as if he were frightened of having revealed too much he added hastily, "It makes sense, doesn't it? If you don't take the trouble to vote against the government you must be satisfied with 'em, mustn't you?"

"I suppose so," Lenoir did his best to recall all that he had been told about the satisfied vote. When the Durags were explaining the political set-up Liram had told him that their party needed to gain it to win the next election, and that they could do that if only the shell were collapsed. He had taken her remarks to mean what they would have meant in the twenty-first century; that a large section of the electorate was on the whole content with the present government, and would continue to vote for it until the shell's opening showed them what they were missing. He didn't feel like kicking himself too hard for his misinterpretation. It was reasonable in the circumstances.

He saw Frack was still staring at him curiously. He began

to feel uneasy about that. The Rufuses and Yurli Cardell might be upset if they learned that he had let a creature like this Lem Frack into any secrets, even by accident. And yet his hunger for more information was so ravenous that he felt inclined to take the risk.

He thought of the ready-made excuse for ignorance that the leo had supplied him with, and trotted it out. His companion looked surprised, then grunted. "Oh, so that's it. You want to keep away from those quacks." He looked at Lenoir with half-closed, appraising eyes. "Any other memories that crook took out, so you don't know what things are all about, you just ask me."

"Thanks." Lenoir felt that he would have been better pleased with the offer if it had come from another source. But he was itching to know if he had understood Liram correctly now. "Is it true," he asked, "that the government only gets the satisfied vote for the duration of the emergency?"

"Only get it for the what?" Frack blinked.

"I mean, do they lose it if the shell is collapsed?"

"So they say. Can't see the Rufuses letting it be taken away from them though, shell or no shell. Especially Burt Rufus." Frack's eyes gleamed with unholy admiration. "Don't give a damn for nothing or nobody, that Burt Rufus. Not even for them two brothers of his, much as they'd like to see him oblitted. There's rumours that right now he's up to something that'll settle them and the business of the satisfied vote once and for all."

I'll bet there are rumours, thought Lenoir grimly.

Frack, evidently a man of short-lived enthusiasms, suddenly seemed to grow bored with the subject of satisfied votes and the Rufus brothers. "Look," he said, "you ain't going to talk about politics all the time, are you? Dirty game to be mixed up in. Look at the sort of thing it leads to; like that explosion at the S.O.P. Hall." He shook his head lugubriously. "Nasty business, that."

"Very nasty," agreed Lenoir. Caution urged him to damp down or at least conceal his curiosity. "Hell no," he said. "I'm not interested in politics. You brought the subject up, after all, mentioning that there might be a general election."

Frack grinned. "Well, that's different ain't it?"

"Is it?"

"Sure it is. Anybody's entitled to look forward to an election day, with giveaways going on all the time. You know what they were giving here last time? For free? Six nudejudes a-clawing."

Lenoir blinked. Nudejudes a-clawing? And what the blazes were they? Although every other indication seemed to contradict the idea his stomach was still reminding him that this was supposed to be a restaurant. But nudejudes a-clawing certainly didn't sound like anything to eat. It was obvious though, that whatever they were Frack expected him to be impressed. He thought it discreet to oblige. "Six eh?" he said in a slightly awed tone.

"Yeah." The scar-face man sighed. "I expect we'll only get two tonight, as usual, even though we're paying."

"I expect so," said Lenoir. "Still, I suppose they'll be enough to fill us up."

Frack sniggered. "Yeah, that's right. We won't need any pudding afterwards, will we?"

Lenoir edged away a little. He had made another successful joke, and he was expecting the elbow to come into play again. However, at that moment the audience stirred, and they became completely quiet. At the coming of silence the white wall in front of the rows of seats began to slide slowly upwards. With an air that was oddly dramatic considering that nothing much was happening yet, it revealed a roped enclosure similar to, but rather larger than a boxing ring of an earlier century.

Gently, with much more the sensation of having his attention drawn to something he had known for some little time now rather of than having been granted a sudden revelation, Lenoir became aware that he had now acquired more items of information about the present world. This place was no restaurant; never had been. This was a centre for the "games" that the Durags had spoken of. And "nudejudes a-clawing" was definitely not something to eat. He didn't know yet what it was; but he was about to find out; and he had a grim suspicion that when he did he wasn't going to like what he had learned.

CHAPTER EIGHT

HE WAS right. He didn't like it.

Not that he minded the two judies who entered the ring being nude. Taboos against nakedness had virtually disappeared before he was even born. What drew his eyes with fascination born of sheer revulsion were the mitten-like affairs that the two girls wore on each of their hands. Mitten-like affairs with six-inch, gleaming metal claws, sharp-pointed and slightly curved. Wicked weapons that would gouge and rip soft flesh almost without the wielder feeling the obstruction.

Dry-throated, he told himself that the claws would be merely symbolic. The girls would do a dance, or something; degenerate and sadistic in appeal, no doubt, but free of real blood-letting. The crowd around him, though, was beginning to build up its pack-cry; a cacophony of mingled screams, guffaws and pure animal growling. Lenoir held on to his illusion for only a second or two. He had never heard the blood-roar of a mob before, but he could not fail to recognise it now that he had.

He tried to find what solace he could. If those poor little devils were really going to fight with those things they would both be mercifully dead in a matter of seconds.

A few moments later he found that he had underestimated the showmanship of the organisers. The girls were led to the corners of the ring directly opposite to each other, and fastened to long springs which were secured to the top of those posts forming the corners. Lenoir did not need to be told that the length and elasticity of the springs were nicely calculated to allow the girls to leap towards each other and stay there just long enough for one quick slash. Then, of course, they would be dragged apart, ready for the next leap.

The audience, in fact, was going to get plenty of time to enjoy the show.

Sickened, Lenoir lowered his eyes. He heard a male voice sound off in the age-old sing-song of a sports-item announcer.

"Ladies and gentlemen. There will be the usual single preliminary display of these two items on the menu. After that you will be asked to make your choice, and indicate how many portions you would like to partake of. Thank you."

Lenoir wondered if he could slip out before anything actually started. He began to get to his feet. Before he had risen more than a few inches somebody behind him yelled, "Sit down," and let loose a string of adjectives which had not been included in his language training.

Frack grabbed him and pulled him back. "You should have gone before you sat down," he said. "You'll have to bottle it up now. They'll never let you get there in one piece."

Lenoir slid back into his seat, resumed staring at his lap. He heard the creak of strained springs and a sound, half-whimper, half-groan, from one of the girls in the ring. There were a few appreciative "Ah's" from the men. Some of the women giggled shrilly. And you hire skilled cosmeticians to keep your faces beautiful, thought Lenoir. Dear God! Are you really too degenerate to realise the irony of that?

The outburst was followed by a tense hush. Lenoir whispered to Frack, "How do they get the girls to submit to it? Surely no matter how much money they offered it wouldn't be enough?"

"Money?" Lenoir saw the lower part of Frack's body twist towards him. He sensed that the little man was staring at him, amazed. "Where'd you get the idea that they paid them money?" he squeaked.

Then his tone dropped abruptly, and he sounded mildly friendly again. "Oh, I forgot. You went to that quack neo-hypnotist, didn't you?" He chuckled. "Well, you can think yourself lucky you didn't finish up out there. That's what's happened to all the performers at games. They were mugs enough to go to the wrong neo-hypnotist."

Lenoir said in a flat, sick tone, "You mean they put themselves into the hands of a practitioner on the understanding that they were to be cured or helped, and instead they were deluded and degraded until they were willing to take part in this sort of thing?"

One of the girls screamed shortly. The hall was swept again by a chorus of delighted grunts and high-pitched, half-hysterical laughter. Still keeping his voice low Frack said

hotly, "Now you listen to me, mister. Human nature is human nature no matter what, and not you nor no one else is going to change it. People want games, and they are going to have them. That's one thing the holy joes that slobber about abolition never take notice of. And supposing there wasn't no neo-hypnotists ready to make a bit on the side by recruiting? Why, everything would be a lot more cruel then, because you'd have to have people up there who knew what was happening to them."

"As it is, they don't know?"

"Course they don't. The recruiters jazz 'em around so they don't even know who they are. And just before they go into perform they make them think they're going to play some patsy game, like throwing a tip-ball for a kitten or something." Frack's voice became sanctimonious. "I tell you it's real kindness doing it this way."

Lenoir shook his head slowly. On his lap he began to intertwine and unwind his fingers. He watched them intently, as if they were performing independently of him. He found it impossible to make up his mind whether this latest information increased or decreased the horror of the games.

It occurred to him to wonder why a victim's relatives or friends did not come searching for him when he failed to return from a hypnosis session; but he did not bother to pursue the question. The crooks would have found some way round that difficulty, and that was all there was to it.

After he had sat there for a few more minutes he became conscious of a stir at the end of his row of seats. Still keeping his eyes diverted from the ring he looked up. One of the boxes with side handles, perhaps the same one he had already seen, was being passed along from person to person. He heard a murmur of voices. "One egg and fry with butter sauce." "Three eggs and fry with chestnut sauce." "Two eggs and fry with—"

"You betting on the blonde or the dark one?" said Frack abruptly.

"I—I don't want to bet."

Frack glared at him. "Look," he said. "The way you are, there's so much you don't know you're liable to land up in trouble. Some things you'd better start learning fast."

"What do you mean?"

"They don't run these special eateries as charities. Orzon don't like ret-pat hoarders."

The little man's tone was disapproving, and it plainly would not take him long to change from disapproval to hostility. Lenoir shivered, then forced his lips into the shape of a grin. "Hey," he said. "Who says I'm a ret-pat hoarder? It's just that I'm fed up with eggs and fry. They ought to change the menu."

Frack laughed dutifully, but his eyes remained watchful. Lenoir, after 'ordering' three eggs and fry with chestnut sauce, resumed his semi-embryonic position, and did his best to put out of his mind what was happening around him.

Not that that really brought him very much comfort. To the extent that he was able to render-himself unaware of his immediate surroundings, he was left free to think of others, related things. The casual way that the leo had led a complete stranger to the fake eateries immediately he was asked; for example. And the perfunctory manner in which the organisers of this affair handled the business of disguising transactions such as the payment of entrance fees and the laying of betting stakes as purchases of food. All this pointed to one thing. The government, although it was not prepared to make the games legal, knew of their existence and tacitly approved.

Why? He didn't know the answer, but it was easy to guess. A convenient method of syphoning off every election day a large number of satisfied voters who might otherwise go to the poll, and prove not so satisfied. And surely, too, a spectacular and effective second half in that well-tried and trusted combination, bread and circuses.

You couldn't wonder that many decent-minded people hated his F-shell, and wanted it down.

The thought had slipped out before he had had time to guard himself against it. And although only he had accused him, he nevertheless grew angry. That wasn't fair. He had invented the shells but he hadn't asked anyone to keep one up for four hundred years. And even after it had been mis-used to that extent, who could say this shell was responsible for what had happened? The games in ancient Rome had been as cruel and bloody as this.

But that had been ancient Rome, another civilisation alto-

gether. The civilisation of today was a direct development of the one that had existed in the twenty-first century, the one that for all its brashness and vulgarity and haunting fears of the Bomb had still managed to be the most humane in recorded history.

Something had gone wrong; and even if he was not directly responsible, maybe he ought to do something—

For a moment he toyed again with the thought of the tremendous power of destruction that was his. But to destroy that way necessarily led to creating anew, and so, perhaps, creating worse. Better to stick to his original resolution, co-operate with the government, and then go safely home.

During all this reverie he had stayed in touch with reality just enough to know that the nudejudes had long done a-clawing, that several other items had come and gone, and that he had made several bets without having any idea whom he was backing, or for how much. Now, at the outer edge of his awareness, he became conscious that something out of the regular routine of the entertainment had started. Something that was causing a shocked reaction in the audience.

Irritated, he tried to ignore it as he had the rest; but Frack at his side started moaning, "Oh no! Not again. That'll make three this week."

Lenoir looked up. The ring had been reasonably clean the last time he had seen it. Now it was stained with blood and spattered with less mentionable things. Down in the mess, struggling in a half-crouching position, was a man armed with a brutal-looking knobbed flail. Standing upright above him was another man holding a similar weapon.

Plainly this should be the climax to an exciting contest. The man of the floor had lost, and was about to be finally disposed of by the man on his feet. Only things weren't working out that way. The upright man seemed frozen, incapable of anything but staring. And the man below him was crawling slowly backwards, dragging his knobbed flail behind him.

Suddenly the man swung his flail, not at his opponent, but to and fro slowly in front of himself. "Red. The wrong red. I wasn't mashing a tomato to make a bloody mary at all—" His voice burst out violently, shrill with horror and loud

enough to fill the hall. "The games! Dear God, I'm in the games!"

The audience was cat-calling by now. The man retreated into his corner, and started waving his flail threateningly, still mouthing something about tomatoes and the games. Frack said disgustedly. "A wakie! Six eggs and fry I've got on him and he has to turn out a wakie."

Lenoir's mind went to the picture in his room. But too much was happening for him to be able to concentrate on the memory now. A square-faced, lumpy man came creeping slowly into the ring, just to one side of the wakie. His right hand formed a ball around something, and between the second and third fingers of his hand a short tube poked out. Although he had not seen either this one or the other properly Lenoir was convinced that this was another weapon of the type that the leo had threatened to draw on him when they had first met.

He almost shouted a warning to the wakie. In a second or so he probably would have done. Luckily it wasn't needed. The wakie turned suddenly and flung out an arm, swinging the knob at the end of his flail. The spiked piece of metal thunked against the hand of the man holding the tube. He howled, and dropped the weapon.

Having got that far the wakie seemed to run out of initiative. He stayed in the corner of the ring, half-crouching, his eyes flickering first to the square-faced man and then to the frankly howling mob in front of him. "Run, you fool, run!" screamed Lenoir.

"Ain't going to do him a lot of good if he does, is it?" said Frack with disgust.

Somebody behind them shouted, "What about our bets?"

Frack scowled. "Now that ain't right," he said in an aggrieved tone. "People shouldn't go making trouble asking questions like that. This is Orzon's territory, and everybody knows his rule about bets on a wakie."

Lenoir ignored the talk about bets. He kept his eyes fixed on the wakies, willing and willing the man to come far enough up out of shock to be able to try and escape. Suddenly he had his way. Still holding his flail the man ducked under the ropes and raced off towards the back of the hall.

"He'll be all right, won't he?" said Lenoir. "I mean, there'll be some way he can escape."

"Some way who can escape?" said Frack. Then he saw which way Lenoir's eyes were turned. "Oh, you mean the wakie." He gave Lenoir a curious stare. "You ain't trying to be funny again, are you?"

It was Lenoir's turn to stare. "Funny? What was funny about that?"

Frack cackled sharply. "Sure. I keep forgetting those memories they took right out of you by mistake. Listen, no wakie ever gets right away. They don't wake up enough to remember nothing about who they are and where they came from, you know. Only that the other bloke's head isn't a mashed tomato, or what-have-you. So if they do get clear of the games hall, they just give themselves away in front of the first leo they meet. Then they get direct therapy."

"Direct therapy?"

"That's right." Frack balled his hand and poked his thumb out between the second and third finger. He pointed the thumb towards Lenoir. "Did you think you were playing with the kids, maybe? And did you wake up to find things all screwy, and you wasn't where you thought you was? You did? Now that's bad. Very bad." He leaned closer, began to rap out questions in quick succession. "What's your name? Where do you live? What's your job? Who's your family? Come on, tell me. Oh, so you don't remember any of those things? Now that's even worse. In fact it's just about as bad as it can be. Sorry pal, but—"

He leaned back again and began to turn the thumb between his fingers up and down. "Zzzap!"

Lenoir didn't need to be told what "Zzzap!" was supposed to represent. His first reaction was dazed incredulity. He could accept that law-enforcement-officers might take their cut of the money made out of the games; but that they should lend a hand in the elimination of inconvenient wokies was too much to believe. Then he remembered how the leo who sent him here had behaved when they first met.

He was just going to spit out an indignant comment when Frack snapped. "Hold your questions. I got to listen to how this lot take the announcement."

A dapper little man in a grey suit piped with blue was

walking out to the centre of the ring now. His appearance set the audience yelling worse than ever. He raised his hand for quiet, but failed to get it. Unperturbed, he set himself the hurculean task of making himself heard above the din. "Ladies and gentlemen," he bawled. "As is well known, customers at our eateries get a lucky-numbered ticket with each meal; allowing them to take part in a raffle for many valuable cash prizes. It is with great pleasure that I announce the number of the winning ticket issued with that last item. It is, zero, zero, zero."

The audience began to howl louder than ever. Somebody shouted, "You packing your menu with wakies?"

"Now that's silly," growled Frack. "Who knows who's going to be a wakie before it happens?"

"What's it all about?" asked Lenoir.

Frack answered in a worried tone. "Orzon's rule on wakies is the same as with most d'links. All bets are off, but no stakes are given back."

"And the mob doesn't like that?"

"Generally they take it quiet. But this is third wakie in a week." He eyed Lenoir up and down. "I dunno," he said doubtfully. "There's you. But then there's this lot. Alk ain't going to like it if I let them wreck the place without doing something about it."

Several members of the audience had already left their seats to run towards the ring, and others were breaking away every second. Lenoir stared at Frack, then lifted his eyes higher as over the little man's shoulder he spotted something of greater interest. The larger part of the audience had been between him and the combatants all along. Now that section that had been behind him was breaking up, flowing forward and past him. The congestion between him and the door was clearing rapidly now, and in a few seconds time he should be able to get out of this place safely.

He heard Frack say cryptically, "I guess it'll be all right. There's so much you don't know you can't be no one else but who he thinks, anyway." If that made any sense at all Lenoir didn't intend to hang around long enough to find out how. Brushing the little man aside he made rapidly for the door. A few seconds later he was outside the building and part way round the curve of the wall. Confident that

nobody from the games would interfere with him here he lifted his wrist and began to fumble.

When Liram's face showed up on the telephone he said softly; "All right, you win. I'm lost, and I want to come home. How do I get there?"

CHAPTER NINE

GETTING THERE turned out to be simple. Although he had not noticed it the guard-rails at the edge of the mobilways were marked with letters and numbers that indicated distance-from-shell-wall, direction and level. If you had the letters and numbers of the place you wanted to get to, finding your way became just a matter of following arrows and doing mental arithmetic. Ten minutes later Lenoir was back in the flat, seated and eating gratefully from a steaming bowl.

As he ate he gave them an account of all that had happened to him. Liram stood across the room from him, staring sullenly and accusingly as she listened. Durag sat in one of the upright chairs, leaning forward with his hands in his lap. Occasionally he looked a little worried, but when Lenoir was done he spoke in a tone more reassuring than reproachful.

"Luckily you haven't done a great deal of damage. The government can trace the money you spent, of course. But they will only learn that you've been to the games, not where you are living. And a flat to flat search of the whole neighbourhood would be too public a move for their liking."

Lenoir said, "What about that leo? I told him where I was staying."

"I don't think we need worry," said Durag. "He probably didn't pay enough attention to remember what you told him. In direct therapy they are only concerned that you should know your address, not what that address is. And he'll be reluctant to talk about the episode. Even a present-day leo has to be a little bit discreet when he goes touting for customers for the games."

Lenoir nodded. "This business of accidentally getting into the games brings up something I've been wanting to ask you

about. If you could teach me another language under hypnosis you could have taught me my way round the present-day world as well."

"We didn't teach you the language. It was done before we kidnapped you," said Durag. "It's true though, that we could have taught you your way round the present-day world. There were two reasons why we didn't. First—We wanted you to judge our institutions with the fresh eye of a twenty-first century man. If we had taught you what to expect our civilisation might have seemed common-place, and therefore acceptable, as it does to most people. The second reason was—We not only wanted you to join us, we wanted you to be satisfied you were a free agent when you did so. If we had tampered with you too much under neo-hypnosis you might have begun to suspect that we had used it to make you co-operate."

"You're still at liberty to suspect that if you want to," said Liram.

Lenoir glanced at her briefly. He was still at liberty to suspect it, but he didn't. "Frankly," he said, "I thought I was kept in ignorance to make me a prisoner in the flat."

Liram snorted. Durag smiled. Lenoir spooned up some more food. "All right. But since you haven't forced information on me under hypnosis, you should try to remember to let me have more in the normal way. This matter of the satisfied vote for instance. It shook me down to my heels when Frack told me how the government had fixed things for themselves there."

Liram said, "We told you that our only chance of getting that vote away from them was to get the shell collapsed."

"I thought you meant that people were satisfied and actively voting for the government because they didn't know what it was like to live free of a shell. That once you had given them a glimpse of the outside they would gladly vote for you instead."

"Well, it was a bit stupid of you to think that," began Liram hotly. "Considering that we'd already told you—"

Durag exerted his authority. "Quiet!" he snapped. The girl subsided.

Lenoir, a little embarrassed, said quickly. "I'd already guessed for myself the difficulties that you or anyone else

were going to come up against when explaining things to me."

He frowned down at his nearly-empty bowl. "You know," he said, "There's one other thing. This neo-hypnosis as you call it, is a much more powerful tool than the hypnosis used by practitioners of my time—"

"Techniques have improved enormously," said Durag. "There are new suggestibility-inducing drugs, localised-irradiation machines that can in effect produce a temporary lobotomy, afferent-nerve depressives that induce a state of sensory dissociation—"

"Fine," said Lenoir quickly. "But then why does the government bother with votes? Why not just make everybody obey by using neo-hypnotism?"

Durag said haughtily. "By and large neo-hypnotism is an honourable profession. There aren't enough dishonest practitioners to enable the government to do that."

"Then where do the recruits for the games come from?"

"Where indeed?" murmured Liram sardonically.

Durag remained unperturbed, "I said there weren't enough dishonest practitioners for the government's purpose. I didn't say that every single practitioner was honest. The number of people required in the games is small compared with the number of voters."

"It's still a pretty disgraceful state of affairs." Lenoir spooned up the last of his meal. "With that sort of thing liable to happen, why does anyone go to a neo-hypnotist?"

"To be cured of psychosomatic diseases, or neuroses," began Durag pompously. "To compress into a few weeks the training for a new career that would ordinarily take years. To acquire fresh skills for the enrichment of leisure. To achieve the eradication of damaging habits or addictions. To—"

"There's quite a lot of this, if you let him go on," said Liram warningly. "He's paraphrasing it from their enrolment oath."

