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A novel of interplanetary menace

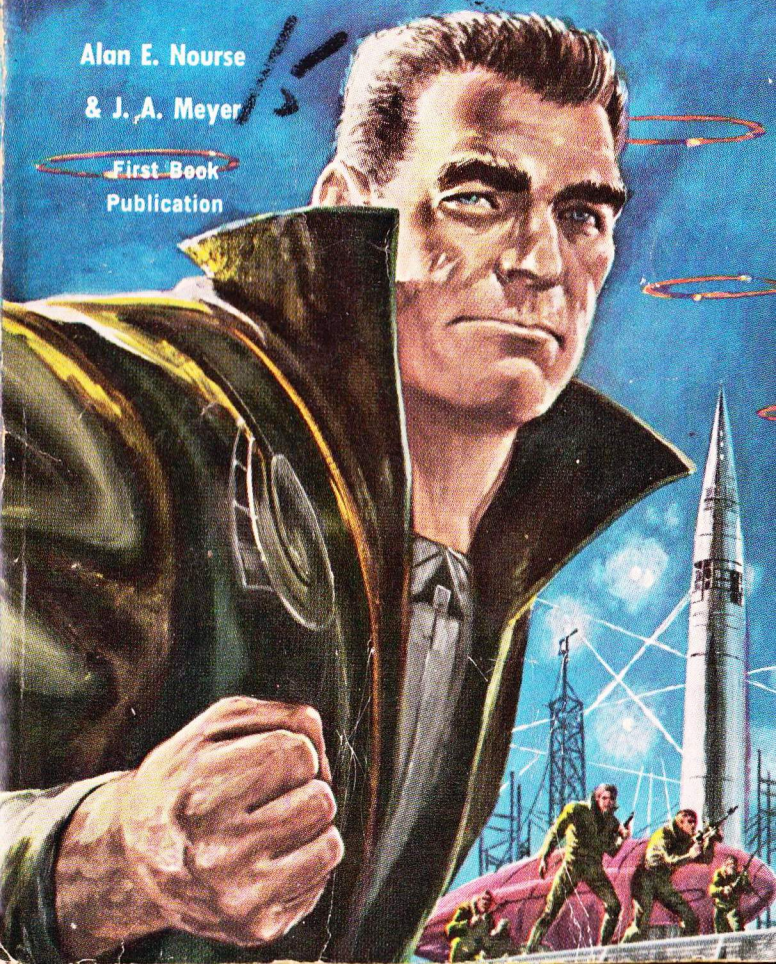
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BOOK

# THE INVADERS ARE COMING

Alan E. Nourse

& J. A. Meyer

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Publication



## BREAKTHROUGH IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Major Harvey Alexander, Director Wildwood Atomic Power Plant—that was his title. But impressive as it sounded, the major knew it was nothing more than governmental putting-out-to-pasture. A former top-ranking Army Intelligence officer isn't placed in charge of an antique power pile in the middle of nowhere unless someone with a great deal of influence wants him out of the way!

And when three bars of U-metal were smuggled out of the plant—carried right past the exit monitors in an obvious frame-up—then Alexander knew for sure that his unknown enemy was ready for the final step. And in Federated America, where the Department of Psychological Control ruled unquestioned, that final step was the *mind-pick*!

The major had to work fast now. He had to find out who was trying to destroy him, and why . . . or face the rest of his life as a mindless idiot in a forced labor battalion!

**ALAN E. NOURSE** gives the year of his birth as 1928 and the place as Des Moines, Iowa. After graduating from Rutgers in 1951, he began his writing career while studying at the University of Pennsylvania Medical School for the M.D. he received in 1955. In that period he rapidly made a name for himself among the science-fiction readers. Over half a hundred of his stories have been featured and a number of them reprinted in anthologies. Since receiving his doctorate he has taken a leave from the practice of medicine to devote full time to his writing.

He has had several novels published in book form, mainly juveniles, of which *Junior Intern* (Harper's) is an instance. Ace Books have previously published his *A Man Obsessed* (D-96), and now, in collaboration with J.A. Meyer, his latest work, *The Invaders Are Coming!*

# *The Invaders Are Coming!*

by  
ALAN E. NOURSE  
and  
J. A. MEYER

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## PROLOGUE . . .

SOMEWHERE in the empty miles of New Mexico desert a spaceship was standing.

Not many people remembered that it was still there. To the West it was shielded by the sprawling, treeless humps of the Organ Mountains; to the East lay the scorched sand and twisted mesquite of the desert. A road lay somewhere to the South, but hardly anyone passed there any more; and the few that did were not thinking about spaceships. If they knew what was standing in the valley behind the mountains, they didn't care. They didn't want to know about it.

The ship had been sitting there for decades. Day by day the wind piled sand against the half-welded superstructure. The seams were splitting, and the hull-plates sagged and twisted in the wind. Below the ship, the fire-gutted buildings stood forlornly, their doors flapping on rusty hinges.

There had been violence here; now there was only desolation and decay. Twice a day the silence was shattered by the whine of engines as cargo missiles passed through the sky, bound for the great cities of the Southern Continent. Occasionally, bands of Qualchi raiders met in the ruined buildings on their way north to Oklahoma and Kansas, but this happened rarely, and only in the shadow of darkness.

But these things did not affect the ship. It stood unfinished and decaying in the desert, hated and untouched and slowly dying.

That was what the people thought.

Peter Elling had never seen the ship. He had died long before its time. There had been no spaceship in his calculations, no dream of space. Peter Elling had seen that fragment of the future that is revealed to idiots and geniuses, but it was only a fragment. In his dogged British fashion he had worked at his desk and blackboard and said, "This is what men could do," before his light had flickered out. There were no spaceships then.

Mark Vanner lived to see the first fruits of Elling's work. He saw the first XAR rocket rise from the New Mexico desert and split apart at the seams thirty miles above the Gulf of Mexico. He saw the second and the third go the way of the first as the time of accounting grew closer. He had begged, and pleaded, and fought to stop them, but no one would listen to him . . .

Later, they listened. After the crash that he had foreseen, more horrible and crippling than any war, they had listened to Mark Vanner because they had to. He showed them the way out of the chaos of those days, and they left the ship standing in the desert, a plague spot.

But in the world that Vanner built, there were no spaceships.

The helicopter had landed on a sandy hillock near the ship, and they had been walking slowly through the wreckage for two hours . . . a tall man with flowing white hair, and a smaller, younger man.

"All right," the white-haired man said at last, "you wanted to see it. Now you see it."

The younger man nodded and brushed sandy hair back from his forehead. "This was the fifth XAR ship, am I right? I hadn't realized it was so nearly finished." He spoke softly, and only the slightest burr betrayed his Highland origin.

"Another month would have seen it aloft," the white-haired man said. "It was that close." He took a cigarette from a bright titanium case and stooped to light it against the wind. "Now, of course, it would take longer, but that doesn't matter. I'm going to raise this ship."

The sandy-haired man looked at him. "Do you realize what you're going to have to fight in order to do it?"

"I realize. It will take time. But I'll do it."

"It will take more than time," the Scotsman said slowly. "People hate this ship. They fear it. They hate it for what it did to them before, and for what it could do again. You won't be able to change that by yourself."

"There is a man who can do it," said the white-haired man. "His name is Julian Bahr."

"It will take more than just one man," the Scotsman said.

"You don't know this man. He'll do it. He doesn't know it yet, but he will."

"And when the time comes, will you be able to stop him?"

"I don't know," said the white-haired man. "That's the flaw, of course. I just don't know."

The Scotsman regarded his companion closely. "You know that we can't guarantee you any help at all," he said. "Officially, BRINT knows nothing of what you're planning to do."

"But you'll help, just the same. Just give me time. I'll need more of that than anything else."

"I know," said the Scotsman. "That's what we're afraid of. Because there isn't much time left, any more."

Later, the helicopter engines coughed, and the craft slid back into the air, hovered for a moment, and then headed East, leaving the dying ship in a swirl of dust.

The two men understood each other, at least up to a point. They both wanted the same thing, even though their reasons were a world apart. Consequently, they would help each other.

Only the Scotsman knew that it was the eleventh hour.

## Part I

### PROJECT FRISCO

#### *Chapter One*

THE ALARM went off at ten minutes to midnight. Loud, clattering, urgent, splitting the drowsy silence of the power plant guardroom, it jarred the two corporals into stunned wakefulness.



"What the hell!" They jumped to their feet, jaws slack, as the screaming bell hammered in their ears. In the corner of the small drab room the chopper was spitting patterns of triangular holes into the alarm tape, its own clack-clack-clack lost in the steady, deafening ringing of the alarm bell.

Across the hall the duty sergeant burst out of the john, still stuffing his shirt into his green cotton pants. "Geiger alert!" he yelled at the still-immobilized corporals. "For Christ sake, don't just stand there, call the OD! Switch on the floods and the radar sweep . . ."

The sergeant snapped on the squawk-box to the plant security police barracks and turned up the volume. Behind him the corporals were frantically pulling emergency switches, flooding the whole rain-soaked power plant compound with powerful but invisible infra-red.

"This is Hutch in F-Building," the sergeant growled into the squawk-box. "Geiger alert. Get all your flying squads up. Burp guns, ground trucks and squooshers ready. Got that?"

"What happened? Where?" the voice came back.

"How do I know where? Somewhere in Sector Five . . ." The sergeant checked the alarm tape. "About five miles north of the gate. Sent the ground trucks out on Road 423 and get them out there fast!"

He flicked the selector to the inside guard barracks, all security-cleared troops assigned to patrol the inside of the Wildwood Slow-Neutron Power Plant. "All patrols," the sergeant barked. "Geiger alert outside the compound. Start Plan B as of now . . . stunners and infra-scopes. The floods are on. Freeze the compound and check IDs on everyone inside the fence. Got that? That means yourselves, too."

He let the switch go and turned to the map. The gong had stopped ringing, the chopper had stopped feeding tape. Out in the plant the dull, steady hum of the slow-neutron separation units continued unbroken. The compound outside, cross-flooded by infras, was still black to the sergeant's eyes, but he could make out faint running shapes circling between the wire mesh fences in the slow, drizzling rain.

"On my watch!" he exploded to the corporals standing nerv-

ously by. He went to the wall map and jammed in a red flag at the site of the buried alarm station five miles north of the plant, the place where the alarm had originated. "Eighteen years those Geigers have been sitting out there, and the first time hot stuff goes through them has to be on my watch . . ."

The OD burst into the guardroom, his jacket still unbuttoned, sleep heavy in his eyes. He was carrying a stunner in active position in his hand. "What happened?"

"Geiger alert, sir." The sergeant pointed to the red flag on the map. "Outside the compound. And would you please put that stunner back in the holster, sir?"

The OD stared open-mouthed at the map, then at his hand, then at the sergeant, then at his hand again, and put the stunner back in his holster.

"It's still on active, sir."

The OD swallowed and flicked the safety on. "I don't understand," he said. "What happened?"

"Some hot stuff . . . radioactives . . . went past that alarm unit out on the north road, and the alarm went off."

"*Outside* the compound? But how did it get out there?"

"I don't know, sir. It got out, somehow, only none of the gate units picked it up."

Bewilderment deepened on the OD's face. "You mean somebody stole some U-metal out of this place? But that's ridiculous. Who'd want to do that?"

"I don't know, sir." The sergeant shifted uncomfortably. "We'll probably have an investigation to find out."

The OD cursed and ran through the alarm tape swiftly. "Wait till I get my hands on those goddamn gate guards. Did you order the patrols out?"

"Yes, sir. The minute the alarm came in." Somewhere in the distance he heard the gyros on the ground trucks whining into high gear. "Christ! They didn't even have the gyros running."

"How's that?" the OD asked.

"I said the gyros are running now, sir," the sergeant covered up hastily. It would be somebody's neck if they found

out that the patrol squads had to wait for gyros to get revved up. But what could they expect after eighteen years of nothing happening in a godforsaken boiler factory like this?

"Did you notify the major?"

The sergeant rubbed his chin. "I thought you'd better do that, sir. He's not going to like it, sir."

With a groan the OD spun the telephone dial, listened to it buzz as the clock hand hit midnight. The sergeant was dead right about that one—the major was *not* going to like it.

North of the plant, the leading ground truck churned slowly up the single 18-inch asphalt wheel strip, its headlights picking out the trees and tangled brush edging the road. Rain beat down unmercifully out of the blackness. Somewhere ahead was the automatic alarm station that had sounded the Geiger alert, a buried monitor triggered to pick up any hard radiation that passed within thirty yards of it.

"Light up ahead," the driver said suddenly, slamming the brake. The ground truck skidded to a halt, almost jumping the strip. Stabilizing gyros jerked against the buffer springs to keep the two-wheeled truck from tipping.

"Put the beam on them," the corporal said, cranking his burp gun and letting the safety lid snap open. "It may be what we're after." He stuck his head out of the cab, shouting back at the trucks behind, "*Squooshers . . . Ready!*"

"Hold it," the driver said. "They're signaling back. It's a DIA field unit."

The corporal blinked. "DIA? What in hell are *they* doing out here?" He stuck his head out again. "*Hold it . . . Hold it . . . DIA Unit.*"

As the buzzing of the squooshers subsided, the corporal stumbled out of the truck, shielded himself against the rain, and started ahead toward the light. "What's a DIA unit doing here?" somebody mumbled behind him. "Those guys hit faster than strychnine. It's only been ten minutes since the alarm went off."

"Fifteen," said the corporal, feeling a tightness in his throat as he approached the two men holding hand flashes on

them.

"Army?" a voice asked.

"That's right. 923rd Security Police, Wildwood Power Plant, Corporal Barns." He held his badge forward in the flashlight beam.

"All right, Barns. Put those burp guns back on safety," the voice said. Barns knew better than to argue with DIA men, or even to ask for counter-identification. He didn't want any damned investigation made on him. He didn't want anything to do with the DIA.

From the third truck back a lieutenant came stamping up in the mud. "Barns, why are we stopped? I didn't give any orders to stop here."

"All right, Lieutenant, knock it off," the DIA man said.

"Who in the hell are you?"

"Carmine, DIA." The man pulled a badge out of his civilian raincoat pocket, flashed it briefly.

"Oh," the lieutenant said, much quieter. Barns grinned.

Someone came out of the darkness, a big man in a belted black raincoat and plasticcovered hat. He had enormous shoulders and a heavy, powerful body, yet he had come down the road without a sound, like a tiger coming down to a watering place. "That Security?"

"That's right, Mr. Bahr," Carmine answered. The man called Bahr moved forward between the two DIA men and squinted at the lieutenant.

"You're Axtell, attached to the Wildwood Plant, right?" It was not a question, but a direct statement of fact, as if he were challenging Axtell to dare to be anyone else. "All right, I'm Julian Bahr . . . DIA. We picked up an alarm on our atomic net and got a field unit in here. Was that signal inbound or outbound?"

It caught Axtell unprepared. "I . . . don't know, sir."

"Then we'll assume it was outbound. U-metal theft," Bahr said. "Whoever it was can't have gotten far yet in this brush, and we know he's not on the road. I want you to deploy your men in a large circle around the strike point. Send your trucks out in a pincers and drop a man off every quarter mile

with an eye-beam. Stick to open country, grass and roads, and use the eye-beams for a fence. I don't want anything larger than a chipmunk to get out of the strike area. Now move!"

Lieutenant Axtell saluted, rather uselessly, since Bahr was a civilian and did not return it, then hurried back down the road to the trucks and began shouting. Tires squealed, men pushed and cursed, gyros screamed as the trucks broke away from the road strip and started rolling in both directions out across the soggy, rain-swept fields.

Down the road a siren whined, and the trucks stopped moving. A winking red turret light was dodging swiftly up the road between the half-evacuated trucks. Then the car, a sleek, mud-spattered Volta 400 one-wheeler, ground screaming to a halt a few yards from Bahr and the other DIA men. A short, lean, raincoated officer with major's leaves on his shoulders was the only one in the car. He jumped out into the mud.

"Axtell!" he screamed.

Axtell bellowed from down the road, started running through the mud. The major turned on the DIA men, a flashlight sweeping across their faces, picking up their civilian clothes. "What are you doing here?"

Axtell stumbled to a halt, saluted. "Lieutenant Axtell reporting, sir."

The major swung around to him. "What's the matter with the road? Is there a tree down?"

"No, sir."

"Then why are you pulling the trucks off into the mud? You're not at strike point yet. Have you spotted something out there?"

"Sir . . . these DIA men told me . . ."

The major looked from the lieutenant to the DIA men and back. His face was gray and heavily lined, but his eyes were bright with anger. "DIA? What's the Department of Internal Affairs doing on a military security problem?"

"We picked up the alarm on our atomic net," Bahr said, moving forward. "We've been waiting here for over ten

minutes," he added pointedly. "I directed your man here to circle the strike area and fence it in."

"On whose authority?" Alexander asked.

"Atomic Security Act of 2005," Bahr said. "That was an outgoing signal from your road monitor. That means a theft of U-metal from your plant until proven otherwise."

"You haven't been called in on the problem," the major said.

Bahr snorted. "You were a little too late to call us in. We've already got road blocks mounted. We had a 'copter unit in the air at the time of the alarm. We stationed it immediately." He hunched his shoulders forward, with a glance at Carmine. "You can take it from me that there's no vehicle between here and the road block. Whoever broke U-metal out of that plant has taken to the woods by now."

"Then I'll send a unit in after them," the major snapped.

"In this downpour?" Bahr said. "You're fifteen minutes late for that. The only chance now is a circling move." Bahr started to move off down the road.

"Let's just get something straight here," the major said. "I'm Major Alexander, 923rd Security. These are my troops, my territory, and my problem. I don't want a lot of Washington Intelligence men nosing around this power plant."

Bahr suddenly looked at him very hard. "My name is Bahr," he said. "Assistant Director, DIA." He flashed his badge, then moved forward a step to look at Alexander coldly. "And I'd like to know what sort of a security system you're running that lets hot-stuff get five miles outside your compound before it's picked up by monitors. I'm also curious to know why you're trying so hard to delay an organized search."

Alexander felt a sudden knotting in his stomach. DIA meant investigation, and nowadays investigation could mean a full scale DEPCO psych-probe, months of interrogation, stability downgrading. . . . ruin. And DIA could play the sluggish arrival of his security troops into anything they wanted. . . .

"I'm not trying to delay anything," he insisted. "I am

trying to carry out a security plan. Unless you want to make this a straight DIA project."

"I'm making it a joint maneuver," Bahr said shortly. "My organization and your personnel. I'll have more DIA units here in fifteen minutes. In the meantime I don't want anybody or anything to get out of that strike area."

"All right," Alexander said, "then we'll combine efforts." He turned to Axtell. "Lieutenant, deploy your troops on Mr. Bahr's orders."

Axtell saluted, ran down the road, and began shouting. The squeal of tires and treads began once again.

Bahr turned on his heel and slogged across the road strip into the clearing where his 'copter had landed, Carmine at his side. Angrily, Major Alexander followed through the mud. A man was standing by the 'copter radio. "Have we got anything?" Bahr asked the radioman.

"Unit B just reported in, Mr. Bahr. Seven 'copters."

"Good. Give them the strike point co-ordinates. Tell them to use an expanding square and drop their Geigers through the trees on cables at thirty-yard intervals." He turned to Alexander. "What we need to know now is how much U-metal was stolen. Do you know how much is missing from the plant?"

"No U-metal is missing from the plant," Alexander said tightly. "I checked on the way out. There are exit monitors at all the gates and none of them have recorded radioactives going out."

Bahr stared at him. "Are you trying to tell me that a road alarm goes off five miles from your plant indicating hot-stuff being moved *away* from the pile, and yet nothing has disappeared out of the plant?"

"I don't know *what* tripped the road Geiger," Alexander snapped. "All I know is that nothing could have been smuggled from the plant. Our security system is quite thorough."

"Your security system stinks," said Bahr. "Your guards are probably asleep, or in town drunk. You couldn't even get a truck full of troops up here for fifteen minutes. By God, Carmine, make a note of that. We'll have a look at that

security system before we're through here." He turned back to Alexander. "Do you by any chance keep an inventory of the U-metal at the plant?"

"Certainly," Alexander said, his face very red.

"Well, take another one right now. Shut down the whole lousy boiler factory if you have to, but I want every slug of U-metal and every cubic inch of slush accounted for."

"You're out of your mind," Alexander said. "All of greater St. Louis is using our heat and power. You can't just turn off a power plant the way you cut a station off the air."

"Look, Major," Bahr grated. "*There's been a U-metal theft.* It's slipped past your security system. I want to know how much metal has been taken. Now are you going to order the inventory, or am I?"

"You have no authority inside that compound," Alexander insisted.

Bahr looked at him. Then he turned and walked to the 'copter. He grabbed up the radio mouthpiece. "Get me Unit C," he said.

The radioman spun the dial rapidly. "Listen," Alexander burst out. "I warn you . . ."

"This is Bahr," the big man said into the mouthpiece. "Bahr talking. There is a change of plan for Unit C. I want all personnel to land inside the compound at the Wildwood Plant. I said *inside*. I want a complete inventory on the U-metal in that plant. I want to know how much has been stolen, and I don't care how you find out."

"If your 'copters are fired on, it'll be your own responsibility," Alexander said. "My men have orders . . ."

"They won't be fired on," Bahr cut him off. "Nobody fires on DIA 'copters."

Overhead, six fiery red circles made by jet-tipped 'copter blades were moving across the field toward a patch of woods, buzzing just over the treetops, hanging motionless for a moment as Geigers were dropped through the trees and then reeled up again, then moving on.

Alexander turned to the radioman, bristling with rage. "I want to send a message," he said. "Crash priority."



"Sorry, sir. This unit is busy now."

"This is crash priority," Alexander snapped.

"You heard him," Bahr said without turning. "Use your own radio."

Alexander scuffed back through the mud to his Volta, turned on the sending unit, and contacted the relay back at the plant. "This is Alexander. I want a crash priority through to Washington. Urgent, personal, to John McEwen, Director, DIA. Reference Wildwood Power Plant: Your assistant, Bahr, orders shutdown of entire project for investigation—stop—exceeding authority—stop—request you direct him rescind this order pending further study and evidence—stop. Harvey Alexander, Major, nine-two-three Security. Reply immediately. Out."

He dropped the mike back in the slot and sank back in the Volta. Suddenly he realized that his hands were trembling. Unless he had a quick response from Washington he was in trouble, bad trouble. He groaned inwardly. As if there hadn't been enough trouble in the past six weeks! He knew enough about how the DIA worked . . . why hadn't he just kept his mouth shut, co-operated, and then struck back through the proper channels later? Why couldn't he have had *that* much sense, instead of acting like a bumbling fool?

But still, he was stunned at the ruthless disregard Bahr had shown for military authority. The man was out of line, unless there was far more involved here than he could see.

Alexander gnawed the inside of his mouth, listening to the pelting rain on the plexiglass roof. The ground trucks had moved out in a wide circle now, with the 'copters preceding them overhead. Alexander scowled. What was so imperative about some radioactives passing a Geiger alarm? Bahr had no evidence whatsoever that the hot stuff had come from the plant. And Alexander was virtually certain that it had not.

He knew the security system at the plant because he had personally organized it from top to bottom. After his downgrading from BURINF, when they had ordered him to the military limbo of this antique power pile in the Illinois flat-

lands, Harvey Alexander had realized that his only hope for reinstatement would be a record of exemplary execution of his new job—the security protection of the plant. Within a week he had studied and thrown out the old, ineffective security system and installed the system he had so carefully and painstakingly devised to meet any imaginable emergency situation.

It was as perfect a system as Alexander knew how to devise, and he was singularly expert on the matter of security systems . . . though only God and BRINT knew that, besides himself. And he was sure that no U-metal could have left that plant without his knowing it.

But even if it had, he could see no cause for panic. Who would try to steal U-metal? It was as useless as gold bullion. There were no markets for it. It was worthless outside a power pile. Besides, the Wildwood Plant was one of the oldest piles in existence, built back in the Twentieth Century with all the incredible engineering inefficiencies that the early 1960's had produced. The U-metal slugs it used would only fit that particular pile.

It simply didn't make sense. The complete irrationality of *anybody* stealing U-metal caught in Alexander's orderly mind like a barbed hook. And this DIA investigation . . . he winced.

What could there be about a U-metal theft . . . the most impractical of all crimes . . . that attracted the DIA?

From somewhere to the West, two more squads of 'copters slid into the sky, fanning out in a huge circle radiating from the thick patch of woodland and brush surrounding the area of the strike point.

Somewhere out there, something radioactive had tripped a road monitor and centered an alarm. Whatever it was, it was still out there. But even as he watched, Alexander could see the huge circle growing tighter. Men shouted and trucks moved. 'Copter blades fanned the sky. In the gloom he could see the DIA men moving efficiently and quickly, following the maneuver from the headquarters of Bahr's 'copter.

It was like a huge, well-oiled machine, and he had no part of it. There was nothing for him to do, no orders for him to give, because Bahr had done it all.

The crackle of the radio jerked Alexander to alertness. "Major Alexander. ASPX nine-two-three calling Major Alexander."

He picked up the speaker, held the switch down. "Alexander here."

"Washington refers us to Lowrie Field, Denver, sir. McEwen is on vacation there."

"Then resend the message," Alexander said. "Plain-language heading: 'Personal McEwen', and put it on a Q priority."

"Yes, sir." Over the speaker Alexander could hear the click-click of the cipher-typewriter as the new message was made up. "Hold it a minute, sir . . . the OD wants to talk to you."

The OD's voice rasped in the speaker. "There are six DIA 'copters just landed in the compound, sir. The investigators want to stop production and hold a U-metal inventory right now. What should I do?"

A number of suggestions, all of them obscene, came immediately to Alexander's mind, but he stifled them and thought carefully for a moment. He'd hoped for an answer from McEwen by this time, but now everything was sitting in his lap. He knew the DIA had no authority in the compound without special orders from DEPOP, but that was a legal technicality, not a practical consideration. Obviously Bahr was going to force through an inventory if he had to hold off the compound guards with stunners. And the chance of Alexander's OD putting up any resistance to a determined DIA squad was less than epsilon for any epsilon chosen. Bahr was not going to be stopped.

"Do nothing whatever," he said to the OD. "Don't co-operate, don't interfere. They're exceeding authority."

"Very well, Major." The squawker went dead.

Alexander leaned back, sweat pouring down his sides. Everything now depended on McEwen backing him up, even if it were too late to stop the inventory. It would be Bahr's

neck, not his, as long as McEwen stuck to the letter of the law.

And that, he thought warmly, he could count on. McEwen had been doing that for twelve years.

For all the ominous reputation of investigations, arrests, and interrogations carried on by the Department of Internal Affairs, the dreaded civilian intelligence organization that had grown up in the wake of the corrupted and long-defunct FBI to serve as watchdog for the new Vanner-Elling Stability government, one single fact had always remained paramount: The DIA would never exceed the legal limits of its authority. Even Alexander, after his brief and bitter experience in the Bureau of Information, still believed this record to be accurate, and not simply a matter of silencing all witnesses to exceptional cases.

The DIA had no need to break laws. Their investigations and interrogations were so thorough that they could, on sound legal grounds, pick up a man for a misfiled travel permit, or an unsatisfactory follow-up marital survey, or even for failing to report a prostitute's serial number correctly, and in a few days of questioning get him to confess to every crime and misdemeanor he had ever committed or even imagined he had committed. For the tough cases their legal lobby would squeeze a new law into the books in the middle of an investigation, just to fit the case.

But this time Alexander knew the law. He knew he was right, but he was a little surprised at the rapid pounding of his heart and the sudden trickle of sweat running down his arms. There was something ominous about this sudden appearance of a swarm of DIA 'copters at the site of an isolated Geiger alert.

He looked through the haze of headlights and falling rain at the tall, dark-coated figure standing there, shoulders hunched, hands deep in his raincoat pockets.

Julian Bahr . . .

The name was oddly familiar to Alexander. So was the big, thick-set body, the hunched shoulders, the heavy face,

the bark of the man's voice. He knew Bahr from somewhere, he was sure of that.

Alexander ran backward in his mind through his career in BURINF, the huge, energetic mouthpiece for the Department of Exploitation—super press room, propaganda mill, advertising agency, motivational research center and public relations bureau without peer in the world. Faces, names, ideas . . . private conversations, board meetings, luncheons flooded his memory. He felt a wave of nostalgia begin to rise smotheringly, a pervading sense of desolation at the fall he had taken from there, so abrupt, so unexplainable.

He blocked it. Julian Bahr was not part of BURINF.

Back farther, then. Britain, Turkey, Buenos Aires, Australia . . . a dozen past assignments shuttled through his mind: the solar research project he had been in charge of in Mexico; the huge Yangtze dam at which he had been only a lieutenant, the curious Asian-Western partial truce that had resulted in the U.S. Army building the world's greatest dam across the Yangtze to stop the floods and starvation that were driving China into ruthless expansion in spite of the brilliant economic blockade with which the West had accelerated her inflation, until the vast continent was almost entirely reduced to barter, governmental ferocity notwithstanding.

The Army, the vast administrative tool of the Department of Exploitation, since it no longer had any function as an effective fighting force. Fifteen million men and officers handling the immense problems of supply, law enforcement, transportation, engineering and education in the precise ecological reorientation that the Vanner-Elling system prescribed when it came to power after the Crash in 1995, and which DEPEX operated. That was the old Army of fifteen years ago when a man was given a job to do and the authority to do it, not like the snarled . . . Alexander blocked the engulfing bitterness. Bahr had not been in China . . .

Antarctica . . .

Like a key fitting a lock, something clicked in Alexander's mind, and he realized why he had not been able to place this man.

It was Antarctica. He remembered Julian Bahr.

He jumped as the door of the Volta slid open and Bahr stood there, rain pouring from his hat. "I need your car," he said.

"Is that an order?" Alexander asked.

"Call it whatever you want," Bahr snapped. "A couple of our ground units have been flown in about a mile up the road, and I—"

"*Strike!*" The squawker boomed. "Mr. Bahr . . . there's a strong signal on a Geiger from Unit B 'copter Number Seven. They're holding position. Over."

Bahr picked up the speaker, rotated the broadcast selector to the DIA frequency. "This is Bahr. Number Seven? What have you got there?"

"Can't see it, but there's something down here in the woods," the voice crackled. "Got a hell of a jolt on the Geiger."

"All right, all units," Bahr said. "Circle at a quarter-mile radius from Number Seven. Ground units alert for encirclement. Use caution. Whatever's in that circle, *keep it in there!* But do not attack. Repeat: *do not attack!* Out."

He turned to Alexander as Carmine came stumbling up through the muck and rain and slid into the car without saying a word. "You heard that," Bahr said. "I need this car to join the ground units."

"This is a Volta," Alexander said. "You'll break your neck in it, if you don't know how to drive it."

"Then you drive it," Bahr said. "Now get it moving."

*He knows you,* Alexander thought. *He knows you, and he's playing this little game out, just waiting for you to break.* There was no longer any question in Alexander's mind about his being investigated. But McEwen could get him off the hook. He'd known McEwen back in Mexico, when McEwen was training with BRINT. McEwen would help him . . .

Viciously, Alexander slammed the controls into full drive. The car screamed out of the soft, muddy rut, siren going, and Alexander sent it screeching along the center of the road

strip, wet grass and bushes slapping at the sleek, high-speed plastic shell, headlight on high and red turret-light winking. The Volta could actually do 300 on a good road, but on this winding, gravel-shouldered road strip Alexander held it down to 120. They made a sharp turn, and he slammed the directional gyro at a ninety-degree offset, using the boosters to overcome the inertia of the loaded car. Gravel spat out under the single wheel as the Volta skidded onto the shoulder, gyros whining to keep the car from toppling. He could feel Bahr's huge body stiffen as a tree loomed up at them, then relax as they slammed off it and kept on going after the jolt.

"Hold it," Bahr said as they approached the helicopter cluster. Alexander hit the brake button and the Volta squealed to a halt, rocking. Spotlights were on them for three seconds before the car stopped. Carmine opened the door, and he and Bahr jumped out without a word to Alexander.

The DIA ground troops were already trotting into the drenched brush and forest, their flashlights bobbing, disappearing. They melted into the brush with a certain grim urgency . . . no shouting, no waste motion. Probably veterans of the crack 801st, Alexander thought, the legendary guerilla army that had been fighting the war of containment in the East Indies. Commanded by the British, the 801st had never been manned by anyone but Americans, the toughest, hardest, most incorrigible mercenaries the British could find, executing raids on Indonesia and South China that made Sherman's march look like a reforestation project. British Intelligence used the 801st to forge stubborn links in the Asian economic and political situation, but BRINT's interest in a young army sent back to the Americas each year a steady quota of battle-toughened, BRINT-trained intelligence men in their late twenties.

The DIA had their pick of these men, and to date there was no record of anyone resisting arrest by DIA agents. Which, Alexander thought, was just a little bit ominous.

"Strike!" the squawker boomed again. "Ground Unit Three. There's something up here, Mr. Bahr."

"Hold your position," Bahr's voice grated from one of the 'copters. "What do you see?"

"Nothing clearly. It's hot, though . . ."

"Get some flares in the air. Bring your circle in tighter, but hold fire . . ." Bahr's voice trailed off in a crackle of static. Then another voice came in.

"Mr. Bahr? This is Johnson, at the plant. You were right, sir. Three U-metal slugs are missing from Number Four pile. Dummies loaded instead."

"Good work," Bahr's voice came back. "That about clinches it. We've got them cornered out here. Sit tight."

Stunned, slack-mouthed, Alexander slumped back in his seat, his heart barely beating, cold sweat forming on his palms and forehead. A dead, crushing weight seemed to be locked inside his chest.

*Three slugs missing.*

Even McEwen could not help him now.

His security system, worked out step by step over the months at Wildwood, thought to be absolutely flawless, had let three U-metal slugs, each weighing fifteen pounds and furiously radioactive, get out of the compound. And his career . . . he swallowed, a bitter taste cloying up in his mouth.

A supply dump in Watooki at best. At worst, a full-scale DIA investigation, a court-martial, a DEPCO psych-probe, the final down-grading.

Once Bahr got those three slugs, he was finished.

Somewhere in the sky a flare burst, throwing dead white light down on the treetops. Another flare, and another, appeared below the fiery 'copter rotor jets. Alexander pulled himself out of the car, stumbled up the hill into the woods. He heard radio chatter crackling from a ground unit as he passed:

"Disk . . ."

"What is it? Where?"

". . . looks like some kind of craft. . ."

"Where?"

". . . metal disk, over there to the left. . ."



“. . . been there all the time. . . .”

“Move back, move back . . .”

Beyond the closing circle of men, Alexander could see something. It lay in a clearing in the trees, vaguely defined in the harsh flare light . . . something large and gray and flat.

“Put a camera on it, whatever it is,” somebody was shouting very near him.

“Get us Air, Lowrie Field; we’ll need Air. Ground units hold . . .”

Quite abruptly, the gray thing in the clearing seemed to blossom out like a violent orange flower. The blast wave of the explosion struck Alexander like a wall, hurling him flat, as a flame-colored cloud mushroomed upward, brilliantly lit from below by something burning furiously, briefly, then sputtering out in a wave of intense heat. The ‘copters still in the air closed in like so many vultures to peer down into the smoking crater, and in the silence and darkness there was only the scattered sound of bits of wood, dirt and metal falling down through the trees; then shortly after, the smaller fragments, almost dust, sprinkling slowly down in the rain, silent, invisible, and slightly radioactive.

### *Chapter Two*

NUMBLY, Alexander flexed his fingers a couple of times, feeling his wrist artery hammer revealingly against the pressure cuff that was making his left hand swell and discolor, and driving one of the polygraph pens across the recording sheet in an agitated sinusoid pattern.

“It’s all very simple, Major,” Bahr was saying, walking around in front of him. “All we want from you is the truth. Now, I think that’s a reasonable enough request under the circumstances. Just a few simple facts. You know them. You must know them, because you were the security officer there, and you admit you devised the system. Our investigation is going to turn up those facts eventually. You’ll help yourself if you save us some time.”

"I've told you everything I know," Alexander insisted, his diaphragm collapsing in a long, exasperated sigh.

McEwen, sitting on one side of the room, motioned to Bahr, who glared at Alexander for a moment and then turned away with a growl. From the corner of his eye Alexander watched them whisper. Bahr's huge fist slapped the arm of McEwen's chair angrily; the elderly DIA Director mumbled back something low and inaudible, shaking his head. Alexander couldn't catch the words, but one thing was apparent: Bahr was winning the argument.

John McEwen had arrived. McEwen, the ace-in-the-hole, the white hope, the letter-of-the-law defender of National Stability and the democratic way of life, took one look at the gaping crater five miles north of Wildwood, and ordered a complete news blackout (illegal except under hemispheric Condition B), isolation of the area within a twenty-mile radius (illegal without consent of the Army unit responsible for the land, since it was part of a military reservation, and Alexander had not even been asked for his consent), and scrambling of all communications (legal, but almost without precedent since the bleak days of 1995-96 when the panic wave that followed the Crash was at its bloodiest).

Bahr had outlined the observed facts to McEwen, briefly and authoritatively, and McEwen had accepted the most obvious explanation. The three U-metal slugs missing from the plant had been carried—by person or persons unknown—past the road alarm, and loaded into the vehicle in the woods—whatever that was—which promptly blew up when searchers approached it too closely.

When Alexander had protested and brought up certain annoying details such as the questions of method, motive, and the silent exit monitors at the plant gates, Bahr had countered angrily with charges of obstruction, interference, non-co-operation and concealment. Quickly he tore into the tardy arrival of Alexander's security troops, who were still strung out halfway across Illinois on a long eye-beam perimeter, wondering what had happened.

Finally Alexander had played his trump . . . the blatant

illegality of Bahr's DIA unit forcing an inventory at the plant. McEwen muttered something unintelligible about Project Frisco, and walked back to stare into the crater again. Alexander was packed into a 'copter and flown to Chicago for questioning.

The questioning had started six hours ago.

In spite of the glare of lights in front of him, Alexander could turn his head enough to get a fairly good look at McEwen's face. The DIA Director's skin looked dirty gray, his eyes hollow with deep creases. The corners of his mouth were pulled down, immobile even when he talked. The face was a mask, the face of a man who had been sick for a long time . . . or afraid.

*Do I look like that?* Alexander wondered. He knew the look of a man who was fighting to hold on; he had seen it on his own face often enough these last few months.

He broke off sharply as the real, immediate problem of how to get this investigation over with exploded in his mind. He felt a sudden wrenching in his stomach, and a dizzy, sick feeling of fear. So far neither he nor Bahr had given the slightest indication of their previous acquaintance, imposing their own private rules in this cat-and-mouse game of polygraphy in which Alexander was the carefully-calibrated mouse. But the questioning was getting sharper. Bahr didn't seem to tire; already Alexander could feel fatigue catching up with him.

It was only a matter of time before his ability to pick his way through the razor-edged questions would begin to falter, and confusion and bewilderment would set in . . .

And he knew, as Bahr glared at him and argued with McEwen, that there was more to this than just a routine interrogation.

Bahr was remembering Antarctica.

Vividly the memory flooded back to Alexander now. Bahr had been in the Army then . . . a sergeant in Communications Command, assigned to the tiny post in the early-

warning net that stretched across the frozen Antarctic continent.

How long ago? Four years? Five?

Alexander's mind placed the date instantly: July 12th, 2019, just three days after the first radar alert, when the scopes of Station 1743, buried deep in the Antarctic ice, had picked up three unidentified objects moving over the lower end of South America at an altitude of 800 miles, three times higher than anything had traveled since the satellites had been scuttled and the infamous Moon-rocket project abandoned back in the '90s. The three objects had made four passes around the Earth at precise orbital speed, tracked at the South Pole and across the Pacific, then lost as they moved over the East Indies, China and the Soviet. An immediate report had gone to the special intelligence section of DEPEX, and when the objects did not reappear after the fourth pass across the "dead" area, the entire Western Bloc went into Condition B—preparation for H-missile attack.

Coded intelligence releases from DEPEX inferred that the Eastern Bloc had developed a missile, unknown even to British Intelligence liaison, which could be mounted in orbit. BRINT of course denied that anything approaching that size could have been developed in Eastern territory without their knowing it years ago, and suggested an extraterrestrial source, possibly meteorites—a somewhat unsatisfactory idea, since meteorites do not normally orbit at 800 miles.

Antarctic Station 1743, Alexander's command, was the chief early-warning unit between Southeast Asia and the vital South American population centers. It was expected that the first hostile move from the East would be an armored H-missile plunging into the buried station from a 600-mile altitude. The station had been living on coffee and hyperstimulated fear for forty hours, the air reeking with sweat and adrenalin, the men snarling at each other with increasing tension, when the sergeant had come into Alexander's office.

"I want six hundred sedation units," he said.

"What for, Sergeant?"

"I am going to put half the personnel under sedation for

twelve hours," the sergeant said, "before we have a riot."

"Half the personnell!" Alexander said. "That's impossible. We're on Condition B."

"I know that. I can't be responsible for blunders in Washington," the sergeant said to him. "If we're hit, it won't matter whether we're sleeping in bed or souped up on Benny, but if those men out there stay awake any longer they won't have to be H'd. They'll tear each other apart."

Alexander had known that the tension was growing there, but he was in command of the station, and a Condition B could not be ignored. "Suppose you let me make the decisions about the welfare of the men, Sergeant," he said sharply. "That is not your responsibility."

The sergeant stared at him across the desk, clenching his fists. "You stupid bastard," he said distinctly. "You pig-headed, uncomprehending son of a bitch. If I didn't *make* it my responsibility to run this lousy unit for you, you'd have been cashiered out of the Army in a week for snafuing!" Alexander realized, suddenly, that the huge man was trembling with rage. "Do I get those sedation units, Captain?"

"No!" Alexander managed to choke out. "Get out of here. Get back to your station."

