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THE HEROD MEN

NICK KAMIN

Planned death vs. unwanted birth in the Overpop Era



A slow motion explosion ripped behind his head as the car's front fender caught him behind the door. The Laika slewed sideways on the road. He tried to correct, tried to will the car between the two cement abutments.

An instantaneous death thought burst from his mind. . . .

The Brotherhood of the FROG was after Matter. As HEROD's troubleshooter in Canada, KillCaptain Matter had a life expectancy of zero. But why?

Outwardly, his assignment was a simple one: enter Gauze and see if it was a free love commune, violating the population edicts which HEROD was pledged to enforce. Yet, why should this investigation concern the FROGs? Certainly they were Fundamentalists, believing in "free birth," but why kill a HEROD agent over one commune? Or was there something special about this commune, something so vital to the FROGs that they would openly battle HEROD, the "kill organization," to preserve their secret?

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NICK KAMIN

ACE BOOKS

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I

HE STEPPED ONTO the morning balcony and let the chilling air surround him. His body relaxed and he inhaled deeply, letting his arms rise slowly upward until they were level with the plastic flooring.

It was the first time in three years that he could do his breathing exercises outside the sanctuary of the air-conditioned suburbs and he relished each lungful. It was difficult to get a good gulp of air in the city wearing a nostril mask.

The cold Canadian air filled his lungs, salving their encrustations, seeking out each crevice. An exuberance filled his psyche. His extravagant flaunting of the pine air would shock the Society's treasurer.

It would be shocking because Matter had stepped directly from the rinse shower to dry himself on the balcony. Properly, the shower dried with warm air, sucking the moisture through the vacuum vents to return it to the pump reservoirs. The amount of water missing from evaporation would be added to his bill when he checked out.

Using the water rinse at all was an extravagance. The modulated ping cleaners oscillated body grime quite well without water, but the splashing feel of the water felt sinfully good to him and he indulged himself.

Naked, he shivered in the cold air, dropped his arms slowly to his sides and exhaled.

What the hell. It wasn't his idea to jaunt up to Manitoba. If the Society saw fit to send him on a search for a screwball project, he was damned well going to take advantage of the vacation.

He glanced incuriously at the jumbled summer houses clustered around the motel, appreciatively watching the tourist children playing outside the multilevel cubes. They

were easy to spot; their parents did not fully believe that the mountain air was relatively unpolluted and demanded that their children wear masks.

His trained eye paired them into familial groups, two children per family.

Acceptable, he thought. The semirich, the ones who could afford a vacation retreat in Canada to fill their flaccid lungs with the chilling air, always chose to go the limit with their families. Rich enough to afford the taxes for two children and dumb enough to flaunt it.

Acceptable, he thought dutifully, but not optimal.

The superrich bothered him occasionally, but they usually managed to bribe off the collectors. He was rarely involved.

His real problems were the stupid bastards who refused to be intimidated by a tax increase because they could not afford their present taxes anyway. The poor could be a pain in the rectum. They and the fanatics.

One of the children laughed and waved to him. He looked back at her coolly, not especially liking children. They seemed alien, like small invaders from another galaxy plotting to devour all the world's resources. Under her electric bodystocking, the young body testified to its sturdiness, that much he had to admit. She would become a tall willow of a woman, alive and healthy because of her parents' obedience to the law.

The sunlight felt too good on his body to allow it to be covered, so he draped his clothes over his arm and sauntered to the front office.

"Good morning, KillCaptain," the clerk said, his eyes liquid pools. "Were you comfortable last night?"

"Very comfortable," Matter agreed.

"I'm so glad," the clerk said, staring hungrily at Matter's body.

That was a mistake, to walk naked into the clerk's office. He pulled his stocking on slowly, tugging it over his head. "Is there a good restaurant nearby?"

"Our very own restaurant, of course," the clerk said with a trace of disappointment as Matter covered himself. "We have simply *wonderful* steaks. You simply *must* do your tummy a favor and try one."

"I'm sure they're very good," Matter said. "But I'm a vegetarian."

"Oh my, yes of course," the clerk corrected himself. "There's a truly marvelous menu this morning of lentils and soya. But are you sure you won't relax your principles and try one of our steaks? People come from a thousand miles around, literally, to enjoy a Wasag steak."

"Well, it's not exactly a matter of principles," Matter said to placate the clerk. He finished smoothing the stocking over his shoulders. "I'm just not particularly fond of animals, alive or butchered."

"I sense a civilized man," the clerk sighed. "All these tourists up here, rushing around trying to see squirrels and birds. Such a dreariness."

He leaned over the counter, looking covetously. "Forgive me if I seem forward, KillCaptain, but I haven't had breakfast yet either. Perhaps you and I could . . ."

"Thank you, but some other time," Matter said, then added. "I'm afraid *that* is a matter of principles."

"Oh, too bad," the clerk said. "Heterosexual, eh?"

"Flagrantly."

"Ah, well," the clerk shook his head sadly. "Would you like a playfriend after breakfast? The lodge boasts some of the finest and most accommodating playfriends in central Canada. Here, just have a look."

The clerk spread a sales brochure on the counter. Matter glanced over it briefly. There were blondes in sunsuits, blondes without sunsuits, redheads with high heels, brunettes with astonishingly voluptuous mammaries.

"Very nice," Matter nodded. "I'll let you know after I've eaten."

He ate well, devouring stacks of wheat cakes that had been milled fresh from the Manitoban grain fields. He felt he was almost a grain gourmet and found it difficult to believe that anyone would prefer bloody meat to the nuances of the cakes.

The waiter rolled to his table soundlessly and offered a garnish of fruit from the depths of its chromium innards. He let the waiter pour him a gently alcoholic coffee beverage and sat back contentedly to watch the motel patrons.

The restaurant had swelled since he began eating and now was filling with collections of middle-aged couples,

talkative and exaggeratedly friendly. A couple entered holding their heads high so that the rest of the crowd would notice their daring omission of their nostril masks.

"Would you like to place a bet, sir?" the waiter asked.

"A bet? On what?"

"The morning games are about to start," the waiter said.

Matter swiveled in his chair to see the game wall. As he watched, it flickered and formed a trid image of the morning's combatants.

"Beautiful resolution," someone cooed in the crowd.

"These Canucks do it up big, don't they? What the hell do you call a trid up here?"

The screen solidified and the two combatants glared at each other. One was a Caucasian armed with a pair of brass knuckles. His opponent was a Negro dressed in ersatz jungle skins and clutching a machete.

"Dira. Means 'hole' in Russian. Lot of Slavic influence around here."

Matter turned to the waiter. "What are the odds today?"

"Three to one in favor of the knife," the waiter answered. "He has had six professional bouts, five of them wins and one draw."

"Mm," Matter said. "In what order?"

"Four consecutive wins, the draw, and another win last week. Would you like to place your bet now? The game will begin in a few minutes."

"What about his opponent?"

"This is his first professional fight, but he has done extremely well in the amateur rankings."

He had stayed alive, Matter reflected. That was pretty successful.

"I'll put a hundred on the knuckles," Matter said. "He seems awfully sure of himself to be entering with just those brass knuckles. Besides, the knife may be getting a little too sure of himself but still worried about that recent draw."

"Very good, sir," the waiter said and tallied up the bet and the meal, relaying the information to the accounting desk. It purred questioningly and offered a pastel-colored joint of marijuana.

Matter inspected it appreciatively, noting it was top grade

Mexican, but waved the waiter away with the brush of his hand.

There were too many things he had to do and he wanted to go at them with a completely cold mind. He had made it a personal rule never to smoke before a job. It clouded his judgment.

His judgment was not doing too well. As the crowd roared its approval, the Negro took one blow to the head before he countered with an uppercut that laid the Caucasian open from naval to throat.

It was a short game and the tourists were laying bets on the next game as he finished his coffeebeev and left the restaurant. He walked around to the rental garage and waved at the attendant. The attendant failed to recognize him until he slid into the silver Laika and pulled out onto Highway 10, heading north.

Like molten lead dropping on a cold concrete floor, the road coiled down the Riding Mountains, dodging around birches and pink granite, running hard onto the Manitoban plains.

The transition was abrupt. Dribbling down the northern face of the mountains like a meandering waterfall, the road hit the tabletop wheat country and splattered out a ruler edge to the horizon.

A persistent ticking started at the base of his brain as he passed a tourist lookout tower, thinking it might be a good place to dump a body. He was debating whether he should have pulled in to inspect the opposite ravine more carefully, but the thought was lost in a sweeping curve at the base of the range which took his attention. The high view of the road disappearing against the horizon was momentarily lost in the trees, until it appeared again at the base of the mountains, a gray band shimmering in the July sun.

At the end of the ruler edge highway, as it lost itself on the flat country, Darby was waiting.

He could almost feel the g forces pile up in his can as the silver sports car came through the last turn and squashed its solid tires on the long stretch of highway.

He was amping a clean three thousand, he noted casually, as the rear end of the pickup truck ahead of him grew progressively larger. The highway seemed clear all the way

to Darby. He eased the Laika into the left lane to pass and the curious ticking suddenly concentrated on one side of his head, warning frantically.

He passed the truck easily and began pulling back into the right lane. There was a car ahead of him slowing, its right turn signal blinking.

If he pulled in front of the truck, he would have to dump his brakes and he was not confident of the truck's stopping ability. At an even eighty, there was not all that much room between it and the slowing car. He elected to pass the car and eased back into the left lane, tapping the horn quickly.

The ticking in his brain howled as he saw the front wheels of the car cutting to the left.

An incredulous half second vanished as he jammed his brakes, dodging for the ditch, laying on the horn. He had a fast glance of narrow eyes popping open on the truck driver as the driver of the other car cut his wheel even farther to the left.

The bastard isn't stopping! He's still turning!

He saw his front fender miss by inches, a blur of movement.

Slow down, dammit, and I can miss you!

A slow motion explosion ripped behind his head as the car's front fender caught him behind the door. The Laika slewed sideways on the road, a four wheel broadside at eighty with a bridge suddenly coming up. He tried to correct, tried to will the car between the two cement abutments, but the tires were beyond their limits of adhesion.

An instantaneous death thought burst from his mind as he kicked the brakes, skidding in front of the truck for the grass on the right side of the road.

A catastrophe of wet grass and brush flashed around him and the Laika spun backward. He felt it leave the ground and jammed his head under the headrest, forcing his eyes to stay open to witness the last seconds of his life.

There was a heavily dull concussion and then a myriad of cascading shatters as the Laika vaulted the river and dug into the opposite embankment.

Damn! he spat and wondered how high his adrenalin was pumping.

He pulled the keys automatically and looked at the willows still quivering over his head. *Dammit!*

Mental feelers searched out all the extremities of his body and surprised him by finding that everything was still working. He crawled out of the convertible, cursing and sick to his stomach. *Wait till the Society gets this bill!*

The windshield and a variety of metal oddments were smeared around him into the stones and gravel; the Laika smashed against the vertical bank. More than thirty feet across the stream he could see where the car had left the opposite side, a clear swath of clipped brush leading to the edge. Then thirty feet of clean pine-scented air and then the Laika with its tail buried in the dirt wall.

Close, he thought. Almost went all the way that time. Stupid damned way to die.

Luckily he had hit with the rear end first and had scrunched his head down into the headrest. If he had gone straight in, he would have waltzed through the windshield. And if it hadn't been for the headrest, he would have snapped his neck and his head would still be rolling up the bank.

He made a mental note to remember to send his appreciation to the man who had insisted on the headrests, then recalled seeing on the trid that the old warrior had died only a few weeks before, a victim of the ineptitude he had fought.

It did not matter much now. All the automotive safety devices were meaningless anyway.

"Anybody hurt down there?" an anxious voice called from above him. He looked up carefully and saw the truck driver leaning apprehensively over the bridge railing.

"Now that's a damned stupid question," Matter grumbled and was surprised by the anger in his voice. It was not until he clambered out of the ravine that he noticed his hand was skinned and bleeding lightly. The sight of his own blood made him feel better. Not being injured in the wreck was almost obscene, as though he had committed a blasphemy against the ghouls. The small amount of blood eased his conscience.

"How about the other one in the car?" the truck driver asked.

"Nobody else in the car. Only me."

"Could have sworn there was someone else in the car," the driver said disappointedly.

"No, you must have seen the headrests."

That definitely did not give rise to encouraging expectations. The only justifiable excuse he had in the accident was that the jackass in the car had signaled a right turn and had turned left instead. If the truck driver couldn't tell a headrest from a passenger, he wasn't going to be much help as a witness.

Not that it made much difference. The Canadian anti-litter laws were child's play compared to the States'.

The other car was stopped in a side road. Matter walked around the front of it, glancing at its mangled left fender. *A couple more inches and I could have made it*, he thought, watching the turn signal blink.

"I see you've got your left turn signal on now," he said quietly.

"It was on all the time," the driver said. "Didn't you see it?"

"No, but I saw your right signal blinking," Matter said. He scoured his mind to find a loophole for sanctioned homicide, but killing for a material object was specious grounds. He could try for social extermination of ignorance, but that was pushing it.

"You made a mistake," the man said.

"Uh huh. I see that," he said and looked at the highway and the car parked in the side road. It had completed its turn, a solid ninety degree turn from the road. Matter nodded sourly. "Funny the signal is still flashing. You'd think it would have canceled itself as soon as you straightened out on this side road."

"That is funny," the man said. Was there a trickled smile on his face? "You must have damaged it in the wreck."

"Looks that way," Matter said and drew a deep breath. There was something naggingly familiar about the man, something hiding in his face that was tickling Matter's subconscious, but he was positive he had never seen the man before. Where was the itch? In the man's mouth, the way his lower teeth showed when he spoke? In his eyes, or in his cheeks with just enough lean to show the cheekbones?

Not quite any of those. Something in the soft puffiness under the eyes and the way the lower lids closed a fraction

tighter than normal on the iris. A studied tightening that gave a false illusion of mirth.

Matter did not believe the accident could have jammed the turn signal in its opposite direction, but saw no reason to argue the point.

He had already resigned himself to the outcome of the accident investigation as soon as he crawled out of the broken Laika. The car would have to be destroyed. The only thing he could do now was to give his version of it to the Mounties and let the insurance brokers haggle over it.

But it was so damnably inconvenient. So close to his target to be stopped short. That was the frustration of it. That, and the disappointment in himself that Philip would be unknowingly disappointed. Like the birthday present that never existed and, having never existed, was never missed.

Except by the giver who never gave it and *damn it all anyway* Philip would have enjoyed the sadistic humor of the Russian sportscar.

"We'd better find the State Police," Matter said and checked himself too late. No states in Canada. Provinces instead, so it's the Provincial Police or the Mounted Police and he had just given away what was probably an obvious fact; he was an American.

The squinty man savored the information. Matter growled inwardly. Canucks still had an overblown idea of Uncle Sugar's progeny, tempered by no small animosity toward the constant pour of tourists.

Affluence, my ass, Matter thought. Nineteen thousand annual per capita wage, a computer in every kitchen, three and a half workday weeks, long weekends of the death games.

"Good idea," the man said. "There's a resident Mountie back in Wasag. It'd be quicker to go there than on to Darby, and he could just about take care of everything, I'll bet."

"Probably," Matter nodded, watching the man closely. The cynicism under the man's eyes had been the alert and now a warning chill brushed Matter's senses. He had been trained not to rely on blind luck.

But not to ignore the caution flares his instinct was detonating either.

"Yeah, but that would be out of your way," Matter said.

"No problem. Don't mind at all," the man said.

I'll bet, Matter thought. "Okay, let me see if there's anything worth saving in the car and I'll join you."

"Let me give you a hand," the man said, swinging out of the car.

"Don't bother," Matter said. "No sense in both of us getting muddy."

The truck driver was still at the bridge looking down on Matter's Laika. "Need some help?"

The cynic-eyed man answered for Matter. "Everything's under control."

"Want me to go on to Darby and get the MPs?" the truck driver offered.

"No need, but thanks anyway," Matter smiled lamely. "We're going back to Wasag and see the Mountie there."

"Staying in Wasag, hey? That's a nice place up there," the truck driver said conversationally.

"Up until a couple minutes ago I was enjoying it," Matter said.

The truck driver looked down the sharp embankment of the river. "You're going to have a bitch of a time getting your car out of there."

"It wasn't mine anyway," Matter said lightly. "Rented it in the States and had it shipped up here. Best thing that can be done with it now is to eliminate as many problems as possible. Stick around if you want to see it blow."

Matter guessed the truck driver would not leave until the car dissolved. Which was fine with him. He wanted the truck driver gone, but not too soon. Not so soon that the man with the lean eyes would be the only one standing over his back while he rummaged through the car.

The rear of the Laika had been smashed to the seats, the jellied methane tanks ruptured and oozed their contents over his luggage. He should have left all of his luggage at the motel, but there was a chance he would have actually found Philip today.

Besides, the Gimps would have searched the luggage for weapons.

The front, aside from a profusion of dents and scratches,

was relatively intact. At least the car had not prematurely activated itself.

The edges of the trunk were indistinguishable from the torn metal. He tried to kick it open but decided even if he got it open his clothes would be useless. He wrenched open the hood and activated the sodium charge.

Out of the corner of his eye he could see the man on the bridge watching him closely, watching what items he retrieved, watching for the careless move that would give him reason to send a bullet plowing into Matter's spine.

Just as well that there was no gun in the car. He decided to fake it, leaning through the open top and scooping up the first thing his fingers found. It was a plasticized map. He turned his back casually and stuffed it under his collar.

It was against the law to eliminate wreckage before the accident was investigated, but the insurance settlement was going to be messy enough without worrying about who had jurisdiction over the wreck. The local fuzz would be unhappy, but he'd worry about that later.

Worry *about* that. The squinty man's pronunciation of the *ou* diphthong had been Matter's firm clue. The man had spoken the words *Mountie* and *about* in the international midwestern accent, a sliding *aw* inflection.

Not the sharp pronunciation native Manitobans used as though they were saying *boat*.

A small slip, but it was enough. The man could have picked it up watching the States-based trid shows. Matter doubted the man's origin was Canadian, and probably not even North American.

Say, Dutch?

"How's it coming?" the squinty man asked.

"All right," Matter said. "I can't get the trunk open, so I guess that's about it."

The sodium grenade was armed and would obey the Federal regulations against littering in five minutes.

"Ready," he called and climbed up the embankment.

"You going to blow it before the cops get here?" the truck driver asked incredulously.

"Any second now," Matter said. "I'd suggest you clear out."

"You've got nerve," the truck driver whistled. "You can

bet I'm going to clear out. I don't want to be around here when the Gimps show up."

"Well, if my insurance brokers need you, I'm sure they'll be in touch. Thanks for your help," Matter said. He was in the squinty man's car, and they had backed out onto the highway and were heading for the mountains before the truck driver could answer.

The truck driver was happy he had not been asked for his idnumber. He hoped the KillCaptain would not think of the oversight.

"American, aren't you?" the squinty man asked. He was driving surely with one hand, the other hanging tensely by the side of his seat.

"Yes, I am. You from around here?"

They entered the mountains. Matter noticed the man did not bother to shift out of the electric drive and on to the meth even though they were up to speed limit.

"I live around Salton," the squinty man said.

Like hell you do, Matter thought. "Nice country around here," he said.

"You on vacation?"

"No, I'm with a trid production. Sort of an advance scout. We're thinking of doing a show on the Canadian prairies."

"Not much to see here, is there?" the man asked. "Just a lot of flat country except this one skimpy mountain. That's about all."

"That's what makes it so interesting," Matter said. "Most of our viewers in the States have never seen enough open country to see the horizon. It'll be a good show if we can work out the technics."

"What's the problem? Not enough power for the lasers?"

They had rounded the last clearing and were engulfed by the mountains. Matter appraised his situation. The mountains were under the Provincial Game Preserve and the Gimps were feisty when it came to guns on their turf. Matter had to ship the Laika into Canada just so that he could hide his paspistol in the valve cover. Customs had scanned the engine before allowing it into the country but had thought the extra lump of metal was simply another example of clumsy Russian engineering.

He had removed the pistol the evening before and had

left it at the motel. He wondered how much protection a plastic map was going to give him.

"No, power's not the problem," he said absently. "If we can't find enough, we'll bring in generators. Depth is the problem. Even with the holograms, the stereoscopic effect becomes negligible after a couple hundred feet. The angle gets too acute. For someone who has never seen it in person, a horizon thirty miles away becomes incomprehensible."

The squinty man nodded, faking interest. Matter complimented himself. It even sounded plausible to himself.

"The ancients imagined the sky was a dome over the earth," he continued. "That's important, because it tells us that after a certain point the illusion of depth is lost. There has to be an intermediate focal point, something the viewer can relate to. It's easy to make a room look a hundred feet long, but shoot the sky without any trees, for instance, and you might as well be shooting a painted backdrop."

"Uh, yeah, right. So what are you going to do?"

"Number of tricks we can use. We might pull the lasers farther apart and increase the angle. Or we might put a few objects in the foreground. Maybe a couple of Indians."

"Don't think there are many Indians left in Manitoba."

"Americans think there are. Well, we'll get something up close. As long as the viewer can see some definite depth, he won't complain too much. After that, everything becomes relative."

"Guess so," the man said and Matter decided it was time to pull the plug.

"Lots of things are relative," he prodded. "What one man thinks is criminal, another man thinks is sacred. Death is anathema to some people. To others, it's a simple necessity."

"Or a game," the man said quickly. He was alert now, but off guard. Matter had made a correct guess.

"Sure. Now you take a man who thinks glutting the world with kids is a holy mission. A religious duty. He doesn't give a damn about the consequences, about who is going to feed all those kids. He has no concept of the strain he's putting on the world ecology and he's too dumb to care. All he has is some fuzzy notion about kids being

good and self-control being animalistic. So he proves his superiority by rutting every female in heat."

The man's eyes squinted closer, losing even their glaze of false mirth. "I take it you've got some better answers."

"Even answers are relative," Matter said broadly. "We just can't do away with all kids. I just think a few healthy kids are better than a lot of starving ones."

The man did not reply. Matter watched the blood drain from his face. He cleared his throat, his left hand tensing beside the seat. "You have any kids of your own?"

"Christ, no," Matter said.

"Then it's pretty easy for you to talk, isn't it?"

Matter grinned and leaned against the car door. "I'll bet you've lost count of how many kids you've spawned."

The man worked his jaw. "You said you were with a trid production. Just what call letters might those be? Maybe HEROD?"

Matter smiled coldly. "Let's just say my biggest competitor is FROG."

"Uh huh," the man said, his hand inching farther down the seat.

Matter shoved his hand under his vest. "I'd recommend that you not reach for that gun," he said levelly.

"Why shouldn't I? You're not carrying anything."

"That's the trouble with you FROGs," Matter said. "All you can see is what happens to be smack in front of you. You don't consider the possibilities; for instance, what I may have gotten out of my car."

"I was watching you," the man said. "You didn't get anything." He considered briefly. "But assuming you did, how do you want to play it?"

"That's up to you," Matter shrugged. "If you go for your gun, I'll have the wheel out of your hand and run us both off this mountain. On the other hand, if I *do* have a gun I'll kill you quicker. But you'd probably jerk the wheel and we'd still wind up in a ravine."

"Which you wouldn't mind too much," the man said icily.

"I've been dying for a long time," Matter said. "But remember, you're the one who has to preserve life at any cost. You're the one who believes life has to multiply. I might point out that you can't do much multiplying if you're dead."

"You're not afraid of dying because you have nothing to live for," the man said. "Me, I've got meaning in my life, and when I die I've got eternal life waiting for me."

"Oh, horseshit," Matter said lightly.

They were over the crest of a ridge now. Matter spotted the tourist observation tower showing itself through the birches. There was a parking lot beside the tower. On the other side of the road, the ridge disappeared into a long cliff.

Handy that his curiosity had been piqued enough that he had taken a second glance at it on his way down the mountain. Maybe too handy for sheer coincidence.

"I don't think you've got a gun," the FROG said finally.

"There's one sure way to find out."

"Amen. We'll pull in up ahead. If you've got a gun, the joke's on me. But if you don't, you might have enough time to bail out before I nail you. How's that grab you?"

"Sounds fair enough."

"Righteousness regulates," the man intoned and smashed his foot against the brake.

Matter hit the door latch. He heard the gun boom and saw the window splinter in front of his face as he kicked backward out of the car.

He landed on his back and skidded over the pavement as the man came piling out of the driver's seat. The man wasted a second flipping his gun to his right hand and Matter took advantage of the delay to dive for the brush. The gun boomed again and Matter felt the air crackle around his ears from the concussion of the twin bullets.

Amateur, he thought. Trying for a clean kill in the head. Should be going for the big target, torso.

He saw the sight-seeing landing across the road, fringed by plastic beams, overlooking the sloping drop to the intermediate valley below. The FROG lowered his aim and flat-nosed dumdums began splattering through the bushes.

He had thought it was a good place to dump a body, but he hadn't expected the body was going to be *his*.

The man came running after him, hard footsteps interspersed with the thundering cracks of the pistol. Matter hoped his quick glance of the terrain was adequate. He was rapidly revising his opinion of the FROG's marks-

manship as he saw the plastic rail puff up from two more of the dumdums a split second before he jumped.

He hit the slope on his buttocks and slid, sending a flurry of stones before him that bounced and flailed in the air until they rattled to a stop a hundred feet below the landing. He twisted and flattened against the nearest tree.

The impact of a double round of bullets into the bark momentarily saddened him. But the angry pity for the defenseless tree passed quickly as he considered the alternative . . . bullets in *him*. Still, the tree was defenseless and even if it did not fall under the World Wildlife Welfare regulations, one had to respect the general helplessness of plants.

Matter reflected upon the legal complexities as the FROG pumped a few more rounds into the tree. *How many bullets did that damned thing hold?* The answer would come eventually without the aid of a shot of memory stimulant.

"Hey, you Fundamentalist idiot," he yelled up the slope. "Willfully harming a living organism is a misdemeanor."

The man paused and reloaded his pistol. *Sixteen*, the answer came creeping to Matter's consciousness. Sixteen big doubles, .50 caliber casings necked down for .30 caliber slugs, stuffed in tandem staggered load position. It made a cumbersome pistol. Cumbersome and nasty.

"Hey, that really worries me," the FROG said and put another double round into the tree. With enough patience, the man could probably chop down the tree.

"Somehow I didn't think it would," Matter said. Canada had led the way in enacting the greenery protection laws with some of the stiffest penalties in the world. But the man was no Canadian, so he would plead international immunity.

"Well, just don't hit a bear by accident," he added. "Capital offense, killing an endangered species in a game preserve."

The man replied with a few more shots, one round missing the tree entirely. Matter guessed he was tiring of the sport. Squeezing off more than twenty rounds with that blunderbuss could tire anyone.

"You seem pretty hip on the law," the man said. "But I'm forgetting you're a HEROD. And HERODs know all there is, right?"

"To the letter," Matter called.

Another double round chunked into the tree. "Think so, huh?"

"At least I know there's a big difference between a five year murder rap and a life sentence for game genocide."

That quieted the shooting. Five years maximum for murder. A light fine with even a fledgling lawyer. But kill a member of an endangered species? Matter could not remember *anyone* beating that Gimp rap.

"The Gimps ought to be here pretty soon," Matter volunteered. "They can hear that cannon of yours all the way back to the Game Preserve Station. Of course you can take a chance that I'll stick my head out long enough for you to get a clear shot. But you have one hell of an imagination if you really think I'm *that* dumb."

He could sense the man glancing nervously up the road. The Gimps could be notoriously unkind toward offenders, especially ones who punctured their trees and international immunity be damned.

"Thanks for the target practice," the man finally yelled.

"Any time," Matter yelled back.

"I'll be seeing you again and next time you won't have a tree to hide behind."

Next time, I'll be prepared, Matter thought.

He heard the footsteps run from the railing. A moment later, the car spun gravel as it turned and headed back down the road toward Darby. The man knew where Matter was headed. The FROG intelligence network had been doing its homework.

Not that his presence was a secret. The Society had made his reservations and he had arrived in Wasag the night before in full Kill uniform. What did surprise him was the rapidity with which the FROGs were moving to intercept him.

The hissing whine of a helicopter interrupted his thoughts and he glanced up. The green and brown colors of the Gimps were wafting through the air. He had not really expected the Game Preservation boys to show up so quickly.

He was going to have to make a fast choice. Probably the smart thing would be to meet the Gimps, tell them who

he was, solicit their help. After all, *he* didn't put the slugs in the tree.

On the other hand, it was going to be touchy explaining the paspistol in his motel room. Which could be turned to an advantage. Running from the Gimps might help construct a believable cover and gain his admission into Philip's commune.

The chopper skirted the area inquisitively. It spotted the burned tire tracks and veered toward Darby, following the speeding car.

Matter crawled up the incline and dusted himself on the road, glancing around for a ride back to Wasag. None was coming and he checked the road map. The scale was too small for an accurate idea of the distance to the resort town, but he guessed it was better than ten klicks.

Distantly, he heard the chattering of a machine gun, punctuated with the heavy booming of the hand cannon. Gradually, the chattering took dominance until the booming faded among the birches and pines.

Kiss one FROG goodbye, he thought hopefully and immediately his subconscious questioned. A childhood tale drifted through his mind. Hell of a note if the FROG turned into a prince.

The possibility raised innumerable avenues of thought. What if all the little tadpoles in the world grew up to be princes? What if all the FROGs were correct and the only purpose in life was to create more life?

He trudged up the road, rephrasing the Law of Contradictions amiably, a slightly schizoid murderer who believed in love, peace, and infanticide.

II

THE COLD EVENING was approaching by the time he walked, stiff-legged and the soles of his feet burning, into the resort town.

"Lost your key?" the clerk asked, looking at the sweaty dust caked on Matter's face and the dense grass stains on his stocking.