Durag looked deflated. Then he grinned. Lenoir responded with a smile of his own. "Thanks for the warning," he said to the girl.

She eyed him coolly. "If you really want an answer to

your question, here it is. How many people in your day knew about the road casualty and lung-cancer statistics?"

"All of them, I imagine."

"And how many of them gave up their cars or cigarettes?"

"All right, you win," admitted Lenoir. He put the empty bowl on the table. "But what about these wakies? Aren't they a bad advertisement of the impermanent effect of neo-hypnosis?"

"Not really," said Durag. "The wakies normally only recover to a very limited extent."

"Frack told me that they don't get back their full personality."

"They don't even begin to," said Durag. "Not usually, anyway. A neo-hypnotised subject who has had memories suppressed finds it impossible to recover them in the ordinary way. They can only be forced into the open again by the strongest possible fear."

"Fear such as anyone faces in the games?"

"Exactly. Where the alternative of releasing the memories is suffering torture or death the subconscious mind will let go. Even then, though, it won't do more than just free those memories that its owner needs in order to save himself. Moreover—and this is the bit that's cost a lot of people their lives—it still won't or can't release those memories in an immediately comprehensible form. First it hands out symbols of the memories' content; queer pictorial distortions perhaps or oblique verbal references, or even puns."

"Like that mashed tomato that the wokie I saw was talking about? That was a symbol of a man's bloody head?"

"Probably. And it might also have served to remind him that his name was Tom, or maybe, even, the man he was fighting was Tom. The release symbols work in all sorts of weird ways."

"But out of the symbol the true memory emerges?"

Durag paused. "It can, anyway," he said. "If the victim is given time to think, or talk to a sympathetic listener about his symbols. But of course people in the games never are given that chance."

Lenoir nodded slowly. "The Wokie's Horror. 'I saw the legendary light in the sky. But where was my boy.' translates as 'I saw the Sun; but where was my son?'"

"That's it," said Durag.

"It's a scene from a famous teleplay," said Liram. "She becomes a wakie; and her son, who has been tricked into being one of the audience at the games, recognises her and rescues her." She snorted. "Romantic nonsense. No d'link would ever be fool enough to let that sort of thing happen in real life."

Lenoir nodded again. "All the same, if the threat of death or torture brings a partial awakening, why doesn't every games victim become a wakie?"

Durag said, "A games participant is taking part in a genuine, deadly fight. But he doesn't desperately need to know that that is what he is doing unless he is losing the fight. So long as any fighter has the remotest chance of winning the conditions for going wakie aren't fulfilled. And usually by the time the loser in any event knows with absolute certitude that he is going to lose, there isn't time for going wakie and saving himself."

Lenoir brooded for a moment, then asked, "If a games victim does escape death, is there any chance of a cure for him?"

Durag nodded slightly. "A faint one. When anybody is undergoing a course of neo-hypnotism it's usual to implant blocks that will prevent any other practitioner from breaking into the patient's mind to insert counter-suggestions. If that's been done the victim's only chance of recovery—a thousand to one shot—is a series of brutal threats accompanied by basic questions covering so wide an area that they would, if answered, put the patient in touch with the whole of his own personality again."

"That so-called direct therapy operated by the leos, eh?"

"So-called is right," said Liram. "Yurli Cardell and her leos aren't interested in real therapy—"

"There are some cures of theirs on record," said Durag judiciously. "Remember, the threats have to be real if there's to be any hope of their doing good. And if you don't shoot one man after you've told him you will, the next man will know, subconsciously, that you don't mean what you say."

"Maybe," said Liram obstinately. "But if the leos were really interested in cures they'd add to their chances by letting the wokies talk about their recovered symbols."

Durag nodded and sighed. "I'm afraid that's true."

Lenoir lifted his head slightly, caught a glimpse of dun-coloured sky through the window. "I'm afraid a good many damn things that I've been trying not to face up to have turned out to be true." He sighed. "Better get that key-pack out again, and let me know just what your plans are."

It was an invitation that he did not have to repeat. Within seconds the key-pack was back in his hands, and Durag, with many interruptions from Liram, was outlining their plan with a mingling of verve and self-satisfaction that made it clear that he felt that he was describing a masterpiece of strategy. Lenoir, though, found himself growing more and more uneasy as father and daughter talked on. However, he sat quiet, keeping his objections to himself for the moment.

The plan was based on a roof vent to the Hall of S.O.P. that had been damaged by the Direct Actionist's explosion. Originally entry to the vent had been blocked by thick metal gauze not wide meshed enough to let a fly through. Now, however, the gauze had all been blown away, and the vent itself distorted so that the entrance was slightly wider than usual.

"We'll dress you in guard's uniform," said Durag. "We've stolen several about your size, so there's bound to be one that fits. And when everything else is ready we'll smuggle you in through the vent. It leads via a tube to an express escalator that drops right to the ground, just at the rear of the hall, behind the guarded section where the origin-point controls are."

"And once you are safely in place up above," said Liram "We and other members of the party will create a diversion—start a fight or something—at the entrance to the hall. And when the guards come over to deal with us you can drop down and get to work."

"Even if some members of the public do notice you manipulating the controls they won't take any notice," said Durag. "They'll think it's all right, because of your uniform."

"I hope so," said Lenoir slowly. After what had happened he was reluctant to start arguing with these two again. All the same, it would be he who would have to carry out this plan if they went through with it. He felt that he was

at least entitled to try to plug some of the bigger, more obvious holes.

He said, "Supposing only a few of the guards go over to deal with your riot, and the rest stay by the controls?"

"Then we'll start another riot in another part of the hall and draw off the rest," said Liram confidently.

"Discipline is poor in their organisation. They'll do the immediately obvious thing, rather than the long-term sensible thing," said Durag.

"Anyway," said Liram, "Supposing their discipline was quite good, it would still be more likely that they would use all their forces to deal with a riot, if it seemed necessary. Keeping a guard over the controls isn't much more than a ceremonial usage nowadays. Without your knowledge and the box we have stolen for you, no one could do a thing if he did get at them."

"All right," said Lenoir, "One other thing, though. You'd better arrange to keep the guard busy for quite some minutes. Collapsing a shell that's been fully safeguarded by the methods I designed is quite a complicated job."

Durag nodded. "We can arrange it for you. Don't worry about that."

Lenoir wanted to say more, but he was checked by the feeling that it would be boorish to go on trying to puncture such self-confidence. And anyway, had he the right to try? If this little plot seemed too slap-dash and dependent on luck, well, that was the opinion of an out-worlder who knew practically nothing of the circumstances. Besides, if these two did listen to him seriously enough to give up this idea, they would surely have a moral right then to demand that he produce another and better one. And he couldn't.

"I don't think," he said slowly. "That I ought to go into this blindly, just working on your descriptions of what it's like at the Hall of S.O.P. Can I visit the place first, to get the hang of where everything is and sort of mentally rehearse what I have to do?"

Durag stared at him. "My dear man, did you suppose for a moment that you weren't going to be given such an opportunity? You must put us down as thoroughly impractical plotters."

Lenoir's mouth opened slightly. He closed it. "Heaven

forbid that I should ever think that," he murmured. Liram took the words at their surface value. But Durag gave him a sharp glance. He added quickly. "All right. Then let's go and visit the hall now, so that I can get started."

Durag looked at him doubtfully. "You're not too tired?"

"I'm too keyed up to be tired," protested Lenoir. "Now that I've eaten I'm fit for anything."

Durag said, "All right. Let's get ourselves ready and we'll take you to have your first look."

CHAPTER TEN

LENOIR, ALONE in his bedroom again, found another cause for embarrassment. Just what really was covered by the term 'getting yourself ready' these days? Should he change? If so, did he have anything to change into? He hadn't brought any extra clothing; and it was unlikely that the True Freedom boys would have brought anything away from the government H.Q. when they kidnapped him. A bath? That might take too long, and keep everybody else waiting.

In the end he compromised with another wash and depiloshave. When he returned to the living-room he found Liram waiting. Lenoir raised one eyebrow. "The lady ready first?" he said. "Now I know I'm in an alien civilisation."

Liram said humourlessly, "Girls of your day had to repair their complexions every time they washed. One treatment is reasonably permanent these days."

Durag came into the room, frowning slightly. "You're both ready? Good." He crossed over to the outer door of the flat. "I've been thinking. We'll have to take a taxi at least part of the way. But it mustn't be your retinal patterns that tick up at the C.B.S. for the hiring. You'll have to let me pay your fare."

"Of course. And thanks," said Lenoir. But he wasn't too happy. He didn't exactly mind stinging Durag for one taxi fare; but he was going to have to do a great deal more than that. So long as he stayed in these people's hands they were going to have to buy literally everything for him. Which could be embarrassing on a number of counts.

Especially, he thought with a ripple of amusement, if certain natural needs arose while he was away from the flat, on an occasion when only Liram was around. Though perhaps such things were free nowadays, anyway?

They left the flat, and as they stepped on to the brown path outside Lenoir glanced at the girl, ready to make conversation. She, however, seemed to be withdrawn, almost brooding. Unconsciously frightened of the result now that it looked as if the shell really is going to be collapsed? wondered Lenoir. Or has she got such complete contempt for me that she can't solidly believe I'll succeed in opening it even with everything in my favour?

They rode a little way, until they came abreast of a taxi company advertisement. Durag walked over to it, glanced into the smooth strip at the top and spoke. "Place of pick up; at this point. Times; now. Convey to—" and he reeled off a string of co-ordinates.

He looked up at Lenoir. "I hope you won't mind, but I've only booked to within a quarter of a mile of the hall. I'm probably being over-cautious; but I'd rather not take the slightest chance of anyone's noticing how often I visit the controls."

So, thought Lenoir, we now apologise to people for making them travel a quarter of a mile on their own feet. Not actually doing anything so exhausting as walking, of course, but at least travelling on their own feet. Is my F-shell to blame even for that one, or can I pass at least that buck to the automobile?

Blackness and a half-felt shadow wrapped them from above for a moment, and then a jet-coloured ovoid dropped neatly beside them to hang, unmoving, some six inches above the mobilway. Durag went through the inevitable routine of gazing into a retinal-pattern identification strip set in its side, and then a door slid away to allow them to enter.

Deceived by the unrelieved blackness of the taxi's exterior Lenoir expected that riding in the thing would be rather a claustrophobic experience. He was pleasantly undeceived by finding that the opaqueness of the upper parts of the body-work was one-way only. From inside the walls and roof were so transparent that you seemed to be travelling on a moving platform fitted with seats.

There were no controls of any kind in sight, and as far as Lenoir could see no way of getting at any. "Burt Rufus must have had a pretty drastic conversion job done to have been able to take one of these over manually," he commented.

Durag said, "It wasn't a taxi like this. More of the control apparatus was inbuilt, less of it situated at the central station. After Burt Rufus pulled his trick a number of the local d'link's boys started stealing taxis to convert the same way. It got to be such a plague that the taxi companies had to redesign their fleets."

"And put up fares to cover the cost," added Liram.

"And put up fares to cover the cost," agreed Durag ruefully.

Lenoir grinned. "That last bit's a tale of woe that isn't new to your era."

His eyes turned away from his two companions, drawn outwards towards the city. This was an angle from which he had never seen things before; the shield-scrappers apparently swaying slightly from side to side while moving off downwards to the left, the strips of dun-coloured sky between them growing larger and clearer, partly because of the taxi's rise, partly because the shell-roof was dropping to meet them from above.

He leaned to one side and peered over the edge of the taxi's floor. "Anything wrong?" said Durag.

"Not a thing," said Lenoir. "It was just being nosy. Do grass and trees still grow, down at ground level?"

Durag gave him a curious stare. "You're asking a lot, aren't you? The engineers who originally planned the food and water cycling arrangements had all their work cut out to allow for the necessary number of human beings."

Liram said abruptly, "Tell us about vegetation."

It was Lenoir's turn to stare. "Tell you what about it?"

"Oh, everything. Is it really all different shapes; tall and short and round and long? And are there really dozens of shades of green?"

"Hundreds, I should say."

Durag chuckled softly. "You can see hundreds of different shades of green in the nearest curtain display. Or at the local artists' supply shop."

"Maybe," said Liram. She looked at Lenoir appealingly. "But it isn't like that, is it? It's much more wonderful."

Wonderful? thought Lenoir. It's odd how you can know something intellectually for years, and yet never begin to realise the solid truth of it until some trivial happening brings it right home to you. A garden, a park, a day in the country, you took them all for granted back where he had come from. You might casually apply the word 'wonderful' to one of them; but they were all too commonplace for you ever to feel to the full the awe-dominated, joyously humble emotion that alone should justify that adjective.

But supposing you were someone who had never, literally never in all his life, seen a leaf or a twig or a flower? It could be, then, that truly wonderful things would exist for you outside the shell.

The thought somehow made more solid the mental picture of the girl that he held in his mind. She became less of an arrested teenager-type, less of a crass do-gooder, and more of a human being. He looked at her, smiled, and for the first time since he had met her tried to speak to her with genuine kindness. And by his kindliness trapped himself into what seemed to him later the worst unkindness of his life.

"Let's go about getting the shell open as quickly as possible," he said. "Then you'll be able to see for yourself how wonderful it all is."

There were no means by which he could know then that he was later to seem unkind, of course. He accompanied the words with a smile, and when the girl smiled back he let it light a little glow of complacency inside him. Then the taxi began to dive. He realised that their journey was nearly at an end, and he immediately forgot any emotional reaction to Liram. She became simply one of the many factors with which he now had to deal.

The vehicle curved in neatly over a mobilway and became stationary above the non-moving strip. Durag and his daughter stepped out, and Lenoir followed them.

"You'll notice," said Durag didactically. "That we are almost at the edge of the shell here. There is only room for two levels of mobilway between it and the ground."

Brown-red light glared above their heads for a second, then disappeared. Lenoir lifted his head just in time to get

the full effect as it came on again. It was the sign above the Hall of S.O.P., the glowing bronze disc at the centre of the swirl of thin, black spirals. And, as Durag had promised, it was less than a quarter of a mile away. From this close it looked huge enough to be overwhelming.

Durag took Lenoir to the edge of the way. Liram followed close behind. "The mobilway we're on," said Durag, "leads to the level above the Hall, immediately under the shell. Luckily this level in that tower never served any purpose but that of a store-room, and has not even been used that way since the D.A.E.'s explosion. So nobody will be likely to notice us as we climb down to the vent."

"That's good," Lenoir spoke absently, busy with his own thoughts for the moment. "I was looking at the hall down there," he said. "It looks to me as though it's built right up against the shell."

"It is," said Durag. "In fact the shell actually forms part of the roof and wall of the hall."

"But won't that be dangerous, when the shell is removed suddenly?"

Durag shook his head. "No building actually uses the shell as a support. Remember, when this place was designed the assumption was that the shell was going to be collapsed again in the near future, at the end of the emergency."

"I see. So the Hall of S.O.P. itself was actually designed to be an open-air display."

"A what?" said Liram.

"Never mind," said Lenoir. He spoke more briskly and pointed towards the hall. "Let's get over there and carry on with my instruction."

"Of course," agreed Durag.

When they reached the spur-path at the level above the hall Durag halted his daughter. "You wait here. When we are ready to climb up on to the path again I'll give a whistle, like this." He whistled two notes softly. "If anyone is in sight you hum 'Shades of Aurion.' If it's all clear hum 'Maltraser's March'."

"I'm glad that's your part of the job," said Lenoir, "I'm so good at carrying a tune that I defy anyone to pick out which of two songs I'm supposed to be humming."

"Oh, but these two are quite different," said Liram. "One's in B flat."

Before Lenoir had quite had time to recover she hummed a few bars from each tune. Durag commented dryly, "'Shades of Aurion' sounded as lively as the march the way you rendered it. And it's supposed to be a dirge."

"But I don't feel like singing a dirge," said Liram.

I can see you don't, thought Lenoir. And despite his previous kindly feelings towards the girl, his thoughts continued—In fact you're thoroughly enjoying yourself, aren't you? Lots of cloaks and daggers and real live conspirators, and you nice and important in the middle of it all.

Just the same he still did not feel like deflating her, although, all unaware, he was getting closer and closer to the moment when he was going to have to attempt to do precisely that; and do it in a pretty brutal manner.

Durag walked off towards the store-house door. Lenoir followed him. Almost at the end of the spur-path Durag pulled himself up on to the guard rail and sat astride it. Lenoir did the same, expecting to see a dizzying fall on the outer side of the rail. Instead he found that the hall had a small side roof of its own that jutted out under this part of the spur-path.

Lenoir slid over the rail and lowered himself. His feet found the roof within a comfortable distance. He turned to give Durag a hand, but the older man was already down and walking back under the mobilway. Lenoir followed him.

As soon as they were far enough in to be out of sight of anyone standing above Durag turned. "On the day," he said, "You will have brought your guard uniform with you. And you will change into it here."

Lenoir said, "All right. But where's the damaged vent I'm supposed to get in by?"

"Over here." Durag led him further under the mobilway. The going began to get a little rougher. Blast from the D.A.F. Party's sabotage attempt had obviously pretty well spent itself before it reached this far, but it had caused some damage. Lenoir found himself wondering whether the roof, which was buckled and in places shifted, was still strong enough to bear the weight of two men. Fortunately it proved to be so.

"You know," said Lenoir, "The more I see of it the more I realised how silly this sabotage attempt by the Direct Action people was. They couldn't even have planted the explosive properly if most of the blast was wasted upwards, like this."

Durag nodded and scrambled on. The vent, originally designed to be completely invisible, was still so well hidden that the old man seemed simply to disappear abruptly when he went into it. Lenoir hurried over, and was relieved to find that actually the hole was easily seen when you got close enough.

He stepped through and found himself in a short length of circular pipe, about eight feet in diameter. The further end of it, which was now open, had been roughly railed off, a temporary measure adopted after the original end of the pipe had been blown away.

Durag, nearly at the railing, looked back over his shoulder and said; "You'd better come and have a look at things from here, before we go down." He turned right round and began to walk back. "You'll see the escalator that you'll use on your left."

Owing to the circular shape of the pipe a certain amount of leaning and edging was needed before Durag and Lenoir could get past each other. That done, Lenoir walked to the rail at the end. The escalator, debouched at the top within comfortable stepping distance of the pipe. He walked up to it, and leaned forward to have his first look at the interior of the Hall of S.O.P.

A large section of the roof, and all the right-hand end of the wall facing him, consisted simply of the shell, so that anyone who descended by the escalator could have walked straight ahead into the open air if that dun-coloured barrier had not been there. The building proper was on the left, and below him. It consisted mainly of curved walls of steel-grey which were decorated at the regular intervals by bronze circles surrounded by black spirals.

"That railed-off part in the middle where you see the men in grey lounging is where the controls are kept," said Durag softly. "The public entrance to the hall is on your right. That's where we will start our diversion. The escalator will drop you down on the left there, where the sheeting is."

For the first time Lenoir realised how perfunctorily the damage of the explosion had been dealt with. If any repairs at all had been effected they were not visible. All that he could see was a certain amount of screening-off with light, portable partitions and sheeting. He wondered about that. Did the government plan deliberately to keep this place in its damaged state for propaganda purposes, or was this just another symptom of the deterioration of present-day civic morale?

Unable to decide, he leaned a little further forward to get a better look at the guards and the controls. In this he was partly disappointed. The guards he could see, of course; and also a few of the visitors. But the controls were too distant to show as anything but a blur.

He sighed, and stepped back. "All right," he said. "I've learned about everything I can learn from up here. Let's go and see if Liram feels like humming the right tune, and then we'll look over this place from below."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

LIRAM DID hum the right tune, and a minute or so later she, Durag, and Lenoir had descended the escalator and were walking along a spur-path leading to the public entrance to Hall of S.O.P.; a tall rectangle let into a pseudo-grecian frontage of columns and pediments. As they walked Liram touched Lenoir on the arm. "I feel excited enough to explode," she said.

"You probably will, my girl," said her father.

"No I won't," she said with a giggle. "The D.A.F. tried an explosion, and look where it got them." She definitely patted Lenoir's arm this time. "I'm going to wait for the shell to be opened properly."

A jokel thought Lenoir wryly. Nearly as poor a joke as one of my own; but undeniably a joke. Much more of this and I really will have to admit that the kid is human.

The hall seemed larger from below than it had from above. And the decorative motif was much more impressive than Lenoir had realised. The bronze-coloured circles were

actually bosses, each larger than a human head; and both they and the black spirals around them were raised up from the surface of the wall so that from a little way away they seemed to be standing clear of it.

Lenoir had intended to go straight over to the controls; but between his leaving the vent and his getting down here a party of school-children in the charge of a yellow-clad male teacher had invaded the hall. Now the children were standing round the railed enclosure, chatting, giggling, pinching and punching each other slyly.

The teacher lifted an arm, and snapped his fingers. "Beta-tron," he said.

It was almost as if he had produced Medusa's head. The children instantly became still, with a strained rigid stillness. Lenoir startled, glared at the man.

Liram evidently thought he intended to interfere. She caught hold of him by the sleeve. "It's all right," she said "The teacher has thrown them into a neo-hypnotic trance by the use of a pre-arranged key-word. Now they'll be able to memorise his lecture perfectly without any effort."

"A vast improvement on the educational methods of your time," said Durag.

But education isn't just a matter of memorising things, of learning them by rote. Lenoir's schoolteacher friends had hammered that into him long ago, and with the humility of a specialist who is dealing with matters outside his own field he had accepted it. Now Durag's words forced him to revise his ideas just a little. Maybe education wasn't all learning facts by rote. But when you came to look into things, a surprisingly large amount of it was. No child could come to appreciate literature without first learning to read, or sense the subtle intellectual excitements of mathematics without first parroting the multiplication tables.

Despite these perfectly valid arguments however, he still found the idea of suddenly transforming a number of perfectly normal children into a group of little robots distinctly revolting. How many of them, he wondered, were fated to imagine themselves say, stirring strawberry juice into a bowl of cream; only to awake and find themselves holding a bloodied whip over a screaming, crawling, fellow human being?

He shook his head. He was over-dramatising. Being in the control of a neo-hypnotist like this was painless, and basically no worse than being subject to the sort of discipline that had been forced on children in his own time. And apart from the fact that no one in his right mind was going to recruit for the games in public; children of this age would be under the control of a parent or guardian who would soon come demanding explanations if their children failed to return home.