For an instant he thought the man was going to reach out and take him by the throat. Then Sergeant Julian Bahr turned on his heel. The heavy plastic door slammed, and he was gone.

Four hours later, in the mess hall, one of the men began beating on the table with a heavy plastic cup, the long underground chamber echoing the blows. In an instant the walls were reverberating with the thundering clatter that could be heard all through the station. Someone began to scream. In a moment twelve hundred men were screaming, cursing, yelling at each other, the benzedrine-stimulated fear and frustrated helplessness erupting in volcanic pandemonium.

At the decibel peak of this first crescendo Alexander walked into the mess hall, unarmed and alone, aware that he might not live three minutes longer, but realizing that the riot had

to be stopped. What he said to that mob of angry, frightened, cursing men was drowned in noise; quite suddenly he was facing a closing circle of hate-filled faces. With coffee mugs and table knives in their hands they crowded toward him . . .

Something seized him from behind. Someone jerked him out the door, half-carried and half-dragged him down the corridor, up a flight of stairs and down another corridor to the weapons room. Groggily he saw Bahr kick the door open with a wrench of cracking plastic. Then with a heave Bahr threw him through the inner door that led to the weapons rack.

"The key, give me the key," Bahr demanded. Heavy-duty stunners lined the racks, carefully secured by a steel bar and padlock.

"You don't touch those weapons," Alexander warned.

Bahr jerked him around viciously, turned his pockets inside out, dumping the contents on the floor. "*Where do you have that key?*"

"You're not going to touch those weapons," Alexander told him bluntly. "I'm still in charge of this station." Bahr didn't even answer. He slammed the inner door shut and bolted it as the sounds of the pursuing mob grew loud in the corridor. As the first pounding of cups, feet, fists and shoulders began on the plastic door, Bahr crouched in front of the weapons rack, his hands gripping the six-foot-long steel lock bar. He began wrenching at the bar, his huge back and legs straining.

Alexander pulled a thin metal cylinder out of his pocket, ostensibly a pencil, but actually a low-power stunner which all foreign-service officers carried. "Get away from that rack," he said. "Those men will take my orders or face mutiny charges. I'm not going to have anybody doing any killing and paralyzing with stunners."

Bahr only grunted as the steel rod began to bend a little.

"I warn you . . . I'll fire," Alexander said. Bahr turned his head, saw the shiny cylinder and recognized what it was. Behind him the plastic door shuddered under the crash of a heavy bench slamming into it.

"Drop dead," Bahr said, and began pulling on the rod again.

Alexander fired. Bahr screamed and hit the floor like a block of wood, smashing his face on the floor until the blood ran from his nose. The stunner should have knocked him unconscious and paralyzed his whole body in a rigid knot, but it didn't. Somehow, unbelievably, he pushed himself off the floor, grabbed the back of a chair and hoisted himself erect, his right arm, neck and side frozen in the position he was hit, his right leg jerking in agonizing, uncontrollable spasms. Alexander started to aim the cylinder again, and Bahr swung the chair, hitting him across the face and knocking him back against the wall. The cylinder flew out of his hand across the room.

Dazed, Alexander saw the big man drag himself across the room, using the chair as a crutch, his right leg and arm flapping, his face half-twisted out of recognition with pain. Alexander watched incredulously as Bahr seized the padlock in his left hand and slowly twisted the lock apart, the hard steel snapping with a sudden crack. Bahr tore the lock-bar off and pulled a sleek heavy-duty stunner from the rack as the plastic door cracked under the savage pounding, spilling a dozen men into the room.

What happened after that Alexander learned later in bits and snatches while he was recovering in Buenos Aires Military Hospital from a fractured skull and a broken nose. He had passed out. Bahr, armed only with an unloaded stunner, drove the rioters back into the mess hall and, though obviously half-paralyzed, marched six hundred of them through twelve-hour sedation shots, ordering the four frightened lieutenants around like puppy dogs. With half the station sedated, he sat at the head of the mess hall, stunner across his knee, making the men recite dirty stories for eight hours until his leg stopped jerking and his right side would function again.

Condition B was called off long before Alexander came out of his coma. No H-missile attack had occurred, the unidentified objects never reappeared in the sky, and gradually

the radar incident was forgotten. Alexander received a letter of recommendation and a boost to major from the Communications Command for his excellent handling of the riot—non-violence, judicious use of sedatives, and so forth. The station personnel were docked two months' pay, and Julian Bahr was court-martialed out of the Army for striking an officer.

The court-martial was already over when Alexander regained consciousness. He pieced the story together later, when he got his promotion and new assignment to BURINF in New York. Bahr had refused counsel during the proceedings. He made no attempt to deny or refute the charges made by one of the lieutenants (who was soon promoted to captain for his excellent assistance to the investigating body), but sat silent throughout the trial, glaring at the Board of Officers with such open hatred and contempt that only consideration of the extreme circumstances saved him from Leavenworth.

Once out of the hospital Alexander had tried to reopen the case, but there was little official interest. Nothing Alexander could do, they had informed him, could influence the observed facts recorded on Bahr's permanent Stability Record: that the man was contemptuous of authority and prone to violence, a dangerously unstable personality, and hence a serious Stability risk. Under the basic principles of the Vanner-Elling governmental system, this meant that Bahr would never be allowed to climb above a green-card position in any career he might choose, and that was that. Alexander never knew if Bahr had been informed of this, or whether he even cared.

And now, across the room from him, behind the glaring lights, was the same Julian Bahr, unquestionably a top lieutenant in DIA, the most powerful and mysterious of all governmental agencies, and Alexander wondered, wearily, who had slipped up, and where . . .

"Now," Bahr said, stepping around in front of him. "This



nonsense has gone on long enough. We've given you every chance to help us."

"I've told you everything I know," Alexander protested. His heart began pounding suddenly as he saw one of Bahr's men move a small sterile tray within his range of vision. The tray held two syringes and an alcohol sponge.

"You're lying," Bahr said. "We know that. We've considered the possibility that you may not be lying deliberately."

"I'm not lying," said Alexander.

"You're afraid, aren't you?"

"I'm not afraid."

"But what are you afraid of? What are you hiding?" Bahr paused. "All right, start the recorder."

Alexander had been straining forward against the restraining jacket; now he slumped back suddenly as the recorder began to hum.

"Your first name is Harvey?"

"Yes."

"You hold the rank of major in . . ."

"Army. Security Command."

"Duty station Wildwood Power Project?"

"Yes."

"How long have you held that post?"

"Six months."

The routine questions, the endlessly routine questions, step by step, wearing him down. Alexander felt the fatigue and boredom slowing his pulse, blunting his responses.

"What security system was in force when you took command at Wildwood?"

"Standard Army, Class six."

"Was that system still in effect last night?"

"No."

"Why not?"

Alexander felt a sudden respiratory spasm. His pulse started to pound. "Because I ordered it changed."

Bahr circled in front of him, confident of the shock he had registered. "What plan did you substitute?"

"A modified Bronstock plan."

"You devised it?"

"Yes."

"Without authorization?"

"I had the authority to do it," Alexander said.

"Why did you change the security system?"

"I felt the old system was not good enough," said Alexander. "Class six is next to no security at all."

"And your plan was better, I suppose?"

"Yes."

Bahr leaned down to him savagely. "But it didn't work," he said.

Alexander did not answer.

"Why did you change the security system?"

"I told you—"

"Was it blackmail?" Bahr snapped. "Or were you bribed? Did you try to stall us at the plant to hide your own tracks, or was the stall a part of the plan?"

"You're out of your mind," Alexander said.

"Didn't you tell me last night that no U-metal was missing?"

"Yes."

"Was the U-metal missing?"

"Yes."

"Didn't you try to prevent the investigating team from examining the plant?"

"Yes."

"Did you tamper with the exit monitors?"

"No."

"And the monitors would record any radioactive material passing out the gates?"

"Yes."

"Do you know how the U-metal left the plant?"

"No."

"Do you know the loopholes in your new security system?"

"There aren't any loopholes."

"You mean it's absolutely flawless?"

"To the best of my knowledge."

"But the U-metal was stolen."

"Yes."

"Doesn't that prove that your security system had loopholes?"

Alexander groped for a way out of the trap. His eyes were burning from the glare of the lamps; his mind wasn't functioning properly. The gap between questions and answers widened as he fought to shore up his sluggish control.

"Well?" Bahr said.

"There were no loopholes."

Bahr jerked a chair around in front of him, sat down very close, leaning his arms on the back of it as he faced Alexander. "What was your post before Wildwood, Major?"

"Bureau of Information, New York."

"Your position there?"

"I was Director."

"You didn't like the work?"

"I liked it."

"Then why aren't you still there?"

Alexander's hands clenched the chair arms. "It's on the record, you can look it up."

"I don't have time to look it up. Why were you downgraded?"

*Not downgraded, Alexander's mind screamed. Re-evaluated. Reassigned. Too much pressure, they had said. Too much aggression breaking through. BURINF can't risk any instability in its personnel, Major. You can understand that. The nation depends on BURINF for stability.*

"There was a routine stability check," he said hoarsely. "I was re-evaluated, and reassigned."

A cold smile crossed Bahr's face. "Your position in BURINF was an important one, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"It gave you considerable national prominence, considerable power?"

"Yes."

"And then they dumped you in a sludge-pot like Wildwood."

"They couldn't do anything else," Alexander protested. "I

was getting shaky. The psych-men had no choice but to re-assign me."

"You mean you *approved* the reassignment?" Bahr said incredulously.

"No. I mean, I didn't like it, but . . ."

"Who bribed you, Major? What was the loophole in your security system at Wildwood?"

"There wasn't any loophole."

Bahr threw up his hands. "We're getting nowhere. You admit your security system broke down. There must have been loopholes. You won't tell us what they were. We'll just have to stimulate your memory." He pulled the syringe tray toward him.

"You can't use that," Alexander protested. "I have not been charged with any major crime or espionage. I have no legal counsel here. And only qualified therapists in DEPCO can use drugs, after a case has been properly reviewed."

"He's right," McEwen said wearily from the side of the room. "He's on sound legal ground."

Bahr turned to the older man. "This is an emergency, and you know it. The man is obviously lying."

"We can't help that."

"Mac, Project Frisco itself may hang on the information he has. This is the first real break we've had . . ."

"The law is the law, Julian," McEwen said, "Project Frisco or no Project Frisco. You can't deep-probe this man."

Alexander felt like yelling with relief. Bahr's eyes glittered, and for a moment his heavy, impassive face started to twist with rage. Then he shrugged.

"Okay," he said. "You're the boss. We'll just hold him, and try to clear it through Washington. We'd better check the teletype and see if anything new has turned up."

Together Bahr and McEwen started for the door. Bahr looked back, nodded to his assistants. "See that the major is taken care of," he said.

When Bahr was gone they took off the pressure bandages, the per-plates and salivators, the respirator and the restraining jacket. A man began winding up the long spool of poly-

graph tape. For Alexander the relief was almost shock-like; some inner tension that had been holding him together began to give way, and he sagged weakly when he tried to stand up. One of Bahr's serious-faced young men wheeled in a mobile stretcher and they lifted him onto it gently, in spite of his protests that he would be all right in a moment.

"Cigarette, Major?"

He nodded, inhaled gratefully. Like many people of ability and imagination who had battled feelings of guilt and insecurity all their lives, and had gained enough insight to recognize them for what they were, Harvey Alexander feared more than anything else the psychologically abhorrent process of having his brain picked by strangers. Now, having escaped it, he was almost dizzy with elation and departing fear, hardly noticing the skillful hands that were attending him, until he felt an itching in his nose, and went to scratch it.

His wrists were bound.

He strained and thrashed, and found his ankles strapped too. A huge light was being lowered from the ceiling. Above him, like serious, pale, eager-faced gargoyles, were Bahr's young men.

He shook his head desperately, pleadingly as the amphetamine and curare needles were flashed before his eyes, and he was suddenly violently sick, bound and helpless.

There was a sudden sharp pain in his thigh, and hopelessly, he screamed.

### *Chapter Three*

IT WAS A BREAK; to Julian Bahr there was no question of that, it was the break he had been waiting for since the very beginning of it eleven months before, and now, at last when there was something for him to grab hold of, John McEwen had decided to put on the brakes. It was at that moment that Julian Bahr made the decision he had known all along was coming: John McEwen was through.

"I don't like it," McEwen was saying now, deliberately

avoiding Bahr's eyes as the big man paced the DIA teletype room. "I don't like any part of it. I've been liking it less and less, and this thing puts the lid on it. Julian, I've given you a free hand; I've backed you right from the start of this thing, but I can't do it any more. We're out of our depth. We're dealing with something we can't handle by ourselves . . ." His voice quavered and he spread his hands helplessly.

Bahr smashed his fist into the palm of his hand, trying to choke down the anger and impatience. He liked McEwen. In the early days of his DIA work he had liked him thoroughly, and felt a powerful obligation to this fatherly, impeccably honest older man who had salvaged him from the drunken, thwarted existence he had sunk into after his court-martial from the Army.

But McEwen had changed. Since the beginning of Project Frisco, Bahr had watched him crumbling, bit by bit, until it seemed incredible that this sick-looking creature could be the same man that he had known before.

Bahr remembered the morning five years before when Libby had come to get him at his dingy third-story flat over the New Jersey waterfront. She had taken in the stacks of filthy dishes in the sink and the half-empty whiskey bottles on the floor at a glance, and with one disgusted shake of her head, started packing a bag for him. She got him sober with coffee and thiamin, and made him shower and shave. "Quickly," she had urged. "We're driving to Washington."

Then she told him why.

"McEwen!" He sat bolt upright on the bed, staring at her. He had heard about the DIA . . . plenty and enough to make him stiffen with alarm. "What does he want with me?"

"He has a spot open. You've been recommended. An old friend of yours said you could fill it."

"I don't have any old friends."

"You'd be surprised. And even if you didn't, you've got a new one, whether you like it or not." She had stared at him, pleading. "Julian, won't you trust me this much? What are

you going to do, just rot here? You've got to give this a chance."

He had driven the girl's sleek imported Sonata onto the Washington Speedway, pushing it up to 300 and flashing past the trucks and casual traffic. Libby had been tense at first; finally she relaxed and leaned her head against his shoulder. An hour later they rolled into McEwen's parking channel. The very distinguished-looking DIA Director was there to greet them; and then, inside, grinning at the surprised and baffled look on his face, he saw Frank Carmine. . . .

There were others there, half a dozen of his closest friends from Fort Riley, veterans of the 801st and now high up in DIA. With McEwen, Bahr was stiff and reserved; then Libby got the director out of the room for a moment and he and Carmine began to pummel each other. The rest of the 801st boys joined in, and they were laughing and singing and more than a little drunk by the time Libby's high heels came click-clicking down the hall at them.

Later, they had talked, and Bahr liked the way McEwen looked at him when he talked, and said what he meant without a lot of double-edged words. Gradually Bahr's violent bitterness toward everything disciplined and governmental began to soften, and he would talk. "I've got a green card," he said. "They gave me that after the court-martial. They told me I was dangerously unstable, and you know what that means these days when it comes to finding work."

"I know," McEwen had said. "Do *you* think that you're unstable?"

"I'm like a rock," Bahr said flatly.

"All right, then I don't think we need to worry about your official Stability Rating too much. With a little pressure on DEPCO from this end, we can swing it. Anyway, you've got an inside track with your therapist." He smiled at Libby.

"I can handle the details at DEPCO," she had said. "If you'll co-operate a little."

"Hell, I'll co-operate," Bahr said.

They had shaken hands on it, and when he had Libby a safe distance away in the parking lot, Bahr had grabbed her

and hugged her until she gasped. They drove back to New Jersey slowly, and he felt that the past was falling sharply away, the future bright before him.

After that, his rise in DIA had been no accident. With his bottomless energy, his genius for organizing, and his ability to command the fierce loyalty of the men around him, Bahr had forged the DIA into a rock of efficiency such as McEwen had only dreamed of. When Project Frisco arose, McEwen had dropped it in Bahr's lap.

Something out of the ordinary had been going on. There was nothing tangible: a dozen tiny little incidents that nobody could explain, completely unrelated to each other, except that they did not fit any reasonable pattern of normal occurrence.

They had been nebulous things, at first: the theft of a commercial codebook reported from a San Francisco office; scattered unexplained radar pickups fanning across the mid-west over six months time, without identification of target; the hijacking of a thermite truck on the New York-Chicago Expressway, followed a week later by six simultaneous thermite fires in a pattern over a hundred mile area, photographed by chance by a passing jet liner; the disappearance, under questionable circumstances, of several dozen men in key scientific and government posts . . .

No pattern, no relevance to the occurrences, but something was going on. The presence of *any* imponderable in the delicate social and economic machinery of the country under the Vanner-Elling eco-government was not tolerable. The balance of power between the Federation Americas in the West and the Sino-Soviet bloc in the East was far too treacherous to permit unexplained incidents to remain long unexplained. That balance had teetered once, in 1965, and the world still bore the scars of that brief, bitter war. After the violent economic crash that had engulfed the world in 1995, a different sort of balance had been forged, but still the balance was there.

It was clear that whatever was behind the occurrences had to be discovered. Project Frisco, under Julian Bahr's



diligent direction, had thrown the entire striking power of the DIA into a swift, silent search for a pattern behind the occurrences. And Project Frisco, until now, had failed.

For eleven months they had run up against a blank wall. A thousand leads traced down, led nowhere. A thousand blind alleys were carefully explored. No clue to the enemy's intentions, nor even to the enemy's identity. Only the constantly growing conviction that somewhere in the pattern, there *was* an enemy . . .

And now, Wildwood. For the first time, a chink in the armor, a possible break . . .

And John McEwen was afraid to go on.

"Listen to me, Mac," Bahr said. "This is the time to move in, not the time to sit on the fence and worry. We've got something here at last that we can get our hands on. This major . . ."

Weakly, McEwen shook his head. "The DIA has its limits, Julian. An atomic theft . . . this is out of our hands."

Bahr's face hardened for just a moment. Then he swung a chair over toward the director, smiling and calm, and looked into the older man's tired face. "Mac, let's get this thing straightened out right now. I don't think you've thought this Wildwood incident out yet." He sensed the reaction from Carmine and the others, felt their eyes on his back. "The thing that happened last night at Wildwood changes the whole nature of Project Frisco. We can't back out now even if we wanted to. We've got to hang on if it kills us."

McEwen shook his head again. "I . . . I don't see . . ."

"Mac, whoever stole that U-metal made a mistake last night. A very bad mistake."

"Mistake?" said McEwen.

"There was nothing wrong with those exit monitors. They were working fine. You couldn't get a radium-painted watch dial past them without tripping the alarm, and they were permanently sealed so they couldn't have been disconnected."

McEwen looked up. "Then you think Alexander was telling the truth?"

"Not necessarily," Bahr insisted. "But some things have

checked out, and there is one simple fact that we just can't ignore. Whoever took that U-metal out of the plant had it so effectively shielded that it didn't trigger the exit monitors."

McEwen blinked. "Julian, that doesn't make sense. The very minimum shielding for that stuff would be a foot-thick slab of lead. *Nobody* could have carried that out past the guards. They won't even let you carry out a mechanical pencil."

"But a man could get a property pass," Bahr said softly.

"For a truck-load of U-metal and shielding?"

"Oh, no. But maybe for a briefcase."

"You're not making sense," McEwen said. "Those slugs . . ."

Bahr slammed his fist down on the desk. "Mac, *it happened!* Can't you begin to see this now? *It happened!* Of course it doesn't make sense; there's no earthly way anyone could cram those slugs and shielding into a small package and waltz out the gate with them, but that is exactly the thing that happened; it *must* have happened." His eyes were bright on the director's face. "All right, we have to work with it, find out *how* it could have happened. Nothing yet in Project Frisco has made any sense, but now a pattern is beginning to take shape. Suppose a special shield was used . . . a very special shield, say, maybe just a monomolecular layer of neutrons packed in tight like the tiles in a mosaic . . . an invisible skin built into the wall of a briefcase, completely impermeable to any radiation . . ."

"There isn't any such shield," McEwen said flatly. "If the Eastern Bloc were within five years of something like that BRINT would have told us long ago. And nobody in this country is working in nuclear physics. They don't even dare talk about things like that any more for fear DEPCO will be down their throats."

"What you are saying," Bahr said quietly, "is that there is nothing known to Earth science that could be used as a shield like that."

"Of course not. Nobody—" McEwen broke off, staring at him. Across the room the teletype had stopped, leaving a sudden void of silence in the room. Early morning traffic

sounds came up from the street, muffled, a world away. "What do you mean?" McEwen said hoarsely after a long moment. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that we've been trying so hard to pin all these occurrences down to the Eastern Bloc that we've ignored what was staring us in the face," Bahr said. "Nothing has fit together in any way we could see, but these things have been purposeful, just the same. Those thermite fires: all six burned in front of searchlight reflectors and beamed *straight up*. The high-frequency signals we've been trying to pin down—not messages, not traffic or Morse characters, just *signals*."

Bahr stood up, his huge body filling the room. "What have we been looking for, Mac? A Chinese guerilla unit? A Russki intelligence team? Maybe even a BRINT unit checking our reaction speed? We've been looking for something we could recognize and classify, something we *know*. And we haven't found it. But nothing that we know could have gotten those slugs out of the Wildwood Plant."

For a long moment there was silence. McEwen's face was grey. "Julian, if there were a remote possibility . . ."

"I saw that explosion last night, Mac. I saw the thing before it exploded. And I know the panic it would start off if even a hint of it ever got out. That's why we have to sit on this so tight that nobody even hears about the Wildwood raid until we know for sure what we're dealing with. That U-metal would be worthless to any human agent, but to an Alien intelligence team, it might be a different story. We can't guess what they might have wanted it for. Their idea of intelligence might be as different from ours as . . . as DIA from BRINT."

Slowly, almost feebly, McEwen fumbled in his pocket, pulled out a white box and took out a capsule. Bahr filled a paper cup at the cooler as McEwen, with hands visibly shaking, stuck the capsule in his mouth. He swallowed it after a couple of tries, and coughed weakly. "What do you think we should do, Julian?"

"First, sew up last night's incident tight. That means

blackout of all news stories, and indoctrination of the cities and towns where the power failed. Make up a cover story to give them, and make it good. BURINF can take care of that . . . .”

With an obvious effort of will John McEwen straightened up. “If there’s a leak . . . if even a hint gets into circulation . . . it could be worse than the crash.”

“There won’t be a leak,” Bahr said confidently. He turned to Carmine. “We’ll keep everything to do with this incident and any new ones under top security. . . . But most important of all, don’t use the word *aliens* in any communications. Don’t hint at it, don’t joke about it, don’t say it, or write it, or think it. Because if there *are* aliens . . . .”

Carmine nodded and left the room, pad and pencil in hand. McEwen watched him go, and then looked at Julian Bahr, shaking his head with the slow, baffled uncertainty of an ineffectual parent.

With all the speed, force and precision of a guillotine blade, the blackout fell on the incident of the Wildwood Power Plant raid.

The coverup was fast, and skillful. Frank Carmine talked to BURINF, at Bahr’s orders and over McEwen’s signature and political support, and the greatest communications network in the world jerked as if it had been hit by a whip.

From somewhere in BURINF emerged a newscast story of a power-line failure between Wildwood and St. Louis, causing a power blackout the previous night. It was a clear, simple, convincing story, broadcast over a tightly controlled net to reach only St. Louis and its suburban centers, and it reassured everyone and explained everything, even though it was a complete and deliberate lie.

North of Wildwood, *Road Washed Out* signs went up on all wheel-strips leading within twenty miles of the crater, with DIA field units spread out in a wide perimeter around the site of the blast. ‘Copter units maintained air coverage to keep unwanted small craft out of the area. Major Harvey Alexander’s absence was covered, and the cordon of young,

serious-faced DIA men circulating in the plant area proper was convincingly explained as a team of auditors evaluating the plant operations to prevent another breakdown.

In the great Vanner-Elling calculators in Verdon Caverns, the key words "Wildwood," "atomic," "explosion," "demolition," "DIA," "alien," "mystery," and scores of other journalistic leak-words were unobtrusively loaded into the electronic sensors that tested every story, column, ad and byline for any contextual association with the Wildwood raid, with results screening continuously into the huge BURINF clearing house.

Likewise, an integrated check-system monitored the TV-casts, and thousands of concealed microphones in playgrounds, washrooms, cafeterias, bars and other strategic places—long the standard emotion-samplers and information-gatherers of the government Stability program—went on active to test the rate of occurrence of any of the key words.

And all this was done so swiftly, so silently, that even the TV stations, press rooms, and standard information services did not suspect that a continental alert was on.

Which was why, when the leak came, it was so unexpected.

Station WDQM-TV in Jefferson City, Illinois, reported on a newsbreak flash that a local hunter in the bush had been awakened during the night by an explosion in the region of the Wildwood Power Plant. A forest ranger had also seen the blast, and noticed the concentration of helicopters in the area.

Bahr only caught the last few lines before the commercial, after a frantic signal came through from the local telecast monitor, but that was enough. Cursing, he ordered the story squelched, and the phone line to WDQM began buzzing. In New York an ace copywriter had a recording of the broadcast and Bahr's personal instructions ringing in his ears began to create, out of nothing, a cover-lie. DIA ground cars intercepted the station's TV field unit en route to the scene, and took the driver and technicians into custody for interrogation and indoctrination.

But the move was not fast enough. Even while the cover-story was being written, Station BCQN in Canada, on a network that was not under DIA censorship, called WDQM for details. Someone at the station blundered and said the story had been killed. Fifteen minutes later, in a scheduled newscast, the Canadian station opened the dike.

"A mysterious explosion last night in the vicinity of the Wildwood, Illinois, Atomic Power Project, has become the subject of a furious DIA censorship move," the announcer said. "Earlier this evening Station WDQM-TV reported two eye-witness accounts of the strange blast, which occurred shortly after midnight, but further details have been totally suppressed. In spite of the censorship move, however, an amateur radio group TBX-57HC3 picked up some police-frequency radio chatter last night, tentatively identified as originating in the blast area. TBX has been able to provide us with a tape recording of this chatter, which we have edited somewhat in preparation for this rebroadcast."

Bahr was on the phone personally before the first sentence of the newscast was finished. He listened as the call went through to make sure it was going to be as bad as it sounded. Finally he was connected with the manager of the BCQN station.

"This is Julian Bahr, Assistant Director DIA, speaking for the director," he said. "We've just caught the beginning of your broadcast, and you seem to have some misinformation about the situation here at Wildwood."

"Really?" the manager's voice said languidly.

"We'll be glad to give you a complete picture of the situation in another half hour, but we'd like to request that you . . . er . . . hold off on that broadcast," Bahr said. "It might cause some . . . er . . . confusion to have different interpretations of the event in circulation."

"Yes, I should think it would," the manager said.

"Then you'll cancel the broadcast?"

"Oh, I'm really afraid that would be out of the question, Mr. Bahr." The voice was infinitely regretful, but quite firm.

Bahr caught the remark from the radio about the tape

recording, and realized instantly that TBX was a cover code for one of the Canadian intercepts for BRINT. He covered the mouthpiece with his hand.

"BRINT picked up our 'copter chatter last night," he said, looking at McEwen's white face.

"They've got to kill it," McEwen said hoarsely.

Bahr uncovered the mouthpiece. "We would appreciate it very much if you could hold that broadcast, somehow," he said, throwing up the lure. There was no time to lose.

"Er . . . do you think we could get a reporting team into the area?" That meant, of course, a BRINT intelligence team.

"I doubt it," Bahr countered, curious to see just how eager BRINT was. "We'll give you a complete report."

"I'm not sure that would be completely satisfactory."

They *were* eager. Very eager.

"Well, but the Wildwood plant is a highly classified government project," Bahr said, "and our security people are naturally leery about commercial news agencies which aren't subject to our security regulations nosing around . . . not that *I* doubt your discretion. . . ."

"Of course, I understand the problem you have with security," the manager said, warming to the bargain. In the background Bahr could hear the first fragments of 'copter-chatter coming through—his own voice, directing the Unit Seven 'copters toward the strike area. "Still, we *do* have an obligation to our public to verify newscasts as thoroughly as we can." Meaning that BRINT knew something was in the wind but hadn't pinned it down yet. Bahr cupped his hand over the mouthpiece and turned to McEwen and Carmine.

"BRINT wants in. Badly. They must have flushed Project Frisco and—"

He never finished the sentence. Quite suddenly McEwen clutched at his chest and moaned, his eyes bulging. His breath went ragged, his face turning blue.

"*The chief!*"

McEwen coughed, a strangled sound. Then his arms dropped and his body slumped back, his eyes staring blankly at the ceiling.

"*Get a doctor!*" Bahr roared, slamming the phone down, the Canadian broadcast forgotten. "For Christ sake get a doctor!" He lifted McEwen onto the desk, stripped off his own jacket and put it over the director's chest, felt quickly for a pulse.

A doctor arrived in a few minutes, but it was too late. McEwen was dead, diagnosis coronary occlusion precipitated by overwork and sudden shock.

As the white-coated ambulance attendant carried the stretcher out, Frank Carmine put a hand on Bahr's shoulder. "Well, Julian," he said, "it looks like it's up to you, now."

### *Chapter Four*

LIBBY ALLISON, make-up pencil in hand, was trying ineffectually to smooth her dark red hair and paint her mouth back into shape as the small private elevator shot up from the lobby of the New York DEPEX building to DIA headquarters on the eightieth floor.

Julian was up there, she was certain of that, even though his office front-runner had denied it when she tried to contact him earlier. She should have known there was trouble in the wind when Julian didn't call her when he got back into town last night. She had tried to call him after midnight, and had gotten Frank Carmine instead, pleasantly apologetic but pleasantly firm. No, nothing wrong, just a dozen top-level conferences since he'd gotten back to New York. He'd be in touch with her, she shouldn't worry . . .

But, of course, he hadn't. Instead, there was a visit from Adams that morning in her office at DEPCO. Little, weasel-faced Adams, with his warm professional smile and his cold eyes watching her. Libby shuddered. Everything in her years of psychologist's training screamed out whenever Adams came near her, and she had wished for the thousandth time that somehow somebody in the whole great, sprawling social-and-psychological Stability Control organization that was DEPCO would break down just once and say exactly what



he was thinking in plain unadorned English instead of skirting and backing and filling and muddying up the already muddy waters with psychiatric jargon and fuzzy, suspicious, defensive little ideas.

Not that Adams had mentioned Julian, of course. Not a word about Julian. No request to review her case-work on him, no suggestion that a machine-analysis of her reports on him might be in order . . . nothing as straightforward as that from the DEPCO Director. Instead, a lot of smooth, innocent DEPCO jargon about the threat that an aggressive, unstable, ambitious personality in a position of responsibility presented to the smooth functioning of a Truly Stable Society (she could quote Vanner and Larchmont page and verse); some "thoughts" on her sworn duties as a Department of Control psychotherapist to help identify and weed out such unstable personalities before they could constitute a threat; some very vague and veiled and thoroughly nasty remarks to the effect that fornication and psychotherapy were not precisely synonymous and that the former could not really serve as an adequate substitute for the latter, no matter what the non-professional relationship of the therapist and the patient.

Adams hadn't said a single word about Julian, but it was there; he had been talking about Julian every inch of the way, and he knew it, and she knew it, and he knew that she knew it.

She hadn't slapped his face, but she had wanted to, and he knew that, too. There was no voiced threat when he had left her, only the least tangible of implications, and yet Libby knew beyond any shadow of doubt that something had happened last night, something bad, and that Adams knew about it, and hence DEPCO, and that neither Adams nor DEPCO liked it.

The elevator stopped, and Libby stepped across to the DIA reception desk. "I have an appointment to see Mr. Bahr," she told the girl.

"Do you have a pass?"

"I have an appointment."

"I'm sorry, Miss. Mr. Bahr has canceled all appointments. You'd need a special authorization."

So there *was* something in the wind . . . all that commotion on the Foreign and Eastern news nets about an explosion at Wildwood. "Let me speak to him, then." She picked up the desk phone, started to dial Julian's extension.

"I'm sorry, Miss." The receptionist gave Libby an innocent stare. "Mr. Bahr gave orders not to be interrupted."

Libby reached into her handbag and set her white DEPCO card on the desk under the girl's nose. "If I have to get a force-order to talk to him," she said icily, "Mr. Bahr is going to be very unhappy about it." She was surprised, and then irritated that Bahr had forgotten their appointment. No, not forgotten . . . his memory was very good. He had ignored it. A moment later the receptionist answered the switchboard, flushed, and nodded to Libby.

"Hello, Julian? Libby." He answered something, quite abrupt. "But I can't," she protested. "Not over the phone. And it's too hot down there anyway." She pulled the receiver away from her ear and glanced angrily at the ceiling as the invective grated over the wire, quite audible ten feet away. "All right," she said finally. "I know you don't give a damn. On the other hand, I do. We don't just skip appointments . . ." She put in the knife. "It looks very bad on a Stability Report, you know . . ."

A moment later she put the phone down and snapped her handbag shut with finality. She smiled warmly at the receptionist. "He'll see me," she said.

The long, high-ceilinged DIA headquarters was the center of a storm of subdued but feverish activity. There were half a hundred men there as Libby passed through, and a haze of cigarette smoke rose in the room, sucked upward by the ventilators. Telephones buzzed sharply; at some of the desks men were handling two and three calls at a time, speaking in rapid, hushed voices. For all the activity there was an unnatural hush over the place; a bank of teletypes clattered

along one wall, and a dozen unit-dispatchers were speaking into sound-dampened microphones.

Everywhere was a flurry of clerks, division heads, scribes, all so feverishly intent on what they were doing that they nearly tripped over her as she came down the corridor.

Across the dispatching room she could see a huge wall map, with red flags mounted for each DIA field unit alerted—the focal point for all the activity—and Libby felt a sudden sick, uneasy feeling in the pit of her stomach. There was an air of tension here, a sense of suppressed urgency that suddenly recalled to her the confused, puzzling nature of the morning TV-cast she had seen. A powder keg smoldering, with the DIA working full strength to keep it under control, working so silently and smoothly that no one else sensed it, while the whole country coasted along in its usual indifferent, video-hypnotized, confident, imperturbably stable way.

She had a mental picture, suddenly, of a calm ripple-free ocean surface, with monsters locked in some sort of leviathan death struggle just beneath the surface.

The door to McEwen's office was wide open. Julian Bahr sat at the director's desk, the cone of a dictating machine in one hand. Frank Carmine was nearby. A dozen other people were there, shoving reports under Bahr's nose, leaning over to exchange a word or phrase, nodding sharply and hurrying off. He saw her, and said something almost audible and unpleasant to Carmine, and went back to his dictating. His voice cut sharply across the murmur in the room, incisive, impatient, commanding.

She did not see McEwen, and the sick feeling grew stronger. Here was the center of the sense of urgency and tension that pervaded the place. Bahr's face was tense and angry, his eyes bloodshot, his mouth a hard, confident line as he dictated. With her trained psychologist's eye Libby could see the danger signals like foot-tall handwriting on the wall. The controls, the adjustments she had tried so hard to build into his personality were beginning to snap, one by one.

"Julian, I want to talk to you."

He slammed the microphone down and pulled her to the

side of the room. "Damn it, Libby, I can't see you now. Go on down below and I'll be down when I can break away."

"We have an appointment now."

"Yes, I know. In an hour."

"You're lying. You're stalling me, and you know it."

His scowl deepened. "So I'm lying. I told you I'm busy."

"I know you're busy. So am I. That's why I've got to talk to you today. Now."

"Look," he said, "I've got a Condition C problem to handle, and a new job to get under control. I don't have time for your . . . interview."

The deliberate vulgar connotation on the last word made her face flush red, but she refused to be driven off with insults. "All right," she said, "then I'll drop your case right now. I'll have another worker assigned to you tomorrow, if you like. A man, in case you don't want any more . . . interviews . . . with women."

Bahr stared at her, his face heavy with anger. She knew she had struck his Achilles' heel—his savage, almost pathological fear of the DEPCO mind invaders, the one beast in his Twenty-First Century jungle he did not know how to cope with. He glared at her, his hand still clutching her arm. Then he nodded to the anteroom that still had his name on the door, and pushed her roughly inside. He kicked the door shut and turned on her. "All right, what do you want?"

"Julian, what's going on here? Where's Mac?"

Bahr told her. It was like a slap in the face. "We're keeping it out of the newscasts until we have things under better control. Of course we notified the key government people."

"But . . . *dead*." She shook her head helplessly. Now there was no doubt why Adams had come to her office.

"He's had a bad heart for a long time," Bahr said.

"Particularly since you've been bucking him," Libby said bitterly.

"Look, Lib, you know I'd have gone down on the floor for Mac. When he heard that Project Frisco had been compromised, it was more than he could take."

"And you're the director now," Libby said.

"For the time being, yes. I can't let this Project Frisco sag while DEPCO bickers about a new appointment."

"Oh, it won't sag! Not with Julian Bahr running things." She turned on him viciously. "You should have seen yourself out there! The Commanding General, whipping his whole Army into trembling readiness. They're like a pack of bloodhounds baying for the hunt. You love it, don't you? Blood pressure up, adrenals pumping, ego swelling up like a big purple balloon. . . ."

"That's about enough from you," Bahr said.

"No, it's not quite enough, Julian. Adams was in to see me this morning. You're going to have to resign as director."

"Resign!" The anger fell away from Bahr's face, leaving incredulity in its place. "But I've been working for five years for this job."

"I know that. I've been watching you, and I knew all along it was coming to this. You can't keep the job. DEPCO won't let you."

"They've got to let me," Bahr said flatly. "Nobody else knows what Project Frisco is . . . not even BRINT. They're going out of their minds over there; they don't even know the cover-name for the Project. But since Wildwood, Project Frisco is a Condition C operation. We aren't dealing with Eastern Bloc activity, Lib. It's more than that."

Then he told her about the U-metal, and the exit monitors, and the whole story.

"You mean you think something . . . extraterrestrial . . . was responsible for the raid?"

"For everything. God knows how long it's been going on. The thermite fires, the disappearances . . . Did you know that James Cullen vanished from his home last night? There's no man in the country who knows more about our Stability Control system, and now all of a sudden he's gone. Libby, somebody's got to track this thing down and find out what's happening while there's still time. Nobody else could do it, but I can push it through. I'll do it if I have to run my men into their graves." He stopped suddenly. "You think I'm lying, don't you?"

"No, Julian, I think you're telling the absolute truth."

"You don't think I can do it, do you?"

Libby did not answer.

"And you don't want me to try," Bahr said bitterly. "You'd rather have me stick my neck in the yoke like a work horse and just pull, let somebody crack a whip over me . . . pull like all the other workhorses all day long, and at night trot home to my own little pasture and play stud to you. You'd like that, wouldn't you? Well, I don't like taking orders from people who aren't as good as me. I've taken too damned many orders, and now I'm going to *give* some . . ."

"Julian, you just won't understand." She turned away, but he jerked her around. The enthusiasm was gone from his face now, and there was anger in its place.

"You'd like to stop me, wouldn't you?" he said. "Push me back in the rut. Punch some new holes in my Stability Card and dump me back at the bottom of the heap again. That's what you want, isn't it?"

"It isn't what I want or don't want," Libby said wearily. "If you won't step down now, I can't protect you any more. You'll have a DEPCO man in your office before you can turn around. You'll never know what hit you. They'll find that you're unstable and dangerous for anything but a green-card job. They'll get one look at your Stability profile and downgrade you right into Critical Ward. Then they'll give you recoop and shock-analysis, and if there's anything left you'll spend the rest of your life picking oranges somewhere. That's not what *I* want, Julian. That's the law."

He looked at her and suddenly laughed. "I don't believe you," he said. "You've been handing me this Stability garbage for five years now. Acting like I'd committed some crime that you were covering up for me. Always trying to make me stop pushing. Why, every time I took a step up the ladder you'd nearly have a fit. As if I couldn't handle the job."

"It's not that," she said. "It's what you might *do* in the job. And I've been covering for you, believe me, but I can't

do it any longer. If you don't quit this job right now, I can't help you any more."

He walked around the room, slamming his fist into his palm. "Okay," he said unexpectedly. "I'll quit, then. But not now. Not today. Project Frisco is urgent, and there's nobody else to take over. I'll need time to get it straightened out."

"How much time? Two days? Three?"

"God, no! I couldn't get anything done that soon."

She shook her head. "No good, Julian. I've got to have a definite date. You're up for an automatic DEPCO check right now. You can't get away from it . . . the best I can do is stall them. And if you won't give me a definite date, I'll call them right now."

"For Christ sake, what do you want me to do?" Bahr burst out. Then he stopped, searched her face. "Libby . . ."

"I mean it, Julian."

"You're bluffing," he said. "You won't call them."

"I took an oath when I joined DEPCO. I can't leave you in this job."

"Oath, garbage! You haven't lived up to that thing since the day you signed it. If I get my Stability clearance revoked, it's your neck, too. There goes your career. Think about that."

"I already have." Libby turned and picked the phone off the desk that used to be his desk, and dialed the DEPCO exchange.

Bahr watched her make the connection all the way through to Adams' office. Then he hit her with it.

"You'd better think about Timmy before you make that call," he said.

Very slowly, Libby put the phone back on the hook, turned to face him. All the fight was gone from her suddenly. She felt weak, and sick. "You couldn't be that rotten," she said. "Not even you."

"I want this job." He wouldn't look at her face.

"Julian, you promised."

"Sure, I promised. Things are different now, that's all. I'm not going to do any parting favors for somebody who's going to sell me down the river."

"Julian, he's your child, too. I'm entitled to one child, with my job rating. I'll raise him and support him. I won't tie you down or ask for partial support. All I want is your signature and a BHE test. Is that asking a favor?"

"You can stand a five-point cut in your Stability rating," Bahr said. "I can't. I can't even stand a DEPCO review. Particularly when my therapist has been . . ."

"I can claim it was part of the therapy," she pleaded. "I'm willing to take the blame."

"They'll put you under polygraph."