"I was out hiking," Matter said. Stupid of him to have yanked the useless car keys and forgotten the motel keys in the car. "Must have dropped it."

"Terrible, terrible. Shame on you," the clerk said. "Now some burglar will find it and rob our rooms."

Matter was going to point out that it made little difference if someone did find it. There were over four thousand doors in Wasag and most of them opened with a featureless encoded square of metal. A burglar would have to be hard pressed to try a key in all those doors.

And he would have to be a veritable magician to reconstruct it from the molten remains of the Laika.

He let the point pass. The clerk was a fringe member of the property owning class and Matter had never uncovered any point worth discussing with a property owner other than taxes.

"You shouldn't worry about it," Matter consoled. "I was off the regular trails. Not very likely that anyone would find it."

"It makes for a terrible inconvenience," the clerk said testily and decided Matter's carelessness needed amplification. "You should never have taken the key with you. Legally, the key is our property, you know. You should always leave it at the desk when you go out."

"You're absolutely correct," Matter said obligingly. "Now may I have a duplicate key so I can get into my room?"

"The only duplicate belongs to the house. If you lose that, we'll have to burn our way through the door to get into your room. That would be expensive."

"I doubt that will be necessary."

"How do you propose we get in if you lose your key again?"

"I won't lose it," Matter promised. "I'll be very careful."

"You'll have to leave it here whenever you go out."

"I realize that," Matter said. He was beginning to wish homos were not so amply protected by law.

The clerk hesitated. "I suppose it will be all right, since you're a KillCaptain and all . . . but I do wish you'd let us code the door for your fingerprints."

"No, I'm a bit old-fashioned," Matter said. He never knew when he might not be wearing his fingerprints.

The clerk sighed wistfully. "Yes, I gathered you were a

bit old-fashioned this morning." He handed Matter the duplicate key. "Very well, but do be careful with it. I know you're not like the rest of those tourists from their smelly cities, but please realize that I would have to send all the way to Winnipeg for a replacement if you lose this one."

"I really will be careful," Matter said.

"And I always thought you HEROD people were so careful."

"It must be the clean air. It's invigorating."

A few people were still gorging themselves on steaks when he walked past the restaurant, but the day games were thankfully silent.

He pressed the key to the elevator wall and let it hush him to his floor. The luminescent hallway, quiet and softly glowing, seemed safe enough, but if a FROG could attempt to nail him on the highway one could certainly follow him to the motel.

He walked carefully to his room, glancing around for anything that would start the cautionary ticking in his mind, satisfying himself that his room was secure. A shower and a change of stocking were going to feel welcome.

Matter stripped, tossing his bodystocking into the ping cleaner and punched the turquoise button on the room's computer board. The closet revolved easily and exposed the shower third of it. He smeared depilatory and cleanser cream over his body.

While he waited for the cleanser to soak in, he waved the telephone awake and placed a call to Chicago.

Josephine answered and raised both eyebrows at Matter's image.

"Good evening, Captain," she smiled. "You seem to be doing well."

"Hi, Josie," Matter said. "Has Lembeck gotten back into town yet?"

"No he hasn't, sir. He should be back in . . . oh . . . two or three days."

"Okay, fine. When he comes in tell him that I'm staying at the motel as per instructions and wondering what I do now."

"Didn't he give you your instructions?" Josephine asked. Matter liked her. She was almost the mother hen for the Chicago Kill Command.

"Just to dig around and see if I uncover anything about that stupid FROG scheme," Matter answered. "Tell the truth, Josie. Is Lembeck trying to phase me out? What the hell makes him think I'm going to find a starship in the middle of Manitoba?"

"The colonel must have very good reasons for sending you to Canada, Captain," Josephine soothed. "Have you located the commune yet?"

Matter grimaced. "The FROGs tried to run me off the road while I was trying to get to it."

"There, you see? There must be something important up there if the FROGs are moving so quickly," Josephine said.

"They were successful, by the way," Matter said. "The car is a loss. Better inform the brokers."

"Nice friend you have," Josephine said.

"I don't think Philip had anything to do with it," Matter said. He touched his face and inspected the beard stubble that the depilatory had loosened. "Well, I guess I'll take a shower now. I'd appreciate if you'd tell Lembeck I called. Tell him I'll have another go at the commune, but I'll be back here at the White Willow in a couple of days if he should happen to call in."

"Take care, Captain," Josephine said cheerily; and just before she hung off, she added seriously, "Incidentally, it might be wise if you use a scramble phone next time."

He turned on the shower and let the modulated high frequency ping his skin clean. Josephine knew more than she was saying.

It was a good motel. He could picture the clerk gloating over the water readings as he activated the rinse for the second time in one day.

He was listening lazily to the recirculatory pumps when the door whispered behind him. A maid entered the room.

Now that's a good trick, considering he had the only duplicate key.

"Hi," he said. Since the combination bed-closet-shower occupied more than half of the room, it was difficult to ignore her. He let the water play over his skinned knuckles, inspecting the chipped flesh.

"Good evening, sir," the maid said surprisedly. She recovered from the shock of finding him in the room quickly and let her eyes play over his body. He decided he liked

her review of him. It reminded him of the warm water that gurgled over him.

She cocked her head appreciatively, honestly or simply from good manners. "I came to straighten your room, but it seems you haven't been in all day. Is there anything else I can do for you?"

"Come to think of it, there is," he said lightly. The water ended and the warm air dried him, sucking the moisture through the vacuum vents. He waited until he was thoroughly dried. Check out time seemed to be getting closer than he had anticipated.

She glanced around the cubicle. "And what would that be, sir?" she asked as though she didn't know.

Matter stepped out of the shower and pressed the white button to return the closet. He had the paspistol out of the spring holster and into his hand before the girl could move.

"As a starter," he said easily, "you can take your clothes off."

She frowned. "Now really, sir. I'm only the maid. If you'd like special company, I'm sure the lodge can provide someone who can better appreciate your sadomasochistic tendencies. There is a fine selection of playfriends in Wasag and I'm sure the clerk could recommend one."

"No argument there. I've seen the sales literature," Matter smiled. "And you're right. Some of them are delectable. Now that we've taken care of the sales pitch, would you mind taking your clothes off?"

She bit her lip and Matter flinched. He had not been expecting the girl to have a cyanide capsule under her lip. He was inwardly complimenting her resourcefulness when he noticed she was still standing.

He nodded relievedly, but reminded himself to keep a closer watch on the girl. "Look, I'm not going to hurt you or make love to you. Just humor me and everything will be all right."

"I've heard that before. Why don't you want to make love to me?" the girl asked, feigning wounded pride.

"Later I could be interested, but not right now."

"And you don't want a playfriend?"

"Quite sure."

"Do you find something wrong with me?" she asked, playing for time.

"That remains to be seen," Matter said, waving the passpistol. "If you don't start getting undressed, we never will know."

"Maybe there's something wrong with you," the girl said dangerously.

"Number one, I'm impatient," Matter said. "Come on now. Off."

She sighed resignedly and peeled off her body stocking. *Nothing to be ashamed of*, Matter observed. Very tidily put together, except for the small bulge under her left breast.

The girl winced as he reached forward and ripped off the plastic skin pocket. A flat object, contoured to fit against her rib cage, dropped into his hand.

"I was wondering how you got in here," he said and tossed the microcoder across the room. "Clever."

"It's just possible that I used the office key," the girl argued.

"I'm glad you didn't try to tell me that before," Matter said. "I've got the office key. You didn't do your homework very well. Now turn around. I want to see what other surprises you're hiding."

"Help yourself," she said saucily and turned obediently. Matter ran his eyes over her smooth back and swelling hips. He found another bulge blended with the flesh at the cleft of her buttocks.

He began to reach for it and she stopped him with an upturned wrist.

"Don't touch that," she warned, twisting her wrist so he could see the inside of her palm. There was a bluish spot in its center.

"Epidermal switch," Matter said respectfully.

"Good for you."

"I assume it's connected with that lump on your fanny."

"Good for you again. There's enough gel to blow this room over the mountain."

He moved around her. "Any more detonation switches on you?"

"One is enough, isn't it?"

He looked at her thoughtfully. "Possibly. You don't mind if I have a look, do you?"

Very nicely put together, he thought. He dragged his eyes over her more carefully. Pert firm breasts, taut stomach muscles, nicely rounded thighs.

And a small jagged mark peeping up at him from under her navel. It was less than an inch long, a zigzag mark like several w's run together, too brightly red to be a scar.

"What's this?" he asked, pointing the paspistol at the mark.

"A tattoo," the girl said.

"Ask and you shall know," Matter muttered. "It reminds me of a zodiacal symbol, like half of an Aquarian mark. Is there some special significance?"

"You're very astute. The mark will be completed when the age of brotherhood is completed. Or do you think the age of love is already here?"

"Not that I've noticed." It could have been worse. A FROG symbol, for instance. Still, the tattoo tingled his curiosity. There was something about it that he should have remembered.

He shrugged and returned the paspistol to the closet, turning his back purposely as he selected an iridescent green body stocking.

The girl blinked. "Is that the end of the interrogation?"

"For the time being," Matter said. "We're not getting very far this way. If you want to be cooperative, you could tell me what you hoped to find in my room."

"Some information about you," the girl said candidly. "Already I know you have illegal possession of a firearm in a game preserve."

"You should have asked. It's a lot simpler that way. My name is Calder. I'm up here enjoying a bachelor vacation from my two wives."

"Do you normally carry a gun when you're vacationing? Besides, I don't think you're rich enough to afford two wives."

"Not at the same time, no. But there are such things as not renewing a license," Matter said. "As far as the gun is concerned, it's to protect me from uninvited guests dropping into my room."

"Is that why you are putting it in your arm holster?" she asked.

Matter smiled, slipping the gun under a fold of cloth and setting the spring.

"I still don't believe you," the girl said defiantly. "Middle class clods don't drive Russian sports cars. By the way, where is it? I didn't see it in the garage. That's why I thought you were still out."

"Ran out of meth and that was a damned careless assumption on your part. If you're going to do sneaky work, you can't rely on the obvious." He inspected himself in the closet holomage and shuddered. If nothing else, he looked like a tourist.

"And I suppose you're the one to teach me," the girl said bittersweetly. She stepped beside Matter and riffled through his clothes. "Do you mind if I borrow something? I don't think a maid's uniform will be very appropriate if you're taking me to dinner."

"Am I taking you to dinner?"

"Of course. You said yourself we weren't getting anywhere here. We can introduce ourselves over dinner." She sorted carefully through his clothes.

"Good idea. I'd rather have dinner with you than with that bent office clerk downstairs. Besides, I'm hungry."

"Did you work up an appetite walking back from your car? Don't you have anything nice in here?"

"There's a black satin you might like," Matter indicated. "Why are you so interested in my car?"

"Oh, it could be a clue," she said and shivered. "I don't like black. It reminds me of ugly things."

"Worried about dying?" Matter asked. "You might try something orange, except the Chinese used to dress their condemned criminals in orange."

"Have you condemned me so soon?" she asked lightly. "I'm sorry if you have, because I'm not what you think I am."

Matter smiled. "I know you're no maid."

"I mean, I'm not what you think I *might* be."

What was that supposed to mean? That she wasn't a Fundamentalist? Matter shelved the question as he watched her slide into his favorite suit, the only one Josephine had

not picked. He had to admit that the white knit looked better on her than it ever had on him.

The girl poked indifferently at the eighty dollar steak. The restaurant was filling again with the night tourists, jamming into the dining room to devour the miniature meat.

"Don't you care for steak?" he asked.

"Yes, but this is more than I can eat," she said.

He glanced at the steak resting beside a slice of hydroponic tomato. The tomato was winning the quantity race. He finished his cakes, looking at her through his eyebrows.

"You've hardly eaten at all. Do you belong around here? Most of the tourists would have gobbled up that steak even if they had to vomit it back up a minute later."

"That's stupidly wasteful. It sounds like the ancient Romans," she said and dabbed her lips with a napkin. "No, I'm not from Wasag."

"Sure you wouldn't like something else to eat?"

"Thank you, but no. This really was more than enough." She looked at him over the napkin, soft brown eyes blending with the subtleties of the muted lighting. "To be honest, I can't stand reconstituted dehydrated meat and that's what this is."

"My God," Matter faked. "An unmitigated carnivore. Fresh meat, yet. I suppose you like it while it's still bloody and warm from the hunt. Sorry, I didn't mean that. Look, why don't you have a salad or something that will ease my stomach."

"You're a softy. Really, I'm not hungry." She looked past her napkin at him, then smoothed it carefully on the table. "You're very generous and I don't understand why. Is this one of your 'sneaky' tricks to lull me into a false security? You have every reason to be less than cordial to me."

"Because you snuck into my room? Nonsense. The room was the motel's property, not mine."

"But you were holding temporary possession."

"Everything is temporary," Matter said and smiled happily. "Now why should I be angry with you? You're a good-looking girl."

"And you like good-looking girls. I didn't mean angry so much as suspicious of me."

"Actually, I was suspicious until I found the lock coder on you."

"And that makes it all better?"

The waiter rolled to their table and he shifted his attention to it. Her entrance into his room had been disconcerting and would have been even worse so if she had used a key. Supposedly, he had the only duplicate key. If she had used one, then there was a conspiracy between her and the clerk.

On the other hand, the truck driver could have gotten the key out of the Laika before it blew and passed it on to her. That was even worse.

He was glad she had used a microcoder. It cleared her of implication with the FROGS. It was also keeping her alive a little longer.

"You're playing games with your riddles," the girl pouted. "Why aren't you asking me any questions? I think it's your turn."

"Sure, I have a lot of questions." He selected a wine from the tray and tasted it. It was overly sweet, but he guessed the girl would like it.

"Then ask me something."

The wine was artificial syrup on second taste. "I figure you'll tell me even if I don't ask."

She sipped her wine and nodded her approval. "You're very sure of yourself, aren't you? That may not be wise."

"Perhaps," he said. He rolled the glass in his hand and let his eyes drift over her shoulders, appreciating the spaced knit pulled taut over her breasts. Her body had just the slightest hints of imperfection that made her more interesting. The knees a shade too angular, the chin a touch too square. Tiny discrepancies, but enough to tell him that she had not been selectively bred.

A movement at the entrance of the restaurant caught him and he watched peripherally as a Mountie entered and scanned the crowd.

"Since you won't ask any questions, I'll volunteer some answers," the girl said, missing Matter's sideways glance. "I'll tell you my name if you'll tell me yours."

"I already have." The Mountie was peering over the diners intently.

"No, I mean your real name."

"What's wrong with Calder? Suppose I tell you I'm not here on vacation at all but that I'm with the Geneva Statistical Survey? Would that be more satisfactory?"

"That's closer," she said and shrugged. "All right, my name is Mary."

"Is that your real name?"

"Of course not, and it serves you right."

He chuckled and looked at her dark eyes. "I like you, false Mary."

"Thank you, Mister Calder." The girl returned his chuckle with an open smile. "I like you, too. You have a nice face. Is it real?"

"Certainly. Why do you ask?" The clerk had joined the Mountie at the portal and was helping him pick out faces. *Damned fag.*

"I thought it might be artificial and that was why you didn't want to make love. Do you mind if I touch?"

"Help yourself." The Mountie finally spotted him and began moving through the room.

"It feels real," the girl mused, running her fingers lightly over his cheek. "But then, they're doing amazing things with plastics nowadays."

"It's real," he assured. He caught her fingers and kissed them as the Mountie stepped up to their table.

"Excuse me for interrupting, Mister Timber, but I wondered if I might have a word with you?" the Mountie asked politely.

"Mm," Matter said. The girl's lips parted to question the acquisition of his latest name and he stopped her quickly, letting his fingers slide down her hand and close over the skin switch.

"Do you own a Laika roadster, Mister Timber?"

"My company did," Matter said. The girl's face was clouding darkly. He tightened his fingers against the palm. "I wrecked it this afternoon."

"Indeed you did." Being assigned to a resort area had long since taught patience to Sergeant Buddenbrock. "Would you mind explaining why you disintegrated it so quickly without making a report first?"

"Mister Timber is a very headstrong man. He enjoys taking chances," the girl said. She watched him closely as he located the hard nubbin under her palm.

Matter smiled coldly at her. "Force of habit," he said to the Mountie. "I was under the impression that junk should be discarded as soon as possible after consumption. It's against the law to leave trash laying around in the States. The antilitter device is standard equipment on all American cars."

"We do have the same regulations in Canada," Buddenbrock said, bored. "But we normally expect an accident to be reported before the wreckage is cleared. You could have caused a very unpleasant brush fire on the plains."

"Sorry, I guess I wasn't thinking," Matter said.

"Another one of Mister Timber's qualities," the girl added lightly.

"Thanks, love," Matter said and squeezed the palm switch sharply with his thumb. Nothing happened.

Matter released the girl's hand. "I do apologize, officer. It was stupid of me."

Buddenbrock nodded. "May I see your id, Mister Timber?"

"I left it in my room."

"I see," Buddenbrock sighed. "Was anyone hurt?"

Matter watched the girl rub her palm. "No, nobody was hurt."

"You're fortunate, Mister Timber," Buddenbrock said.

"Yes, isn't he?" the girl murmured.

"Thank you, officer," Matter said. "Suppose I stop by your office in the morning and we'll clear up this accident? I imagine there are a few other things you would like to have clarified and I'll be sure to bring my id with me."

"Thay may be a very good idea," Buddenbrock said. It was not a serious infraction of the law and there was no point in riling a tourist. Except that he had doubts about this particular tourist.

"I'll see you then," Matter said.

"You'll be expected," the Mountie said and automatically tipped his hat. "Have a pleasant evening, Mister Timber . . . miss."

The girl batted her lashes at the policeman as he left, watching his gray summer uniform shadow through the

crowd. Matter watched him also, keeping his eyes averted long enough for the girl to slip her drug into his wine.

"So you ran out of meth?" she teased.

"About the same way you had a detonation switch in your hand."

"I fibbed about that," she admitted. "You may be *too* sure of yourself. How did you know it wasn't real? You could have destroyed the entire motel."

He downed his wine, seeing the girl watch him with satisfaction. "A palm switch is too vulnerable for a girl. It's used only when death seems certain and is preferable to being caught. We could be making love and I might grab your hand too hard. That would be a climax to end all climaxes, literally. No, love, that switch doesn't activate a charge."

She cocked her head and he winked. "I don't think you have a bomb on you at all."

"But wouldn't you like to be sure?" she tempted.

He felt the drug seep into his head, replacing the cautionary ticking with a dull buzz. "It could be fun looking for it."

She looked at him carefully. "Do you know what I think? I think you may be the one, Mister Calder-Timber."

"The one to go looking for your bomb?"

"No, the one I'm looking for."

He tossed the comment back into the recesses of his mind to speculate, but he was already sluggish. His mind regurgitated the comment.

"Take you home?" he asked as they turned to the door. "As you have learned, I'm in no position to offer you a ride."

"That's all right," she said pertly. "We're going to spend the night together."

"Wonderful, but I wish I hadn't drunk the wine. We're not going to have a very exciting evening."

"You'd be surprised," she said.

He let his guard drop, too interested in the way her body slithered under the knit as she walked out the portal in front of him. Otherwise, he might have seen the man outside the door before the splinter gun was jammed into his back.

"Why don't you just hop in the car there," the man

breathed in his ear. "Let's hope you have more intelligence than to try something profoundly stupid. We wouldn't want to make a big mess for the Sanitation Department on their nice, clean sidewalk, would we?"

"'Solutely not," Matter slurred jovially. It was all he could do to keep his tongue in his mouth. The girl slid into the back seat before him and motioned him in.

He sidled into the car and collapsed against the foam cushions. "God, what kept you people? I'm bushed."

"Sorry if we kept you waiting, Captain," the gunman said, steadying the gun at Matter's head across the seat back.

"Oh, don' menshun it," Matter sighed and put his head on the girl's lap. He was asleep before the car left the city limits.

III

"WHAT DO YOU THINK?" she asked as the driver and the man with the gun lifted Matter out of the car and carried him into the Quonset hut at the circle of the horseshoe.

The man stood outside the car balanced on his cane, looking after them thoughtfully. The cool air off the plains was wisping around his porous kneecap, and he was beginning to feel an aching chill through his leg.

There was more than the chill of the night air that brought pain to him. The drugged man had carried an iciness with him, a coldness that brushed against Philip.

"I'm not sure," Philip said slowly. "It looks like Matter, but that doesn't mean much."

"He said his name was Calder and the policeman called him Timber. Do those mean anything?"

"Not unless it's another one of his little jokes. Both names end with an *er* suffix. They may be his way of giving us a clue."

"I hadn't thought of that," she said. "Do you think he did it without being aware of it? I mean, I told him my name was Mary because it was the first thing that I thought of."

Philip led the way across the gravel to the hut, caning his way. "That's because you are an open person, Stuckey. You do things honestly. Matter is a devious and careful man, on the other hand. He can be charming, or very obnoxious. But he never does anything unintentionally."

She tossed her head stubbornly in the night. "Yes, I was introduced to his obnoxiousness."

"Telling you to take your clothes off? I heard that," Philip nodded. "The voice sounds the same also, but some work on the larynx could account for that. Incidentally, what was that business with the Mountie? I missed some of the transmission."

Stuckey shrugged at her failure. "He was squeezing my palm while the policeman was talking. I don't know how, but he guessed I didn't have a bomb on me."

"Matter would take a risk like that," Philip mused. "We'll have Brad take the transmitter off you tomorrow. We won't be needing it any longer."

"Don't you want to know what he is doing?"

"Of course, but we'll all be watching him from now on."

They entered the hut and Philip stood over Matter, looking down on the familiar face that hid nightmares. "Is it real?" he asked.

"It's either real or it's a perfect graft," Leo said. He had taken the splinter gun out of his side holster and rigged it on the night stand. Denny had already settled into a chair and was waiting for Matter's awakening with a bored yawn. He tapped his pockets for his pack of smokes.

Philip worked his mouth soundlessly. If the man on the bed was a facsimile, he was flawless.

"Let me know when he comes to," he said at last. "And Denny, stay awake and off those damned weeds, huh?"

"Aw, come on, Philip. I need something to relax me," Denny argued. "It's not every night I help kidnap someone."

"Just stay awake," Philip repeated sternly and approved the rigged splinter gun with a glance.

He went back into the cool night air and sat on the concrete step, conflicting thoughts crossing his mind. The northern lights were hanging closely over his head, casting a false moonlight over the sprouting crops.

"So he was driving a Russian sports car?" he thought aloud.

Stuckey settled herself beside him. "Is that significant?"

"Could be," Philip smiled grimly. "We met during the Okhotsk conflict. Just before Matter transferred out of the armed mercenaries, I mentioned that I was saving my combat pay to buy a sports car when I got out. Matter got shipped out and a week later I got my knee blown off."

Stuckey frowned sympathetically.

"Which pretty well ended any ideas I had of circuit racing. Matter would remember that sort of thing and he'd be the type to come driving up in a sports car, just for old time's sake. And a Russian sports car, for good measure. That's the way he is. Anyone else would have been afraid of hurting my feelings, but not my old friend."

"He really is obnoxious," Stuckey said.

"Frankly, I prefer it that way," Philip said. "I got enough of that 'hire-the-handicapped' crap to last me the rest of my life. Condescending remark-hedging is a pain in the ass."

"I'm sorry," Stuckey said quietly.

"Hell, don't be," Philip said. "I said it only as another example why this man may be legitimate."

He draped his arm around her and found her shivering. She was heading into a fistful of trouble and he felt sorry for her. He wanted to tell her how much he felt sorry, but that would have necessitated dredging out old memories.

"I hope I can pull it off," she said.

"Don't worry about it. Matter's not the only HEROD in the world, you know," he said. "If it doesn't work, we can always find another one."

"Wasn't he your friend once?"

"We fought together," Philip agreed. "But that doesn't always lead to friendships. I know how his mind works, but that's the only reason I have suggested him."

She was quiet for awhile, soft tremors rippling through her. "Do you think I may have given him too large a dose?"

"I doubt it," Philip shook his head. "If it really is Matter in there, he knew perfectly well you were drugging him and went along with it willingly."

"You're confident it's him?"

He pulled his arm back and cupped his fist on his legs, leaning into the coldness around them and peering into the darkness of the grain fields that stretched into the night.

"Sorry, Stuckey. I'm afraid it is."

IV

ARCHCOMMODORE GUDTSLER was in uncommonly good spirits. He had spent the morning reading the latest reports that had come trickling over the datatran and had found them reassuring.

Better than reassuring. He had found them lucidly rewarding.

Each row of figures had sent a warm thrill of almost sexual pleasure coursing through him. He had never doubted the Gabriel Project's feasibility, but to read the actual production data was surely the hand of the All-Productive reaching forth and stroking his brow.

His Excellency, the Most Holy Schicten I, second pope of the arisen church, would be equally pleased. He hoped. Schicten had been in angry sorts the past month, soured by the legislation presented to the moronic World Congress. His Excellency would greet the progress reports as tonics.

How appropriately the early semantics had chosen their phrases, the ArchCommodore reflected. Such a perfectly apt and illustrious phrase was *in good spirits*. How well it summed up the whole of man's existence.

In three barely uttered words, the Creator was invoked and manifested Himself, entwining His totality with man's lesser passions.

When the spirit resides in man, Gudtsler murmured solemnly to himself, *righteousness is regulated and mankind lives to the fullest moderation*.

He was eager to tell his good news to Schicten immediately, but his hand stayed over the screen. His Excellency was scheduled to spend the entire morning with the lobbyists, playing their insipid games.

Expedience was a painful thing to behold. Pagans all of them, with not an ounce of fervor in their syphilitic bones, but even the Most Holy had to stoop to their wretched level to utilize their questionable politics. Man's world was loathsome indeed.

He decided not to call the Most Holy. Schicten would appreciate it if the news was delivered personally. By the time Gudtsler walked through the catacombs to Schicten's tower, the morning's sparring with the politicians would be ended.

Gudtsler stretched himself behind the mock altar that served as his desk. The free lovers had thought God had been destroyed in the vileness they had created, but they underestimated His power. They had only induced God to wash His hands of this cesspool, beckoning the true believers to a new and virginal world, unspoiled by philosophical droppings.

A world free even from the butchering HEROD Society, that band of international child murderers. A new world safe from all of the sinners, beyond the third constellation, awaiting the plentiful and blessed seed of the Holy Fundamentalists to create a new galactic diocese.

He spread his hands reverently on the altar, imagining the orbiting platforms that awaited the joining of the immense ion drive. Waiting to take them—the Brotherhood of the FROG—to their new universe.

He flipped through his office memoranda, absently noting obscure facts and fancies. Until that dawning of the new glory of man's loins, it was a sluggish battle between the graft-infested World Congress and the Brotherhood of the Fundamental Religious Orthodoxy General Assembly. A discouraging amnesty that was held together only by the delicate tact of the pope.

Political wranglings were beyond Gudtsler. Why did the church need permission to spend its own funds for the Project? How could the world governments assume the authority to tell the church how to spend its own money?

The lights were sacredly dim in the imported catacombs as he padded soundlessly over the rough flooring. Three new nuns had been brought in according to the day schedule, but his greeting to them would have to wait until after his audience with the Most Holy.

His Excellency demanded alertness and an hour's dalliance with each of the novices could sap the strength from even the most hardy of God's disciples.

Gudtsler had an increasingly nagging question. He could easily understand why God had made the procreation act so blissfully intense, that sweet pain the free lovers misin-

terpreted and which the HERODs scoffed at, but which he, in total acceptance of God's will, adhered to and practiced strictly.

But why had He made it so physically demanding? And especially for a man whose hair was graying so copiously?

A new face turned the corner of one of the cubicles, a face glowing with hesitant anticipation, attempting a smile open with invitation.

The novice flushed instantly as she saw the yellow braid encrusting Gudtsler's red cloak.

"Oh! Forgive me, Father," she stammered. "I did not recognize you."

Gudtsler returned his most paternal smile. The novice was a fetching little thing.

"Ask not for forgiveness, child, but rather what you can do for your faith. Remember, there is no greater joy than to succumb to God's bidding. There is no reason to be apologetic."

She knelt before him and clutched the tails of his cloak, burying her kisses into it. "Then . . . we must do His bidding, Father."

"Unfortunately, not now, child," Gudtsler said, hoping his voice was as roundly mellow to her as it sounded to him. "The Most Holy beckons me."

"The pope himself?" the novice whispered, looking up with large eyes.

"I am his *confidant*," Gudtsler said, allowing a trace of forgivable pride to enter his voice.

"You must go to him now?"

"There is certain information."

"But Father," she said uncertainly, "to walk by me now while my body yearns for its initiation into the holiest of holy rites . . . would this not be a violation of God's will?"

Her insolence surprised him, but he reminded himself that she was only a novice. Calmly, he contained his momentary shock.

"You are but a tile in the mosaic of His infinite wisdom, child," he intoned. "The business that I must discuss with the Most Holy Schicten transcends all such single tiles and, rather, incorporates an entire pattern. To walk by you now is not a violation of ethics, therefore, but a holy necessity instead."

The novice dropped her eyes. "Forgive me, Father. I spoke out of turn. But the moment I have waited for is so close at hand . . ."

"I can understand your eagerness," Gudtsler said, contemplating the pinkness of her tongue.

Rank was a heavy sword to carry. He would have liked to carry this child into her cubicle, to delight in her youthfulness, but an ArchCommodore could not risk contamination by a novice.

A *meaningless rule*, Gudtsler thought to himself peevishly although he had advocated the rule early in his ministry. Every novice was medically inspected before admission to the catacombs. But fertility was another matter entirely and an ArchCommodore must save his exaltedness only for the nuns who had proven their fertility by bearing at least one healthy infant free of the devil's venereal poisons.