The instructor, having arranged the children evenly round him, lifted his hand, snapped his fingers again, and said, "Betatron two." His pupils became even more stiffly attentive. The teacher said, "Good. Now, today we are going to hear the story of Neals Lenoir, the man to whom we owe our present-day civilisation—"

"Oh no we're *not* going to hear it." Lenoir was suddenly in such a rage that he did not realise he had half-shouted the words until he saw Durag and Liram staring at him curiously. He flushed. I'm going crazy, he thought. What the blazes was there to lose my temper about?

Nevertheless he said to Durag abruptly. "Can we go over and have a look at where the escalator comes out? Until the children have gone, I mean, and I can study the controls properly?"

Still looking at him with a somewhat puzzled expression Durag said, "Why not?"

The three of them strolled towards that end of the hall. As they got out of ear-shot of the schoolmaster's droning voice Lenoir found himself almost trembling with relief. Studiously he ignored his own reactions.

From ground level at the foot of the escalator things looked even better for the Freedom Party's plan than they had from above. The bottom step was quite close to the controls, but partly screened from anyone standing near them by one of the temporary partitions. Given that the promised diversion was only reasonably successful Lenoir felt that he could be up at the controls and at work too quickly for any bystander to realise that he had no business there.

His hand slid into his pocket. Although he had only designed the key-pack, and never constructed or used it, his fingers knew exactly what they would have to do. Press the

second blue knob and then the third green one together. Half-press and release the first green one—

"The children will be going in a minute now," said Liram. "Then you can go over and look at the controls properly."

"That's fine," said Lenoir.

The schoolmaster raised an arm and flicked his fingers again. His pupils suddenly became animated. It did Lenoir's heart good, as they trooped away, to see the last two boys trip each other and then start a scrap out of sight of the teacher.

As the Durags and he started to walk towards the controls Lenoir saw that the girl was clenching and unclenching her hand, breaking off every now and then to wipe the sweat off her palms down the side of her coat. And even Durag, though still comparatively passive, was breathing a little faster than usual. Liram said suddenly. "It's seeing the children that really makes it all worth while, isn't it?"

"I suppose so," said Lenoir guardedly.

"Suppose so," she said indignantly. "How else could it be? They're the new generation and they have a right to play freely and happily on the green grass out in the sunshine and to grow up in a world that's free of F-shells and crime and disease, and horrors like the games."

And that's the trouble with people like you, thought Lenoir half-sadly. Has been right through history. That's why you never really achieve the utopias you dream of, and why so many of you grow sour after getting what you've fought for all your lives. Because in your eyes there's never anything but one immediate cause of all evil. Get rid of that, whatever it is—Monarchy, Popery, Slavery, Colonialism, Capitalism, Communism—and from then on everything must be sweetness and light for ever after. And of course it never is.

He caught Liram's eye, and she gave him a quick smile. His mood began to shift. Perhaps I'm the one that's being too defeatist, he thought. Maybe in the end the only reliable way to make progress is to deal with obstacles one at a time. The collapsing of the shell is going to bring into the open a million and one problems that these two and their fellows haven't thought of. But how can they know what the problems are, or begin to think about how to deal with them, before the shell is collapsed?

He realised that his hand was in his pocket again, gently fingering the knobs on the key-pack without pressing them hard enough to operate them. He smiled wryly at himself. That unconscious action had a significance that there was no escaping. However naïve or reckless the Freedom Party seemed, however many holds the government had over him, however horrible the fates it could threaten him with, his own sense of right and wrong had committed him irrevocably. The shell must go.

Liram was holding his arm again, drawing him towards the penned-off section where the guards were. He let himself be led until he was up against the rail. Behind him Durag said something in an encouraging voice. Lenoir waved a hand without bothering to answer, then leaned over the rail and stared at the bank of controls.

Then stared again. And went on staring for long, long minutes, while the universe metamorphosed into something bleaker and harsher than it had been even in the depth of the worst despair that this century had yet thrust him into. And who, he thought, will ever be able to measure the full depths of corruption I have wrought with my invention? And is there anybody at all left now who is worthy of trust?

Insidiously, a serpent that had wandered far from anything remotely resembling Eden, the memory crept into his mind of the power granted to him by his temporal displacement. Destruction. Annihilation. So easy to cause, so tempting to think about now. He shook his head slowly. To give way to that impulse would still leave the major problem unsolved; and maybe put him in a position where he would have not even the remotest chance of solving it. And because he had been betrayed it was more important now than ever before that the problem should be solved.

He realised that Liram was speaking to him sharply, "Is something wrong?"

He lifted his head, "Wrong? Not really. It's only that I've changed my mind about which side I'm on. The government have control of the time-machine, after all—"

Despite his defiant attitude he really expected that even the Freedom Party would have been efficient enough to have someone around ready to recapture him by force when or if he ratted. But they hadn't. He was allowed to walk briskly

away, out of the hall, on to the mobilway. A few minutes later he was putting a call in to Yurli Cardell.

He did rather wonder what system was used to sort out her calls when within seconds her face appeared on his wrist screen. Obviously not everyone who dialled for her could get such V.I.P. treatment as an immediate, personal reply. But he did not let it bother him for long. Instead he spoke coldly. "You recognise me?"

"Of course."

"All right. A little while ago you were broadcasting a message telling me that I would be executed if I co-operated with either of the freedom parties."

He paused. She looked at him keenly. "Well?"

"I've just seen the controls at the Hall of S.O.P. They're fakes. I couldn't use them to open the shell even if I wanted to."

"Even if?" she mocked. A frown drew her eyebrows down closer over her eyes. "And I suppose you've come running to us now, hoping we will cancel your sentence and take you back. Accept you as a friend because it's proved mechanically impossible for you to co-operate with our enemies?"

"You will if I'm useful enough," he said coolly. "And I must be very useful indeed; otherwise you wouldn't have gone to all this trouble to get me here."

She nodded. "Very well. But don't go expecting even your usefulness to save you if you are disloyal again."

"I won't. I'm clear of the Freedom Party now. Finished with them. Tell me how to get to Government Centre and I'll be with you in ten minutes."

He did not keep his promise literally. Although he followed meticulously Yurli Cardell's crisp and precise instructions it was nearly fifteen minutes before he got his first sight of Government Centre.

It was near the middle of the city, in the top floor of its shell-scraper, immediately below the shell's highest point. The nearest mobilway came only within a quarter of a mile of it, so far off that the spur-path that connected that way to the Centre's main entrance was itself mobile, with one central, slow-moving strip. And for three mobilway levels below that there was no spur-path connections with the shell-scraper at all.

Lenoir hesitated for a moment or two before he ventured out on to that final spur-path. There were fifty or more leos, some men, some women, between him and the entrance to the Centre. And they all had about them an air common to most young people who have been armed, blessed with a little vain authority, then cursed with a boring job. An air of being ready to take it out in violence on anyone who offered them the slightest excuse for doing so.

Lenoir was a very thoughtful man as he stepped on to the path, stopped, and allowed himself to be identified.

"Is the Centre always as well guarded as this?" he asked the male leo who had come forward to check on him.

The young man glared. "What do you think?"

Lenoir did not talk about it further, but having received permission, set off towards the building. Nobody bothered to escort him along the path. He was simply allowed to pass through. When he reached the entrance huge double doors glided apart for him. As he walked between them he noted idly that they were more than a foot thick, and that a couple of yards beyond them was another pair that duplicated them. The first pair of doors closed tightly before the second began to open, to reveal in their turn a third pair.

In all Lenoir passed through five sets of doors, and four of the narrow chambers between them. Then he found himself in a long corridor. A young-looking male leo was waiting for him.

Lenoir said, "All right. Here I am. Now what happens?"

The leo replied stiffly, "Both Mr. Navel Rufus and Mr. Samas Rufus have expressed a wish to see you immediately."

"Have they now?" said Lenoir dryly. "Very well. But don't I get a chance to tidy up, or something first?"

The leo's eyes widened. He achieved the feat of remaining stiff-faced, and yet looking horrified. "They expressed a wish to see you *immediately*."

Lenoir sighed. "And their slightest wish is my Lawd-help-us, eh?" He grinned at the leo's blank stare. "O.K. sonny. Lead on."

It was a measure of how little he had adapted himself to this age that he did not realise at first that he was being led through an unprecedented display of expensive luxury. It was not until he had passed more than a dozen of the brown

figured panels in the wall of the corridor that he was struck by their sheer incongruity in this setting. He stopped and fingered one.

"Hey," he said. "This is wood, isn't it?"

"Carved in genuine deal," said the leo. His tone was reverent.

Lenoir began to look around. He pointed down to one of the quite ordinary-looking rugs on the floor. "Rabbit-skin?" he asked.

"Genuine fur of some sort," said the leo seriously. "Most of it, anyway. I understand that some of them have had to be repaired with matching synthetics. Not that the worst-worn of them wouldn't still be worth a fortune."

Lenoir rubbed the back of his neck slowly, the impulse to pull the young man's leg faded from him.

After all, the value of an article at any given time and place is its value at that time and place. That the thing might, by comparison, have been almost ludicrously cheap and common-place centuries before was entirely irrelevant. And theoretically the only income that any Rufus had was his salary as a minister!

Lenoir's first impression of the two elder Rufus brothers, when finally he was shown in to them, was that they looked like debased copies of their own likenesses. Navel's features were coarser than they had seemed in the picture that Liram had produced, his face was more lined, and the protuberance below his chest was decidedly more prominent. Samas, though the likeness was truer in his case, did not in real life display what little air of manhood his portrait had endowed him with. And Lenoir had not been in the room more than a minute before he realised that the waves of over-sweet perfume washing through the place were emanating from him. Although adulthood had brought Lenoir more sophisticated ideas about this type, vague memories of schoolboy legends still almost made him expect the man to lisp, and walk with swaying hips and one hand at his waist.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE LEO had simply waved Lenoir through the door and then left him, without saying a word to the brothers; who now stood blinking silently. Lenoir, once he had mentally registered their appearance, found time to begin wondering uneasily what they were waiting for. For him to speak first? Or were they expecting some physical mark of respect, a bow or a salute? However he might feel about it personally, in the eyes of the present-day world he would rank far below them in social position, and it could be that contemporary etiquette demanded that he should acknowledge the fact.

Something coldly resentful stirred inside him at the thought. To hell with them. He owed them no respect and didn't intend to show them any unless far greater pressure than this was put upon him. He returned their stare coolly and determinedly said nothing. After a few seconds Navel said, "So you've decided to throw your lot in with us rather than with either of the freedom parties, eh?"

Lenoir said, "It's the most sensible thing to do, isn't it? This is the only way I can get to spending any of my money. And, more important than that, you've got the time-machine that I need to get home."

Samas giggled, then said, "You do need it to go home don't you? And we need to have you go home in it, if we're to get our dear brother Burt back."

Navel swivelled his eyes round to glare at his brother. "Stop talking like a fool." He spoke coldly, but without real hostility.

Lenoir blinked. Despite Navel's contemptuous words he began to sense that any tensions and covert rivalries that existed between these two brothers were far enough outweighed by those existing between the pair of them and the third member of the family, to make allies of them.

His contempt for the True Freedom people grew. Dissension in the ruling family; Navel and Samas versus Burt—it was surely a situation made to order for the party. They should have been exploiting it to the utmost for years now

instead of fooling about with printed pamphlets and stickers, and relying on the government to supply them with their only weapon, himself.

Forcefully he reminded himself that none of that was any of his concern now. He was here to carry out his own plans. But if these two did not particularly want Burt back, if they were ready, even, to gang up together to make sure he didn't get back, would that affect his own plans? Perhaps. It turned, of course, on how far they understood the implications of the scientific discovery that they had misused to get him here.

"Look," he said slowly. "The money's important but the time-machine is more so. You've got to promise to let me use it, or—"

Navel interrupted him. "Don't pose as being more naïve than you are. You knew perfectly well that nothing you can do can make us keep any promise we choose to break. And you know equally well that promise or no promise we've simply got to let you use the time-machine."

Lenoir nodded. "I realised it. But I wasn't sure you did. Just as a point of interest, if you know that much why did your lady friend Yurli Cardell threaten me with death in her broadcasts?"

Samas giggled again. Navel said, "That woman's useful, but she can be a fool at times. I tried to tell her you would see through that bluff."

Samas said almost gloatingly, "It isn't much good to you really, is it? I mean, knowing that we can't kill you and we've got to send you back. There are so many other interesting things we can safely do to you you, if you don't co-operate."

So you don't really see the whole of the implications after all, thought Lenoir. Because actually there aren't really so very many things you can safely do. Very few indeed, in fact. He said curtly, "You've no need to threaten me to get my services. Just agree to get me home."

"We will, if you co-operate," said Navel placatingly.

Lenoir nodded. "I've been told that you brought me into this time to help you rid yourselves of the freedom parties, and to preserve the satisfied vote. Is that true? And if it is, what exactly do you expect me to do?"

Navel looked at him sharply. "Didn't your kidnappers tell you exactly what we wanted you for?"

Lenoir said, "The girl Liram Durag did say something about enclosing the present shell's controls in a smaller shell of their own—"

"That's it," said Navel brusquely. "Think you can do it?"

Oh, I can do it all right, thought Lenoir. The point is, do I want to? Do I dare?

He shivered. He didn't really dare to. He was too eager to get back to Betty, too fond of his home and comforts, too much of a physical coward, to be that daring. All the same, he knew he was going to do it. He said, "It will probably involve a great deal of work. But I don't see any reason why it shouldn't be possible, given time and all the necessary facilities for research."

Navel looked at him sharply. "The necessary facilities for research will include a close examination of the larger shell's controls, I suppose?"

Lenoir shrugged, feigning indifference. "Eventually," he said. "But there's no hurry."

Samas giggled again. Navel said, "Fine." His tone became brisker. "It's understood, of course, that you will work here, and send out for any materials or parts you want. The freedom parties are too powerful and widespread for us to be able to risk letting you wander freely about."

Lenoir grunted, then nodded reluctantly. Navel said, "That's how it's got to be for a time."

"It is a shame, though, that you can't get out to spend your lovely money, isn't it?" said Samas softly. "There are so many nice things you can buy nowadays that you couldn't buy in your time." His tongue, red and glistening, slid forward between his lips, and traced their outline moistly. "So many, many nice things."

"Indeed?" said Lenoir curtly. He addressed himself to Navel. "All right. I agree to do the job for you, and to your conditions. And now, if there's nothing else of importance that you want me for, I think I'll go to bed. I've had a tiring day, and I shall be all the fresher to start work in the morn—when I get up."

For a moment it seemed that the excuse was going to work. Navel nodded, murmured politely. "But of course," and turned his head towards a retinal-pattern plate set in the wall just at eye level.

Then Samas stepped closer, smiled coyly, and piped, "Oh, don't send for a leo to see Mr. Lenoir to his room. I'd be delighted to do that myself."

Lenoir was startled. The sort of creature that Samas was had been evident to him almost as soon as he had met the brothers. But somehow it had never occurred to him to imagine the pervert's odd tastes turning towards himself; and reasonably broad-minded though he was his skin crawled at the idea. It crawled still more, until the repulsion almost made him cringe, when Samas leaned closer, exhaled perfume-sweetened breath all over him, and whispered, "You'd like that, wouldn't you darling?"

Just how do I handle this? Lenoir thought, almost panicking. He would have been in no doubt as to how to handle it if it had happened to him back in the twenty-first century; but anything in the nature of a violent protest now might ruin all his plans. And yet he couldn't and wouldn't submit tamely to this little beast's ludicrously sudden outburst of passion.

The sick feeling that had formed in the bottom of his stomach vanished abruptly. *Ludicrously sudden*. He had mentally used the phrase to himself. And it was apt, vivid, and accurately descriptive. And Samas—although his perversion was obviously genuine enough—was definitely not the type to humble himself with ludicrously sudden outbursts of passion. Not while he was in a position to command loftily a whole shell full of boys.

The Rufus family doubtless had its talents; but acting was not one of them. Now that Lenoir had wrenched his attention far enough away from his own emotional revulsion to register the fact he could see that this 'preliminary-steps-to-a-seduction' scene was almost comically wooden and contrived. The discovery, though, didn't clear anything up. Just plunged him into a thick fog of bewilderment.

He looked from one to another of the brothers; Navel, trying to look discreet but knowing; Samas maintaining, albeit in a rather wobbly fashion, an oh-you-naughty-thing-but-I-like-it smile. It didn't seem that either of them had anything to gain. Sufficient biographical material about himself must still exist in this era for it to be perfectly well known that he was sexually normal. Surely, then, if this farce was going

to have any effect at all, it would be in the direction of making him more reluctant to work for the government in the making of the small shell.

Startled, he held that last thought for a moment, examining it incredulously. Surely not? Not now, after all that had happened. And yet—

Well, there was only one way to find out. He turned to Navel and said coldly, "There's one further condition laid down before I'll agree to work for you." He gestured towards Samas. "That you keep this piece of filth away from me for the rest of the time I'm in this century."

Navel leaned forward and whispered confidentially. "I understand how you feel; and I'll do my best. But it's a bit difficult. As a member of the ruling family Samas has been used to certain privileges all his life."

He straightened himself and spoke severely. "You must try to control yourself, Samas. As you can see, Mr. Lenoir isn't the sort to take kindly to your advances."

Samas giggled again. "Oh, but he'll change his mind. There are ways of making him do that. Quite a lot of ways."

Or at any rate, thought Lenoir grimly, there are quite a lot of ways of making things unpleasant for him if he doesn't change his mind.

When at last he found himself alone with the leo that Navel had sent for, he thought of asking questions about those unpleasant possibilities. However, he decided against it. First he would check the evidence in his assigned apartment. Later, if that pointed towards the conclusions he suspected, then he would perhaps offer a little encouragement to whichever of the leos it was that was supposed to become overfriendly and make indiscreet revelations about how persistent a wooer Samas was, and how vengeful he grew if his attempts to satisfy his lusts were thwarted.

The evidence in his apartment, when he examined it, did point towards the conclusions he suspected. One of the window-slides had been so carelessly bolted that although he was ostensibly locked in it was quite possible for him to break out using only his bare fingers. And when he accepted that implied invitation he found himself on a broad ledge, guarded on the further, outer side by a waist-high balustrade, so that the most nervous of escapers could scarcely be frightened

to move about on it. A short walk along the ledge brought him within sight of a spur-path other than the one he had entered by, that led to a totally empty section of the mobl-way. As a slight concession towards realism the inner end of this path was guarded by a leo; but as Lenoir approached him that gentleman obligingly let his head roll forward and begun to snore convincingly.

After which it seemed almost ungrateful not to escape. Especially as he had wanted to so badly. So very, very badly that even now he found himself wondering if he had done the right thing by letting his chance slip. Betty, he was certain, would feel that he hadn't, if she ever learned about it—

He shook his head sharply. Much as he loved his wife he had other responsibilities besides those of a married man. Right now his place was not with Betty, not even in his thoughts, but where he could be most useful.

Which place rather oddly perhaps, was in bed, sleeping as naturally as he could.

When a leo called him in the morning, uneasily conscious that his non-escape might prove to be both unexpected and unwelcome, he put on as unconcerned an expression as he could achieve and demanded breakfast. Then, after the attendant had gone, he waited with some trepidation to see what would happen next. Nothing happened except that the leo returned and, together with a companion, served the meal. When he had finished eating Lenoir, his self-confidence almost fully returned, asked for writing materials. He was immediately supplied with them. Dismissing the leos he sat about making a list of all the things he was going to require in the making of the small shell that the Rufuses wanted.

Once he had started scribbling he continued for almost an hour without stopping. Surprised and pleased at the swift precision with which his memory was working he almost began to believe that time-traveling was in some way a mental stimulant. Certainly his brain wouldn't have worked like this back in his own time, even allowing for the fact that he knew now exactly what he was going to do and how he was going to do it.

When he had finished his list he checked it, then got up from the table on which he had been writing to use the

summons button to call a leo. Before he could press it the telephone on his wrist pinged softly.

For a moment he debated whether to answer it or not. Then he shrugged, put his list back on the table, and set the phone to 'receive', fervently hoping that the caller would not turn out to be either of the Durag family; though he could not imagine who else would be calling him.

To his surprise no picture appeared in the small circular screen. Instead an apparently disembodied voice, so husky and distorted as to be obviously disguised, rasped at him. "Neals Lenoir?"

"Yes," said Lenoir cautiously.

"You are alone," stated the voice positively. "That's good."

Lenoir was normally a courteous man; but the situation he was in and the frustration he had been subjected to had excoriated his nerves. "Look," he said, "I'm too busy for a lot of chit-chat. Get on with your business, whoever you are."

The voice said slowly, "As for who I am—it's close enough an identification for our present purpose that I am the leader of the D.A.F. party—"

"The what?" interrupted Lenoir. Then memories of Liram's and Durag's explanations returned to enlighten him. "Oh, you mean the Direct Action for Freedom Party." His irritation began to deepen. "Look," he said, "After what I've been through at the hands of your opposite number I did think you'd have the decency to let me alone. Since you haven't though, I'll put the whole thing in plain words and make it clear where I stand once and for all—"

"Any stand you feel like making at the moment is based on a misapprehension," said the voice decisively. "Whatever the True Freedom Party did to you has nothing to do with us. Our interest and yours are identical—"

"My interests and yours are completely opposed." Lenoir realised that he was shouting, and dropped his voice. "I want you to be perfectly clear about this. I'm having nothing more to do with any organisation interested in opening the shell. That applies to your lot and to everybody else as well. Now get off the line before I send for one of the leos to have this call traced."

He wasn't at all sure that it was possible to trace calls with this type of telephone, and he was even less sure that his authority was sufficient to get the tracing done if it were possible. Fortunately his bluff was not called. There was a soft click, and the microphone of his instrument went as dead as the screen had been. Thankfully he went over to the push-button again, and handed his list over to the leo who responded to his ringing.

Still left on his own, and with nothing to do now, he began to feel restless and pretty much at a loose end. Luckily it was a condition that he did not have to endure for long. Within an hour everything that he had asked for arrived, and he was, in addition, introduced by one of the leos to a marvellously well-equipped and well-planned little workshop that he was told was to be his for as long as he needed it. Filled now with a genuine enthusiasm for doing what he had planned to do he managed to thrust out of his mind all thoughts of the inevitable consequences that would follow from it, and plunge into work.