"I have contacts. Some of my father's friends . . ."

"Then get me a white card!" Bahr said.

"I can't do that. Julian . . . he's your son. I don't want to lose him. Do you want him to go through the same thing you did: the Playhome, and Playschool, and Techschool and everything? You don't know what those schools are like now. They didn't experiment with the children when you went. . . ."

"Those are DEPCO projects," Bahr said. "That's your outfit running them. Don't you like them?"

"There's a lot about DEPCO I don't like, but that's neither here nor there. . . ."

"Then get them changed!"

"They're all right, most of the time. Most of the kids come through all right, as long as they're not too stubborn or independent. But what if he's like you, Julian? What if he fights back?"

"Then good for him. I took it, he can."

Libby pushed away from him, looked at him coldly. "I could name you anyway, and have you dumped as a Stability risk for refusing to accept paternity."

"And I can get eight men to swear you picked them up and took them to bed without a prostitute's license. Eight men who can keep up the story under polygraph."

"Julian," she said, "what makes you such a rotten bastard?"



"You're the psych doc. You ought to know." He looked at her, and suddenly, inexplicably, she was in his arms, and he was crushing her against him, his face in her hair, his hands digging desperately into her shoulders. "Oh, God, Libby, I don't want to fight you. I didn't mean it about Tim. I swear I'll quit this job just as soon as I can get things under control, but it means too much to me right now. It just means too damned much. You've got to go along on my terms for now . . ."

"I know." She tried to keep the tears back, clinging to him. "But believe me, I'm going to watch you, and if you start to go off the deep end, I'll turn your case over to DEPCO lock, stock and barrel."

Bahr laughed, the old confidence returning, and he tipped her chin up gently, kissed her. "That's fair enough. You watch me."

On the desk behind them the intercom crackled. "Julian? Frank. We've got a BRINT man on the wire here."

"What does he want?" Bahr snapped. "I can't talk to him."

"I think you'd better," Carmine's voice said. "There's been a landing up in Canada. BRINT won't let us into the area unless you head the team yourself. They want to know right now."

"Christ!" Bahr said. He pushed Libby away. "Look, Frank, tell them yes. I'll be in the air in three minutes." He snapped the speaker switch to off.

"Julian . . ."

"Not now, not now. This is important." He paused at the door, looked back at her. "You stall that DEPCO team," he said. "I don't care how you do it, but stall them. This may be the break we've been waiting for."

Then he was gone. She walked around the room, trying to smooth her dress, straighten her hair, fix her make-up, cursing him for the things he could do to her, and herself because she couldn't fight him. Two people. A man who could not possibly understand, or give a damn, and a woman who could not help loving him.

She found the elevator and started down for street level.

## *Part II*

### *THE MAN IN THE MIDDLE*

#### *Chapter Five*

HARVEY ALEXANDER accepted the proffered capsule without a word and popped it into his mouth while the nurse and attendant watched. He took a mouthful of water, tossed his head back and swallowed, coughed a couple of times, and took another swallow of water to stop the coughing.

The nurse nodded. "That should hold him for another eight hours," she said.

"He'll be on the list for recoop in the morning," the attendant said. "Doc says around nine."

Alexander leaned weakly back against the pillow. His eyes were already beginning to blink. He groaned, rolled his head for a moment, and lay still, his breathing returning to the slow steady respiratory rate of the drugged.

As the nurse and attendant left, he opened his eyes and turned his head sharply, listening to hear if the door locked from the outside. The solenoid lock did not buzz, and he leaned back with a sigh. Very sloppy, but then they probably counted on the sleeper to keep him immobilized until dawn. He opened his mouth and lifted the not-yet-dissolved capsule from under his tongue and stuffed it under the pillow.

They would not be back. He had eight hours.

During all the dizzy, kaleidoscopic period while he had been recovering from the deep-probe, a single idea had been evolving in his mind—escape. His treatment at the hands of Bahr and his men convinced him that he could not expect their investigation to clear him, even if McEwen would back him to the hilt. The chance of even the legal process of a court-martial seemed remote. He would be recoopied, and treated with chemo-shock, and wind up in a fruit-picking

battalion with a new name, a new identity, and a blacked-out memory.

He looked out the window of his room. The hospital was surrounded by a ten-foot brick wall, with guards at the gates. He had only a limited view of the building itself. He was undoubtedly in a maximum-security wing that could be reached only by elevator, or by passing guards. It was, surprisingly, a suburban hospital. From the rows of dingy apartment flats spreading out beyond the wall, he guessed it was probably twenty miles or so out of Chicago.

He thought over the hospitals he knew of in the Chicago suburbs. Only two had psychotic-security facilities: the George Kelley and the Sister Andrea Farri. The Kelley seemed more likely, especially since the DIA was involved. And if he were in the Kelley . . .

Five years before, three max-security patients had escaped from the Kelley. They were of course picked up again inside of two hours, but the incident had shaken the administration, and the entire security system had been revamped to make a similar occurrence impossible.

But Alexander, when he was assigned to the Wildwood Plant, had spent several weeks studying all the major security systems of note in the world: prisons, psychotic wards, A-plants, computing centers, the Kingsley mines, the Chinese and Soviet political camps. He had also spent three months in the Army hospital in Buenos Aires after the Antarctic incident, where as an esteemed guest he had had the run of the place, and had learned a certain amount about hospital customs and routines.

During his Mexican tour he had worked with a special Army Central Intelligence team that was trying to break up the Qualchi ring of smugglers who were constantly moving Chinese guerillas, weapons, and supplies into the southwestern United States. After six weeks of intensive coaching, and with a cyanide capsule adequately concealed, he was methodically beaten up, flogged, and dumped in a filthy Mexican bastille where three known Qualchi agents had been incarcerated, after much careful maneuvering, for

slugging and robbing a couple of American *touristas* (actually CI agents) who were slumming in Mexicali.

The whole affair had been so neatly staged that even the Mexican police did not know they had Qualchi agents in their jail; the three agents were completely duped, especially since they were not interrogated, and cursed their ill luck rather than Army CI.

Alexander was turned over to Mexican authorities when he tried to accuse the Army of sweating him over to make him confess to being a Qualchi agent, instead of merely a petty thief who was broke and hiding out in Mexico. His charges were of course denounced as preposterous by the same Army CI Major who had supervised his mauling. The Mexican police, while they believed his story, were still quite willing to lock him up anyway, because the Army was good for their whorehouses.

He was soon on confidential terms with the three Qualchi agents, who turned out to be part of an isolated cell and had no real information. They did, however, have certain contacts in Nuevo Laredo, so Alexander, unable to notify the CI people, planned and executed a breakout from the bastille that he had thought beyond his capabilities, taking the three Qualchi men with him, and heading south.

For the next four months Alexander was on the CI report as a deserter and bug-out (an agent who went over to the enemy camp); they posted substantial rewards for him or his cyanided body. He turned up one day in Des Moines, Iowa, and furnished an order of battle for the entire Texas-New Mexico-Oklahoma-Kansas Qualchi net, having worked himself up to the rank of Supervisor of Local Theft and staging six still-unsolved supply raids on warehouses in the area for the benefit of guerilla troops.

With twelve other Qualchi agents he was arrested, interrogated for two days without breaking (before witnesses who were returned to the Qualchi six months later on a prisoner exchange) and then, like three other top Qualchi agents, one of whom turned out to be a BRINT man, he simply vanished. In the ensuing roundup, carried out

strategically over a nine-month period, 120 Qualchi agents were captured and interrogated, the un-co-operative ones being turned over to BRINT for unrestricted examination, and over 600 Chinese troops from the tough Mukden school were trapped and committed suicide. The operation was considered to be a major coup, even by BRINT. Consequently, as is customary in intelligence work, all the credit was given to a few CI and DIA figureheads who were military-looking, telegenic, and willing to accept the risk of assassination that accompanied such notoriety. Alexander, like the other CI main links, had his face altered slightly by surgery and was given a new assignment halfway around the world, with his Army records adjusted to cover the five month lapse.

The only records of the affair were in the central CI files where his name had been replaced by a meaningless cover number. There was no decoration, commendation, record of service, or even mention of his CI experience after that. Most of the CI people who had worked most closely with him did not know his real identity, and the trail of Agent C451933 ended as abruptly as if he had never existed, as was customary in intelligence work.

But Alexander had never forgotten the experience, particularly the breakout from the bastille, which he had considered a maneuver with overtones of brilliance. As a result of his intimate acquaintance with intelligence operations, he always, in any new assignment, imagined himself in the role of an intelligence agent and/or prisoner, and studied the existing security system for loopholes.

This was not merely a hobby or diversion; he had no way of knowing when the dead trail of Agent C451933 might be reopened by a chance recognition, or when he might have to worry about getting people into places or getting himself out.

The fact that he was confined in an American hospital in the outskirts of Chicago, rather than in a Chinese or satellite compound, was slightly irrelevant under the circumstances. There was no question in his mind that his neck at the

present moment depended upon his finding out what had actually happened at the Wildwood Plant, and he was satisfied that Bahr's DIA henchmen were at least as dangerous an enemy, to him personally, as a dozen Qualchi knife-men.

But the Kelley Hospital was a break. He had studied the Kelley system—modeled on the Bronstock system used in the Eastern European “rehabilitation” centers—when he had developed the Wildwood plan. He had found no noticeable weakness in the Kelley system at that time, but then he had been on the outside, not inside.

And that, he decided, made a very great deal of difference.

Moving out of his bed, he put his ear to the door. There was no sound in the corridor. He opened the door a crack, ear pressed against the aluminum sill, listening for the tell-tale vibrations of the alarm gongs used in the Kelley. There was nothing. No ringing, no pounding of feet. Somewhere below, he knew, a master-panel lit up any time a patient's door was opened, but it was nearly dinner time and most of the personnel would be occupied. A blue light might go unnoticed for a while. Even the hall TV scanners were dim, though he knew the slightest alarm would throw the hallways and rooms under surveillance in ten seconds flat.

Out in the hall he padded across to the men's lavatory and ducked inside. There were commodes, a urinal, and sinks. He collected all the toilet paper rolls and hand towels he could find and crossed swiftly back into his room again.

It took only moments to crumple the paper and towels, wrap them in a sheet from the bed, and stuff them under the sponge-plastic mattress. There was a bed-light on the wall; he pulled out the plug, ripped the lamp off the wire, and bent the naked copper ends into a neat pair of lobster claws.

Finally, he dropped the three metal toilet-paper rollers into a pillow case stripped from the bed. Pulling all his clothes off, he plugged the lamp cord back in the wall socket and touched the lobster-claws together near the nest of torn paper. There was a shower of sparks, and the fuse

blew, but he blew gently into the paper nest and was rewarded by a tiny flame.

The power came back immediately on an emergency circuit. He heard a buzzer down the corridor summon the maintenance men. The smoke was already beginning to pour from the heated sponge mattress, stinking and acrid. Choking, Alexander threw the door into the hall open and peered out as smoke began to billow out.

As he had expected, there was a turnoff at the end of the corridor, with a civilian guard just settling back to his magazine after the buzz for the blown fuse. Alexander waited until the smoke in the corridor grew thick enough to haze out the nearest TV scanner. Then he screamed, "Fire!" and began running toward the guard, with the pillow-case blackjack held out of sight.

The guard jerked up in surprise, staring incredulously at the man running at him stark naked down the corridor. Instead of blasting at him with the stunner he was wearing, the guard stood open-mouthed, as Alexander had anticipated, expecting that the last thing a naked man fleeing a fire would do would be to slug him. On the dead run, Alexander swung the pillow case, and the three metal rollers slammed into the guard's head.

As soon as the guard hit the floor Alexander unzipped the front of his light blue duty coveralls. Then he hoisted the limp form to his shoulder and hurried back to the room. Smoke was billowing out the door, and in the distance he heard the fire gong clanging. He held the coveralls and let the guard slide out of them like an egg yolk. Once into the coveralls, he shoved the guard's body into the smoke-filled room.

At the end of the corridor there was a sudden burst of noise . . . undoubtedly the fire squad. Alexander took a deep breath and plunged into the smoke. He seized the guard's ankle and began to back out slowly, coughing noticeably as the first of the emergency crew arrived.

Eager hands assisted him to get the guard, face down, out of the room. Someone started artificial respiration, and Alex-

ander coughed into his hands and backed away as more people and equipment began to arrive. An extinguisher began to spray the smoldering mattress, which threw up great clouds of acrid black smoke. In twenty seconds Alexander was walking slowly away, past several interns who were hurrying toward the noise, and into the main-wing corridor of the George Kelley Hospital.

With the first step behind him, Alexander moved swiftly toward the service elevator which had brought up the fire-fighting equipment. It was only a matter of time before somebody noticed that the victim in the smoke-filled room was a guard and not a patient; he had to get beyond the hospital walls before the security alarm went off.

He had long since discarded the idea of posing as a dischargee, impossible because discharge hours were over for the day; or as a guard or even a doctor, impossible because the fingerprint-check would stop him cold at the gate. He knew the hospital used plastic sheets and gowns which were sterilized and remolded after use, so no laundry trucks ever left the compound. Food cartons and supplies came in from outside on standard conveyor strips, X-ray checked as they entered. Garbage and trash were similarly conveyed out in sealed drums.

But in Buenos Aires, Alexander had noticed a curiosity in that hospital's security procedure which he thought should be present in the Kelley's system as well.

He found the morgue in the basement, adjacent to a loading platform in the rear of the main part of the building. He reached it through an employee's stairwell and a concrete tunnel leading past the power pile.

Chicago, like all major cities, had a central autopsy room; and the Kelley, like other hospitals in the city, shipped all its cadavers there on a day-to-day basis. The transit was usually made at night to avoid traffic on Wahanakee Drive. Now Alexander saw that the truck was still waiting, backed up to the loading platform while the drivers were in the cafeteria for coffee. There were four wheeled stretchers,



with sheets covering the bodies, loaded into the back of the refrigerated truck.

Alexander scrambled up the tailgate, peering into the truck. Back of the stretchers the undomed gyro was spinning, an almost inaudible high-pitched hum coming from the flywheel. Back of the gyro unit was a two-foot work space with a spare wheel and half a dozen plastic sheets.

He heard the drivers returning, and crouched down behind the gyro, half-covering himself with a sheet. Heavy footsteps came to the back of the truck; then the tailgate squeaked up. The doors closed with a clang, and he was locked in with four bodies in a black and freezing coffin.

The blackness took him by surprise; he hadn't counted on it, and for a moment he fought down a rising wave of panic. In spite of the sheets he began shivering with cold. He heard the driver rev up the motor, and the truck gave a lurch and began moving.

There were three stops, the last one accompanied by the noise of the exit-gate swinging open. Then they were rolling . . . outside.

He waited until his teeth were chattering with cold, and he was certain the truck was on open Throughway. Then he groped forward in the darkness until his hand touched the gyro mount. The gyro was one of the air-driven Robling types, very simple, very reliable, the flywheel driven by a tiny stream of air impinging on the peripheral turbine blades. Once it was in motion, very little energy was needed to keep the heavy rotor turning at a high enough speed to stabilize the truck. The flywheel and turbine blades were shielded, but directly under the pressure nozzle there was a slot to let the air out. The air stream produced the hum, and Alexander felt around the rim of the turbine casing until he felt the cool steady jet.

He moved his fingertip up gingerly until he felt the turbine blades nick the tip of his fingernail like a buzz saw. Then he pulled one of the toilet paper rollers out of his pocket.

Wrapping his hand carefully in one of the plastic sheets, he

rammed the metal roller up against the spinning turbine.

There was a shower of hot sparks, and the turbine screamed and shuddered. The metal rod began to heat up as the turbine blades ground down the soft metal. Suddenly the whole truck bucked and lurched, throwing him down onto the stretchers; the flywheel dropped below critical stability RPM, and the truck tipped and fell over on one side with a long skidding crash, wrenching the doors open and dumping three corpses out on top of him on the ground.

There were curses from the cab, and the drivers piled out. "Musta been the gyro. What in hell went wrong with it?"

"Oh, my God. Look at the stiffes all over the place."

"Never mind the stiffes, what happened to the gyro? Where's the flashlight?" Together the drivers shoved the corpses and Alexander unceremoniously out of the way and crawled into the truck with the flash. Neither one noticed that one of the corpses had coveralls on.

There were headlights coming down the road, and Alexander slid hastily into the shadow of the truck as the car roared by. Then he crouched low and ran over to the shoulder of the road. He slithered down into a drainage ditch as two more cars approached, slowed, and stopped.

He knew he was on Wahanakee Drive, but he didn't know where. There were apartment buildings nearby, and now people were running down the road toward the wrecked truck. In the distance he heard the first faint rising whine of a siren.

Alexander hurried down the drainage ditch, then climbed up and crossed the highway as the steady trickle of people grew into a crowd and jammed the traffic, their voices rising on the excitement. He walked slowly away, fighting the urge to run, staying out of the way of people who kept hurrying down to the road, expecting at any moment that the drivers would discover what had happened to their gyro and begin to wonder how four naked corpses had managed to wreck it so completely.

He was out.

He found an apartment building with the door wide open, the tenants out on the highway sharing in the excitement. He picked up the lobby phone, dialed a suburban Chicago number. Three long rings, and then a woman's voice said, "Hello?"

"BJ?"

"Yes. Who is this?"

"This is Harvey."

There was a moment's silence, then a cool, deliberate answer. "Oh . . ."

"Listen to me, BJ," he said urgently. "This is very important. I'm over on Wahanakee Drive, at the Kingston Apartments. Can you pick me up at the parking lot by the north entrance?"

"Can't you take a cab over?" The voice was distant, non-committal.

"No," he said, "I can't. I'm in trouble."

"I'll be right over." There was a click, and Alexander put the phone back on the hook. He wiped his prints off it and then walked out of the back exit into the parking lot. He could hear more sirens on the highway, and a police 'copter roared overhead, sliding down toward the wrecked truck. It was only a matter of time, now, he realized, whether BJ got to him before the police did.

Harvey Alexander knew Chicago, at least suburban Chicago, fairly well, having spent three of his Christmas vacations here during his West Point days, courting his now ex-wife, Betty Jean Wright. From her apartment to this part of Wahanakee Drive was about twenty minutes, he estimated, if the driver was in a hurry. He hoped the police would start searching the buildings before throwing up road blocks. That might give him time enough.

If they blocked the roads it would be bad, but it seemed more likely that the people at Kelley would make a thorough search inside the hospital before assuming that he had gotten through their foolproof security system.

He smiled wryly to himself. Amazing how natural it was

for a man who developed a security system to assume it was foolproof.

Still, the Kelley would certainly notify the police and the DIA about him as soon as they heard of the wrecked truck. And he didn't want to get BJ in trouble with the police and DIA, smashed-up marriage or no.

He remembered another parking lot behind the old Oak Park Country Club. Back in '94, he had been a third-year man at the Point, captain of the chess and judo teams, and he had very matter-of-factly started to change a flat tire on her father's new Electro two-wheeler which they had borrowed for the dance. He hadn't understood the techniques for capsizing the car by cranking the gyro around, and had tried to topple it with a borrowed jack. After much muttered profanity and sweat he wound up with one end of the car high in the air and began straining to make it fall over on one side so he could get at the wheel. BJ doubled over and screamed with laughter, and the Competition, a physicist from Chicago U., offered carefully baited suggestions in his sarcastic midwestern drawl.

He didn't remember the exact move and countermove, but somehow BJ had talked the Competition into changing the tire, with accompanying lecture on the scientific method and the principles of gyro mechanics, while they quietly climbed into the Competition's British four-wheeler and drove off. They ran the car out of gas somewhere along Lake Michigan at four AM, and hitched a ride back on a milk truck, coming up the front walk toward the anxious parents and sulking Competition at six-thirty, and squelching all criticism and admonitions by announcing their engagement.

He graduated from the Point the next year, three months early because of the crash, and he and BJ got married the next day in the barbed-wire-enclosed Church of the Redeemer in New York against the advice of parents, relatives, and their own common sense.

The crash . . . dirty, stinking, bloody crash . . . that knocked the whole world face first into the dirt, knocked their marriage around, too. He saw BJ twice in the first three

years. The second time, when he had the two weeks leave they had planned on for ten months, he was ordered back on active duty the second day and sent to China because of the sudden Yangtze truce. BJ blew up then and told him she was sick of it. He blamed her parents, and told her she was selfish and childish and a lot of other stupid, angry things, and left.

When he came back from China two and a half years later, she told him she was divorcing him. The Competition, quickly switching his field of work from physics to sociology, along with the more agile of the intelligensia of the country, had fallen into a cushy, high-stability-rating job in DEPCO, the new Department of Economic and Psychological Control that had taken over the shattered government while he was in China. The Competition had been most attentive, and convincing. BJ married him as soon as the divorce papers came through.

When Alexander saw her some eight years later, on his way through Chicago to Mexico, he learned that the second marriage had folded too. Of course any marriage lasting over five years in those days was a minor miracle, but BJ was bitter and disappointed about it. They got drunk together for old time's sake, but she was all walled off by then, and there was nothing between them any more.

Now he shivered in the cold night air, and wished he had stolen the guard's underclothes as well as his coveralls. At least six sirens had come screaming up Wahanakee Drive before he heard the crunch of gravel at the parking lot entrance. He ducked down low behind a jack-balanced Hydro 22. The car, a Volta sports model, kept inching along on its single wheel, headlight on dim. He saw BJ had left the top down and the dashboard lights on so he would recognize her. Over on the highway he could see the search parties beginning to fan out through the grass and weeds along the drainage ditch, flashlights winking.

He waited until the Volta was almost past him, then tossed a handful of gravel against the plastic side.

"Harvey?" The Volta stopped.

"Right here." He glanced carefully around, and climbed in the car, rocking it slightly on its single wheel.

"What's this about your being in trouble?"

"I'll tell you later. Do you know how to get out of here without running into any police roadblocks?"

"Are all those cars after you?"

"I don't know. I think so. See, they're searching the ditches."

"There was a truck on its side down there," BJ said. "They didn't stop me, but I had to go very slowly, and I think the officer routing traffic was looking into the cars as they went by."

"Well," Alexander said, "maybe I'd better get out and take my chances. You could get into a lot of trouble if you were caught with me."

"Don't be silly." She looked at him in the ill-fitting coveralls and laughed. "What's it all about? What have you done?"

"I just broke out of the George Kelley Hospital, for one thing."

BJ stopped laughing. "Out of the *Kelley*? But that's . . ." She looked again at the blue coveralls with K stamped into the plastic. "Okay," she said, and headed the car out of the parking lot. "Hold on."

Alexander sat silently, watching her drive as she rolled through the Kingston development, drove across the sidewalk, wove through a Playschool playground and finally onto a golf course. It was one of the new ones with plastic grass that would not wear out or divot, with plastic weeds and trees, the whole thing a curious but ineffective camouflage for the huge meat-processing plant buried beneath it. When they came off the golf course, she turned south onto an old-fashioned road, obviously built in the days of four-wheeled cars, and stepped the Volta up to about ninety. A moment or two later they merged into traffic on one of the new speedways, where the Volta could cruise along at 200 with the rest of the traffic.

"This way will take a little longer," she said, "but they'd have to get out a state-wide alarm to cut us off now." She

set the car on automatic, letting the photosight follow the white lane strip, and turned to face him.

"Now what's all this about? What did they have you in the Kelley for?"

"Recoop," Alexander said.

"You? For recon? My God, Harvey."

He told her about the Geiger alert at Wildwood, and how the suddenly-appearing DIA unit suspected him of being involved in the theft, and put him under polygraph. She let him talk until the whole story was out. All the bitterness burst out suddenly, and he talked for quite a while before he had boiled off enough rage to stop talking.

"Then you think there's something rotten in the DIA?"

"Well, what does it sound like to you?" Alexander said. "Bahr has some of the men so loyal to him that they take orders from him regardless of McEwen or the law." He chewed his lip, thinking. "I've got to contact McEwen, some way, and let him know. Maybe he won't listen to me, but Julian Bahr is dangerous. McEwen ought to know it."

"You're a little late for that," BJ said flatly. "McEwen died early this morning. Of a heart attack."

Alexander swallowed hard. "Then Bahr is running the DIA?"

"Pending appointment of a new director, yes."

He swore. "Then my only chance to avoid recon, or being shot for implication in the Wildwood theft, is to find out what actually happened to the U-metal that was taken out of the piles."

BJ frowned. "But they know what happened. DIA denies it, of course, but the European and African news nets have been jabbering about it all day. Radio Budapest has been beaming it over here in English. . . ."

"Beaming *what* over in English?"

BJ reached out and switched on the radio. She flicked the dial through squalling and static and picked up the nasal voice of the intercontinental Radio Budapest announcer.

". . . still have not retracted the belligerent and idiotic denial of the theft of a large quantity of atomic materials

from the atomic power plant at Wildwood, Illinois, by alleged interplanetary aliens," the voice was saying, "in spite of the now familiar Canadian interception of the messages sent between the different DIA units that were attacking the saucer at the time the aliens allegedly blew themselves up in a semi-atomic explosion. Radio International has been trying to reach Julian Bahr, new head of the DIA secret police, to find out why the facts about the aliens are not being brought into the open, but Director Bahr cannot be reached.

"Reliable sources in New York now believe that another alien landing has occurred in northern British Columbia near the Yukon border. BRINT and DIA investigating units are now en route to the site of the landing. We will continue to broadcast the true facts on this latest incident, in spite of the militaristic security procedures resorted to by the DIA secret police . . ."

BJ turned it off, and looked at Alexander. He shook his head, staring dazedly at the radio. "I saw that thing in the woods before it blew up," he said finally. "I thought I was sick, seeing things . . . but aliens . . ." He shook his head again. "BJ, I've just been through eighteen hours of interrogation on how the U-metal got out of the plant, and I tell you it *couldn't have*. Even aliens couldn't have gotten U-metal out of that plant unless they used the fourth dimension to do it, and then they certainly wouldn't have set off a Geiger on the road."

"They think they know how it was done," BJ said, and told him what Radio Budapest had reported about a neutronic shield.

"But why? And how is Radio Budapest getting all this information if the security lid is on? There must be a hell of a leak somewhere in the DIA."

"I don't know, but BURINF is nearly going wild. Even John John got flustered on his TV-cast tonight. And an awful lot of people are listening to the Radio Budapest reports. . . ."

The car whizzed through the thinning residential areas. Alexander sat silent for a long time. "I still say that U-metal



couldn't have gotten out," he said at last. "There were people at the plant that hated my guts for changing the security system around and making them do some honest work for a change. I wouldn't put it past one of them to do something deliberately just to get my neck under the axe. I can't tell about this alien thing, but I know there were plenty of non-aliens at Wildwood who would gladly have seen me thrown out of there."

BJ gave him a long look. "I hate to say it in these terms," she said, "but that argument has a very paranoid slant to it. Everybody against you, and everybody wrong but you."

"You think I'm lying?"

"I think . . . well, I think you're excited, and desperate."

Alexander didn't answer. He realized now that he had been blocking from his mind what he had seen in the woods north of Wildwood, because he had seen it and yet could not understand what he had seen. Now he was forced to face it. He needed a plan, some simple stratagem he could act on and carry out to clear himself, but there seemed no place to turn, nothing he could do but wait helplessly until the police or a DIA field unit found him and picked him up. . . .

He saw BJ watching him, her eyes wide with concern, her dark hair framing her thin, sensitive face. She looked as young and vital now as she had twenty years ago, and it came to him in a rush of warmth that just being with her now made him feel quieter, safer and farther from danger. Here was a haven in the storm, one person he could trust without a qualm. It was incredibly good to be with BJ again.

He laughed suddenly, as though some tough, unbreakable fiber in him had come to life again. "A hell of a thing," he said. "I've been in the Army for so long I've almost forgotten how to fight. They're going to have to find me before they can drag me in, and I think that's going to take some doing."

"What are you going to do?" BJ asked.

"I'm going to find out what happened to that Uranium," he said. "It's the only hope I've got, with Bahr running the

DIA. If I get any information, I'll get in touch with BRINT, I can trust them. Can you drive me down to Wildwood?"

"Harvey, if these reports are true, it'll be crawling with DIA men."

"I'll have to chance that."

"All right. We can stop at my place and get you some clothes."

"Good. I could stand a drink, too." On the surface he felt a lot easier, but deep in his mind the questions were still nagging him.

DIA was corrupt, and Bahr, in the face of the rigid DEPCO control system, was making a power grab. That much he could understand.

But an alien invasion—what did *that* mean?

### *Chapter Six*

THE FLIGHT into Canada took over eight hours, and to Julian Bahr every moment of it was torment.

BRINT had the whip hand, which was intolerable in itself, and they were using it with every evidence of relish. Aside from the bare fact that an unidentified craft had made an unauthorized landing somewhere in the wilderness of northern British Columbia, Bahr had been able to extract no information whatever from BRINT's New York offices.

They were regretful, but firm. London had been explicit in its instructions. If Mr. Bahr wished, he could contact their BRINT agent in Montreal and accompany him to the site of the landing. Every precaution had been taken to seal off the area and preserve it for the DIA investigating team—accompanied by BRINT, of course.

In Montreal he had waited, fuming, for four hours in the rain until the BRINT man, unaccountably delayed, made his appearance. Bahr had had enough experience with BRINT in the past to expect the unexpected; Paul MacKenzie exceeded even his worst expectations. The BRINT man was small and wiry, with sandy hair and a soft Scottish burr, and an air of vacuous naivete about everything he said or

did. There was no BRINT team . . . only MacKenzie, extremely apologetic about his "delay," and obviously not impressed by the presence of the new DIA chief.

Only now, hours later, as the streets and buildings of Dawson Creek slid past below their 'copter, Bahr was realizing uncomfortably that the facade of naivete was only a facade, and that Paul MacKenzie was very sharp, exceedingly sharp, and in perfect command of what he was doing.

After leaving Montreal they had chatted about practically everything except DIA, BRINT, and Project Frisco, and still, somehow, Bahr had been made aware that BRINT had been following Frisco for almost two months, had tracked his 'copter units to Wildwood the night before and set up an intercept team inside US borders within fifteen minutes of the alarm.

This was not news to Bahr; he had suspected something of the sort because he knew that 'copter radios were too weak to reach Canada without phenomenal weather conditions. But the skill with which MacKenzie put the matter on the line was professionally fascinating, as well as professionally disturbing.

And throughout it all Bahr could not shake off the uneasy feeling that the BRINT man was very quietly, very discreetly laughing at him.

"Amazing," MacKenzie said, looking down at the small armada of 'copters fanning out in their wake, "simply amazing how you Americans manage to get so many machines to work with. You must have two dozen rotors down there."

"Two field units," Bahr said, a little defensively.

"I doubt if there are a dozen of those available to BRINT in the whole Western Hemisphere," MacKenzie said. "We're always having to borrow them from the Air Force."

"We used to have the same problem," Bahr said, "when I first took over the field units. But I changed that."

"Yes, we've noticed quite a few changes in DIA field units since you took over," MacKenzie said. Then, after a pause, "What are you planning to do with them all up here?"

"I work on the principle that it's better to have them and

not need them than to need them and not have them," Bahr said. He stared down at the wilderness of alder thicket passing below, a succession of rolling forest land, swamp, underbrush, and lakes. "Look, let's get down to business. You must know something about what happened up here."

"Not very much," MacKenzie said. "Radar unit 1237, that's some fifty miles north of here, picked up an echo at 15:30 this afternoon. Radar unit 1240 confirmed it and together they tracked the trajectory of the target. It was moving fast, and its descending pattern was decidedly curious." He handed the report to Bahr.

Bahr blinked. "How much verticle coverage does your radar sweep give?"

"At that range about 70,000 feet. And a 15-second sweep cycle."

"Then why didn't your unit pick it up before?"

"We were extremely fortunate they picked it up at all," MacKenzie said. "These are Early Warning units, specialized to pick up missile trajectories. This target didn't follow any missile trajectory. In fact, no missile, not even a Robling missile, could make a trajectory like this. This target didn't come over the Pole, it came straight down."

"But from this, the strike area could be anywhere within a fifty-mile radius!" Bahr burst out.

"One hundred mile, to be accurate," MacKenzie said mildly.

"How do you expect to search a hundred mile radius of this sort of wilderness?"

"Well, there's really not much way anything can get out of the area," MacKenzie said. "Only a single road, the Alaska Highway, which we have blocked and sectorred."

"But all this delay in getting to the target area."

"Well, we've been a step behind you in this thing, so far," MacKenzie said pointedly. "And what with all this rabid talk of the European nets, we felt obligated to follow through the investigation on a joint basis. Different techniques, and all that . . ." His talk was light enough, but there was no mistaking the steel-sharp intention to check DIA's methods.

BRINT plainly did not like this alien thing one bit. "And then, we may have an ace in the hole," MacKenzie went on. "There's an American photography team camping in this area; at least, they obtained a permit to camp here. Two men and a Hydro two-wheeler. Professional cinematographers making nature-study documentaries. They've worked this area several times in the past three years. One of them is the cameraman, the other chap does the editing, commentary and sound track. If we're lucky, they may have picked up a disturbance. If they're actually around, that is."

"I don't suppose you know their names," Bahr said, unable to keep the sarcasm from his voice.

"Stanley Bernstein, age forty-two, height medium, slender physique, married, two children," MacKenzie said as though running off a tape. "He's the cameraman. The other chap is Anthony Russel, formerly Russano, age thirty-three, tall, over six feet, also slender physique, dark hair, unmarried. Both men from New York City." He paused, smiling at Bahr. "We have launching facilities in this region, you know. We could hardly let someone into the area without a check-through."

"What I can't see," Bahr said, "is why an alien craft should pick this region to land in in the first place."

"Rather obvious, don't you think? If they hoped to land undetected, that is. They very nearly succeeded." He peered at the map. "The photographer's camp should be on this lake, East side. The Highway passes within a mile of shore. Why don't you have your units drop down and try to spot the camp?"

Bahr picked up the speaker mike and pressed the button. The lake was visible in the late evening light, a small, kidney-shaped body of water, almost indistinguishable from the belt of swamp, underbrush, fallen timber and alder growth. Over the lake, two of the 'copters dropped down almost to tree height and began moving slowly along the lake shore.

Ten minutes later the speaker blared. "There's a tent in the clearing down there, Chief. Shall we land?"

"Ask them to hold off a bit," MacKenzie said quickly. "I'd like to have a look myself before we take any action."

"Hold it," Bahr said into the speaker. "We'll be right over." The 'copter swung down. In the fading light a spotlight glared, picked up a small clearing on the lakeshore, and the canvas roof of a tent on the edge of an alder thicket.

"No fire," MacKenzie said slowly. "Tent looks odd, too. Shall we land and have a look?"

Bahr gave the order to the pilot, and picked up a burp gun from the floor, jammed a clip expertly into place. The 'copter settled quickly in the high ragged grass of the clearing, its spotlight still focused on the patch of canvas. Another 'copter landed beside them, and Frank Carmine jumped down.

When the whine of the engines died, there was dead silence. Not a breath of air stirred. The lake was like glass. Bahr and MacKenzie started across the clearing, with Carmine close behind. Both DIA men carried burp guns. MacKenzie carried a flashlight and his pipe. They walked cautiously over toward the tent.

"I thought that looked odd," MacKenzie said, stopping. The tent was ripped and shredded, hanging like a ragged washing on a line. One corner of it was entirely cut away, with chunks of canvas lying scorched and partly charred on the ground.

"Jesus," Bahr said. "It looks like somebody cut through the back of the tent with a blowtorch."

"Watch your foot," MacKenzie said sharply. He aimed his flash on the ground a few inches from Bahr's toe. There was a twelve ounce can of Bako condensed stew, the top part of the can missing. Together they knelt over the can. It looked as though the top had been burned off, the metal rim curled and blistered. A few shreds of stewmeat and bouillon jelly clung to the bottom of the can.

Quickly MacKenzie swung his light at the food locker. The door had been burned open, making a very smooth, slightly discolored cut. Food containers were scattered all over, some empty, some merely opened and discarded.

"Christ, what a stink," Bahr said, swinging the flashlight beam back and forth across the ground.

"Hold it." MacKenzie added his beam, and they looked at a small, reeking puddle of something greenish and disgusting.

"Somebody heaved," Bahr said.

"Yes, I was about to say so myself. Apparently couldn't stand the Bako stew. Can't blame him, really . . ."

"Where in hell are the two men?" Bahr said. "Their camp's been rifled, and not a sign of them." He swung the light around at the trees and the ground. "Which way is the lake?"

"About that direction, I'd say." MacKenzie started through the trees. "There's a path. Better leave your man behind, Bahr. We don't want any more footprints than necessary until we get a look."

Bahr waved at Carmine to stay back, and followed the BRINT man, who was threading his way through the alders. Ahead was a glint of sunset light from the lake. They moved silently, Bahr holding the burp poised in his right hand, finger on the trigger, MacKenzie searching ahead with his flash.

"Hold on."

They stopped. Something gleamed up ahead on the path. They moved closer, and Bahr turned his light on too. "A camera. Movie camera. Why would somebody leave a camera lying out here?"

"Dropped, I'd say. Seems to have bounced from . . ." MacKenzie moved the flashlight beam carefully, slowly along the ground down the path toward the lake.

"Christ!" Bahr said. The flashlight beam had stopped. In the small circle of light was a man's hand, palm down, fingers clawed stiffly, four furrows gouged into the soft dirt by the final desperate death agony.

"I think we've found the strike area," MacKenzie said.

Above the trees balloon flares hung, blindingly white, cutting the brush and pines into incredible patterns of light and shadow. Below on the ground flashbulbs popped, and small busy teams of men moved actively about, looking,

measuring, probing, photographing, collecting, working silently or talking in hushed voices, but all very desperately urgent.

Across the clearing, the film from the camera was being processed in the portable lab carried by one of the DIA 'copters. Bahr and MacKenzie stood over the body as the blanket was lowered into place. There was a large dripping hole through the man's chest, and a stinking, grisly stain on the ground, as if the fleshy contents of the thorax had been melted out en masse, leaving the bare bones of the cavity.

The body was sprawled facing away from the lake, hands outstretched, the face frozen in an expression of unimaginable horror.

"Bernstein," MacKenzie said. "The camera suggests that."

Bahr grunted. "We'll know in a minute. A man is checking his prints and dental." The big man paused, looking back at the lake. "He was running away from something, that's sure. Must have hit him in the back."

"With what?" MacKenzie said.

"Some sort of dum-dum."

"Looks more like a chemical agent to me."

"Well, what difference does it make?" Bahr said irritably, annoyed by the BRINT man's quiet, infuriatingly reasonable contradictions. "We'll have a lab check, of course."

"You might," MacKenzie suggested, "try Oredos Vegas at the Puerto Rican Cancer Research Center. He's been doing work with proteolytic enzymes . . . top man in the field."

Bahr turned to Carmine. "Have the machine section at DEPEX run a cross-index on protein solvents, and that man's work," he said. "If he's done anything, it'll be in the files."

"I doubt it," said MacKenzie. "Your files may fall behind the researcher a bit. Vegas doesn't publish work in progress."

"Then how do you know about him?"

"We have an alert contact in the Research Center," MacKenzie said amiably. Bahr scowled, repressing a sudden violent urge to take the little Scotsman by the throat and choke him. As usual, BRINT's eclectic view of intelligence put them a jump ahead. "All right, if we can't solve the



problem ourselves, we'll fly him up to our lab and put him to work on the case," Bahr said.

MacKenzie laughed cheerfully at this. Bahr turned and started toward the small group of men on the lakeshore, Carmine at his side, with the BRINT man following.

Carmine checked a notebook. "We've got one field unit working the brush, and a group checking the camp area. There are some footprints down there on the lakeshore, but they aren't distinct. Must have been raining."

"Anything from the roadblocks?"

Carmine's sneer said what he thought of BRINT roadblocks. "But we've found their two-wheeler. Smashed up in the trees a hundred yards back toward the road."

Bahr nodded. "This is beginning to add up," he said to MacKenzie. "The ship landed somewhere near here, somebody entered the camp, killed Bernstein and tried to make a meal of the camp stores, then attempted to use the car to get out to the highway."

"Is that your analysis, from what you see?" MacKenzie broke in.

"You see anything wrong with it?" Bahr snapped.

"Just one thing. Where's Russel? The other man."

"Find him," Bahr said to Carmine. "Or his body. And tell them to get moving on that film."

They moved across the clearing through the huddles of DIA men, flashlights swinging unnecessarily because of the brilliant flare lights. As they walked, Bahr smouldered, wondering just what in hell MacKenzie was doing there in the first place getting in the way, wondering how he could be doing any investigating, since he didn't seem to have a shred of equipment with him. He didn't photograph or measure anything, didn't pick up specimens; in fact, the BRINT man just seemed to be wandering about in his shapeless tweed overcoat with his hands in his pockets, watching, as if he were really amazed at the strange and inexplicable activities of the DIA men.

Difference in methods, MacKenzie had said. Crimes investigated by BRINT were deliberate, logical distributions

of motive and violence, and therefore soluble by introspective analysis of first principles, whereas crimes investigated by DIA were characteristic and unconscious behavior of deviants (criminals) and were therefore soluble by measurement and sorting. (Laughter from BRINT, mocking laughter.)

For a brief, glorious moment Bahr had a mental picture of MacKenzie reduced to mouse-size and strapped down on a mouse board, his chest opened wide by a huge scalpel incision, and Bahr, with magnifying glass and probe, was lifting the BRINT man's heart out with the probe and carefully counting the squoosh-squoosh contractions to find out what made him tick. The heart removed, he dropped the body in a tank of alcohol. The image recurred, cyclically, synchronized with Bahr's steps, so that every time his right foot hit the heart came out, and every time the left foot hit, plunk, into the tank.

By the time they reached the wrecked car Bahr had personally destroyed BRINT, mouse-man by mouse-man.