A sterile nun could be useful in training initiate priests in their final rites. A laudable, if not the penultimate, exercise of God's will. But certainly not a pastime for an ArchCommodore.

Rank carried its sword, Gudtsler again reminded himself as he turned away from the novice. It would be so nice to have a virgin again.

"I will send a priest to administer to you," he said and avoided the joyful tears suddenly running down the novice's face as she piously crossed her shoulders and abdomen. "Prepare yourself to receive him."

Her head was swimming with the magnitude of her effrontery. Imaginel She had been chastised and rebuked by none other than the ArchCommodore of the Netherlands. She, a raw novice, questioning the faith of the second highest Fundamentalist in the world. No wonder she had been rejected!

Surely, some demonic force had grasped her entrails and pressed the foul words past her lips!

She turned down the sheets of her bed for the arrival of the priest. Would the ArchCommodore actually send someone to console her or would she remain an unfulfilled virgin all her life for her horrible transgression? She could argue that she did not know the language adequately, but that was hardly valid after her four years of Dutch.

The tales she had heard were true. Some shadow vestige

of paganism had clung to these caverns when they had been transported across Europe. Some insidious crawling thing that had infused itself in these ancient bricks had slithered down her throat, threatening to seduce her into chastity.

A finger of fear tingled against her. The pagans who had once occupied these catacombs still lingered. They had been vanquished, eliminated, but the corruption still wafted like a foul odor.

Yet, it was their hypocritical dual standard that had led to the Fundamentalists. Even the pagans' ancient symbol had augured the present. Their fish symbol, free in a vast elemental sea, appropriate for its time, now joined with the mystic fluidity of space.

The physical mark had remained the same, but the new Fundamentalism was based on older concepts and the new meaning was necessarily truer. The mark was still drawn with the same two intersecting curves, except that it was no longer representative of a fish. Now it was a tadpole. The early Christian pagans had been overanxious and their fish had been stillborn.

But a tadpole was a glint of greatness to come. Not yet mature, but containing all the requirements to allow it to thrive on land or sea. Or even the vast flux of space.

She sketched the tadpole mark on the wall dust, struck anew by its meaning. Carefully, she rubbed off one of the continuing intersecting lines, leaving a compressed oval with a single arching tail.

The stylized sperm would swim as freely in the void as it now did in the oceans of ignorance. As she stared, another meaning reached her out of the sketching. Feeling heady, she erased the remaining tail, leaving only the compressed oval.

A welcoming vulva remained, the mark of the holy duty of womankind. She crossed her abdomen nervously, feeling a strangeness descending on her, then rubbed the drawing from the wall before she was overwhelmed.

The young priest was standing in the doorway. A small smile crossed his face and for a moment she thought she would be scolded for making light of the holy symbols.

Instead, there was an anticipatory smile on his face. "I am Father Grahm," he said. "Are you ready to share communion?"

A wave of dizziness swooned over her as he untied her habit.

Gudtsler stepped into the holy chambers, holding both hands over his head in a dutiful duplication of the twin v's. In ultimate adulation, he waggled his fingers and let the vibrations continue down his arms until his whole body was quivering.

"Come in, ArchCommodore," Schicten's voice sounded sonorously.

Gudtsler sighed relievedly and shuffled down the long hallway, bowing his head automatically at each of the thirty-three Picasso erotic prints lining the walls. By the time he came to the balcony office, his neck was aching. A good sign he was growing old, as though he needed more proof.

"I have received encouraging news, your Holiness," he said.

"Then it has been a blessed morning," Schicten answered majestically. He turned his massive bulk in the swivel couch and spread both hands over his head in an encompassing blessing. Gudtsler appreciated the effort and worshipped the strain. "Tell me your news, brother, so that I may weigh it in my fevered mind."

"These are the final calculations for the ion drive, your Holiness. They were received just this morning from Smolensk."

Schicten peered at the myriad of binary figures with an effort, cocking an eyebrow. "Such trivial scratchings are meaningless to me, I must confess. I have not bothered to clutter my mind with such mental meanderings, dear Gudtsler. Be so kind as to tell me the verdict," he said in a long, rumbling voice that spread from his lips like reluctant honey.

"It is affirmative," Gudtsler said.

"Of course it is," Schicten's voice curled across the balcony. "Had you ever doubted? We are about to embark on the most noble crusade of man's existence. God would not have misled us."

"Never did a doubt enter my mind," Gudtsler said. "The only question was how many of our brethren could join us on the Gabriel ship. With these latest estimates of the ion drive, we know accurately."

Schicten watched with careful eyes. "And the amount?"

"Approximately two thousand people," Gudtsler said.

Schicten's heavy jowls turned to liquid and wavered across his face. They solidified into unbelieving rage. "Two thousand! I had prayed for two *million!*"

Gudtsler blinked at the outburst. "But . . . it would take thirty more years to build a ship that large. The Russians confirm . . ."

"Bah! Who can trust those lying Russians?"

"Even to complete the Gabriel ship for two thousand will require another five years."

Schicten shook his head carelessly, the fat wallowing from side to side. "Impossible. Impossible." He sank into the couch dejectedly, stabbing the tranquilizer controls.

"Perhaps," he trembled long minutes later, "we should be thankful that God has answered our prayers at all and not quibble about quantities."

Gudtsler crossed himself.

"Let us rejoice in our humility," Schicten murmured. "But it is so insignificant, just two thousand brethren!"

Gudtsler bowed his head. "His mercy is infinite, if not incomprehensible. We might also pray that He gives our brethren the wisdom to accept our choices of who shall go."

Schicten shifted his bulk against the cushions. "I detect a tinge of sacrilege in your words, ArchCommodore. Our brethren will accept what is chosen when they understand the holiness of our mission."

"All creation is based on the premise of prior destruction," Gudtsler said. "For the sake of the body, the toe must sometimes be sacrificed."

"Sacrifice will always be necessary," Schicten said, wagging his face from side to side. "But we must remember that although re-creation rises from old ashes, true creation exists where only emptiness occupied."

"I don't mean to sound offensive," Gudtsler said. "Perhaps we should also consider the burdens we are asking our brethren to accept."

"Two thousand people to build a new world," Schicten whispered. "The mere hint of it will unite our brotherhood as never before. Yes, it will be a tremendous burden, demanding great faith of our nuns and priests. Faith and stamina."

Gudtsler settled himself at Schicten's feet and looked worriedly out the window. He wished he had known of the

Most Holy's expectations. *Two million?* Had he known, he would have said the Project was an impossibility.

Perhaps that was why he had not been told.

The sun was showing itself through the metal gray sky, its bright beams breaking through the smog to baptize their conversation. Gudtsler cleared his throat cautiously.

Schicten looked at him sleepily.

"Let us hope not too much stamina," Gudtsler coughed.

His Excellency stiffened. "What did you say?" His face turned livid, the small eyes bugging out from under the folds of flesh. "There is a new world out there to populate. We must choose the most fertile and strongest of our brethren to habitate it."

Gudtsler clenched his teeth. This was going to be painful.

"It is true, Holiness, that the ship will be able to support two thousand people, but only two thousand. That includes men, women, children, although some allowance can be made for very small children. But if our brethren are not . . . shall we say . . . *careful*, the ship will contain only corpses by the time it reaches the new world."

Schicten's jowls quivered. His body picked up the quivering and shook him violently.

"Vile, Gudtsler. Vile! Are you even *suggesting* self-denial? Would you dare utter such heresy in my presence?"

"Assuredly not," Gudtsler said hurriedly. "Obviously we must not violate His holy teachings and deny our brethren the holy rites. No, your Holiness, I was certainly not suggesting such evil."

"What then?" Schicten asked suspiciously.

Gudtsler braced himself. "I was merely saying that we should begin the voyage with less than two thousand to allow for the inevitable growth. By the time it reaches 13,115 it will be carrying its maximum load."

Schicten narrowed his eyes. "You have such a reduced figure already in mind, have you not?"

"Yes, I have," Gudtsler said quietly. "Four hundred, Holiness."

"Madness."

"Four hundred maximum."

"Impossible!"

"It is limiting, to be sure, but if we do not accept it we will have to wait thirty years," Gudtsler said, pausing

for the quake to subside, wondering if he could stay alive for another three decades.

Schicten sensed the same question. He sighed massively, sinking deeper into the couch. "What shall I do, ArchCommodore? Perhaps God will watch over us on the voyage. Perhaps the births will be limited naturally by some force we haven't yet discovered. We don't fully know what conditions may be encountered in interstellar space, do we?"

"Not entirely, but we will be selecting only the most productively capable," Gudtsler reminded. "If our brethren can overcome the rigors of a new planet, I suspect they will also be able to overcome whatever they may find in space."

"Perhaps so," Schicten nodded slowly. He let the filtered sunlight play across the folds of his face. "There must be an answer, ArchCommodore. Speak our new world's name to me again as I think. It brings pleasure to this fevered mind."

Gudtsler smiled relievedly. "13,115, your Holiness."

"Not those silly numbers," Schicten objected. "Its *name*."

"It will be known as Lazarus," Gudtsler said. "From the death throes of this dying world, a new world will come to life. The name was taken from the old pagan biblical story about a man who was risen from the . . ."

"I am aware of its origin," Schicten said. "A name of life reincarnated. Perhaps there is an indirect meaning in the name for us, Gudtsler. What of the cryogenic experiments in the United States? Hasn't there been some news recently of an attempt to revive one of the subjects? We could freeze our brethren and awaken them when the ship reaches Lazarus."

Gudtsler smirked embarrassedly. "The United States experiments were a disaster. They revived nothing but sodden hamburger."

"Oh, too bad. But there must be another way. How about the Chinese?"

"Perhaps," Gudtsler agreed. "They have been investigating a new method of voluntarily imposed suspension. But I don't think it's anything we should rely on. I gather the suspension is fairly permanent."

He watched the sun hide itself again behind an ochre cloud that was scudding out to sea.

"Troublesome," Schicten said.

She felt the priest press upon her, her thoughts reeling in a centrifuge of emotion. *Make me worthy*, she pleaded, biting her lips. *Take this unconsecrated body unto Your will.*

His body was heavily on her, an overpoweringly suffocating weight, damp with the heat of his exertion. Her psyche was nearly bursting with the promised ecstasy to come, the sensation second only to the vision of Himself rushing toward her.

Her years of training and catechismal teaching were forgotten with a piercing pain and a flurry of his activity over her. *Now, oh God? Now? Was this the sweet pain, the tempting apple, the elusive paradiso?*

The priest grunted and groaned.

She opened her eyes, catching her breath in sharp gulps, watching as he pulled his robe around him. She should have been more curious and appreciative of his body, but she transferred her eyes to the ceiling instead.

"The Lord's will has been done," the priest said, swallowing hard as he fumbled with his buttons.

She blinked, feeling the coarse sheets under her damp from his sweat. The priest was young, probably not older than she, with tight eyes that seemed to be laughing at her.

"Was it satisfactory?" she asked.

"Satisfactory, yes," he said, finishing the tying of his robe cord. "You're the fifth nun to share communion with me. With practice, you'll be able to enter more fully in the rites. You seemed somewhat unresponsive, but you're still young."

She looked at the crumpled black virginal gown hanging loosely over the chair like a broken bat. Henceforth, she would wear the red habit of a properly consummated bride. She pulled the sheet around her, rolling on her stomach and staring into the pillow.

Her voice was tiny, falling unnoticed into the foam rubber.

"Is that all there is to it?"

He was conscious of the bed he was lying on, conscious in the same way that he was of hearing or knowing that shoulder blades existed on his back. The consciousness was

beyond his senses, beyond his vision, but he knew rationally that a bed was under him.

But something kept insisting otherwise.

Something was insisting that his consciousness was separated from him. For an interminable time, there had been only the darkness after the girl had drugged him and he was floating in it. The drug had hit him harder than he expected it would. Only a speck of awareness was glistening within him, despite the broad range immunity he had taken every week since he had joined the Society.

Dimly, he recognized the groping darkness as sleep, but sleep unlike any he had encountered before. Something was happening on the fringe of his nonvision, something alien to him, something that was growing.

It was happening away from him, a soft orb of subdued fireworks that was exploding silently in the center of a black sleep cone. It grew gradually larger, crowding out the darkness and replacing it with pastel shades of green and violet, a fluctuating, vibrating globe of movement.

The sparkled fireworks were not growing larger. They were coming closer. He tried to move back from them but the bed held him and his drugged body did not respond.

He watched it crowd out the darkness and the sensation of drowning lapped around him. He was looking down a deep well and the well was filling with a glittering liquid. At any second, the liquid would touch his face, burble against his forehead, churn past his jaws.

His mind recoiled against the fireworks, shoving them back into the chasm. But it had touched him, pastel colors had momentarily flooded into him. It retreated quickly, sensing its unwanted presence and was offended, gathering itself and slipping away, leaving a perfumed taste in his mind.

Sweet Jesus wept, what did that girl give him? He felt the rumpled cover under him, began to hear the buzzing of the room around him.

Consciousness inched back and he kept his eyes closed in case anyone was watching him. The fireworks subsided and he felt a loss in their leaving. Something alien had touched him, but alien as meeting a hummingbird's mind would have been.

In its place, fear had been left.

He had long since discarded most of his emotions. *Damn,*

he thought. *Why should I be afraid?* He had let the girl drug him and he knew what effect most drugs could have on him. There was nothing physically to fear . . . his immunization would protect him from that. It was the mental side effect that was unpredictable.

But why fear?

He opened his eyes, looking straight up at the lumipanel of the hut. He detected a slight lag in focusing ability and noted it, letting his eyes drop slowly over the curving plastic walls.

Something very pink was watching him.

"Hi, man," his watcher said. "You back yet?"

Matter found the answers inadequate so he wet his lips and glanced around the Quonset hut.

"Oh wow, man, you look like you've really been zapped."

"Excuse the cliché, but where the hell am I?" Matter growled.

"Wow, baby," the young man chuckled, adding color to his sunburned shaved scalp. "You're in Gauze, like where else? It's four in the morning, you've been zapped for about seven hours, my name is Denny and there's a sonofabitchin' dragon waiting outside."

"There's a dragon in your head," Matter said. "Where's Mary?"

"Crying under the cross," Denny said seriously.

"The girl who drugged me," Matter said. He propped himself on his elbows, feeling the sluggishness in his muscles. His stomach was twisting and there was a zinc taste in his mouth.

"You mean Stuckey. Man, I don't know. She's probably sleeping, dammit. You can kiss a miss, but when it comes to Stuckey, man she's ice."

Matter saw the splinter gun on the night stand. He forced his eyes to focus. The barrel was resting conveniently on a table rivet. *Since when do tables have rivets?* He flattened back against the bed and glanced under the table. A mini-mitter was stuck to the bottom directly under the rivet.

Ignore the gun, he told himself. *Trap signal.*

He squinted at Denny. "Are you supposed to be watching me?"

"We weren't sure how high you were going so we thought someone ought to be around when you came down."

"Thanks," Matter grumped. His irritability surprised him. Whatever had touched him had left a residue of resentment with the fear. He recalled something about fireworks, but the memory was vanishing quickly.

Denny shook a pack of factory grass from his pocket and extended it to Matter. "Smoke?"

"No, I just got back," Matter said curtly.

Denny pulled out a joint and lit it. "Can't blame you, man. These Canadian brands are pretty poor shit."

"Enjoy yourself," Matter said.

Denny cupped his hands and inhaled deeply. "It's real crud. You almost have to imagine a high with it."

"Yeah, I noticed," Matter said. His eyes were clearing and he decided to get out of the room before Denny's grass clouded him again. He reached over and flicked the gun off the table. It broke contact with the rivet and he knew an alarm was ringing somewhere.

Denny watched it bounce on the floor. "Hey, man, you're in trouble now. They're going to bust in here thinking you shot me."

"I'm too friendly for that," Matter said. He tightened his arm and unexpectedly felt the flat shape of the paspistol under his armpit.

Denny was humming to himself when the hut door banged open. Matter looked at the stocky figure with the blonde beard standing in the doorway.

"Hello, Philip," Matter said easily. "I've been expecting you."

Philip relaxed against the door. "Good to see you, Matt. How have you been?"

He crossed the floor, crinkling his nose at Denny's marijuana, and grasped Matter's hand. Matter felt the strength that years of using the cane had given.

"Just fine," Matter said warily and swung off the cot. He nodded at Denny humming in the corner. "Maybe not as happy as your guard there, but otherwise fine."

Philip grimaced. "He's no guard. He's your new roommate. I didn't want you running off before we got a chance to show you around Gauze. Damn it all to hell, Denny, didn't I tell you to lay off that stuff?"

"You told me to stay awake." He winked broadly at

Matter. "See, I told you there was a sonofabitchin' dragon waiting outside."

"I stuck around because I'd like to have a talk with you," Matter said, ignoring Denny. "You keep this commune of yours pretty well hidden. We've been trying to locate you for months."

"It's not hidden," Philip shrugged. "You can spot it easily from the air. Come to think of it, we spotted some of your jetchoppers about a month ago. Looked like black crows up there, circling around. That's when we got the first clue you might be visiting us."

"If I had a jetchopper with me, that'd be dandy," Matter said. "Driving here is something else. Nobody in Wasag seems to have heard of this place."

"Yeah, they have. They just weren't telling," Philip said. "We don't encourage the tourist trade. We had some trouble with groupies and trippies in the beginning so we closed ourselves off. If you wanted to find us, you should have asked in Darby Plains or Salton. We trade with them and they know us."

"I was trying to get to Darby Plains, but I didn't quite make it."

Denny's humming trailed off into snoring.

"Why don't we go outside?" Philip suggested. "The fresh air may help your head."

Denny grumbled as they closed the door. Philip smelled the night air. It was going to rain in the morning.

"How come you didn't get to Darby?"

"Had a car wreck."

"Sorry to hear about it. Glad you weren't hurt in the accident."

"It was no accident," Matter said. "It was a FROG trap."

Philip worked his knee, bending the kinks out. "Sure about that?"

"Well, he didn't flash his membership card at me, but he had one of those trick double-barreled pistols the FROGs prefer. Didn't know how to use it very well, though."

"Apparently not," Philip grinned. "Religious devotees usually make pretty poor shots."

"Wasn't one of your boys, was it?" Matter asked bluntly.

"Come off it, Matt," Philip grumbled. "We're down to earth here, but we're not raving Fundamentalists. I'll admit

we're careless at times about screening new members and we don't keep very close tabs on anyone, but that's why we're here. Murder doesn't suit our temperament. Live and let live, that sort of thing."

"That's partially reassuring," Matter said. He was becoming uncomfortably cold and something was still scratching his mind.

Philip looked at him evenly. "Having a HEROD here isn't exactly reassuring, either."

"That's strange. A couple minutes ago, I was under the distinct impression that you wanted me to stay around."

"Let's just say we heard you were in the neighborhood and thought we'd extend our hospitality."

"You go all out making a man feel at home."

Philip broke a clod of dirt with his cane. "Thinking of joining us?"

"Up your nose," Matter said. "This is strictly a business trip. Mind if I check around tomorrow?"

"Feel free," Philip offered. "That's what Gauze is all about. You aren't going to find anything exciting, though. No illegal births that aren't reported to the province. No screaming sex orgies. Not that there's a damned thing you could do about it even if we were running the world's whorehouse up here."

"Don't make it sound difficult," Matter said. "You don't know how determined the HERODs can be. And remember that the Canadian government has formalized its agreement with the Society."

"Big honking deal. You haven't bothered to ask how we keep all those groupies and trippies outside."

Philip smiled and clapped Matter on the back. "But don't let it worry you, Matt. Take it easy and enjoy yourself. There are more important things here to get stoked up about."

V

FOR THE THIRD CONSECUTIVE DAY the morning was a sheet of rain. It fell cold and drenching; the frigid Arctic air barely warmed by its passage over the northern wastes ran

head-on against the warm air from the States. The Riding Mountains caught it and poured it instantly over the plains.

He woke late again, borrowed Denny's raincoat and ran across the commons to the dining hall. The grounds were a wet sponge, sucking at his feet, slowing him enough to drench him thoroughly.

Matter barged into the dining hall, sliding out of the raincoat and shaking the water from him. The rains had brought a halt to the farmwork and the hall held more than its normal amount of people for this late in the morning.

He glanced around, trying to find Stuckey. He had not seen her since their planned meeting in Wasag and wanted to know if she still had the bulge above her buttocks. Philip had assured him that Stuckey was still at the commune but had not bothered to mention where.

Missed her again. He knew she had a small appetite, but she had to eat *sometime*.

Denny waved to him from a group across the room. He returned the wave and shuffled into the empty serving line.

"Morning," he said to the girl polishing pans behind the table. "What was for breakfast this morning?"

"Ah, late again. Why don't you try sleeping at night?"

She had small perky features and Matter guessed she might be a redhead because she *seemed* like a redhead. One of these days he should do something about making sure of his guess. That was one thing about the snippies that Matter still found difficult. It was hard to tell what color hair a girl had if she insisted on shaving her head.

On the other hand, if a man wanted to find out what color hair a girl had, he would be forced to do more extensive research. Hair certainly grew in other places. Not an infallible clue, but a hell of a lot of fun.

Maybe the snippies knew something he didn't after all.

"Sleep isn't my problem," Matter said, wondering idly if she shaved everywhere. "I've been sleeping too well."

"That's because you're bored," the girl said. "You should find something to occupy your time."

"I was thinking about that," Matter agreed. "Any suggestions?"

"How about weaving?"

He tilted his head and shook it slowly. "Somehow I was

thinking of something to occupy my night hours. That's when I sleep the most, you know."

"Wrong thinking. You're *supposed* to sleep at night," she grinned.

"Come to think of it, I've never been adverse to daytime, either."

She smiled at him. If she had had any hair, she would have tossed it. "Do you want something to eat or not?"

"That was my original idea. What do you have?"

"I was making lentil soup for lunch, but it's not ready yet. How about bacon and eggs?"

Matter shuddered. Eggs, those unfinished, halfborn things that stared up from the plate. It curdled his stomach thinking of them. And stripping the flesh from an animal shocked every sensibility in him.

"I think I'll pass on that," he said queasily. "How about some cereal?"

"The eggs are nicer."

"That's what you say."

He carried the bowl of warmed gruel across the room to Denny's group and joined them squatting on the floor. There were three couples and Matter felt he should know one of the men.

"How's it going today?" Denny asked cordially.

"I'm making it," Matter said. "How's with you?"

"Sure can tell you're a city boy. You're going to sleep straight through until tomorrow one of these days. Do you usually sleep this much?"

"Only when I'm on vacation," Matter said. He helped himself to a basket of rolls in the center of their circle. "Brenda up at the counter thinks I'm bored. I was trying to talk her into a remedy."

"When you do, be sure to clear it with Tree," Denny advised, indicating a friend standing near the serving table. Matter turned his head. Tree was better than six and half feet of sinew and muscle. Tree was aptly named.

"Mn. And all this time I thought you took this business of share and share alike seriously," Matter said dryly. "I'll bet Tree isn't worried about insomnia at night. Do you think he would mind if I borrowed Brenda?"

"You can always ask, but I don't recommend it," Denny grinned. "Are you being bothered with insomnia?"

"Off and on. I fall asleep, but I keep waking up through the night," Matter said. He bit into one of the rolls. It was hollow and stuffed with dry curdles and slivers of green. He munched it thoughtfully, trying to decide whether he liked the vaguely sour taste. At least it was not marijuana.

"Maybe you need a hobby," one of the girls said.

"That's what I was trying to tell Brenda," Matter said.

"Everyone's getting bored with this rain," Denny said. "Look, you might as well start meeting some people around here. That's Faith, that's Lydia, Harold, Tom, Leo. You remember Leo. He was the one who stuck you up in Wasag with Stuckey. Meet Matter, people."

"Professional job, Leo," Matter said. It had been a sloppy child's job. Jamming a gun in someone's back left no room for the unexpected. Matter could have turned and bumped the gun sideways with his elbow, coming face to face with Leo inside his gun hand. Leo would have had to pull back to get a shot. By that time, Matter could have had his paspistol ejected from the armpit holster and Leo would have found himself bleeding on the sidewalk.

Children, Matter thought.

"We were sitting around rapping when you came in," Tom said. "What did you do in your other life, Matter?"

"Huh?" Matter said.

"Tom means that everyone here got too strung out doing whatever they were doing before they came to Gauze," Denny explained. "What did you do before, Matt?"

Matter chewed on another roll. Philip knew, of course, and he probably would have told Denny since Denny had to put up with Matter sharing his hut.

The others might not know, though. He wondered how sensitive they were.

He glanced sideways at the group. "Really want me to level, Denny?"

"Why not? It's all in the past now."

"More or less," Matter nodded. "Okay. HEROD Society." The mention of it brought a cold pause.

"Those baby killers," Lydia said tonelessly.

"You're not being completely fair, Lyd," Denny said. "The HEROD is a regulatory agency. Just because Matter worked for them, don't condemn him too much. Maybe he just

checked up on families to make sure they were paying their full tax."

Lydia was having none of it.

"You have mandatory abortions," she accused.

"Everybody can have as many kids as they want," Matter said.

"Up to two," Faith interjected. "Isn't that true? What did your HERODs do if someone wanted more than two children?"

"Anything over two, the State requires a special license," Matter said. He did not like heavy talk so early in the morning. He finished his roll.

"Look, I don't want to get into a big coffee discussion about it, but you know as well as I do that it's the only way we can keep the planet alive. If a family wants a third kid, all that is needed is a dispensation."

"Average waiting time is around six years," Harold grunted.

"The State needs some time to rejuggle the balance," Matter said. "It takes time and it costs a little money. But parents can usually get the dispensation if they want it badly enough."

"Hell, by then they've probably lost interest in having another kid," Harold argued.

"That's the whole idea," Matter said.

Tom chewed on a dried bean. "How about castration, Mister Matter? I've seen some of you HERODs go at it damned zealously. I saw them nail one poor bastard in Toronto, right on the street. It looked like the guy had been dragged through a meat grinder by the time they were finished."

"A kid born out of legally sanctioned wedlock is a hell of a burden on the world," Matter said testily. Why the hell were they jumping on him? "Some guy or gal who refuses to take out a marriage permit, but keeps screwing around making babies . . . well, Christ, there's not much alternative but forced sterilization. Sure, some of our guys may have gotten carried away at times, but cutting a fornicator's balls off on the street makes a damned effective public statement."

"It was effective, all right," Tom said darkly. "The guy didn't make it to the hospital."

Lydia shivered. "God, that's disgusting."

"Were you ever married, Matt?" Denny asked, trying to divert the conversation.

"Couple one year trials, but never got either of them notarized," Matter said.

"No children, then?" Faith asked.

"Wouldn't that have looked great? A HEROD with children of his own? That's about as likely as human parthenogenesis."

Lydia shook her head. "I don't blame you for leaving."

Matter looked at the group calmly— He clicked his teeth and smiled softly. "I haven't left them."

They slogged across the commons. "Hey, you're really sweet," Denny said. "Why didn't you warn me what you were going to say?"

Matter shrugged, the rain running down his neck. It felt warm in comparison to the mood of the group he had left.

"You said it was all right. I assumed Philip told you who I am and you told the rest of them. Why should I hide it?"

"Philip didn't tell me you were a HEROD. All he told me was that you had some problems that needed working out."

"My only problem is being stuck in this mud puddle," Matter said.

"Man, I didn't know you were going to lay it on them so heavy. You've got some unhappy people back there."

"Tom boy was the one who brought up the nasties," Matter said. "You go talk to him. Or is the truth a little too strong for your people? Rather hide in your weed dreams?"

"Okay, okay. You've made your point. Even so, it might be a good idea if you ate in the hut tonight. Let me try to convince them what a fine fellow you really are before you go back to the dining hall."

"Oh, good," Matter grunted. "What am I supposed to eat meanwhile? The bedsheets?"

"I'll get someone to bring you dinner, providing anyone is willing," Denny said. He lit a factory smoke and held the smoke in his lungs as he spit off wet shreds of grass. "Philip won't mind that."

"Philip is going to be even more unhappy if you keep

burning that stuff," Matter said critically. "You're going to puff up and blow away one of these days."

"It's lousy grass," Denny said. "Besides, I can turn off a high faster than you can operate that toy gun of yours."

Then why let him keep it? Matter had not checked whether the gun was still loaded, but it seemed unlikely that it was not. If they were going to let him keep it, why not all the way?

With the whole encampment watching him, how far could he get anyway?

Come to think of it, how far could he get even if he was not watched? Philip had said something about keeping trippies and groupies out. Did that mean *everyone* was unwelcome without special invitation?

If that was true, just *how* were they excluded. *Now there's an interesting thought.* Because anything that could keep people *out* could also keep people *in*.

What kind of fence did his old buddy have running around this commune?

Matter stopped at the hut door. "Hey, look, Denny. I'm going right out of my gourd sitting. Isn't there some way you can show me around this place?"

"Not a hell of a lot to see," Denny said. "The rain has put a stop to the planting and everybody is staying inside. A few of the girls may be mending clothes, but that's about it."

"Christ, I can't take staying inside any longer. Even if all I see is some wet dirt, that's a step up."

"Know what you mean." Denny hesitated, the rain making minute splashes on his balded head. "Aw, what the hell. There should be a batmobile charged up over at the garage. Come on, let's do it."

They slogged toward the open end of the horseshoe, each step threatening to pull off their slippers. The battery car had been deposited by its last user behind a shed. As they walked past the shed, an odor reached out and wrenched Matter.

"Oog, what's in there?" he gagged.

"Chickens," Denny said. "That's one of the chicken coops."

"They live in there?"

"Yeah, when it's not raining. They're not so stupid that they walk around in the rain."

"What else do they do in there? Don't answer that. Do they lay eggs?"