He continued steadily for several hours. Pleased as he had been earlier by the accuracy and scope of his memory he now found even more pleasure in the way his hands seemed almost to know what to do of their own accord, without prompting from him. The initial stage of the small shell progressed further in that morning than he would have expected it to do in a week.

Just as he was beginning to think seriously about lunch, he heard the door open. He looked up, expecting to see only a leo attendant, probably come to remind him about his meal. Instead he was startled and rather displeased by the sight of Yurli Cardell smiling at him.

She continued to smile, almost embarrassingly unembarrassed, while he recovered from his startlement. Then he said dryly, "Well, I suppose you expect me to feel flattered?"

She shook her head. "You won't," she said. "You aren't one to be impressed by the importance of people's positions. I could tell that by the way you handled Navel and Samas."

He raised his eyebrows slightly. "So you had that interview monitored?"

"I have practically everything around here monitored," she said carelessly. "And don't fool yourself that you could get

me into any trouble by telling the Rufuses about it. They approve of safety measures. Although you were carefully ray-searched for weapons before you were admitted to them you might have decided to attack them with your bare hands once you were in there."

"So I might," said Lenoir. He stared with some curiosity at the girl. For a tyranny to perpetuate itself it is necessary either that the tyrant be strong, or that he should be the tool of someone who has strength enough for two. With Burt gone no one in the Rufus family could qualify as a strong man. But then the strong person didn't have to be a man—

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

LENOIR REMEMBERED the loose window-pane in his room, the balcony outside, the sleeping leo. And he remembered, too, that the Rufuses really did want the small shell that he had started to produce. He shook his head slowly. "I don't understand you," he said.

"It isn't in the least necessary that you should," said the buttress of tyrants coldly. Then the woman underneath rather spoiled the effect. "What don't you understand about me, anyway?"

"The way you're having the time-machine misused." Yurli Cardell looked just a shade disappointed, but Lenoir continued without noticing, "The greatest invention of all time, with scientific and sociological possibilities that make your head spin to think about them; and you just use it to bring me here. And when you've got me you make me a pawn in a few trivial and almost self-contradictory political manoeuvres—"

"They may seem that way to you," she interrupted. "But they are essential to us if we are to consolidate our power. And it's more vital than ever that we should consolidate our power now, since continuity of government is the prime necessity if our civilisation is to remain stable enough to survive the impact of a wider use of time-travel."

Even twelve hours ago he would have argued hotly about

that. Now he just shrugged. "Perhaps you're right. All I'm concerned with now is to get this job done and get back to my own time."

She nodded. "How long do you think it will take you?"

He said rather despondently, "Months, at least."

Her expression became grim. "All right. But you had better make good in the end. Remember, we've had to give up Burt Rufus, to get you here."

And is that such a sacrifice for you? he wondered idly as she turned and went out of the room. Then he shrugged, rang for lunch, and ate it without giving the girl another thought.

It was hardly possible, though, not to give her another thought when she dropped in to see him the next day, and then the next, and then the next. And as visit succeeded visit the nature of the other thoughts that he had started to give her began gradually to change.

His recollections of the twenty-first century told him that his life had been a fairly gregarious business; that although credit for the F-shell belonged primarily to him he had worked on it as the leader of a well-integrated team, with every member of which he had been on friendly terms. And also, outside his working hours, Betty and he had done a great deal of visiting and being visited.

Now he was being left to himself the greater part of the time. The Rufus brothers, after the failure of Samas's attempt to shock him into making a fool of himself, had apparently decided not to come near him. And his two attendants, although soft-voiced and obedient, were altogether too impersonally efficient to constitute anything worthy of the name of company.

Yurli Cardell's visits therefore, which were initially just a barely-tolerated nuisance first became part of the routine, then a mildly welcome break in the day's work, and finally something to look forward to with eagerness.

During all this time, though, he was never quite at his ease in knowing what to talk to her about. The sheer alienness of the era in which she had grown up, and his complete lack of sympathy for everything she stood for and believed in, served to restrict his tongue to such a degree that he sometimes wondered why she bothered with him at all.

She suffered from no such difficulties. Every time their conversation faltered and threatened an awkward hiatus she would set things going again by chatting gaily about three-dee TV programmes that he really shouldn't miss even if it meant leaving off work early to catch them; or by asking him questions about the twenty-first century and then contrasting that era with the present one, or by pressing him for intimate details about his courtship of Betty, and his life with her.

It was more in an effort to keep his end up conversationally than because he really thought she would be interested that he told her the story that by now was beginning to bore even him, about the ugly, artificial-looking wigs that had become a fashionable form of head-gear for women in his time, and how Betty had bought one and insisted on wearing it even though he didn't like it, and how they had quarrelled about it just before he had been snatched away into this era. "I feel a bit conscience-stricken about that now," he admitted. "But how was I to know what was going to happen to me?"

To his surprise he saw that Yurli Cardell was staring at him with a sudden, sharp increase in interest. "Is that your last memory of your own time?" she said. "That quarrel with your wife over the wearing of the wig?"

"Well, yes. But—I don't understand. What's all the excitement about?"

She smiled. "Excitement? Not exactly that. Just interest. You see, according to the temporal physicists you weren't pulled out of your time just after that quarrel, but a half an hour later. But the psychologists theorised that your recollections would place the transition at some point preceding the actual event and adjacent to an emotional upheaval of some nature."

"Did they?" he said vaguely. "Well, perhaps they were right." Or perhaps, he thought, temporal physicists are easy to fool. Or perhaps, even, that whole line of talk about recollections being drawn to an adjacent emotional upheaval is just a cover up for the fact that you were more interested in Betty's wig than seems natural.

He couldn't think of any reason why she should be, though. And so, to change the subject, he started talking about one of the three-dee TV programmes she had described, commenting on its apparent resemblance to a series that had

been running in his own era. Promptly she suggested that he should stop work a little earlier for once, so that they could watch it together on the as-yet-unused set in his apartment.

He looked at her in mild astonishment. "And what are your all-powerful employers going to say if they hear that you've seduced me away from my work?"

"They'll be pleased," she said seriously. "They were saying only today that it is necessary for a man to have some recreation periods if he is going to do his best work."

It didn't sound like the sort of thing the Rufus brothers would think of for themselves; but he was quite prepared to believe they had said it if she wanted them to. He was quite prepared to believe that they would say pretty well anything that she wanted them to. "Well," he said. "I'm honoured by the invitation. Unluckily I won't be able to accept it tonight." Mentally he crossed his fingers, hoping that her ignorance of mechanics and electronics was as vast and as comprehensive as most people's. "There is an essential component that I must get into place within the next hour or so, otherwise the S.O.P. I've started to build will revert, and I'll have to do it all over again."

The excuse sounded so contrived that he was even more surprised than relieved when she accepted it. Until, that is, he had time to realise what she had probably realised straight away, that he had trapped himself with an evasion that could by its very nature work only once. When she came to him the next day with a repeat of her invitation he simply had not the nerve to fabricate another, more obvious excuse.

At the end of that work-period she went with him to his flat, stayed to watch the programme that she had recommended, then left. At the next period's end she went with him to his flat, watched two programmes, stayed for a short chat, then left. At the third period's end she went with him to his flat, sat and viewed TV through the whole of the scanty leisure period that he allowed himself, ate into his self-allotted sleep-period with an hour's lively conversation, then, with obvious reluctance, left.

In his youth there had been in current use a rather brutal phrase describing the position of a man whose lady friend was in a wholly compliant mood. It was said of him; 'It's there for him if he wants it.' It was several weeks after Yurli

Cardell's first visit to him when Lenoir realised suddenly that it was there for him if he wanted it; that, in fact, it had been there for him if he wanted it for quite some time. When the fact finally came home to him he felt a little contrite about having up till now stupidly failed to notice the obvious; and he felt, too, titillated in both vanity and loins. However commonplace beauty might be in this era, there was still no denying that Yurli Cardell was a beautiful woman. And yet—

Back in his own era he had conformed by talking in the contemporary, flippantly cynical manner about sex. But deep in his heart he was a romantic. If Yurli Cardell had fallen passionately in love with him he would have found it embarrassing but delightful. If she had been deeply sympathetic to him and had tried in a strictly maternal way to show him loving kindness he would in his loneliness have responded eagerly. But despite her behaviour he knew with humiliating certitude that he was being offered neither a lover nor a mother. He was just being offered—well, what was there for him if he wanted it. And so he was not at all sure that he did want it.

And anyway, his conscience reminded him with a jolt, there was Betty.

Betty! He was snapped out of his reverie. Hell! he thought, this was too bad. He'd hardly given Betty a thought for weeks. Not since that time he'd been faintly disloyal to her by describing their quarrel to Yurli Cardell. He closed his eyes, deliberately shutting out the present and trying to recall happy times that he had spent with his wife, times before that stupid quarrel over the wig.

It was a shock to find how wraith-like she had become; but he managed to bring her picture back with some vividness, and even to get it to stay that way for a while. Then, somehow, he forgot to keep on making an effort, and just let his thoughts drift whither they would. Which was away from Betty again—

Even the most sophisticated of males can be naïve about his own emotional reactions. If the affair had just been described to him, if it had been something he had observed but in which he was not concerned personally, Lenoir could have prophesied with certainty just what would happen to a man in his circumstances.

But because he was concerned personally he kept himself in suspense for the next few days, pretending that he was making sure he wasn't just letting himself go because of what would happen after he finished the little shield, that he was still deciding what was best for Yurli, for himself, for Betty.

When though, the inevitable at last started to happen—with all thought of Betty discarded along with Yurli's clothing; with nothing mattering but here and now and what was happening on his firm but yielding bed—why then he did try to have enough honesty not to pretend to himself that he was surprised. And so it was all the more disconcerting to find that he was surprised; that he had genuine cause for surprise. At least, it seemed to him like genuine cause, though in his still-abysmal ignorance about the sexual mores of the day he could not be sure.

When their climax was spent Yurli rolled away from him and half-crouched on the further side of the bed, tawny-pink against the dark cover, her long red hair just brushing her bare shoulders. She looked at him with half-hooded eyes. "Well?" she said.

Well what? he thought. And then, in a sudden surge of tenderness for her! Dear God! she could do that much for me, and I'm really building that miniature shell-origin-point she asked for. Out of ordinary decency I ought to scrap the thing.

Common sense returned, swept away the moment's softness. Hell, he thought, I was willing to push the thing through despite my own interests, and despite Betty's. I'm not stopping now for a dozen Yurli Cardell's, even if they do all turn out to be rather better than I expected them to be. All the same, there might be other things than stopping my work that I ought to do for her.

She was still staring at him enigmatically from under half-closed lids. He blurted out; "I—uh—that was the first time, wasn't it?" He flushed, and began almost to babble. "I—I'm afraid I know damn-all about how these things go nowadays. I—I'm not supposed to marry you or anything, am I? I mean—"

"You mean," she said severely, "That there's Betty, don't you? But you're wrong, my friend. There isn't any Betty.

Neither she nor her wigs have been around for centuries. So however much of a married man you feel, your claim to be legally considered a widower and free to remarry will be unassailable."

"Will—will it?" Her tone of mock severity had him fooled for a moment. Then he realised suddenly that she was laughing at him. The expression of relief on his face was so patent that she began to giggle openly.

"No, you needn't worry," she said. "There won't be any—what did you people call them?—shot-gun wedding this time." Still giggling she leaned over to tweak his nose, gently at first, and then more and more painfully, until he was persuaded to roll across the bed to spank her once again.

When they were lying still once more, except for their panting, he said, "When I first met you I told you I didn't understand you. That still goes, if anything more than ever now."

"Why?"

He laid his head back on his hands, "Well, I suppose even the chief prop of a tyranny like the Rufuses' and the leader of a force like the leos would have to be a human being as well. But—"

"But you didn't expect me to be quite so much of a human being, eh?"

"Something like that," he admitted. His passion temporarily satisfied, he found himself curious about her in other ways. Curious as to the truth of certain things about her that he had heard half-hinted, half said aloud. Watching her closely he probed experimentally. "They tell me you had to do quite a bit of killing to get to your present position."

"Do they indeed?" she said mockingly. "And was that the worst your Freedom Party friends could find to say about me? They must be slipping." She sat up and clasped her hands in front of her knees, granting him a glimpse between precision-curved thighs. The pleasurable effect of that, however, faded almost instantly as her face darkened and she began to stare at him enigmatically. She kept the stare going for a long time, and as he endured it silently it began to have a curious effect on him. Somewhere behind those unmoving eyes, he felt, his compliant mistress was being folded up and put away until there should be leisure enough to

bring her out and indulge her again. And in her place someone else was being brought forward. Someone harder and colder and, in the last analysis, more real.

He had hoped, without fully realising it, that his accusations would be answered with disavowals; that she would somehow disprove those unpleasant things said about her that he knew in his heart to be true. Now it was brought home to him that nothing of that sort was going to happen.

She spoke abruptly. "In your time," she said, "Governments took only two forms, democracies and dictatorships."

A lecture on politics? he thought. Now? Then, as he began to understand her a little more clearly; but of course now. First the romp, to show the little man what can be had if he behaves himself. Then, while his memories of fleshly delights are still new, the serious heart-to-heart talk about current affairs that will make him understand that although he can take the chief of the leos to bed he cannot expect to influence events on a governmental level. And then no doubt, if he is sufficiently docile, another romp.

Well, he thought, until it's time for more important things, why not? Of course the government's were either democracies or dictatorships," he said. "They had to be one or the other, didn't they?"

"Did they? Why?" Without giving him time to answer she went on, "Because no such set-up as the present one existed in those days you can't even imagine what things are like now. Theoretically we still live in a democracy, but the old forms and institutions have decayed until they are largely farcical. But they haven't disappeared altogether. There are rules that can be ignored, but there are rules that must appear to be kept, and there are even rules that really must be kept. And the nature and delineation of each kind changes with every decade."

"And is that supposed to persuade me that you didn't do any killing, or supposed to excuse you for having done it?"

"Neither," she said with a touch of acerbity. "I've had a few people executed; but probably less than you've been told, and certainly no more than deserved it. Most of the killings that have been done by my leos were in the course of direct therapy on wakies. And they were genuinely necessary in the interest of other wakies."

Still vaguely hoping to goad her into a disavowal of this side of herself Lenoir said abruptly; "You know, for all your tough talk, and for all the terrible tales you tell me, I still can't help feeling that your job doesn't fit you. That business of broadcasting all those threats to me, for instance—"

She began to move her right big toe backwards and forwards slowly, keeping her head lowered to watch it. "But that's something I'm trying to get you to realise," she said. "It's something you must realise, if we're going to have fun together without finishing up in trouble. That business, as you call it, was essentially me. Before anything else, I'm the chief of the leos. I'm a woman too, but that comes second. And it won't come anywhere at all if at any time again you threaten my job or the security of the state. When I broadcast those threats I meant every word of them, and I'd have carried them out, if you'd made me."

Her insistence stung him, made him want to sting her in return. "For Pete's sake stop talking as if you take me for an absolute fool," he said irritably. "You might have felt vengeful if I'd worked for any of the freedom people, but you'd never have dared to kill me."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

SHE SEEMED by now to have forgotten that she was naked and in bed. She scowled at him, and the vagrant thought wandered in and out of his mind that this was probably the oddest lover's quarrel that the shell had ever enclosed. She said savagely, "Now don't go lulling yourself into a sense of false security. I shall dare to kill you all right, if I have to; however much I might hope I don't have to. And if I once decided to do it, all the whole shell won't be big enough for you to hide in."

"But—"

"Yes, I know what you're trying to say. Back in your own era you haven't finished your work on the larger type shell yet. If I kill you now you'll never complete it." She shook her head. "You've already completed small models, and most of your assistants understand the lines you are

working on. If you disappear others will carry out the rest of the work, and the erection of the shell will only be delayed by a few years."

"There's something even more important to you than the erection of the shell—"

"And I've thought about that, too. Your premature death wouldn't change the broad outline of the future much, but it would alter quite a number of details. And each alteration would cause scores of others that would then multiply themselves again, spreading outwards from the original changed event until in a hundred years or so they would be having repercussions on things which on the surface would appear to have no connection with you at all. And one of the things they might very well repercuss upon would be the marriage between great-great-grandmother whoever-it-was and great-great-grandfather Cardell."

He nodded, "That's it. You and everybody else would be wiped out more thoroughly than anyone has ever been wiped out before. You'd not only cease to exist, you'd cease ever to have existed."

"And you're relying on my fear of that to keep you safe? You're a fool. I've worked hard, made sacrifices, done a thousand and one things I hated doing, just to get the position I've got. And if the power of the Rufus brothers is broken I lose it all immediately. I'd sooner take a dozen chances on never having come into existence, than let that happen."

And the unkindest part, thought Lenoir wryly, is that she really means it. So much for my greatly-prized invulnerability. Oh well, that wasn't going to last any longer than it took me to make the small shell, anyway. Meanwhile, what's to be done, now that the lady has got that little lot off her shapely chest?

He had approached that question with his intellect, but as Yurli fell silent, regarding him sombrely from between sweeps of her red-gold hair, his loins answered it for him. That their activities had been confined to conversation about politics for so many minutes was mainly his fault. If he made moves to alter that, then a lady who had already proved herself to be so eminently bedworthy could surely be persuaded to prove it again—

He succeeded in persuading her at intervals for the next three weeks. Anticipations of the inevitable unpleasantness that would arise as soon as he finished the small shell did intrude from time to time, but he always turned his mind firmly away from them. And in his preoccupation with his woman and his work it never even occurred to him that unpleasantness even more extreme might turn up before he had completed his job. Then one evening he returned alone from the workshop to his flat; Yurli Cardell having been called away on some obscure government business.

He opened the door, went through, and let it slide back behind him as he crossed the room to switch on the three-dee TV. The thing was seldom in use nowadays, but he had come to depend on it for company on the rare evenings when he was alone. As he bent over it all his thoughts were about the programmes he expected to watch that evening, and at first the rustle of movement and the sound of breathing behind him did not register on his senses.

Even when he did suddenly become aware of them he was not too concerned. He turned slowly, expecting to see an over-zealous leo attendant. Instead he saw two men in ordinary clothing standing between him and the door. And each man was holding one of those now too-familiar tube-like weapons, with the barrel poking out between his fingers.

Lenoir's diaphragm constricted sharply. This was the first time he had been threatened in any way since Yurli Cardell had punctured his comfortable illusion about his own invulnerability. And he did not like the feel of it.

He spotted a scar on the face of the smaller of the two men. "I know you," he said shakily. "You're Lem Frack, the man I met at the games."

It was the bigger of the two men who answered. "It just happened to be at the games, because that's where you was. You was going to meet Lem anyway. I'd sent him along to check up on you."

Lenoir's mind was beginning to get over the initial numbness of shock. There wasn't any point in shouting. The sound-proofing of the room was far too efficient. But if he could get to the button by which he called in his leos he could get some help. At the present moment, though, the two intruders were standing between him and it, and he had a

feeling that it would be very unhealthy to try forcing his way past them.

He glared at the bigger man who he guessed, rightly, to be Alk Orzon, and tried to put on an expression of outraged dignity.

"Ch—check up?" he said. "What right have you to check up on me? And what do you want to check up about anyway?"

Orzon's thick lips curled into a smile that had very little friendliness in it. "Oh, I just wanted to make sure you really was who you was supposed to be. Neals Lenoir, the boy that invented the shells."

Lenoir looked warily from one to the other of the two. How had they got in to him? They hadn't broken in. The place was too well guarded for that. They had been deliberately let in by somebody. But who?

He put speculation aside for later. At the moment he needed to concentrate all his attention on handling the current situation. He had at no time told Lem Frack his name while they were together at the games. The little man might just have guessed who he was, so it might be possible to claim that he wasn't Lenoir. On the other hand it would be stupid to deny his identity too positively if they were already certain of him. That way he might simply cause himself a lot of grief to no purpose.

"Now look," he said slowly. "Do you really believe a thing like time-travel is possible?"

Orzon lifted his right hand just an inch or two, bringing the weapon he was holding more plainly into sight. "Weren't thinking of saying it isn't possible, were you?" he enquired gently.

Lem Frack said, "Don't be stupid, Lenoir. It's too late now to fool us. You was worried about using your ret-pats for buying your way into the games. You didn't know how to put bets on, nor how people get recruited for the games, nor what happens to wakies. I don't think you knew what a wokie was, proper. And you even had to ask me what the satisfied vote was about—"

"I gave you a perfectly good explanation for my loss of memories."

"Perfectly good?" Orzon sneered. "That bunk about a

neo-hyp who took a lot of extra stuff out by mistake? As though anyone would get a license to practice if he was misbegot enough to mess things up like that. And as though you wouldn't have sued him for—and got—every milnpoun he owns and will ever earn for the rest of his life if he had done it." The d'link's head jutted out, and his shoulders bowed forward. It was only a slight movement, but it was enough to give the effect of his looming menacingly over Lenoir. "You didn't know about ret-pats and all those other things because you've never known about them. And it just ain't possible for anyone to have been born and raised in the shell and not know."

Lenoir shrugged, surrendering. "All right. Since it won't do much good to deny it, I'll admit I am Neals Lenoir, and I have come from the past. Unless, as seems unlikely, you are interested in history, what good will that do you?"

"I'm interested in history the same way the Cardell woman and the Rufuses are," said Orzon. "We're all interested in the same little bit. The little bit that says you are the only one outside the big boys' family who can open the shell."

"You want the shell opened." Lenoir was bewildered. Orzon in the role of amateur historian had seemed unlikely. Orzon in the role of covert supporter of either of the freedom parties was ludicrously incredible. "What the blazes do you want the shell opened for?"

Orzon grinned slowly. "It's none of your business really. But since you're going to be working for me, and I like things nice and friendly, I'll tell you. As even you know, I'm the boss of the games in this locality." He swayed backwards on the balls of his feet, relaxing his hunched position. "But it's only a small locality I'm boss of. As big as most others, sure. But not big enough for a man with big ideas, like me."