There was no body of Russel at or near the wrecked car. No footprints along the rest of the path to the road, nor any sign of disturbance in the surrounding brush. The brush was a thicket of tightly-grown alder and vine maple; it would take a man ten minutes to get through ten feet of it.

"The man didn't just vanish," Bahr snarled.

"We've got 'copters working the brush with flares," Carmine said. "They haven't turned up anything."

"But this is impossible. Whatever killed Bernstein wouldn't let his partner just run off. It doesn't make sense."

"It seems to me," MacKenzie said slowly, "that it's pretty obvious what happened. If I had your resources at hand, I'd send for an aqua-lung team."

Bahr turned to stare at him. "You think the ship landed in the lake?"

"What better place for concealment? And why do you assume that the aliens in the ship would immediately take off across the countryside? Seems to me they'd need information first—about the country, routes, places of concealment—from

somebody acquainted with the area. Like Russel, for instance."

Bahr scratched his jaw. "They've been picking up men all over the country . . . we're sure of it." He turned to Carmine. "How fast could you get Van Golfer up here? With a complete outfit?"

Carmine calculated rapidly. "Maybe three hours."

"Get him," Bahr said. "This time there won't be any Wildwood tricks. If that ship is in there I'll get it out if I have to dam and drain the lake to do it."

Several hundred feet of birdlife flickered by on the screen, good, bad, occasionally out of focus. Then suddenly there was a switch to a sky shot, without a filter, and nearly into the sun. Bahr squinted at the brightness, and slapped mosquitoes in the little field-projection tent.

"Must have seen the ship," Bahr said. MacKenzie grunted as the next sequence came on. It was much darker, taken across the lake . . . something slanting down toward the water, a splash as a flat, discus-like object scaled like a rock, hit a second time and sank. The camera followed the bounce, then showed a long stretch of film as the lake settled and the waves damped down.

"Too far from the camera to see much," Bahr said. "We'll have some blown-up stills."

"The lighting was very bad," MacKenzie said.

Something small and indistinct popped out of the lake like a cork, fell back and floated. The camera followed it, a barely visible dot, as it approached from the middle of the lake. The dot left a small wake, approached within a few yards of shore, directly under the camera, then began to rise out of the water.

It was quite clear, in spite of the slight tremor of the camera. A bulbous, gleaming helmet two feet in diameter, and below the helmet a dripping pressure suit, a bisymmetrical body, completely humanoid except for grotesquely long thin legs. It slogged out of the water, easily ten feet tall, and moved toward the camera.

Abruptly, the film stopped.

MacKenzie scowled at the screen as the lights came on. "That's part of your answer," he said. "It landed in the lake."

"Get those lung men down there," Bahr said. "I want two 'copters overhead with cables down, ready to pull them out fast. And, Carmine!"

"Yes, Chief?"

"I want a report on the slop back of the tent and the stuff from Bernstein's chest."

"I'll check," Carmine said. "And they're holding an urgent for you at the radio."

Bahr found the radio 'copter and took the yellow message sheet. It was signed by the New York DEPEX chief.

BAHR DIRECTOR DIA STOP REFERENCE PROJECT FRISCO STOP JAMES CULLEN AND ARNOLD BECK REPORTED MISSING SUNDAY PM FROM UNIV MICH FOUND WANDERING IN DAZED CONDITION CENTRAL LOS ANGELES BY POLICE 2200 HOURS STOP TOTAL FORTY THREE OTHERS MISSING SIMILAR CONDITIONS STOP BELIEVE IMPORTANT STOP PLEASE ADVISE

Bahr suddenly grinned at Carmine and handed him the slip. "Some of our missing people are turning up. Frank, I want you to take over here. Don't miss a thing. Keep MacKenzie with you if he insists, but have those men find that ship if it's the last thing you do. I want to know why they're here, and what they've done to this man Russel." He paused. "I'm going to see what they've done to Cullen and Beck. . . ."

The radioman looked up from the headset. "Another urgent, Chief. Personal from Abrams in Chicago."

The message was just three words long, and Bahr swore when he saw it.

"What is it?" Carmine asked.

"Alexander," Bahr said hoarsely. "Our nice, innocent, bumbling Major Alexander. He's broken out of the Kelley."

Carmine blinked at him. "Chief, if he gets through to DEPCO . . ."

"He won't." Bahr scribbled a quick message with Project Frisco priority and handed it to the radioman. "Abrams knows his stuff. Or he'd better."

MacKenzie came up the path with a smocked, balding DIA technician. "We were right about Bernstein. It was a proteolytic enzyme of some sort." The technician pointed to a small ulcerous area on the back of his hand. "Still active as hell."

"And the slop?"

"Nothing there. The food wasn't chewed at all, just decomposed by acids and spewed out."

Bahr nodded. "All right, keep at it. And call down a 'copter. I have to go to Chicago. Carmine! Nail that ship."

He was actually looking right at the lake when the blast came—a sudden burst of light and a column of water shooting into the air, followed immediately by the shock wave which hit them as a muffled crash. The light went out, and the trees rocked and squeaked as the sudden wind passed through them. Bahr stared, then broke at a dead run for the water's edge, MacKenzie at his side.

"Those poor bastards," somebody said.

"Poor devils didn't have a chance," MacKenzie muttered. Still Bahr said nothing. For a long moment his stubborn, determined face had sagged, drained of color, the heavy jaw hanging slack as if he could not breathe. Then he turned away, his head still shaking.

"It's too late to do anything now," MacKenzie said.

"Again," Bahr said slowly. "They did it again!" With an effort, he caught control again, and his jaw shut and clenched. His eyes met MacKenzie's, and the two men looked at each other, the hostility strangely absent from Bahr's eyes. For an instant MacKenzie had the fleeting feeling that if he could say exactly the right thing, things between him and Bahr would be permanently different, but no idea came, and then the moment had passed. Bahr's face was hard and remote as he turned back to Frank Carmine.

"Get some medical up here. Do what you can, and then join me in Chicago. Be ready to bring MacKenzie down when he wants to go."

Carmine nodded and went about organizing the DIA activities while Bahr, still sobered to an almost passive point, climbed into the 'copter and sat brooding and silent while the rotor whined up to speed and lifted off the ground.

The last thing he saw in the glare of the floodlights was Paul MacKenzie, standing back out of the way and watching him, and he wondered, vaguely, at the look of puzzlement and concern on the BRINT man's troubled face.

### *Chapter Seven*

"YOU CAN'T question these poor devils now," Dr. Petri said. "They're exhausted. They're just recovering from shock. The only reason they're not under heavy sedation right now is because your men told me . . ."

"I know, I know," Bahr said impatiently. "It's too bad, but they've got to be questioned."

"You'll get much farther with them if you'll let them sleep for eight hours." The doctor flicked a 3-V switch. "Look at them."

Bahr glanced at the 3-V image of the Critical Ward. The men were there, not two, but seven—including the eminent James Cullen of the University of Michigan, one of the leading socio-economists in the country, and, it was said, one of the ten men in the world who fully understood the social, economic, and psychological implications of the Vanner-Elling equations. They were sprawled in R-chairs, glassy-eyed and haggard, trying to relax and sleep in the face of the sustaining drugs they had been given. They did not look like the leading scientists of a nation. They looked like living dead men.

"We can't wait," Bahr said. "If we let them sleep, they won't come out of it for days, and we've got to know what happened to them."

"Mr. Bahr, you don't understand the strain . . ."

Bahr pulled himself to his feet. "You take care of the bodies, Doctor. I'll make the decisions about what we do with them. I'll want each of them in a separate room, and I'll want somebody with me who can keep them awake. Is that clear? I mean wide awake."

The doctor took a breath and left the office, leaving Bahr glaring at the wall clock. Fleetinglly, he thought of the return trip from Canada. A DIA car had met him at the landing field, whisked him through the downtown Chicago streets with siren at full blast, but even that brief ride had brought him back shockingly to the change that had been taking place since the Wildwood raid.

He had not seen the normal early-morning bustle of people on the streets. Instead, people were gathered on street corners, moving listlessly into the buildings. A huge crowd had gathered to watch the morning newscast, projected on the eight-story screen on the Tribune building, with John John relaying the latest news from BURINF, but it had been an uneasy crowd. A dozen times on the way to the hospital he had heard police sirens wailing.

And at the hospital, the sudden appearance of TV cameras, and a dozen newsmen, all of them talking at once about the European newsbreaks and about an alien landing, asking for confirmation or denial, complaining bitterly about the anemic information BURINF had made available.

He had shouldered his way through them, repeating his "Sorry, boys, nothing now," until a woman's voice, quite loud, cut through the babble of voices.

"Isn't it true, Mr. Bahr, that your appointment as Director of DIA has not been approved, pending a DEPCO check?"

Bahr stopped, found the woman's face. "Who gave you that information?"

"Just rumors, Mr. Bahr."

"Well, you can publish that I have assumed John McEwen's post in DIA, pending appointment of a new director, for reasons of National Security, and you can serve the interests of National Security a great deal by refusing to spread any more nasty rumors than you can help." He started on, and

added, "I don't know who the new director will be, and right now I don't care. I'm simply doing a job that has to be done."

It had sounded all right, he thought now, but it had come too close to the mark. He looked up as Dr. Petri came to the door, nodded to him.

"All right, Mr. Bahr. But I warn you—"

One of Bahr's aides stopped them in the corridor. "There's a Mr. Whiting from DEPCO here to see you, Chief."

Bahr scowled. "Too busy," he said.

"He has an AA priority. And he says it's about this alien business."

"What office of DEPCO?" Bahr said, stopping suddenly.

"Foreign affairs. It's about those broadcasts."

Bahr relaxed. It was not Adams' office. He was not eager to talk to anybody in DEPCO right now, but an AA priority was hard to sidestep. "Ask him to wait. I'll be up as soon as I can."

He turned into a small white room. The polygraph operator was ready, and a sterile tray rested on the desk. "All right," Bahr said to the doctor. "Bring Cullen in."

Two DIA men led Cullen into the room, a grey-haired man of about sixty with a wrinkled, haggard look, stooped and squinting as if the glaring white walls hurt his eyes. He was leaning heavily on his two escorts, obviously on the verge of nervous collapse. His eyes had the raw, unnatural brightness of amphetamine-induced wakefulness.

Bahr motioned him to the PG seat, held out his wallet with ID card showing. "I'm Julian Bahr, Dr. Cullen. Director DIA. We'd like to ask you some questions."

"Please," Cullen said dully. "Let me sleep. I've been questioned for days, I can't think any more."

"We'll be as brief as possible," Bahr pressed him. He nodded, and the technicians strapped one of the Gronklin polygraph receptors around Cullen's chest.

The old man shook his head feebly. "Let me alone! I can't answer any more questions."



"Who's been asking you questions?"

"I don't know, I don't know. Somebody. My mind is a blank."

Bahr's jaw settled grimly. "Your name is James Cullen?"

Cullen did not answer.

"Dr. Cullen, I have some idea of what you've been through. If what we think is right, more than forty of your colleagues are going through the same thing right now. Don't you want to help stop that?"

The old man shook his head helplessly. "I don't know anything. I'm tired. I don't remember what happened."

"We'll help you remember."

"Does my family know I'm safe?"

Bahr's fist clenched at the digression. "They'll be told. Now just answer yes or no to my questions." He eased back in his chair and rolled the polygraph paper ahead. "You are a professor of Vanner-Elling principles at the University of Michigan?"

Again Cullen did not answer. Bahr smashed his hand down on the desk, noticing with satisfaction the sudden change of blood pressure at the noise. "I think you're tired," he said solicitously. "I think you'd better have a little stimulation."

"Please . . ."

"Just a little adrenalin and amphetamine. You'll feel like a new man." The technician clamped Cullen's arm down, deliberately missing the vein twice. In a minute Cullen's heart was thumping desperately against the chest constrictor, his eyes blinking rapidly. "Have another dose ready in case he begins to doze off," Bahr said.

Cullen was really quite co-operative after that, and his memory became remarkably clear, at least in places. There were aggravating holes in his story, but the pattern was clear enough.

He had been abducted from his home in Ann Arbor sometime Sunday night. He could not remember how, nor what his captors had looked like. He did recall, vaguely, a long ride somewhere in some sort of vehicle, a strange room, and blindingly bright lights.

And the questions . . .

"Who was questioning you?"

"I couldn't see. Just a voice. An odd voice."

"A human voice?"

"No. Definitely not . . . not what I heard." The old man hesitated. "It didn't make sense, but I was sure it was a tik-talker."

Bahr's eyebrows went up, and he glanced excitedly at the technician. The electronic tik-talker, which converted punched tape patterns into speech sounds, had first been developed for long-distance speech communication, particularly useful when scrambled signals were necessary. Scrambled voice, bouncing off a fluctuating ionosphere, was likely to emerge from the descrambler as a series of moans, pops and whistles. The tik-talker reduced speech to a burst of seven pulse characters, reassembling and unscrambling them at the receiving end. It was quite reliable, but the speech itself always had the tonal curiosities of electronically sliced language, and was easily identified by anyone who had ever heard it before.

"You've heard a tik-talker before?" Bahr asked.

"We've used them at the Center. For distant communications and translation purposes."

"And what were the questions like?"

Here Cullen was very clear. He had been asked hundreds of questions about his work at Michigan, especially with regard to the Vanner-Elling equations and their current application to controlling the psychological and economic stability of the country since the economic collapse of the crash in 1995. He had been asked about the poll-taking functions, the work of the machines in outlining production schedules and anticipating psychological soft-spots in various segments of society.

He had refused to answer questions on one very highly classified project, and was given repeated low-voltage electroshocks until he passed out. He could not remember being reawakened. His next recollection was wandering in confusion through the downtown Los Angeles streets until the

police picked him up for vagrancy.

He also refused to tell Bahr what the project was, or anything about it, even though Bahr threatened him with more amphetamine. Cullen knew about security, and nothing short of a BRINT unrestricted examination would have gotten topsec information out of him. Bahr made a note on the spot to give Cullen a type 4 background check as soon as things quieted down; Bahr did not like people to refuse him anything.

The following six men, far more co-operative, had also been picked up, as far as they knew, from their homes on Sunday night by unidentifiable captors. There were two sociologists, a biologist, two linguists, and one of the few physicists in the country still working on physics. They had all been questioned intensively about their respective fields, never seeing their questioners and all confirming the curious sing-song of a tik-talker intermediary. One of them had been indiscreet enough, after two hours of electroshock, to divulge certain information about a topsec project he was connected with for DEPCO. It showed on the PG, of course, and Bahr made a note to frighten as much information out of the man as he could about DEPCO research plans before turning him over to DEPCO for prosecution.

This procedure was not ultimately carried out, due to the subject's suicide sometime after the interview, which annoyed Bahr considerably. Bahr did not as a rule allow people to change his plans for him.

But the pattern was unmistakably clear, when all the data had been gathered. All seven men had been abducted by someone, taken somewhere, and systematically drained of information, then dumped in widely distributed areas in a state of confusion and extreme nervous exhaustion.

Bahr slammed the folders shut and went down to the room where the repatriates had been herded after their interrogation. Dr. Petri was hovering there, anxiously awaiting permission to administer sedation. Bahr shrugged off his protests, and nodded to the two DIA men standing guard at the door. One of them was a tall, heavy man with a crew

cut and a hard, convict's face; he returned the nod briefly, and straightened his shoulders automatically when Bahr came into the room.

The repatriates looked up apathetically as Bahr put a heavy foot up on a chair and faced them. "All right, we're through questioning you for now," Bahr said. "When Dr. Petri is satisfied that you're in good medical shape, you'll be released." He watched the sagging heads, heard the tiny sigh of relief around the room. "However, you will be kept under full security surveillance."

It was the equivalent of house arrest. The sagging heads jerked up again in protest.

"But you've already questioned us," Cullen said feebly.

"Obviously you must realize that under the circumstances we can't assume that anything you've told us is true," Bahr said.

"But surely the polygraph records. . . ."

"May mean nothing at all. I realize that we've never found Occidentals who could beat our polygraph system, under suitable drug treatment. Unfortunately, the results are inconclusive with Orientals, who have a different notion of truth, and particularly with yogis, who can control their sympathetic system."

Cullen was sitting up now, his face red with anger. "Mr. Bahr, we have certain legal rights."

"As of now, Dr. Cullen, you have no legal rights," Bahr said sharply. "Until proven otherwise, we are forced to assume that your abductors were alien creatures who are engaged in the first steps in an invasion. You men have been in contact with those aliens . . . the *only ones* who have been in contact with them. From the manner in which you were abducted, it seems obvious that the aliens are able to penetrate our cities without detection, either in disguise as humans, or by using and controlling humans. All right, *you* add it up. If your abductors have techniques of mind control that we don't know about, you men may be dangerous pawns. We can't take the risk that you're not."

He paused for it to sink in. "Now, if you have that

straight, we'll get on. You will be released in the custody of Mr. Yost." He indicated the hard-faced man with the crew-cut. "You will be responsible to Mr. Yost for everything you do or say. You will answer no questions and make no statements. If I find a single quote, admission, or good guess in any of the TV-casts, Mr. Yost will be in charge of improving your understanding of security."

Yost led them away to the recovery room. Bahr had seen the spark of grudging admiration in Yost's eyes, and he smiled in satisfaction. Yost was a former 801st lieutenant who had been in a Texas penitentiary for rape, assault, and a dozen other crimes of violence before he had volunteered. In Texas he had been a prison bully; in the 801st he found his calling, and had toughened his guerrilla platoon, and subsequently his DIA field unit, into a sharp, violently dangerous force. Yost believed in only one thing—power—and to him Bahr was power. He was afraid of Bahr, and hated him, but he was willing to obey him to the point of death. Bahr knew this, and depended on it. He recognized the advantages of a subordinate whom everybody feared and hated, who would do his dirty work for him.

And he was quite sure that by the time the repatriates were released, they would have transferred their hate and fear permanently from him to Yost.

He pushed back his chair and went upstairs to where the committee from DEPCO was waiting.

The Department of Control, the sprawling, multi-faceted, interlocking bureau which held the ultimate, final and definitive executive power of the Vanner-Elling Stability Government in its hands, was a love organization.

It had taken Julian Bahr several years and hundreds of contacts with DEPCO men at all levels of importance, from top-level executive sessions with the Joint Chiefs right down to the most casual contacts at cocktail parties, to realize the fundamental truth of that fact and, realizing it, to fully comprehend its implications. Libby Allison had denied it vigorously, and just as vigorously (if unconsciously) proved it

in armed battles and bed-talk with Julian. He had heard it from the lips of high DEPCO officials who had no idea what they were admitting, and he had heard it from other DEPCO men who recognized it for what it was and still admitted it.

DEPCO was a love organization. Everything they did had love overtones. Inevitably, it clouded their judgment. Equally inevitably, it entrenched them with incredible firmness in the position of power they had held since Mark Vanner had set up his equation-control on a government-wide basis after the crash. It was exceedingly difficult to attack love as an institution and get very far with the attack.

To Julian Bahr the whole concept was difficult to comprehend, and utterly impossible to understand. Bahr instinctively preferred hate and fear to love, but now he knew that he had to have wholehearted, unquestioning co-operation from DEPCO. Therefore, he had to love them. While his elevator rose the six stories to the conference room where the DEPCO committee had been waiting for him, Bahr tried valiantly to think of a single reason to love the organization which was doing everything within its power to wreck his life.

He couldn't find a reason.

Love was necessary at times, of course, sometimes even pleasant, refreshing, comforting. Sometimes he thought he really did love Libby, and suffered violent pangs of guilt at the way he always seemed impelled to fight her, to try to dominate her. He wished he didn't have to depend on her faking his Stability Rating, because if she had just been a good-looking girl maybe he could talk to her frankly the way he once had talked to certain prostitutes before the custom of installing tape recorders in hotel rooms and houses.

But Libby was still a therapist who worked for DEPCO, and there were some things you couldn't tell your analyst even when she was sleeping with you.

He found the DEPCO committee waiting patiently, still smiling in a fatherly fashion after being kept waiting four hours on an AA conference priority, still greeting him

warmly, still accepting him, still loving him. The leader of the group was a tall, blond-haired man with pale blue eyes, trying to hide the lines of worry on his forehead as Bahr entered the room.

Bahr shook his hand and smiled through his teeth, and then he saw Paul MacKenzie sitting at the side of the room, unconcernedly cleaning his fingernails, hardly looking up when Bahr sat down but taking everything in, spying. Bahr felt his shoulders and neck tighten.

"All right," Bahr said. "Sorry to hold you up, but I had some important work in progress. Now let's have it. What do you want?"

The leader of the delegation cleared his throat. "I'm Whiting, Mr. Bahr. We're really sorry to cut into your time like this; naturally we realize that you're extremely busy, but to be perfectly frank, Mr. Bahr, we're alarmed."

Bahr said a silent prayer for control, and smiled at Whiting. "About what?"

The DEPCO man seemed embarrassed. "About the way the DIA is handling the investigation of these . . ." He hesitated, obviously striving to avoid saying the word. ". . . These incidents that have been occurring."

"You mean the alien ships that have been landing?" Bahr said.

Whiting winced. "I don't think you realize the magnitude of what's happening here, Mr. Bahr. We have just received a machine run of certain samplings taken in Continental United States and other parts of Federation America, plus two field units from Europe. Our prognostic curve . . ." He opened a portfolio and laid a graph in front of Bahr. The DEPCO man's hands were trembling. "Mr. Bahr, these curves indicate that there is a very fast-growing panic spreading in the country, centered in rumors of alien landings. This morning there was a closely-averted riot in Los Angeles, and another in St. Louis. Our sources indicate that foreign news-listening is up by a factor of ten in the past week." The DEPCO man spread his hands helplessly. "Naturally, our social-control techniques were devised to handle panic-

emergencies, but nothing of this magnitude has ever happened before, not even during the late crash years. If this were to explode into a full-scale panic . . ."

Bahr scowled. "Why are you coming to me, Mr. Whiting?"

"Because of the leaks, Mr. Bahr, the security leaks. The foreign news nets are getting information and the people are listening to them. Your cover stories from BURINF are simply not selling. And the foreign network implication that you are trying desperately to cover up is just fanning the flame."

Bahr shrugged impatiently. "We had one really bad break," he admitted. "That was the 'copter chatter intercepted by the Canadians." He glared at MacKenzie. "There haven't been any leaks since then, and there won't be."

Whiting frowned. "But, Mr. Bahr, six hours ago Radio Budapest was broadcasting a detailed description of an alien landing in northern British Columbia."

Bahr slammed his fist on the desk and jerked to his feet, sending the chair crashing against the wall. "*What did you say?*"

"He said the news is out," MacKenzie said from the side of the room. "It's all over the country."

Bahr swore viciously. "Then there's a leak somewhere between DIA and BRINT. We've kept it so tight that . . ." He broke off, turned to an aide. "Tell them to get ready for a complete news blackout on all frequencies. Tell them to get those foreign nets jammed. Every news story that goes out will have to clear with me personally."

Whiting of DEPCO sat staring, his face going white. "Mr. Bahr, you can't do that! A news blackout now would be the last straw!"

Bahr swung on him. "You idiot, don't you recognize a war when you're staring one in the face? That's what we have on our hands—war, deliberate psychological war! Whatever this alien is, we know practically nothing about him, and he knows everything about us. We can't even guess what his next move might be. He's landed here, he may have been monitoring our TV-casts and newscasts for years. He's



interrogated our key personnel. Everything he has done has been perfectly geared to touch off a generalized fear reaction."

"But the people . . ."

"The horse is already stolen, why try to lock the barn door?" Bahr snapped. "If the only thing the people will believe is the truth, then that's what we'll give them. The truth."

"We can't give them the truth," Whiting said in the stifling silence that followed.

"Why can't we?"

"Because the one thing our society simply cannot face is an alien invasion," Whiting said. "It will tear our society out by the roots."

"Why?" Bahr said harshly.

"Because we have absolutely no defense against an alien invasion . . . *none whatever* . . . and the people know it."

"Nonsense. We have weapons, we have technology," Bahr said.

"They won't do us any good, against an alien invader," Whiting said. "Not in the face of fear. We don't know exactly where that fear is rooted, basically—probably in the pre-crash drive to space—but the fear is just as strong now as it ever was."

"You mean the fear of space?"

"I mean the fear of *spaceships*," Whiting said. "You have no idea how deeply it penetrates. You have no idea how we've struggled to sublimate it since the crash." Whiting sighed, his eyes taking on a dreamy look. "Vanner recognized it, long before the crash; at least he read the symptoms. He even recognized what had to be done: to anchor the Vanner-Elling system, to drive technology from the minds of the masses, especially the future masses. That was the only hope for stability, and we needed stability at any price. A brilliant vision. Vanner was afraid of it because of the repercussions, but Larchmont . . ."

Suddenly, Bahr tagged him. Whiting . . . of course! The one Libby had told him about that night at the Colony

Club, when they both had been a little drunk, and gotten to laughing so hard their sides had hurt. Whiting . . . the last of the pure Eros men left in DEPCO, a protege of the legendary Larchmont who had almost succeeded in converting the educational system of the country into a vast group-analysis instrument during the shaky, formative days of the Vanner-Elling government. Larchmont had not quite succeeded in putting that through, but he had left the imprint of his own occult personality permanently in the psychology of the country, and in the government.

It had been his followers who had shifted the romantic folklore of the country from the old fallacy of the Clean-Cut-Hero-Beautiful-Heroine-In-Love Hollywood standard to the even more horrendous fallacy of the Be-Her-Daddy-Be-His-Little-Nymph concept of the current fictofilms, poptunes and couch confessionals.

And Whiting was a Larchmont man, a psychoanalytical dreamer, a fantasy rambler, kept on by DEPCO in the Foreign Affairs office because he was harmless, and a handy repository for the grasshopper-minded fringes of the psychological world, also harmless because nothing ever happened in Foreign Affairs.

But now something had happened. The foreign nets handling the alien story came under Whiting, and naturally Whiting came to Bahr. But what Whiting had to say was another thing. Bahr relaxed, suddenly feeling warmly exultant, listening now to see how Whiting, who after all did have DEPCO authority, could be used.

" . . . We interpreted the spaceships as phallic symbols," Whiting was saying eagerly. "At the height of the crash, there was the tremendous father-hatred and Oedipus feeling toward the ships. The mobs smashed the last one before it was even completed, so we used the father-hatred to persuade the masses to reject the ideas of the former legal and military governments. And we had the computers. We had to use them because Vanner, after all, was the political rallying point. But the idea of putting them into the caverns was a stroke of genius on Larchmont's part. The computers meant

security and warmth and protection and anti-spaceships, and they were in the caverns . . . a magnificent Oedipus feeling."

Bahr glanced across at Paul MacKenzie, who was sitting sleepy-eyed and unperturbed through this emotional drenching that Whiting was pouring out. MacKenzie apparently had heard this litany before. He seemed to be the only one in the room, besides Bahr, who was not caught up in the revival-meeting feeling.

"What you mean to say," Bahr cut Whiting off in mid-sentence, "is that the people now have an enormous guilt-fear of spaceships and, by association, are afraid of aliens. Is that right?"

Whiting seemed stunned by Bahr's succinct summation of his still unfinished Articles of Faith. "Well . . . well, yes, that is . . ."

"All right," said Bahr. "Now listen carefully. We'll have to give them the truth . . . as we see it, of course. We can use sibling rivalry toward the aliens because of their humanoid form. Of course, we'll have to declassify that." He spoke swiftly, powerfully, hoping that he wouldn't get Libby's little bedroom lectures on theoretical psychodynamics so badly scrambled that even Whiting in his ecstatic state would choke on them. "Then we'll play up the non-phallic shape of the alien spaceships, and feature protection and security as coming from a computer-guided defense against the aliens . . . from the caverns, of course."

He was afraid for a moment that MacKenzie might laugh out loud and spoil the whole thing, but the BRINT man managed to suppress the reaction in a fit of coughing. Whiting was nodding eagerly.

"Brilliant . . . brilliant . . . Larchmont would have liked that idea."

"Certainly that approach will cut any panic off at the root," Bahr said gravely. "No need for a Condition B alert. With DEPCO authority—from you—we'll handle the security by compartmentalizing the country by ethnic areas; we'll play up the We-group against the Aliens. Of course, we will need

a Condition B censorship on newscasts and travel."

Whiting looked doubtful. "That's quite a lot to ask for."

"Don't worry," Bahr said. "I'll see that the Joint Chiefs go along, if you'll back me."

"And of course there'll have to be careful work on the news releases from BURINF," Whiting said, warming to the idea.

"I'll take care of that," Bahr said. "For a news break like this, we won't want a written release. We'll need a personal address."

"Of course!" Whiting agreed. "We have some people who could put it very nicely."

"No need for that," Bahr said firmly, completely confident now. "I'll do the talking myself."

The broadcast was made at seven o'clock in the evening from the BURINF studios in New York, where Bahr had flown when he finally broke free of Whiting. Since noon, when the Condition B news blackout had fallen, the powerful BURINF TV net had moved into action, co-ordinating trailer broadcasts, reaching every radio, public address microphone and television set in the nation. BURINF had had long and fruitful experience with mass audience control as a major vector force in implementing DEPCO policies; in the seven hours of maximum saturation they were able to guarantee an 80% viewing at announcement-time, with rebroadcast catching an additional 17% by midnight.

The substance of the trailers alone was sufficient to guarantee maximum attention. The blackout was a calculated blow, with a single item of information coming through from all sources: that the director of DIA would discuss rumors of an alien invasion of Earth.

"You've got to be careful," Libby told him, checking his TV make-up carefully. "They'll be watching every gesture, every mannerism."

"Certainly they will," Bahr growled. "That's what I want."

"I don't mean the public. I mean DEPCO. Adams was furious when he got Whiting's report. They're watching you, and I can't stall them much longer."

"Of course you can," Bahr said. "You're doing fine."

"When did you sleep last?"

"I don't need any sleep. I feel great." He nodded to a technician who signaled from the control window, got up, and walked into the BURINF broadcasting room.

Libby was right: they *were* watching him. The cameras picked him up as he came through the door, and he could feel the hush of voices in the darkened room and across the nation, waiting, watching him. His mouth tightened in a flat smile he couldn't control. This was the moment he had been building for. *The past doesn't matter any more*, he told himself savagely as he crossed the room. *Nothing matters any more except this thing now. It doesn't matter that they gave you a green card to keep you down, to break you. It doesn't matter that they court-martialed you out of the Army. All your life they've been trying to break you, trying to jam you down into the mold, and all your life you've fought back, and now you're going to win.*

He saw himself in the monitor screen as he walked to the microphone in the center of the booth, carrying his coat, his shoulder holster with the gleaming and deadly Markheim stunner showing, flanked by Frank Carmine on his right. Vaguely his ears picked up the commentator chattering the introduction in a hushed voice.

". . . Julian Bahr, Acting Director DIA, who is going to make a statement to the people of Federation America about the urgent national crisis which has arisen. Mr. Bahr's assistant is seated now. Mr. Bahr is putting on his coat. He has been working right up to the moment on the solution of the crisis. And now, friends, the Director DIA, Mr. Julian Bahr."

Silence lay heavily as Bahr waited, looking out at the gray faces in the room, sensing the desperate hush before ninety million TV sets across the country. He saw Adams' face, tense and grim, watching him, and far to one side, the face of an elderly man with an unruly shock of white hair, watching him.

And then his voice came, heavily resonant, powerful, com-

manding and yet reassuring. "Friends, there is no longer any question that we are facing a national crisis. We know that alien ships have made a landing on Earth in the first wave of a silent invasion. They are among us now . . ."

### *Chapter Eight*

CARL ENGLEHARDT, lean-faced and impatient, paused for a moment on the exit platform of the New York-Washington jetliner, then spotted the waiting Volta with the official license tags and the dark-suited DIA guards. He hurried down the ramp and skirted the slowly dissipating airport crowd, moving at the quick restless pace that made him look, at a distance, like a man of thirty-five except for his lined face and unruly shock of white hair.

He climbed into the Volta with an impatient nod to the DIA driver, and settled back with a cigarette from his engraved titanium case as the car started up the long ramp to the elevated streets of rebuilt Washington.

He had heard of the urgently-called meeting of the Joint Department Chiefs six hours before Bahr's sensational announcement broadcast, first from certain sources in BRINT, then through official channels indicating that his presence at the meeting would be desirable, not to say imperative, with full endorsed approval of DEPCO and all the other agencies involved. Now, he relaxed for a moment, chuckling. God, how they hated to call him in! The fact that he was called at all only served to underline their desperation. The very fact of his existence, utterly unassailable and unanswerable to any agency of the government, was repugnant to DEPCO, who in eight years of continuous study and examination, by hand and by Boolean logic computation on the machines, had still been unable to mount a convincing case of monopolism or tax evasion against him. And the simple and inescapable fact that his independent existence was a major factor in the successful function of the Vanner-Elling eco-government which had evolved during and after the crash was even harder to swallow.

To the socially controlled, highly integrated economy of Twenty-First Century Federation America, Carl Englehardt was an enigmatic anachronism. Nobody knew, for certain, the true extent of the industrial constellation he headed. The analysts and doom-harbingers in DEPCO clucked and squawked in protest, propounding theories and citing figures that Englehardt and a stable eco-government were mutually exclusive and could not conceivably coexist in the same plane. But they inevitably had to ask Englehardt what *his* plans were for the next two or three year period when they were setting up the parameters for the annual VE economic prognosis, and they had to admit, however grudgingly, that Englehardt's vast interlocking holdings were invariably the buffer that absorbed the stresses and strains of the annual VE plan.

Since the earliest days of the VE system, Englehardt had walked the tightrope of that controversy, managing a balance of opposing forces with a finesse that was exceeded only by the legendary skill with which BRINT effected the balance of power in the Eastern turmoil.

And now, faced with a crisis, they were turning to him again. As the car left the overhead road and moved down toward the circle of government buildings, Englehardt considered the circumstances. He knew what they wanted, and he knew, on the other hand, what he was prepared to provide. The meeting would be a violent one. But violence was no stranger to him.

He had weathered violence before, and survived.

Mark Vanner had predicted, almost to the week, the time when the society of the late 1990's, like a Hegelian pot of water absorbing energy without recognizable change, would suddenly begin to boil. In the case of the old United States economy, it was crumble rather than boil, but the pattern of collapse had followed exactly and disastrously the steps that Vanner had outlined as much as ten years before.

The brilliant sampling and determinants theory for constructing a total sociological-economic-psychological picture

of a nation at any given moment in time had been the work of the obscure British economist Peter Elling, but the mathematical extension of the theory into a workable, reliable technique for predicting and controlling the future was the creation of sociologist-mathematician Mark Vanner. He had tried in vain to convince the shaky, frightened Hartman administration that the wild, exhaustive race with the Eastern bloc to mount permanent, manned and armed satellite ships in space and manned garrisons on the moon was leading the country to the brink of economic disaster; that unless it were stopped in time, it would inevitably lead to a total collapse of the economy. It had been clear since the early 1960's that a dangerous proportion of the national reserve of money and man-hours was being poured into defense tactics, but the continuing drain of the XAR spaceship project was staggering, multiplying with each succeeding year.

Carl Englehardt had read Vanner's works, had talked with Vanner, and had seen the fissures in the clay. He was fifty then, chairman of the board of Robling Titanium, and in a small way a strikingly successful man. Robling had been supplying structural titanium to the spaceship project in New Mexico, the project Vanner had denounced so clearly as the economic blight of the century, and he realized that when the abreaction came, the spaceships and everything connected with them would be trampled under.

He also realized that the Eastern bloc would wait, poised and ready, until the American economy had broken at the wheel, and then launch the all-out H-missile attack that would finally and decisively destroy the North American continent as a political or military threat.

What Englehardt did then was still considered by some to be the most colossal act of high treason in the history of Man; by others, a stroke of military and diplomatic genius. It was during the first barely evident economic dehydration of the early weeks of the crash that he made his proposal to the President. By having parts made in European factories, and by having the parts assembled and tested by Ferranti and



launched from British installations in Australia, Englehardt was in a position to supply intercontinental ballistic missiles accurate within one mile of ground zero with a maximum range of eight thousand miles. Such missiles had already been built and tested by Robling subsidiaries, and could be delivered to specified launching sites at the rate of ten per day. If prepared and stationed quickly enough, they could forestall the H-missile attack from the East which was almost a day-to-day certainty.

The missiles would be delivered to the American government in exchange for food; there was no money available, with the strangling cost of the still uncompleted satellite ships and, anyway, Englehardt was clearly aware that within a few short months money would no longer buy work.

But there was a single condition. The Robling missiles were not for sale. They were for rent.

There would be no blueprints. The missiles would be manufactured, sealed, and aimed for launching by Robling employees. The design of the guiding mechanism and the propellant would remain the exclusive private domain of Robling Titanium.

The proposal was staggering in its audacity. The Hartman administration was still not convinced that Vanner was right, and chose to bicker. Already the economy was splitting at the seams, the stock market lurching, strikes spreading, food supplies in urban areas becoming scarce, but they would not agree to Englehardt's terms. There were threats, accusations, appeals to patriotism, but Englehardt had remained adamant. He did not want his designs and his technicians commandeered, his contracts and legal protection invalidated and himself impoverished and cast out by any sudden governmental confiscation of private properties during the impending crisis. He had deep-rooted, almost archaic convictions against socialization and government ownership after the still memorable experiences of the Sixties.

He would not yield. Quite abruptly, he vanished. Before the Hartman administration could reconsider, the horror of a great national economy in its death agonies was sweeping

the western hemisphere. In three short days the stock market collapsed and ceased to exist as an instrument of business exchange when the New York Stock Exchange was raided and burned by panic-stricken mobs. The military struggled helplessly to contain the spreading violence in the face of its own mounting toll of insubordination and desertions. Within weeks the value of the dollar had dwindled to nothing; in the overcrowded cities, thieving, blackmarketing and prostitution ran rampant. The embattled government withdrew to the armored sub-basements of the Pentagon to await the inevitable attack of H-missiles from the East.

But the attack from the East never came.

Gradually, the reason why became clear. Ten missiles a day were emerging from the Robling foreign interlock, paid for by the British, and guarded by the British, who had fewer scruples about dealing with private munitions makers than the Hartman administration had had. A series of highly publicized demonstrations had been conducted, proving conclusively that the Robling missiles would do all that Englehardt had promised they would do, and the British published an ultimatum that pulled the teeth of the Eastern bloc: Any H-missile launched, from either the East or the West, would be intercepted and answered by Robling missiles. The British, for the first time in eighty years of tight-rope walking between the Cold War powers, now held the whip hand.

There would be no H-war.

But the rising terror of the crash continued unabated. True to the pattern predicted by Vanner, control measures snapped one by one in the face of the savage tide. Food rotted in midwestern railroad yards, while mobs roamed the streets of the huge urban centers of the East, starving and vicious. Through betrayal and desertion in the FBI and Secret Service, besieging rioters broke through Pentagon defenses; the President and Joint Chiefs were shot without trial or ceremony. In mid-August of 1997 the mobs sacked and burned the XAR atomic spaceship project in New Mexico, smashing into the compound in trucks and killing, injuring and torturing the scientists and technicians there.

As the wave of anti-space violence rose, physicists fled for their lives. Atomic motor plants, titanium factories, astronautic research centers, even universities and libraries were crushed and burned by hungry mobs, finding only technology and the drive to space to blame for the chaos that had descended in the country. Four prominent engineers were beaten to death on the University of Iowa campus. John Hannibal, editor of *Outstanding Science-Fiction* magazine, and a major driving force in the "space in our time" philosophy of the past decade, was burned alive in his Manhattan office, where he had barricaded himself behind crates of out-of-date science-fiction magazines. . . .

In northern Europe, where Englehardt had been sequestered and guarded by British Intelligence, a kidnapping attempt was forestalled within hours of its completion. Englehardt was well aware that he owed his life to the BRINT team which had uprooted the conspiracy; characteristically, no mention was ever made of it, although it was rumored in later years that Englehardt had personally paid for the famous BRINT building in New York.

But when Mark Vanner organized his provisional government in New York and began to weld together a pattern of order around a nationwide application of the VE equations, Englehardt came out of hiding. For two decades he had continued to pour his immense wealth and resources back into the Americas, by means of a vast system of interlocking holding companies, reopening factories during the reconstruction period and building up the network of small industries that made him the phenomenon and power that he was.

No one seemed to know what Carl Englehardt was really after: not power, because he had turned down all offers and opportunities for political succession; not money, of which he had a surfeit; not glory, which he avoided like the plague. Because he was not directly or formally in any government function, the DEPCO analysts could not get at him to poke through his mind and background to find out what made him tick. There were rumors that he had watched his only

son tortured and murdered by the mob during the sacking of the XAR project, but even though they spent plenty of time and effort trying to pick up the threads of his past, DEPCO had been unable to confirm such rumors. The crash had destroyed so many records, and killed and scattered so many people that the job seemed hopeless.

And still, in critical times, they needed him. Now the DIA Volta let him off at the official entrance to the DEPEX building. Englehardt walked quickly down the hall, cleared his identification with the guards, and went on toward the conference room in the administrative wing. They had called him now because they needed him, in spite of themselves.

But they were not going to like the proposal he had to make.

"Our problem," said Timmins, Director of the Department of Population, "is one of defense measures. That's why we asked you to come here today, Mr. Englehardt . . . to bring you up-to-date on what information we have on the alien threat, and to get your views on certain problems that Mr. Bahr has . . . er . . . brought to a head."

Englehardt nodded, looking at the men in the room. Adams of DEPCO was there, cold-faced and angry. Bahr drummed his fingers impatiently on the table top. There was a General of the Army that Englehardt had met casually. Half a dozen other bureaus were represented. Englehardt looked back at Timmins' blond, boyish face. "I would think," he said, "that your defense measures would depend heavily on the nature of the enemy you were fighting."

"That's what I've been trying to tell them," Bahr exploded. "We simply don't have enough information. We have no hint . . . not even a suggestion . . . of their plans. There is a very strong suspicion, however, that they can control the actions of certain humans, at least to a limited degree."