"Sure, if they're in the mood. Sometimes they lay them outside and then we have to hunt like hell to find them before they rot. But usually, if we're lucky, they lay them in the coops."

Matter swallowed. "What happens to an egg if you find it outside on the dirt?"

"Hell, if it's still fresh, we eat it," Denny said.

Matter let the rain run into his mouth. He was glad he had not eaten any of Brenda's eggs.

The battery car slurred over the mud through the loose cluster of buildings. Philip pointed out the granaries and low cellar buildings. He identified a long building as a milking barn. Matter preferred to ignore it.

"Infirmary over there," Denny indicated.

"That's a good thing to have out here in these wilds. Have much illness?" Matter asked.

"Not too much. Aches and bruises, mostly. If someone comes down with anything serious, we haul them into Salton or Darby Plains. If it seems contagious, we squirrel them away in one of the huts until we can figure out what it is."

"Something contagious like outsiders? Since I'm staying in one of the huts, does that put me on par with a virus?"

"There's not much virus here," Denny grinned. "A virus has to have enough people in a closed area to survive. Otherwise, it dies off of its own accord."

"I didn't know that. Viruses are another of overpopulation's bushel of blessings," Matter grunted. "Which brings a question to mind. What about births? How do you handle them?"

"Thought you'd get around to that. To begin with, having a kid is no big deal. Pithecanthropus knew how to do it without any special training."

"Pithecanthropus wiped himself out at Kow Swamp sixteen thousand years ago," Matter said. "That didn't take much brains, either."

"Funny, I thought that was Java man."

"You're changing the subject."

"Hell, I don't know. We don't have many births around here. Those who do have kids generally wind up leaving," Denny said.

A commune with a limited birth rate? Either they had other things to occupy their time or Matter had underestimated their willpower. Or they just did not want to mess up a good thing.

He had a hunch Gauze was a good thing.

"Most of us sort of gang together, but there's always a few loners who prefer living alone," Denny continued. "They get the single huts. But don't think you're being discriminated against, though. Philip thought you'd rather be on your own for a while until you got a feel for the place."

"Tell Philip I appreciate his concern for my privacy, but sharing that hut with you is crimping my night style. Or is lovemaking communal, too?"

"To each his own and all that kind of fazz, but I know what you mean. You're thinking of Brenda, right? Tell you what I'll do. I'll move out tonight. How's that suit you?"

"Beautiful," Matter said.

They buzzed through a fringe of trees and stopped at a barbed wire fence. Matter got out to open it, touching it gingerly, half expecting it to be electrified.

"Why the fence?" he asked as he climbed back into the car after he had closed the gate.

"Keeps the cows out of the planting fields," Denny said.

"Keeps the cows out?" Matter repeated softly.

"Yeah, you know. Milk, meat, cows. What did you think we milked? Chickens?"

"Milk isn't one of my all-time favorites," Matter said.

"You eat cheese, don't you? How about those rolls you had this morning? Those are Brenda's specialties. She stuffs them with cottage cheese and dill. Want to guess where the cottage cheese comes from?"

"I know about that," Matter said. "Milking doesn't hurt a cow nor humans if the milk is pasteurized. I suppose after you've gotten the milk, you butcher the cows?"

"Eventually. A cow is one of the most efficient protein converters in the world. It eats cellulose and synthesizes it into protein, more protein than could be grown if the pasture was turned over to crops."

"That may be, but there's lots of other things that can be eaten."

Danny glanced at Matter. "I take it you're not a big meat eater."

"I don't mean to offend your personal way of life, but eating meat has always struck me as, well, barbaric." Matter gestured uneasily. "It's just that, you know, killing a cow . . ."

"Cows aren't exactly an endangered species. You don't have to worry about the Gimps raiding us," Denny chuckled. "You're some kind of strange guy, Matt. You talk about forced birth control for humans, but eating a cow, wow, you practically turn green."

Matter shoved himself further into the seat. He would have to think about that.

Through the gray rain he saw fields of thin growing things on the verge of fruition, somber clumps of dark forested areas blotting the horizon. Gradually, he spotted more strands of barbed wire, but they were random fences, nothing remotely resembling anything that could possibly be a barrier around Gauze.

He argued with what he saw. Gauze was too self-contained, too self-sufficient not to be protected. In the States, this flat plain of fertile soil would be overrun almost immediately once word of it leaked.

Canada, or at least the citizens of Salton and Darby Plains, might be lagging behind the States' population squeeze by a few years, but Gauze was too ripe a prize to remain unmolested. Even assuming provincial legal protection, something *had* to be keeping the raggedy-assed masses out.

There had to be a barrier. Something waiting out there in the rain, something standing guard around this clump of ground.

They churned through the soaked land for hours, the burring sound of the batmobile and the lazy splashes of rain on the windshield lulling Matter into a dull drowsiness. His subconscious first sensed the pattern.

They were approaching a forest with a tall canoe birch in its center. He had seen the tree before; its white bark hanging in shreds tickled his memory.

Denny was driving in a slow zigzag, crossing his path occasionally, always turning, always shying away from the forest. When Matter saw the tall birch for the third time, he roused himself.

"What's on the other side of the forest?" he asked, knowing Denny had led him into the question.

"Private land," Denny said. "Or it belongs to the province. I'm not sure which, but it isn't ours."

"Gauze ends there?"

"That's the boundary, the other side of those trees."

"How big is Gauze anyway?"

"Twelve, fifteen square miles. Somewhere around there," Denny said. "It's sort of a sloppy pentagon shape. We left some forest standing when we moved in, but most of it has been cleared. Jackfish River drops down from the mountains and just about cuts Gauze in half."

"I didn't notice us crossing any river."

"It's more a creek than a river, but you still wouldn't have noticed it. You walked right over it on your way to the dining hall from the hut. It's been routed underground for our generators. We manage to draw enough hydro to keep the lights burning."

"You're more independent than I thought. Also more sophisticated. You people have been industrious."

"If you want something badly enough, you have to go ahead and do it."

"Gauze isn't exactly what I pictured as your average, run-of-the-mill commune."

"Well, we had some help."

Matter looked at Denny. "What sort of help?"

"Oh," Denny paused. "Just . . . help. Mostly financial."

He cranked the wheel around abruptly and headed back for the hut.

"Let you off here," Denny said, bumping the car to a halt in front of the hut. "I'll be back later to move my things. Better get this thing recharged in case someone wants to use it."

"I'll come along," Matter suggested. "Like to see your hydro setup."

"Hell, I'm just going to plug the car in at the garage," Denny said. "Nothing to see there and you'd just have to walk back in the rain. No sense in both of us getting muddy."

Something jarred Matter. He nodded and crawled out of the car.

Denny was slow in returning. Matter turned on the hut

wall, letting it warm him. After an hour, there was still no sign of Denny, and Matter wondered if he was making a report to Philip.

He flexed his shoulder and the paspistol sprang into his hand.

It was still carrying a full load of bullets, or at least something that looked like real bullets. He squatted to the floor, held the pistol close to the doorframe and fired. The gun jolted reassuringly in his hand and a snubnose thunked against the plastic. An empty shell casing rolled across the floor, sending up a wisp of smoke.

Loaded with real stuff. Philip, you have a lot of balls, he thought cynically.

He sorted his known facts loosely, tumbling them into a semblance of order. There was definitely a boundary around Gauze. The forest with the tall birch was less than an hour's walk from the commune, an estimate that Denny had made easy by driving back in a straight line from the forest.

So they were daring him to inspect the barrier.

He stretched on the cot and put together a few more thoughts. He had his paspistol and they knew it. Yet they let him keep it. So they were expecting him to use it.

And a paspistol did only one thing particularly well. It killed people.

There was a Mountie back in Wasag who was going to wonder what had happened to Matter, and then the motel clerk would start getting curious, too. When Lembeck got back into town and Matter's daily reports were not waiting for him, the Society would get nervous.

Whatever Philip was planning was going to have to happen soon. It had been a long time since he had seen Philip. A lot could happen to a man in three or four years. It would be good to know which side of the road Philip was traveling.

A warning ticked in the back of his mind. A sound outside the hut had alerted him. Someone was at the door and it was not Denny. The footsteps were too muted.

He swung off the cot carefully, braced himself and slapped the door open. Stuckey was on the other side, juggling a tray, her hand frozen over the door, ready to knock.

She made a small nervous laugh. "You startled me. I was bringing your dinner. Were you planning to go out?"

"No, I've been out today," he said, both relieved and apprehensive. His tension eased and he watched the rain running down her face.

"Denny said I should bring you something."

"Good old Denny. You're getting wet. Why don't you come in here?"

He stepped aside and closed the door after her. The rain had drenched through her hair and was soaking the nape of her neck.

He found a towel as she pulled off her poncho. "Come here, I'll dry you. Denny told me he was going to stop by later to pick up his things. I hope you're not one of the things."

"Not if you'd like me to stay."

Denny was right. It was lousy marijuana. He listened to the rain on the hollow roof making a drumming constancy and doubted there was more than a shred of real grass in the joint. The rest tasted suspiciously like dried lettuce. He almost wished tobacco was legalized again.

He blew a shadow circle of smoke in the darkness of the hut that spiraled upward until it merged with the sound of the rain.

Stuckey was sleeping, her breasts rising and falling with the soft breathing. He felt the easy roundness of her body against his and tried to drown out the picture of her in his mind when she had undressed in his motel room. It was a futile effort.

He crossed his arms over his eyes, pressing on the pupils, but his mind kept returning to the nearness of her.

This is sophomoric, he chided himself, stubbing out the smoke. Just because the lady doesn't want to make love is nothing to get strung out over. *Later*, she had said. *Perhaps later*.

He had slept with enough women in his life that being in bed with one should have no overpowering effect. There was no justifiable reason to be bothered by the scent of her hair or the faint ruffle her breath caused on his face.

Except that when she moved in her sleep, the touch of her flesh against his was almost painful.

He slid out of the cot and padded to the door. The drumming of the rain sounded more gentle now, but he had not

been paying attention to it and there was no way of knowing if it actually was diminishing.

A single light was burning in the middle of the commons, the rain bending and fragmenting its glow so that it was a flickering nova. As he stared at it, something finally dropped into place.

No sense in both of us getting muddy, Denny had said outside. Precisely the same words Matter had used when he climbed down the river embankment to his Laika.

Pure coincidence, or had Denny gotten a firsthand report?

And the familiarity of the squinty-eyed bastard who ran him off the road. Matter was positive he had never seen the man before, but the impression they had met still persisted.

He was being used, being manipulated. Philip had brought him here and had let him remain armed. Philip needed a killer in the middle of his children.

There was something dark hanging over Gauze. Something that Philip feared even more than an investigation by the HEROD Society. Something ugly was brewing in this flat bowl of Manitoba big enough to alert the FROG network of his presence.

Why the hell did Philip suddenly feel he needed protection after all these years? More importantly, if it was protection that Philip needed, how much help could a single HEROD give to an entire commune?

An image formed itself, a remembrance of Philip hauling across the Okhotsk beachhead, spraying nine millimeter slugs as though he were twirling a Roman candle baton, chewing single-handedly over the brittle ice until he shoved his machine gun into the throats of the enemy fire squad.

If anyone needed help, Philip was not it. Philip could take care of himself, kneecap or no kneecap.

He stared out the window, listening to the rain. No doubt about it; the rain was slowing. By morning it would have ended, and he could start his personal inspection of Gauze, not another guided tour by Denny.

He could take Stuckey with him to make it look like a friendly walk and maybe the grass in the forest with the tall birch could induce her to give what had been withheld.

She mumbled in her sleep, turning on the bed. "What are you doing?" she asked drowsily.

"Thinking," he said, looking at her soft form in the darkness.

"You'll get cold standing there."

"It was cold in bed."

"Don't be that way," she said, pulling the covers over her. "I like you near."

It bothered him as the days crowded into weeks. She had no hesitation in crawling into bed with him naked, nor did she indicate any embarrassment in finding her head resting on his chest in the mornings or doubled close to him for warmth. But anything hinting or approximating intimacy, she rejected.

Later turned out to be a long time. He watched her undress evenings, folding her clothes in an orderly pile on the night stand and wondered if she knew what she was doing to him. Even though she seemed unaffected by his casual inspections, he began to feel oddly uncomfortable as though he were watching a man undress in a show room.

Maybe that's the clue, he told himself. Living in a commune blurred property rights. Carried far enough, it could blur a person's own image. By obliterating the differences between a man and a woman, what was left? Undressing in front of him was only a matter of taking off her clothes and getting ready to sleep with no sexual overtures. A person cleaned, rinsed the mouth with dextranase, took off the clothes, went to sleep.

But he was beginning to feel protective of her. It was a useless emotion, but the vague fireworks kept returning regularly, leaving him tired and coldly depressed in the mornings.

Unisex or not, he decided he would still ask her to walk to the woods with him. If lovemaking was out of the question, there was still the fence.

Each Manitoban day compacted three seasons into itself. The mornings were chilled and damp like early spring. The afternoons mounted into the nineties and cracked the earth into dry tile, plunging back to the autumnal evenings.

He woke one morning and forgot there was a world outside.

VI

"WE MUST LEAVE THIS WORLD of corruption and aborted life and lead our faithful to the land of milk and procreation."

"Thus it will be," Gudtsler said. "You indicated that you had new information this morning of your own?"

"Ah," Schicten sighed. "The World Congress is in its usual turmoil. The governments are on the brink of collapse and most of the countries are bankrupt. It now appears that even France may bow to the HEROD Society. Can you imagine anything more ludicrous? That is like asking the Spanish to give up their bulls."

"At least bulls have some value as food supply," Gudtsler remarked.

"Did you know there is serious talk of dispensing with the international murder penalty entirely?"

Gudtsler flinched. "That is madness."

"Madness, indeed. These are tumultuous times, Gudtsler, when death can be condoned so easily and birth so condemned. But there are still shafts of light in this morass," Schicten said. "Savonelli will support our cause before the Congress."

"Savonelli?" Gudtsler questioned. "Does he carry enough weight? What about that Britisher Jerdon, or even that Russian fellow?"

Schicten shook his head, sending cascaded flesh rippling over his face and neck. "The British are too closely allied with the Americans and the Americans are strong enough to single-handedly shelve the proposal for the next aeon of sessions. Admittedly, it would be nice to have the Anglo-American wedge, but I think the arrangement might lack credulity. After all, the British were the first to follow the Japanese birth control methods and the Americans originated the HEROD Society, those heathens."

"I see what you mean. What of the Russians? Their alliance with the Americans seems rather tenuous."

"Off and on. As long as their conflict with the northern Chinese continues, the Russian support seems suspicious. Be-

sides, that crude cossack, Feodov, wants too many concessions," Schicten snorted. "He views our ark as a military fortress. Once assembled, I wouldn't put it past him to confiscate it."

"I believe that would be an impossibility," Gudtsler said hesitantly. "The ship is being built in orbit. How could Feodov attack the ship above the earth without destroying it in the process?"

"Ah, you overlook the cunningness of the political mind. Feodov insists upon a contingency of Russian technicians in exchange for his support. He claims we must return the favor of alleviating his country's unemployment problems. Stupid nonsense, of course."

"I see," Gudtsler said. "Still, Feodov has the industrial capacity and we have reached the point of needing an armada of shuttle craft to continue building. What does the Italian offer us?"

"Savonelli will deliver the Italian Communist party to us and, tacitly, the approval of the Roman church. Don't underestimate him, ArchCommodore. Already he has assured us of the Greek support, not a small feat considering the ideological differences between their countries."

Gudtsler nodded skeptically. "I thought we already had the Greeks on a religious basis. If we accept Savonelli's support and not the Russians', what missile base would we use? The Sicilian base? I must question it."

"And rightly so," Schicten said. "Yorges has suggested that a supplementary base might be constructed near Athens. For that, we *do* need the politicians, much as I hate to admit it."

Gudtsler cocked his head, estimating. There would be logistical problems, but not insurmountable ones.

"It *may* be feasible. I'll have to verify it through the computers, but we may be able to do it. We have only four years left to complete our five-year deadline. The biggest obstacle I can foresee is convincing the Russians to release the ion drive to the Italians."

"That's where the Italian Communists become helpful," Schicten said roundly. "I have the utmost faith in your organizational abilities, dear ArchCommodore. You must have more faith in my persuasive abilities."

"Technically, I imagine, it is feasible," Gudtsler repeated quietly.

"Naturally, there other problems, but you needn't concern yourself with them."

"Such as?"

"Specifically, all of our political allies expect berths on the ark. If we honor all of our pledges, there will be no room left for our own people. That, incidentally, is why I was so shocked a year ago when you said only four hundred could leave."

"I *am* sorry about that, but it is irrefutable," Gudtsler said.

"Well, it narrows the choices considerably. Do you really believe there will be any need of politicians on Lazarus?" Schicten asked slyly.

"We should begin searching for the most perfect of our brethren," Gudtsler said.

"Exactly so," Schicten said and let the couch shoot a load of tranquilizer into him. He sank back, his eyes glazing at the ceiling.

Gudtsler followed his stare, knowing where he was looking. Beyond their vision, the skeletal platform was orbiting with millions of pieces outside the lacy ionosphere, waiting for the final joining.

The Church Militant had the money to construct the ark. All that was needed now was the cooperation of a few hundred industrial complexes for the finishing and assembly of all the necessary hardware.

But to do that, the companies needed the approval of their governments. Nearly ten years in the actual making, only short years to completion, but now the ark was threatened by the bog of bureaucracy and its petty jealousies.

He had thought the World Congress would leap at the opportunity. It was already squandering billions trying to revive the corpse of the world. What more logical answer than to simply leave this world?

Still, Schicten could do it. He could convince the World Congress that the expenditure and effort was worthwhile, even if he had to play its repulsive game and resort to empty promises. God would forgive that small lie if even a small segment of humanity flourished.

Suddenly, shockingly, he understood the Most Holy's dilemma.

He turned to speak his fears to Schicten, but the Pope was already asleep. What would happen to the brotherhood if this great starship collapsed?

What would the world do if it learned that not two million, but four hundred, would leave? And what would be the reaction of the faithful brotherhood? That was stretching faith painfully thin.

Four hundred! By the consecrated ejaculation, nobody must know!

VII

"FEELS GOOD OUT TODAY," Matter said.

"And I always say if it feels good out, leave it out," Philip returned.

Stuckey groaned. "I was nibbling on my crib when I heard that joke, Philip."

"Don't be vicious," Philip said. "I may decide not to give you your present."

"A present?" Stuckey said, reaching across the table and patting Philip's hand. "And what would that be, dear, sweet, kind Philip?"

"Aren't honest girls a pleasure, Matt?" Philip grinned. He peered over his cup. "How about going to town today? Both of you."

Matter looked up, surprised. He and Stuckey had been having breakfast in the hall when Philip sidled up to their table. He had sat quietly, poking the ersatz tea leaves around in his cup, watching Matter eat his customary cakes and gruel while Stuckey smeared egg yolk over her plate.

"What's the occasion?" Matter asked.

"One of the main bearings in the generator sounds like it's going bad and I want to order a new one." He sloshed a mouthful of tea.

Matter moved a chunk of cake onto his fork. "Why don't you call and order it?"

"There's no phone line out of Gauze. I thought you knew that. We have to place our orders in Salton. I've got a few things to do around here today and thought you and Stuckey might like the outing."

"Sounds fine. How about you, Stuckey?" His stomach flipped as he saw the mess she had made with the eggs.

"Wonderful," she nodded. "When do we leave?"

"Soon as you like," Philip said, burrowing in his crusty work fatigues and retrieving an envelope. "Just drop this off with an old guy named Tassian at the general store."

"General store," Matter repeated. "That's a joke, right?"

"Wrong. Salton is not what you might call a metropolitan delight," Philip said. "The order's in the envelope."

Matter shoved it under his collar. "What'd you say his name was?"

"Tassian. As in passion. Have fun, you two."

Matter meant to ask how Gauze acquired the money to pay for generator parts but he was halfway to the garage with Stuckey before he thought of it. Leo was tending the garage and apparently knew that Matter and Stuckey were leaving. There was a fully charged two seat ATV waiting for them.

"Which way?" Matter asked as they clambered into the ground truck. "I don't even know where the entrance is."

"That's good because it means you haven't been looking," Stuckey smiled.

"I guess that's true," Matter said and remembered what he was. He put the thought aside.

"Go straight ahead and turn left after you pass the hydro station," Stuckey directed.

"You'll have to tell me where that is, too." He pushed forward on the double power wands and they churned out of the garage, all six wheels chattering and growling. He may have gained Philip's confidence enough to take Stuckey out of Gauze, but he was not going to win any races doing it.

They ground over the gravel roadway, Matter glancing questioningly at the grooves and ruts in it.

"Tractors," Stuckey yelled behind him. "Oh, there's the hydro station. Make a left when you come to the road."

He recalled now that he had seen the station when Denny had given him the tour. In the rain, he had not recognized it for what it was. In fact, even in the bright sunlight he would have overlooked the whitewashed shed.

"Not very impressive, is it?" Stuckey said. "I think most of it is under the ground."

"Serves its purpose. Are you a mind reader, or what?" he laughed. "How did you know I was thinking about the hydro shed?"

"Didn't you know? People in love always know what each is thinking."

"Is that right? So where does that put us?"

"It means I can't read your mind."

"That doesn't surprise me," Matter shook his head. "Damned shame, too. We'll have to do something about that. Purely in the interest of science, of course."

"Of course."

He swung the ATV to the left when he came to the center road and glanced back. He and Denny had turned to the right and driven out the open end of the horseshoe. But now he was driving back into the semicircle of huts and buildings. They passed the dining hall, weaving between buildings and granaries and through a protecting clump of trees.

The gravel ended and became a wandering ribbon of dried mud.

"Now I understand why you people need ATV's to get out of here," he said, his teeth jiggling at each lurch across the path.

"Some of the kids wanted to use horses at first," Stuckey said. "They even wanted to plow the fields with them."

"I've never ridden a horse," Matter said. "But it can't be much worse."

"Try slowing down," Stuckey called. "We have all day. And I thought you had learned to relax."

"I'm still having problems at night," he grinned.

"Anyway, when the generator was built, Philip convinced them that the horses were too expensive to maintain. The bat cars and the ATV's are more dependable."

"Dependable they may be. Comfortable, no," Matter grimaced. "Were you here when the generators were built?"

"I came shortly after the generators were finished," Stuckey said. "Why? Do you find that important?"

He hit a rock that jounced the control wands out of his hand, tried to correct by pushing power ahead too quickly, and slewed the ATV sideways. He gritted his teeth and concentrated on keeping a straight line.

Stuckey was laughing happily when they topped the crest of a hill and he saw the walls.

Two fifty-foot lengths of curved wall were standing alone in front of them, glinting with a dull blackness in the sun. As he pulled closer, he could see they were curved inward together, like two reversed parentheses guarding each other's flank.

They looked unpleasant. The dried path led between them and out the other end. He pulled back evenly on the wands, grinding the ATV to a stop. An ominous clinging reached out from the walls and slithered around him.

"That's the gate through the barrier, isn't it?"

"Yes. Stay here a minute, Matt," Stuckey said. She swung out, rubbing her buttocks stiffly.

He watched her step carefully to one of the walls and press an invisible button. She spoke a few words to the wall and walked quickly back to the ATV.

"Let's go. We have ninety seconds to get through before the gate rearms itself," she said as she climbed in behind Matter.

Go through what? He squinted at the path between the walls as he jammed the ATV forward. The rough path ended with an evenly graded stretch between the walls.

"Is the path triggered?" he asked dryly.

"Fragmentation mines," Stuckey said. "They're deactivated for a minute and a half by a code phrase."

It impressed him. A voice-operated trip switch in the middle of the Canadian plains was serious stuff. Denny was right when he said they'd had some help building Gauze. Expensive help.

He pulled onto the graded section between the walls. What if Stuckey had forgotten the correct code phrase? What if he drove smack on top of one of those fragmentation mines? What if this was Philip's big surprise for him? What if . . . ?

Stuckey cried a strangled scream and it hit him like a bombshell, turning his spine to pablum jelly. It collapsed his lungs and sent them bugging out of his eyes. He gasped and it was all he could do to keep the wands pressed forward.

She was clutching his back and biting a hole in his neck. He released the wands and trembled to a stop.

"Holy damn!" he wheezed when he found his breath. "What was *that*?"

"The spill over," she whispered, her breath coming in ragged tears.

"You mean that's just what dribbles over the walls? Christ, I'd hate to try it full strength."

"You couldn't survive it," she said, gulping the air. "The walls stop most of it, but some gets over the top. The gate is the only way through and if you don't know the password, you'll be blown up by the mines."

"Nice friends you have," he choked.

"Philip took me in when I needed help. You'll have to remember that," she said, still struggling to regain herself. Her voice came in broken, half-uttered shreds. "I was going to warn you about the gate after Denny said you were interested in the barrier, but Philip wanted you to experience it for yourself."

"And Philip always gets what he wants, doesn't he?" The shock was wearing off. In its place was anger at Philip for having subjected Stuckey to the gate's terror. Even though she may have passed through it a dozen times and knew what to expect, it still had hurt her.

She put her head against his back and did not answer.

Damn you, Philip, he thought bitterly.

The ATV was grumbling under him. He waited until his adrenalin was approximating normal and pushed the wands forward. Philip had a jewel of a toy out here.

Broad beam, foolproof and cheap. Something Philip's piddling hydro station could keep supplied with electricity without a massive power drain. He had a good idea what it was. He had an even better idea that Philip was not playing games.

They bounced into a ditch and growled up the other side onto a graded road. "Right," Stuckey shouted, and he bolted the ATV into a rasping turn.

They were covered with dust and the sun baked down on them. "How far to Salton?" he asked.

"About six miles," Stuckey yelled in his ear. "Don't tell me that outdoor living is beginning to bother you? You've been living in those air-conditioned cities too long."

He nodded. "Decadence has its advantages. At least you can breathe in the city."

"Sure, but what are you breathing there?"

"A lot less dust," he laughed. "Mind if I ask a question?"

"Is it a Matter type question, or is it a Captain Matter type question?"

"All-American-boy type question. A few minutes ago we were kidding about mind reading. I'm not complaining, understand, but we've been sharing the same bed for a couple of weeks now and that's all . . . sharing a bed, period. So I've been wondering."

"I don't have to be a mind reader to guess what you're wondering."

"You may be wrong," Matter said. "It's your choice if you don't want to make love to me. I don't necessarily like it, but I won't fight it. What I want to know is whose woman you are."

"Do I have to be someone's woman?"

He eased back in the fiberglass seat, steering the ATV more surely now that it was on a road.

"No reason you should be, I guess, but on the other hand I can't see any reason why you shouldn't be. In case nobody has mentioned it, you happen to be a very attractive girl. Maybe I'm assuming too much, but I don't think you would be sharing a bed with me if you found me totally repulsive."

"You're not assuming too much," she agreed softly.

"Then what's the problem with us? Is it the fact that I'm a HEROD?"

"It's hard to ignore," Stuckey said. "If you believe strongly in complete birth control, there's not much purpose in making love, is there?"

"It's the other way around," Matter said. "It can strengthen the love between two persons."

"Love can be found anywhere," Stuckey said. He was unsure whether she said it sarcastically.

"I was supposed to check into your commune's breeding habits and, frankly, I expected things to be a lot looser. Thought that an old war hero like Philip would have his own personal harem going. Instead, there's more action going on in that middle-aged tourist trap up on the mountain."

"Are you being critical?" Stuckey asked jokingly. "Or are you simply disappointed that we haven't made love?"

"Sure, I'm disappointed. I'm not crazy about kids, but that doesn't mean I'm a celibate. But I was making an observation. For what it means, that's the conclusion I'll be filing with the Society."

"Philip will be pleased to know that," Stuckey said. "But you're basing your observation only on what you've seen. There's more to people than what you can see with your eyes."

"Granted. Making love, incidentally, is an excellent way to learn about a person."

"Yes, it is," she said quietly, barely audible over the ATV. He could feel her dropping the conversation under its treads.

In the distance, Salton's grain elevators were standing like totems.

The village had one main street and two corners with four blocks between the corners. A Greek Orthodox church, its gilded dome dull with tarnish, stood empty guard on the first corner as he turned onto the main street. Across from it was a Roman church, collapsing into the dust as its soul competitor had. There was an overgrown cemetery behind it, bleached stones furtively looking out from weeds and gangling stalks of last summer's sunflowers.

A farmer was sitting in front of a dilapidated combustion engine garage drinking Wynola and watching the ATV kick up dust clouds on the street.

"It's like stepping back in time, isn't it?" Stuckey said reverently.

"I didn't know places like this still existed," Matter said.

"See, I told you, you were spending too much time in the cities."

He pulled the ATV to a stop in front of the Salton General Store, parking next to a pair of ancient glass-topped gasoline pumps, rusting and encrusted with two decades of dead flies. He helped Stuckey out and worked the driving kinks out of his arms.

The store was a museum of curios and oddments. Horse collars with cracking leather and dried bags of wheat littered the walls and floors. He stepped his way to the counter, stale sugary smells of caraway and anise wafting up to him.

A back door opened and a man whose face matched the

cracked leather came around the counter, looking inquisitive and reservedly friendly.

"Mr. Tassian?" Matter asked.

"Yes?" The old man looked past Matter and recognized Stuckey. "Ah, young lady. It's good to see you again. How have you been?"

"Fine, Mister Tassian," Stuckey smiled, turning to Matter. "Mister Tassian has been running this store for a long time. He can tell you some very interesting stories about Salton."

"But don't believe them," the old man warned, wagging his finger.

Matter shook the old man's hand. "It's a pleasure meeting you, sir."

"Oh, there are some stories I could tell," he winked at Stuckey. "Is this young man staying at the farm, Miss Stuckey? He seems like a nice enough young fellow. Are you from the city?"