Lenoir, momentarily irritated into forgetting caution, said coldly, "Men of your type seem to run to the same pattern whatever century you live in, don't you? But let me warn you. I come from an age when the world was a much bigger place than it is now, and I never heard of a gang leader with ideas about expansion whom the law or his rivals didn't eliminate sooner or later."

"Eliminate?" Orzon blinked. "Oh, you mean oblit." He

nodded. "Funnily enough, I'd be agreeing with you in the ordinary way. The whole shell's split into little patches, and so long as I can remember every time a d'link tried to grow outside his own patch he finished up oblitted." He grinned widely. "But that, like I said, was in the ordinary way. Now, with you opening and shutting private holes in the shell for me, things won't be ordinary any more. My boys will be able to come in on other people's boys edgeways, where nobody is expecting 'em and nobody is guarding against oblits. That way I think we'll take over quite a lot of territory."

The idea was so utterly fantastic, and yet so exactly the sort of thing that might seem feasible to anyone ignorant of the scientific principles of an F-shell that Lenoir was reduced to silence for a moment. Then he began to splutter, "You fool. A shell can't be opened or shut in little pieces like that. It's either wholly on or wholly off. And anyway, even if a total shut-off were of any use to you, I wouldn't be able to help. I don't know how to collapse this shell that we're living in now."

Orzon's grin disappeared. He said gently, "One of the first things you'd better learn, Lenoir, is that I don't like being called a fool. And even more, I don't like being treated like one." His voice suddenly became loud. "You invented the shells. You know more about them than any other boy living. And if you've just done a nice handy piece of forgetting, why you'd better start trying hard to remember again, quick. And without bothering me with excuses like neo-hyps that took out too many memories."

Lenoir's mouth was dry. But still his irritation was stronger than his discretion. "I don't care what you like being called. You obviously are a fool, in scientific matters at least. What you're suggesting is utterly impossible. And I'll say it again, even if a total shut-off were of any use to you, I wouldn't know how to go about causing one to the present shell."

Orzon's breathing became audible; a slow succession of hisses. He looked downwards, and opened his right hand slowly. "You've come from a long time in the past," he said. "Maybe you don't know about zapp-guns, about all the things that can be done with them."

Lenoir looked at the weapon in the d'link's open hand. He was tempted, but the uncomfortable knowledge that

Frack's tube was still pointed straight at him stopped him from doing anything foolhardy. However, he tried to take in as many details as he could of the gun. In his present dilemma any sort of knowledge might come in useful. The thin grey tube that poked outwards between the second and third fingers when the weapons was held at the ready bulged smoothly at its inner end until it became an ovoid. At the top of the ovoid, where the thumb would rest when the thing was held in the palm of the hand, was a small, red button. At the point where the tube began to broaden a white, milled flange ran right round it.

After allowing him to look for a second or so, Orzon tapped the milled flange with his thick forefinger. "That thing's set for top discharge now," he said. "That way the gun's ready for oblits, which it's generally used for. But you can alter that if you want to." His finger slid the milled flange round. "Now it's set for the lower discharge. And when I use it there won't be an oblit, but something else again." He rolled the gun and closed his fist, letting the tubular part slide easily between his fingers. Almost imperceptibly his thumb flicked at the top button—

And in that instant F-shells and freedom parties and d'links and Yurli and Liram and Durag and Betty lost all importance to Lenoir. The only thing that mattered in all the universe was that there should be an end to the pain. The searing, unendurable, incredible pain. Vaguely he was aware that he was on the floor writhing; that he was screaming his throat into a state of rawness. Less vaguely he was aware that neither of those things was rousing in his tormentor the pity he was so abjectly praying for.

Good resolution vanished now in the same holocaust as pride and courage and human dignity. Without pity there would be no respite for him. Now there could be respite only if he destroyed the present circumstances. And if in destroying them he also destroyed those who trusted him and those who loved him and those who slept with him; and if he destroyed too his only chance to right a great wrong and his whole self-respect for ever after—why so much the worse for those people and those things.

The pain ceased abruptly. For one delirious moment, too happy to be ashamed of his cowardice and of the fact that

he was still snivelling he thought that his decision had had its effect and that he was home again. Then he saw, distorted and blurred by his tears, the feet and legs of Frack and Orzon towering above him. He stared incredulously, and almost screamed again. There was one thing he had forgotten. His power of destruction could only exist by consent of a future, tranquil version of himself. Yet surely no future self of his could be altruistic enough to withhold the rescue he needed, even if by then it would only remember, not presently endure, the agony besetting him now?

It seemed that it could and would, and for a moment he hated his noble self-that-was-to-be. But that emotion was futile, and his present position too desperate to allow much indulgence in it. He couldn't endure that zapp-gun torture again. Couldn't, couldn't, couldn't. But if he didn't think of something he would surely have to. Huskily he said. "Listen, Orzon. Have you ever known anyone to stick that pain without giving way?"

"No," said the d'link complacently. "I don't think it can be done."

With a mental apology to Durag and his daughter Lenoir went on, "And do you think the True Freedom Party people would have been afraid to use it on me? Why do you think I had to escape from them and give myself up to the government, even though the party offered me a hundred thousand milnpounds to work for them?"

Orzon looked suspicious. "What are you getting at?"

"Well, surely that proves that I really don't know how to open the shell. If I did I'd have had to open it for the True Freedom Party."

Orzon grunted and looked dubious. "Maybe, maybe not," he said.

Fear made Lenoir preternaturally intuitive. The argument, he knew with hideous certainty, just wasn't going to work. If he really didn't know how to open an F-shell then Orzon had nothing to lose if he died under torture. And so long as he was still alive to suffer there would always be a remote chance that he was holding out, that just a little more pain would break him down.

Oh Betty! Betty of the red-brown hair and the black wig. If only there were a chance of a reconcilliation now—

Lenoir shook his head savagely. This was a hell of a time to start suffering from nostalgia. He had to think. Think. How about using the same arguments he had tried on Yurli Cardell? No. A man like Orzon would not know enough about the laws of cause and effect. He would never understand that changes in the pattern of the past caused by the non-return of a time-traveller would almost certainly result in his own non-existence. And an attempt to explain that would probably sound to him like an idle threat, and would start him off with the zapp-gun again all the sooner.

All right, thought Lenoir. If that won't work something else must. Think. *Think*—

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

SUDDENLY HE had hope again. The memory of a half-joking suggestion that he had once made to Liram, came back. Orzon, almost certain to be ignorant equally of laws and economics, could probably be persuaded to take it seriously. He saw that the d'link had started to tilt the zapp-gun again. Desperately he blurted, "Wait!"

Orzon waited, rubbery lips twisted derisively.

Lenoir said. "Look, let's talk this over. Why do you go to the bother of organising the games?"

Orzon snorted "Huh? Why do I do what? Now listen; if you're going to waste time asking funny questions—"

"I'm not. This is serious. You don't do it just for the fun of the thing; just for the sake of giving pleasure to a few thousand strangers every night, do you?"

Despite his growing impatience the d'link was irritated into replying. "Just to give pleasure to those misbegots? You think I'm solid stupid right through? I run the games to heap up more of the right stuff against my ret-pats in C.B.S."

"What else?" agreed Lenoir. "Now, supposing you could make a lot more money than you would ever get out of the games, and make it a lot more easily?"

"I could do that if the shell was opened the way I want."

Lenoir shook his head. "You can give me a hell of an

unpleasant time with that gun, but you can't squeeze out of me a secret that I don't have. You'd just finish up with a useless corpse. But I do know a way to make you really rich. Maybe the richest man in the shell."

"Then why ain't you rich yourself?" asked Orzon reasonably.

"Because it wouldn't work for me. I've got to be back in the past to fix it. Look, do you know anything about compound interest? I can get between four and five per cent on any money I invest in my own era. Have you any idea what that would grow to between then and now?"

Orzon turned his head slowly towards Frack. The little man frowned in concentration. Rather astonished, Lenoir realised that the d'link's 'boy' really was capable to some extent of doing mental arithmetic. After a few seconds Frack said, "Can't work it out exactly in my head. But every unit invested will grow to well over a million."

"Exactly," said Lenoir swiftly. "And although I'm not terrifically rich I'm not a poor man in my own era. As soon as I get back I'll invest five hundred in safe stocks and make a will leaving the lot, with accumulated interest, to you. By the time things get around to this era again you'll be worth more money than you can imagine. You'll be rich enough to buy the Rufuses out if you want." He caught a glimpse out of the side of his eye, of Frack, looking slack-mouthed and avaricious. "And I'll invest fifty for you too, while I'm at it," he added generously.

This idea was going to work. He could feel it in his very bones. Ruthless greed was Orzon's most basic motivation. And the bait being dangled in front of him was tempting enough to lure him away from his normal, inherently suspicious attitude of mind. All the same there was still a certain amount of persuading to do.

"Sounds fine," admitted the d'link. "But how do I know you'll do what you say once you get back home?"

"I haven't all that much to lose if I do," said Lenoir. "I had more than five hundred at that point in my life that I was snatched from. And I'll certainly have a lot more later on." He shuddered realistically. "And I might get pulled back to this time again, where you could get at me and give me another session with the zapp-gun. Do you really think

I'm likely to risk cheating you to save myself a sum of money that I can comfortably afford?"

Orzon nodded slowly. "And if I agree, how long will it be before you deliver the goods?"

"You'll get them as soon as I get back to my own time. But I'll have to finish my job for the government before that can happen. They won't let me get at the time machine otherwise. I should be able to clear everything up in a couple of months, though."

Orzon was still nodding. "All right. Make it six hundred and it's a deal."

"Done," said Lenoir happily. "And," he added over his shoulder to Frack, "I'll make it sixty for you too."

* * *

Although he had been bullied and conned and generally pushed around quite a lot since he came into this era, Lenoir had got along so far without actually offering physical violence to anyone. Without, even, wanting to offer it to anyone except a couple of ruthless criminals. He came near to destroying that good record when the third leo in succession looked at him blankly and said, "What two men, sir?"

"What two men?" echoed Lenoir bitterly. "You don't know, of course. You didn't see them come and go any more than your other two colleagues did. Or any more than the next fifty will have done, I suppose, if I'm fool enough to waste my time asking them."

He jammed his hands into his pockets and glared at the leo, who looked, woodenly, straight in front of himself. The idea that the man might be speaking the truth, that the now-departed d'link and his henchman had made their entry by a secret passage did not even occur to Lenoir. The leos were conscientious liars, but untrained ones. And it showed.

But why should they lie? Then he thought with a mental groan; This seems to have become my favourite sort of question since I was pitched into this era. Why are people doing this or that? It's crazy. Four hundred years is far too short a period for men's basic motivations and patterns of thought to have changed completely. And yet if they haven't

I should be able to understand at least sometimes why people behave the way they do.

He spoke again, grimly. "Look. When my two invisible pals were in here using the zapp-gun on me, I was quite willing, even eager, to do anything I could to please them. I'm not apologising for that. I don't think any human being would be capable of doing anything else. But the point is although they must have been quite sure that they had me in their power now and for ever after neither of them bothered to instruct me not to report their little intrusion to the powers-that-be."

He broke off, waiting for a comment from the leo. The young man, still flushed, continued to stare silently ahead. After a second or two Lenoir went on. "They didn't care whether I reported them or not, and you people are lying to cover them. So it's pretty clear that whatever connections they have in this place reach right to the top. Isn't that right?"

The leo still made no reply. Lenoir answered himself mentally. Oh, it's right enough. And so—and so here we go again, back to the same maze of incomprehensible motivations. Connections right to the top means connections right up to Yurli, or the Rufuses, or someone close to them in rank. And how the hell can Orzon have connections right through to anyone of that status? And even if he has, why should whoever-it-is let him get at me to try and force me to open the shell while they are straining every nerve to keep it closed?

Unless whoever-it-is should in fact be Samas. Perhaps that damned nancy wasn't just trying to disgust me into escaping. Perhaps he really did fancy me, and now he's doing a sort of inverted Potiphar's wife act by letting that d'link get at me.

D'link? Can I be sure of even that? Perhaps Orzon isn't really a crook at all, but a government agent, and that caper with the zapp-gun was some sort of test of my loyalty. Though that doesn't make much sense—

Suddenly Lenoir was so utterly fed up with it all that he could with pleasure have committed a murder or two. The unfortunate leo, though obviously responsible for practically nothing, took the brunt of his rage merely by virtue of being there.

"Get out!" Lenoir yelled at him. "Go right away and don't

come back. And if I've got any influence at all in this place you can consider yourself as good as broken to the ranks—"

"But I'm already in the ranks." The leo seemed almost ready to cry.

"Well then you'll stay there. And now get out and stay out."

After the leo had gone Lenoir found that he felt a little better. And then, paradoxically, for that very reason he started to feel the worse. He felt better because he had vented his rage on an innocent man, and he knew it would not be long before his conscience began to trouble him about that. It was almost a relief when his telephone pinged and gave him a fresh excuse for rage. "I'll be damned if I do," he said aloud. "The way things are going just now you can't be bringing anything but more trouble."

He threw himself on the bed, and tried to relax. The telephone pinged insistently again, and then again. He gave a half-groan. "All right," he said at last. "I can see I'm not going to get any peace until I do."

He turned the thing on. As had happened before the screen remained blank, but the microphone became alive. The croaky, disguised voice that had spoken to him previously said, "Neals Lenoir?"

"Oh no!" protested Lenoir. "Not you again."

"Why not?" rejoined the voice reasonably. Without allowing Lenoir to achieve the interruption he wanted to make it went on, "You know, you really ought to have sense enough to come and join us in the D.A.F. Why should you want to stay where you are, after the unpleasant evening you had yesterday?"

Lenoir jerked himself into a sitting position. "Oh?" he said. "And how the hell did you know about that? Listen, if it was you who let those brutes on me—"

"Don't be silly. How could we get d'links into Government Centre, even if we wanted to?" The voice paused and went on, "Not that we wouldn't do it, Lenoir, and fifty times as much besides, if we thought it would help in getting the shell collapsed."

"Threats," said Lenoir acidly, "won't get you anywhere. And as for any proposition you may have in mind the answer is the same as before. No!"

His fingers moved towards the 'off' button. The owner of the voice spoke quietly. "If I were in your shoes I'd feel in need of some protection after what happened yesterday. And, as you must realise, you are fully entitled to the protection of the Direct Action for Freedom Party."

Fear quenched Lenoir's anger for a moment; then served as fuel for it, making it reignite and flare higher. "Oh? And just why should I feel entitled to protection by the D.A.F., even supposing I needed protection?"

"Because you are doing D.A.F. work of course," said the voice.

Lenoir stared at the little circular screen for long, long seconds. When he spoke his voice was almost as croaky as the one that had come out of the telephone. "I—I don't know what you mean."

The voice ignored that. "You'll never get away with it, you know," it continued. "The people in Government Centre aren't such fools as that. Sooner or later they'll realise what you intend to do. And then you won't find the Rufus brothers any kinder than Orzon was."

Lenoir spoke carefully, willing his voice not to tremble. "I'm not trying to get away with anything. I was brought here to build a miniature shell to enclose the controls of the larger one, and that's exactly what I plan to do."

"Of course. But there's a snag, from the Rufuses point of view. They want the present controls made eternally inaccessible, so that our big shell can't be collapsed. But you're just working to enclose the shell-origin-point and the controls of the big shell in an ordinary small shell, different only from the big one in that the turning on will be done by an automatic device that will enclose itself."

"And what's wrong with that?"

"Even I can see what's wrong with it. An F-shell isn't made of solid matter, though it acts as if it was. It is a field, continuously maintained, through the boundaries of which nothing can penetrate, not even another F-shell."

"Well?"

"It's obvious. The moment the small, inner shell is turned on it will contain the origin-point of the bigger shell. That shell will be able to expand outwards only within the confines of the smaller shell. In layman's language it will be trapped

inside. And although technically the bigger shell won't be collapsed, since it's origin-point will still be operating, the effect from our point of view will be the same."

Stark incredulity at the stupidity of the human race purged even rage out of Lenoir. He was a hollow man, with a core of nothingness where his emotions should be. "And so you'd worked out what I was trying to do," he said numbly. "But did you have to interfere? Couldn't you have left me alone to try? I came so near—"

"You never came within a million miles of success," said the voice brutally. "If we can work it out, the government boys can do it too. You'd never have been taken to the S.O.P. and allowed to switch on your little gadget before it had been tested a thousand ways to make sure you weren't pulling a trick like that."

"But I might have got a chance to turn it on myself—"

"Before they'd shown you where the real S.O.P. is? And even supposing you'd found its whereabouts for yourself, would you have taken the risk of using your knowledge, with the memory of the zapp-gun torture still fresh in your mind?"

"The sudden disappearance of the shell would have caused chaos. I could have escaped easily. Remember, I'm the only person alive mentally and emotionally equipped to live in the open air—"

And then an appalling thought hit Lenoir. He almost choked when he went to speak again. "God!" he said. "What fools you people are! I suppose you are confident that calls made on these modern telephones can't be traced back to the caller or you wouldn't ring me up so freely. But didn't it occur to any of you flaming idiots to wonder whether incoming calls to this place are monitored?"

"Oh, we didn't have to wonder," said the voice. "We know for a fact they are. Miss Cardell maintains quite an efficient little spy-system."

Lenoir said flatly, "You—you know for a fact that the calls are monitored, and yet you've trapped me into admitting the trick I planned with that small shell—" The fascination of imminent horror dragged his eyes towards the door. For a moment he forgot the voice that came from his wrist. Forgot everything else too, except one thing. At any second men might come through that door, men, and maybe

a woman too. And they would all be armed with zapp-guns. Guns that they would use on him as that gun had been used before—

Oh, no! Please God no! It couldn't happen again. It just couldn't—

For a long time the telephone remained silent as if the man at the other end were waiting, expecting or hoping that something would happen. Then, when Lenoir was almost ready to scream, the voice spoke again.

"Oh, nobody is listening to telephone calls continuously," it said. "They are automatically taped, and then checked through every hour on the hour, to see if anything interesting has turned up. It's now—uh—twenty to thirteen, so you've got plenty of time to get out before anyone finds out what we've been talking about."

"Why you—"

"I'm sorry," continued the voice imperturbably, "that I can't give you the co-ordinates for our headquarters; but of course someone will be listening to this conversation later. However, if you come straight out now you'll find a taxi waiting for you at the mobilway, with our address already fed into it."

Lenoir made a choking noise. The voice said, "I take that to mean that you are going to join us, however unwillingly." It went on more briskly, "By the way, when you do get to our H.Q. you'll recognise me. Will you do me a favour and not tell the other people you meet there just how we got to know each other? There are certain rather hot-headed young members of our organisation who are best not trusted with all our secrets."

"I'll bet there are," said Lenoir grimly. He meant the comment to sound gravid with hidden meaning. In fact, as he fingered the 'off' switch he had an uneasy suspicion that it had sounded merely silly. But then so many things now sounded merely silly. What was just one more?

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

BEYOND THE unlocked window, the easily traversed ledge, and the once-more sleeping guard, the taxi waited as promised at the mobilway. Lenoir entered it, and it closed its door behind him; then carried him for about a mile. It stopped at the end of a spur-path that led to a low, wooden door set in a stark glass-and-concrete frontage. Lenoir walked to the door, found a high set button, and pressed it.

He had been warned that he would recognise the owner of the voice when he met him. He was not too surprised, therefore, when he saw the man who opened the door, zapp-gun in hand. After all, there were not many people whom he had met in this era who could, even by the wildest stretch of improbability, turn out to be the leader of the D.A.F. The taxi ride had given time for a great deal of his bitterness to seep away, but he still felt sullen about the way he had been forced to come to this place. When the man nodded he said derisively, "Oh, so it's you. I hardly recognised you out of your leo uniform. Have you sent any more mugs along to the games lately?"

The man said evenly, "Being sent to the games was a necessary part of your education. And now, please remember what I asked you about not revealing my identity."

He turned and led the way inside the building. Lenoir followed, feeling a little chastened. It seemed that he had been too hasty in dismissing the D.A.F. as no better than the True Freedom Party. True, that sabotage explosion had been a pretty footling sort of move. And this man, playing his part as a leo, might have provided a rather better excuse for the gaps in a time-traveller's knowledge than that business about an inefficient neo-hypnotist. Frack had pretended for his own purpose to accept it at the games; but Orzon's contemptuous dismissal of it later proved how credible it really was. All the same, the party had been able to infiltrate the leos with their own leaders, and have one of those leaders handy and ready to give him, Lenoir, an ob-

ject lesson just when he needed it and was available for it. That alone proved them a dozen times more efficient than that ramshackle movement represented by the Durag father and daughter.

Which is, perhaps, just as well, thought Lenoir grimly. At the moment little Yurli and the Rufus brothers are probably happy because at last I've taken the bait and escaped as I'm supposed to. But in a very few minutes someone is going to make the hourly check-up on telephone calls. And then I'm going to start needing all the good, competent allies that I can get.

The D.A.F. man, still a step or two ahead of Lenoir, slid the gun into a pocket-cum-holster in the left-hand side of his jacket, leaving the ovoid butt protruding. He spoke over his shoulder. "By the way, my name is Petrie. Toms Petrie. And I'd like to say that I'm glad to have you come in with us."

"I wasn't left overmuch choice about that, was I?" said Lenoir.

Petrie chuckled with a half-apologetic note. "No. But we really couldn't do much else. We had to get you out of Government Centre somehow. You just weren't going to get anywhere with that hare-brained scheme of yours, you know."

Another door slid open before them. Petrie led the way through it. Lenoir followed. The room was small, seemingly crowded although it held nothing but a table and four chairs.

Two of the chairs, those on the further side of the room from the door, were occupied. The other two, with their backs to the door, were empty.

The occupants of the two further chairs were men, one impatient-looking and young, with blue eyes, the other middle-aged, and plump.

Petrie waved his right hand, first towards the young man and then towards the plump one, and rapped out two names. "Kriss Bartor. Jem Kennings."

Lenoir nodded to each of them in turn. The youth, Kriss Bartor, glared at him and said thinly, "I'd like it put officially on record that I thoroughly distrust this man and highly disapprove of his being here."

Lenoir sighed quietly. One of the young hot-heads who are not trusted with all our secrets, he thought. "I disapprove

of my being here too," he said. "It seems that neither of us had much choice."

The plump man, Jem Kennings, said, "Really Bartor, I don't see that there is any need to be so rude."

"He has a point there, you know," said Lenoir.