Englehardt frowned. "Do you have proof of that?"

"Not yet," Bahr said. "Unfortunately the man who might have given us the answer has escaped our custody. I'm

referring to Major Harvey Alexander, the security officer at Wildwood."

"That is neither here nor there, right now," Adams broke in. The DEPCO chief spoke rapidly and nervously, keeping his long narrow fingers very precisely before him on the table. "An even more acute problem is the public reaction to Mr. Bahr's television fiasco. Unless we can convince the public that everything is under control . . . that the aliens cannot harm them . . . we may be dealing with a major panic."

"In other words," Englehardt said, "you are proposing to fight malaria by distributing citronella to the natives."

Adams frowned. "I don't think I understand you."

"You're facing an unknown enemy with short-range planning and countermeasures," Englehardt said. "Which inevitably puts you a step behind him. To destroy malaria, Mr. Adams, we spray the swamps, kill the disease at its source. It seems to me that our only defense here is a powerful attack, or the ability to make one."

"But what are we going to attack? Our biggest enemy right now is not an alien invader; it's *fear*. We have to deal with that before we can even think of defense or attack."

"Then harness it," Englehardt said. "Forget about trying to control or sublimate it—use it! That's what Vanner did. He put fear and panic to work for him. He made the people rebuild and start a new society."

Adams sighed. "I don't think you understand the basis of this fear reaction. Unfortunately, this is not an attack from the Eastern bloc. This is an attack from space."

"I don't care what it is," Englehardt said angrily. "How can you expect to fool people into security when you don't have any program, any plans, any ideas at all about what to do? You launch a good overall program, something concrete and solid, and your public reaction problem will take care of itself."

"A program like that would upset the stability of the nation in a week," Adams said. "We can't take that risk. We in DEPCO have *made* the public, Mr. Englehardt. We

have been fighting to maintain controlled stability because stability is the only safe, sensible, logical way to keep our economy and sociology balanced. Vanner and his ideas were necessary, of course, in their time; he changed the direction of society. Now it is our function to keep it running in that same direction."

"Have you ever heard of the Wywy bird, Mr. Adams?" Englehardt asked. He was referring to the ancient and vulgar joke about the bird that flew in ever-decreasing spirals until it flew up its own derriere. Bahr and a couple of the military men laughed. Adams blinked and reddened. "I really can't see . . ." he began hotly.

"I think we're getting into personalities," Timmins said quickly from across the room. "You've made some strong statements about our having no plan of attack ready, Mr. Englehardt. If you think we should *not* try to keep the Vanner-Elling system in normal operation and devote our efforts to keeping the public in a good state of mental health, then what *should* we do?"

"Let's put it this way," Englehardt said. "Mr. Bahr, when the Chinese landed their guerrilla army in South America two years ago, what was the first thing you looked for?"

"Their supply routes," Bahr said. "They weren't a true guerrilla army; the civilian population would not willingly support them, so we knew they had to have outside channels of supply."

"Exactly," Englehardt said. "Now, why shouldn't the same apply to an invasion force of aliens? Assuming that the alien maneuvers so far have been preliminary junkets, we can expect them to mount larger maneuvers in the future. But for that they will have to have supply routes. Now, where would they stockpile their supplies?"

There was an uneasy stir in the room. Adams was suddenly sitting upright, very alert. Timmins cleared his throat nervously. "Mr. Englehardt . . ."

"Somewhere off the planet," Bahr answered the question. "Probably in orbit."

Adams turned sharply to Englehardt. "Just what are you

proposing? That we develop a radar system to pick up some sort of . . . of space warehouse? Some missile artillery which could intercept them when they try to land personnel or supplies?"

"You mean anti-aircraft?" Englehardt said angrily. "Never! All the defensive maneuvers in the world won't stop them. Look, what is the one biggest advantage that the aliens have over us? Invulnerability! They can get to us any time they want to—witness the Wildwood mess—but *we can't get to them because they come from space!*"

"But we can't build spaceships!" Adams exploded.

"Why can't we? We were on the verge of it in the Nineties. We had all the technology and engineering we needed; it was just a matter of time."

"But Englehardt—for God's sake, man—the *spaceships caused the crash*. The whole country went insane over that. You know that, you lived through it."

"The crash came because we could not build those spaceships the way we were building them at that time," Englehardt said. "The crash was not because of the spaceships; it was because of the expense, the drain on our resources."

"But it would be the same thing again. Do you want us to go through another crash?"

"We have the Vanner-Elling system now, and the computers. We can harness them to provide a surplus in the form of spaceships the same as you have them set up now to provide a surplus in the form of entertainment."

"But the entertainment is necessary for social control," Adams said. "If we took away the entertainment and counseling, and expression programs, the tensions would begin to build up all over again."

"And isn't a spaceship an expression just the same as a city, or a set of laws? Doesn't it represent a definite step in the development of the people?"

"A backward step," Adams said angrily. "A regression."

"Nonsense," said Englehardt.

Adams attempted to laugh. "Really, Mr. Englehardt, I think you're disturbed. Emotionally upset. It's not an unusual

syndrome among formerly technical people, of course—a fixation on spaceships. Tell me, have you ever . . .”

“Gone to a psychiatrist?” Englehardt’s face blanched. “No! Nor felt the urge, and let me tell you something else while we’re on the subject of fixation and living in the past: your precious DEPCO for the past fifteen years has been doing nothing but trying to stay in one place, and keep the whole country and economy in one place, and if that isn’t fixation, then I’d like you to please explain just what else it is!”

“Hold it,” Bahr said sharply. “We aren’t interested in holding DEPCO up for inspection right now, nor Mr. Englehardt’s psyche, for that matter. But one thing is certain: we have to have an aggressive plan of action. I personally can see many points in favor of being able to mount a small space fleet, if for no other reason than investigation and early-warning. It’s certainly a better solution than simply digging holes for ourselves, or sitting with stunners across our laps waiting for whatever the aliens are going to do next. The question is, can we do it?”

“We have the technology,” Englehardt said.

“How do you know that?” Bahr asked.

“I know the men and techniques I have available. My University . . .” Englehardt habitually spoke of the Robling-owned Harvard University as his personal property “. . . Has an astronautics library of four thousand tapes. There are plenty of good engineers in my . . . er . . . in the private industries who could pick up where the men in the Nineties left off. I can guarantee that we have the technology.”

Adams was shaking his head violently. “There’s no use even debating it. Psychologically it’s out of the question. We’re only now getting stabilized on the Oedipal corrections that Larchmont introduced.”

“Aberrations, you mean,” Englehardt said. “The man was psychotic. I was around Washington when he broke. He tried to disembowel himself with a fingernail file.”

Adams glared at him. “You *do* have ego problems.”

“Let’s forget the smears for a while,” Bahr said. “I’ll go along with Carl Englehardt, at least to the point of letting



him show us that it is technologically practical to build spaceships. We don't know that it is, any more than we know what the public reaction to the idea would be." He stood up, and the rising clamor of voices and disagreement stopped. "I put it to a vote," he said. "To determine whether spaceships are possible and practical on engineering grounds."

Adams lurched to his feet. "This is not something to be voted on," he cried. "We can't just brush aside fifteen years' policies of social control. DEPCO has the power to approve the plans and projects formulated by the other departments, and we cannot accept spaceships as a solution. They are hostility symbols, and an economic peril."

"All right," Bahr said harshly. "You're opposing the idea without the slightest factual grounds for opposition. DEPCO hasn't investigated the spaceship problem for twenty years. You don't have a legal leg to stand on."

"The Stability Act of '05 specifically states . . ."

"You can recite amendments for us some other time," Bahr broke in. "I'd like to see right now how many here agree with me that an investigation is a reasonable solution." He looked around, counting thumbs.

The military, of course, went along with Englehardt. DEPEX, always willing to implement new programs, went along. DEPOP, conservative and crusty as usual, opposed. DEPRE, always willing to take on another research job, and politically jealous of DEPCO's restraints on their research into DEPCO methods, went along with Bahr.

"It looks like an investigation is in order," Bahr said.

Adams jerked to his feet. "I'll stop that if I have to drop every other project in the department," he said.

"What are you afraid of?" Bahr said to him. "Does a big, tall tower give you bad dreams? Maybe you're the one that should be seeing the analyst." The military and Englehardt were chuckling.

"I think, Mr. Bahr, that we may be over to interview you very presently," Adams said acidly.

"Well, before you come, you'd better have some explanation for the fact that as soon as a constructive idea is pro-

posed to meet this problem of aliens, you immediately try to block it," Bahr said. He saw his error, he shouldn't have ridden Adams so far. But now there was no turning back. "Maybe when we know more about the aliens' operations, we'll understand why . . ."

"That is a preposterous accusation, and you'll answer for it," Adams said, his voice so tight it was hardly audible.

Bahr looked at him, then turned to Englehardt. "How soon can you give us figures?"

"Three days," said Englehardt.

"That's too long," Bahr said. "Make it two. Because by then we need to know whether spaceships can be built or not, and how soon."

"I'll stop you, Bahr," Adams grated. "I'll stop you and Englehardt both."

Englehardt laughed.

### *Chapter Nine*

IT WAS ONLY a matter of time now, Harvey Alexander realized as he crouched waiting beside the roadstrip, before he would make the inevitable slip that would signal the DIA search units like a waving red flag and bring them down on him. He had known, from the beginning, that BJ would become seriously involved, and he had done his best to talk her out of coming, but she had insisted. Now she had been expended, as he had known she would be. With luck, ingenuity, and full expeditious use of her face and figure she might make her story sell and get away with a fine or warning . . . but that seemed doubtful. At worst, they would hold her for checking, and uproot the connection between them. The ultimate consequences, for BJ, were painfully unpleasant to think about. For him . . .

For him, it was a reprieve, a few more hours to remain free to hunt down the answers that he had to find.

It was not a question of concealment. He knew from experience that he could hide, drop from sight so quickly and effectively that a nationwide concentrated manhunt would

not dig him out in years. But such a move would brand him irrevocably as an accomplice in the Wildwood raid, and confirm the charges Bahr had leveled against him.

The alternative was to find out what really had happened at Wildwood and get the information into the hands of authorities who could help him that could not be carried out in concealment. He had to gamble time against exposure.

And the worst of it was that he didn't know what to do.

The trip to Wildwood had been a complete fiasco. BJ had dug up clothes for him and found an old lieutenant's ID card for him from the foot locker of his things she had unaccountably kept. Some amphetamine had routed the last sedative effects from his mind. On the trip down to Wildwood they had listened to the foreign broadcasts on the alien landing in Canada, BJ frowning and shaking her head at the reports, he listening with a puzzling sense of detached curiosity, as though the whole matter, somehow, had no application whatever to him, but was something happening in a different world.

The reason was easy to see now. Clearly something had happened at Wildwood that he, for all his security and personal handling, had not known about. He had racked his brain for a memory of anything extraordinary or peculiar that had happened there in the preceding few weeks, anything that might have hooked in his mind and been pushed aside for want of explanation or significance, but he found nothing. If aliens had worked from within the plant, they had done so with consummate skill.

It had taken two hours in BJ's Volta to reach the vicinity of the Wildwood plant. They ran into the first roadblock fifteen miles north of the plant, and slid into a series of side-roads that kept them away from the main highway strips. Alexander directed her as they moved through two sleepy towns and across a river to the pillbox apartment buildings used by the civilian engineers who ran the plant.

"Are you sure you can trust this man?" BJ had asked him. "Are you sure he won't just turn you in?"

"No. I'm not sure who I can trust. We were friendly,

used to play chess together, that was all. But Powers might have something I can use, and I've got to take the chance. Take this right."

They wove through the winding roads of the apartment development. Alexander motioned her to stop, peered out at the neatly-kept lawns, yellow under the streetlamps. "I'll go from here. You go back to the road, and wait outside the entrance. Give me an hour. If I'm not back then, you get back to Chicago as fast as you can."

"I'll wait for you," she said.

"You do what I tell you," he said sharply. "If a police car blocked the entrance to this place, you'd never get out. I'll be all right."

He waited until the red tail light of the Volta had disappeared around the circle toward the entrance gate, and then moved across the lawn and into the building. The buildings were familiar; he had been quartered in a similar development farther down the river, and he remembered Bob Powers' door combination. He let himself into the building without signaling, took the stairs by the elevator, and stopped before the door marked 301.

The door opened a crack when he knocked. He saw Powers' face, puzzled-angry at first, then startled in recognition. "Alexander! Good lord, what are you doing here?"

"Let me in. I've got to talk to you."

The man hesitated for just a moment. Then he unlatched the chain, held the door open as Alexander stepped into the flat. "Look, do you want to get me blitzed?" Powers' voice was a harsh whisper. "They're looking for you, they've got a red alarm out."

"Nobody followed me," Alexander said. "This will only take a couple of minutes, you—"

He broke off as the man shook his head violently, jerking a thumb at the TV set in the corner. Alexander bit his lip. Of course they would have all Wildwood personnel on audio-control. He jerked open the door, pulled the engineer out into the hall. "You were on duty in the power pile before

the raid," he said desperately. "You must have seen something, noticed something out of the ordinary."

"No, there was nothing."

"Think! There must have been something."

"Look, Harvey, they grilled me for hours. There was nothing."

"I don't mean anything obvious," Alexander said. "I mean somebody behaving strangely, anything . . ."

The engineer was almost beside himself. "Look, they're liable to be here any minute. I tell you, there was nothing. Everything was running according to plan. They . . . they think you were the one. Didn't you hear the broadcast?"

"What broadcast?"

"The DIA director. There's a general Condition B on communications, travel permits canceled . . ."

Alexander swore. That meant BJ would be cut off from Chicago where she belonged, and that she would inevitably be picked up. "And he said I was implicated in the raid?"

"He didn't mention your name, but some scientists have been picked up under alien control."

He knew then that he couldn't rejoin BJ. If the bug monitor had been alert, DIA cars would already be moving in on the apartment development. He nodded to Powers and started down the corridor toward the fire escape stairs. It was an outside stairwell, and he saw the two DIA cars moving toward the building from the central circle.

He cursed, crouched close to the wall, and moved as silently as he could. A spotlight broke into the darkness from one of the cars, roamed the grounds, while the other started bumping across the lawn to cover the rear.

Then the spotlight caught something, and moved back to the row of hedge along the adjacent building. Suddenly BJ's Volta broke from the cover of the hedge, did a pirouette on the slippery grass and spun down the road toward the entrance, doing ninety from a dead stop in five seconds. The DIA siren screamed, and both cars broke into pursuit.

From the stairwell Alexander saw them skid on the circle as the little Volta in the lead met spotlights from the gate

head-on, crashed through the hastily-arranged road-block, and accelerated on the main road strip.

Alexander reached ground, and ran, keeping in the shadow of buildings as much as possible, then darting down the hill that separated the apartment houses from the fringe of woods along a secondary road. He stopped at the road, catching his breath in great gasps, and then ran, dropping down in the ditch whenever oncoming lights flickered into view.

He had given her a cover story: she had heard about the Wildwood incident and come down to see if her ex-husband had been hurt in the blast, since she had not heard anything from him. It might conceivably hold up, since he had been quartered in apartments nearby. They could hold her for not having a travel pass for more than 200 miles radius of Chicago, but maybe she could sell them that she was too excited and confused to remember. As long as they didn't put her under the polygraph, her story might hold up.

Until they grilled Powers, and then it would fall apart like cotton candy.

He shivered.

His hand touched something in his pocket, and he drew it out—money. Simple, practical, typical of BJ. She knew he had none, that he wouldn't ask her for it, that he needed it. Stupid, he thought with a sudden pang of bitterness, when people got married and split up and still felt that way about each other, and yet had to be all wrapped up in the inhibitions and conventions that kept BJ from saying, "I'm sorry we couldn't work it out, I was selfish, and I still love you, and I'd try it over again but I'm too bitter now, and still I feel guilty about it just the same and want to make it up to you somehow." Instead, she had just stubbornly driven him down here, given him money, and set herself up to give him the time he needed to break from his first bad blunder.

She had already paid for the ruined fragments of their life together. Even the tightest control couldn't make them forget what life had been before the crash—all the unscientific group pressures and outmoded mores, the things

that would always be right and wrong to them, and speakable and unspeakable. Of course, now the new educational programs were gradually removing that alleged stewpot of all emotional woes—the family—from existence in society. For the new generations that was fine, maybe, but for those like himself and BJ there was only the bitter hopelessness of trying to exist in the present and think in the past, as all exiled castes do.

The road crossed a secondary highway strip, and he turned toward the south. St. Louis was forty miles away.

Half an hour later headlights sprang up behind him that were too yellowed and dim to be police, so Alexander took a chance and stepped out beside the roadstrip to thumb. The old rattletrap Hydro slowed and stopped, and Alexander ran down the strip to climb in, slamming the door behind him. The driver was a worker, his yellow Wildwood plant badge still exposed. He was a man of thirty or thirty-five.

He looked Alexander over as he started the car again. "In a fight?" he asked.

Alexander carefully slipped into the speech pattern of his cover identity in the Mexican incident. "Uh? No, no' me. Spill. Took 'turn t'fast. Zip. In 'a ditch." He looked at the driver. "Gemme to St. Louis, huh?"

"Yeah, sure." The driver accepted his story without a frown. He was overheavy, with a flat moon face, and he was a talker. Already he had started talking about car wrecks and how his Hydro could only take a corner so fast any more, and he was too involved in his own bubblings to do any analytical thinking about why a man should be hitchhiking at two in the morning.

Alexander sank back in the seat, allowing the man to ramble without paying too much attention. He was worried about what was happening to BJ, and he was worried about the gulf that seemed to stretch before him. He could get to St. Louis, yes, but then what? From there, what could he do? As the car buzzed through the flat countryside, he probed at the problem against the background of the driver's chat-

tering until a word jerked him up sharply and set his heart hammering in his throat.

Alien.

"How's that?" he asked, trying to recall how the driver had begun his longwinded surrogate sentence.

"Like I said, the aliens," the driver said. "I was tellin' my nymph last night, 'a way I figger it the second wave will be comin' in any day now, like it said in the book, and maybe there'd be riots in town an' all, but she said maybe people wouldn't get too scared, I mean, knowin' what was comin' next, you know, 'cause they told her plenty of times in Tech School how it was not knowin' what was comin' that made all the riots so bad back in the crash days. So I told her not to worry, 'cause if it looked like they were comin' to Wildwood again I'd stay home and take care of her an t' hell with work."

"Oh," Alexander said, still not comprehending.

"'Course she gets scared kinda easy that way, you know. Maybe they'll wanna use her for a breeder unit or something, like they do with cows, you know—sort of like an incubator, it says in the book. She's afraid if they do anything like that to her she won't be able to, you know, sex it up any more. She's kinda hot, y'know, and we still got four months contract to run before we switch off."

"Breeder units," Alexander said slowly.

"Yeah, the aliens. You know. You seen the book, huh?"

"Y' got me runnin'," Alexander said. "What book?"

"The alien invasion book, o'course." The man looked at him in surprise. "Ain't you seen it yet?"

Alexander shook his head numbly. "Don't read much . . ."

"You're fixated, Jack. You're really repressed. That pulpie's been goin' the rounds for six months; everybody's seen it. What a lover-cover! Say, you ain't a book-snooper?"

Alexander relaxed slowly. "Not me. I been away." He saw now what the trouble was. Book and magazine publishing, like TV and radio, had been under BURINF control since the early post-crash days, and here especially BURINF had used the double standard circulation techniques with in-



credible success to carry DEPCO control propaganda to the huge urban populations. Standard publishing channels were controlled and censored; their print orders and outlets carefully designated by VE equation analysis and machine computation. The vast quantity of "live" psych-control material went out through underworld channels. This included pornomags, feelie-tapes, all the vile and violent entertainment and expression sops that could be counted upon to satiate all levels at their own levels. The BURINF-created myth of the book-snoopers provided the necessary stimulus of salaciousness and illegality to insure that the material would be widely circulated hand to hand, and above all, read. But a book about alien invaders . . .

"You say it's been out for six months?" he said to the driver.

"Yeah, sure, you mean you really haven't read it? It was supposed to be just a story, you know, but now with the Wildwood raid and the Canadian landing, and now the blackout, everybody knows it was the real thing, y'know? This is just the first wave, like it says, testing our defenses and getting hypno control over all the key people, softening us up for for the big wave. Why, they've been catching our teevies for years. Probably even learned how to unscramble our topsec sendouts and everything, just like the book says."

"Does it tell how they're going to invade?"

"Oh, sure, right down to the button; only it doesn't say how long between the first and second waves, y'know. That's wha's got my nymph so scared. Hasn't scared *me* much, but that's prob'ly because I'm better adjusted, I'm really a pretty well adjusted guy. Went to a good Playschool, you know, and I can get along with everybody and I don't go fightin' back and gettin' all twisted up inside. Even the group-doc at works thinks I'm pretty well adjusted; just the same, though, I wouldn't want any aliens nervin' me into a twitcher-coma, or using me for a food culture incubator, or white-mousing me, or anything."

"Yeah, I know," Alexander said. "You know a place I can get this book?"

"I'd let you have mine, on'y I let my nymph's girlfriend take it to show her daddy. We kinda switch off sometimes, even if it ain't strictly legal until my contract's up, but sometimes even a well-adjusted guy like me gets all tied up and can't loosen up, you know. I ain't scared at all, o'course, but some of the things that the aliens can do can really make you shaky. You don't think that means I'm unstable, do you?"

"No, your group-doc has just been slipping up, not helping relax you and get you back into the swing," Alexander said comfortingly, remembering his BURINF days.

"Yeah, that's what I've been tellin' my nymph, the group-docs oughta know what to tell us about the aliens so we know what we oughta think; it's their fault if we get kinda shaky and get screaming dreams sometimes. But look, Jack, we're gettin' pretty near my place, so if you wanta you can come up and meet my nymph. I ain't got any old-fashioned blocks about her, you know, and any friend of mine is a friend of hers."

"Thanks, some other time." The car had been wheeling through the low, drab buildings of north St. Louis. "Look, what did you say that book was called?"

"*Alien Invaders*. You can get it anywhere. You sure you don't wanta come up for one round anyway?"

"No thanks," Alexander said, feeling a little sick, not so much with disgust as with pity, "but give her my love."

"All twenty-nine, and same to you."

Alexander stepped onto the curb and waved, and walked quickly toward the man-strip as the Hydro buzzed around the corner.

The town was dead in early-morning stillness, and he headed for the downtown section. The gulf before him had suddenly narrowed, and he thought he saw the first step across.

A pulpie book called *Alien Invaders*.

It was ingenious, and deadly, and it fitted, Alexander realized as he sipped surro-coffee in a stall in the deserted

downtown area, waiting for the city to come alive. He knew that BURINF would never have countenanced a book like that. Actually, it could not have known of its existence, or it would have been nailed before a dozen copies had been circulated. No publisher in the country had dared try to launch a science-fiction or fantasy book since the crash, under the tacit threat of embargoes on paper and typemetal, and of DEPCO investigation and reassignment of Stability Ratings if that was not enough.

But the channels of distribution were there, created by BURINF, and the psychological Achilles' heel of the society was there, too—the abiding, hysterical, carefully nurtured fear of space and anything associated with space.

Quite abruptly, Alexander could see a pattern. Early, undetected landings . . . contact, perhaps psychological control of key individuals . . . a concentrated study of the society and psychology of the inhabitants . . . circulation of a book, fanciful enough in nature until the things it predicted began happening . . . then landings that were less secretive, designed to draw attention to feed the growing fear and panic, in preparation for the final, massive blow.

He dropped his coin in the slot and went out into the cool, gray early-morning ugliness. In his head the syrupy tunelessness of the coffee-stall vendo music was still recycling, monotonous, deliberately unresolved, always running itself back into the beginning of a phrase. He walked faster, dredged up the theme from *Marche Slav* to drive the vendopop from his mind, blinked a little as the sun hit him through a break between two building cubes.

Near the river front he found a street that looked likely, crowded with bars and porno-mag stalls and drunks sleeping on doorsteps. The first step would be easy: get a copy of the book. At least he thought it would be easy until he tried it; then, quite suddenly, it wasn't so easy after all.

The first stand was completely out, sold out for a week. Another place the vendor started to shake his head, then blinked at Alexander suspiciously and claimed he'd never heard of the book. In a third the last copy had gone the day

before, and the distributor wouldn't be back for a week at least. A fourth, fifth and sixth try were equally fruitless.

Back on the street, Alexander looked around him at the sluggish hesitancy with which the city was coming to life. There was none of the downtown hustle of the early job-rush. People seemed to be moving aimlessly, stopping to gaze in windows, congregating in small groups on the street corners. It was something Alexander had not seen since the early days of the crash, when the people, not yet desperate enough for violence, had walked about stunned, realizing with painful unwillingness that the little familiar formalities of dull, dreary work were suddenly meaningless.

And now, on this morning, he saw and *felt* the same blunted apathy.

It was wrong, somehow, in the same way the Wildwood raid had been wrong, in the same way a pulp magazine called *Alien Invaders* was wrong . . . all fitting, but not quite fitting. DEPCO, he knew, should be clocking this rumbling volcano; they should be furiously at work draining off the pressure before the action stage was reached, before the explosion came. That was what DEPCO was organized to do, *had* to do to maintain the stability that had to be maintained.

But there was no evidence of DEPCO activity, and Alexander, seeing the vacuous, frightened faces passing him, felt a growing sense of alarm, as if all the twittering birds and monkeys in this nightmare psycho-structured jungle had suddenly stilled at the soft low cough of a stalking killer.

He found the place he was looking for, taking a spinner across town to the crowded warehouse and trucking terminal. He saw the lettering on the third floor window of a decrepit plasti-brick building of the last century: *Magdisco*, the local warehouse of the sprawling Magazine Distributing Company. Since hardbound books were practically nonexistent any more, except for collector's items and university archives, all books and magazines were distributed by magazine wholesaling agencies, and Magdisco was the largest,

and the one least critical of the material it handled. Alexander crossed the street, assuming his Qualchi slouch, and went up the narrow flight of stairs.

The operation from the warehouse was largely automatic, and the tiny, littered office space was empty. The rest of the place seemed to be crammed to the ceiling with bundles of remainders, nude glossies, and a huge stack of particularly disgusting action sets that were obviously meant for the Playschool contraband circuit. Alexander's eyes searched the piles for the title he was looking for, but there was no evidence of it.

"Help you?" A thin, putty-faced man with thick glasses appeared out of the file room in the back.

"I'm looking for a copy of *Alien Invaders*."

The man lost interest. "Sorry, we don't retail."

"I was thinking of buying in quantity."

"Got a retailer's license and quota?"

Alexander let his eyes shift to the stack of glossies in the corner. "This was . . . uh . . . for private distribution."

"Look, beat it, huh? I got an agreement with the retailers and racks. I don't sell to private parties . . . and they buy up to quota. I'm happy, they're happy. Get your copy at a rack; I'm not cuttin' my throat." The man plunked down behind a desk and turned to the talktyper.

Obviously subtle questioning wouldn't help. Alexander's ID card was actually ten years out of date, but it looked official when he flashed it under the man's nose.

"Lieutenant Alexander, Army CI. I'm checking up on *Alien Invaders*. I want to know who wrote it, where he lives, what else he's written. And I want all the copies of the book you have."

The man stopped typing in midsentence, staring up in alarm, because Alexander had slouched into the place with the shifty, cautious manner of his Mexican cover identity. Now suddenly he stiffened and barked out his orders in the voice of a very tough and very impatient CI lieutenant.

The man hardly looked at the card. "I . . . I . . . we don't have that information here, Lieutenant."

"You have it," Alexander said, stepping past him to the files and yanking the first drawer open.

"Wait a minute, wait a minute . . . I'll look." The man fell over himself to get to the files. "The filing system is . . . er . . . kind of complicated . . . special . . . with the company. . . ."

"You use alphabetical chronological," Alexander said, "or else you'll have misfiling charges to answer for."

"Maybe it's in the other cabinet. I'll look in the other cabinet," the man stammered. It might have been a stall, but the man seemed genuinely scared.

"You'd better find it if you don't want to log some poly time," Alexander said. "We might throw in a few questions about where you get the Playschool contraband over there. That's you; that's not Magdisco." Unregistered contraband and interfering with the Playschool conditioning programs could mean recoop and very probably a new identity in a labor battalion. The man fairly tore into the files while Alexander ransacked his desk, pulled out a much-thumbed copy of *Playschool Champ*, a standard authorized porno that had been written ten years ago when such things were sensational rather than commonplace everyday fact. The writing, by one of the best BURINF copywriters, had been inspired virtuosity, and the book, widely distributed, had entered into the thinking of the public and paved the way for the family-disassociation theories of the Playschools.

"There's nothing here," the man said, dusty from the files.

"Let's have a copy of the book," Alexander said.

"They're all sold out. They've been sold out for months."

"You're lying," Alexander said. "You wouldn't be out of anything that's selling that fast." He saw the man look around wildly, ready to make a break, and he moved in fast, clamping a wristlock on him.

"I don't have any. Please! I don't have any . . ." Alexander jerked his arm, and he twisted and groaned, and then said, "Okay, okay. . . ."

"Fast," Alexander said.

"I was just told not to give any to investigators, that's all.

I just had orders," the man whimpered, pulling a book out from beneath a stack of glossies. The cover was a masterpiece of the art, the title fairly screaming out *Alien Invaders: How Soon?* The byline was Diff Rarrel, the imprint Squid Pubs.

"Listen, you won't tell anybody I gave it to you, huh? Just say you found it here. I just get orders, that's all."

"Who gave you the orders?" Alexander said, dropping the book in his pocket. The man didn't answer. "They don't publish anything like this in Squid. They just do glossies and comics. Who was the source publisher?"

The man made a break for the door. Alexander thrust out a foot, tripped him, and fell on him hard. He pulled the man's arm up behind him, and then noticed the small variously aged scars and realized what caused the desperate silence. Whoever was supplying him was also giving the orders.

Alexander stabbed in the dark. Drug traffic took size and power. Only one publishing house had that kind of power, and the ruthlessness to go with it. "Was it Colossus Books?"

The man just groaned as his shoulder ligaments began to tear a little more.

"We can find out under a poly . . ."

The fight went out of the man, and he started blubbing. Alexander hacked him sharply across the neck, left him unconscious on the floor and made his way down the narrow steps. It was Colossus that the book came from, the same as *Playschool Champ* had ten years before.

At the street level his old Qualchi experience made him cautious; he covered the street quickly with a glance, then walked with a swift, shambling pace toward the man-strip at the corner.

When he had gone ten paces he knew he was right. All the fumbling at the files had been a stall after all; there was a two-wheeler moving slowly down the street a hundred yards behind him, with two men in it.

Still sweating from the physical workout upstairs, his heart pounding in his throat, Alexander was pretty sure he could handle two men if they didn't use stunners. He estimated the

distance to the man-strip, and decided that they wouldn't dare use stunners with all the traffic on the street, so he didn't rush.

He felt a little sick; every step took him farther from the law, deeper into violence. He hadn't physically attacked a man for years, and he had thought that he never would again. But then he realized he was fighting now, fighting for his life, and he felt a wave of elation drive the sickness away. Odd that even with the car following slowly behind him he felt safe, as safe as a man fleeing recoop could feel. But he was also puzzled.

Were the stalkers DIA men?

Aliens?

Who?

### *Chapter Ten*

IT WAS A DODGING, running game, trying to shake a tail in a crowded city when he didn't know how many of them there were, nor who they were, nor what they wanted. The alarm had been out for him on open police channels for eighteen hours, he was certain, and on public broadcasts for at least six. But DIA did not normally stalk their prey, particularly in a city where there was a large field office and plenty of local support. They moved fast, struck hard, and disappeared with their quarry.

Alexander tried to think clearly, to recall some past association with St. Louis that might afford cover at least for a while. It was the desperateness, the hopelessness that probably did it, dredging up from the past all the cunning and energy of his Qualchi days, when he had played the nerve-racking game of dodging and hiding without using any of the standard devices so the Qualchi would not realize that he was outrunning them.

Bombardment was the technique he had used then. He didn't know if it was used by DIA or BRINT; he had gotten the idea from some super-slow cloud chamber movies he had



watched in his Army training. The idea was simple: to start branching trails so the pursuit would become confused as to whether to stick with him alone or follow the other trails as well.

He set up a couple of dummy branches first. He stopped in a mylebar dealer's and bought a raincoat and hat, then into a bookstore, haggled with the book dealer for a while and gave him the book back, but only after tucking the receipt for the raincoat into the book.

Then he took a whirler up a few blocks, detoured through a mag stand dealing in second-hand mags, into a urinal, then out again when the vendor was busy, ducking quickly around a corner. He ripped open the package with the raincoat and hat, slipped the coat on, pulled the hat low, and walked off at right angles with a couple of late-lunching business men. He stepped into a movie house, and right out a side exit, raced down the side alley, slipping out of the raincoat and hat and jettisoning them in a trash can. He jerked his jacket off, even though it was a little cool, and mingled with a knot of people on a man-strip, carrying his jacket and faking a conversation with a dumpy housewife.

The next stop was real, a hotel lobby. He flashed a half-credit note at a very young bellhop.

"Blonde or brunette?"

"Information," Alexander said. The boy stiffened, his hand dropping too quickly into his pocket. Alexander felt a little glow of satisfaction. He could always spot a KM contact. He knew what was in the pocket, too. He let a little more of the half-credit note show. "I want a KM cutout man."

The boy's shifty, cunning eyes looked him over carefully. Alexander sagged into the slouch of his cover identity, his mouth twitching at one side. The bellhop was satisfied. He did not look like a DIA inspector.

"Shine boy, two blocks down. Tell him you're from Ronny." He picked the half-credit note expertly from Alexander's hand and turned away. As Alexander went out through the door, he saw the bellhop moving toward a phone-booth.

"Ronny sent you?" the shine boy asked, a sallow, impassive-faced nine-year-old.

Alexander nodded and showed the corner of a half-credit note.

"Perv?" the boy asked, then added hastily, "I'm no trade . . . not for any credits . . ."

"Information," Alexander said. "Where can we talk?"

"Shine, mister?" Then, in a lower tone, "What do you want?"

"A tape library hook-up. I can't get at the files in this area. I want somebody to file a probe for me and bring me the report, someone with a local ID card that's up-to-date and cleared for financial reports."

The boy looked suspicious. "That all? Why don't you try an eagle?"

"No good. Can't take a chance on a straight lawyer without an ID." As he expected, the lie about having no ID cost him a three credit reward on the spot, but it overcame suspicion.

"All right. I'll take you to Wah."

Wah, it turned out, was an eleven year old girl at the South St. Louis Playschool, traffic monitor for the third grade and a trusty at the school. It didn't surprise him. Because of the terrific political pressure the organized KidMobs could bring to bear, the teachers and supervisors were always happy to give them the trusty jobs so they could supervise the other youngsters who were not members. The chilling thing was the authority, the sheer, uninhibited power-feeling that this cherubic, plump-cheeked little blonde called Wah exuded, stopping truck traffic with a wave of her grimy hand or a shrill toot, moving the gnome army across the truck strip, cuffing the slow ones. To the others around her, Alexander realized, she must have filled the gaping need for authority and love and protection left vacant by the family disintegration system of the Playschools and unsatisfactorily compensated for by the most thoroughgoing DEPCO theories, and from them she got the terrific violent power that satisfied her furiously uncivilized mind.

The new crop of Playschool "students" were part of the non-authority experiments that DEPCO had been playing with for the past ten years, a violently group-oriented group of childlings elaborately deprived of civilized restraints. What DEPCO had not foreseen was the manner in which some of them saw through every propaganda trick directed at them, and with the horrifyingly practical cynicism of unmodulated savages built up a hierarchy of KM organization which filled the holes that DEPCO had left unfilled.

In his BURINF days Alexander had spent a couple of months of depressing research on propaganda effects at the famous Trivettown Playschool, and he knew the toughmindedness of those KM's. And he knew that it was a sobering and discouraging opinion in BURINF that DEPCO was building a Frankenstein, of which little chubby-legged, smiling, cold-eyed eleven-year-olds like Wah were the brains.

"I'm Wah," she said to him. "How many credits do you have on you?"

"Enough," Alexander said.

"I'll decide," Wah said shortly. Alexander felt a stir behind him, and his wallet was lifted. He didn't move. He still had half his money in his sock, so even if they rolled him he wouldn't be helpless.

Wah whistled softly, held a fifty-credit note up to the light to check for counterfeit. "Real," she concluded. "Marked?"

"No."

She eyed him. Then: "We'll take a chance. Come on."

Alexander nodded, and followed her.

First branch-point!

Considering the sectionalization and communications blackout, four hours was an extremely short time to wait for an answer, Alexander decided. It should have been virtually impossible for any information to get from the Washington files to the BURINF center in New York, and then by relay to a legal office in St. Louis, where the eagle turned the photoprint over to the KM cutout.

And as he stared at the report, Alexander decided that for fifty credits it was dirt cheap.

It was a corporation statement, list of officers, deposition of primary shares, list of subsidiaries and order of battle of the Colossus Publishing Corporation.

But Colossus, the report indicated, was itself a subsidiary. Controlling interests in Colossus were owned by Poughkeepsie Research, owned and operated by Harvard University, which, as everyone in BURINF knew, was part of the constellation of Robling Titanium.

It didn't make sense. Not the business tie-in—no one associated with the government could really be surprised to learn that any given company, however obscure, might ultimately be traced back to Carl Englehardt and his Robling interests—but the book.

Why had Colossus published *Alien Invaders*? How could they have published it without risking their multi-million-credit necks to a BURINF check and ultimate prosecution?

Alexander tore up the photoprint and turned to Wah. "I've got to get East," he said. "How can I get to New York by tomorrow?"

"Drift," Wah said. "Hitch a ride with a trucker."

"They're stopping trucks," he said.

"That's right," another KM confirmed. "It's the freak hunt. Even the regular lines are getting stopped by DIA."

"I'll cover expenses," Alexander said.

"Sorry," said Wah. "I'd like to take your money, but we have to keep up our standing." Alexander nodded, noticed unobtrusively the hard avaricious glint in the eye of a couple of ten-year-old bowmen. One of them was toying with his bow, a small spring-steel crossbow that could fire a five-inch shaft through a man's body at fifty feet, yet folded up into a pseudo-jackknife.

"Okay," he said. "Thanks anyway." He started down the stairs of the deserted loft the local KM used for a headquarters. Behind him he heard voices suddenly raised, and Wah arguing briefly. He leaped down the remaining stairs, then paused to scatter a handful of small credit notes on the

floor where the light would hit them. He heard a clatter on the stairs, and burst out on the street, catching the eight-year-old chickie in the chest with his knee. He seized a bicycle and pedaled off furiously, staying in shadows, crouching over the handlebars of the awkwardly small two-wheeler.

There was a roar of pursuit behind him, giving way to a louder greedy squabble as the pursuers stopped to pick up the scattered credits. After a moment he heard the yelps as the bicycle posse started after him.

At the man-strip at the end of the street he parked the bike on the loading deck, dropped a token in the gate and hurried through, leaving the bike behind. His guess was right. The KM's would not pay a token apiece to follow him once they had recovered the bike. But the alarm would be out about a drifter with money.

He knew he would have to get out of St. Louis by morning.

Above all, he had to get to New York, to somehow establish a contact with a BRINT agent high enough up to listen to what he had to say, not as a fugitive and possibly an alien-influenced traitor, but as a man who had somehow managed to keep his head and see the way through to the truth.

The report on Colossus had been the key, jarring the not-quite-fitting pieces down into a compact perfect fit, a quite different pattern than he had considered before, but a pattern that was for the first time unmistakably clear.

He knew now what had happened at Wildwood. He knew that he could not waste a minute now. He might already be too late.

Once on the man-strip he began switching strips at the switching centers to see if his previous tail had managed to follow him after he left the temporary protection of the KMs. There was no one following him on the strip itself, but a Hydro was moving doggedly on the roadstrip below. Alexander crouched back out of stunner range, fear creeping up his spine again. They couldn't be DIA; they would have

picked him up long ago. But if they were aliens, why were they stalking him so patiently?

He dropped off the strip as it passed back through the trucking center. What he needed was an accomplice so his pursuers would have another branch-point to worry about, and so he could get a truck.

It was the only way. With a truck, and a trucker's ID he could drive to New York; and plenty of New York long hauls went through at this time of night. But he needed a decoy bait to get a trucker out of a brightly lighted diner and into an alley or motel room.

He found his prospect in the third diner he checked. It was surprising to find a woman left in one of them; most of the night runs had left already. He walked up behind her, grabbed her by the wrist. "Let's take a walk," he said.

Her lips twisted into a snarl as she whirled on him. "DEPCO?" she asked, the words sticking hatefully in her throat.

Alexander shook his head. "A friend." He tightened his grip on her wrist and started to walk her out. He had not seen his shadow since the last switch on the man-strips, but he paused warily at the door, then pulled her out into the darkness.

"Two credits," she whispered, "flat rate, if you don't take too long, two credits, you can take your pick. . . ."

"This is something special," he said. He told her what he wanted, then slipped her a ten-credit note.

"But where?"

"There's a motel behind there."

"He might kill me."

"He won't kill anybody, don't worry."

He watched her go back into the diner. Ten minutes later she came out with a heavy-set, stupid-looking man with a trucker's cap on. They walked back to the motel office, then down the darkened path toward the cabins.

Alexander moved after them silently. He couldn't count on handling a hulking truck driver alone, but there are times when a man is helpless. He hoped the woman would

remember the signal, and fought down the intense wave of self-loathing that welled up in him. There was no stopping now, no turning back to order and precision and the proper running of things, no turning back to the warm, easy security of Absolute Stability, the peaceful quiet of not having to think or worry. A week before he would not have dreamed of doing the things he was doing now as a matter of course.