"I'm from the States. Just visiting here," Matter said. "My name is Matter."

"Very nice meeting you, Mister Matter. I'm George Tassian. Tassian as in passion. Although I must admit that passion is rather inappropriate at my age."

"Shame on you, Mister Tassian," Stuckey said. "You'll be here after all of us have gone."

"Everything must grow old," he laughed brittlely, his voice like strained parchment. "Things come and go. It's good that you have your farm the way the world is going today. It allows you time to stop rushing so and see where you've been. So many changes."

He shook his head wryly and extracted a bowl of stale horehounds from under the counter. "Sometimes I wonder what the world is coming to when I hear about your United States, Mister Matter. Killings and fighting. Mind you, I'm not criticizing, but some of the old fogies around here would say that your country still hasn't grown up."

"Perhaps the whole world hasn't grown up yet," Matter said. He smiled easily. The old man was an original diplomat, careful of how he phrased his comments so as not to offend his customers. The free enterprise system had long since made the old man cautious.

"A very intelligent observation, Mister Matter," old Tas-

sian said. "Do you have any other name, Mister Matter?"

"Legally? No, Matter is my only one." He took a horehound that Tassian offered.

"But I'll wager you have a long identification number."

"Everyone does," Matter said.

Tassian tutted softly, sucking on his candy. "Now I think that may have been a mistake, doing away with family names. I know what you're going to say—selective breeding makes names unnecessary, and all that, and I don't want to appear to be standing in the way of progress—but some of the old things really were awfully comfortable."

"Probably so," Matter said and wondered if the old man was a Fundamentalist, if not in capacity at least in spirit. It seemed unimportant as he chewed the candy. He became aware that Stuckey was holding his arm warmly.

"Enough of my talking," old Tassian said. "What can I do for you, children?"

Matter fumbled under his collar and found Philip's envelope. He had almost forgotten about it.

"Philip wants to order something for the farm."

Tassian adjusted an antique pair of glasses on his nose and carefully tore the envelope open. He peered at the writing plastic, tutting to himself.

"Mn, yes," he mumbled and pulled a ragged service manual from a shelf. "Some problem with the generator again. I *told* Philip a windmill was more reliable."

Stuckey seemed warm and comfortable in the ancient store, pressing softly on Matter's elbow. She felt good, holding his arm. He looked down to smile at her and saw the man across the street aiming the gun at them.

He ducked instantly, pulling Stuckey to the floor with him. The front door blew apart, and Tassian's brains smeared across the cracked leather harnesses.

Stuckey screamed.

"Stay down!" Matter yelled. He pushed her behind the sacks of dried wheat, ejecting the paspistol into his hand as soon as she freed his arm. Another double round of dumdums tore out half the wooden doorframe.

He hit the floor, covering his head as the store window blasted apart in cadence. Glass and slivers of enameled

cookware showered the store like shrapnel, the double bullets chewing gaping holes in the faded wallpaper.

Stuckey was moaning shrilly, crying spastically as a thick treacle of Tassian's blood inched across the floor and soaked into the wheat. There was a pause in the thunder, and Matter rolled on his back, counting the craters in the wall. Sixteen big holes, counting the one in Tassian's face. Time out for the sharpshooter to jam another clip into the bulky grip.

He dodged to the shattered windows and glanced out. A thin cloud of gray smoke was hanging over the street in front of the combustion garage. Someone was disappearing around the side. Someone, Matter guessed, with squinted eyes.

His paspistol was useless beyond a few yards. Throwing a shot at the scurrying killer would only be a waste and confirmation that the killer's target was still alive.

"Stuckey?" he cried. "Are you all right?"

Her sobbing reached him and he scrambled over the broken glass to her. Giant tremors were shaking her. She was staring with screaming eyes at a rivulet of blood that had found its way through the litter and was touching her outstretched fingers.

"Oh, Jesus," he whispered and lifted her from the floor. She struggled against him, her cries coming in hoarse groans, leaving dirty red smears on his body stocking as she tried to push away.

"Easy, easy, baby," he said. He caught her hair and pulled her face against his chest. "You're okay now, baby. Take it easy."

She shuddered in his arms. He heard footsteps and half turned, flicking the paspistol at the ruined doorway. A farmer peeked into the store and said something unintelligible in Ukrainian. Matter kept the pistol leveled at the farmer's stomach.

"HEROD!" he barked. "Stay the hell out of here."

The farmer backed away, turning sick. More people were running up the street and Matter glanced nervously as they began gathering around the ATV.

"Come on," he said to Stuckey. "We're getting out of here. See if you can make it to the truck, huh?"

He led her out, holding her with one arm and threaten-

ing the paspistol at the collecting crowd. She slid into the back seat and sank like a torn doll, holding her face in her hands. He started to climb into the ATV and stopped, looking at the group of farmers.

"I'm sorry," he said loudly. "I liked Tassian. I'll find the man who killed him."

His words were repeated in Ukrainian and the crowd slowly melted back from the ATV. He thanked them wordlessly and jammed the power wands forward.

Stuckey's sobbing had quieted by the time he pulled the ATV onto Highway 10. He pushed the wands all the way to the dash and watched the speed creep to forty-five miles an hour.

"Where are we going?" she trembled.

"First to Darby Plains to make an overdue phone call. Then back to Wasag, but I don't want you along. I'll leave you with the Mounties in Darby and get word to Philip somehow."

He watched the highway closely, alert to any slowing trucks or mistaken turn signals. They had tried to nail him once on this road and in the ATV he and Stuckey were wide open with no speed or power to outrun a kill squad.

"Don't leave me," she said.

"I'm the one he's after," he shook his head. "He'll go back to the motel and see if I show. If I don't, he'll come looking for me again until he is sure I'm dead."

"I don't want to be alone," she insisted, clutching his back. "Can't you understand that?"

"You'll be dead if you stay with me," he said, biting the words. "An old man is dead because he happened to have the bad luck of meeting me. I'm a professional killer. Do you understand *that*, Stuckey?"

"I'll be dead without you," she whimpered.

He pressed his eyes closed. "You're out of your mind, girl. If you're going to say something ridiculous like you love me, don't. There's no reason for it and no future. I could say I loved you, too, but it would only be words. I want you, but I don't need you."

She pressed her head against his shoulders, holding on tightly. "Oh, God," she whispered. "Why do you have to choose to be honest now?"

"There's no percentage in loving a HEROD, Stuckey,"

he said quietly. "I've been a member of the Society for almost five years now. That's seventeen months longer than the statistical life expectancy for a HEROD. What do you expect from me, girl? A lifetime mortgage on a kitchen computer?"

"But could you love me?" she asked, not hearing.

He felt her softness on his back. "If I ever forget myself and say I love you, forget you heard it. It's totally meaningless."

"You still don't understand," she said, and he knew without looking over his shoulder that her dusty face was being streaked with tears.

They were approaching the outskirts of Darby Plains. "I know who I am," he said. "Stay away from me."

"For God's sake, stay away from me," he added as an afterthought.

VIII

SERGEANT KULCHESKI saw them coming up the front stairs before they even entered and did not like what he saw. Dirty, grimy and sweaty; with blood stains on the man's chest; the girl looking as though she had been dragged across a floor.

He had been prepared for another slow day of post duty, the usual rash of traffic complaints, a farmer accusing his neighbor of ruining water with barnyard runoff. Kulcheski marked the man as an American, and from the way he was almost pulling the girl along, he guessed there had been a lovers' quarrel.

Typical of the juvenile Yanks. He leaned back for a messy session of name calling.

He was unprepared for the sweaty man.

"I'm KillCaptain Matter of the North American HEROD Society," Matter snapped as he tossed open the door. "You can confirm that through Ottawa. Find somewhere for this girl to clean herself and get me a scramble phone connected with Chicago."

Kulcheski clambered up from his chair and saluted clumsily.

sily. Matter returned the chest slap, coming around the control console without pausing.

"Yessir," the sergeant stammered. He watched helplessly as Matter punched the Ottawa area code and then the Canadian office's coordinating channel.

"Dossier information," Matter said as soon as the trim clerical worker with her black and purple uniform came on the screen.

There was no small talk on an official network channel. "Restricted or routine?" she asked.

"A routine verification for the RCMP."

"Would you step closer to the screen, please?" the clerk said efficiently. She blipped on the encode scanner.

Matter placed his hand on the center circle of light.

"Affirmative," the clerk said. "Your eyes, now."

Matter stared at the circle as it inspected his retinal pattern.

"Affirmative," the clerk said again. "Would your party prefer this information verbally or will he require a written confirmation?"

Matter glanced the question at the Mountie.

"We'll accept a verbal confirmation," the sergeant said quickly. "But I will appreciate a confirming printout later."

"Certainly," the clerk said. "The man in your presence is KillCaptain Matter, Chicago Regiment, North American HEROD Society. We request your conformance with the International Population Control Code and extension of all courtesies to Captain Matter. This information is given without implicit guarantee of identification accuracy due to possible transmission inconsistencies. However, it is accurate to the best of our knowledge and you may act accordingly but without assumption of responsibility by the HEROD Society or any of its agents."

"Very good," the sergeant said and broke the connection. The recitation of the standard disclaimer gave him time to regain himself. He passed his hand over the intercom and Corporal Borosy answered.

"Sergeant?"

"Corporal, set up a scramble call to Chicago. We have a visiting HEROD here." He waved off and turned to Matter.

"We'll have the call set up in a few minutes, Captain. Can I do anything for you in the meantime?"

"Someplace for the girl," Matter said.

"Of course. Excuse me, miss, but we're somewhat limited here." He looked embarrassedly at Matter. "She can use the men's ping in the locker room or the facilities in the women's detention cells. I'm sorry, but we don't have a large post."

"Clear out the locker room for her," Matter said. "I don't want her anywhere near a cell."

"It's all right, Matt," Stuckey said. "The women's facilities will be fine."

"No they won't," Matter said and glowered at the sergeant.

Kulcheski got the message. "Right this way, miss," he said and led her to the locker room. He returned as the corporal was buzzing him.

"Scramble phone is connected, Sergeant," Borosy said. "We're sandwiched between two American transmission channels. I doubt if I can hold the modulation for more than a few minutes, so you'd better ask your guest to hurry."

Matter nodded and followed Kulcheski to the enclosed booth. He slid the door behind him, automatically sound-opaquing the walls, and opened the fluctuating frequency band.

"You look terrible," Josephine said.

"Thanks," Matter said. He held his hand to the screen and stared again at the encode blip for Josephine's identification. Her desk computer confirmed his identity.

"We've been trying to reach you for two weeks now, Captain," Josephine said. "We had almost given you up for lost. The colonel was ready to send a squad of jet-choppers up there to find you if you didn't report in soon. And why didn't you use your identification card instead of sticking your nose at the screen?"

"I've run into a bind," Matter said. "I forgot my id in the motel and now I'm wasting time getting confirmation from Ottawa. How about sending me a new card so that I can get back into the damned country?"

"Here's a better idea," Josephine said. "Why don't you go back to your motel and get your original card?"

"My motel room is an open lobby. People walk in and walk out whenever they please. I haven't been back in there since the last time I called and if the FROGs haven't stolen my id by now, they've at least faked it."

"Are you still working out of the same motel? Same cover name?"

"Check," Matter nodded. Careful, cautious Josephine was not about to send replacement ids for a simple phone request, scramble call or not. "White Willow Motel, Calder. Does that satisfy you, Josie?"

She blushed. "Sorry, Captain, but you know how risky a scramble call from Canada can be. We'll have the ids delivered as soon as possible. Would you like to speak to the colonel now?"

"Is he back? Yes, switch me over," Matter said. A bright beam of interference greened across the screen. *Hold that fix, you redcoat Uke*, he thought bitterly. The screen finally cleared, and Lembeck was looking at him.

"Good afternoon, Captain. What have you been up to? I've missed your normally cheerful reports."

"My apologies, Colonel," Matter said exasperatedly. Why did the HEROD have to be so forcefully casual all the time? "Colonel, would you mind telling me what's going on around here?"

Lembeck smiled. "I believe that is your job, Captain. Josephine has told me that you smashed the car. Are you having more difficulties?"

"Other than getting shot at again, no problems. I don't mind being a target, but I would like to know why."

"I'm sorry if you are having a troublesome time, Captain, but if we didn't think you were qualified for the job, you wouldn't have been sent."

"Thank you for the compliment, Colonel, but I would like to know what my job is. My orders said to investigate a love group outside of Darby Plains. Well, I've found the group, but it's no love colony. Who the devil has been handling our Canadian intelligence?"

"That's very interesting," Lembeck said obliquely. "We can use that information. Any other details?"

Matter saw him flip on his desk recorder.

"Nothing official, only impressions," Matter said, cooling himself now that it was becoming part of the official re-

port. "I was kidnapped—or allowed myself to be kidnapped—and taken to the commune. Met Philip. He seems more passive than when I knew him, but that's subjective. The entire commune seems aboveboard, farm communal concept, nothing original. Couple things seem off kilter, though. I have been informed that the birth rate is quite low. Haven't been able to authenticate it, but in the two weeks I've spent there I can't recall seeing any kids."

Another flurry of color interrupted him.

"Speed it up, Captain," Lembeck said. "You're fading."

"They have a barrier of some sort running around the commune. Haven't determined its nature, but it looks deadly."

Crackling colors.

"That's it? Two weeks and you have nothing more definitive than a few observations? I won't ask what you have been doing, Captain, but I suggest you get back to work," Lembeck said coldly.

Matter was taken aback by the reprimand. "What kind of information do you want?"

Lembeck sighed. "We have reports that something may be brewing up there, Captain. You weren't briefed on it because we wanted you to play it by ear and see what you found. Apparently, we have sent a deaf agent. For your good, I hope this old friendship with the leader of the commune has not jaded your judgment."

Matter scowled. *Don't be pushy*, he felt like saying. "My judgment has been unaffected, Colonel. I only wish I had been told of those early reports."

"They were of a political nature," Lembeck said. "It wouldn't have made any difference as far as you were concerned."

The screen blanked temporarily and then came back on, Lembeck's image wavering.

"Considering that I'm the one getting shot at, I prefer to make my own decisions as to what may affect me," Matter said sharply.

Lembeck stared at him calmly. "If you think it will help your position, it involves the World Congress and the Fundamentalist Gabriel Project. There is speculation a FROG nerve center may be located in middle Manitoba."

Matter almost laughed. *Gabriel Project! That screwball FROG scheme?*

"Why are we worried about that? We know it's an impossibility, lifting two million FROGs off the earth," Matter insisted.

"The final expenditure vote is coming up in the Congress shortly for a referendum. Presently, the Fundamentalists have enough sympathy to swing the Congress in their favor. May I remind you, Captain Matter, that we are talking of a world expenditure in excess of twenty billion dollars on this single vote alone."

The screen stuttered and broke into colored light patterns.

"What do we care if two million FROGs do blast off?" Matter yelled, trying to break through the interference. "We should be supporting the Project. The fewer FROGs there are, the better."

Lembeck's face came back on. ". . . mned nuisance. That is precisely how they gained the support they have now. Nobody *wants* to help the FROGs, but it seems a small price to pay to get rid of them. On the other hand, if we can discredit the scheme thoroughly, we could certainly use the money for something more construc . . ."

His face faded out entirely. A dull hum emanated from the screen, signaling a complete break in the scramble channel.

Matter punched out and slid open the booth door.

Borosy was shaking his head. "Sorry, Captain, but I held it as long as I could."

"You did a good job," Matter said absently. "I was getting bored with the conversation, anyway."

His mind was on Philip and the commune. Philip a Fundamentalist? Had the Okhotsk campaign been too much for him?

Philip was an old friend. It would hurt to kill him.

"Looks like you could use a ping yourself, Captain," Kulcheski said.

"Thanks, but I'll skip that for now. There's a motel room waiting for me in Wasag. What I could use, though, is a fast car."

"You have it," Kulcheski said. "Take one of the patrol cars and leave it at the post there."

He had little love for Americans and less liking for the HEROD Society. Kulcheski had always considered it symptomatic of the American penchant for excess. But an international agreement was an international agreement and it was beyond his responsibility.

"I appreciate that," Matter said. "I owe the Mountie in Wasag a visit. Do you know him, by the way?"

"Buddenbrock? Certainly. We get together every so often, but not very frequently. That tourist camp in the middle of his territory keeps him busy."

"They probably keep him jumping," Matter agreed. "What about Salton? Is that in your territory, Sergeant?"

"It is," Kulcheski answered.

"There's a commune named Gauze near Salton. Would that be in your area, also?"

Kulcheski nodded. *What was this HEROD pumping for?*

"Are you aware that there is a lethal barrier around the commune?" Matter felt the sudden cooling.

"No one has ever been killed by it, so I'm not sure it is lethal," Kulcheski said. "Of course, I know of its existence. I remember signing the permit."

Matter shook his head slowly. "You signed it without checking?"

"There is nothing illegal about it in itself," Kulcheski insisted. "The people in the area know of it and stay away from it. It's a little uncomfortable knowing it's there, but we feel the commune has every right to protect its property."

"That's commendably broad-minded of you," Matter commented. "Have you ever walked into the barrier, Sergeant?"

"I've never had the desire," Kulcheski said.

Matter tightened his face. "I'd like to see how broad-minded you are after you've tried it. Until then, I would like to examine that permit application. Since you signed it, I imagine you have a copy here."

"Certainly," Kulcheski said. He motioned to Borosy who began sorting through the tape files.

Matter scanned the specifications, whistling to himself.

Low frequency sound, in the twelve per second range, substantially below audible hearing. Disconcerting in itself,

like the bass sound of a neighbor's Moog booming through a plastic apartment wall.

With enough amplitude, it had a direct effect on the adrenalin glands, a phenomenon he had painfully experienced going through the gate. A reverse mental process. The body felt the rise of adrenalin and told the mind there had to be a reason for it. The mind interpreted it as fear.

Paranoid fear, with no visible cause. A man could walk into the barrier and be gripped by total horror, reduced to a screaming, begging pulp and have no idea why.

Cute, Matter thought. He advanced the tape to find the amplitude. Since some of the inaudible sound had filtered past the baffle walls, he was guessing the volume was high. The more intense the soundless sound, the more immediate its effect.

His mouth went dry as he read the specs.

Sound was a cyclic motion, striking anything in its way with successive blows. Tapping the middle C of a piano caused two hundred and fifty-six waves to impact on a music lover's ear each second. That gave the note its character. But what was destructively important was the strength in which those tiny trip-hammers struck . . . its volume.

And it was high. Philip's barrier was shattering outward at ten g's amplitude. Each blow, twelve times a second, was striking and retreating at a force of ten times gravity on every square inch of surface it encountered.

A man caught in its path would be literally vibrated to death, imploding and exploding twelve times a second until all the cells ruptured. In time, all that would remain would be a particularly messy wet spot.

No wonder Kulcheski did not know of anyone being killed by the barrier. There would have been nothing left to examine.

Matter closed the tape. One question had been resolved. Philip was prepared for *big* trouble.

"Find the information you wanted?" Kulcheski asked with a hard humor.

Matter nodded. All he had to do was duck a few bullets, but Philip and Stuckey were involved in something far dirtier. He was suddenly worried, deeply worried, for the girl.

Against all the rules of common sense, he was allowing himself to be concerned for a girl.

No percentage in it, he had said. He reminded himself of his words, making them sink in deeply.

"Anything else you'll be needing?" Kulcheski asked. He was hoping the HEROD would leave soon.

"There is something," Matter said. "Since I'm here, I may as well report a murder in Salton. Someone took a few shots at me and missed. Hit an old shopkeeper named Tassian instead. I'd appreciate it if you could take care of the funeral arrangements and charge it to my account."

Kulcheski's face went ashen. "Old man Tassian? He was killed?" He dropped his eyes to the smears on Matter's chest.

"Did you know him?"

The sergeant brought his eyes up slowly. "For a long time."

Matter felt the cold resistance building. "I'm tracking the killer now, but all I have on me is a paspistol, and the killer is carrying some heavy stuff. If it's possible, I'd like to borrow some heavier armament."

"I can offer to help you," Kulcheski said.

"Declined," Matter said. "This is a HEROD problem and, besides, you'd probably only try to bring him in. I'm not bound by your moral code."

The sergeant drew a long breath. "I can offer you my help, but I can't let you have a gun."

Matter looked at him steadily. "Wasn't there something about cooperation being mentioned a couple minutes ago?"

"We'll cooperate fully with American-Canadian law, but I can't authorize an obvious violation of a world game law," Kulcheski said evenly. "Wasag is in the middle of an International Preserve. I can't allow you to take a gun in there knowingly, and I'm going to have to ask you for your pistol."

Matter stared at him. Behind, he heard Borosy closing the door to the scrambler room. Kulcheski's eyes told Borosy to hold his ground, then returned to Matter.

The sergeant put out his hand. "Your gun, please, Captain."

"I'm afraid not," Matter said. "If a Gimp officer wants to take this gun from me, he's welcomed to try. But it's not your worry, Sergeant. Wasag is out of your jurisdic-

tion and if you try to stop me from going there, I'll have you knitting qiviut wool at the North Pole."

Kulcheski's eyes darted to Borosy.

"Use your head, kid," Matter warned. "Make a move toward me and I'll have you and your sergeant up for international insubordination."

He heard Borosy breathing hard behind him. Kulcheski stood still, considering the odds.

Matter tightened his arm pressure on the ejection holster.

"Matt?" he heard Stuckey ask as she entered the desk room. He pressed his eyes shut in relief and Kulcheski sagged.

"How are you feeling, Stuckey? You're looking a lot better."

"Still shaky," she said. "Is everything all right?"

"I was reporting the . . . accident to the sergeant here. He knew old Tassian."

"It's a terrible shame," Kulcheski said.

She nodded wordlessly.

"Well," Kulcheski stumbled, wiping his hands on his shirt. "Would you like to clean up, Captain?"

"I think it would be better if we left," Matter said.

Kulcheski motioned to Borosy. "Corporal, bring a car around for the KillCaptain. I take it the young lady will be staying here. Shall I arrange a hotel room for her?"

She looked at Matter pleadingly.

"No, that won't be necessary," he said. "The young lady goes with me."

His face was stinging from the perspiration dribbling into the glass cuts. The patrol car felt heavy but responsive as he aimed it over the long stretch of highway between Darby Plains and the mountains. In the distance, the black pavement was swimming in the afternoon heat. He watched the flat highway uncoil under the car.

"You're bleeding," Stuckey said quietly. She had been silent since leaving the MP post, giving him only a thankful look as they had piled into the patrol car.

He wiped his face, his hand coming away speckled with flecks of scabbed blood. He was having massive reserva-

tions about taking her to Wasag, but was telling himself that at least he could protect her.

"Don't worry about it," he said, looking at his hand broodingly. He did not want to admit his presence was the danger, the reason she had to be protected. "Doesn't mean anything. There was a lot of glass flying around back there."

She rummaged in the glove compartment and found the sterilized towelettes in the first aid kit. She popped open the pack and slid across the seat to Matter.

"Concentrate on your driving. I'm going to wash your face."

"It's nothing to worry about. I'm all right."

"Who's worried about you?" she joked. "You'll scare those poor tourists half to death looking like that."

The towels felt cool and intimate against his face, more intimate than watching her undress had been. She washed his face gently, dabbing out the grime and dried blood.

"That feels good," he murmured. "Thank you, Stuckey."

She leaned her head on his shoulder and watched the dancing mirages on the highway. They were approaching the mountains and he saw the bridge, feeling again that one chilling moment when he thought he was going to die.

"Is that where it happened?" she asked.

"You passed it when you shanghaied me to Gauze," he said.

"Could we stop? I want to see it."

"If that turns you on." He braked the car off the road. Burned rubber composition streaks were still marking a jagged arc across the pavement. "Made contact there when he turned in front of me," he said, pointing up the road. "Spun out about there and went over the river. You can see the branches broken and the dirt torn up. Landed against the river bank over there where that singed spot is."

He motioned over his shoulder. When he turned back, Stuckey's eyes were moist.

"I'm glad you weren't hurt," she said very softly.

He looked at her wide eyes. She came to him easily when he touched her face. "Ordinarily, it wouldn't have made a difference. Right now, I'm glad I'm still alive, too," he said quietly.

A HEROD should not be having feelings like this.

She was against him, the sharp edges of her teeth sliding across his tongue. "Where have you been?" she whispered, then shook her head and buried her face on his shoulder. "No, I shouldn't have said that."

He frowned, smelling the natural perfume of her hair.

"How have you gotten where you are, Matt?" she asked, pulling back from him.

"I'm not sure what you mean. I haven't thought about it," he said. "You mean, why am I a HEROD? That's simple. When I quit the mercenaries, I needed a job. Since it was pretty obvious that I was going to have to work for a living, I thought I might as well do something beneficial. Birth control seemed as good a prospect as any. I couldn't cut a desk job and with my military background, becoming a field agent was a natural step."

"There are other ways of accomplishing the same goal. Do you enjoy your job that much?"

"The other ways have failed. The most poverty-stricken areas of the world are also those with the highest birth-rate. It's a racial reflex action. When a species begins to feel starvation, it begins multiplying heavily to preserve itself. That's basic to every animal, and it's stupid because it only accentuates the problem. Instead of perpetuating the species, it only diminishes the food supply even more drastically."

"Then we should increase the food supply," Stuckey said. He knew she was no more concerned with the balance of the world than he was at the moment, but it helped keep his attention from the sharp edges of her teeth.

"That becomes only a vicious circle," Matter said. "During the middle of the century we tried to convert the desert land into farmland in India. It was technically feasible and, in a limited way, it was successful. But the population rose faster than the land could be converted, so it was a losing battle all the way. All we did was delay the inevitable."

"Then we could share the wealth," Stuckey suggested.

"That was tried, also," Matter shrugged. "Getting back to India, the cost of converting the land was more than the food grown was worth. It turned out to be cheaper for Russia and China and the U.S. to simply donate the food rather than to float the loans. That worked until the ma-

for powers began feeling the crimp themselves and we ran out of surplus reserves."

"So you feel birth control is the only answer?"

"Not necessarily, but it's the most immediately effective," Matter said. "Besides, the pay isn't bad."

She smiled sadly. "But what are you preserving?"

He felt the irony of a world maintaining its life by sanctioning the daily kill games on the trid and turning its legal back on murder. He returned the smile.

"Existence, Stuckey. That's what it's all about."

"It seems so pointless," she said.

"Life is one long string of dirty jokes," Matter said. "It's one big porno game. By the time the punchline comes along, the humor has gone and it's anticlimatic. That's the point of it, Stuckey."

"There has to be some other way," she said, resting against his chest.

"You can button yourself up on Philip's commune and pretend that the pornography doesn't exist," he said.

"Could you live that way?"

The question had been unvoiced in his own mind, but he knew it would show itself eventually. "You would be very easy to love," he said.

"You said there was no percentage in that," she reminded.

"It's a zero game all the way. I love you, Stuckey," he said and the words hurt.

"I know that," she said.

"Christ, don't say that. Say you love me or tell me to get away from you or tell me to wise up. Whatever you say doesn't count anyway. It's just a game, remember?"

They pulled into Wasag an hour later, dumping the patrol car in front of the motel.

"My key," he said to the clerk.

The clerk gave him a brimmingly expectant smile until he saw Stuckey standing with Matter. "Ah, Captain. We've been terribly concerned about you. Everyone has been asking for you, but I can see now that there was nothing to worry about."

He dragged his eye over Matter's grimy bodystocking. "Been out hiking in the woods again? My, but you are the physical type, aren't you?"

Matter's face darkened. "My key," he said, motioning with his hand.

"Of course, sir," the clerk smirked. "It's gratifying to know you took my advice and found a playfriend for yourself."

"You go to hell," Matter said evenly.

"Are you sure your old room will be adequate? Perhaps the mirror room?"

The tendons tightened across Matter's neck.

"And what about you, sweetie?" the clerk insisted. "We could let you have the artificial mud room. The two of you could slip and slide all night long and just cover yourself with ooze."

Matter leaned across the counter. "If you so much as open your mouth to speak to this girl again, I'll kick your teeth in so far you'll be chewing with your asshole."

He walked Stuckey to his room and punched the closet button.

"You have an endearing quality about you," Stuckey said, shaking her head.

Matter growled. "Queers are protected by the uniform birth control laws and he knows I can't do a damned thing to him. But it felt good to say it."

It came as no surprise to find his wallet and id papers missing. Two weeks vacancy in a motel was an open invitation.

"You're antisocial, too," Stuckey said.

"I'm also broke," Matter said. "That little fag has cleaned me out."

"Are you sure it was him?" Stuckey asked.

"Supposedly there's only one key in existence to this room, and he has had it since I've been out."

"What about the cleaning crew? Someone has been in here since we were. The microcoder is gone," Stuckey said.

He glanced around the floor, but she was correct. "That's not very encouraging," he said. He punched the ping button disgustedly and waited for the shower to revolve.

"That outburst wasn't like you. You're usually more analytical," she said. "If there's nothing you can do to him, why do you allow yourself to get angry? He's probably

feeling smug and pleased with himself for having goaded you."

"Probably," Matter agreed. "Christ, I don't know why I said it. This whole country is beginning to bug me."

He was angry enough not to notice that Stuckey turned her back shyly to him when he peeled out of his stocking and stepped into the ping.

IX

THE BLACK AND PURPLE UNIFORM abraded nerve endings in the resort town. Even the children who had waved to him on his balcony now refused to look at him as he and Stuckey wandered down the streets.

He was baiting the killer, daring him to show himself. His training made him eager to atone for the shopkeeper's death but at the same time, for Stuckey's sake, he was hoping the killer would stay under cover.