Startlingly, Petrie began to shout, his voice coarsened by rage. "I've told you before Bartor, that I'm not standing for this sort of thing, and I mean it. We're going through with our plan as arranged. And I personally vouch for Mr. Lenoir."

Lenoir's own rage had built up now, and it was directed equally at everyone in the room. "Nice of you Mr. Petrie," he said icily. "I only wish I could vouch for myself just as confidently."

Nobody spoke for a second. Then Kennings said cautiously, "What's that supposed to mean?"

Lenoir found it incredible that men who were apparently of at least normal intelligence could be so obtuse. "After the trick you people used on me you don't deserve that I should help you. But I will. Don't you realise that it has been far too easy for both the freedom parties to make use of me whenever they wanted to?"

Bartor said, "Far too easy?"

"Of course. Have you ever seen how well-guarded Government Centre is? The True Freedom Party could never have kidnapped me out of there; and after I'd given myself up I'd never have had a chance of escaping again, if somebody hadn't deliberately made things easy for both of us. You're fools to want me here. I'm a wooden horse."

Kennings frowned. Bartor sneered. Petrie said, "A wooden what?"

"Never mind," said Lenoir impatiently. "The point is that the Rufuses are not only stupid, they are greedy too. They undoubtedly want me to build a properly working small shell for them; but they are making use of me first by planting me on you to betray you in some way. Probably by leading you somehow into causing another and worse sabotage explosion."

"Oh, is that all?" said Petrie airily. "We've known about that for months."

Lenoir gulped slightly. "You've known for months? But—"

"What we need to know," interrupted Bartor grimly, "Is not why you're a wooden horse, whatever that is, but why you betrayed the True Freedom Party and deserted them for the government. If you found you were being used the way you say, why didn't you just report it to party officials?"

"I'm Neals Lenoir. Remember? I invented the F-shells, and I know quite a lot about them. I spotted that those controls in the Hall of S.O.P. were phonies the moment I saw them. But I'm newly arrived from the past, and I don't know a damn thing about this era except what people choose to tell me. I knew the controls were a trap, but whom could I trust with the information? Durag and his daughter? They might have been the very people who were responsible."

"So instead you went to the enemy voluntarily and offered to work for them," said Bartor coldly.

The lines about Petrie's mouth became pinched and hard. He said. "I didn't intend to tell you this Bartor. It might have started you off bawling that he should have been left alone. But even in Government Centre Mr. Lenoir remained loyal to the cause of getting the shell collapsed."

"Oh? And how was he going to collapse it from in there?"

"That small shell he was building would have acted as a total cut-off surrounding the origin-point of the bigger shell."

It was Bartor's turn to go grey-faced. He jerked his head round towards Lenoir.

"Is that true?"

"Perfectly. And if you intend to start protesting now that I should have been left alone to get on with it I may say that I agree with you."

"I certainly am going to start protesting that you should have been left alone to get on with it. What the hell are you up to, Petrie?"

"He could never have succeeded," said Petrie obstinately. "The government knew what he was doing."

"And how the hell can you be sure of that?" shouted Bartor. "Or did you tell them?"

Kennings voice broke in calmly, urbanely, courteously, "Really gentlemen, arguing over might-have-beens gets us nowhere. Mr. Lenoir is here now. Better to accept his presence and carry on from there."

Lenoir sat down on one of the chairs that had its back

to the door. "I'm glad there's at least one of you who can talk sense. Now, let's discuss reasonably what we'll do. Since you took it on yourself to wreck my plan I assume you have one of your own, other than this futile business with printed exposés?"

Petrie gave a last glare at Bartor, then sat down. "Those exposés weren't futile. They served their purpose. But you're right, of course. I have an additional plan of my own, and one that'll work. This is what we'll do—"

Liram Durag spoke coldly from the door. "Don't bother to explain your plans to him. You won't be allowed to carry them out, whatever they are."

The other three froze. Lenoir turned slowly in his seat. Mentally he was almost gibbering. Events had gone right up through the top of mere improbability now. They had risen to cloud-cuckoo level, to the realm of the farcically unpredictable. Still seated, he came right round to face Liram. She was standing in the door frame, holding the door open by the presence of her body. The dramatic air of her intervention had somehow led him to expect that she would be holding a gun on them all. Instead her hands were empty, dangling at her sides.

Petrie said, "So you people managed to trace the taxi we sent for him?"

"We who work for true freedom have our resources," she replied haughtily.

Lenoir felt that a line like that cried aloud for rude comment. Liram didn't give him time to make any. She made an imperious gesture through the door opening. "Come along," she said.

Lenoir snorted. "What do you mean, come along? I prefer to stay and work with these people."

"These people aren't going to be allowed to work," she said. "Their reputation with the general public is so bad that they can only damage the cause."

"Us damage the cause?" said Petrie. "When you've done nothing but blunder ever since you splintered off from us?" His voice rose. "It's like your damned impudence to talk of not allowing us to do this or that. If we choose to go ahead just how do you propose to stop us?"

The girl hesitated then said, "The party has thought this

over very carefully. And reluctantly we have decided that sooner than have a small, breakaway minority like you ruining our reputation, we will make you inactive by denouncing you to the government."

"You'll do *what*?" Incredulity distorted Petrie's voice until it was almost a squeal.

Lenoir said, "You fools! You'll never get the shell open this way in a million years, quarrelling among yourselves—" He let his voice trail off. He'd said it all before, and nobody had listened. And nobody was listening now. Petrie was glaring at the girl. Bartor was leaning forward, breathing heavily. And Kennings seemed to have shrunk in on himself, almost fearfully.

Then Bartor said, softly and viciously, "Kill her Petrie."

For the last few seconds Lenoir had been engrossed by the nightmare feeling that things around him were moving further and further off into some half-dream universe having no relationship at all with the solid world of reality. Now, suddenly, his nose was rubbed brutally into the knowledge that all this was actually happening, actually happening to living, breathing human beings. People that he knew and even, sometimes, almost liked.

He turned to the front again. And while he did so Bartor said, "It's got to be done," and Liram half-whispered, "You wouldn't dare," and Petrie muttered, "At least it will delay their denouncement for a while," and reached for his gun—

Lenoir was never quite sure afterwards how he did it. Maybe the hours that he remembered having spent watching TV thrillers in both his own century and this paid off better than he had ever realised they would. At any rate after what, according to the literature of such affairs, should have been 'one lithe movement'; but what was in fact a wriggle, a jerk, and a stumble, he found himself at the door by Liram's side, with Petrie's gun in his hand.

He made an awkward business of getting the barrel between his fingers. However, he had the weapon in place before anyone else moved, and when his thumb hovered over the red button everyone flinched satisfactorily. "And now," he said coldly, "Let's get one thing perfectly clear. Whatever else has to be done to get the shell collapsed, there isn't going to be any shooting down of defenceless young women."

Petrie said, "So you are going to change sides again?"

"I'm not. I'm just trying to make sure this young fool doesn't get herself killed."

Petrie ignored that. "Well," he went on, "Go with the True Freedom lot if you feel you have to. But I give you fair warning that if you don't open the shell for them either, I personally will hunt you down and kill you."

"And if he doesn't," said Bartor savagely. "Be sure I will."

Lenoir came near to letting loose a shot or two just for the sheer relief that it would give to his feelings. "You blasted idiots!" he yelled. "Can't you believe anything I tell you? I'm trying to save this girl's life, and nothing else. I want to work with your lot. But it mustn't involve the murder of innocent people."

"Of course not," said Petrie mockingly. He half-closed his eyes. "It may surprise you to know, Lenoir, that for some weeks now I've been trying to make up my mind whether to kill you or not."

"Indeed?"

Petrie nodded. "Yes. We in the freedom parties have been trying for years to get the shell collapsed. But we've always failed. It might be easier and better to cut things off at the root."

Bartor said in a tone of grudging admiration, "Why the hell didn't you suggest that before, Petrie?"

Lenoir shook his head slowly. It seemed crazy that men who had gone to all that trouble to get him out of Government Centre in the hope that he would join them should suddenly have performed a mental somersault and turned on him like this. But he was getting used to having to adjust himself to other people's mental somersaults. "Eliminating me is just sacrificing yourselves for nothing," he said. "I've already completed small, early models of shell-origin-points. My colleagues will be able to go on from there with no further assistance from me. If you kill me now, you'll stop existing. But the big shell won't."

"But it wouldn't have existed for so long," said Petrie. "And the Rufus family wouldn't have come into existence any more than we would."

"And how do you know the alternative would be any better?"

"I don't. But it might be worth giving history another chance."

"But that's it!" Bartor thumped the table in excitement. "Give history another chance." He savoured the phrase, then said suddenly. "What are we waiting for?"

"You are waiting," said Lenoir coldly, "Because I'm holding the only gun in sight, and would have plenty of time to use it before anyone could draw another. Had you forgotten?"

"They haven't forgotten," Liram said softly. "If you are going to rescue me you'd better get on with it instead of letting them keep you here arguing until they find a chance to get the gun away from you."

Lenoir flushed. Oh well, he thought ruefully, obviously I haven't absorbed as much of those TV thrillers as I thought I had. He retreated backwards through the door.

As soon as the D.A.F. men were hidden from sight he asked humbly, "How can I lock them in, temporarily?"

"Play your gun for a second or two at the base of the door," she said. "It will hold them until they can phone for help and get themselves out." She frowned, and said darkly. "You realise that as soon as they get free both our lives will be forfeit? We shall never be safe again, anywhere inside the shell."

"Cheerful thought," he said grimly, using the gun as she had directed.

Tacitly Lenoir and the girl agreed to take the precaution of avoiding a taxi. They rode silently on the mobilways, Liram with her head drooping. Lenoir holding the gun in front of him, turning it over uneasily. He wanted to put the thing away, but couldn't see any safety catch on it.

The girl suddenly spotted his dilemma. "Here," she said. She took the weapon from him, and pressed the red button, not downwards but to the right. It rolled out of sight, and a black stud took its place.

"It's safe now," she said as she handed the weapon back. "Thanks."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THEY SAID nothing more as they finished their journey. When they entered the communal room of the flat, Durag met them with a pleased smile. He spoke to Lenoir. "So you've realised the D.A.F. are completely impotent now, and you've decided to come back to us? Good."

"I haven't come back here to rejoin you," said Lenoir brutally. "Only to see that your daughter gets home safely."

"Safely?" Durag looked astonished. "Why shouldn't she?"

"You old fool," snapped Lenoir. "Did you really think that the D.A.F. were going to accept an ultimatum like yours mildly and peaceably?"

Durag looked slightly distressed, "I hadn't thought about it one way or the other."

"It doesn't matter now, anyway," said Liram. "I'm here, and I'm safe. The big thing is to put the past mistakes behind us, and make better plans for the future."

"Good idea," commented Lenoir dryly. "Only you'll have to do it on your own."

Liram shook her head. "We won't," she said. "You're our man now whether you like it or not. You've nowhere else to turn for protection. Yurli Cardell knows you've tried to get the shell open. She'd shoot you on sight. And the D.A.F. would treat you as badly."

And will you treat me any better? thought Lenoir sullenly. He sighed; utterly weary. If only his future self didn't—wouldn't—for some reason taboo the use of his power—

"Your political parties use the damndest methods of recruitment nowadays, don't they?" he said. "All right. I suppose I am stuck with being your man. And so now that you've got me, how do you propose to use me?"

The question seemed, oddly, to disconcert both the man and the girl. Durag said softly. "I'm still convinced the original plan could be made to work."

"If you really believe that," said Lenoir. "Then you're an even bigger fool than you seem."

"Not really," said Durag. "We know now that the controls on display at the Hall of S.O.P. are fakes, but the real ones must be there too."

"Why?"

"The original government must have put the genuine ones on show at first. There were too many people about in those days who could have seen through a fake set. And any subsequent government who wanted to rewire the connections to the S.O.P. wouldn't want to pull down a dozen shell-scrappers to do it; so they'd install another, secret set of controls close to hand."

"Then all we've got to do is find them," said Liram. "Well, we could go around the Hall of S.O.P. every day and let you practice on the controls that can be seen, while father and I search for the others. That way you would get trained and skilled in their use and when we eventually uncover the real ones—"

Her voice trickled off as she met Lenoir's eyes. The silence held undisturbed for a few seconds. Then she said hesitantly. "Or perhaps we could apply more pressure to the D.A.F., and force them to tell us what their plan was—?"

And these, Lenoir thought bitterly, are the people I've got to work with. "Can you take me to the genuine controls immediately?" he asked. "Or failing that, can you fit me up with facilities to erect a relatively small shell over the whole Hall of S.O.P.?"

"You're asking too much," said Durag.

"Much too much," said Liram firmly.

Lenoir restrained himself from shouting at them. "All right," he said. "If you can't do what I suggest, exactly what the hell can you do to help me?"

"Why do you keep asking us to do things, anyway?" said Liram sulkily. "You're the great Lenoir. You ought to be able to think of something more easily than the rest of us can." Her tone grew spiteful. "You'd better, you know. With your silly capers you've made the shell a thoroughly unsafe place for yourself."

Lenoir shrugged. "How would I be any safer outside? I might get the D.A.F. off my back, but Yurli and her mob would be keener than ever on killing me."

Durag looked worried. Liram said, "You could hide be-

hind a—what do you call the things?—a bush while they were around.”

. Suddenly it was all too much for Lenoir to endure any longer. He began to yell. “Oh for God’s sake, if you can’t talk more sense than that shut up altogether! This damn shell seems to be peopled entirely by fools and rogues. And I’ve got so sick of the fools that I’m beginning to prefer the rogues.”

He swung away from the Durags, fled into his room and flung himself on the bed.

For a few moments he lay there, face downwards, restrained only by sexual pride from breaking into sobs. Everybody was crazy. Durag, Liram, the Rufuses, Petrie, Yurli Cardell. Government and rebels both. All as crazy as hell. Why should the True Freedom people have used such vicious tactics to get hold of him? They had no idea what to do with him. Why should the D.A.F. have wilfully wrecked the effort he had been making to open the shell? And why, after trying once to recruit him, should they refuse to accept him when offered; insisting, instead, on making this stupid gamble on his death? And why should the Rufuses, whose main purpose was brutally selfish but at least comprehensible, persistently risk losing him by trying to use him first for another stupidly trivial end? The only people, it seemed who could be relied on to act sanely, if at times unintelligently, were Orzon, Frack and himself—

And himself? Himself act sanely, when he was at some time in his own future going to be willing to have endured so much to preserve the existence of people who made themselves hoarse bawling how ready they were to be sacrificed; people who, moreover, had never shown the slightest aversion from seeing him go out of existence—?

To be forced to suspect the sanity of others is a shock. To be forced to suspect ones own sanity is a greater shock. A shock severe enough even in normal circumstances to rock that personal, subjective universe that every man builds around himself. And Lenoir’s circumstances were far from normal. So it was at this stage in his mental turmoil that the thing towards which so many events had been leading for so long finally happened. His personal universe had already been set teetering; now it did not merely teeter or rock but swayed

far beyond the balance point of no return—displacing and smashing as it went a whole continuum of preconceived ideas; of long-sacred notions of what should and could be—and then continued turning and turning over and further over until it turned completely upside down and—

And landed on its heels. For of course up till now it had been standing on its head.

Lenoir's first reaction was a mingling of acceptance and stark disbelief. It was true. It had to be. Only it just couldn't be— *And if it were true? Much that had been mysterious would then make sense; but there was a dark shame and a terrible disgust that could stir just beyond that new-found truth—*

He dismissed the formless revulsion, and started to try and think calmly and logically about this new view of things. It was only a theory, of course, but it answered many questions. A good theory, though, should not just answer many questions. It should answer all questions. Did this one?

He rolled over and sat up on the edge of the bed. The shame and self-disgust stirred once more and he began to acknowledge the nature of their origin. Nevertheless he pushed them aside again. Whatever the strange things that time-travel could not bring about, this remained achieved. Neals Lenoir was Neals Lenoir was Neals Lenoir—

Unconsciously his hand slid into the pocket of his jacket. He began fingering the smooth, rectangular shape that he found there. Suddenly he realised what he was doing, and his lips twisted derisively. So he still had the key-pack. Did he still need it? No knowing yet, and that wasn't important anyway. The main thing was this; details apart, he knew something that he had not known even ten minutes ago. He knew how to bring about the collapse of the shell. Not where to find or how to operate the origin-point; that was one of the details yet to be uncovered. But, in general, how to bring about the collapse. Though, of course, there did remain to be solved the practical problem of staying alive long enough to do it.

Background sounds intruded suddenly. He lifted his head. Liram was standing in the open doorway. She stepped forward and the door closed. "And how long do you propose to stay in here sulking?" she demanded coldly.

"Sulking?" He considered the word for a moment. "Perhaps I've got something to sulk about."

"Any grievances you may think you have you've brought on yourself," she said. "If you'd only helped us open the shell properly at the start, none of this need have happened."

Lenoir found himself admiring quite impersonally the beautifully calculated injustice of the reproach; the neat precision of the probe at his feelings. "You know," he said thoughtfully, "I've been thinking about all the people I've met since I awoke in this century."

"Yes?"

"Yes." He began to tick off on his fingers. "Yurli Cardell, who whatever her feelings towards me is ready to hunt me down, offering me now nothing but death. Navel Rufus, who would willingly have killed me since he knows I threaten his power. Samas Rufus, who has further reasons of his own to want to be rid of me. Petrie, who threatens to murder me if I fail to open the shell for you people, and debates aloud with himself the advisability of murdering me anyway, just to give history another chance. Bartor, who doesn't hold any debates with himself but proclaims that he is quite sure that history should be given its other chance right away. And then you and your father who have not threatened me yet, but who might well start to do so at any moment."

"I see." Liram's eyes were oddly glittering. "And what do you think about all this?"

"What do I think?" Lenoir smiled slowly. "Why, I think I have far too many kind friends and well-wishers. What I need are a few enemies." And he lifted his right hand, clenched his fist, and swung it forward.

He meant to hit the girl in the face, but at the last second he couldn't do it. Instead he gave her a flat-handed push so that she staggered and began to fall. He stepped forward, caught her by the shoulders, and swung her towards the bed. She collapsed upon it, kicking and squealing indignantly. He turned to the door and went through.

Durag looked startled as he came out, letting a blast of the girl's shrill protests through with him. The old man said, "Wasn't that Liram screaming?"

"Oh yes," said Lenoir casually. "She's a little upset. I've just raped her." And he went on out of the flat.

He didn't really expect the lie to do much good. Durag was too reasonable a man. He would go and get Liram's version of what had happened before taking any action. Still, every little would help.

Out of the flat and mounted on the nearest mobilway Lenoir began to give more serious thought to his present need. Yurli? The Rufus brothers? Petrie? Bartor? Perhaps later. But first there was someone who would serve better than any of them. Lenoir lifted his wrist and began dialling. He had hardly finished flicking the appropriate letters into place before Orzon's face appeared, blinking curiously.

"Oh," said the d'link, "It's you. What do you want?"

"Nothing much, said Lenoir airily, "I just thought I'd like a little chat about that arrangement we have, where I'm to leave you money in my will."

For a moment Orzon simply looked astonished. Then his face darkened with suspicion. "Yeah?" What is there to chat about?"

"Several things. All of them very interesting."

"That so?" Orzon's expression grew darker still. "Look. You wouldn't be thinking of doing anything stupid, like backing out for instance would you?"

"Backing out?" Lenoir's features relaxed slowly into a wide grin. "Why should I back out and spoil the joke? I always was one for a good laugh."

Orzon's expression was by now very nasty indeed. "Joke?" he said. "Well, maybe if it's a good joke I'll do a little laughing myself. And then, maybe I won't. Just what exactly is it that's so funny?"

Lenoir chuckled. "The fact that I'm going to do exactly as I said I would, and you're going to get exactly what I promised you."

"And that's funny?"

"Very. Do you know what an inflation is, Orzon?"

The d'link said harshly, "Ignorant, that's me. So you tell me what an inflation is."

"It's an economic process in which prices and incomes keep chasing each other up and up, so that any unit of money buys less and less as time goes by. It goes on to some extent all the time; but usually it's fairly slow. Any sort of a crisis, and particularly a war scare, will quicken it, though."

Orzon said, "You ain't trying to tell me that's what's going to happen to the money you leave me—?"

"Why not? Somewhere between my time and yours there's going to be one whale of an inflation. The currency unit of my time, in this country anyway, was the pound sterling. As I promised, I will leave you six hundred. And as Lem calculated for you, with the compound interest which will accrue right through to this present era that sum will increase to several hundred million pounds. Or, as it would be put nowadays—now that the words have been cut short a bit—"

"Several hundred milnpouns," Orzon finished for him.

"That's right."

Lenoir expected the d'link to start blustering, shouting threats. Instead the man said almost gently. "Just about half what I make in a normal week, eh? You're right, Lenoir. It is a joke, and a damned good one. But you ain't going to enjoy laughing at it for long."

"I couldn't resist telling you," said Lenoir airily. "And you've got to find me before you can do anything to me."

Orzon smiled in a manner almost benign. "Oh, I'll find you, Mr. Lenoir. Quite soon. And I'll be looking forward to doing it."

The screen on Lenoir's wrist went blank abruptly. For a moment panic flickered through him. What am I doing? What am I *doing*? Then he calmed himself. The memory of the zapp-gun torture was bearable so long as there remained a chance of escape. And—he recalled a jibe thrown at him in early days—and if he was half the man that Liram; or for that Yurli or Durag or Petrie or any of the rest of them thought he was there was more than a chance of escape; there was a virtual certainty.

A certainty of escape from what, though? From physical torture, yes. But from disgust and self-loathing—

He snorted violently. To hell with that. Lenoir was Lenoir was Lenoir was Lenoir.

Returning his mind to business he rang the Rufus brothers. Navel came into view facing the screen, with Samas behind. Lenoir neither threatened nor reproached; just gave them, briefly, an outline of his latest discoveries and conclusions. Navel looked vicious, but wary. "Now wait," he said slowly,

"You haven't got it quite right. And anyway, there's a perfectly good explanation—"

"There always is, isn't there?" said Lenoir. "Whenever anybody plays a dirty trick on any body else, he's always got a perfectly good explanation." And before the wheedling and threats had time to begin he rang off.