*But it was not as a matter of course, not now, he thought. It was a matter of survival.*

He heard them inside, heard the woman's voice, low and suggestive, then dropping into a stream of underworld jargon so filthy Alexander was afraid for a moment she would frighten the quarry away. Then it was quiet, with only murmuring sounds, and he waited for the signal.

Silence. It took an instant to register that it was too quiet, suddenly deathly still. He gripped the latch, turned it and burst into the darkened room.

Then he screamed as the light hit his eyes, glaring, blinding, burning white, searing his retinas, and he clamped his hands over his face . . .

He felt the blow at the back of his head, and then the glare-whiteness dissolved into blackness.

He was in a room without windows, a single door, a single chair, utterly black, although he could feel other presences there, other light breathing quite near him. He could not move his head, and he realized, quite suddenly, that it was clamped into a frame on the chair.

And it was silent, except for the voice that was asking him questions. It had been asking them for a long time, it seemed, and he tried to orient himself, to remember when the questions had started, and what they had been about.

But only now could he focus on the voice, slowly repeating a question, pausing, then another, pausing, a curiously metallic, unmodulated voice like a person talking with laryngitis.

He had heard that voice before, years before in the communications shack in Antarctica, transcribing messages from

Control in Washington, and he remembered now, with a jolt of fear, what the voice was.

It was the characteristic electronic voice of a tik-talker.

### Part III

## THE TIGER PIT

### *Chapter Eleven*

LIBBY ALLISON was kneeling on the floor playing googly-goo with the tow-headed baby in the playpen when Julian Bahr walked in, threw his coat on the bed-couch, and walked around a few seconds impatiently while she continued to ignore him. Then his impatience seemed to evaporate, and he sat heavily on the edge of the relaxo, and with a half-groan, half-sigh began to pound his fist into the palm of his left hand.

Libby looked up then. "Trouble?" she asked.

Bahr's only answer was a sudden vicious smack of fist against palm, as if in his mind he had just driven his knuckles into the fragile bone-structure of somebody's face.

"DEPCO?"

"That too."

She put the youngster back in the playpen, and brushed her hair back where his small hands had been pulling at it. "What else?" she said.

He didn't answer for a minute or more. His jaw was knotted in anger, his huge body tense, but there was something else in his face, perhaps just in his eyes, when he looked at her. Then he shook his head helplessly. "The elephant, again."

Libby turned sharply, the baby forgotten, her heart suddenly thumping wildly, her trained psychologist's mind focusing abruptly on an almost simultaneous kaleidoscope of incidents, remarks, mannerisms, and the few desperate grud-



ging revelations that formed in her mind the clinical picture of Julian Bahr.

"Last night," he said angrily. "Actually this morning, just before I woke up." He held out his left hand for her to see. The knuckles were cut and bruised.

"Julian . . ."

"I was hitting the wall. I hurt my hand, I guess that was what woke me up." He sat quietly for a moment, his breathing shallow and rapid. Holding his hand, she could feel the furious pounding of his pulse, watch the slow tensing of back and shoulder muscles as if he were trying by sheer physical force to throw off an ugly, frightening memory.

Finally he stood up, jammed his hands in his pockets, walked around the room once, then came back and sat down. "All right," he said. "It's the first time in two years. Why did it come back, Libby? I went to sleep all right. I worked until I was ready to collapse, I can always get to sleep then, but I woke up at three in the morning beating my fist on the wall, and all I can remember is the elephant."

"Did it start out the same way? Out in the street?"

"Yes, the same way. The same woman, too. Some man was looking for her, and she had to hide, so I went into the building with her. There was the long hall with doors all up and down, and little rooms opening into it, and the elephant was at the end of the hall."

She nodded wearily. It was the same, detail for detail. "And the elephant picked her up?"

"Just like before—in his trunk. He wasn't hurting her any but he was going to carry her off, and she screamed for me to get a blanket and put it over his eyes so he couldn't see. So I took the blanket and threw it over the elephant's eyes, but it stuck on his tusks and only partly covered his eyes. He started to come down the hall, and I knew he could see me, and I had to run, only I couldn't run fast enough, so I went into one of the little rooms and closed the door. The elephant went right on by, but when he got to the end of the corridor he started back, with people going past him like he wasn't there. There was no way out of the room, and I

couldn't jump, and the elephant began pushing in the door . . .

He stopped for breath, and straightened his back for a moment. "Then I woke up. I was hitting the wall and I woke up." He sighed again, his breathing deep and labored.

"The woman," Libby said. "Did you know her?"

"No."

"Was she with the elephant when he was chasing you?"

"No," Bahr said. "After I started to run she wasn't there at all." He looked up at her, suffering in his face and eyes. "What does it mean, Libby? Why does it . . . scare me like that? Why does it start coming back now? I haven't had it in two years."

She sat down, shaking her head and holding his hand between hers. "Julian, the last time, I told you . . ."

"But what have I got to be scared of?" he roared, jerking to his feet. "You want to dig and poke and scrape things open in my mind, but those things are all gone now, they aren't ever going to come back again; I won't let them come back!" He collapsed into the seat again, the anger fading as suddenly as it flared. "It's no good, Libby, it's just no good. I can't do it your way."

"It's the only way I can help you. And I want to help you, you know that."

"I know." He leaned back, breathing slower again, more relaxed. "Thank God I can come here sometimes," he said, almost to himself. "Sometimes things start pressing in until it's more than I can stand. Here I can rest."

"How do you feel now?" she asked.

"Better, I guess. Pretty good. God, I'm hungry! Haven't you got something to eat?"

"I'll make some sandwiches and coffee," she said, and went out into the tiny kitchenette.

Bahr paced up and down the room a few times as she put the coffee on the sonic unit. Then she didn't hear him walking any more, and she glanced out to see if he had left.

He was crouched, one knee on the floor beside the playpen, poking his huge finger at the child, who struggled to thrust

it aside, and then grabbed onto it with small un-co-ordinated hands. Finally Bahr chuckled and picked up the baby in his huge hands. He began to swing the child up and down, toss him in the air, the pale blue eyes regarding him with wide surprise, and each time Bahr caught him he would whisper a soft "Ahhhhhh . . ."

Then Bahr, the lesser, began to squall, and the big man glanced around the room guiltily, and seeing that no one was looking, lowered the loud one back into the playpen.

"The kid's crying," Bahr said roughly. "Why don't you feed him?"

"I will," Libby said. *When he's alone, she thought, when he's alone he's different. He's almost human until he thinks people are looking at him.*

Suddenly Bahr was behind her, jabbing his thumb into her ribs, laughing as she jumped. "What's the matter?" he said. "I'm starving, and you let the coffee boil over."

"Just thinking," she said, but there were tears in her eyes.

She waited until he had finished his coffee before she told him about Adams' visit during the afternoon.

"You must have been out of your mind," she said. "I told you DEPCO would be watching that announcement speech. And then you stood up there and shouted to the world that we were being invaded."

Bahr looked at her and grinned. "I hope they got plenty to see. I put it on the line, all right. *Somebody* had to."

"Oh, you put it on the line, all right. Do you know what you looked like, out there with all those cameras? Like Marc Antony doing 'friends and Romans.' Do you think the people in DEPCO are idiots?"

"The ones I know."

"Julian, you cut your own throat with that speech. DEPCO doesn't have to wait until they interview you. They can slap an injunction on your job on plain suspicion of Instability and schedule you for interview when they have time."

"They aren't going to have the time," Bahr said. "Look . . . they're scared. They can pull that Instability bunk and

jerk men out of their jobs when there's nothing on fire, but not during an emergency."

"They can, and they will," she said.

"How many people did they dump out of jobs during the last Condition B? What about the Southwest during the last Chinese landing down there, when they had the blowups? How many key people did they dump then because they twitched or doodled the wrong way? The answer is not a damned one, and they're not going to pull me out now, because there's nobody to replace me. And if they were going to do it, Adams would already have run it through after the conference yesterday."

"Did you have a run-in with Adams?"

"Englehardt did. He's the head of Robling, and he believes in doing something instead of patting the public on the fanny and telling them everything is going to be all right."

Libby looked up at him, and her face was suddenly white. "What does he propose to do?"

"Build spaceships and go after them."

"Spaceships! But, oh, that's ridiculous. Everyone from DEPCO right down to the Machines will stop it. You mean he actually *proposed* that?"

"He's got backing. The military and DEPEX are with him."

"They don't count. DEPCO has the final say on something like that."

"Well, maybe this time DEPCO won't," Bahr said sharply. "You and your damned psych-docs mumbling about symbols and fixations. *I'm* the one who's got to fight the aliens, and they're not going to turn up for analysis. This is no little guerrilla campaign this time; we may need those ships to survive. Did you ever think of that? Your therapy and adjustments aren't worth a damn when it comes to staying alive."

"That's not the important thing right now," Libby said. "All DEPCO has ever tried to do was to change a few minor things, like wars and squalor and neurosis. And that means catching those things at the roots."

"Garbage," Bahr said. "Englehardt put his finger on it when he said we had no place to go, and that is why everybody is afraid. If they had something to do, they wouldn't be afraid any more."

"Do *you* have something to do?" she asked him.

"You bet your life I have. Run the DIA. Get to the bottom of this alien business."

"Are you afraid?"

"Certainly not. I'm too busy to be afraid. I . . ."

"But you dream about elephants."

Bahr's mouth closed and he was silent. Libby stood up to avoid his eyes. It hit him where he couldn't fight back, she knew, but somehow the only way she could make an impression on Bahr was to hurt him. "You don't understand," she said slowly, "and you've *got* to understand. There are things that drive people to do things, and they don't even recognize the reason. They think up all sorts of fantastic cover-lies to somehow justify doing things that they just can't help doing. That's why DEPCO was set up—to spot those drives and do something about them, dig them out by the roots. That's why I've been trying to help you for four years now, Julian, because you don't even understand what's happening inside your own mind; you just keep finding reasons and excuses and urgent necessities for everything you do, and blaming other people for everything that's done to you or everything that blocks you. I've tried to show you that it's all inside you, in your own mind, but you just say no, stall DEPCO, get me a white card, I won't let them stop me. . . ." She broke off helplessly. "You don't even know why you *want* a white card."

"I certainly do," Bahr said. "I can't get anywhere without a white card stability rating. A green card is two strikes against me everywhere I turn."

"And if you got a white card . . . Suppose you got a white card, and you got everything you wanted . . . then what?"

"What do you mean, then what?"

"What would you do if you had everything you wanted?"

"I'd change things," Bahr said harshly. "I'd change everything that got in my way."

"But after you'd done all that . . . after you'd done *everything* you wanted . . . then what would you want?"

Bahr stared at her, not comprehending. "That couldn't happen. Everybody gets in my way, tries to stop me. I could never get everything I want."

Libby sighed, and ran a hand through his hair. "On that one thing, you're right, Julian," she said. "You don't know how right you are."

She had hoped that maybe she had reached him somehow, that possibly some spark of contact or understanding had been struck, but when he asked her later, "Well, what about Adams?" she knew that she hadn't reached him at all.

"I'll try to stall him as long as possible," she said. "I don't think it will do much good. Adams is suspicious, and he's taking a personal interest."

"I hope he does," Bahr said sharply, "because I'm taking a personal interest in him. What do you know about him?" "Why?"

"Because if he's what I think he is, I've got a couple of specialists on my staff who can quiet him down for good."

She whirled on him. "Julian, you wouldn't . . ."

"Look, you don't seem to understand. Adams or nobody like him is going to put me out of a job on a Stability check."

"You think you can blackmail him out of it? It wouldn't do you any good. There are other people in DEPCO just as big as Adams, and they can't be bought off or blackmailed. Julian, there's a storm working up in my office. Aliens or no aliens, I can guarantee that you'll be up against a prelim by tomorrow. And you won't pass it."

"I passed the other probes."

"Because I told you the answers beforehand, question by question. But I can't do that on a prelim; they use a polygraph."

"They just poke around the sore spots, don't they? They

skip the questions that you don't bounce on, and just dig in the soft spots?"

She hesitated. "Yes, they study the prelim awhile before they go into a deep probe."

"Fine," Bahr said. "Then you can brief me on it."

"You couldn't use dummy answers under a poly, they'd bounce all over the place. With your adrenals . . ."

"I can control my reactions," he said.

"Your face muscles—maybe. Not your blood pressure and your sweat glands."

"Not even under hypnosis?"

"Even then, even with suggested reactions to specific trigger questions, I still don't know if it would work. You'd have to know the questions."

"You can find out the questions."

"No," Libby said.

He stared at her. "What do you mean, no?"

"I mean up until now I could always say I'd mis-evaluated your pers scores, or I was emotionally involved and didn't know it. But deliberate faking on a prelim is a federal offense."

He sat silent for a minute. Then he spread his hands wide. "Look, I've never asked you for much. I've always just told you, before, and you did what I told you. Now I'm asking you, and if asking doesn't do it, by God, I *will* tell you. I've got too much at stake to trip on this thing now. You've got to get me past this prelim."

"I can't do it," she said. "If they caught me, I'd be through. I'd never get a professional rating again."

"I'm not talking about professional ratings," Bahr said quietly. "I'm talking about you and me."

"No," Libby said.

"I'll make a deal with you. You've always wanted to find out about the elephant. You've always wanted to get me into deep analysis and run me straight through from scratch. You know even DEPCO can't get me into deep analysis if I block; I'd have to be willing, co-operative. All right, you get me through this prelim. As soon as I get this alien thing

and Englehardt's project squared away just enough so it doesn't take all my time day and night, I'll let you start analysis. I won't fight you, I'll co-operate."

She knew he was lying, and suddenly she didn't care. He didn't know he was lying now. Right now he thought he meant it, and even though she saw through the mask with perfect, frightening clarity, she couldn't help herself.

"Will you take a BHE and sign the paternity papers if I do?"

Bahr nodded. "If I get past the prelim."

She leaned back against his shoulder, suddenly infinitely tired, more weary than she had ever been in her life before. "You know, it would have been so easy," she said. "All this running and fighting; it would have been so much easier if you had let me start deep analysis two years ago."

He stiffened against her. "Easier?"

"You wouldn't have the elephant, and the sleeplessness, and you wouldn't be boiling up with hate and beating your fist against the wall in your sleep, and you wouldn't have this prelim coming up."

"And I wouldn't have gotten anywhere," Bahr said.

### *Chapter Twelve*

From: BRINT USNXY To: BRINT HQX LONDON  
Priority: IMMEDIATE ATTENTION  
Distribution: HQX-K7 ONLY

Dear Roger:

I'm using our private channel for this letter because I am becoming more certain every hour that our normal channels are under constant DIA surveillance, and I clearly cannot route my personal opinion of the situation over here through Julian Bahr's hands if I have any hope of keeping my Scotch neck in one piece and serving any useful purpose in the future.

As you might guess, Arthur and his people in the NY



office are rather at a loss, with the city walled off by the recent communications edict. I am relying on the usual private channels to keep in touch with my groups, and particularly with Carl Englehardt. So far every report in my hands indicates that the pot of water is heating at a far greater rate of speed than we had originally assumed would be the case.

Arthur persists in adhering to our original immediate and long-range plans, ignoring the almost incredible pattern that has been emerging in the past weeks, and he feels that we must try to get things back to normal as quickly as possible. He has sent (against my outcries of warning) a note to Bahr suggesting a meeting which could be nothing more than a ceremony of agreement.

I oppose this.

"Normal" in Federation America is at best a relative term; I am certain now that if Bahr proceeds unchecked, he will in a matter of weeks have initiated an irreversible reaction, and that "normality" in the present sense of the word will never be seen again. If we could predict, even in the broadest terms, where this reaction would end, I would be enthusiastically in favor of riding it out. Unfortunately, I don't think that Bahr himself knows where it will end, and this alone makes his position intolerably dangerous.

We have assumed from the start that DEPCO, with all its systematic precautions to keep emotionally unstable personalities out of key spots, would have automatically harnessed a man like Bahr very early in the game. This has not happened. His emergence confirms what I have been telling you for several years: that the DEPCO system has been in a spiraling decay since the death of Larchmont, and that something new is certain to emerge.

At this writing, that "something new" is taking the shape of Julian Bahr.

Bahr has seized the alien crisis as his chance for power. This is hardly surprising. I predicted it, you recall, when Project Frisco was first launched. What I could not predict was the simple fact that Bahr has run headlong into the

DEPCO restraint system and broken the restraints one by one. Ironically, the DEPCO philosophy, which aimed at controlling and inhibiting men like Bahr, is inadvertently guaranteeing his success. If he succeeds in destroying DEPCO, there are no strong men at the top in Federation America to oppose him.

I think it is most important to realize this early. If Bahr succeeds, there will surely be very strong central control emanating from a single point, and no chance for us to encourage internal schism as we have in Asia and USSR. Nor would it then be safe to think of replacing him with a puppet if he were deposed or in some way removed from power.

It is my considered opinion that if Bahr is allowed to reach that point, we will have lost everything we have been working for. Unfortunately, we have needed him badly, and right now we continue to need him. I believe that Englehardt will support Bahr at all costs in order to get the Space Project in operation. I will talk to Carl personally about this as soon as possible, but I have very little hope of dissuading him.

Meanwhile, it is imperative that we be ready to cope with the political and economic changes which I think are about to begin; ultimately we must be in a position to cage Bahr or destroy him. Bahr may have considerable information on our activities, so we must be alert to a purge of some kind. He is very abrupt and direct in his actions; with the alien threat to justify him, he may move without warning at any time.

I wish I could be more optimistic, but I honestly think it is all as bad as I have outlined. I think things will be a bit tricky for quite a while, and I may have to move quickly without clearing through you or Arthur. There is one item of genuine promise, the matter of the elusive major that I mentioned before. Here is a man who has successfully thwarted Bahr, and he still remains at large. Indications are that he can be extremely useful to us . . . or extremely dangerous to us. I am bending all efforts at present to locate

him. Saunders had his trail in St. Louis, but lost it. I will have more to report on this at a later date.

Meanwhile, if you see some brilliant chess move that will put us back in a position of advantage, contact me without delay through Talbot. Repeat, night or day.

Best wishes,

Paul MacKenzie

### *Chapter Thirteen*

AT ONE A.M. the phone jangled insistently, and Bahr, still sleepless, reached over and seized it. "Bahr," he growled.

"Abrams, Chief. I just wanted to co-ordinate with you on discontinuing the search."

Bahr sat upright, suddenly tense. "On what?"

"The drag . . . for Alexander. I just wanted to advise you I was dropping it. I'm checking out the field units now . . ."

"Scrambler," Bahr said. "Four-three-nine. Baker." He punched the scrambler buttons on his own phone and tested. Then: "What in hell are you talking about, dropping the search? Did I give you *orders* to drop it?"

A long silence. "No . . . but . . ."

"You get those field units back into operation in three minutes, or I'll greencard you so fast . . ."

"But, Chief, didn't you hear? He's been picked up."

"Where?"

"East St. Louis. They booby-trapped a motel room. I'd lost him an hour before, just picked him up again two hours ago and then they landed him. Another DIA unit. Didn't you get the report?"

"Must have been a slip-up in the tracer relay," Bahr growled. "They're probably trying to locate me now." Then, cautiously, "Which unit was it picked up the major?"

"They didn't sign through the roadblocks as a unit," the man said. "It was on a personal chit. Only I didn't know you had any informal units working this drag with us."

"Whose personal chit?"

"Carmine's. But I don't see why they didn't notify us they were shadowing, too. I mean, it's customary. Unless you . . ."

"You're certain it was Alexander they picked up?"

"Positive, Chief. There's no mistake."

"Okay, drop the search. I'll pick up the story from this end. And thanks for the call."

Bahr hung up, flipped the scrambler off, and dialed the locator relay. "Bahr speaking. Any calls come in for me?" He knew before he asked that there had been no call.

"No call, sir."

"Where can I locate Frank Carmine, DIA-43?"

He heard the whir of the locator file on the other end. "He's in transit now. Destination, Red Bank, New Jersey. Field Unit HQ there. Planned arrival two A.M. Shall I try to make contact when he arrives?"

"Just deliver a message. Tell him to meet me at two-thirty at the Red Bank Ground Terminal. There won't be any answer. I'll be leaving shortly for that same destination number."

He was resetting the scrambler when Libby sat up, turning up the light. "Trouble, Julian?"

"Go back to sleep," Bahr said. "I've got to take a little trip."

"But you've got the prelim tomorrow." She glanced at her watch. "This morning!"

"I'll be back. It's only over in Jersey."

"You can't take the prelim on no sleep. The suggestions won't cue in properly if you're too tired. We can't risk all the work we did this afternoon."

He continued placing his call, and motioned her to silence as it came through. "Bahr speaking. Get one of the dummies ready. Tell him to take a 'copter to Rahway, and a ground train from there to Red Bank Ground Terminal. Tell him to get there at two-thirty. No, nothing else, just report back afterwards. And," he added, "tell him Condition B when he hits Red Bank. Use his stunner if he has to."

Double A security on this, too. And see that his stride is right. I take big steps. Okay, see you."

"Sending a dupe?" Libby asked.

Bahr nodded as he disconnected the alarm from his Markheim stunner on the knee table, hefting the sleek, surprisingly heavy weapon thoughtfully.

"What is it, Julian? Aliens?"

"Maybe," Bahr said, dressing hurriedly. "Maybe . . ."

"Are you taking a 'copter unit with you? Are you sure you'll be back in time for the prelim?"

"Where are the keys to your Volta?"

"On the sill. But what do you want the Volta for?"

"If anyone calls, I'm on my way to the ground terminal. Don't mention the Volta." He tucked the stunner into his shoulder holster.

"You're not going there alone! Julian!"

The door closed quietly behind him.

2001, the fourth year of the crash that had staggered North America and most of the rest of the world, a year of desolation, a year of retrenching and finally coming to grips with the horror of the crash, when some semblance of order was pounded, often quite unmercifully, out of chaos. Federation America, a broken nation . . . a nation without jobs or purpose, without the stability of money, with broken-down communications and impossible transportation and the imminent, momentary, endless threat of war.

2001, and Julian Bahr had been rounded up with a lot of other drifters, young and old, and hauled to the Indianapolis Processing Center for testing and relocation in line with the personnel policies of the Department of Exploitation in the fledgling Vanner-Elling Stability government. He had been fingerprinted, photographed, weighed, measured, and run through the maze—the personality and intelligence tests that, unrealized by him, were going to mark off the sharp limits of his future for him.

After a year of shiftlessness, hunger, ration lines, pilfering, and completely unlimited freedom of movement, Bahr was

hostile and suspicious of the newly-designated authority figures.

"How old are you, kid?"

"Thirteen."

"You're too big for thirteen. You're fifteen."

"Go to hell."

They found the ID card he hadn't bothered to show them, and sent him into the testing center. The testing procedures were routine, the operators bored and indifferent. They paid no attention to Bahr's resentfulness and hostility; when he scored a sloppy dull-normal on the initial tests, the test teams looked no further, assumed the worst, and hustled him through the Rorschach, thematic apperception and Vornay without ever getting far enough behind the shell to even glimpse what the big, belligerent youth's mind was really like. He looked big, tough and stupid. They sent him to Riley to let the military knock the rough corners off.

Fort Riley Infantry Tech School, the new kind of military academy, where boys in their early teens were molded into the toughest guerrilla troops in the world. Just as they reached the beginning of their peak years in stamina and physique, they were offered the option (which they all accepted) of a ten year enlistment in the 801st. The weeding-out was enormous; screened before they entered, only twenty percent survived as guerrilla fodder, while the rest were sloughed off into the normal backwaters of Army administration and logistics. The Hitler youth groups in its most fanatic hour had never approached the tremendous group pressure techniques that drove, goaded, and quite often crushed the raw material into the proper shape.

In the first few days at Riley, Bahr moved mechanically at the furious bellowing of the non-coms, still too stunned to realize what was happening to him. Then came the initiation, the inevitable judgment of his fellows—could he take it?

A framed-up infraction, which Bahr knew was a frame, and a kangaroo court of second-year supervisors in a locked barracks squad room.

"Ten belts," the second-year "judge" said. "If the prisoner

flinches he will be restrained and the sentence doubled. Assume the position." The mocking, overbearing authority drove the blood from Bahr's face and made his fists clench, but he had made up his mind that they were not going to break him, and he bent over, mute and burning with anger. The belts were delivered with a flat paddle longer than a baseball bat and swung with two hands so it struck like a mule-kick and left welts and black-and-blue marks for a week.

He took nine blows impassively. Then a voice was raised. "The prisoner flinched. Any witnesses?"

"Yes, I saw it. The prisoner moved evasively." There was a clamoring of assent in the excited circle of men. Bahr mentally estimated twenty more blows. "The prisoner will be restrained. Rope. Double him over the railing and tie . . ."

Bahr straightened up, turned slowly. "Nobody ties me up," he said.

"No? You'll get twenty more for insubordina—" But the new threat was too late. Bahr grabbed the paddle out of the executioner's hand and swung it sidewise against the fish-sergeant's head with a loud thunk, knocking him sprawling and unconscious to the floor.

In the stunned silence Bahr leaned on the paddle and looked into the circle of shocked white faces.

"Next?"

They tried. For two weeks, gangs of upperclassmen tried to gang up on him, beat him up, break him. But when they crept into his barracks at night they found him gone, and returned to discover their own bedding soaked and knotted with far more imagination than they could achieve. One day five of them cornered him, beat him up and broke his nose; one by one they suffered return engagements and were beaten and mauled with systematic ferocity. The dispensary medics became experts at setting broken noses.

The silent cure, ostracism, fell flat because to his own classmen, in spite of indoctrination lectures, Bahr was a hero. In a grimly silent mess-hall Bahr could tell a dirty joke and the whole first year class would laugh on cue.

Halfway through the first year, the training officers at

Riley consulted the BRINT people who were responsible for the 801st.

"He's a misfit," they explained. "He has too much drive, too much intelligence. We can't see why DEPEX sent him here in the first place."

"But a natural leader, you say," the BRINT contact man said.

"Highest morale a first-year group ever had. But a maverick is dangerous if he can't be controlled. Question is, should we weed him out now, or keep him and hope he falls in line?"

The BRINT man thought it over. "Your field maneuvers are coming up, am I right? Which is your weakest platoon, poorest in training and discipline?"

"Third, Baker Company."

"Put this Bahr chap in charge of it during maneuvers."

The Riley people didn't like it. "They're fourth-year men. They'll never take orders from a first-year man. The platoon will fall apart the first day out."

"Let's try it anyway," the BRINT man said with a note of finality. "We'll prepare his orders."

Baker Three was still legendary at Riley years after the maneuvers of '02. Bahr's mission was given to him by BRINT, and by the time he reported to their field unit in Ontario three weeks later with sixty percent of his platoon still intact and uncaptured, and with four prisoners, the Army, the police and the DIA were weary of the fruitless search and were posting imposing rewards for any of his troops who would turn themselves in.

BRINT spent a week interrogating Bahr, his troops and prisoners, on the tactics, techniques and devices they had used to avoid capture, then swore them to absolute secrecy on the methods; but enough fragments had crept out so that when Bahr and his men got back to Riley it was almost a victory parade.

The next three years were almost anticlimactic. Bahr was a made man. All work, play and friendship groups led to him. But while he built his little encysted empire in power



relationships at Riley, getting ready for a hitch in the 801st, the same psych-testing machinery that had misplaced him before had been growing, spreading and self-fertilizing. The powerful DEPCO had begun to emerge in the government as the great peg-placer. They were feared, admired, hated, worshipped, but unquestioningly recognized except at Riley and a few other similar sociological eddies.

Bahr's first contact with DEPCO came when he applied for Commissioned Officer's School, and he ran headlong into a stone wall.

After two days of testing, with polygraph, Brontok symbols and Vargian analysis, Bahr returned to Riley baffled and angry by the continual procession of impassive young men and women who didn't seem to listen to *what* he said, but only to *how* he said it.

DEPCO's report to Riley was uncompromising. Bahr had too much drive to fit into a leadership position in a government that was fighting, at all costs, for stability. He was too ambitious for the new Army of administration and logistics that DEPCO was planning. What the Army needed was administrators, not executives. The decisions were to be made elsewhere, many of them by computers working against the VE equations.

Riley went to bat for him, but DEPCO was immovable. Bahr did not go to Commissioned Officer's School.

He swallowed the first blow, even though he realized intuitively that he had gone as far as he could go as a non-com in his first two years at Riley, and was not satisfied to stop there. The second blow was even more unexpected. Revised placement tests, again sifted through the DEPCO filters, pulled him from guerrilla-training status. He had blundered unknowingly in the tests; he had tried too hard and done too well, and particularly scored unusually high in electronics and mathematics aptitude sections. The DEPCO sorter, looking for candidates in these priority scientific fields, dropped his card in the hopper, and he, of all Riley graduates, was assigned to Communications Command and sent to Antarctica.

His appeal was immediate, vehement, and futile. Even BRINT, which had been following his career at Riley with interest, was unsuccessful in its subtle efforts to alter the assignment. With the new upgrading of the social sciences resulting from the Vanner-Elling innovations, and the witch-hunts against physical scientists and technical people during the crash years, there was an urgent demand for any talent available. And with the signing of the Yangtze semi-truce, guerrilla activities were unpopular. Communications priority was high.

Bahr's tenure in Antarctica, terminating with his court-martial from the Army at twenty-nine, had seemed to him like the first spadeful of dirt dumped back into the grave he had been digging himself out of all his life. He had taken his new civilian green-card assignment as a maintenance man and wire-jockey in the DEPOP computer center with apathetic resignation, burying old memories and bitternesses under a pile of empty whiskey bottles and long moody silences. Maybe Libby Allison might have broken through the apathy eventually, but even she had almost given up when the past, like the proverbial penny, turned up in the form of Frank Carmine.

Carmine had been a year ahead of Bahr at Riley, and with many other veterans of the 801st, had wound up in DIA after his ten-year tour. McEwen, founder and director of DIA, was looking for a man to keep his field units co-ordinated and working under pressure; he advertised his desires to some of the new people, hoping they might know somebody from the 801st or BRINT who could fill the bill. There were a few reticent suggestions; then one of the veterans of Baker Three said wistfully, "What we really need is a man like Julie Bahr to light a fire under this outfit!"

Carmine was assigned the task of locating and approaching Bahr. Bahr knew little about DIA, but the appeal of the old camaraderie, and the opportunities for control and power rang a bell. With the reorganization of the field units that he demanded, and his political jockeying to get his friends into key positions, Bahr soon began to exert much

more power under McEwen than the organizational charts credited him.

McEwen recognized the man's voracious ambition quite early; he realized that Bahr was, eventually, after his job. Soon McEwen could not sleep, his eyes became sunken and bloodshot, his mind wandered, he complained bitterly to his underlings about anything and everything except Julian Bahr. He took vacations, came in to work late, overslept, muddled and whined, and retreated further and further into himself, with the inevitable result that he was forced, irresistibly, to depend more and more on Bahr to keep his organization running. McEwen feared him, but he did not stop him.

And if Bahr ever realized that it was he who was forcing the change in McEwen, he never showed it. He worked with people, with groups, with scattered individuals. As his power increased, imperceptibly, he found people who were eager, willing, desperate to help him, people who wanted his friendship, who sought his influence, who surrendered their confidences to him, and moved in to his side in loyalty that bordered on blind devotion. In a world of unstable personal relationships and obviously cardboard leader figures—senators, congressmen, and especially chief executives who were put in office chiefly on the basis of appeal, good looks, friendliness and the knack of projecting "sincerity" through the TVs—the segment who wanted someone powerful and confident to identify with gravitated their affections, fixations, and complexes on men like Bahr.

The true extent of his personal contacts probably was not known even to Bahr. People who said they hated him, or ridiculed him, or distrusted him, went out of their way consciously or unconsciously to help him. Rumor was that he had contacts, friends and informants in the fringe-underworld, in BURINF, in BRINT, even in the KMs, and that within DIA itself he had a private power-group of former Riley men who held their grim loyalty to him above their contracts, oaths, or national obligations.

Of all these dependables the most loyal, the most de-

voted, the most unswerving of legmen was Frank Carmine.

Which was why, when Bahr found a discontinuity in his space-plan, coming unexplained and unheralded from a source that would have seemed least suspect, he did not surround himself with other DIA subordinates who were close to him.

It was not by accident that he had not been notified of Harvey Alexander's capture. And if Carmine could defect . . .

He moved alone, slit-eyed, the Volta speeding through the vague shallow fogginess of the Jersey flatlands, his mind unraveling threads of contacts, relationships, and attitudes, probing for a motive, preparing himself to inflict the necessary, just, inevitable punishment upon the errant who stood in his way.

The first stop was a southwestern Newark suburb near the Newark Jetfield. Bahr drove into a shabby housing development, parked near the lobby of the main building, hurried inside to the elevator.

The building was silent, the halls dimmed down, the carpet quiet to his footsteps. He picked a door, checked the number, and rang. Inside, some stirring sounds and a muffled answer. A moment later the door opened into a black room, and a brooding, questioning silence yawned at him.

"Julie?"

Bahr stepped into the room, swung the door quietly shut behind him. "Chard? A job. I need help. Are you with me?"

A hand tapped his shoulder in a gesture of reassurance. "In a minute, soon's I get dressed. Say, honey, this is . . ."

"Better keep her out of it," Bahr said.

"Oh."

The man dressed quickly in the darkness, and soon he and Bahr were in the Volta, picking their way through the apparently endless tiers of housing developments, then out on a road strip and into the dark, hostile, run-down fringe area,

still dotted with last-century buildings, that had once been Elizabeth.

"You've worked with Stash Kocek before," Bahr said.

"The nervous one? Yeah. But he makes me . . . you know . . ."

"I hope he's in," Bahr said. "I didn't call ahead." He stopped the Volta, motioned Chard to stay inside, and walked across the street to the rooming house that was Kocek's current residence. He went up two flights of stairs quietly, down the hall, and paused in front of the door with the ribbon of light showing under it.

Bahr tapped a pattern on the door and the light went out instantly. In a minute the door opened a crack. "Bahr?"

"Yes. A job."

The dimmer went up a little, and a thin, weasel face looked out at him, the eyes dark-circled slits. "Jesus, Bahr . . ."

"You on that stuff again?"

Kocek shrugged. "What'll I need?"

"A stunner. Two. Chard's working with us."

There was a flash of hostility on Kocek's face, then resignation. "No stunner."

"What do you mean?" Bahr said, sudden anger rising. "If you sold that stunner . . ."

"I'll get it back, Jule, I just hocked it today, I'll get it back. I needed some credits fast . . ."

Bahr pushed into the room. On the drab iron bed someone ducked quickly under the covers.

"Get your credits from him," Bahr said in a harsh tone.

"I didn't know, Julie, I didn't know you'd want me tonight. I'll get it back." The high-pitched voice was whining, cowed. Bahr looked at the lump on the bed again. Kocek had been booted from the 801st for that trouble; he had always been such a mixture of fear, viciousness, guilt and hatred that Bahr could never have gotten him a rating to work as a janitor in DIA. Kocek was a mess, but Bahr had enough dossier on his sundry illegal addictions to get him recopped any hour of the day or night. Kocek lived in mortal terror of

Bahr, so Bahr could trust him. At least, he could trust him while he watched him. "What have you got? Burps?"

"No, a couple of Wessons. With silencers. And some concussion grenades. You think we'll need them? I only got a couple."

"Bring them," Bahr said. "And step on it. I've got a Volta outside."

"Let's go, let's go." Kocek grabbed a trenchcoat off the chair, zipped his tailored coveralls with the flashy, overdone jumptrooper look. He picked up his briefcase arsenal, and dimmed the light, ignoring the lump on the bed.

Outside in the hall Kocek paused, in the habit of long military discipline, to let Bahr go ahead, then remembered Bahr's aversion to letting people walk behind him, and resignedly started down the stairs.

"Two Wessons and a stunner," Bahr growled disgustedly. "And God knows what they've got!"

It was two-forty, and Bahr rubbed the side of his face impatiently, looking out of the phone booth at Kocek, who was sprawled indifferently on one of the benches in the Red Bank Ground Terminal, and then up at the clock.

Two-forty, and there had been no sign of Carmine, nor of the double who was supposed to have arrived at the terminal by monorail ten minutes before. Bahr wondered, in sudden angry reflection, if his whole DIA organization had been infiltrated and seduced into an anti-Bahr *putsch*. Unconsciously his hand went to his stunner as he considered the prospects that even Chard and Kocek might be part of the enemy. But the motivation—that was the puzzle to him. He could not credit Carmine—small, sad-faced, balding Carmine—with the drive, the personality, the political ambition or the money to mount a secession against him.

It didn't wash. Carmine was an order-taker, not an order-giver. Someone was behind Carmine, someone with drive, money, and a ruthless desire to get him, Bahr, out of the way.

He saw Chard, across the lobby, throw down a cup of coffee at the vendor and hurry across the nearly deserted

station, his stocky body almost bouncing, heels smacking down on the concrete floor.

"What's wrong, Chief? I thought Carm was going to show."

"Something got fouled. There should have been a mono in here ten minutes ago. Check with the station officer and find out what went wrong."

Chard hurried off. He returned a moment later, almost running. "Crackup," he panted. "The mono jumped off the L-ramp just north of the station, went through a guard rail. Eighty foot fall. They haven't even put out the fire yet."

So that was the way it was, Bahr thought. And if he knew Carmine, he would be right there in the throng of on-lookers, waiting to make sure that Bahr had really been on that train. "All right, fine," Bahr said. "It'll take Carmine a while to get back to the DIA HQ here to smooth out an alibi." He looked at Chard and Kocek. "Carmine's got a surprise coming, I think."

Back in the Volta, Bahr sat knotted in anger, boiling slowly while Chard drove. "We may find they have a prisoner there," he said. "Keep him alive. The rest are yours, except Carmine. He's mine."

Chard nodded and swung the wheel harshly. Kocek was half-smiling, his eyes shut, humming to himself, his mind obviously still back in the rooming house. Finally Bahr turned and smashed him across the mouth with the back of his hand. "Stop thinking about that stuff," he said as Kocek blinked, uncomprehending. "If you can't get your mind on killing people, I'm better off without you."

Kocek's face turned white with fear and rejection and hate, his thin lips trembling. Behind the mask of anger Bahr felt a surge of bitter satisfaction.

Loyalty was unpredictable, but fear and hate he knew how to handle.

Three A.M., and from the cruising Volta, Bahr saw there were lights on the second floor of the three-story building that housed the local DIA HQ. The first floor was a launder-

ette, a notoriously good group-gossip center, and also useful for stoolies as a cover destination. The building was on a corner, but there was an apartment building next to it one floor higher. The small dweller-town was silent, partly obscured in the low wet mist the East wind brought in, building eaves dripping, streets glistening under the dim streetlamps.

Chard drove around behind the apartment so they could get in the service entrance. Bahr checked his watch. "Wait for my signal, then get the wires," he said to Chard. He waited with Kocek until the Volta moved off into darkness. Then they started up the stairs for the apartment roof.

Two minutes later they had slid down the fire-escape poles onto the roof of the DIA building, and with Kocek's skeleton key let themselves into the roof kiosk.

It was dark and silent on the third floor. Light came from the stairs at the end of the corridor; downstairs there were voices, talking in the clipped monotone of bored, sleepy underlings. Bahr could pick out three voices. There was a certain amount of cover-noise: a humming and clack-clack-clack that Bahr identified as one of the card machines running a job. The noise of the cardos and the sporadic rattle of the teletype seemed loud enough to have covered any noise they might have made forcing the trap door.

But then, suddenly, Bahr wasn't listening to the sounds below. It was a long corridor, with doors opening off it on either side, and its familiarity slammed into his mind with sledge-hammer force. He had never been in Red Bank before, yet this hallway, lined with its closed, silent doors was familiar, horribly familiar. A chill went through him; suddenly he felt sweat trickle down his back, and the sound of his breathing was harsh in his ears. He clenched his right hand with the still-bruised knuckles . . .

*There should be something at the end of the hall . . .*

With a violent effort of will he shrugged, trying to throw off the overpowering feeling of fear. There was nothing. There was the present, *only the present*. Somewhere below was Frank Carmine. He had to kill Carmine.



But something was screaming out in his mind that it was he, not Carmine, who was being killed!

"Check the rooms on that side," he whispered to Kocek, his throat so tight his voice came in a croak. Kocek nodded and faded into one of the curious angular patches of shadow. Bahr, crouching, moved to a door and put his hand softly on the knob.

He whirled, stunner out, but the hall was empty. There was nothing behind him.

He slid the stunner knob down, almost to the inactive point. At that level it would not hit very hard, but the usual ripping sound was effectively muffled. He did not want to alert the men downstairs if he had to shoot.

The door opened silently, no click, no alarm jangling, the room dark, shades drawn. Bahr stood absolutely still for two minutes, listening to hear if there were any breathing sounds, letting his eyes adjust to the deeper unexplored darkness of the room.

The room was empty. There was a couch, a table and a few chairs. Obviously a sleeping room for DIA personnel on alert. He turned on the power on his infrascopes, scanned the room with a fluid spot of light.

His ears had been right. The room *was* bare.

At the next room he was less tense, but his hands were still slimy with sweat when he touched the knob. He was angry with himself, and puzzled. He had never thought about being afraid before. Even in Antarctica there had never been a flicker of fear, just anger and a sense of necessity. He could find no single, sensible reason why he should be afraid now; and yet his knees felt like jelly and he wanted, uncontrollably, to urinate, and cold, unreasoning sweat ran down his back and broke out on his palms and forehead.

He opened the door a crack, stood listening, and faintly, almost inaudible over the sudden pounding of his pulse, was the sound of someone breathing.

He pushed the door, slid into the room. The breathing was still there, regular, a little shallow. His eyes were ad-

justed to darkness now, and he made out a body lying face up on the day couch. He moved across the room for a closer look, relief flooding him as he realized that the body was alive, real, human.

Vulnerable.

The eyes were open. Light glinted off them, made little bright spots in the face, the dark featureless face that stared mummy-like at the ceiling. He listened carefully. The respiration was faster, shallower. The body knew he was in the room . . . *knew* . . . but the eyes did not move.