She insisted on accompanying him and her presence next to him was like a stone weight on his gunhand. But it was a weight that was warm and comforting.

They finished their second dinner and ambled to the lake shoreline, shivering under the cold air that blew across the mountain-fed water.

"Getting cold," Matter said.

She pressed against him. "Your body is warm."

"It's still in one piece, too, which I don't entirely understand," he said. "He's waiting for something."

"Maybe he's not here."

"No, he's in town all right. But he's waiting. Damned if I know why."

"Perhaps he doesn't know you're here."

"Maybe the sun doesn't shine in the daytime, either."

He looked at the black ripples on the lake. The last of the churner rentals had been put to dock, the last of the tourists had drifted back to their summer cubicles.

"Stuckey, what are you doing here? You know you can be killed."

"You'll protect me," she said surely.

He snuffed his nose. Time was running out for him. He sensed it in his bones, the way his muscles balked imperceptibly whenever they were pushed to their limits. The crisp edge of his reflexes had been eroded by the short, yet interminable, years in the Society.

He accepted his job. He believed—as much as he could believe—in it. But faith alone was not enough to stay alive.

"I want you to be safe," he said. "The best way I know of keeping you safe is getting you back to the commune."

"But not yet," she said. "Later, but not now."

She was looking at him strangely, a half smile on her parted lips.

"Oh, for God's sake, Stuckey. Now?"

"I want to make love to you," she said. "Now. Right here. Right on the beach."

"Sweet Christ, girl, why now? What turns you on, anyway?"

"You turn me on," she smiled. "Well?"

"Here?"

"Why not? It's a nice beach."

It was ludicrous, but he did not laugh. Two weeks of living with her in pastoral peace and now she wanted to go to bed.

"I can think of a lot of reasons why not. Bugs, for one. FROGS, for another. I don't mind getting shot at by a FROG, but giving him two targets for one shot is ridiculous."

"But it'd be a wild way to go, wouldn't it?" she laughed.

"Granted, but I'm not taking you with me," he said.

"Then let's go back to the motel. I still think about the first time I undressed for you. You won't give me a cold inspection this time, will you?"

She pulled him by the hand and scampered up the shore.

"Hey, wait a minute," Matter said. "A couple hours ago we almost had our heads blown off. Are you some kind of sadist who only turns on when there's blood?"

He was sorry he had said it. She stopped and looked at him seriously. "What happened in Salton will sicken me for as long as I live. I want to put it out of my mind tonight."

"You think making love will distract you?"

She forced herself to brighten. "Do you know of a better way?"

"Not offhand, but you're one of the most irrational girls I've ever met."

"Actually, I'm very rational," she said. "Almost as rational as you."

"That's not saying much. If I was rational, I wouldn't be hesitating about going to bed with you."

"Then I'll make it easier for you. I love you. Does that make it better?"

"That makes it worse. Do you call that rationality? I told you there was no percentage in loving me."

"It's all a game, remember? You'll see," she said cryptically and they walked to the motel.

The clerk did not answer Matter when he asked for the key. Matter was just as happy.

He closed the door and she came into his arms like a shadow in the dark room. She found his mouth and her tongue danced into it, her fingers tugging at his uniform. He caught her face in his hands, tilting it back and holding her chin until he could feel her pulse.

Matter pressed the red bed button on the console and the bed slid out of the wall and settled into the room, unfolding its plushness over the floor.

"Don't be too efficient, Matt," she whispered as they melted into the mattress foam.

Her skin was like honey and oil against his. They flowed and merged like the black ripples in the lake breaking on the shoreline.

"Stuckey," he whispered, clenching his teeth until they were grinding. "You have been learning some interesting things on that farm."

"You're teaching," she said softly, stroking his back.

She was barren, not of body but of soul. He should have recognized the signs of her moral decay at their first encounter. Her impertinent, almost accusative, questions should have been enough to warn him of her unfitness. Ordinarily, he would have dismissed such an incorrigible and sent her back to wherever she came to keep the surroundings of the catacombs clean. After several months and still no conception, although she appeared to be in excellent health,

he should have sent her back to the homeland that matched the clamminess of her soul.

It was blatantly obvious that she lacked the spirit of total fulfillment. He had been informed of her obstinance in bearing no child and he had attempted to thaw her will with a succession of fine young priests. But each time, they had failed.

She surrendered herself piously, to be sure, but the situation deteriorated until it became almost a dare among the priests to make her pregnant.

He speculated whether she had smuggled some infernal birth control device into the catacombs with her, but a thorough inspection of her cell revealed nothing and an even more thorough inspection of her organs revealed less.

She did not want to have a child. Either by sheer willpower or by a lucky coincidence of her menstrual periods, she remained unfulfilled and unfruitful.

The ArchCommodore had even resorted to keeping a chart of her temperature rises, but his crafty timing failed. The problem vexed him.

Infernal stubbornness. He was not yet willing to attribute the cause solely to her willpower—he was too scientifically oriented for that—and he should have ignored the whole inconvenience she presented. Such petty concerns were beneath his dignity, but a morale problem was developing among the ranks of the initiate priests.

He had finally decided to take the matter into his own hands. Even if no conception resulted, the novitiate nun provided a pleasant diversion from the tired hags who normally frequented his quarters.

"Did you find it better this time?" he asked as he buttoned his frock.

She stretched lazily on the ArchCommodore's satin sheets. "It is always excellent with you, Father," she said.

He straightened his braid and turned sharply to her. "It is sinful to lie, child, and doubly unwise to lie to me. You allow yourself no joy from the most holy of communions, although I have satisfied a great number of believers in my time. There is no use in hiding the obvious from me."

"Is it necessary that I feel joy, Father?" she asked.

"There is no need for you to feel anything," Gudtsler

said. "But it is symptomatic of your total rejection of true righteousness that you do not. You set yourself above God by refusing to bear His fruit. Moreover, I find your lack of cooperation personally insulting."

She bit her lip. "I don't mean to insult you, Father. Truly I don't. Do I move adequately? Is there some other way you would have? Suggest it and I will be overjoyed to share in your sacred experimentation."

He shook his head gruffly. "The most effective way is the best. Superficially, your responses are adequate. But they are not spontaneous, not the total abandonment of pure joy. You are a puppet, only mimicking the movements of love. You are not really involved. You mock God's gift to you."

"How can I not be involved? Is this not me in the bed?" She frowned.

"You give only a part of yourself," Gudtsler growled. "You are stingy with your emotions. You lie like a wooden log expecting miracles to happen."

"What can I do, Father?" she asked with dark wide eyes. "Is it not the will of God that I do not conceive?"

"I was not even speaking of conception," he said irritably. "I was speaking of a full participation in God's goodliest sacrament."

"I do not understand," she tilted her head. "My catechism teachings tell me that since God is essentially male, it is the man who carries the burden of the procreation act and must not be denied. Orthodox Fundamentalism postulates that a woman do nothing except be a willing and compliant vessel."

"Don't try to shed your inadequacies onto me," Gudtsler fumed. "A little knowledge can be a dangerous thing, child. Beware of yourself."

How was she expected to reach fuller knowledge without passing through the dangerous intermediate stages? "I still don't understand," she said.

He shook his head exasperatedly. "If you don't understand by now, you never will. It is of little importance. Nevertheless, your obstinance has taught me something. I now find that a physical examination in itself is not sufficient to determine a woman's fertility. We will have to re-evaluate our criteria for acceptance on the ark."

"The ark?" She sat up in the bed, letting the sheets fall from her shoulders. She knew the Gabriel Project was under the ArchCommodore's control, but she had rarely heard him speak of it.

"Don't even concern yourself about it," Gudtsler said as he hustled out the door. "You have damned yourself. Only the most fruitful of the brethren can be accepted."

She was really worried now. The ArchCommodore had been in ever-increasing foul moods, and the darkness of his spirit pervaded her soul. She paced the opulent quarters, picking at the closets full of bespangled jewelry and crimson garments.

So august a person was the ArchCommodore. So frail a human.

In terms of frailty, she herself was enormously vulnerable.

She had been living in his quarters for over a year now, but nothing had happened within her body. With the novice priest, the infertility was marginally pardonable for a limited time.

But not even the ArchCommodore had been able to fulfill the most holy of gifts. She was still childless.

Gudtsler's passing comment on the Gabriel Project had suddenly brought home how precarious her position was.

She was getting very worried.

Schicten rolled in his fat, blowing a steady stream of odoriferous wind as he slid his mass over the couch. Gudtsler ignored the passage respectfully, although to have commented on it would have been no breach of manners. Even one of Schicten's farts was sanctimonious.

"Ah, Gabriel," Schicten whistled. "You are within our grasp now."

Gudtsler smiled heavily. "A little over three years remaining. I must admit I had reservations about the Athenian base, but the conversion is coming along remarkably well. We will be able to use it for cargo shuttles until the time comes to lift our brethren."

"Wonderful," Schicten said dryly. "The conversion to personnel will be handled discreetly, of course."

"Of course. When the time approaches, most of the world will be storming Sicily for a berth on the last shuttle

flights. They will be doubly surprised when they learn there will be only one shuttle flight and it will be leaving from Athens. Naturally by then it will be too late for them to confiscate berths. They will suspect nothing until the last of our chosen brethren are safely aboard."

"Very good," Schicten said. "There will be rioting in Sicily and in the confusion the world will not notice a single shuttle craft leaving Athens. Five or six could even leave without attracting undue attention."

"They could, if there was need of them," Gudtsler agreed.

"You are happy with the arrangement, ArchCommodore?" Schicten asked.

"Completely. It is the most discreet means possible," Gudtsler said.

Schicten turned on the couch, forcing the blood to his face. He focused his eyes on Gudtsler acidly. "It is an abominable arrangement."

Gudtsler went cold. "But . . . there is no other way."

"It is a blasphemy of God's will. It is a vileness spawned by the devil himself," Schicten said warningly.

Gudtsler shuffled his papers quickly. "It . . . it is imperative that we handle the loading of the brethren clandestinely."

"The quantity, Gudtsler, the quantity! If we can secret four hundred of our brethren off the earth, surely we can take two thousand just as easily."

Gudtsler shook his head dumbly. "There is no way to build a ship large enough in the time we have left to support the birth load two thousand people would create. We agreed, Excellency."

"I agreed to nothing of the kind," Schicten spat. "The prospect of taking only four hundred brethren is anathema to me. Shall I leave the rest of our brotherhood to be hunted and slain by the HERODs? I cannot be satisfied with that."

Was the pope really saying this? Had these thoughts been festering in his mind all this time?

"It is an impossibility to take them all," he said, blinded.

"If we cannot take them all, then we must take as many as possible. We *must* take the maximum, two thousand."

Gudtsler's head shrank back in uncomprehending fear. "Dear Excellency, we will be condemning ourselves to death

if we leave with two thousand. The life system would be immediately overtaxed."

"Only assuming the birthrate remains constant," Schicten said. "There will be unavoidable deaths along the way, but with God's help, we can hold the ark's population within the critical limits."

"I don't see how," Gudtsler said. "Unless you are suggesting . . ."

Schicten cut him off before the ArchCommodore uttered a blasphemy. "It is no violation of God's will if no children are born to the faithful providing an artificial means has not been used. We do not cast out old nuns from the brotherhood simply because they are worn and no longer fruitful. God's mercy is bountiful enough to incorporate the barren. Do you doubt that?"

"No, but . . ." Gudtsler stammered. "We cannot fill the ark with only the aged. We will require strong and healthy brethren to populate Lazarus. Ones who are fertile . . ."

"Thank you for reminding me," Schicten said sarcastically.

"I really don't understand," Gudtsler frowned, trying to pull his thoughts together.

"Don't you really, ArchCommodore?" Schicten hissed.

He knew, but did not want to admit it.

"The answer is in your quarters," the Pope Millitant said, letting the words curl out of his mouth and entangle the ArchCommodore.

"You lose me entirely," Gudtsler said fearfully.

"I think not. You have taken, quite without valid reason, a young unfulfilled novice to your quarters for the past year now. I repeat, *unfulfilled*. For a year now, you have been spilling your seed wastefully on a woman who has produced not a single child."

Gudtsler pressed his eyes shut. He had hoped to keep that information from the pope.

"I have known of it for some time," Schicten said. "In fact, I took the liberty to ask the medical center about the two of you. You are both fertile, incidentally, in case you were worried that your berth on the ark had been jeopardized by your childish actions."

"Thank you, Excellency," Gudtsler breathed.

"How do you explain this unfulfillment?"

It was a long time before Gudtsler could find his voice. "I cannot, Holiness. I have wrestled with the problem for long nights."

"Unquestionably," Schicten said. "I suggest you learn the answer."

"To be completely honest, the experiment is rather taxing."

"Then let someone else continue with her," Schicten said.

"A number of priests already have with no success," Gudtsler sighed.

"I disagree. There has been enormous success."

Like the sun crawling through the gray smog, the truth illuminated over Gudtsler. "Are you suggesting . . . ?"

"Of course I am," Schicten said. "If we can learn how she has prevented conception, we can teach the technique to all the brethren of the ark. If she has been using nothing but her willpower, it is definitely within God's ethical bounds."

"Merciful God," Gudtsler said heavily. "It's been under me all the time and I did not see it."

"God answers the faithful in mysterious ways," Schicten let himself settle into the couch, pressing for a cooling fragrance. "We must learn whether she can control the technique or whether it is an extended accident. More, we must learn whether the stress of an interstellar flight may not destroy her ability. If so, it will be worthless to us. But we must be sure."

"I'll have her moved from my quarters," Gudtsler said pensively.

"That's not enough. She must be placed in a more stressful environment. A pressure she can feel, but not understand. If she knows why we are doing this, the experiment may prove invalid."

"What do you suggest?"

"Get rid of her. Excommunicate her. Do anything that could conceivably destroy her will," Schicten said harshly. "If her ability withstands the pressure, then we will assume it can survive the hardships of the flight."

"And if it does not?"

Schicten let his baleful stare linger on the ArchCommodore. "Then, in that case, dear Gudtsler, I suggest you begin making major modifications to the ark."

Gudtsler swallowed.

"Protect her, of course," Schicten said. "Drum her out of the brotherhood, mark her, do what is necessary, but know what she is doing at all times. Watch her carefully, Gudtsler. Her pregnancy could well cost you your berth on the Gabriel ship."

X

HE WOKE IN A COLD TERROR, his subconscious screaming in agony. The fireworks were exploding in his mind, drenching him with revulsion and fear. He trembled for a moment, trying to steady his assaulted nerves.

The sensations were intense, far more than they had been for the past two weeks. They wrenched the sleep from him and pummeled his consciousness. The memory of the dream was on the brink of his mind. All he had to do was reach out and grab it, clutch the hummingbird mind.

He stopped cold. There was a pencil line of light across the wall. The sight of it was a hammer blow. Someone was opening the door.

His face was buried in the pillow where his nightmare had driven him. Quietly, expecting the door to be flung open, he slipped his hand under his pillow until his fingers located the paspistol.

He tensed himself, pulling his muscles together to leap from the bed.

The roar of the hand cannon was deafening in the small room. The bed quivered from the impact of the double bullets and he threw himself sideways, twisting in the air.

He was firing before he hit the floor, his thumb jammed down on the automatic trigger.

The killer was silhouetted in the light of the doorway, less than eight feet away. Matter's first round of bullets hit squarely in the torso, ramming the killer back against the doorframe.

He sprawled on the floor, flipping the paspistol upward and twitching the trigger. He put three bullets in the killer's neck, ripping out masses of flesh until the head dangled on shredded tendon.

The barrage of bullets held the killer upright until Matter stopped firing. The paspistol clicked empty and the bag of sodden potatoes that the killer had become slumped to the floor.

He slapped the console panel and the room expanded into light. The doorframe had bloody holes in it. His reflexes may have become tarnished, but his aim was still dead accurate. He had put ten rounds of bullets into two target areas less than four inches in diameter. Seven slugs in the heart, three in the neck.

The fear hit him again and he whirled to the bed. Stuckey!

There was a gaping hole in her side of the bed, exuding foam rubber and bedclothes shreds. It was squarely where she had been.

He dragged his stomach up from his feet. Someone was running down the hall toward the room.

Stuckey had gone! He felt an enormous relief, but an enormous loss at the same time.

It was no accident. The FROG had not missed. He had tried to kill Stuckey, instead.

The house detective was at the door asking stupid questions. Matter told him to contact Ottawa and let the rest of the questions crackle around him, the pain in his head bursting.

"HEROD, eh?" the detective was saying. "We'll check that out. Any idea who this man was?"

"I haven't looked," Matter said numbly. *Stuckey, little Stuckey, where have you gone?*

"Well, let's have a look," the detective said. He lifted the killer's half-severed head by its hair. The detective grunted.

"You have a bit of explaining to do, Captain."

Matter picked his uniform off the floor where Stuckey had dropped it and tugged into it. His head was hurting badly. He could be very dead right now, he realized, but the FROGS had tried to kill Stuckey instead. In a twisted way, he owed his life to her.

"How's that?" he asked the detective absently.

"Take a look."

The bloody head was nearly unrecognizable, resting at a warped angle on the stump of neck. He was about to

shrug and turn away when the recognition dawned on him.

"The hell!" he said. "It's that damned faggot clerk."

"Yes it is," the detective said. "Did you have a lover's spat, Captain?"

"Certainly not. I'm emphatically hetero." *Damn, his head hurt!*

The detective wiped his hands clean on the bedspread. "Everyone has latent tendencies. Do you have any other possible reasons why he tried to kill you?"

"He asked me to breakfast once. I declined."

"Jealousy, then," the detective mused.

"He didn't try to kill me. That bullet hole in the bed should tell you that much," Matter said. "There was a young lady here earlier. His shot was intended for her."

"Where is this young lady now?"

"I don't know," Matter said, running his hand through his hair. "I wish to hell I did."

The detective nodded knowingly. "Very definitely jealousy."

The morgue squad lifted the pieces out of his room and he left the rest for the cleaning women. He was dropping fresh rounds into his paspistol as he watched them mop up the mess. A summer gray uniform looked into the room.

"I'll take that," the Mountie said, nodding at the paspistol.

"Go to hell," Matter said. "I've already gone through that bullshit with your cohort in Darby."

There was a green and brown uniform behind Buddenbrock. "Why don't you clean up a little later, ladies," he suggested pointedly.

The cleaning women left quickly and the game preservation officer turned to Matter. "Turn it over, mister. You're in direct violation of the international game laws."

"Tough piss," Matter growled. "I'd be dead now if it wasn't for this gun."

"That really impresses me," the Gimp said. "I'm not much bothered about your paltry life. My primary concern is for the wildlife in this preserve."

"I don't see any dead animals in here," Matter snapped.

The Mountie cleared his throat. "You'd better do what the game officer says, Mister Timber."

"The name is Matter now, and there happens to be a standing international agreement with the HEROD Society. Stuff that in your law books."

"I don't care if you're Saint Francis of Assisi," the Gimp growled. "You take your international agreement and shove it up your ass. I'm talking about international *law*, mister. Now dump that pistol before I dump you."

He had a good mind to drop both of them, but that would probably make the Society unhappy. Better to be dead than not have a job.

"Thanks a lot," he said, tossing the paspistol to the Gimp. "You've just written my death warrant."

"Could be," the Gimp shrugged. "But if a squirrel lives in your place, it's worth it."

"It's not my own life I'm worried about," Matter said. "There's a girl running around out there who may need protection. Her life may be in serious danger."

"So what's one less broad?" the Gimp said. Matter noticed he was holding the paspistol on him when he said that. Even Gimps knew the usefulness of guns when the occasion arose.

The Mountie cracked the freeze. "We'll check your identification through your headquarters, Captain. In the meantime, there's still the business of your car accident."

"Oh, screw the car accident."

"You do seem to have a talent for creating newer and better problems," Buddenbrock said. "Stay around Wasag for a few days until we get everything sorted out, would you?"

"No promises," Matter said curtly. "The sooner I get out of this damned town, the happier I'll be."

"Don't think we won't be glad to see you go," the Gimp said.

"That's a 'roger' on that," Buddenbrock said.

Matter glowered at both of them as they left his room. He clenched his teeth, trying to drive the pain in his head away.

Stuckey, Stuckey, Stuckey. What the hell are you doing to me?

By the time the cleaning women left his room for the second time the sun was beginning to glow. He was glad

Stuckey had gone. Seeing two killings in the span of a day was not good for a girl's composure.

Funny how popular those double round hand cannons were around here. The blast would have cut Stuckey in two. It was no surprise that the FROGs had been waiting so effectively for him on the highway. The clerk had been relaying Matter's whereabouts to them from the day he arrived.

The truck driver must have been in on it, too. That was a worrisome thought.

Something was wrong here. Matter had been wide open. A couple feet to the side, the barest alteration of the clerk's aim, and the hole that disgorged foam rubber and tatters would have been in him.

He sat on the edge of the bed, his head throbbing. Stuckey had said he didn't understand. That was an understatement. What else was he stupidly misinterpreting?

All of a sudden, leaping into bed with him had seemed the most urgent thing in the world for her. After all that time wasted in the commune with their bodies pressing together, now, when she should have been terrified out of her mind, she suddenly had the hots for him.

His head was hurting, a deep interior pain. He eased back, pressing his neck, trying to relax his muscles. The pain was outside his head, forcing its way inside, and gaining steadily.

He tried to relax his jaw and felt an empty molar.

Damn! The memory stimulant had been crushed in his frenzied lovemaking. Stuckey's love had been so intense, so grasping, that he had forgotten about the capsule.

The stimulant had been working on him for hours now, dredging up lost memories. It had already reached its peak, but what was it uncovering? Incoherent dreams of pain and fear? They sure as hell weren't a part of *his* memory. Something else had slipped into his subconscious during the nights, filling his mind with alien emotions and thoughts. What the shouting hell was he remembering?

The mind of a hummingbird touching him.

Two weeks of recurrent waking nightmares.

Blind and insensible mirrors of lost fears.

It came to him in a rush, dumbfounding him with its

lucidity. This was more than a dream, he realized. This was a mind reaching out for him, bawling of its hurts.

He was feeling emotions through another person, sharing a tortured mind. His ego and being were no longer entirely his. The tears that were building under his eyes weren't his alone. They belonged to someone else.

Stuckey. Warm, friendly little Stuckey. Stuckey with the angular knees and half an Aquarian tattoo on her belly. The mark of unfulfilled love.

The mark of an unfulfilled Fundamentalist.

You poor ignorant child, he thought. *Of all the men in the world, you picked the worst possible choice to . . .*

His face chilled as he continued the thought. To what? To have a child? *His* child? A baby exterminator's child?

Holy damn, he thought. Had she waited to make love until she was at the peak of her month's fertility?

Matter stumbled out of the motel. The patrol car was gone. The Mountie had mentioned nothing about retrieving it, so Stuckey must have taken it.

She would have gone only one place. Back to Gauze. Back to the watchful eyes of Philip and the whole damned Fundamentalist commune.

What kind of sense did that make? Someone had tried to kill him before he had even gotten to the commune, and now someone had tried to kill Stuckey. Two rival camps; one that wanted Matter dead, the other wanting Stuckey dead?

Easy to say, but who the hell would want to kill Stuckey?

The early dawn streets of Wasag were moist and cloying, reaching up to him in a fine fog mist. The shops, with their artificial birchbark canoes and plastic Indian toys, were closed, waiting like apathetic minotaurs to devour the gold-bearing tourists.

His head cleared in the wet air, the memory stimulant sliding away. The problem with memory stimulants was that their effect never lasted. The information they conjured up was as elusive as a dream.

Dreams could not be trusted. Neither could the information dredged up by a stimulant. All it offered was the subjective memory after the subconscious had carefully weeded out the unpleasantness, adding its own dubious interpretations.

That was drawback one . . . the temporariness of the memory. And damned good it was temporary. Permanent recall could lose a man hopelessly in the labyrinths of his own mind. Total recall was a curse, not a boon.

A person who smiled suddenly became a different person. The smile changed the face so drastically that it demanded a new learning process. If the person stopped smiling, then the two memories had to be juggled simultaneously.

That was one problem. There was another. The stimulant yanked out memories that were better left dormant. He was glad he had taken the full course of drug repressors before he entered Canada. They helped mute the effects.

It took three hours for the stimulant to peak and he paced his timing backward. He estimated he had wasted an hour and a half with the officers and the cleaning crew in his room. *Damn, but the clerk had bled a voluminous amount for a weaselly little faggot.* So if he had bitten the molar capsule while he was making love to Stuckey and had fallen asleep, say, half an hour later . . . that left less than an hour for Stuckey to get out and for the clerk to come in.

Pretty close timing, he speculated. Unless Stuckey had been warned.

He wandered down the streets, frowning. If she was a FROG, why should he be worrying about her? He stopped, his mouth going dry.

Was it a game to discredit the HERODs? What had Lembeck said about a referendum vote coming up in the World Congress? Something about voting a wad of money for the FROGs' crazy spaceship scheme. He was supposed to be getting some dirt on the FROGs to scuttle their scheme.

But what if the FROGs were scuttling the HERODs? And there was another kicker. What if the damned girl was pregnant?

Kiss one HEROD goodbye, then. And if the Society dropped him, he could kiss his replacement ids good-bye and his citizenship with them.

Hello, one quick abortion coming up.

Some of the early risers were already in the dining room

watching the reruns of yesterday's kill games. A mock feminist, whose bosom was overcrowding the trid screen, was pounding the bejabbers out of some poor clown's groin with a concrete block. The tourists were enjoying it.

The new desk clerk looked at him coldly as he entered.

"I was expecting a fac print this morning," Matter said.

"Let me check the printer to see if any mail came in for you," the clerk said with obvious effort. "That was Kill-Captain . . . ?"

"Matter. You may as well change my name on your register now. My cover has been pretty well blown."

"You HERODs do seem to have a hard time keeping your identities straight, don't you?"

Matter accepted the comment quietly. Motel clerks did strange things when they got angry.

The clerk looked back from the mail printer. "Nothing here. Maybe it will come in later today."

Matter sucked on his empty molar. Was this a mild wrist slapping from Lembeck? "Okay," he said. "I'd like a hundred dollars in cash. Charge it."

The clerk pouted. "It's customary to ask for identification . . ."

Matter scowled at him. "You don't know who I am after what happened upstairs?"

"A hundred, you said?"

Matter stuffed the cash under his collar and strolled out the door to find some knitting needles. He was getting tired of Lembeck's humor. If the colonel thought things were funny so far, wait until he learned about Matter being involved with a FROG.

The handicraft shop was closed, but he found something more interesting around the corner from the motel. A small parked truck looked extremely familiar. Next to it was a car with a rumpled front left fender.

The car was empty and locked, but it was the one he had clipped.

Very cute, he thought. His FROG friends were in town and making no bones about it. They were advertising their presence, parked a block from the motel. A psyche-out. All he had to do now was figure what they wanted him to do and then not do it.

He knew what he was going to do.

Once the handicraft shop opened it took the better part of an hour of rooting through dusty stock bins to find a knitting needle. The attendant gave him several odd glances as he burrowed through the antique paraphernalia but thankfully did not follow the glances with any remarks.

If Matter had known how hard it would be trying to find a knitting needle, he would have thought of something else to use as a probe for the mined barrier gate.

He finally found a single needle that was plastic—no sense in tempting the odds with a magnetically susceptible probe—and paid the attendant.

It would do the job. For ten bucks, it had damned well better.

He slipped the needle under his cuff and walked to the car rental, stealing a glance up the side street where the truck and the car were parked. They were still there. He had the clammy feeling he was being watched.

His reputation was making inroads with the local merchants. The car rental cleaned out his cash with only enough meth for a one-way trip. He hoped Brenda was keeping the porridge warm. It could be a while before he came back.

The shattered windows of Tassian's store stared at him as he drove through Salton's streets. It was still early for the town to come awake. He knew the morning's activity was happening on the surrounding farms, but the quiet annoyed him. He noticed the fresh grave as he turned past the Roman church.

The trail running off the graveled road was easy to spot. He eased the rental into the ditch, letting the wheels spin and complain as he jolted over the broken ground. The hot summer sun had baked the rain out of the land and laid an alligator's patchwork of parched topsoil. He had driven less than a hundred feet when he hit the brakes.

There were tire tracks ahead of him across the dried earth. Two sets of tracks, one slightly fresher than the other. He swung out of the car and studied them. Two different tire patterns. Two cars had passed over the path in the past day or two.

He walked back to the road and inspected the dirt thrown by their spinning wheels where they had hit the

ditch. The mounds of dirt were scattered toward the road, thrown backward.

Two cars had gone into Gauze but neither of them had come back. He nodded to himself and saw the dust cloud rising several miles down the road in the direction of Salton. He was being followed.

"Welcome, old friends," he mumbled. There had been no reason to expect the FROGS would have appreciated his absence. They were coming to meet him. This time, the squinty-eyed FROG had promised, without any trees to hide behind. That depended on whether he could get through the barrier. There were a lot of trees inside Gauze.

He forced the rental over the jagged ground. From the speed the dust cloud on the road was closing, he estimated he had less than five minutes to get through the barrier.

No way, baby. He would have to squirm his way through on his belly, probing for any low-buried mines with the knitting needle. If he could keep his weight distributed over the widest possible area, he would not have to worry about the deep-planted antivehicle mines.

Five minutes. It could get nasty. The subsonics would have his adrenalin pumping out his ears a quarter of the way in and that was not allowing for fine distinctions. Easy to get careless, but he was gambling that Philip had planted most of the mines to detonate under vehicular weight. Hopefully.

He crested the small ridge and the black walls were looking at him. He glanced over his shoulder and saw that the dust cloud had changed its texture. The FROGS had already pulled off the road and were churning over the dried earth. One would think they knew the way.