He had now made the two important calls that he had decided upon. Was it, he wondered, any use making more. One to Petrie, for example? Probably not. If Orzon and the Rufuses couldn't between them do what needed to be done, then nobody could. He turned to the second part of his plan.

He went to the brown, stationary strip of the mobilway he was on, where the usual row of mechanical vendors lined the edge-rail. When he reached the first of the machines he stared into the retinal-pattern checking screen, demanded "three packets," and pressed the delivery button. The three packets of whatever it was came out. He took them, and tossed them over the edge of the mobilway. Then he moved along the row of vendors, acquiring in turn a packet of handkerchiefs, a puzzle-toy, a bar of chocolate, and a packet of contraceptives. Each item he disposed of as wastefully as he had the first. Finally he came to a taxi-company's machine. Speaking firmly into the ordering grill he said, "Pick-up, this point. Time, now. Convey to main entrance to the Hall of S.O.P."

Now that he cast his last die by ordering a vehicle he was left with an idle moment or two. He leaned forward over the taxi-order machine, resting his two elbows on it. He was slightly closer to the borders of the shell than he had been at the Durags' flat. The illuminated sign above the Hall of S.O.P. caught his eye. It was brilliantly dominant here; a glaring obtrusion when it was alight, a swimming after-image when it was dark. He looked away from it, down over the edge of the mobilway.

Mildly interested, he found that he recognised the neighbourhood. Down there was the 'restaurant' to which Petrie had led him when he was rawly new to this era; a time that now seemed terribly long ago. He was above the place, but he was in a position to view it at a low angle, and could see the entrance despite the shape of the building. The doors were

closed, but whether there was actually a performance on at this moment he could not tell.

The sight of those doors sent Lenoir's mind along grim, gloomy paths. How many more victims had died beastly and bloody deaths since he was there? And how many had in the depths of their terror turned wakie, only to have their faint chance of survival blasted out of existence by the zapp-guns of the games organisers or the leos?

A whisper of displaced air told him that his taxi had arrived, and helped to snap him out of his mood. What was the use of glooming, anyway? What was done was done. He shook himself briskly and got into the waiting vehicle.

He made a few more purchases after getting out of the taxi at the Hall of S.O.P. This lot he just dumped at the foot of their respective sales machines, a free gift offer to the next would-be buyers who came along.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

AFTER THAT he set about finding his way to the shattered vent in the roof of the hall. The flashing light-symbol helped to guide him, and in a few minutes he was dropping over the edge of the correct mobilway on to the extended roof of the hall. He slipped through the torn gap in the metal outer-covering of the vent, took Petrie's zapp-gun out of his pocket, and turned off the safety-catch as Liram had showed him. Using the lowest charge but one he directed the weapon on to the edge of the hole by which he had come in. After a few seconds the metal slumped, effectively closing the entrance.

Although the fear of humiliation and self-loathing was still there it pricked only faintly now. Things were moving at breakneck speed towards the climax he planned, and he felt cool, and confidently in charge of events. There was danger, of course. There had to be danger. But perched as he was far above the main floor of the hall; and being comfortably certain now that no one could come up behind him, he felt serenely confident that he could hold danger off

for long enough. He turned to walk along the pipe that led out to the hall.

And then froze, staring as if neo-hypnotised at the zapp-gun barrel protruding from the right hand of the figure facing him. "I told you," said Yurli Cardell heavily, "that I would kill you if I found that you had been helping the freedom parties. Now I'm going to do exactly as I promised."

He gulped. So, maybe this is how it ends after all, he thought desperately. For she means it. She means every word of it, and there is no escape for me anywhere in the shell.

He flinched and closed his eyes, trying to find some glimmer of hope. Seconds passed, ten, fifteen. And then he knew that, here and now at least, there was no hope at all. Because try as he would he could not believe a word of what the girl had said.

He opened his eyes. "No, Yurli," he said. "It's no good. You don't scare me enough. It'll take more than just you to drive Lenoir the second, who used to be Burt Rufus, into going wakie and remembering how to open the shell."

She stared at him just a second longer. Then suddenly she gave a short scream, dived for his legs and pulled them from under him.

He hit the floor painfully. And through his daze he became more fully aware of sounds and sights that had started just a fraction of a moment before she had moved. A loud, double zoom had twice flashed into and out of existence; and twin red sparks had leaped into being on the wall of the pipe just about at the level where his head had been.

Lenoir shook himself soggily. In this reincarnation he had never before seen or heard a zapp-gun fired at full 'oblit' charge, but he knew what had happened. While he was still trying breathlessly to sort himself out Orzon's voice came up from below. "You might as well come out, Lenoir. You haven't a chance of getting away."

"Keep down," said Yurli. "Nobody can hit us from below at this level. Then she added in a puzzled tone, "It's the local d'link, isn't it? What's he doing here? How did he find out?"

Lenoir smiled thinly. He had forgotten how little she knew of what was going on now. She must have been keeping

track of him through C.B.S., guessed he was on his way here, and just taken advantage of what seemed another chance to throw a scare into him. Thankfully he admired the quickness of her reflexes. Not expecting an attack from below, yet she had reacted quickly enough after the first shot to throw him to the floor before the second, more accurately aimed one had arrived.

"Orzon is here," he said, "because out of all the killers you so kindly sent after me he is one of the few I could rely on to be genuine and not a secret member of a freedom party. And he found me because I've been shopping around and he's got access to C.B.S. data."

Yurli said, "Oh I see. You led him to you in the hope that he would frighten you enough to drive you wakie. All right. But without going wakie first, how would you know enough to want to do that? How much have you remembered, anyway?

He glanced at her sideways. "I haven't remembered a thing. But I've deduced a few items. Lenoir the first lived and died four hundred years ago, and never knew what resulted from his invention. Lenoir the second—I—came into existence a few months back, created at the destruction of Burt Rufus. And although it's literally true that I've travelled through time I've done it the same way as everybody else does. Second by second, hour by hour, babyhood to boyhood to manhood."

She said incredulously, "You must have gone wakie; at least a little."

"No. I've just been using logic, that's all." He paused, lifted his head to listen. Then he raised his gun, set it at the highest reading, and began to crawl back to the open end of the pipe. "There's an escalator just outside," he said. "We've got to keep that covered or they'll be able to creep up on us."

Yurli came up beside him on all fours. "I'll watch the escalator," she said. "You concentrate on trying to remember. What do you know about the two freedom parties?"

He chuckled. "What two freedom parties? That famous split—and the minor one inside the D.A.F.—were staged partly to give you an excuse to push me around more often, and partly to help with the psychological lift-up and let-down

that you planned to use to soften up the Rufuses. They were as phony as the controls in the Hall of S.O.P."

"As phony as the controls in the Hall of S.O.P.? How can you be sure those controls are phony?"

"You mean I can't be sure because neither Lenoir the first nor Lenoir the second would know they aren't genuine just by looking at them? True enough. Lenoir the second though was sure to think them fakes. He—I was constructed without any real knowledge about shells, but with a strong illusion that I knew all about them. Until I go wakie any set of controls will look strange to me; and since I'll have to rationalise that to fit my illusion, any set will look like fakes. But—" He chuckled again. "But if those in the hall were genuine Navel and Samas would never have let me get near them."

He pursed his lips, his expression growing more serious. "You know what was the biggest single giveaway for you people. It had nothing to do with an S.O.P. It was my power, or rather lack of it."

"Your power?"

"Yes. Remember how I thought you would all be frightened to kill me, because it would alter the present if I didn't get back to the past? But I would have altered things even if I did get back. A big shell might still exist now; but my name wouldn't be associated with it, so there'd be no reason to pull me forward into this era. When Orzon started to torture me I decided I'd make that much alteration the moment I got back to my old life. But the trick didn't work. I stayed right where I was."

"Perhaps you are too kind-hearted to eliminate all the people you've known in this era, even to save yourself?"

"Not me. I'm not that kind-hearted. And anyway there's Betty. She's been bobbing up out of my subconscious each chance she's had, dragging that black wig on and off, showing me her natural red-brown hair. Once I'd got the essential clues I didn't have to go wakie to realise what that symbolised."

"You got us worried earlier on when you kept talking about Betty and her wig," said Yurli. "We were afraid you'd go wakie the wrong way. Remember you were Burt, instead of how to collapse the shell. But to go on with your story."

You realised that the black—Le Noir—was the fake, and reddish-brown—Rufus—was real and so you knew you had to be Burt—”

“No!”

For a moment the black fear that had seized him in his first moment of enlightenment reared up again at full strength, and his denial came out so violently that it startled even him. “No! I—” He choked for a moment. “I said I used to be Burt, not that I am him. Why, I’m not a bit like him now.”

“Should you be? When all women are beautiful and games victims can be used openly without being recognised?”

“I know cosmetic surgeons are clever. But I meant I’m not like Burt in my mind.”

Yurli, half-mocking, half-sympathetic, said, “Yes, I know how it goes. A man is his basic personality plus his memories. How the personality originated, where the memories came from, none of that really effects the issue. So, although there are only two bodies there are three separate entities. Lenoir one, Burt, and Lenoir two.”

“Exactly,” said Lenoir too complacently. And then uncomfortable questions about how she could know so exactly when he had not told her began to form. Fortunately, before they could properly surface, his telephone pinged demandingly. He lifted his wrist. Yurli glared at him. “Surely you won’t bother with that thing now?”

“Why not? I’m expecting a most important call from the relatives of the late unlamented. Keep the escalator covered for me while I answer.”

He pressed the receive button. The heads of Navel and Samas Rufus became visible on the screen. Navel began immediately. “Now look here, Burt—”

“Burt?” said Lenoir. “There’s nobody here of that name. You must have dialled wrongly.”

Navel shook his head impatiently. “Surely—” he began. Then Samas leaned forward and whispered. He shrugged and said, “All right, I don’t care what I call him.” He turned his eyes towards Lenoir. “The main point is, whoever-you-are, that it’s time we talked matters over. Things are getting out of hand.”

“Nothing’s out of hand,” said Lenoir. “I have everything fully under control.”

"Come now," said Samas. "If you really are Lenoir, that makes us your creators instead of your brothers. Surely you should have more respect for us? And if you are sensible and come back to us now you can have all your old position and power back again."

"Until you find another chance to cut my throat," said Lenoir.

Navel spoke coldly to Samas. "I told you it was no good. He isn't to be reasoned with." He turned back to face Lenoir. "All right, I've given you your chance as Samas wanted, and you haven't taken it. Now you can take the consequences instead."

"Which means, I suppose, that you'll send some leos out with orders to kill me?" Lenoir grinned. "They won't dare. I've taken their woman Cardell prisoner." He flicked his wrist sideways and back, so that the brothers could get a glimpse of the girl without having time to sort out whether or not she was in any way restrained. "I'm keeping her as hostage. And I'll kill her the instant any one of your leos tries to touch me."

Yurli took her eyes away from the escalator for a second as he turned his phone off. "You realise, I suppose, that even if they believe that last threat of yours it still won't stop them from sending the leos?"

"I'd be disappointed in them if it did."

Yurli turned back to the escalator but went on talking. "Through all our manoeuvring to try to get you to turn wakie you were never really in any danger. True, Orzon didn't know how he was being used. He really thought that he was being rewarded because he'd got hold of a few cate-mites for Samas. But he was watched all the time. He wouldn't have been allowed to kill you. But now—now you've fixed things so that you really will die unless you can get out of the shell."

She shot a quick glance at him. He shook his head slowly. He'd known that already. She wasn't going to make it more effective simply by reminding him of it. After a second or so she said, "You've worked out pretty cleverly what's been done to you. But how could we do it to a man in your position without getting ourselves executed?"

Still watching the escalator along with her, he frowned. She

seemed unnaturally eager to hear him talk. Then the memory of a long-ago discussion with Durag on the nature of neohypnosis came back to him. One of the things that would help an incipient wakie to recover the full meaning of his symbols was his being encouraged to talk about them. He relaxed and grinned slowly.

He said, "As soon as I understood about the satisfied vote I saw your dilemma. You couldn't win an election until after you'd got the shell collapsed, and you couldn't legally get the shell collapsed until after you'd won an election. So, somehow, the shell had got to be collapsed illegally.

"But how? The business had deliberately been made complicated, so that a would-be operator has to be properly trained. So you had only one chance. You had to bring off the unlikely trick of recruiting to your cause one of the only three men in existence who had had the necessary training."

And of course, he thought, bleakly unflattered; you first tried to use woman's time-honoured method of seducing a man from his previous loyalties. Burt Rufus, though, just wasn't interested, was he? Then nothing less would assuage your pique but that you should complicate the plot against the shell with a further sub-plot to trick him into bed with you.

He went on, "Someone in your party, Yurli, is blessed not merely with brilliance, but genius—"

A man came abruptly into sight, running up the rising steps of the escalator. Lenoir's thumb jerked downwards, then he almost dropped his gun as for the first time he heard and felt one zapp in his hand. The climbing man fell back out of sight. Since he had made no sound he was probably not hurt, but if he was it had almost certainly been done by a shot from Yurli. Suddenly the girl said urgently; "Back! Get further back!"

This time Lenoir didn't need her warning. The floor of the pipe had begun to glow in three places, and then started to sag at each red spot. "They're firing through the metal," said Yurli. "You have to hold the gun in one position for some time to do it; usually too long if someone else is firing at you. But these people are below the pipe. We can't get at them."

Lenoir frowned silently at the three crimson, growing

pockmarks. After a moment Yurli said; "We've been trying for a long time to get you to believe the shell was too hot to hold you. Surely you believe it now?"

"Not quite." Lenoir lifted his gun, and not even flinching this time at the noise it made he began to use it to join the three red points with three straight, red lines. The discharge from his gun had to cover a much larger area than those from the three guns below but he had the advantage that his was being used much closer to the metal of the pipe. He was losing much less power. In a few seconds his straight lines became runnels filled with liquid metal. Less than a minute after that the triangle that he had outlined sagged, then broke out and fell with a clang on the floor below.

He crept forward until he was crouched above the edge of the hole. His gun zapped twice. A high-pitched scream came up through the hole. "And that's that," he said flatly. "Now we can cover enough of the floor below to stop them repeating that trick and we can keep better watch over the escalator."

Yurli came up beside him and said mutinously, "Why did you have to be so clever?"

"You mean why didn't I stop myself from thinking out a solution, so that I could stay in danger and have a better chance of going wakie?" He shook his head. "The human mind doesn't work that way. I can't deceive myself into believing I'm in real danger so long as I know I'm capable of thinking of a way of escape."

She sighed, then said, "You were saying something just now about our party having a genius in its ranks—"

He looked at her quizzically. "Who thought out the plot that got you your essential recruit?"

"No one person. Former leaders evolved the idea a long time ago—"

"And planted you in the leos, a young recruit, as the first stage of carrying it out. No wonder you got promotion right to the top while you were still comparatively young. With direct contacts into the heart of the organisation you were supposed to be fighting it must have been quite easy to out-shine all your rivals." He paused, then added abruptly, "And it was quite a plot that your leaders had thought out, wasn't it, Yurli? Three layers deep, with a layer for everybody.

Layer number one for all three of the Rufus brothers. Layer number two for Navel and Samas only. Layer number three exclusively for the freedom parties—"

She looked at him, faintly smiling. "Go on."

"When I arrived on the scene I was told that one freedom party had spent its time fly-posting, and the other had indulged itself in a sabotage explosion that might have permanently ended its chances of collapsing the shell." He shook his head. "It was all too feeble and pointless to be really credible. But although neither act made much sense if you looked at what was supposed to be its purpose, it made sense all right if you thought of it as a stage-setting for bringing off the first step that was necessary to your plot; persuading the Rufus brothers to consent to the use of a fake time-traveller."

He grinned admiringly. "The brothers are in reality safely ensconced behind the satisfied vote; but they are tyrants, and all tyrants are far out of touch with ordinary people. The brothers are so far out of touch that a trusted intimate like you could easily fake an opinion-poll result or two, and get them unhappily conscious of fluctuations in Freedom Party support."

"Several fluctuations. First a steady, dangerous-looking rise in the potential freedom vote as a result of the first lot of propaganda about financial scandals. Then, following the sabotage explosion, a sharp backswing of intended votes in the government's favour, accompanied by the heartening news that the Freedom Party had defeated itself by splitting into two."

"Finally, after the use of new freedom propaganda lines utilising the scandal of the millions collected for Ironglas's ridiculous time experiments; a report that completely undermined the Rufus brothers' self-confidence by dramatically announcing that this latest scandal had led to another and even more dangerous pro-freedom swing in the public opinion, and that on top of that, the two halves of the opposition party were expected to reunite any day."

Yurli said, "Nice thinking."

"Thanks. And your next step was so obvious that you were probably able to get the Rufus brothers to suggest it themselves. Something had to be done to swing support their

way again. So, if their reputation was being damaged by scandal because there was no time-traveller, why not produce a time-traveller? And if the freedom parties had split and also lost votes once because of one sabotage attempt, why not repeat the effect by having them framed for another, and worse one? If after a fake time-traveller had been produced they were given the chance to kidnap him they would be sure to do it; hoping to use him to collapse the shell. And then when they tried to use him that way it should be easy for him to cause a second catastrophe, escape in the subsequent confusion, and leave them to be blamed."

Lenoir paused, then added, "I imagine you are clever enough a psychologist that you didn't even have to ask Burt to play the time-traveller?"

Yurli shook her head. "He was an adventurous man, trapped in a life that bored him. He was eager—"

CHAPTER NINETEEN

SHE BROKE off as Lenoir whipped up his gun. Almost simultaneously she lifted her weapon. Lenoir said, "Somebody started to creep across towards the escalator. He's gone back now."

Yurli said. "Not one of these d'links really knows the first thing about mobilway and 'scraper fighting. Orzon should have rushed the escalator before letting you know he was here, instead of allowing himself to be cut off over by the entrance to the Hall. Or, failing that, he should stop these one-by-one attempts to sneak men over, and rush across in strength, so that no matter how many we picked off enough would get through."

Lenoir grunted. He simply wasn't interested in the stratagems of the present-day equivalent of street fighting. Or at any rate he was only interested enough to hope that Orzon would continue to misuse them like an amateur. After a few tense seconds it gradually became clear that the d'link was going to do exactly that. No concerted attack across the hall took place, and there was no sign that any was going to.

Yurli let the silence linger for a while, then she said gently, "Go on telling me about what you know."

Lenoir breathed in sharply. He was willing enough, really, to go on explaining. Indeed there was something of a kick to be had out of parading his astuteness before the girl. It was just that the primary purpose of the exercise was to push him over the edge into becoming a wakie, and it seemed that was never going to be achieved.

"As soon as I met Navel and Samas I could see that they hated Burt," he said. "And Frack confirmed the fact for me later. I sensed even then that this was a situation that the Freedom Party should be exploiting." His voice warmed a little. "I realise now, of course, that you were exploiting it. And very nicely at that. Oh, I can imagine the sort of stuff you've been able to pump into Navel and Samas over the years. Burt is a danger to their security. He's too ambitious, too reckless, too contemptuous of public opinion.

"I'd guess that even years ago you had them ready to dispose of him if they had the chance. And this time-machine trick gave them just that chance. If the time-traveller died—after serving his purpose by causing a second explosion—nobody would ask where Burt had gone. He was the psychic and whatever-you-called-it equivalent who went back to prevent an imbalance in the continuum. Naturally he was now stranded in the past.

"Of course Burt might get suspicious, or accidentally reveal that he was a fake, before you had time to deal with him. But there was a way over that too. Nowadays everybody goes to a neo-hypnotist to learn the least little thing. Burt would send for one to be taught the tiny amount he needed to know to do a conscious, deliberate job of posing as Lenoir. Why not supply him with a neo-hypnotist in your pay, who would flood him with biographical and autobiographical material and work him over until he really thinks he is Lenoir?"

"But how would getting Burt killed help us?"

"It wouldn't. But he wasn't going to be killed until after he had caused the second explosion, and you knew that when he saw the public controls he would rationalise his ignorance, conclude that they were fakes, and run away from them. Disappointing to Navel and Samas; but of course you could easily talk them into letting you have another try. And

meanwhile—too stupid to have thought of the possibility of Burt going wackie—they would unwittingly have supplied you with the recruit you needed. The original Lenoir was the sort who would hate this present civilisation. The copy would be that sort too; and so be ready to co-operate with you once he got the needed memory back. And so, with Navel and Samas carefully arranging to throw him back into your arms every time he left you—with them even letting the D.A.F. force him out of Government Centre before he discovered that small S.O.P. he was gaily building was a nonsense machine—you set about digging that memory out."

He bared his teeth in a quick grin. "It was when I thought about that digging operation that I realised that there couldn't really be any split in the Freedom Party. Deadly rivals could never have complemented each other's efforts so neatly just by chance. After all, you had to be pretty subtle. You couldn't threaten me directly—'Open the shield or we'll blow your head off.' But you did get to be quite clever at putting the idea across obliquely. Even that tape you sent out right at the beginning, which Liram with such apparent naïvity got me to listen to, contained a few hints that way. And after that things really hotted up, didn't they?"

"First Petrie, posing as a leo, threatened me with direct therapy. Then you shattered my illusion of invulnerability; and subsequently let Orzon loose on me. Then Petrie came in again. On the surface he acted as a stooge for the Rufuses by scaring me out of Government Centre, but actually he pushed the good cause forward by telling me I was in danger of torture again because you'd find out what I'd really been up to with the small shell. Then Bartor seized on Petrie's hoey about giving history another chance, and stepped in to threaten me yet again with elimination if I didn't get the shell open.

In fact the only people who missed out were the Durags, and they were working round to it when I balked them by suddenly realising what was going on—"

He broke off, his eyebrows raised. He had realised suddenly that for a minute or so he had been talking to himself. Yurli, her mind drawn elsewhere, had been giving

him none of her attention. She said abruptly, "They're very quiet down there."

"Orzon's lot, you mean?" he said. "You think they're planning something?"

"Maybe. And maybe they're just deciding to give up trying to get you. A d'link can easily find himself replaced if he starts anything that causes too many casualties among his boys. And anyway, Orzon is in the games for profit, and there isn't any real profit in punishing you."

She dropped on to her knees and leaned over the still-warm edge of the triangular hole. "This is Cardell of the leos," she shouted. "This man is holding me a prisoner. A hundred thousand milnpouns to anyone who rescues me."