*Please, tiger. Devour me, gulp me down quickly.*

Fear. The body was afraid to move. The immobility was a plea.

*Please, tiger. Don't cat-mouse me. One blow. One smashing blow. Kill me. Please, tiger.*

But first he had to see the face. He had to know whom he was going to kill. He had to see the face, the tight, fear-ridden face. . . .

He clutched the scope, and could not raise his arm.

It came so swiftly he could only gasp, a wave of stark terror that clamped shut his throat and froze him immobile. The hallway, the room, the thing at the end of the hall, slammed down in his mind with a jolt, and his mind was screaming, *It's coming! It's coming! Get out while you can!*

The door had swung shut, and he threw himself across the room at it, wrenching at the knob, fighting it, his breath coming in great sobbing gasps of terror. Then it gave and he fell into the hall, the dark, silent hall, with voices below and the clack-clack-clack of the cardos.

He straightened up against the wall, fighting to drive the elephant-terror from his mind, brushing through thick cobwebs of fear. It was a nightmare, only a nightmare, he had been dreaming.

Yes. That was right. Suddenly he was ice-calm. His knees were steady, there was no pain in his chest, no clenching across the diaphragm. His hands were dry and steady; the stunner balanced in his right hand was cool.

He had to hurry. There were more rooms down the hall,

but it was all right, the rooms would be empty, all of them would be empty, like the last two.

Two? Of course not. He smiled vaguely. He shook his head, as if to clear away some shadow. He'd only been in one room. One empty room.

The elephant would never find him. Never!

From somewhere down below a door slammed; there were noises, voices shouting something unrecognizable, then Carmine's flat nasal monotone cutting across the hubbub.

". . . eighty feet off the ramp. Ten people aboard, but we couldn't have squeezed them off without alerting him. All dead, concussion, heat and suffocation." There was a note of pleased satisfaction in the flat voice. "We saw them identify Bahr, all right. Any calls while I was gone?"

"No, no calls."

"Good, three-thirty. I've got to call long distance. How are things upstairs?"

"Quiet."

Bahr nudged Kocek and grinned. Then he crossed silently to the window and flashed a recognition pattern with the infrascopes at the Volta parked down the street.

"In five minutes Chard is going to cut the main power line into here," he whispered to Kocek. "The whole place will black out. We'll go downstairs then. I think there are seven of them. What's your count?"

"The same."

"All right. Chard will come in the front after he cuts the wires. I don't care about the rest, but I want Carmine alive. I've got a few questions."

They waited five minutes, Bahr checking his watch too often. "Ten seconds," he said. He squinted, staring into the darkest part of the hall, his hand tightening around the stunner.

Downstairs, the sound of coffee-drinking and staccato conversation, and the steady clack-clack-clack of the cardos. Carmine was on the long-distance line. . . .

"Heyl"

"The lights . . ."

"Where's the fuse box?"

In the noise and confusion Bahr and Kocek darted down the stairs and crept into adjacent corners of the main room, letting their eyes focus in darkness.

There was a flicker of movement toward the door, and Bahr's stunner ripped at full lethal power, the sub-echoes ringing. A scream and a thud. Silence.

A tense whisper. "Somebody's got a stunner."

Kocek's Wesson spat, a dirty tearing sound. There was a gurgle, a thump on the floor, a chair toppled. . . .

"In the corner . . ." Carmine's nasal voice. There was the snigger of a burp being cranked. Bahr waited, and fired again, his target perfectly picked out in the infrascopes. Body and gun hit the floor at the same time.

Three down.

"He's got a scope." Carmine's voice again. A door squeaked, and there were hurried crawling sounds. Kocek fired twice, from a new position. There was a shriek.

Then utter silence.

"Kocek!" Bahr heard a grunt in response. "They went into the cardo room," he said. Kocek hissed, and Bahr listened. A very faint sound of someone coming into the room.

"Bahr?"

"Over here, Chard. They're in the cardo room. We'll have to flush them." He crawled silently, checking four bodies, guessed at three left in the cardo room. "Kocek! Those concussion eggs."

Bahr unscrewed the safeties, knelt and tossed one egg right inside the cardo room door. There was a dull crash, and the glass blew out of the windows. The second toss was against the rear wall. A burst of orange light flared and a man came screaming into the hall clutching his ears. Bahr cut him down with the stunner and ducked into the room with Chard at his heels.

They started up the banks of cardos, leaving Kocek at the door with the Wesson. When he was sure he would not be

silhouetted, Bahr stood up, took a pile of unpunched cards from the top of a cardo and hurled them against the far wall. A burp spat out reddish flame from behind a sorter three machines away. Chard dropped down, firing. There was a scream of pain.

One left.

"Carmine!" Bahr stood up, stunner ready. There was a scrambling sound. "Don't shoot him," Bahr said. A couple of shots scattered around the room as Carmine fired wildly. "I'm coming after you." There were scurrying noises; if Carmine realized that Bahr was still alive, he gave no indication. Bahr smelled smoke, saw a flare of burning cards across the room. He saw Chard leap across to smother the flame, and cough and reel back as three slugs struck his chest. Bahr fired the stunner once, an off-target narrow beam shot and Carmine screamed.

Bahr hurled himself on the thrashing, half-paralyzed man, tore the gun out of his hand and drove a knee into Carmine's groin. There was a shrill agonized cry, then retching.

"Bastard," Bahr said.

"All clear, Chief?" Kocek asked.

"Get that fire out." Bahr jerked Carmine up by the collar, smashed his fist into his face savagely twice, and hurled him out into the hall.

Then he saw Chard in the growing light of the fire. He squinted into the man's pain-twisted face. "It's okay, Julie. I'm hurt. Just get me out of here."

Bahr saw the red dripping blot on the front of Chard's coveralls as the whole wall began to flare from the burning cards. He saw the death-white face, the eyes wide with fear. "Just get me to a doc, Julie. . . ."

"You're a dead man," Bahr said. "You wouldn't last five minutes if we moved you." He shook his head, lifted the stunner. "The breaks, kid."

One violent, tearing epileptic lunge, and it was over. Silence, the crackling of the fire, waves of heat from the wall. He heard a noise break from Kocek as he turned the

power off on the stunner, put it back in the holster. "Get out to the car," Bahr said. "I'll get Carmine."

Kocek bolted through the door. Sick, rotten, depraved Kocek seemed eager to get away from him.

He thought suddenly of the upstairs. There was something . . . He shook his head, his mind blanking. All he could think of now was *get out, hurry, get out!* It did not occur to him to wonder why he could not go back upstairs. He could not remember what was up there. Upstairs was empty . . . that was it . . . empty.

In the eerie crackling light of the spreading fire, Bahr grinned suddenly, but he did not know why.

The meeting at dawn was short and tense. The principals were Bahr and Kocek, adults, and three celebrities from the toughest of Trivettown's KMs. The place of the meeting was a two-car garage in the Trivettown residential section. Bahr's Volta, with Carmine bound and gagged on the floor, filled half the garage. In the other half there was a work bench, and a nondescript array of woodworking tools, hedge clippers, and two disposal cans. The bench was curiously stained.

There was the usual exchange of greetings and explanations. Kocek, who knew the KMs, did most of the talking, with Bahr silent, watching the one called Joel cleaning his carefully trimmed nails with a tiny gleaming knife. Bahr had heard of Joel by reputation. Now, meeting him, he felt an almost irresistible urge to take the pale, smiling youngster by one scrawny ankle and smash his brains out on the floor. It was just amazing how thoroughly he hated him at first sight.

Kocek negotiated with the girl, who was in charge of proceedings, a thirteen-year-old who was noticeably pregnant. Joel would work at so much an hour for four hours, after which the rates doubled at four hour intervals. If those terms were not satisfactory there would be no deal. Joel was a specialist, but the girl was a business woman. The third noteworthy, a stocky, hard-faced bully, kept a hand in a

pocket and never took his eyes off Kocek while he talked to the girl.

Joel, of course, was different. He was strange, pathologically strange, and he made Bahr's skin crawl. His hands were very soft and white, like a girl's, but his eyes were vulture eyes. Bahr had seen such eyes once or twice before, and he always hated them.

Then the arrangements were completed, and Kocek and the bully dragged Carmine out of the car. Bahr noticed that Joel's eyes began to brighten when he saw Carmine's struggling figure; he stood up, studying Carmine's face, and an odd little professional smile crossed his waxy, almost doll-like face.

Carmine was conscious, his eyes blazing hate at Bahr as he was lifted onto the workbench.

"You can make it easy on yourself, if you want to," Bahr said. "You know what I want to know." Behind the gag Carmine's face twisted almost out of shape, his eyes narrowing to slits. Bahr stepped forward, his fist back, but Joel said, "No!" and stopped him cold.

"You'll have to leave," the girl said. She and the bully moved between him and Carmine. "Don't worry. He's in good hands."

Behind them, Joel expertly finished wiring Carmine down to the workbench, viewed him for a moment with a clinical eye, and then snapped open a black doctor's bag and began selecting appliances.

"All right," Bahr said, suddenly cold. "Let Kocek know when he breaks."

"You'll hear from us," the girl said.

She opened the garage doors, and Bahr backed out. It was almost seven o'clock, and he had to get back to New York through morning traffic. He thought of Carmine and the good hands he was in, and he should have felt good, but he didn't; he just felt hollow and cold and weary.

"He'll break," Kocek assured him as they moved into traffic. "We'll find out who put him up to it."

Bahr didn't answer. Who put Carmine up to it didn't seem important any more, nor did the interview with Adams that was now facing him in two hours with no sleep to support him. He drove through the gloomy drizzling rain, trying to remember something about a woman whose face he could not see, and a long corridor, and an elephant.

In the darkened room, Harvey Alexander lay immobile, staring fixedly at the ceiling, and he smelled the smoke long before he felt the heat of the fire. He tried to move his arms; the muscles responded, but slowly, sluggishly, and he fell back against the couch, panting at the effort.

There were many things he did not understand, many pieces that did not fit, but the long hours of waiting in darkness, helpless and immobile, had given him time to think, and slowly the picture had come clear. Now he understood things, and it was a wellspring of satisfaction and a bitter defeat at the same time. He had heard the shots and screams of the pogrom on the floor below, and then the silence, and then the smoke and glowing heat, and he realized that understanding, even knowing, was not good enough now that it came too late.

There was no one down below who could help him now.

Slowly, he tried again to flex his muscles. It was a major effort just to breath, an impossible feat to sit up on the couch, but he managed it. He felt the floor with his bare feet. Then he tried to stand, and felt his knees buckle, and fell heavily onto the floor.

It was useless. The place was a smoke-filled oven; already he could see the yellow brightness of the flames in the crack under the door. He knew the truth now, and it was possible that he knew things that nobody else knew, but he would never be able to tell anyone, to use that information. It was useless to fight any more, but he tried.

Slowly, he hitched himself up on his elbows, began inching his way across the room toward the hall.

He had almost reached the window when he blacked out



momentarily, choking on the acrid fumes from the fire down below, and he saw the uselessness of it.

He had been running for too long. Now there was no more chance to run.

### *Chapter Fourteen*

THERE WAS NO chance to run, Libby realized, when she saw Adams' feet propped up on her desk. Somehow, in her mind, there had always been the idea that at the last moment she would be able to run away, somehow avoid facing it, call it all off and start with a clean slate, but she saw now with a sort of horrified fascination that she had been deluding herself. The elevator had closed behind her and gone back down below. The office secretary had seen her. Adams had seen her.

She couldn't run now, or ever.

She turned on her most charming smile, her most friendly and sincere smile, her you-don't-know-how-insanely-happy-(hebephrenic)-I-am-to-see-you smile, with a little sex thrown in, even though, as she looked at him, Adams gave her the same cold sick feeling in her stomach he always did. All she could actually say was, "Good morning, there."

Adams of course was not taken in, and Libby was instantly angry with herself for trying to fake her way through the opening. Adams was laying for her. He had made up his mind already what he was going to say and think and listen to; any attempt to ignore the fact would simply debase her a little more. She knew her only hope now was to beat him to the punch and keep feeding him answers before he could get the questions out. And Julian was not there. Where in hell was he?

"I guess you're waiting for Mr. Bahr," she said. Like a chimpanzee, she thought, just like a chimpanzee, sitting around wisely with his thin pale face framed by the thinning pale blond hair that he never seemed to cut. There were two technicians like chimpanzees, too, practically picking fleas off themselves in an effort to look like Adams.

"Where is Bahr?" Adams asked.

"He had an emergency investigation last night," she said. "He may be a little late getting here."

"If he gets here at all," Adams said.

"He would have notified me if he couldn't make it."

"I see."

Silence.

There was no clue as to whether she was supposed to sit down, or break down, or what, so she carried out the ritual of hanging up her coat, straightening her hair, deliberately showing off her figure a little because she thought it would make Adams feel uncomfortable.

"I'd like to see your case history on Bahr," Adams said.

"It's not quite up to date. I have some notes in my apartment."

"Obviously," Adams said.

"His latest Brontok," Libby snapped, flushing with anger at his insinuation, which was not actually an insinuation but a statement of fact. Of course Adams would know.

"We can probably manage without anything from your apartment," Adams said acidly. "I want to see what you have here."

"It's up to date as of two weeks ago," she explained, sliding her safe drawer open. "Mr. Bahr has been too rushed at work for scheduled analysis." Even before she got the drawer all the way open, Libby sensed that something was wrong. Something in the drawer had been changed. Someone had been tampering with her files. She hesitated.

"Would you mind?" Adams said, goading her. She lifted out Bahr's file, trying to flip through briefly to see what might have been changed, or taken out, but Adams was on his feet beside her, lifting the folder out of her hands.

She started to say something, and then let it pass, hoping that maybe if she played it dumb he wouldn't realize that she had spotted the tampering.

Adams retired to the chair, leafing through the folder, pretending to study it. Obviously he was stalling. He knew what he wanted to find; he was just hoping to draw some

comment from her by the long delay. She did not oblige him.

Finally he looked up. "Are you familiar with the function of a DEPCO therapist?"

"Certainly I am."

"How would you define it?"

"Helping people."

Adams gave an impatient shrug. "All right, flood relief helps people, too. Is that what you mean?"

"Helping them to adjust their emotions and thinking processes to living in the world," Libby countered. "Helping them gain insight into—"

"Miss Allison, you've recommended Julian Bahr for six grade changes in the last four years. Do you call this adjustment? When you let a highly questionable individual accrue more responsibility and power with every up-grade? When you put more and more strain on a sick personality?"

"He's my case. I think the diagnosis is my responsibility. And the treatment."

"As long as you remain his therapist, yes, but when you become his agent—"

"I'm still his therapist," she said.

He raised his eyebrows. "Really? I thought this might have changed since his appointment as director of DIA."

"It's only a temporary appointment."

"Temporary. Of course. And he's still under treatment? Coming along nicely, too . . . am I right?"

It took strength to control herself. "You have the case history there."

Adams nodded sourly, and glanced back over the report. "No analysis, I see, after four years. Didn't you think he needed analysis?"

"I wasn't able to convince the patient until recently." Adams dropped the folder on the desk with a thud, and her voice trailed off.

It all sounded so weak. Even knowing in advance what Adams was going to ask didn't improve the story. She had fouled the whole job completely. She had been deluding herself, but she could see it now, coldly, unhappily. She had been

used. Even the most impartial witness, reading that case history, could have seen that. She had twisted, bent, and sidestepped every principle, regulation, safeguard and normal channel in DEPCO to do Bahr's bidding.

Therapist. She had a sour, nauseous feeling, and there was a dull, cramping pain in her thorax. For the first time she saw, in stark, uncolored light exactly what she had been doing. Somewhere, long ago, there must have been a reason, a sane, rational reason, but what was it?

Twelve years of training, six years of hard-earned experience, and she had thrown it all out, a life's work, to play lover to a sick, ruthless brute.

A Phi Beta Kappa concubine. . . .

The phone was ringing. Adams picked it up. "It's Bahr. For you. See that he gets here." Libby took the phone, surprised to find her hands sweaty. She flicked on the local muffler so Adams could not hear.

"Julian? Yes, I know you're late. All night? You knew you had this interview today." Damn him, *damn* him! "I meant what I said, Julian, if you don't come over for the prelim today, Adams will have an injunction against you tomorrow morning. This is 100 percent under DEPCO jurisdiction. Yes, you're damned right I'm looking after my own neck; if I lose my rating . . . That's what I said—by tomorrow morning. All right, I'll tell him, and Julian . . ."

The phone went dead. She hung up, and she knew her face was dead white and that she was trembling all over when she turned back to Adams.

"He'll be right over," she said.

Back in the New York office after the night's itinerary to Red Bank and Trivettown, Julian Bahr had found a multitude of details to catch up on, progress reports to read, orders to give, field units to check out. He almost but not quite forgot the interview with Adams scheduled for nine. It was just that he could not force himself to assign it any priority until it crammed itself down his throat and demanded

priority. There were so many other things, he thought, that demanded his attention far more.

The office was running with its usual furor of activity and efficiency, reports neatly stacked on his desk, calls listed by importance. Certainly there was no suggestion of a conspiracy against him here, only the hollow spot by his side left by Carmine, and already he had determined, grimly, that there would never again, ever, be a hole like that.

There was a huge piece missing in the puzzle, too, which Bahr could not understand at all. Alexander was still missing; there was no filed report on him. Surely if Carmine had picked him up he would have been held someplace at Red Bank, or at least somewhere in the East, but there was no sign of him.

He scanned the reports. No further evidence of alien activity for four days, almost five. "Which seems to us fairly ominous," one of the staff men ventured, and Bahr nodded vehement agreement, slamming his fist angrily into his palm. It was like watching a huge and expertly manufactured time bomb which suddenly and inexplicably had ceased ticking.

But the reaction to the Canadian landing and his speech—there had been plenty of that, and it was still growing, still building furiously. Seventeen reported landings across Federation America, every one tracked down and found to be a false alarm. A new set of directives emerging from the computers in the Caverns, almost hourly, to direct mass-control teams which had been mobilized to counteract the spreading panic, and still the panic spread, until the control teams were unable even to assign priority to segments of their own program. Five square miles of south Los Angeles going up in flames after a riot attack against an alleged alien stronghold in a tinderbox residential district.

And frightened, helpless, desperate eyes turning, continually turning to Washington and New York to do something, *do something . . . anything.*

Carl Englehardt's report was there, a thick bundle of papers that would take four hours of careful perusal, but a quick scan was enough to see that Englehardt had known

what he was talking about. He knew he had to see Carl quickly, at least talk to Carl, and then get the Joint Chiefs together again, though with the DEPCO thing hanging over his head . . . Damn DEPCO! It was already almost 10:00. He would have to move with great caution, but just as urgently he knew he would have to move fast, faster than DEPCO would ever allow him to move.

He told his girl to get Libby at her office, and sent out a tracer to locate Englehardt, possibly for an appointment at lunch. Thank God there was one man left who did not quibble and whine and make excuses—one man he could trust to move and to get things done. . . .

After the call to Libby he cursed, canceled two appointments and called his car. Down on the street he was stepping forward to the open door of the big Hydro when a plush black Volta spun into the curb. "Julian! Julian Bahr!"

Providentially, it was Englehardt. "Let me drive you somewhere, Julian. You've seen my report?"

Bahr nodded, but hesitated as the two men walking with him caught up.

"You won't need them," Englehardt said smiling.

"No, I guess not. Okay, boys, see you at the DEPCO building." He got into the Volta. "They'll follow us like wolves," he said as the DIA men got into the official car and moved out behind the Volta. Bahr looked at Englehardt. The man looked more tired, yet miraculously younger than three days before.

"Why all the precautions?" he asked Bahr. "Is that customary?"

"I was assassinated last night," Bahr said.

"You hardly look it. You got the assassin, I presume."

"No, no leads at all yet." He didn't care to advertise rot in his own back yard. "But something will turn up shortly."

"And the aliens?"

"Nothing. A couple more missing men are back, all with the same story. Things are just too damned quiet, I don't like it."

"You've got my report now, you know what I can do,"

Englehardt said. "If something stalls now, it could be very costly. It could end everything, in fact."

Bahr rubbed his forehead, beat his fist against his palm with a loud flat sound. "I'm doing all I can to push it through."

"Is that enough?" Englehardt asked. "You know I'll back you all the way—money, technicians, influence—but it's got to move, or we're lost."

"I'm having trouble with DEPCO," Bahr said. "They want to pull me off the job until they're satisfied that I'm dull, normal and inert. By DEPCO I mean Adams."

"You never impressed me as the sort that Adams would be likely to stop," Englehardt said.

Bahr's jaw clenched savagely and his fist smashed against his palm. "Adams won't stop me," he said. "Not if I have to break his back with my bare hands. As long as I still have friends I can count on."

Englehardt laughed. "I could tell you something."

"What?"

"A man as ambitious as you are really has no friends, only victims. If I were you I wouldn't count on anybody helping me for one minute after I lost complete control. In fact, if I were you, I might worry about my life, if I had no more DIA to protect it."

It was Bahr's turn to laugh. "Killing is my game," he said, "and I always win."

"Well, I think this is where you're going," Englehardt said as the Volta slowed in front of the DEPCO building. "I *will* see you this afternoon, Julian?"

"You'll see me," Bahr said, and walked into the building.

Bahr was smiling when he came into the office. He smiled at Libby, he smiled at Adams, he smiled at the technicians, and Libby thought he was drunk.

"Sorry I'm late," he said. "Shall we get started?"

Adams rose slowly. "This is a routine examination, Mr. Bahr. You realize that. There's nothing personal in it, but when an individual moves into a job as important as yours,

there are just a few precautions that have to be taken for the public good."

"Fine, that's all clear," Bahr said amicably.

"All we want to do is ask you a few questions, and ask you to give us frank honest answers. Now."

"If you don't mind, I'll call my office and give them this extension," Bahr said, "in case I have to be reached."

"This is an unlisted number," Adams said. "We can't have any interruptions during the test." But Bahr was already at the phone, dialing quickly, still smiling, nodding. He gave the extension number and hung up.

"I left orders not to be interrupted until I called back," he said. "So we won't have to worry about that."

"All right." Adams frowned. "These questions are just to help us make a few simple evaluations on your personality, Mr. Bahr. I think it would be best to let the machine warm up, and let you get adjusted to it. Are you familiar with the polygraph?"

"Who isn't?" Bahr sat sprawled in the surro-leather chair, let Adams fasten the apparatus with his thin bony fingers, although he would rather have had Libby do it. And then he waited through the usual pointless recounting of what they were going to do, until they thought he was ripe. He watched Libby maneuver into a position where she could watch the polygraph and still see him to cue in his suggested reactions. Bahr could feel his palms begin to sweat a little. Why didn't she throw out the first cue? Christ! She hadn't already sold him down the river?

She rubbed her right ear, which was the first trigger, and Bahr could feel the automatic cue-word come into his mind as Adams began the questioning.

It was simple at first, so ridiculously simple that he wondered why he had feared it so long, but then the questions, the questions, the questions began to blur and he grew tired, felt the weariness creeping up, and the boredom. It was the boredom that worried him. He'd made three complete runs so far, and obviously Adams wasn't getting what he wanted because he was already talking about still another repeat, and



Libby, in her carefully inhibited way, was looking too pleased for things to be going too badly, even though Adams was scratching far afield of the normal questions looking for reactions to snap onto.

Then the hooker came.

"I've done my best," Adams said, shaking his head, "and I guess there just isn't any sense to making another run after three confirmations." He began to loosen the pressure belts, and Bahr gradually tensed, knowing something was coming.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Bahr," Adams said sadly. "I really am, and I'd do anything I could to keep from having to do this. Unfortunately, it's just one of those things that has to be looked out for in a job like yours. Otherwise, we'd wind up with people who are dangerously unstable, dangerous to us, and dangerous to themselves." He smiled unhappily. "Of course sometimes it's just a matter of situation, nothing really serious wrong with the individual's personality, but under emergency situations some people just naturally shift into an authoritarian mold. Sometimes pressure forces people into adopting a personality structure that is . . . well . . . dangerous to the society and themselves, and in fact they should be grateful, we should all be grateful that we can detect this sort of thing in time to . . ."

"Hold it," Bahr said, jerking out of the seat and grabbing Adams by the shoulder, his big fingers digging into the man's frail body. "You're not railroading me," he roared. "You and your damned hutch of pink-eyed little rabbits. You couldn't, not even one lousy sonofabitch of you in all of DEPCO, do the job I'm doing, or even get into a job like it; you're not going to . . ."

"Julian!" The stark urgency in her voice stopped him for an instant, and Libby tried to say something to Adams, but Bahr was angry now. The post-trance suggestions were overridden by this new threat, and his whole body seemed to swell with rage. He shoved Libby roughly aside and seized Adams with both hands, lifting him off the floor. "You queer! You lousy, pasty-faced queer, I'll flatten your face out on your own polygraph if you try to . . ."

"Julian, *stop it!*" Libby's voice hit him again, and then something, something she said, hit him like a pail of ice-water.

He dropped Adams, puzzled at the sudden change, unable to recall what she had said, just a single word, that left his spine crawling with horror. He looked at her. She was shaking her head slowly, motioning him to bend over so she could whisper in his ear.

"He did that deliberately to trigger you. Your PG was negative all three times; he had nothing on you until you grabbed him and started to open your mouth. Oh, Julian, why did you have to lose your temper?"

Bahr stood silent, shaken by this, cursing himself a good deal more profanely than Libby had for not immediately realizing what was happening. He had promised to take his cues from her, but the minute there was a real threat—he just couldn't depend on anybody else.

And now Adams had what he wanted. Violence. Ego identification with power and job. Animalization of peers. All the things Libby had warned him about, all spilled out in one stupid burst of rage.

It wasn't much, not enough in itself to get him permanently down-graded or anything like that, but it was the chink in the wall, the one justification Adams needed to have him pulled off the job and taken under observation. Libby and post-trance suggestion couldn't help him much then, and once he was off the wall there would be no climbing back up. Not this time.

This time there would be recoop and a labor battalion, sedation, his daily ration to supplement a fuzzy prefrontal, and all the other permanent, irreversible precautions to make him safe, stable, and happy.

Adams got up slowly, shaken, white-faced, but glowing with triumph. "All right," he said in that saccharine-sweet voice of his. "All right. I think, Mr. Bahr, that that's all we need from you today. . . ."

The phone rang, loud and insistent. Libby took the receiver. "For you, Julian. Your office. They say crash priority."

"What do they want?"

"They'll only talk to you personally." Then, into the phone, "Yes, yes, he's right here. I'll put him on."

Bahr took the phone. He listened for a moment, and his breathing seemed to stop. "You're certain of that?" he said harshly. "The *moon*? All right, get the report, and every possible observer by direct wire to my office. Contact Englehardt and the Joint Chiefs for conference in my office in sixty minutes. Broadcast a Condition B on all channels. Then contact the Chief Executive and tell him to have a joint session assembled in Washington in . . ."—he glanced at his watch—"two hours."

He hung up then, and slowly turned to Adams. "All right," he said savagely, almost gleefully. "Get your injunction, if you can. But you'd better do it fast, because if you don't have it enforced sixty minutes from now, it's just going to be too late."

He stalked from the room, and the door crashed closed behind him.

### *Chapter Fifteen*

NO CONDITION B blackout could ever have hidden the catastrophe which blazed like a banner in the sky, not from the night side where the first report had come from, not even from the day side. Bahr watched impatiently as the congressmen clumped in little nervous knots here and there, jamming the aisles and doorways of the House chamber. The call had only been out for eighty minutes, but they were nearly all here, at least seventy percent, and the Chief Executive and the Joint Chiefs were expected any moment.

The session with the Joint Chiefs in New York . . . with Adams of DEPCO conspicuous by his absence . . . had been stormy; mostly they objected to calling a joint session of Congress, because Congress had no power to do anything about it anyway. But Bahr had insisted that only a return to the half-forgotten formalities and traditions could really drive home to all the people what had to be done. Congress still

nominally represented the people, even though it had no real function any more, since the government was run by DEPEX and DEPCO and the other Vanner-Elling Bureaus and all the congressmen ever did was to formally OK funds. But now they must be made to feel useful, to feel that they were making a decision that all the machines and all Mark Vanner's mathematics could never make.

And the Joint Chiefs finally had given in because they had to, because they had all seen the Moon in the sky—Earth's fine old stable yellow moon against the blue sky, but not a Moon any longer, just a clump of shattered pieces hanging obediently in orbit like the fragments of a broken plate, slowly falling away from each other.

An observatory in Australia had seen the explosion, a sudden flash of incredible whiteness bursting out in the dark Australian sky, and then, dimly, through the curtain of debris, a mammoth slow-motion display of planetoidal destruction. Idiot destruction, destruction without point or reason, but destruction, with terrible implications.

If the aliens could do that to the Moon . . .

Everyone on Earth could see it. In the streets there was the wildfire spread of terror.

From the prop room behind the rostrum, Bahr saw the Chief Executive arrive, wearing a white, impeccably cut nylon jacket that had a modified military look about it, very splendid, very dashing. The president, G. Allen White, had taken the ladies by storm after he deserted the cast of "Heroes of the 801st" on TV to run for President. He still played the dashing hero, which the women all approved, except that now there was trouble, real trouble, and danger, real danger, and he had to struggle to keep the fear from showing on his face. What face to wear? The face of concern, that was it. You could see his actor's mind working. Serious concern, but confidence . . .

Bahr glanced at Libby. "Prettyboy," he said.

"He's cute," Libby said. "No spine, though."

Behind the Chief Executive, the Joint Chiefs, marching down the aisle like the Horsemen of the Apocalypse. The roll

call was taken. There was a simple introduction from the Speaker of the House. "Julian Bahr, Director DIA, has requested this emergency session to speak to you." Then Bahr was on the rostrum.

Behind him, on a vast screen on the wall, images sprang to life. First a night wirephoto of the fragmented Moon, hanging like a cracked and baleful eye above them. A slow dissolve into a chrome-color montage of panic: long ragged evacuation columns, people jammed into the streets, frightened, desperately moving out of the city, rioting crowds at night, brandishing torches, bombed out buildings bursting into flame, shock troops moving in with machine guns and burps, a man in a white shirt running screaming and bloody-faced through a gauntlet of jeering men and women. All hand-picked scenes from the cruel bloody days of the crash, flashing on the screen, then dimming slowly as Bahr's voice rose in the microphone.

"We have seen these things before, in a time of terror, and we pledged ourselves then that these things would never happen again on the face of the Earth. Now, today, we are threatened with just such panic and horror as we see here. Whatever the nature of the alien creatures that have come into our skies, it is very clear what they are attempting to do. We are fighting a war of nerves. Every move the aliens have made has been calculated to spread panic and terror among us, to force us to destroy ourselves. We have not returned a single blow. In spite of every effort, my forces in DIA had no warning of this attack."

He paused to let that sink in. "I am going to say some things now which are triple-A classified. You are being given this information because you must make a decision for the safety of this country that no machines or equations can make. No other branch of the government can make these decisions because they are rightfully yours to make, as agents of our national power, the people."

There was a stir, a rising murmur of warmth, because Bahr had delivered the statement to every single one of them, and they felt proud.

"In facing an alien invader, we have been helpless. Where the aliens are, *what* they are, how they communicate, what they intend to do—we do not know. This latest blow is a mockery. We are powerless to retaliate. Now we are faced with an inescapable choice. We can wait for the next blow, and the next, and ultimately succumb—or *we can carry the attack to the aliens!*"

There was no applause, only a long tense silence as the idea sank in. Then: "There is only one way we can do that, only one weapon that can save us." He turned and pointed to the wall screen behind him.

On the screen a gleaming silver image had appeared, the old, almost forgotten spaceship, the XAR3, beginning its take-off from the New Mexico desert. The ancient film showed in colored slow motion the belching of the engines, the dust cloud. Bahr signaled, and the roar of the massive engines was amplified to deafening volume, cutting all conversation, all thinking to a standstill, the fiery white blast of the jets blinding and fascinating. The huge ship rose slowly, like a tower floating on the searing jet blast, then up, up, the camera panning upwards, the motors screaming, heat waves and sound waves scorching the air, rising, and finally vanishing out of sight.

The screen darkened.

"That," Bahr said, "could have been the most powerful military weapon in history. Had it succeeded, it would have been impregnable, irresistible, omniperceptive. It failed. If the time had been right, space would have been conquered in the nineties, but the time was not right, and we all have bitter memories of that era.

"But that was thirty years ago, thirty years of control, balance, and evolution. Because of the vast reaction of the people, and the teachings of a few biased men who damned Space and science and physical laws to gain power for themselves, this entire area of our culture had been held taboo, while we turned our energies inward. We wanted stability, no matter what the cost. All right—now we can see the cost. But now we must fight for more than stability; we must fight for

survival. And that means we must build that spaceship again if we hope to survive. A spaceship that will work can be assembled and launched in three months. Until that day we are defenseless. But it is within your power to initiate this great military and scientific project again. This is the time to use your power."

The cheering rose to a deafening roar as they rose from their seats. Bahr was gone from the rostrum long before the noise had subsided, and when G. Allen White was finally able to secure the attention of the Congress, he read a short, simple request for congressional action. He had not rehearsed the proclamation, which had been handed to him on a sheet of white paper under the DIA letterhead, but experienced thespian that he was, he delivered it without hesitation, tears in his eyes, straight from the heart. "I propose that the Chief Executive be granted full authority in this emergency to establish a project which shall be called Project Tiger, for the development of a spaceship, and subsequently a space armada, to hunt out and destroy the alien enemy in his lair, and that this project be placed under the special supervision of the Joint Chiefs and Julian Bahr, Director DIA, to take precedence over every other jurisdiction and activity until this emergency is at an end."

There could be no doubt.

Later, in an anteroom that was crowded with people, Bahr pulled off his coat, drenched with sweat, and loosened his tightly strapped Markheim. Libby was staring at him, wide-eyed. When he came into the room there had been a silence, broken by a rising buzz of excited conversation as the immensity, the swiftness, of the thing began to dawn. Something that could not have happened had happened: it was, incredibly, the end of an era.

Reporters were crowding the room, flashbulbs snapping as statements were distributed. Carl Englehardt was there, shaking Bahr's hand vigorously, pounding him on the back. Bahr was voluble, laughing, almost intoxicated. Two of his DIA men crossed over to him, congratulated him, and said

something in low voices. Bahr frowned, his eyes searching across the room.

Near the doorway he saw a thin-faced man, still wearing his trench coat and overdone jump-trooper uniform.

"Kocek!" Bahr pulled away from the clump of people surrounding him, walked to the doorway past Kocek, who fell into step beside him. In the temporary privacy of the hallway, Bahr turned.

"Carmine broke," Kocek said.

Bahr nodded, a hard smile crossing his face. "Who was it? Who was backing him? Who put him up to it?"

"Before he died, he talked." Kocek jerked his head toward the clamoring, racket-filled room. "It was Englehardt," he said. "Carl Englehardt."

## PART IV

### PROJECT TIGER

#### *Chapter Sixteen*

THERE WAS DARKNESS, and pain, and then the sudden, startling realization that he could move his body again. Tentatively, Harvey Alexander tried it, wiggling a toe, stiffly clasping and unclasping a hand. It hurt to breathe and when he tried to sit up, there was a lacerating spasm of pain through his chest. He lay back again, panting and trembling.

He could see the room dimly, and it was not the place where he had been. It seemed to him that there were great gaping holes in his memory. Resting, he closed his eyes, and tried to piece together the fragments.

There was a hospital smell, but it was not a hospital room he was in now. There was a high ceiling, and a heavy oaken door. Bandages on his head and chest, stiffness in his right



arm, and a slow dripping bottle of intravenous fluid above his right shoulder.

*The fire! There had been a fire, and he had tried to reach the window. But then what?* It jolted back memories, a kaleidoscopic blaze of fragments without time-relationships to draw them together. The metallic voice of his interrogators; the questions and questions and endless questions, he remembered that; then darkness, not like the restful seclusion of light here, but almost utter blackness. Muffled voices below. The endless clack-clack-clack of some kind of machinery . . . traffic sounds outside.

And then unconnected bits, only partial consciousness, long periods of waiting for the heavy steps of the questioners outside the door. The tight constriction of the respirator, the utter helpless lethargy and paralysis from the drugs. He had seen curare in use before.

Puzzles, things he could not understand. At one point someone had come into the room from the hall, silently, stealthily, though he had sensed the presence, sensed the violent distillation of danger. There was the vaguest outline of a large man with a stunner in his hand . . . then, incredibly, it was gone. Frightened away? Why? By what? And later, the harsh ripping sound of stunners on the floor below, the screams, the crackle of flames, the heat.

He had died then, trying to inch along the floor to the window; he *knew* he had died! But then there were other memories, fuzzy, incoherent. Arms lifting him up from somewhere, carrying him somewhere. The flicker of city lights and colored neons through a car window, silent men on either side of him. More darkness, a room, muffled voices, pain, unconsciousness again. Once, a hurried consultation with words that stuck in his memory: “. . . Alive?” “Yes. Deep shock . . . touch and go . . .” A woman’s presence, dressed in an outlandish hat, with cool-warm hands. And later a man’s voice, distinctly a man’s voice saying, “That will be all, Sister. I’ll notify you when I leave . . .”

His mind caught at it, held it. A pleasant, modulated voice. “Sister” was not American slang, not in that voice, yet the

woman was not a nun. The key fell into the lock, a perfect fit, and Alexander opened his eyes, saw the fuzzy figure near the bed.

"BRINT?" he said, his voice coming harshly from his throat, a voice he himself would never have recognized.

He didn't recognize the man, either, but he recognized the words when the man nodded and said, "Yes, of course. If you feel you can talk, Major . . ."

But he didn't feel he could talk, he didn't feel he could do anything but fall back against the pillow, the relief flooding every cell in his body. He sighed and, oblivious to the man and the room, he slept, a natural, restful sleep.

Alexander had never seen the man, who called himself MacKenzie, and he had never seen the place before, a small infirmary room high above the rush of Fifth Avenue traffic. He was in the BRINT building of the British Embassy Compound in New York. He had been there for three days, and until eight hours before they had had no very comfortable assurance that he was not going to expire quietly in bed.

"We were looking for you almost as soon as our net picked up the story on the Wildwood raid," MacKenzie told him in his soft Scottish burr, "and of course Bahr was looking for you too, which made the problem relatively simple, up to a point. We thought it would simply be a matter of letting them find you, and then closing in. Then we got back the information check-through from London on your Qualchi experience with us and the Army CI, and we began to worry." MacKenzie grinned ruefully. "We didn't realize then that you were to be used as bait in conspiracy from within the DIA to unseat Bahr. We didn't realize that anybody . . . even Bahr . . . thought you were that important. And we didn't anticipate that Bahr would make such a fast personal move to smash the insurrection." MacKenzie smiled again. "Which rather caught us out on all bases, you might say. Fortunately, we had the wit to get you out of there before you were completely incinerated."

"Yes." Alexander flexed his still stiff arm. "What I can't quite see is why. Why all your interest in me at all?"

"Because we couldn't risk letting you contact your own Army CI, or DEPCO, until we knew for certain just why Julian Bahr was so fantastically interested in having you caught," MacKenzie said.

"Not caught," Alexander said flatly. "Killed. Or at least, recaught."

"But why? Because of something you knew about the Wildwood raid?" MacKenzie asked.

Alexander started to nod, and then caught himself, and frowned. No, that was not it, not quite, and suddenly he saw it quite clearly. The pieces suddenly fell down into place, the obscure, misshapen pieces he had been trying to fit together since the night when the OD had called him to tell him the Wildwood Plant had been raided and robbed of U-metal.

It made sense, of course, and Alexander looked across at MacKenzie and wondered if the BRINT man would be able to see the sense that it made, or if he were the kind of practical fool who would not be able to understand the linkages between a fragment of nuclear physics, a ghost-written pulp book and an industrial giant.

"Because of what I knew?" Alexander said. "No, not what I knew. Bahr never cared about what I knew about the Wildwood raid. There was nothing I knew that he could be afraid of. He knew everything that I knew, by the time his men were through with me at the Kelley. And if it had just been a matter of information in my mind that he wanted obliterated, a simple spot-wash procedure could have taken care of it. But Bahr didn't just want my memory out of commission: *he wanted my mind out of commission.*"

MacKenzie nodded. "I can see the distinction, but why? Certainly not any lingering vindictiveness about the Antarctic business. He already had his revenge for that when he got you broken from your BURINF position and dumped into the limbo of an obscure administrative job—very definitely his doing, according to our contacts."

"No, it was more than that," Alexander said. "Bahr didn't

fear anything that I knew. But he did fear what I might be able to figure out, eventually, on the basis of what I knew."

"Ah," MacKenzie said softly. "Now we are approaching it. What might you have been able to figure out?"

"The truth about what happened at Wildwood," Alexander said. "There have been a couple of solid contradictions I've noticed since, but the Wildwood incident was the key to the whole thing."

MacKenzie poured Scotch in a couple of glasses, handed one to Alexander. "Do you mind if I record this?"

"If you expect proof, I don't have it," Alexander said. "All I have is certain things I *know* are true, and certain conclusions I've been forced to draw from those things. For instance, I *know* that no U-metal was stolen from Wildwood. I designed the security system there, and I knew a few things about it that Bahr and his DIA men didn't know. By the same token, the alien raiders would not have known those things either. Now, what actually happened at Wildwood? An alarm went off outside the compound, there was an explosion several miles away, and subsequently a shortage of U-metal was discovered inside the plant. The inference was that the radioactives detected outside the compound were the same as those missing inside, and that the theft was accomplished by humanoid aliens, or a human agent, who smuggled the material through the Geiger monitors by means of some kind of shielding."

The BRINT man nodded. "A neutronic shield is the popular rumor, I believe."

"But if such a shield could be made and used, why would the thief have abandoned it as soon as he got outside the plant? There was no jettisoned shielding between the plant and the alarm monitor. There are half a dozen other little holes in that idea, but the biggest hole is the idea of a collapsed neutronic shield. That was the flaw that tipped me off in the beginning."