There was no time to squirm through the gate. He could hear the distant sounds of the racing engine behind him. Very shortly, he was going to be treated to another sound . . . the sound of the FROGS' favorite firearm. With a knitting needle as protection.

Very shortly, he could be very dead.

He peered at the barrier gate. Something drastic was going to have to be done.

You sonofabitch, Philip, he cursed soundlessly.

The FROG angled off the road and hit the dirt uncere-

moniously, the truck wheels whining and screaming as he barreled over the dried dirt. The HEROD agent had acted exactly as Father Grahm had thought he would. He had made the logical deduction that the nun returned to the commune and accordingly followed her.

Of course, there had been the possibility that the HEROD would have chosen to fight it out in Wasag, but Father Grahm had guessed right.

The HEROD's spirit was being broken. He had actually tried to protect the nun at the shopkeeper's. The irony of it was wicked.

The FROG, a clerical worker, patted the double-barreled pistol resting on the seat beside him. Father Grahm was a good judge of character, but a lousy shot. There would be no missed shots this time. If the priest had let him eliminate the HEROD after they ran him off the road, they would not be having problems now.

The explosion seared his eyes, rocking the truck. Directly in front of him, the sky suddenly went shock white over the next hillock, then turned to a ball of tainted, dull red.

The concussion reverberated against the truck. Pieces of solid chunks rained down, enameled scraps of automotive metal and rubber composition tattering a ragged melody on the roof of his truck.

He stopped on the top of the hill as a dense roiling cloud of smoke belched up to him.

The FROG grinned, then laughed raucously. *And HERODs were supposed to be smart.*

It would have been more personally satisfying to see the HEROD grovel on the ground with a double round of bullets in him, but this was beautiful.

XI

PHILIP, YOU SONOFABITCHIN' FAKER, Matter chortled.

That was no damned gate. You can't put a hole in a wall of sound and expect the subsonics to continue on the other side of the wall as though nothing had interrupted them. Stick a wall in the middle of a subsonic stream and the wall would turn incandescent in minutes.

This was no break in the barrier. This was an originating point. The walls were the amplifiers, each sending a beam in the opposite direction until it faded into obscurity. What happened then was anyone's guess, but Matter hunched there was a set of wall amplifiers at each corner of the commune's turf aimed at each other to keep the beam of subsonics constant.

He had completely overlooked the obvious. The residual effects of the memory stimulant had cleared out some of the cobwebs.

How many gates there were was unimportant. He could count those later. Right now, the important thing was that the walls were a set of originating amplifiers and not passive receptors.

Because Philip surely would not risk having them blown up.

Some lumbering animal could accidentally trip the mines and a fifth of Philip's pentagonal barrier would be destroyed. Gauze would be wide open. No, Philip played a tighter game than that. Philip would tell everyone the gate was mined and rely on fear. Anyone who was dumb enough to poke his nose between the walls would get a snootful of the subsonic backlash and chicken out immediately.

Matter ripped into the dashboard of the rental, pulling out the printed circuitry of the sodium antilitter device. The knitting needle was handy in scratching off some of the circuit.

The antilitter device normally exploded gradually, disintegrating abandoned automobiles gracefully. But if the controlled delay was shorted, a car could become an effective bomb.

Not that there was much likelihood of catching the FROG in the blast, but it sure would divert his attention.

He peeled off a sliver of chromium plating from the plastic dash trim and stuck it across the circuitry with spit. He shoved the plate back in and jumped out of the car, running for the rocks on the hillock.

The explosion plastered him against the ground and rammed the air from his lungs just as he heard the truck grinding up the opposite side.

Pieces of the rental car blizzarded out of the sky. A

coiling cloud of smoke gushed up the hill and enveloped him as he crouched. He waited until the smoke covered him and then started running for the truck.

The FROG slammed the brakes and squinted through the smoke as the truck rocked on its springs. Compatriot Philip had done his job well . . . the gate had been mined according to instructions. It was a shame, though, that it had to end this way. He would have liked to have taken care of the HEROD without any help from the mine field.

He yelled suddenly as the door was yanked open, flailing for his gun on the seat as a fist roughly the size of a boxcar came at him.

Matter clubbed the FROG, holding him by his hair. The FROG went down and Matter brought his knee up into the FROG's face. He felt the nose bones crunch against his kneecap and the FROG lose control.

The truck driver was loose and unsteady. Matter dragged him upright, took lazy aim, and buried a fist in his mouth.

The FROG collapsed against the side of the truck and slid to the ground. Matter slapped his clothes for a weapon, found none, then looked into the truck. He juggled the double-barreled pistol in his hand and waited for the FROG to come around.

The FROG had a wild look in his eyes when he finally got them opened.

"Bastard," he spat, the words getting mixed with his frothy blood.

"Shame," Matter said. "It's okay for you to ambush me, but when you get caught instead, you start calling names. You can do better than that."

The FROG glared at him through split eyes.

"You're going to die, regardless, so whether you feel like answering any questions is up to you," Matter said easily. "You could be a nice guy and clear up a few things for me, or you could die a loyal Fundamentalist. Which way would you like it?"

"Why should I answer any questions if you're going to kill me anyway?" The words came painfully.

"Thought I'd get that kind of response," Matter said, leveling the pistol at the FROG's head.

"What will you do to the nun?" the FROG said lowly.

"You mean Stuckey, I assume. That depends on whether I can find her and who I find with her," Matter said. He found himself forcing the casualness in his voice. "At any rate, I don't see that's any of your concern. You can't have much affection for her if you've tried to kill her twice now."

The FROG cocked his head, tilting to keep the blood out of his eyes. "What do you mean, twice?"

"Don't give me that innocent fazz. You know what I mean," Matter said. He was tiring of this game. His finger tightened on the triggers.

"We didn't try to kill her," the FROG said, watching Matter's finger.

"Oh, hell no. Next, you're going to be telling me you didn't shoot the old shopkeeper in Salton."

"Sure, we did that, but it was an accident," the FROG said. "I kept telling Father Grahm he had lousy aim, but he insisted on getting you himself."

"You haven't done much better," Matter said wryly. "Which of you put the clerk up to nailing Stuckey in bed last night?"

The blood was dribbling off the FROG's chin. "You won't believe this, but the clerk wasn't acting under our orders."

"Whose, then?" Matter grumbled. "If you don't start coming up with straight answers, you'd better start praying to your stud god."

The FROG shook his head. "I don't know how much of this you know or how much the nun has told you, but it comes down to this: there are some of us who want the girl dead and some of us who want the girl alive. It all hinges around whether she gets pregnant or not."

"That much is obvious," Matter said. Something was tingling at the back of his consciousness. Something that the dreams had been trying to tell him.

The FROG coughed. "Then you might as well kill me now, because there's not much else I'm going to tell you."

"One more thing," Matter said. "Where do you stand in this?"

"Personally, I want to see the nun alive but not pregnant," the FROG said.

"You've just gained yourself a short reprieve. Is that why

you've been trying to nail me, because you're afraid I'm getting too friendly with Stuckey?"

"That's one of the reasons," the FROG agreed. "Aside from the fact that I hate any HEROD's guts."

"No love lost," Matter assured. "Some of you would rather see her dead than get pregnant, right? What's wrong with Stuckey getting pregnant?"

"You're the HEROD. You figure it out."

"I've never met a FROG who was worried about population control," Matter said dryly. "There's more to it than that."

"A lot of planning will go down the drain if she gets knocked up," the FROG said.

"Gabriel Project?" Matter guessed.

The FROG glared at him suspiciously. "Just how much did the nun tell you anyhow? She couldn't have known about that."

"She didn't tell me a damned word," Matter said. "You've been doing all the talking."

The FROG clamped his mouth shut.

"I take it that means the end of our conversation," Matter said. "Okay, on your feet. I told you that you had a short reprieve. You're going to use it to test a theory of mine."

"What are you talking about?"

"I say that barrier gate isn't mined, but then again I could be wrong. You're going to walk through it ahead of me and prove my theory one way or the other."

"You're out of your mind," the FROG shook his head. "I *know* that gate is mined."

"Well, hell, you can't live forever," Matter said. "If we make it through, I just might let you stay alive all the way to the commune. On the other hand, if you don't feel like cooperating, I'll just shoot you now and toss your body into the gate to see what happens."

The FROG crawled to his feet. The omnipotent, the Most Holy Pope *himself* had ordered the mines to be placed in the gate. Nobody would ever violate a direct command from Schicten himself.

He was walking into certain death, but there was a possibility that the blast would catch the HEROD also. If he had to die, he might as well make it meaningful.

Matter prodded him to the entrance. The FROG wavered, hesitating at the walls. Matter could understand why; he was beginning to feel the dull terror of the subsonic backlash enveloping him.

The FROG looked at the open space between the walls, seeing the gates of damnation opening for him. Infinite chaos. So close to salvation, so close to Lazarus, only to lose it all now.

"Move," Matter said.

The FROG bolted sideways. Matter whirled and fired but the FROG was already around the corner of the wall. The bullets nicked off black concrete and whined across the plains.

Matter leaped back, blocking the way up the hillock. The FROG saw him and dodged around the wall.

Screaming, he ran into the barrier, the subsonics battering his body.

His kidneys burst. A twenty-fifth of a second later, his eyeballs ruptured and his brain began to jelly. The screaming became only the sounds of ruined nerve endings twitching in the dust.

He knew the barrier was lethal, but *damn* he didn't know it was *that* fast. It chopped the FROG down within steps and reduced him to quivering protoplasm within seconds. He turned away, shaking his head to clear the twitching vision from his mind.

Why had the fool run? Was it suicide or did he really think he could get through the barrier? He had dodged when Matter fired, so maybe he actually was trying to save his life.

The question was sobering. The FROG had obviously believed that the gateway was mined and decided his odds were better running through the barrier. Matter did not blame him. He would have been tempted to try it also. Before he found out how fast the barrier killed.

He looked across the gravel of the gate, the interior of Gauze mocking him from the other side. He might have to revise his theory about the mines. If anyone should know about them, it made sense that the FROGS knew. And the truck driver had seemed pretty certain.

Some of them wanted to keep Stuckey alive and some of them wanted her dead. And there was a second tire

track going into Gauze. He did not like the looks or sound of that.

He walked up the hillock to the FROG's still running truck and clambered into it, driving it to the entrance of the gate. He lined it up with the gate, shoved the pedal to the floor and held it there with a rock.

The engine roared, threatening to go through the hood. He reached into the cab for the automatic shift, flicked it into drive and got his arm out quickly as the truck howled and tore up gravel and dirt.

He dove behind the first boulder he could find and buried his face in the dirt. The truck lurched into the gate and crunched into one of the walls where they curved inward. The rear wheels, under full power, spun the truck sideways. The rear end smacked into the opposite wall and wedged the truck between them.

The truck wailed, its wheels kicking up gravel.

"Nice aim," Matter growled and picked himself up. He had hoped the truck would have cleared it all the way and he could have run through the backlash. Now he was going to have to climb over the damned truck which meant he was going to get one big dose of the subsonics. They had been bad enough when he and Stuckey had driven through it. It was going to be a lot of fun climbing through them.

A rod finally gave way as he walked to the gate. The truck wheezed a clattering finale and a gout of steam rose to join the still lingering smoke.

It had gotten about halfway before it put itself against the walls. Not bad. At least he knew there were no mines under half the gateway.

Remember that when the backlash is making a babbling idiot of you.

He gritted his teeth, anticipating the surge of adrenalin, and walked into the gate.

It was expected this time and he knew its cause, but it did not help. The fear tore into him like a hungry animal, devouring his rationality. Climbing over the truck was scaling the Matterhorn, each foot of distance from the ground opening a bottomless chasm under him. The walls closed in on him, a giant pincer crab that would squirt the life out of his head like a squashed grape.

The sweat was pouring into his eyes as he made it across the cab of the truck. The ground was a thousand feet beneath him. Every irregularity in the gravel was a loaded mine, ready to detonate as soon as his feet touched the ground.

Get it over with! he yelled inwardly. He eased himself to the side of the cab, his feet finding the window edge.

You're over the hill, Matter. Your fingernails are bleeding, you're clutching the roof so hard. Get it over with. Who the hell cares?

He tried to battle down the irrationality. *There are no mines*, he told himself.

Jump, damn you!

Matter kicked out and hit the gravel on his back, knocking the wind from him. He was afraid to take a breath, afraid the mines would explode, afraid the walls would reach down and crush him.

He groveled in the gravel, forcing his mind to function. He turned over on his stomach and concentrated on the droplets of sweat from his forehead that were sinking into the gravel. He crawled the rest of the way on all fours, the knitting needle held dumbly in his hand, every reserve of strength draining from him, his mind a hollow orb.

The inside of his mind was screaming at him, howling its urgency, but he was too numb to understand. The drips of sweat had formed a small puddle beneath his chin, staining his collar. He dragged a long breath into his body and rolled slowly off the gravel, letting the Manitoban sun balm him.

It was a long while before he opened his eyes and saw the lingering smoke still hanging in the sky. *That* was what his mind had been trying to tell him. The smoke was hanging like a beacon. If the explosion had not been heard, the smoke would certainly be seen.

Did he have anything to fear from the commune?

Did bullets hurt?

Betcherass they did. He stumbled to his feet and got his bearings. The truck was lying cold between the walls, placid as the plains. There was a metallic object shining at the other end of the gateway and he groaned.

The FROG's pistol. Like an ass, he had clutched the useless knitting needle all the way through the gate, but

he had dropped the pistol. And he sure as hell wasn't going to go back through the gate to get it.

He took a last survey, saw the liquid mess of the FROG glistening in the barrier, and followed the tire tracks away from the walls.

As soon as there was enough brush to cover his tracks, he veered to the right, hoping to flank the commune. He was a hundred yards off the path when he heard the mechanical growling. He flattened on the ground, blending his uniform with the stubble grass.

The ATV came bounding over a hill, all six wheels chewing up the dust. Even at the distance, Matter recognized Denny's sunburned scalp easily, shining like an overripe tomato. But Denny's passenger was a mystery. Matter could not see his face, but the man's scarlet cloak encrusted with purple braid was a firm clue. FROG, and up in the ranks.

He waited until the ATV dropped over the terrain, then broke out of cover, running for the trees that fringed Gauze. He kept his ears alerted to the returning churn of the ATV, but it kept receding from him.

Denny was going to find a cute puzzle when he got to the walls. One crater, one wrecked truck, one quivering mess of featureless protoplasm. He wondered how long it would take Denny and his guest to fit the puzzle pieces together.

Probably not long at all. The FROGs had been doing a good job of keeping one step ahead of him so far. No reason they should slack off now.

He found the first fence of barbed wire and knew he was close to the commune. He squirmed through apprehensively. Meeting a cow face-to-face had not been covered in the training manuals.

What would a cow do if it was trespassed upon? Every animal had its own territorial prerogative. Would a cow attack someone walking on its pasture?

Off to the side, he spotted several of the hooved questions ponderously hulking. They seemed benign to him, in an ominous sort of way. He was hoping they knew he was a vegetarian when the gunfire caught him by surprise.

XII

GUDTSLER'S PERSONAL ALARM was buzzing under his pillow. He groped for it in the dark and waited a moment for his sleepiness to fade away before answering the call.

"Yes?" he said curtly.

"The nun is here," Graham said crisply.

"Where?" Gudtsler asked. He was having difficulty stringing words together to form whole sentences. The cool Canadian air and the stillness of the commune were blissfully conducive to sleep. But Graham's short burst of information was forcing rapid awareness in him.

"She drove in about thirty minutes ago in a Provincial car. I think she is with Mister Philip now and I assumed you had been notified," Graham said. His inherent sarcasm was coming across clearly. "When I didn't see you stirring, I thought I should call you."

"Good man," Gudtsler said. "It is well you called."

He frowned. He should have been notified immediately. The nun had been gone when he arrived and he had left explicit orders to be told the moment she returned. This casual communal offshoot of the brotherhood had become lax in its discipline.

"Is there anything else you would like me to do?" Graham asked.

"Mn, no," Gudtsler grumbled. "All the arrangements have been made?"

"Absolutely. I left our truck driving friend in Wasag. We can safely guarantee that the HEROD will be dead by morning."

"Very good," Gudtsler said. "Stay available. It's time for some words with our recalcitrant nun and Mister Philip. I'll need you later to drive my limousine back to that infernal resort town. I'll let you know when I'm ready to leave."

"Extend my compliments to the nun," Graham said. "She has been quite helpful in our game with the KillCaptain. We already have made sure that the scandal has been

leaked directly to the HERODs. It should snowball nicely in the World Congress."

"I will tell her of your pleasure in the confessional," Gudtsler said. "This will hardly be a disaster to the HERODs, but it will be all the wedge our pope will require. You have done your job well, Father Grahm. When you see your friend again, tell him I said so."

"Thank you," Grahm said.

Gudtsler pried himself from the bed and laboriously shouldered into his clerical garb. The sheen of the polished red cloak felt reassuring around him, emphasizing his position among the ragtag communals.

Mister Philip occupied one of the solitary houses near the electrical station. Gauze was sleeping soundly and no battery car came to his door as Gudtsler stepped out. The oversight irked him, but he decided it would be better to let the commune rest ignorant on a night like this.

His breath was short and strained by the time he reached Philip's quarters. Since there were no locks on the commune's doors, he studiously made a point of not knocking. Privacy was a personal possession. If the commune chose to eschew property, then there was no need to respect privacy.

Philip drew himself up quickly, swaying on his bad knee. "Holiness," he said, surprised.

"Indeed," Gudtsler said. His eyes bore down on Stuckey, riveting her to the chair. She shrank under his cold stare.

"Why was I not notified immediately?" Gudtsler demanded.

"You were resting," Philip said without impact.

"I am well aware of that," Gudtsler said. He stepped past Philip and stood over Stuckey, gathering his cloak in front of him and looking down at her over its sheen.

She closed her eyes, then opened them and let them travel the length of his stature.

"Father," she breathed.

"Have you been treated well these past years?" Gudtsler rasped.

She closed her eyes again. Gudtsler took a long breath and framed the question.

"Have you been celibate?"

Stuckey bit her lip. She had lived without knowing a

man since the brotherhood had cast her out, knowing that celibacy was a violation of her vows. But it had been so painful, so futile. Until Philip had hatched his diabolical plan and she had met the devil incarnate.

Matter. The madman. The empty shell with no soul. Yet they had made love together, partly because of Philip's insistence, partly because of the impending visit of the ArchCommodore.

But mostly because, for the first time in the years since her outcasting, she had wanted to make love. To the madman.

"I have not been celibate," she said quietly.

"Wonderful," Gudtsler beamed. He wrapped the cloak around him tighter. It covered him from his ankles to his shoulders and helped slim him. "We hoped you would not forget your training entirely. Tell me, child, have you learned to enjoy it?"

She glanced at Philip's drawn face. "Yes, Holiness," she whispered. The memory was still freshly etched. "I enjoyed it very much."

"Excellent!" Gudtsler broke into a wide smile. "You have learned to share in full communion and still you are not pregnant. Forgive me, child. I realize that sounds like heresy to you, but this is wonderful news."

Before Gudtsler had entered, Philip had been telling her some of the plot. But he had stressed the discrediting of the HERODs. She saw now that Philip had been less than completely honest.

"Explain for me, Holiness," she said. "I still wallow in ignorance."

Gudtsler smiled majestically. "It is possible for some women to render themselves sterile solely by willpower. If the desire not to conceive is strong enough, there is a hormonal change that makes conception impossible. The fact has been known for some time, but the technique has never been understood."

He smiled slyly at Philip. "Of course, we have never been interested before in the technique. But now, child, you have proven that the technique can be mastered. And without loss of the communal rites. You have placed the final building block of the Gabriel project."

She squinched her eyes and looked at Philip for understanding.

Philip shook his head slowly. "I'm sorry, Stuckey, but I couldn't tell you everything."

"You have known all along of this?"

"From the start."

"And Matter? What about him?"

Philip grimaced sourly. "He cost me my leg by shipping out a week before the Okhotsk invasion. This is my way of repaying the debt. When the news of his love-playing with a Fundamentalist nun is made known in the World Congress, the HERODs will be laughed out of the session. You have made the Lazarus ship a final realty. Matter will help us launch it."

"The Lazarus ship?" she quavered. At the end of a black corridor candlelight was flickering. Was it possible that there was still a chance for her? "How can I be important? What effect can I possibly have on two million brethren?"

"Not two million, Stuckey," Philip said. "Nor two thousand. Four hundred. You will have to be their teacher."

He turned away and watched the light burning in the middle of the commons.

She was dumbfounded. She had been a guinea pig, cast out as a nonbreeding experiment, made to feel lost and rejected so that she could be studied and probed.

The squinty novice priest Father Grahm had been her first lover and he had sunk her into disappointment and then into revulsion. There had never been a time when she consciously refused to have a child. It was just that it had seemed so crude and . . . ugly.

Through all these years she had lived with fear and guilt, believing she had been damned to spend the rest of her life on this filthy planet, never to have a chance to ride the Lazarus ship. She had borne no child and thought that excluded her. Now she found her fear was her salvation.

She dropped her head, Gudtsler mistaking it for a prayer.

"Bliss, child," the ArchCommodore said, waggling his fingers over her. "You have done well. I must be leaving tomorrow, but you will follow within a week to begin instructing our brethren."

Tears were mingling with hatred in her eyes. A Fundamentalist woman was destined only to carry the seeds of men. There was no hatred in realizing she had been used. She had been born to be used.

But she should have been told, somehow warned of what was expected. Because the years were a waste, the test was meaningless, void, empty. Of course the experiment was a success! She had slept with no other man except Matter that very night.

Her life was a cipher. She had no secrets for the brotherhood, only fear and pain. More than anything else, she found herself wanting the madman's child.

Gudtsler was still mumbling prayerful thanksgivings over her, letting his cloak rustle around his gesticulating arms. She looked across the room at Philip, bewildered and afraid.

He returned the glance, holding her eyes for long seconds, letting her share her pain.

Philip knew!

He knew the experiment was worthless and he was allowing the ArchCommodore to believe otherwise! The questions flooding her face, she stared at him. He nodded, almost imperceptibly, and smiled wanly.

Gudtsler clasped his hands together, radiating satisfactory joy. "This is a blessed day, indeed," he murmured. "You will be ordained a saint, child."

Stuckey tried to look respectful.

"Yes, most elegantly blessed one," Gudtsler said. He let his gaze drench over her body, seeing her soft swellings. It would be nice to have a saint. "Never have you looked more desirable, child. Perhaps, if the strain of the day has not been too much for you . . ."

Oh God, Stuckey said to herself.

"You know I have always been attracted to you," Gudtsler said unctuously. "Now, with the gleam of your holy mission gilding your halo, I find myself unable to resist you."

Stuckey dropped her eyes.

"Do not be overwhelmed, child," Gudtsler said.

Philip cleared his throat. "Excuse me, Holiness, but the girl has had a most trying day. When you entered, she was telling me how the HEROD abused her. Although

I am sure she yearns for your consolation, she is far more tired than she realizes."

Gudtsler scowled at Philip. He relented with an effort, sighing deeply.

"You're correct, of course. Simply being in the presence of a HEROD must be demanding." He patted Stuckey's head. "Don't be disappointed, little nun. There is still the morning."

"I await tomorrow anxiously," she said.

Gudtsler swept to the door. He looked at Philip leeringly. "And what are you going to do tonight, Mister Philip? You don't intend taking the comforting of this consecrated child upon yourself, do you?"

"There were a few more details about the HEROD I wanted to discuss with her," Philip said.

"They can wait." Gudtsler paused, taking a long, hungry look at Stuckey. "Sleep well, child. Come along, Mister Philip."

He motioned Philip outside as he left. Philip threw a wink to Stuckey. She returned a confused glance of thanks.

She punched off the lights and sorted the smatterings of her sanity. It was almost as though Philip had wanted the experiment to fail. He had protected her, knowing of her burned feelings, keeping men from her. Was it true what he said about repaying Matter? Had Philip been carrying a kill-hate so long?

Her thoughts bridged to Matter, the enigma, the moral zero. Did she only think she loved him because he had made love to her as no man had before, intense but charged with an odd tenderness?

Not tenderness, she corrected herself. Indifference. Not the cutting indifference of the novice priests, but an indifference that Matter directed at himself. He had been in the Society as long as she had been in the FROGS. Had the years cheapened the meaning of life for him so much that he did not honestly care what happened to him?

If she had failed the brotherhood and herself, she knew Matter had lost far more.

She cried herself to sleep, wanting to pray but uncertain that her god would favor a HEROD. *Matter, you stupid fool. Stay alive*, she whispered, and her thoughts were a scream.

The thunder that rolled across the commons was her first realization that she had been sleeping. She tossed in the cot, turned on her side and peered out the window. It was clear and sunny outside.

Heat lightning? She tumbled out of bed and saw the red lace negligee draped over the end of the cot. It confirmed the realization that she had been sleeping. Gudtsler had entered the hut during the night and deposited the gift.

Stuckey tightened her jaw and ignored it and her own clothes. If the ArchCommodore wanted something to excite him, let him cope with her nakedness.

Brenda was standing outside the dining hall, looking at the sky over the horseshoe of trees. She waved as Stuckey came across the commons.

"Did you hear that?" Brenda asked.

"Something woke me. Was it thunder?" Stuckey said.

"It sounded pretty loud for thunder," Brenda said. "I was getting breakfast started when I heard it. It sounded more like an explosion."

Stuckey frowned and looked at the sky. "The gate is over there," she said worriedly.

Brenda was twisting the towel in her hands as Denny ambled up to them. "Sunbathing so early, Stuckey?" he asked lightly.

Stuckey smiled weakly. "Sometimes, clothes are cumbersome."

"You girls hear the explosion?"

"Stuckey thought it was thunder," Brenda said. "Do you think it was an explosion, too, Denny?"

The doors of the huts were opening and more of the commune was coming out on the green to inspect the sound. Philip was still zipping up his pants as he hobbled across the grass, his war surplus jacket stuffed under his elbow.

He barely glanced at Stuckey as he smoothed his fly. "Any idea what it was?"

"Sounded like an explosion," Denny volunteered. "Seems to have come from the direction of the gate. Maybe someone stepped on the mines."

"Not much chance of that," Philip said. More of the people were collecting on the commons, milling around and

exchanging guesses. He saw a lean scarlet cloak moving through the crowd.

"What do you mean?" Denny asked.

"There aren't any mines. I never put them in," Philip said. He jerked his head warningly at the approaching red cloak.

"The hell?" Denny whispered. He saw the priest walking hurriedly toward them and closed his mouth, staring at Philip.

"Play the game with me," Philip said through closed teeth.

"Yeah, sure, man," Denny said nervously and dug in his pockets for a factory smoke.

"Aren't you getting chilly dressed that way, Stuckey?" Philip asked.

"I like to feel the dew," Stuckey said.

Philip shook out his jacket and wrapped it around her shoulders. "Well, go barefoot then, but put some clothes on."

"Don't you remember? The ArchCommodore wants me to share in holy communion with him today," she said hollowly. "I want to be prepared for him."

"It's not the ArchCommodore who worries me," Philip said quietly as Grahm came up to them.

Grahm's eyes were squinted tight with anger. "What are you people doing just standing around here. The commune may be under attack!"

"Why do you say that?" Philip asked, tucking the jacket around Stuckey.

"Look! What do you call that?" Grahm yelled, pointing at the sky. A dark, oily smear of smoke was gradually lifting about the tree line, spreading like a lazy inkblot.

"Guess you win, Brenda," Denny said. "Sure doesn't seem to be thunder. What do you think, Phil?"

"Sure doesn't," Philip agreed. Denny was playing it perfectly. "Looks like someone had an accident."

"Or someone entered the mine fields," Grahm interjected angrily.

"That could be," Philip shrugged.

Grahm gestured exasperatedly, his hands sweeping the air. "Well, what are you going to do about it?"

Philip bent and rubbed his knee, flexing his leg to work

out the morning kinks. "At the moment, I'm thinking of getting some breakfast."

Graham screwed his face into a seething scowl. "You ass!"

Philip planted his feet firmly and let the kneecap lock, balancing his hard bulk dangerously.

"Easy, Phil," Denny said. "Here comes Gudtsler."

Gudtsler pushed toward them, his red cloak flapping like a punished bird. He raised his eyebrows at Stuckey's bare bottom showing under Philip's fatigue jacket and pursed his mouth before speaking.

"You are dressed most curiously, sister," he said suspiciously.

She smiled weakly and tugged the jacket down tighter. "Good morning, Father."

Gudtsler turned to Philip, a scowl darkening across his face. "It would appear you had a pleasant night, Mister Philip. What is happening here?"

Philip felt the bitter humor. "The barrier may have been breached, Holiness. Father Graham and I were discussing our next course of action."

"I was trying to tell this ass that we should prepare for defense immediately, but all he does is make jokes," Graham said hotly.

"Defense would seem wise," Gudtsler said. He was more interested in Stuckey's bottom than the oily smoke.

"Father Graham may be overestimating the danger," Philip said quietly. "The explosion may have already taken care of our threat."

"You spineless fool," Graham snarled. He tossed open his cloak and pulled out his pistol. "You are placing the Arch-Commodore's life in danger. The attacker can be none other than the HEROD. Merely by living this long, he has proved he is a formidable enemy."

"It is also ample proof that you have again failed, Father Graham," Gudtsler said icily. "I feel you boast a long line of failures, beginning with our little nun here. Mister Philip feels no immediate concern, and I am inclined to agree with him." He glanced again at Stuckey's bottom, peeking out from under the jacket. "Besides, there are things that must be done before I leave."

"Yes, Philip seems remarkably calm," Graham growled. "Perhaps *too* calm. Perhaps his friendship has been re-

kindled with the HEROD. He spent two weeks here and the most Philip would do to help eliminate him was to send him to Salton."