Orzon's voice came back to her. "Jump him and hold his gun arm while we get across."

"I can't," she shouted. "He—" And she finished with a short, broken scream.

Lenoir said curiously, "Later on you may have to fight for me openly. What are they going to make of that?"

She chuckled. "If we have to fight them, it'll be all the better to have them a bit bewildered." Then she added more forcefully, "Orzon won't leave you alone now, you know. Not with that much money to be earned."

"And so the shell gets more and more unsafe for me, eh?" He sighed. "I've been trying to hammer that idea into my head for a long time now. But it doesn't seem to work."

Yurli was suddenly deflated, weary. She too sighed. "But why not? You've talked out all the important things now, but you still haven't gone wakie. Why? And why didn't your fears make you do it anyway? What went wrong?"

"I'm an artificial construction. Lenoir of the books. Remember? And no man in his biographies and autobiographies is ever too much of a coward; or too unreasonable. I could not be panicked, and I was too reasonable to believe, really, that any responsible agent of government—even government like that existing at present—would kill me and endanger the security of the state for her own private ends. And I am too reasonable to believe, really, that idealists like Petrie and Bartor would ever commit murder for reasons as trivial as those they professed." And, he thought somewhat wryly, I was too reasonable to believe, really, that a woman who had

once enjoyed sleeping with a man could ever burn him down with a zapp-gun, just for ambitions sake.

"But what about Orzon?" Yurli asked. "You couldn't have been too reasonable to believe that he was torturing you for your secret when he actually was."

He chuckled. "Hardly. Yes, Orzon was your best bet. But he wanted holes made in the shell, and how could I go wakie and remember the way to do that?"

He expected her to start plugging away again, still trying to free his subconscious mind. But she did not. With his explanations. She had bent her head and was staring through the hole again. Lenoir looked over her shoulder. There was nothing visible down there except the triangular piece of metal that they had burned out and the body of the man whom he had shot.

"If only something would happen," she said rebelliously.

Lenoir nodded, sympathising with her impatience. He too wanted things to start happening again. He realised suddenly that he was fingering yet once more the slim, oblong box in his pocket. He forgot momentarily his reluctance to admit that the entity that now composed most of his subconscious mind still existed. He addressed it directly. "All right Burt," he said mentally. "And so something is going to happen, and when it does we will need this key-pack. But what for?"

While he was still waiting for an answer Yurli grabbed him by the sleeve and whispered peremptorily, "Listen!"

Still holding his sleeve she cocked her head sideways. Lenoir bent down forward, though his skin prickled momentarily at the thought that they might be exposing themselves in the line of fire. Nothing happened, however, except that a mumble of voices sounded from below. Lenoir said, "What's so interesting all of a sudden?"

"The leos have arrived," said Yurli. She leaned forward over the triangular hole and screamed; "He's got me trapped up here. Attack at once, before he has a chance to kill me."

A moment's silence followed her shrill appeal. Then a male voice shouted solemnly, "I'm sorry to hear that you've been captured, Madam. But you must realise that now you are in enemy hands we can't accept orders from you."

"No." spoke Yurli viciously, but too softly to be heard below. "No. You wouldn't."

The male voice came again, "Lenoir. Are you prepared to surrender and give the lady up?"

"Is it likely?" Lenoir shouted back.

"Not really," agreed the voice urbanely. Then it resumed its mumbled colloquy with the people below.

Yurli was biting her lower lip, the red soft flesh of it blanching where her upper teeth dug in. Lenoir said; "What's it all about? Are you afraid your leos are going to co-operate with Orzon?"

"Oh, they would have done that anyway," she said. "And I'm not upset. Actually this is just what we need. You wouldn't know, of course; but that officer is one of the best men from our point of view that Navel and Samas could have chosen. Most of the leos are directly loyal to me, personally. But he's an ambitious man."

"And so?"

"And so he won't mind killing me so long as he gets you as well. You're in worse danger than if he were loyal to me."

"Fine," commented Lenoir dryly. Despite his pose of impassivity, though, fear twitched his entrails again. When he had left the Durags' flat that latest time and started on the job of bringing his enemies in pursuit of himself he had trusted to it that inspirations of the moment and revived memories would between them carry him through to a successful finish. Now he was not so sure that they would be enough.

Yurli jumped backwards, drawing in her breath with a sharp hiss. About their feet a dozen or more scarlet spots had come into being. The girl said to him frantically, "Remember! You've got to remember!"

"I—I can't." His throat was so dry that his voice seemed to rustle.

"This isn't a d'link's mob we're up against now," said Yurli savagely. "This is a disciplined force, trained in city fighting. They'll systematically burn their way through the front of the pipe, and then half of them will pin us at the back end of it while the other half will rush the escalator. And we won't have a chance of stopping them."

"I—I know. But—"

"You're going to die, Neals Lenoir, unless you can remember how to get out of the shell. There's no other way of escape. No way at all. You'll die, die, die—"

Lenoir found that he was fingering the key-pack again. He drew his hand away from it. It meant nothing. A sick longing for the peace and happiness of the old days possessed him. A sick longing for the twenty-first century and Betty—

Betty? He muttered obscenities. Betty indeed! The original Lenoir had had a real Betty to cherish and sleep with; but his own Betty was no more than a mock memory, created only to deceive him as to his own identity, serving him only as a source of obliquely-conveyed information, loving him only as much as his imagination bade her. Which of course was what made it so important that she had been head over heels in love with him. Head over heels in love with him—

Head over heels in love. Head over heels. Head over. With black wig-hair swirling and red-brown inside it and where was the law said Lenoir and Rufus was all it could symbolise and black swirling and red-brown and head over and head over and head over again and again and again and yet again—

His sweat had slicked the sides of the key-pack, and it was slithery between his fingers. His heart and guts kept slipping away, so that intermittently his skin housed a gurgling hollow. Beneath him and about him the pipe wavered like an image on slowly rippling water. But—and God bless the less-than-nothing that was Betty for that but—but now he was a wakie, and he had the answer. All of it.

And even that black terror of impending shame and self-disgust was lessened now. Soon there would be a chance of escape. Soon—

"Yurlil!" he said sharply. "When I shout, run for the escalator and get down as fast as you can. Then cover me while I work."

He ignored her wide-mouthed "Oh!" of delight and put his hand in his pocket to grab the key-pack, knowing at last why his subconscious had made him keep the thing. The government had allowed the Freedom Party to steal it, expecting him to use it on his first outing with the Durags. So it followed that it must have certain functions that would be useful to him now. As he pulled it out it almost slipped

from his grip. Then he steadied it and began pressing on the studs with his fingers. The second blue knob and the third green one together. The first green one, then the first blue, the third blue, and the second green successively. And then wait.

He waited as long as he dared, then stepped forward, treading carefully between the growing heat spots, and threw the key-pack down through the triangular hole that he had made. Then, his timing hardly more than a wild guess—"Now!" he shouted to the girl.

CHAPTER TWENTY

HE WAS almost too soon. She had weaved her way to the end of the pipe and, half-exposed already to gun-fire, was getting ready to leap across to the top of the escalator, before the key-pack burst into activity.

The thing had been faked to the Rufus brothers requirements, and it had been designed to impress the public with the idea that another and more terrible sabotage attempt had taken place. Precisely that. Not designed to be a tool in a real other-and-more-terrible-sabotage-attempt. Just designed to impress the public thoroughly with the idea that one had taken place. And now it began to discharge that function.

It started with a blinding red glare, accompanied by swift-billowing grey smoke that swirled across the width of the hall. Then, while the first smoke continued to swirl, the red glow fell back into itself until it was a smouldering core; contracted further, then expanded violently, giving out a noise like the cough of a bronchial giant, and spitting gouts of green flame—

Lenoir turned from the spectacular display and set off after Yurli. Already little more than the top of the escalator was visible; but he soon got on to the thing and descended it rapidly enough to catch up with the girl just as she was skirting the partition at its base. He caught her by the arm. "This way," he said tersely.

The spot he needed was the corner of the hall at once furthest from the entrance and the escalator, where the shell itself swept down to ground level to form one of the corner-angles. They reached it, stumbling, before either the leos or Orzon's men spotted them. Part of the corner was the wall of the building itself, and set low upon this part of it were four of the decorative bosses that lined the whole hall.

The things were even larger than they had seemed up till now. Almost eighteen inches across. Lenoir giggled half-hysterically. "My, Betty! What big heads you've got!"

Choking slightly in the smoke he lunged forward, reached up to the highest of the things, grabbed the swirl of black spirals by which it was surrounded, and pulled downwards to the left. The boss yielded, turning over smoothly.

As he reached for the second one he saw Yurli turn sharply, and heard her gun zapp. He worked on, returning to the first boss when he had dealt with the second, jumping to the fourth boss after he had left that one, and then returning again, timing himself. The bosses not only had to be turned in the right order but at precise varying intervals. So much trouble, he thought wryly. Yet a simple on-off switch would have served as well, except that once a government had had to feel safe from its own people.

He heard Yurli's gun go off again, and became vaguely aware that the key-pack was playing a new colour-symphony, something in white and bright gold. Lighter shades, he thought. Shades that will make us easier to see.

Fear almost made him hurry, and turn the next boss too soon. At the last moment he steadied himself, continued to work carefully and methodically, doing the right things after the right intervals. Men were shouting to each other now, back there in the smoke. 'Here they are!' 'Over here!' 'This way!' Yurli's gun zapped again, and yet again almost immediately.

It won't be long, Lenoir thought grimly. She can outshoot three, four, maybe a half-dozen of them. But in seconds now they'll be coming at her faster than that.

He turned to another boss, swung to another, turned again. Then as he turned back to the first boss yet once more the wall above him hissed viciously and showered him with cherry-red sparks. Guns were zapping more frequently now;

either Yurli's or the enemy's, or both. Five boss movements to go. Now four—

A heavy, male figure emerged close to the wall from the smoke-swirl on his left. Someone has circled Yurli, he thought. This finishes it. And then a gun zapped behind his right shoulder and the male figure fell. His eyes flicked to the right and back again so quickly that he had no time to register anything beyond that his saviour was slim and femininely rounded. "Thanks Yurli," he said thickly.

"It's not Yurli," said Liram. "She's still covering your back." Then she added by way of explanation. "Father and I thought and thought over your silly story that you'd raped me. And then we worked out what you must be up to, and where we'd find you."

"Fine." The single word was pitifully inadequate; but it was all that he had time for now. Three boss movements to go. Two—

The gap between the last-but-one and the last boss movement was almost unendurably long. In the background guns sounded continuously; though fortunately the users of them were too blinded by smoke for accurate fire. At Lenoir's side Liram's gun zapped twice, and immediately behind it was echoed by another, and then another. Yurli and Durag's probably. A fine heroic figure I'm cutting he thought ironically. Leaving it to two women and an old man to fight for me.

He almost flung himself on the last boss, dragging the black spirals down as he went. Molten metal coruscated again just above his head.

Close at hand, shrill above the gunfire and the shouts, someone screamed. Lenoir cringed and closed his eyes. As he did so the world grew bright about him, even through his tight-shut eyelids; and the din that had tortured his ears cut off sharply, leaving a silence more thunderously obtrusive than the noise itself had been.

Shock, Lenoir thought dazedly. The sight of outside has driven them into shock, all of them. That's why they are quiet. But I've got memories to help me face it. *And better still, though I never realised it till now, freedom from threats of shame and self-loathing lies out there. Freedom for all time.* And slowly he opened his eyes.

And the shafts of light were golden but brutally searing and the bowl of blue was not a bowl of blue at all but an incredible azure infinity and the green shapes were mind-stunning in their myriad complexities of form and size. And above his head was a leviathan shape of crags and promontories and dizzying pinnacles, that hung free with nothing to hold it up and yet was plainly moving and so had to be falling. Falling on him. Had to be—

Only seconds ahead of thousands who were to follow he turned and ran, shrieking, back to the base of the nearest shell-scraper. But he was unique among those thousands in the depth of the shelter into which he plunged, in the thoroughness with which he hid himself away.

It was six weeks later when he came back again across the stony, scarred floor of the Hall of S.O.P., out on to that overthick uncomfortably non-level carpet called grass. Even then he was almost the first to venture. And he would certainly not have tried to except that the fear of loathsome degradation that had driven him into deep hiding in those first moments of blind panic had hounded him on and made it essential that he should emerge again now.

In hiding, he had lost track of events and fallen out of touch with the new government. Fortunately, though, not so far out of touch that they would not agree to let him have what he asked for when at last he had communicated with them two days ago. The taxi, its base sunk full inches among green stalks, was standing a couple of hundred yards beyond the city's edge. With his eyes turned downwards he walked over to it, the lumpy terrain straining his calf muscles.

In the over-bright light the black, shiny surface of the vehicle acted as a crude mirror. Although the image was distorted by the curvature he could plainly see that another of those huge, smoke-coloured shapes poised above him. It was hard even now to make himself realise that the thing was not falling. Reaching the taxi he leaned forward for a closer look at the reflection.

"So even synthetic memories are better than nothing. I can't yet look at it all even second-hand."

It was Durag's voice. Lenoir turned slowly. "The memories are not really all that much help." He gave a short laugh. "I'd pictured clouds as being like little wisps of cotton wool,

as big as you might pull off a pad of the stuff with your fingers. And the sky I'd thought of as being like the inside of the shell, but painted blue."

Durag nodded, then gestured towards the taxi. "The thing's been turned over to manual control as you asked, and it's stocked up with spare fuel tablets. Miss Cardell should be along soon to say good-bye. In fact, if you're ready, I'll let her know—"

He lifted his wrist automatically, then dropped it and shook it irritably. "I'd forgotten again. It really is very inconvenient, this having to go everywhere personally to deliver messages."

Lenoir nodded sympathetically. "Your communication system was developed in a situation shielded from natural static. Pre-shield engineers weren't protected that way but they got over the difficulty. Yours will catch up."

"Yes."

A little, awkward silence developed. The colossus overhead drifted slowly between them and the sun, and the surrounding glare was toned to a more acceptable shade. There was a quiver of moving air, and suddenly Durag shivered and hunched his shoulders slightly. "Some of us have been studying old records. It seems that thicker clothing helps with this sort of thing."

"Winter woollies!" Lenoir chuckled.

"Hmm?" Durag looked at him in astonishment.

"Another misinterpreted memory. Betty used to—or rather it seems to me that she used to—nag me every autumn about changing into my winter woollies. But I've only just realised I was supposed to do it for warmth. I thought it was a local custom."

"Oh."

Another hiatus came, and grew longer and more awkward. Durag broke it by saying gruffly, "You know, you're not really doing much good by going off like this. We don't need explorers. Not yet. It might have been different if there had been any other communities near enough to interfere with us; but there's nothing visible but green growths all around even from the highest shell-scraper."

You don't need that I should go, thought Lenoir. But I do. Now that I've plucked up enough courage for it, and now that hiding won't serve for much longer. Durag spoke

again; "For that matter, I don't know what good you thought you were doing getting Frack to hide you away for all those weeks." He shook his head. "It's a good job for you Orzon was killed in the fighting. He would never have hidden you however much you paid him." He lost interest in the subject of Lenoir's self-concealment, and nodded towards the cluster of towers across the grass. "Is this Miss Cardell?"

Lenoir looked. One small boy, hands in pockets, had stepped over the city's edge on to the green and was walking towards them. Lenoir grinned. "Hardly," he said.

As the boy got nearer Durag's feeble eyes were able to make out details about him. "No. No, of course it isn't." The old man sounded disappointed.

Lenoir watched the boy, who was approaching almost nonchalantly, pausing every now and then to kick at a stone or twig; and once even looking up at the terrifying vista above almost with indifference. That generation is going to be all right, thought Lenoir with a moment of fierce gladness. They're going to take back the old heritage as easily as if they had never lost it.

The boy reached them, looked from one to the other, and guessed correctly. "You're Mr. Lenoir?"

"That's right," said Lenoir.

"I got a message from Miss Cardell. She said I was to tell you she wanted to come and see you off; but things have come up now and she's too busy."

"Oh."

The boy turned and had gone a dozen yards before he thought to add over his shoulder. "Oh, and she said I was to tell you she hopes you have a nice explore."

"Well, thanks." Lenoir lifted a hand in a mock half-salute, then shrugged. He expected Durag to comment. When, after a second or two, nothing had happened, he turned and looked. The old man was staring down at his feet, his face a deep red.

Lenoir said, "What are you looking so concerned about? That lady was never noted for having overmuch consideration, anyway."

"It isn't that. I—er—I don't like to tell you this just now, but—"

Suddenly Lenoir understood. He gave a laugh so short

that it was almost a snort. "So you were charged to bring me Liram's apologies, too? And you weren't going to say anything until after Yurli had come and gone; hoping that I'd feel less hurt then?"

Durag said hastily, "It's not altogether Liram's fault. She's badly tied up. Quite important events have been going forward while you were hiding."

Lenoir fixed his gaze on a broad band of sunlight swiftly expanding from the horizon towards them as the clouds passed over. Lenoir the first had read widely in political science and sociology before his death; and every book that was on record as having been studied by him had been fed into the mind of his successor. The current Lenoir said carefully, "Let me see. You will, of course, have put Navel and Samas under protective arrest and thinned out the leos until only those directly loyal to Yurli are left. Now, I imagine, you are tending to get at loggerheads with each other about how soon the next election should be held—"

"We aren't getting at loggerheads. But one section of the party that feels the situation should be allowed to stabilise more before we go through the upset of a general election, and another that feels that we ought to organise the polls right away."

Lenoir nodded. "Yurli being one of the leading lights of the stabilisers, of course. With young Bortor one of her ablest backers."

Durag nodded, almost sullenly. Lenoir went on, "Among the people I know that would leave you, Petrie and Liram pressing for an immediate election."

As he mentioned Liram he felt deep pity. The others could be hurt by disillusionment and disappointment; but they were capable of outliving them, of finding consolation enough in realising as much of their dreams as was practicably attainable in a real world. But Liram, Durag—

Joans of Arc, he thought sadly, should always die gloriously in the hour of their Dauphin's re-enthronement. They should never be called on to live out aftermaths.

He turned slowly. The taxi stood there waiting, stocked with general supplies that could surely be renewed at many places in the world now, and with fuel enough to last for

several years. "Well," he said slowly. "If nobody else is coming along to see me off, I suppose I might as well go."

"If you insist," said Durag.

"It's not exactly that I insist—" began Lenoir. He broke off, still staring at the taxi. He was far from insisting on going. He didn't want to have to go. And Durag, after all, was or had been a professional neo-hypnotist. It was possible that a man of his experience, if he were told the truth, wouldn't feel the repugnance that most people would; possible, even, that he might be willing and able to help.

Lenoir began to speak again, more hurriedly. "Do you know why I rushed off into deep hiding when I found that outside was too terrifying to be faced right away?"

"I've wondered about that."

"There must be hundreds of people by now who know I used to be Burt Rufus, and the number is growing every day. And many of those people have good reason to hold a grudge against Burt and wouldn't hesitate to pay it back to his new self."

Durag said, "All of us who had a hand in bringing the shell down are in some danger from people who want revenge."

Lenoir said impatiently, "You don't understand. I'm not worried about the act of revenge itself; but of the effects of being afraid of it. As I am I'm still a stranger in this civilisation. If too many people try to kill me I'll need to dig out buried memories to survive—"

"Direct therapy!" Durag smiled in sudden enlightenment. "I see now. Why, with your submerged memories already loosened by going wakie once, and the presence of a constant threat that can best be evaded by recovery of the rest of your suppressed data, you stand a splendid chance of a cure."

His tone had steadily grown more enthusiastic as he talked. Lenoir stared at him blankly, incredulously. Then seeing the need to explain himself he blurted out; "But you've got it all wrong. I loathe Burt. Detest him. The one thing I don't want is a cure. That's why I've got to go out beyond the city, now that I can do it. I'll be in danger from time to time out there; but I won't be in any more danger as Lenoir than I would be as Burt. There'll be no urge to go fully a wakie."

Durag said, "But all that loathing is an hypnotic implant, put in at the time to try and stop you from ever realising that you were Burt."

"Obviously," said Lenoir. "But then I'm all implants, aren't I? For all that, I'm an entity in my own right; and I still don't want to go back to being Burt."

Durag rubbed the side of his face slowly. "I see."

"I hoped you would," Lenoir went on. "I don't really want to leave the city. Not yet, anyway. So, wouldn't it be possible for a neo-hypnotist to—as it were—tighten me up again. Stabilise the Lenoir personality so that there's no danger of Rufus breaking through?"

Durag was still rubbing the side of his face. "I don't see why not," he said judiciously. "It would take quite a long time, and necessitate the re-aligning of a number of old-established techniques; but it should be possible. The big snag would be political rather than technical."

"Political?"

"Yes. You'd have to be careful to pick a practitioner you could trust. And generally speaking those whom Burt could have trusted would hate the new Lenoir, and those who'd feel grateful to Lenoir would hate the old Burt."

Lenoir stared at him for several seconds. "I see. Yes; I'd have to be careful about that wouldn't I?" he commented flatly.

Durag met his stare for a moment, then looked away, flushing. "Well," he said defensively, "I would offer to do it myself, but things are happening so fast on the political side that I just haven't the time at present. If you could wait a few months?"

"Just a few months," said Lenoir tonelessly.

"That's all." Durag's uneasiness faded, and his tone grew brisker. "Meanwhile, I'll notify the taxi company that they can take their taxi back and reintegrate it into the public system. And—"

"Don't bother," said Lenoir. "I've changed my mind. I'm going."

Durag blinked, then spread his hand, politely doing his best to disguise his relief. "Well, if you insist—"

"I insist." Lenoir turned away from the old man to look at the taxi. "After all, it's a new world out there. Who knows?

There might even be a new sort of people in it. Somewhere." He started to turn back from the taxi again, lifting and extending his hand. "Well, since this is goodbye—"

He stopped, and lowered his hand slowly. Durag was already a dozen yards away, walking towards the city. Lenoir took a deep breath. "Hey!" he shouted. Durag turned. Lenoir grinned, narrow-lipped. "Let me know before you go," he said. "Shall I send you comic ones with pictures of fat ladies riding about on donkeys, or stick to local views out of deference to Liram?"

Then, finding what consolation he could in Durag's expression of bewilderment he turned and got into the taxi.

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