A silence settled over the group, and Gudtsler patted Stuckey's behind.

"Dangerous accusations," Gudtsler said. "Mister Philip has been acting on my orders to discredit the HEROD Society, a desire which reaches down from Pope Schicten himself. If you doubt Mister Philip's loyalty, I suggest the two of you drive to the barrier and kill the HEROD once and for all. He has served his purpose by now."

Philip nodded carefully, as Stuckey watched him with pain washing over her face. "There's an ATV behind my hut. Are you coming, Father?"

Grahm estimated Philip's bearded bulk. "The full spirit of righteousness has not descended upon this man, Holiness. I do not trust him. Call it a premonition, call it a fantasy, but I refuse to go alone with him."

"The ATV only carries two and I'm not armed," Philip smiled. "I haven't carried a gun since the mercenaries."

Gudtsler looked at Philip's jacket draping Stuckey, weighing Grahm's words. "It is true Mister Philip has never taken the vows, but I have had no reason to distrust him. Still, if you are worried, Father Grahm . . ."

"Simple answer," Philip said. "Denny, you take Father Grahm to the gate. Show him how impregnable the wall is."

There was a finality in the way Philip spoke the words that deadened Denny's sensibilities. "You talking about a grand tour?"

"Sure, why not?" Philip said. He smiled easily, but the humor had gone.

Denny sucked a mouthful of the sweet smoke. He exhaled slowly, letting it linger in his nostrils. "Okay, man. Grand tour it is."

He brought the ATV around the the commons and Grahm crawled in. The ATV churned past the huts and weaved through the trees. Philip waited until he lost sight of it and then waved at the crowd that had gathered. They waved back and began drifting back to the huts and dorm building, only a few still watching the smoke in the sky.

"Let us pray you are correct and that there is no

immediate danger," Gudtsler said. "It would be most untimely to be interrupted this morning by a HEROD."

"Father Graham's fears will be put to an end," Philip assured.

"Graham is a nervous man," Gudtsler said. He ran his hands over Stuckey's shoulders, letting his fingers curl around the jacket collar. "Now, my child, perhaps you will share breakfast with me?"

"Breakfast won't be ready for another hour," Brenda said apologetically.

"So much the better," Gudtsler said. "Adequate time for us to reacquaint ourselves. Come, little nun. Too many years have passed, and I am anxious to see what you have learned."

He peeled the fatigue jacket from Stuckey and dropped it on the ground, a droplet of drool wetting the corner of his mouth. Stuckey threw a frightened look at Philip before Gudtsler clamped her wrist and pulled her after him.

Philip picked up his jacket slowly, brushing the dust from it. He watched Stuckey stumbling after the ArchCommodore, the morning light bathing her fear. He pulled the jacket on laboriously, his muscles knotting and balking.

"Get to your kitchen, Brenda," he said softly.

"You're going to tell him?" She creased her forehead, clutching the towel.

"Get out of here," Philip said. The ArchCommodore almost had Stuckey to his hut before he called out.

"Holiness, you are going to be disappointed."

It stopped Gudtsler. He turned, still holding Stuckey's wrist. "What did you say? Are you in a position to know, Mister Philip? Maybe your jacket on her so early in the morning was more than an act of charity."

Philip hobbled woodenly toward Gudtsler, the perforated kneecap acutely sensitive. "On the contrary, Holiness. I have never made love to your nun. Not that I haven't considered it, but no man has made love to her with the exception of the HEROD."

Gudtsler held his head back, listening to Philip's profanity. "You are lying, Mister Philip."

Philip shrugged, his open hands hanging loosely at his sides. "Ask her yourself, Holiness. Let her tell you she has

been terrified of men since she was introduced to your worthy teachings."

"Philip . . ." Stuckey stammered. "Why are you doing this to me?"

"Tell him, Stuckey. Tell him that the only way you could make love to a man was by knowing you could destroy him in the process," Philip said, limping across the grass.

"That's not true," Stuckey cried. "I love Matter."

"What are you *saying*, child?" Gudtsler seethed incredulously. "That you allowed the HEROD to be the only man to love you? All this time and you have been celibate?"

"What does that do to your experiment, Holiness?" Philip grinned bitterly. "Makes it about as meaningful as your whole cockeyed project, right?"

"This can't be true," Gudtsler insisted, wagging his head. "The Gabriel Project . . . the Lazarus world . . ."

"It can still be possible," Stuckey whimpered.

"In a sow's ear," Philip said. "It's all guesswork, Stuckey. Maybe there's something out there, but maybe there's not. Gudtsler doesn't know for sure. Nobody does. Admit it, Holiness. Tell Stuckey that the whole project has been a damned money grab from the start."

"There is a world waiting for us!" Gudtsler yelled. "Grahm was right! You should never have been let into our confidence. You have ruined the experiment, and you have destroyed this nun's faith. You are no better than the HEROD!"

"Wrong," Philip said. "I'm in the middle. I've watched over that girl for three years now, and I'll be damned if I'm going to let you foul her up again."

"Righteousness regulates," Gudtsler hissed and flipped his cloak open.

"Don't!" Stuckey screamed.

The pistol roared in Gudtsler's hand. The impact kicked Philip's feet out from under him and smashed him face first to the ground. He coughed the dirt from his mouth as Gudtsler laughed. The pain was a familiar memory, and he knew there was no saving his leg this time.

The grass was swirling in front of his eyes as he watched Gudtsler drag Stuckey into the hut.

XIII

A COW FLICKED ITS EAR at the gunshot, brushing off the sound as though it had been a flybite. The booming sound rattled against the horseshoe of trees and then rolled across the plains. Matter crouched, keeping himself low as he ran for the commons. The barrier had sapped his strength, and he was winded and breathing hard by the time he reached the second fence of barbed wire. He did not trust himself to jump over the strands, prying them open instead and ripping his back as he squirmed through.

The stinging made him question why he was hurrying to save a FROG. He had been allowed to keep his passpistol the first night he had been in Gauze. Whatever the reason, it was coming to a head now. Except that now, when he needed the gun, the Gimps had it.

He paused at the edge of the trees, glancing quickly around for more red cloaks. There was a group of commoners huddled near the dining hall and he sprinted brokenly for them. Leo saw him coming and turned angrily.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Leo snapped as Matter stumbled up.

"Who fired that shot?" Matter wheezed. Leo's question seemed especially inappropriate. He was trying to find his breath when he saw why they had congregated. "Philip!"

Brenda was pressing her towel against Philip's leg, trying to stem the growing pool of blood. "Gudtsler shot him," she said, only half-believing her own words.

They were standing around watching him bleed to death as though they were afraid to intervene in the province of some god.

"Give me that damned rag," Matter said sourly.

"Leave him alone, Matter," Leo snarled. "You've done enough damage."

"Not nearly as much as I'm going to do," Matter growled back and shouldered Leo aside. He tore the towel into long shreds and began knotting them together.

Gudtsler. He had heard the name before, but where?

Something he had picked up in a briefing? Not quite, but the memory returned slowly. A hummingbird had whispered it to him while he was sleeping.

"How's it going, killer?" Philip whispered as Matter tied the knotted strips around his leg.

"I'm fine. How about you?" Matter said. "Leo, get me a stick. Who is Gudtsler, Phil?"

Leo hesitated, then pulled a pencil out of a pocket and tossed it to Matter.

"Fundamentalist ArchCommodore," Philip grimaced. "Big man. We had an argument."

"Looks that way. What were you arguing about?" Matter shoved the pencil under the tourniquet and twisted until the thick blood stopped pumping. Philip's face was drawn and whitish. It was hard to guess whether the tourniquet had stopped the bleeding or whether he had run out of blood.

"Stuckey," Philip said.

"Give me some more cloth, Brenda," Matter said. "Why should you argue about her? She's a Fundamentalist, isn't she?"

"Just barely," Philip said. He was weakening quickly and Matter could barely hear him. "They've been using her as an experiment. She's a good girl, Matt. She didn't know about it."

Brenda was ripping off her skirt. "Good girl," Matter said. Butchering meat had toughened her. "What about you, Phil? How much did you know?"

"Enough to know that it's Gudtsler's skin if the experiment fails," Philip grunted. "If Stuckey got pregnant, the whole spaceship scheme would have gone up in smoke. He'd kill her before he'd let that happen."

"Nice guy," Matter said. "Brenda, hang on to this pencil."

Philip looked down at his leg. By the way it was lying at a broken angle, he could see the top of his foot easily. "Looks like I lost it for good this time," he said.

"Doesn't look too good," Matter agreed. He moved Philip's leg together and wrapped the skirt around the severed knee. Even as he tied the cloth, he knew it was futile. The bones and the porous kneecap were demolished. The only things still holding the lower leg were strands of bright

soleus muscle and blackened skin. "How much does Gudtsler know about me?"

Philip was crushing his jaws together as Matter tightened the cloth. "He's not too happy about you. He knows you're the only man who has made love with Stuckey in damn near three years."

Matter blinked. "You're kidding!"

"She's been burned pretty badly, Matt," Philip said, his voice strained and rattling in his throat. "Besides, it was the only way I could keep pumping funds out of the FROGs."

Philip's face relaxed slightly as he dropped into unconsciousness. Brenda stared with a sick fear, holding the tourniquet.

"Where's Stuckey?" Matter demanded.

Brenda was close to crying. "Gudtsler took her to his hut . . . to share communion with her."

"Philip tried to stop him?"

"Yes."

"What about the rest of you? Didn't anyone try to help Philip, or don't you give a damn about Stuckey, either?"

"Dammit, don't stand sounding sanctimonious," Leo spat. "Phil motioned us all back inside before he got shot. We didn't know something like this was going to happen."

"You make me sick," Matter growled. "Is the infirmary equipped for an amputation?"

"An amputation? God, no," Leo said, shocked.

"This leg sure as hell isn't going to be saved. All we can do now is keep Philip alive," Matter said. "Some of you guys get him to the infirmary and pack some ice around his leg. Give him some blood if you have it."

Leo faltered. "I don't know what his blood type is."

"Then give him some plasma. You have plasma, don't you?"

"Christ, Matter, what do you think this is? General Hospital of the Plains?"

"Then cut your wrist and pump *that* into him," Matter yelled. "Find someone with type O. It's universal."

"Okay, we'll find it." Leo waved at the group and they lifted Philip, stumble-running for the infirmary.

"Is he going to live?" Brenda asked, wringing blood from her hands.

"Damned if I know," Matter said. "Where'd this Gudtsler take Stuckey?"

She pointed to the hut. "Don't hurt her, Matter. She didn't know. *None* of us really knew what Philip was doing."

"Seems everybody was using Stuckey," Matter snarled.

"Be careful, Matter," she said. "Gudtsler is armed."

Matter looked at the pool of blood on the ground. "Yeah, I gathered that."

The cold logic of the HEROD Society was dissolving rapidly as he ran across the commons. He was going out of his mind and accepted it. His days were being shaped by the nightly bridging dreams of a Fundamentalist nun, an inexplicable sharing of her fears and memories.

If he could accept that, he could accept that he was charging unarmed against a double-barreled pistol for the sake of a FROG.

Grahm and Denny came over the crest of the hill and looked down at the smoke girdling the black gate walls. The priest peered over Denny's shoulder, his eyes taking in the smoldering wreckage of the rental car across the barrier. Neither of them noticed the slimy mass of deflated clothes resting outside the walls.

He tensed sharply as he saw the truck wedged inside the gate. "Damn, I told him not to rely on that queer clerk. Too unstable and . . ." He caught his words as the meaning of the truck suddenly sank in.

"What's that truck doing there?" he demanded.

"Looks like it's stuck," Denny said. He lit another factory smoke, inhaling deeply to steady his nerves. His mind seemed to be racing physically ahead of him, projecting itself yards before him as he jammed the power wands forward and brought the ATV rambling down the slope.

"Yes, it's stuck, damn you," Grahm shot. "Why wasn't it blown up in the mine field?"

"Hell if I know," Denny shrugged. His neck was thirty feet long, holding his head in front of him on a gangling stalk. Behind him somewhere, his hands were operating the controls, but it was taking a long time for his brain's messages to reach his limbs. One of his arms conveniently

lengthened itself to allow another drag on the marijuana joint, then slithered back to the controls.

"I'll tell you why not," Grahm yelled. "Your precious crippled leader has disobeyed us! The gate has never been mined. We have been cheated!"

"Wouldn't know about that," Denny slurred. It was difficult to follow Grahm's reasoning, but it seemed logical enough. Far behind him, the ATV was approaching the gate, but his mind had already floated through the gate unaffected. Nothing to fear there, his mind sluggishly concluded. He eased one of the wands, turning the ATV.

"Where are you going?" Grahm yelled.

"No mine field. No barrier, either," Denny gurgled as the ATV angled away from the walls. His head was already halfway across the barrier and nothing had happened. There was only the clear July sun and the bright green fields. The smoke that was curling up from the ruined car looked like soft cotton fluff. His mind sank into it, tumbling lazily in its gentle turbulence.

"Stop! You're driving into the barrier!" Grahm screamed.

"Nothing to worry about," Denny gurgled. "I'm already through it, man. It's soft and warm."

"You're out of your mind," Grahm yelled. He reached over Denny to yank him back from the controls.

"Oh, no you don't," Denny said and rammed his elbow into Grahm. "Nobody is taking my softs away from me."

His floating mind could see them closing on the barrier, but it failed to see Grahm pull out his pistol frantically. Its vision was clipped instantly as Grahm fired point-blank.

The impact plastered Denny against the dash, squashing the power wands full forward. Grahm scrambled for Denny's shoulders, trying to pull his body away. A wedge of horror crushed into him as the ATV lurched past the walls.

The subsonics shattered their bodies, curdling their cells. The ATV growled through the barrier, carrying its collapsing passengers. It crawled up the opposite hillock, the jolt shifting the oozing corpse that was pinning the power wands. The protoplasmic mass slid slowly sideways, easing the power from one side of the tread wheels. The ATV turned lazily, making a sweeping arc that brought it back

to the barrier. This time, the subsonics ruptured the muscle tissue and Denny's body began losing its shape, sliding in a lumpy heap under the dash.

The ATV shuddered to a halt as the power wands returned automatically to their neutral position. It sat humming until the battery pack broke open and there was only the soft sound of the smoke.

Matter hit the door without slowing, ripping off its hinges and scattering plastic doorframe. A man was standing half-naked in the middle of the room, flowing red cloak covering the wrinkled muscles that had turned to fat. Stuckey was motionless on the cot, Gudtsler standing over her with his pistol held in his hand.

He crashed into the room, diving for Gudtsler, trying to keep his balance. Gudtsler spun, whipping the gun around at Matter's head. The butt caught him below the ear, sending a numbness bolting down his back. Matter careened into Gudtsler, grabbing a handful of cloak as the blow sent him to the floor.

Gudtsler dropped heavily on top of him, flailing in the air. He hit hard and the gun bounced across the room. He rammed a fist into Matter's breastbone, then followed it with a knee into his groin. Matter gagged, bright spots flashing before his eyes as Gudtsler found his throat.

Matter locked his neck, feeling the larynx bones start to give under Gudtsler's thumbs. He chopped for Gudtsler's head, but Gudtsler shrugged it off easily, taking it on his shoulders.

He kneeled on Matter's chest, both knees sinking into his solar plexus, leaning his weight into his hands around Matter's throat.

The bursting lights were giving way to a suffocating darkness. Matter locked his hands around Gudtsler's head, trying to throw him off, but Gudtsler was a rigid wall.

He felt his control beginning to fade, his fingers dancing and twitching in the air. There was a sharp jab against his hand. Lethargically, as though he was dredging the memory out of a well, he remembered the knitting needle.

His strength was going rapidly. He forced his fingers to steady, got them around the needle and pulled it out of his sleeve.

His lungs were ready to blow. He put one end of the needle against triangular bone at the base of his thumb, pulled his hand down under Gudtsler's arm, and then shoved upward. He was unsure if the gurgling sound came from the ArchCommodore or from himself.

Breathing was total pain. The air came in long rasping rattles, cracking its way through his throat. He reached up trying to ease his spasmodic neck muscles, feeling the bloodiness of his hand where the needle had penetrated his palm until it had been blocked by the bones.

He rolled painfully, pushing Gudtsler's body from him. It thudded against the floor, writhing spastically. Matter waited until he heard the twitching stop before he opened his eyes. An inch of the knitting needle was protruding from Gudtsler's armpit, the plastic rapier point embedded in his heart.

Matter got to his feet, crossing leadenly to Stuckey. Her face was swelling and turning blue from the bruises, matching the angry scratches and discolorations on the inside of her thighs. He sank to the cot and ran his fingers through her hair, letting his fingers slide to her temples to find the pulse.

"Good God," someone said behind him. He looked up and saw Leo standing in the doorway. "What have you done, Matter?"

He turned back silently to Stuckey, his chest heaving. Wiping out a rival kill agent was expected. If a bystander got nailed accidentally in the process, that was unfortunate but acceptable.

But carry a kill game all the way to a ranking Fundamentalist? The rules did not allow that. Nobody in this world had ever done *that* and gotten away with it.

"I think I've just lost my job," Matter whispered hoarsely.

Leo leaned against the doorframe, weakened. "God help us all, man."

He clenched his jaw. Possibly, he could have explained away his dalliance with a FROG nun. He could have even argued his failure to unearth any damaging evidence against the Gabriel Project. But a HEROD murdering an ArchCommodore?

There was no doubt now which way the World Con-

gess sentiments would bend. The Society was going to lose its case. The FROGs were going to get their spaceship.

Lembeck was going to be *very* unhappy.

"Help is a little late in coming," Matter said. "How's Philip?"

"We're giving him some blood now, but he's not going to make it unless we get him to a hospital," Leo said, pulling himself away from the door. "What about Stuckey?"

"Raped, but she'll make it," Matter said bitterly. "Get some guys to hold the transfusion bottle for Philip and let's get going."

"We'll take Gudtsler's limousine," Leo said. "It's bigger and fast."

"Yeah, okay. Get Philip in it and I'll be right with you. Stuckey is starting to come around."

Leo ran across the commons, yelling orders. From behind a hut, a car started, a deep combustion engine roaring. Matter watched from the center of the room as the car braked in front of the infirmary.

"Matter?" a small voice whispered.

"Stay there, Stuckey. Don't try to get up yet." He staggered across the room and covered Gudtsler's body with the red cloak.

"You know, don't you?" The voice was quiet, drained even of tears.

"Enough," he said. He looked at her painfully.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"You'll be all right," he said, stumbling to the door. "I've got to get Philip to a hospital. I'll tell Brenda to come in and give you a hand."

She saw the huddled cloak on the floor, saw her dreams of the Lazarus planet burning in the red flame of its cloth. "Will you come back?"

They were moving Philip out of the infirmary. "I can't do that, Stuckey. I blew this mission pretty badly. Once I get past that gate, I'm going to keep running. There are going to be a lot of angry HERODs after me."

"You could stay here," she whispered.

Leo motioned to him from the car. They had Philip bundled into the back seat, the engine gunning impatiently.

"I loved you, Stuckey," he said as he swung out of the doorway.

Harold and Tree were juggling the transfusion bottle and Matter slid inside.

"Do you need a bandage for your hand, Matter?" Brenda asked.

"No. I'm all right. See what you can do for Stuckey. Gudtsler beat her up and did a few other tricks on her," Matter said. "Better get some guys to bury him."

"We'll throw him in his damned barrier. No remains, that way," Leo snapped and shoved the accelerator. They shot over the commons, turning hard through the trees. It took a moment for Matter to realize where they were headed.

"You can't use this gate," he said. "I jammed a truck in it."

"Then we'll have to move the truck," Leo said. "There aren't any more gates."

"What? Denny said Gauze was laid out like a pentagon. There have to be amplifying walls at each corner."

"Sure, but they don't have to be double walls. Those are more expensive to build. Philip economized and built all of them solid except one. So there's only one gate."

"Oh, Jesus," Matter said.

They came over the crest of the hill, looking down on the walls with the truck wedged between them. The wreckage of the rental car was still smoldering, but something had been added.

Beside the walls was an ATV, the bare metal of its electric drive glinting in the sunlight as its paint was chipped off by the subsonics. Rumpled clothing saturated with a milky pink gruel was occupying the twin seats.

Leo stopped the car at the walls, his hands trembling on the wheel. He groaned suddenly and vomited. When the retching had settled, he leaned back stiffly in the seat, closing his eyes.

"Damn it, damn it, *damn* it," Leo yelled. "Come on, you guys, let's get that truck out of there. At least we can keep Philip alive."

"Rod's busted," Matter said. "We're going to have to push it out."

"We sure as hell aren't going to drive this car through the barrier," Leo snapped. "You know any other way?"

"Yeah," Matter said. "Go back to Gauze and turn off the power."

"How?" Tree asked. "Philip kept the switch a secret."

"Then we'll blow up the whole damned power plant. Come on, let's move."

Leo rammed the car into reverse.

"Hang on," Harold yelled. "No big hurry. Philip just checked out."

XIV

THE GOLDEN GRAIN REACHED to the horizon, an undulating blanket that swayed and flowed with the air. It merged distantly with the hard blue of the sky, reminding him of gold and turquoise Aztec jewelry as he ran through the fields. The autumn sun mirrored the ripened grain, a circular medallion of pounded shimmer, saturating the land with the last of the summer's heat.

Stuckey laughed, veering through the rows, dodging and taunting him with the bronze of her skin. He chased her, sharing her laughter, ducking through the wheat and doing his best not to bruise the plump kernels, sidestepping and leaping over the dark earth.

The pale lavender of the Riding Mountains edged one side of the horizon, a dwindling line of rounded humps that vanished at each end into the goldness. The sky was perfectly clear, only a fraction of whitening showing over the mountains, an umbrella of vastness punctuated only by the sun.

The purity of the colors and the lush starkness of the wheat were filling his eyes, demanding too much of his attention to catch Stuckey.

She was beginning to broadcast her movements, turning her head in the direction she was anticipating. He saw one of her quick steps before she changed her direction and managed to be there before she was. She whirled, trying to duck under his arms, but she was too slow not to be caught.

He caught her as she slipped by, getting his arm around her waist and letting himself be pulled off balance. They landed together in the dark soil, letting themselves be covered with dust. She laughed, playfully pushing his hands away, until he burrowed his face under her chin and kissed her neck. Stuckey chortled merrily and pulled him to her, chewing on his lip as he unzipped her coveralls and made lazy love.

Matter wadded his bodystocking under his head and lay watching the sky through the waving wheat. "I'll bet the MURC index is at a record low today," he mused. "The air is so clear it's like taking your lungs out for a washing."

"Any dirt in the air must be the dust we stirred up," Stuckey smiled. She was resting her head on his stomach, looking up at him.

"We did that pretty well, didn't we?" He ran his finger down the bridge of her nose, pressing its tip like a toy button.

"The sky is beautiful, isn't it?" she said, turning to look up. He sensed the wistfulness in her voice. "So wide, so free."

They had not talked of it for the past two months, only quick hints and guarded comments. Both of them had been content with letting love bloom and were not concerned with the weeds that had been sown. He played touch button with her breasts, then relaxed his hand, feeling it rise and fall with her breathing.

"I wonder if they made it off," he said, knowing what she was thinking.

"Do you think they could have?"

"Probably. Not much doubt of it. I'm sure the World Congress voted in their favor."

"Is there really another world out there, Matter? Somewhere fresh and new and unspoiled?"

He sighed, pulling her up and resting her head in the bend of his arm. "Maybe there is. The only way to find out is to go out there and look. Two generations from now, they may find their Lazarus planet. Or they may find nothing except a frozen ball waiting for them. We'll never know."

He watched a breeze wave the grain over them, think-

ing quietly. "I wonder if they'll radio back to Earth some day if they find it."

"Would you blame them if they didn't?"

He thought about that. "I can understand why they wouldn't, but it would be good to know there was another answer."

"Does it bother you that you'll never know?"

"Everything becomes relative after a while, Stuckey. All you can do is accept what is happening now and do whatever is expedient."

"You're soundnig like a HEROD again. Am I simply something expedient to you?"

He tightened his arm around her and held her, pressing her head to his shoulder. "No, you're a real thing, Stuckey. You were in my mind before I even met you. Our alpha waves, or some nonsense like that, came into contact. When I climbed out of that wrecked Laika, I knew that I recognized Grahm. But not from my memory . . . from yours. The first week I was here, I woke up each morning feeling so damned depressed that I thought I was having a psychotic reaction to the drug you gave me. It took me a long time to realize that I was feeling your fear, and then it took me even longer to admit it."

"Fear is a real thing," Stuckey said. "Animals can smell it in humans."

"It was more than that. I felt it even when I wasn't near you."

"You're a romanticist," she said.

"Which is a dangerous thing for a man. It can soften him."

"If you're living outside, I suppose it's important to be hard. But you don't have to be that way here," she said.

"That's why I'm staying," Matter said. "Not that I could go back to the Society. They'd have their hounds on me before I even got across the border. I'm bored with killing people. That sounds pretty harsh, but maybe every HEROD comes to a saturation point if he lives long enough. Don't know for sure . . . I've never talked to a retired HEROD."

"Maybe the Society hides them away so they can't influence younger agents."

"That's probably 'not necessary. About the last thing I'd

want to do now would be to influence anyone. You try to stay objective, but pretty soon you begin saying that no life is important, that everyone has to die eventually, that life itself has no value. If you stop there, you can still function as a HEROD. But if you are honest, you reach the conclusion that your own life isn't very important, either."

"Philip talked about you," Stuckey remembered. "He said you were a calculating man and that you always knew what you were doing. If you didn't think your life was important, why were you careful?"

He smiled brokenly. "Philip was a careful man, but he was also cursed with bravery. Calculating the odds only means getting the job done. It has no more to do with carefulness than bravery does with suicide."

"Philip died trying to save me," Stuckey said, and fell serious. "But it was so unnecessary. He was trying to protect me from Gudtsler, but I had been to bed with the ArchCommodore so often before that it really didn't mean anything. Why did Philip do that, Matter?"

It was important for her to know, but he did not have the answers. "I don't know," he said. "Maybe he felt guilty. Maybe he was in love with you."

"He never told me," Stuckey said.

"He had a lot of secrets," Matter said. He motioned Stuckey off and got to his feet, slapping his bodystocking across his back to knock the dust from him. "Philip was building his own private world."

"And now you're part of it," Stuckey said, squirming into her panties.

"I had a strong reason for getting back in," Matter said. "I wasn't sure if I loved you or hated you, but I wanted to find out."

"It's a nice world that Philip built," she said.

He smiled at the sky. "Yes, it is."

She finished dressing and they walked through the wheat field, pulling off kernels and chewing them. He was quiet, watching the sky carefully.

"Are you angry with me for talking about Philip?" she asked.

"What? No, of course not," he said. "It's just that I don't understand him or what he did."

"He died for something he believed in," Stuckey said. "Just as Denny did."

He thought of the obscenity of death, the pornography of suicide. "I prefer to think that Denny was too blown out on grass to know what he was doing. It's easier for me to accept that."

They stopped at the garage on their way through the commons. Leo was finishing repairing the threshing machine. He nodded at them as they looked into the garage.

"We'll start harvesting tomorrow," Leo said. "Let you ride it for a while, Matter. Think you can handle it?"

"I eat the grain. May as well learn how to pick it," Matter said. "Has Harold gotten back from the gate yet?"

"Came back about thirty, forty minutes ago. Larry's down there standing guard now."

"Anything happening?"

"Nothing since we saw that car pass by a week ago."

"Probably just a lost tourist," Matter said thoughtfully.

"Yeah, probably," Leo agreed. "How's it going, Stuckey?"

"Fine," Stuckey said. "What's this about a car?"

"We've been posting a guard on the gate to watch for uninvited guests," Matter said. "Nothing to be worried about."

"Do you think the Fundamentalists may be looking for revenge?"

"It's possible," Matter said.

"I don't think so," Stuckey said. "The most important thing to the FROG movement was the Gabriel Project. If they have accomplished that, everything else is unimportant."

"Let's hope so," Matter nodded carefully. "It's about lunchtime. Feel like joining us, Leo?"

"Hey sure. Hang on a second and I'll be right with you." He found a rag and was cleaning the grease from his hands before he saw the unwelcoming look in Stuckey's eyes. "Hey, I just thought of something. You go on and maybe I'll join you later."

"What was that all about?" Matter asked as they walked to the dining hall.

She shrugged, tossing her hair in the breeze. "Oh, I just wanted to talk to you alone."

"Stuckey, we were out in the fields for an hour. Why didn't you tell me out there?"

"We were having fun then. This is something serious," she said. She stopped, looking up at him. "You won't be angry, will you?"

"I don't know. Tell me first."

"Well, I think I'm pregnant," she said. "I mean, it's been over two months, Matt, and I haven't had a period. . . ."

"You're not joking?"

"Are you angry?"

He looked down at her, too surprised to say anything, until he realized he was not surprised at all. He pulled her close to him, wrapping his arms around her and letting her huddle against his chest.

"Good for you, kid."

"You're not angry?" Her voice was a small, hesitant creature, a hummingbird whisper.

He pressed her tighter to him. "No, for God's sake, I'm not angry. I'm happy for you."

"I want you to be happy, too."

"I'm happy," he assured her. They rocked together on the grass, letting the soft wind curl around them. He unwrapped his arms and tilted back her head so that he could see her eyes and she his.

"I'm glad I'm here with you, Stuckey," he said.

She closed her eyes and smiled. "I'm glad you're here, too, Matt."

Brenda gave them a bottle of chokeberry wine to celebrate and they left the dining hall and drank slowly under the trees. He was feeling warm and satisfied with Stuckey asleep against him when he heard the hard fluttering sound in the air.

He looked up and saw the black jetchoppers flying in from the mountains. The HERODs were coming for him.

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