"Such a thing would be very useful," MacKenzie said. "A shield a few nuclei thick with all the stopping power of a huge block of concrete . . ."

"And even if it were tissue-paper thin, it would still weigh as much as a four foot slab of lead," Harvey Alexander said.

MacKenzie blinked, as though somebody had suddenly flashed a bright light in his eye. Then he was roaring with laughter. "Of course it's obvious," he said. "Once it's pointed out. They'll have a fit back home, for not noticing that."

"The rest wasn't so obvious," Alexander continued, "but it made sense when you thought it through. Without a shield, no U-metal came through those gates. Therefore, the hot stuff that set off the road monitor was *not* the U-metal that was later found missing in the plant. So the three missing slugs must have been disposed of *inside* the plant. If you were looking for it, you could see how easy it would be. There are refuse pipes leading from the plant to the waste dump. If the metal was dumped down those pipes, only a radiation-level check of the dump would ever reveal it. But if that was what happened, then the raid on the Wildwood Plant had to be a forgery. If that raid was something that was deliberately staged—and it must have been—then Project Frisco must have been staged from beginning to end. And that was what Bahr was afraid I would figure out—that the alien invasion has been a hoax from the beginning. *There aren't any aliens!*"

Alexander turned to MacKenzie then, and set his drink carefully down on the table. "I also think that BRINT knows that is true, and has known it from the start. But I could be wrong, of course."

"Oh, no," MacKenzie said slowly. "You aren't wrong. And you can see why we could not afford to have you place your deductions in the hands of DEPCO." The BRINT man's voice was suddenly tired, and tinged with bitterness. "We've been playing a long gamble, and it seemed as though we were winning, at least at first. We were all very clever, we had all the answers to all the questions, until we came to the really big question, and now we find that we don't have the one answer that we really have to have." He looked at Alexander. "How to stop Julian Bahr before it is too late to stop him."

"We needed a wedge," MacKenzie said later, "to smash through the wall that DEPCO had built around itself. A balance of power can be maintained only if the two sides of the balance are very nearly equal. On one side we saw the Eastern Bloc, pulling out of the crash with a burgeoning military machine and an aggressive totalitarian government. We were able to hold the Eastern Bloc in check . . . *barely* hold it in check . . . by the threat of the Robling missiles. But on the other side, in Federation America, we saw DEPCO grow and expand, entrenching itself more and more firmly as the all-powerful, controlling bureau in the government, following its course of stability at any cost and gradually dragging the whole Western economy to a standstill."

The Scotsman poured another drink. "We could see it happening on all sides: the involuntional thinking, the systematic witch-hunting to drive every leadership figure out of his job before he could even taste the bit, the growing emphasis on the internal sciences—psychology and sociology—and the shunning of the physical sciences and technology. Nobody knows where it might have ended if it had gone on undisturbed, but anyone whose head was not buried in the system could see how it entrenched itself more firmly every year. Every frontier, every challenge was systematically being sliced away, every sign of progress curbed, a whole economy slowly grinding to a halt. This was not Vanner's plan; he saw the stability period as a transition, a 'getting back on their feet again' before picking up the gauntlet. It didn't work that way. The cure drove out the disease—the chaos of the crash years—and then became worse than the disease. How soon the society would have disintegrated completely, nobody knows. But it was clear that a frontier had to be established again, before it was too late."

"A space frontier?"

"Anything would have done it," MacKenzie said, "as long as it was a frontier. Some drive was needed to provide a stimulus, a drive that would require a massive national effort to achieve. To allow a war would have meant the certain destruction of Federation America. Only one challenge was

big enough, but a drive to space was the one thing, above all things, that DEPCO would block at any cost. The fear and suspicion of spaceships that was engendered by the crash was not a rational fear, but that didn't matter. You know your history of bipartisan politics in the old United States. It took the Republican party thirty years, a major war, a war hero and a decade of unparalleled prosperity to overcome the public reaction to the depression of the '30s. And the crash of '95 made that depression look like a Sunday School picnic."

"So Bahr was your wedge," Alexander said.

"Bahr was our wedge. Carl Englehardt didn't recognize the peril in the same terms we did, but he also wanted the spaceship project re-established. His motives were entirely personal and individual; the important thing was that he thought he knew a way to force a reopening of the project. He knew a young, ambitious man in the DIA, a man who was strong enough and tough enough and ruthless enough to drive a hole through DEPCO's wall of over-regulation and smash it down, given a toehold. Englehardt gave him the toe-hold, a series of carefully staged incidents which led, by inference, to the conclusion that we were on the eve of an alien invasion."

"Then Englehardt prepared the 'ships' that exploded?" Alexander asked. "What about the Moon?"

"If you remember that Englehardt has been making inter-continental missiles for years, capable of carrying fusion war-heads, it isn't hard to see how he could place a half a dozen unmanned drones on the Moon. The difficult part—in which BRINT co-operated—was handling the leaking of information that followed each successive incident. Bahr knew it was a hoax, and it fit into his plans perfectly. Once started, it all followed nicely: the circulation of a pulp scare-book to prepare the public for the panic that would follow; the step-by-step creation of a national peril which could be met and answered only by a drive to build a space fleet. Vanner had proved that the conquest of space would ultimately require a national effort comparable to a full-scale war, but if Fed-

eration America were to support it, it had to be an emotional cause, a fear-cause with a leader who could draw the people along and supply the great force needed to burst through thirty years of entrenched anti-space conditioning."

MacKenzie spread his hands. "We needed a man with the drive and strength to leap into the breach and *use* the crisis. We had to have Bahr, but he moved too fast; he was too successful. He didn't fight DEPCO the way we expected him to; he simply walked around DEPCO and left them standing there. Earlier, we might have been able to control Bahr. Now he is out of control, and in a matter of weeks he will have a continent under his thumb, and a military and technical program straining the nation to its limits. In six months he will want the world, and we won't be able to stop him . . ."

"Can't Englehardt stop him?" Alexander asked. "Surely he has the power."

MacKenzie gave him an odd look. "Englehardt is dead," he said slowly. "Curiously enough, he was shot down on the street an hour after Bahr made his appeal to Congress." The BRINT man shrugged. "The assassination was blamed on DEPCO fanatics who were determined to block the space project, and Englehardt was given a state funeral. Bahr's speech at the funeral was very touching. When it was over, he nationalized Robling holdings by edict, and doubled the pay of every man in the organization."

The two men sat silently for a few moments. "It seems to me," Alexander said, "that the job is only half done. You have to leave Bahr in power until he's carried Project Tiger to a fruitful point."

"And shaken the government apart, and entrenched himself like an iron fist," MacKenzie said. "What do we do when Project Tiger is half-completed and Bahr has made himself invincible?"

"Then we dump him," Alexander said.

MacKenzie was about to make a sharp retort, but he looked at the major's face, and realized that he was serious. "We can't do it by brute force. Do you have an idea?"



"I have an idea," Alexander said. "I think Julian Bahr's great strength can be his weakness. I'll need help. But if I'm right, when the time comes, I'll dump Julian Bahr."

"At the height of his power?" MacKenzie asked.

"Like the tragic hero," said Alexander.

### *Chapter Seventeen*

TO LIBBY ALLISON it seemed as if the world of nightmare had suddenly become reality. There were people here, a million people in the rooms and corridors, all talking at once, milling around, laughing too loudly, shaking hands too eagerly, with smiles on their faces and fear deep in their eyes. It had all been over after the speech, everybody knew that, yet they had waited for the formality of congressional approval, waited until the resolution had been formally read, and debated, and carried without a dissenting vote. And then the reporters were there by the thousands, flash-bulbs popping, a hundred questions in the air, and every eye was on Julian Bahr.

He was the center of attention, talking, laughing, proclaiming, as all the little men with pads jotted down his words. He was flushed and voluble, almost as though he were drunk. When the vote results came down four men moved in to his side, heavily-built men dressed in psychophantic imitation of Bahr, keeping the crowding groups of people from coming too close.

She watched him in growing horror, and in growing fascination. There had been times when she had seen this clearly, the thing that had been coming from the very first. Now, suddenly, all the restraints were broken, all the barriers down. He had stamped and pounded and bulldozed through the field, and suddenly it was empty before him; he was in command. He stood there, talking, his ego swelling, power and confidence in every word, every movement of his head, every gesture of his hands. And still he was driving forward, fighting . . .

*He will change the whole country, everything in Federation America into a dynasty, she thought. He will set civilization*

*back six hundred years. There will be no stopping him if he succeeds in this. He is thirty-four years old, and in a week he will be ruling a continent, but that will not be enough. He could be the master of the world, and that would not be enough. By the time he is fifty, the idolatry of ten billion people might still make him feel unloved.*

It seemed to her that this was unreality, a dream she was floating through, and she could only see it with a sense of detachment, as though it were not really happening to her. Even when Bahr was at her side, taking her arm through the crowds, smiling and talking about reform and the part she would play in it, there was no sense of reality. She saw him, and realized with a shock of horror that she was proud of him, excited for him, eager for him. He had fought so hard, he had even fought her, and now he had won, in spite of everything. And now he was making her a part of the victory.

His white goddess. His empress. His wife, his lover, his concubine, his first love, his partner, his daughter, his sister, his mother . . .

Reality broke in on the dream with sudden brutality, and the vast panoramic nightmare-lens clamped down to a tight, narrow channel and came into focus on Adams' face.

Adams, pushing his way through the room, his coat lapels flapping, lank blond hair awry, face white and distorted and ugly as he made his way across toward them. He thrust at the crowds of people that were intervening, and they stepped back as his anger swept the room like a wave. He approached Julian Bahr, and two of Bahr's men appeared at Adams' side, suddenly, each taking an arm, holding him as he writhed to break away from them. But his hate-filled eyes were not turned toward Bahr at all; they were turned toward Libby.

"You bitch!" he screamed at her, lunging forward to glare into her face. "You bitch! You did it, it's *yours*. Aren't you proud! Vanner should be proud of his bastard daughter. Oh, yes, he should be proud, and your whore mother, too! You've done their work well for them, haven't you? You've

betrayed everything they ever believed in, and now see what you've won for yourself . . ."

She had a drink in her hand, and she hit him in the face with it so hard that the glass shattered. Something snapped in her mind, and she threw herself on Adams, gashing his face again and again with the broken glass, pouring out all the hatred she had ever felt. And then she heard somebody screaming, and it was Adams screaming, and his face looked like the skin had been hacked off. She stepped back, gasping, and at her side Bahr was laughing, and the DIA men were grinning at her and holding Adams so he couldn't move, and Adams kept screaming, "Traitor! Traitor!"

Then Bahr nodded, a curt order, and the men dragged Adams out through the door, and Libby was sick, more violently sick than she had ever been in her life. Somebody was helping her across the room, into a lavatory. In the mirror she saw herself, and there was blood all over her hands and arms and dress, and some of it was her blood, but most of it was Adams'.

All the way home, through the dark wet streets, something in her mind was screaming at her that the nightmare was real, the nightmare was real, the nightmare was real . . .

He didn't notice that she was not there for quite a long time, and then only vaguely, as he caught himself looking around the room, trying to see where Libby had gone. He chuckled to himself. She had turned on Adams, all right. God how she had turned on him! He hadn't thought that she had it in her, and he felt his pride swell as he thought of it. He'd been right about Libby. She would help him. She knew the DEPCO organization, she would know whom to keep, whom to get rid of. With Libby at his side . . .

But she was not in the room, and he spoke to one of his men, who vanished from his side for five minutes or so, then returned, frowning.

"She's gone, Chief. She left the lavatory, and somebody saw her hail a cab outside."

Alarm leaped in his mind, and he blinked, trying to think

it through. Not a word to him, nothing, and there were people she would have to see, work to do, plans to be made. "Get a car," he said, "and get these parasites out of here."

How long had it been since she left? He tried to wade through the drunken exhilaration of the past hours, and he couldn't remember. But something cold was eating away at his chest, and he snarled at the driver and slammed his fist into his palm, wondering why it was that he was actually feeling pain in his chest, physical pain, as though something were crushing the life and breath out of him.

Outside the apartment building he leaped from the car, jammed the elevator button with his thumb, then cursed and started up the stairs three at a time, with his men panting behind him. He ran down the corridor, digging for keys in his pocket, but he didn't need the key. He stopped at the apartment door, and saw that it was hanging wide open into the darkened room.

Inside, with the lights on, there was nothing. She was gone. The closet doors hung open, clothes gone as though grabbed up in a desperate sweep of the hand. A suitcase was gone from the shelf. Dresser drawers yawned at him, empty. And in the back room the crib was also empty.

He stared at the room, unable to believe what he saw, shaking his head helplessly as he tried to fight down the rising wave of fear in his mind, surging in to fill the void left by the shock.

He looked up at his men, and told them to wait in the hall. He was trembling; he couldn't control the shaking of his hands. He saw his face in the mirror, and slammed off the light switch with a snarl of rage. He stood in the darkness, and then walked over to the window, stared out at the lights of the city, trying to make his hands hold still by gripping the sill with all his strength.

She was gone as if she had never been there. But now, in the silent room, things were blurred in his mind, confused. Was it Libby who was gone, or was it someone else? Suddenly, it seemed that it had all happened before, so long ago that he could hardly remember, and the bafflement

and rage and pain he was feeling now was the same bafflement and rage and pain he had felt then, when someone, someone . . .

Ruth. A door opened in his mind. Click, a light went on! A face stood stark and revealed. A faceless woman he had dreamed about, a woman and an elephant. Even the thought brought a shudder of fear through his body, and he clenched the window sill. Out across the city he seemed to see fires rising, blazing infernos, with yellow flames licking up into the black sky. A woman's face, but he could see it now stark in every line and hollow, and it was Ruth's face. And he knew that the elephant was only a symbol of the one he did not even dare to dream about.

*Ruth had left him, just as Libby had left him. He had cast it away, buried it, driven it from his mind, but now it was back, fearfully back, etched in orange and crimson on the black night sky.*

Ruth had left him. But that was another place, in another time. Bitterly, then, Julian Bahr remembered it all.

1995, and the desert installation of the XAR rocket ships. He was twelve years old, an angry, lonely, bitter twelve years in a world where there was no love, no understanding, no place to anchor firmly—a world of absolute authority, utter loneliness, and uncertain affection. He did not know what Howard did on the spaceship, he was an engineer of some sort, working eighteen hours a day in the testing labs, seldom home, and when he was home, the endless siege that Julian could only watch helplessly from the sidelines. Ruth was sick so much of the time, gone so much of the time, and those month-long absences were barren for Julian, utterly barren. Then, when Ruth came back from the hospital, or from the coast where she was "resting," things became warm and alive again. She sang, she chattered, she hugged him and wept over him and drowned him with tearful demonstration. Those returns were the oases of his life, but then Howard would come in, bone weary, and the laughing and singing would stop. In a few days Ruth's warmth would

recede, and her nervousness would begin again, and Julian would fold inward again.

Life was life, and the facts of life were simple and unyielding. First there was Howard, who was to be obeyed, with his sarcasm, his cruelty, and the long bitter battles that drove Ruth away again and again. Above his father was a uniformed unknown, the Army, which was powerful and treacherous. His mother, when she came into his life at all, brought warmth and happiness and love. But then she was gone again, without warning, and he was alone with Howard.

He hated it. His rebellion was total, and oblivious to consequences. There were the schoolyard fights, the petty larceny, the bitter obsessive competition. His classmates hated him because he hurled back their overtures of friendship with sarcastic bitter words from Howard's mouth. His teachers hated him, and he returned this with interest. And as the reports sifted home, into Howard's hands, he knew that Howard hated him, and was disgusted with him, and despised him, and for this there was no answer, no way to fight back.

He found himself one day pointing a rifle at his father's back. He could not remember the circumstances; he could remember clearly the long, glinting barrel of the rifle, the sight at the end, his father's back through the open window clearly outlined. The gun was loaded, and he could see the exact spot where the bullet would hit; he could visualize excitedly the exact action of his father falling forward against the desk, collapsing to the floor, writhing and spurting blood and dying. He saw it coldly, clinically, without the slightest flicker of concern or affection. He could do it, and then Ruth would come home and stay home. His finger was tightening on the trigger when it occurred to him that Ruth would probably be upset, so he lowered the gun and returned it carefully to the gun rack. The next day he took the rifle out to a quarry and threw it into thirty feet of water.

Then, incredibly, the crash, and the storming of the Rocket Project. He was thirteen when the mobs smashed into the

compound at White Sands, murdering, sacking and burning their way to the hated spaceships and all who had worked on them. The rumors of the "gasoline day" gauntlet spread with the growing national riot, where scientists and engineers and technicians were wrapped in gasoline-soaked rags, set aflame, and forced to race each other a hundred yards to a single waterfilled drum, as the mob lined up screaming on either side.

The mob came to their part of the compound, and Julian's father did not hesitate a second. He snatched up a box of shells, and opened the gun rack as the shouting, angry, blood-hungry gang reached the front door. But the rifle was not in the gun rack.

Three of the men were killed and two others beaten senseless before they broke Howard Bahr's arm and knocked him down and dragged him out into the street. They caught Julian and Ruth and hauled them out to watch the beating and mutilation, and finally the inferno, all of which Howard endured with stubborn, scornful silence. That day Julian realized something very surprising about his father, yet even as he watched the orange flames consuming the dead body he felt a strange excitement and release.

He wrung free of the man holding him, picked up a gasoline can and sloshed it in the face of the bully who had led the execution. The man roared and lunged at him, but Julian jumped back over the fire. The flames caught the man, and while he thrashed and screamed and rolled on the ground Julian broke and ran through the compound, dodging into the flickering shadows thrown by the fires, running until there were no more footsteps, until he was gasping for air choking with exhaustion and fear. In the distance he heard the shrill tortured screams, but they did not interest him. He had killed a man, but that was not enough. There was more to do before the job was complete. He had to kill them all.

He found Ruth standing in the shadows waiting for him in the smoking ruins of the houses when he returned, after the men had gone. She had not gotten away, and she had not been killed. Her mouth was drawn into a thin line, and

she moved very slowly and painfully, and she would not look into his eyes.

A confusion of nightmare days and nights, then. There was violence, and more violence, as everyone connected with the space projects fled for their lives. Julian lived with Ruth in part of an abandoned church, and he begged, and stole, and foraged, like everyone else in the early days of the crash, seizing anything to live on or trade with. Ruth was changed, she never seemed to be herself. She was always talking and laughing without making sense, talking about her school days in Vermont and her father's pipe, and acting as though there hadn't been any crash.

One night she had shown Julian a small bottle, and he had been afraid it was poison until she explained. "I've kept it for weeks. A very expensive fragrance." She held it to his nose, her eyes bright, and his flesh crawled on his spine as he realized it was nothing but perfume. "Of course it's worthless now," she said. "All fine beautiful things are worthless now. I'll have to go home soon." She had held his hand against her cheek, kneeling beside him in the darkness as if she expected him to say something reassuring, but there was nothing to say. He couldn't steal enough to feed both of them. He had pulled his hand away.

And the next night, when he came home from scavenging, Ruth was gone. All the food, clothes and cigarettes he had been hoarding were also gone. He searched for two days, but he could not find her. Then he made an impossible decision, crept through the guarded double-fence of the Military Police compound and headed toward the well-lit barracks in the officer's quarters.

There were many women there, with hungry pinched faces. Someone was playing a piano, and through the partly opened door he could see Ruth dancing while everybody watched. Her face was flushed, her eyes were sharp and hard with a vision of death and hatred. The men laughed and shouted to her, and she smiled, and sang something in French, and went on with her dance.



Julian had turned and walked away, then, and never looked back. Until now, as he walked through Libby's empty apartment, staring at the empty drawers, the empty closet, the empty crib.

He drove his fist down on the table, snapping a leg and splintering the top. Pain surged through his wrist, and rage boiled out of control. He moved about the room, half-blind, smashing, kicking, destroying until the rage had burned down to a hard red coal. Then he opened the door and went out into the hall.

Libby had walked out. After all he had done for her, even after what had happened tonight, she had walked out, left him flat, turned her back on him.

But this time he wouldn't walk away.

This time he wasn't hungry, frightened, helpless. This time he was in command, and he would see her burn in hell before he was through with her. This time she would suffer, the way *he* had suffered.

And then, when he was through with her, there was the boy.

He turned to his men, and swiftly, carefully, he began giving his orders.

### *Chapter Eighteen*

ONCE THE WALL was broken down, Bahr moved fast, driving ahead with the bulldozer force that meant safety and security and hope to the people who looked to him to lead them.

Even Alexander and MacKenzie had not anticipated the speed with which the man would move. For MacKenzie, there was endless work and a nightmare of administrative detail in the BRINT field offices. For Alexander it meant a growing desperate urgency to develop and crystallize the plan he had seen only in its barest outlines, an urgent necessity to re-evaluate the situation continually, with the everpresent responsibility of picking the right time, the exactly right time, to move.

He spent days on the flat, multi-volume dossier on Julian Bahr from the BRINT top-sec files, the thousands of feet of recording tape, the miles of motion picture film, and the endless succession of documents, memos, notes, affidavits, opinions, history-segments that the BRINT network had so painstakingly accumulated.

And through it all he saw the governmental structure of Federation America tremble, totter and crumble under the driving force of one man and a project called Project Tiger.

The changes were sweeping, and fundamental. With the Robling combine under national—and Bahr's personal—control, the first moves were swift. At White Sands, for thirty years a ghost town, the shabby, burned out, gutted and abhorred remains of the old XAR project were exhumed. Like a phoenix rising from its own ashes, White Sands became a booming metropolis. The buildings were rebuilt; the country was combed for scientists, engineers, technicians, craftsmen—anyone who had contributed or could contribute, until the newly organized technical schools could pour out their new blood. Blueprints were drawn from dusty files, materials poured South, and the abandoned shell of the final XAR ship disappeared beneath a new scaffold crawling with workmen.

As the progress reports and development plans were read, the research director for the defense section of the old DEPEX rose in protest. "What you are proposing is impossible," he told Bahr in the hot, crowded conference room one morning. "The economy cannot support it. It would require an effort equivalent to a major war, and even then I could never guarantee success."

"We *are* engaged in a major war," Bahr said, "and there will have to be changes in the economy."

"But the changes you are talking about aren't possible without reducing the population to a starvation level."

"That may not be true," Bahr said, "and it certainly is immaterial. We have no choice in the matter, and starvation is the least national threat we are facing. Above all, we cannot afford to sentimentalize." The research director was

encouraged to accept a job in another highly non-critical organization, and Bahr named a suitable replacement.

Thereafter, steps were taken to alter the economy to comply with the demands that Project Tiger was already making.

Bahr's manner of dealing with DEPCO was swift as the stroke of an axe, though far more humane. He did not arrest anybody in DEPCO. He simply cut off their funds, and red-carded every man, woman, and stripling in the DEPCO organization. A few hundred people were picked up for questioning, but there was no purge. Adams' subsequent suicide was unquestionably a suicide. Bahr did not even forbid the DEPCO people to go to work, or continue their research, but he told them in a firm, quiet voice that the economy was being reorganized to accomplish Project Tiger, and that long-range research programs which would not contribute to the major effect were being temporarily suspended. He promised them that as soon as funds were available, their pay would start again, but he conveyed to them in various subtle ways that there might be some delay.

And through it all, an infiltration of trusted DIA men began into the bureaus, the planning commissions, the offices, and a slow, inexorable tightening of control began, a rerouting of the channels of authority in an upward pyramid which led, ultimately, into the office and the hands of a single man. There were more alien incidents, with the usual publicity and no captures, but the panic and terror which ensued was channeled and held in the rigid program which was to rid the skies of the aliens forever.

It was a pattern as old as time, moving step by step in its dreadful familiarity, and Alexander and MacKenzie watched it. Every real tyrant in history had followed the pattern. . . . Napoleon, Hitler, Stalin, Khrushchev . . . they all knew it well.

But to Julian Bahr a far more important war, a private, personal war, was progressing, and he drove his fist into his hand again and again as the coal of rage burned brighter and brighter.

It took the BRINT network and Harvey Alexander almost a week to pick up her trail, but he finally located her, in the filthy third-floor room in a run-down Boston suburban apartment house. He had only the BRINT profile of her to go on, which he had thought was remarkably complete, and it took him three days of surveillance to be sure that he had the right woman.

When he was finally certain that she was not under DIA stake-out, he went up to the third-floor room, and knocked.

She was staggering drunk, and her voice was hoarse and ragged. When she opened the door she had on a dirty bathrobe, with a towel around her hair, and she reeked of gin and cheap perfume. Behind her the room was a mess, clothes strewn around, makeup scattered, the bed disheveled. "You want something?" she said harshly. "I don't want to stand in this doorway all night."

Alexander pushed past her into the room and closed the door. She looked at him, and shrugged, and went across to the half-finished drink on the bureau. "Sure, all right, come in," she said. "Who asked you in here?" Then her eyes opened wider, and she seemed to see him for the first time, and her face was frightened. "DIA?" she asked.

"Make some coffee," Alexander said. "I want to talk to you."

"Thanks, I'll stay drunk."

He hit her viciously across the face twice, and dragged her by the collar of her bathrobe over to the wash basin. He made her throw up, and wiped her face off with a wet towel. He made some surro-coffee, and she sat bent over drinking it, her eyes closed, tired and defeated and sick. She threw up the second cup; by then she was fairly sober, and her face was dead with exhaustion and fear. "Who are you? What do you want? Why can't you just leave me alone?"

It looked bad, and Alexander shook his head. Her red hair was an unkempt mop, and her mouth sagged open in a stupid, beaten expression. He saw the bruise under one eye, the black-and-blue marks on her neck, and he ground

his teeth. "For God sake clean up and get some clothes on," he said. "You make me sick to look at you."

She did not protest, but picked up some clothes and headed for the bathroom.

It was bad, far worse than he had expected. How could a woman go to pieces like that? He paced the floor, lit a cigarette, wondering if he had made a terrible error. He needed her, everything he had planned depended on her, but she would have to be strong, not broken and washed out.

Clothes and make-up made a change. She seemed a little more alive when she reappeared. He stood up. "All right, my name is Alexander, and I'm not DIA. I'm with Army Intelligence, assigned to BRINT. I want to talk to you, but it's nearly dinner time. I have a car outside. Where do you want to eat?"

Libby looked at him for a moment, confused and disbelieving, and her face colored. Then she seemed to stand a little straighter, to look more like the attractive, intelligent girl the BRINT dossier had described. "Do you know Boston?" she asked.

"Chicago, yes. Boston, no."

"I know a place . . ." She smiled at him. When they reached the car, he opened the door for her, and her eyebrows lifted slightly. "If this is an arrest," she said, "I hope they're all this way."

It was not an arrest, and it was critical that she be made to understand that. Making friends with her, Alexander decided, had indeed been the right policy. A good meal, a couple of cocktails, some small talk, a little light banter—the rituals of a culture that had twice been eroded out of society, and Libby Allison was a new person. Her self-respect had been knocked apart. He would have to have the details, later, but she was basically a strong person, and Alexander began to feel that just possibly he might still accomplish what he wanted.

He didn't question her that night, even though he was eager to sound her out. She looked exhausted, and her apart-

ment was still a mess. He said he would be back in the morning, and left her at the door. Before he left the neighborhood, he made certain that the BRINT stakeout understood its job. She was to be there when he came back.

As he had expected, the morning saw a new person. Drab as it was, the apartment was in order, and she offered him coffee when he came in. They talked, and Alexander told her enough to make it clear that he knew a great deal about her, and about Bahr.

And then, quite abruptly, the pain and terrible grief came out in a torrent, a storm of emotion that she had been tormenting herself trying to hold in. Alexander listened, and knew for the first time that he was going to win.

"I knew he would be angry when I left him," she said. "I didn't realize that he would be so violently, vindictively furious. It wasn't just me, it *couldn't* have been just me; he never cared that much about me. It was something else that he had to make me suffer for.

"The morning after I left, he canceled DEPCO. People were picked up for questioning, and the files cleaned out. He canceled my clearance and my stability rating, though of course those don't mean much now, unless he *wants* them to mean something. That first day his men found out where I was staying. When I came back home my car had been stolen and my apartment looted. I took Timmy and found another place. I thought if we could just wait it out for a few days he would forget it, it would blow over."

She looked up at Alexander, and the fear and grief were still in her eyes. "I was wrong, oh, but I was wrong. The second day they attached my bank account, and I had no money. That afternoon the police came, with a committee of Education and Conditioning people. They were very regretful, but very firm. I didn't have a job, I didn't have an income, so obviously I could not adequately support a child. They took Tim away. I thought I knew Julian, but I couldn't believe that he'd let his own son go into the Play-school system. He did it just to hurt me. I tried to get in touch with him, but all I got was the run-around. Inside

of three days I didn't have enough money to eat with. Then Bahr nationalized my apartment building, and I was out. He put in this miserable currency reform, and I didn't have a bond or security that was worth the paper it was written on. Even my life insurance . . . well, you know the hell he's been raising with this economic mobilization . . ."

She broke off, and poured herself a drink.

"Why did you leave him?" Alexander said.

"I wish I knew that. I wish I knew, for sure." The girl threw herself down on the sofa, searching his face as if somehow she might find the answer written there. "Mark Vanner wasn't really my uncle, but he brought me up from the time I was a little girl. He was a national figure when Julian Bahr was a scrawny little road-rat smuggling watered-down antibiotics for a living. Mark Vanner held this country together for years on just faith, and respect and decent, honest leadership. Do you think Julian Bahr could have done that?" She spread her hands helplessly. "Vanner was a man, a magnificent man. When he became chief of economic planning there wasn't a factory in operation anywhere in the country. He didn't have money, or a gang of gunmen to back him up. But he talked to people, and he went around to the colleges and defense agencies, and the people volunteered by the hundreds and thousands—the best minds in the country. They came to Washington, knowing that they weren't going to be paid, sincere people who believed in Mark Vanner and believed that his social-economic system was the only thing that could pull us together again. Harrison, Kronsky, Williams, Otto Lieblitz . . . my mother and father before they were killed . . . those were the kind of people who started DEPCO."

It was silent in the room, and outside the rain was coming down against the window. Libby Allison was talking, and Harvey Alexander listened. Gradually the pieces were falling into place, the picture he was trying to see.

"They worked for five years," Libby went on. "They built this country up again, from a dying giant to a prosperous,

stable world power. It was only supposed to be a temporary measure, a chance for the country to get back on its feet again, to get its bearings. I wanted to help. I wanted to do more. Do you know how many years I spent getting my doctorate? Eight years, and three years of field work. I had the highest rating of any L-12 in fifteen years. I got a letter of commendation for some of the work I did on the Playschool analysis. And then Julian Bahr came into power. He hated DEPCO, and he was afraid of DEPCO, and in one week—less than one week—he destroyed the DEPCO organization that it took twenty-five years to build.”

“But that DEPCO organization wasn’t all good,” Alexander said.

“Of course it wasn’t all good, but the point is, *it wasn’t all bad*, either. And me, I was the fool, the wide-eyed virgin.” She bit her lip. “I suppose you know how Bahr got through the DEPCO screening for the last five years. I first ran across him when he was being screened after his court-martial. I couldn’t believe that his IQ was really that low, I wanted to help him channel that awful drive and ambition, I practically forced him to work with me. I was terribly in love with him when we first met, and I told myself lies about him and made myself believe things that never could have been true. But then, when he had broken down DEPCO, even I couldn’t pretend to myself that I could ever control him. I could see what he had done to *me*. He knew I had the same kind of hate in me that he did; he saw that when I hit Adams. But when I found myself standing there deliberately mutilating a man that I hated, I knew if I stayed with Bahr I would have to destroy things the way *he* wants to destroy things. I had already compromised DEPCO and broken every promise and moral contract I’d ever made, and betrayed everything I’d ever believed in.”

She took a deep breath, and spread her hands again. “I knew then that I couldn’t do it, and it wouldn’t make any difference what he did to me, no matter how much he hated me, I couldn’t do it.”

She was silent for a long time, and Alexander gave her



time to recover. She looked at him, and gave a brittle laugh. "There isn't much more. I got out of New York. The police had me in for questioning twice. I spent a night in jail for vagrancy, and I saw he wasn't going to quit, not until I was pounded right down into the ground. I stole a car and drove to Boston and ran the car into the river. I had no money and no papers, so I couldn't get a job. I didn't dare register for relief, because Bahr would find me. Well, he'll find me eventually, anyhow, but right now he's too busy. There isn't any work for me here. I have three college degrees and an IQ of 150, and I can't even get a job as a waitress. I hadn't eaten for two days when I got to Boston, but I found a way to live. No papers, no clearance. I can't even be a registered whore, so I take what I can get. I'm young, I learn fast, I'm scared sick and I get myself drunk as much as I can stand it. I hate myself, but I swear to God I hate him worse."

He knew that any comment now would only rub salt in the wounds, and finally the shell fell away completely and she began to cry, and he let her lie on the bed and cry herself to sleep as if she were a little girl. She had a nightmare and woke up screaming, but he held her and talked to her like a child and after a while she lay quiet. Finally she woke up, for which Alexander was duly thankful because he was getting a trifle impatient, and he knew that he had not yet begun.

Later, a quieter, more restrained Libby showed every evidence that her confidence had returned a little. Alexander recognized that at least one important point had been won: that to her he was the reincarnation of Mark Vanner. He played his cards skillfully then as he made sandwiches and coffee for them. He told her about his own blitzing from BURINF to Wildwood, let her realize that he was an outlaw like herself, although in a stronger position, and able to help her. She accepted this; even though she had drawn herself in after the naked release of the morning, he could see that she wanted his friendship desperately.

In a flash of insight he sensed that she *was* Mark Vanner's

daughter. In the BRINT dossier she looked like her mother, but now, watching her . . . the flair for organizing uncertain and inexact ideas, the talent for abstraction . . . it was clear.

He waited until he was certain that the time was right before he said, "I think that I might be able to find out where your son is," and a door that had been slammed shut in Libby's life swung open again.

"He's somewhere in the Playschool system," she said, hardly daring to believe what she heard. "The records will have been changed. And Bahr's people have infiltrated."

"I know that," Alexander said. "I still think we could locate him. If he is in the system, BRINT will have duplicate files."

She stared at him. "If you could do it, if you could only do it." She was interested, desperately interested.

Alexander suggested a plan.

If they could locate the boy, BRINT would get him out of the Playschool. Money would be made available, and Libby and Tim would be conducted out of the country, probably to Canada. In return, Libby would help Alexander.

"How?" she wanted to know.

"It has to do with Bahr. I can't tell you more right now, except that it may be dangerous for you."

"And Tim will be gotten out of the school in any case?"

"Before anything else begins," Alexander promised her. "There's one thing, though. You may have to face Bahr personally and fight him. If you're afraid to, you'd better say so now."

Libby was silent for a long time. Then she turned away. "I don't want anything to do with Bahr," she said dully.

"All right, but what are you going to do with your life? Drink yourself blind? Forget Bahr and your son? Just stand by and turn into a low-grade prostitute? Look, you're part of this. Julian Bahr didn't just happen out of a clear blue sky. You made him. DEPCO made him. Vanner . . . yes, Mark Vanner made him, hate by hate."

"I know that," she said sharply. "I know the life he's had.

I know what DEPCO did to him when he was in Riley. He was washed up when I met him. I made him stand up again. I made him fight . . ." She stopped.

"Yes, you made him fight, to build an empire to lay at your feet." He faced her, forced her to meet his eyes. "Do you know why you ran away from Bahr? I'll tell you why. Because you'd already destroyed DEPCO. You always wanted to."

"I didn't! I wanted to help, to do all I could."

"By shielding Bahr? By putting him in power?"

She whirled on him. "Why do you want to torment me? I hate you!"

"You hate Bahr. Fight him."

"All right, I will. I'll get even with him!" She bit off the rest of the sentence, but her eyes were narrowing and hardening in anger, and Alexander knew that the White Queen was already taken.

### *Chapter Nineteen*

IT HAD GONE smoothly for Bahr, everything had gone smoothly during the weeks while the continent was torn, hammered and smelted into a space industry under his ruthless reform. There had been enough work to tax even Bahr's enormous reserves, and exhaustion gave him occasional stretches of dreamless sleep. On his desk was the report from White Sands announcing the first successful pilot model of the new atomic drive, and he was pleased, vastly pleased, until the memo came into his hands—an innocuous enough note except that it came in under a special code heading that guaranteed it would come to his personal attention.

He read the memo, and threw his office door open, bellowing for Walters, from whom the memo had come. "What does this thing mean?" he roared, waving the memo sheet under Walters' nose.

"Just what it says," Walters told him. "She took the child back."

"What do you mean, she took the child back? Who said she could take the child back?"

Walters showed him the papers. The whole matter was perfectly legal and straightforward, and much as he wanted to, Bahr could find nothing out of order. An attorney representing Libby Allison had paid a quiet visit to the authorities at the Bordentown Playschool. He had made the proper identification in Libby's behalf, and presented satisfactory evidence of her desire and ability to support the child properly. She had a sufficiently good job, and a suitable standing account in a Canadian bank. The paperwork had been carried through, and Tim had been released in her care.

The last Bahr had heard directly from Libby, she had been dispossessed from her New York apartment. After that, there had been too much demand on his time, too many things to do, and not enough of his personal staff to handle the load. Now he alerted four of his men and ordered them to make an investigative pounce.

They found her apartment in Boston in ten hours flat, but Libby Allison was gone, permanently. Her forwarding address was in Quebec, Canada. A check with the Border Guard Intelligence gave the tantalizing information that Libby had driven into Canada with a permanent residence passport the previous day.

The boy had been with her.

The very audacity of it infuriated Bahr even more than the fact itself. A conference with Braelow, his personal attorney, and he laid it on the line. "I want that boy back here. I don't care how, I don't even care whether he's dead or alive, *I just want him back!*"

Braelow studied the situation, and came back with empty hands. The DIA team that Bahr had sent to Canada for surveillance returned with a report as detailed as it was useless. Libby had a job; she left Tim in a nursery during the day, and took him home to an apartment a few blocks away at night. Her Canadian job was actually a civil service job. Bahr saw an opening wedge there, and put pressure on various people to get her fired, so that she would be unable

to manage support, but something or somebody seemed to be exerting equal pressure on the other side, and Libby was not fired from her job. . . .

He had Braelow contact Libby indirectly, delicately suggesting certain material advantages that would accrue if Bahr were permitted to adopt the boy, and certain unpleasant consequences if she continued her ridiculous attempt to thwart him; but Libby made a scene, and chased the contact man out. Bahr listened to the tape recording, and seethed, driving his fist into his palm until his arm was numb to the elbow.

He tried diplomatic channels then, demanding to have Libby extradited on certain legal and political charges, but this curiously came a cropper, and the Legation, in a huff, returned him a sharp warning against trying to violate political sanctuary. By this time Bahr was boiling.

Then he received a personal letter from Libby, through her attorneys. Bahr read it, and tore it into shreds, and shortly thereafter planned the kidnapping.

His DIA men did not return at the appointed time; in fact, they did not return at all, so he did not know exactly what had gone wrong. But not only did the kidnapping mission fail, the incident hit the newspapers, and the Canadian police found out somehow that there was a DIA linkage in the kidnapping attempt. Although it was only rumor and completely unconfirmed by Canadian officials, the European news nets played the story up as fact. Quite suddenly Bahr found the devoted public of Federation America catching the scent of scandal and looking to him confidently for explanation. BURINF handled the cover story very skillfully, but still there was a stir, an unpleasant aftertaste, and Bahr was beyond reason.

He faced Braelow in private conference. "I want that boy back," he said furiously. "If she hasn't had enough yet, then I'll give her enough. I'll break her into little pieces. I want that boy, and I don't care what it costs you to get him. Just get him."

Braelow spread his hands. "There isn't any way but a court

fight," he said. "She's deliberately turning this into a dirty mess. It's impossible . . ."

It was the wrong thing to say. "I said I wanted the boy back," Bahr grated. "Set up any kind of case you have to, but get him back."

"You mean you'd let it go into court?"

"My God, are you deaf? No common, low-grade whore is going to . . ." Bahr broke off, incoherent. "You heard what I said. Now you *do* it!"

Braelow and his staff mounted the case.

Julian Bahr tried every conceivable device to keep the affair out of the courts, but after the kidnapping failed it was evident that he was not going to succeed. Libby would not meet with him or his attorneys directly. She left all negotiations in the hands of her counsel, who were, collectively, the best legal firm in Canada. With no other alternative at his disposal, Bahr bent every effort toward a quick, quiet settlement before a Canadian judge, confident that BURINF could do a neat job of cover-up for him on the American side.

Consequently, he received a bad jolt when he walked into the courtroom with Braelow at his elbow, and found himself facing a battery of 3-V cameras and microphones, with the press-box packed with the most eloquent journalists on five continents waiting patiently for the fun to begin.

He caught Braelow's arm. "What are those cameras doing in here?" he whispered furiously. "Those newsmen . . . This is *my* fight, my personal, private fight."

"You don't have anything personal or private any more," Braelow told him coldly. "You might as well get that through your head. We're on thin ice out here, and it's out of our control. The cameras were the judge's option, and he insisted on having them here so there wouldn't be any kickback later."

"All right, then, get my men to work jamming any broadcast," Bahr said.

"They've tried it already, and they can't. Radio Budapest

is getting through, and so are half a dozen other foreign nets." Braelow shrugged. "According to Intelligence, most of the population is following the news, one way or another."

Bahr cursed. "How is this thing going to go?"

"Maybe not too bad," Braelow said. "In fact, I don't see how we can miss. We have evidence of immoral conduct, the men involved will give us perfect testimony if we need it."

"They'd better."

"And we have a terrific edge on the support aspect. The woman's job here will hardly clothe and feed the child, much less educate him. That's plainly one of our best cards."

"You play the cards, don't bother me with them," Bahr said tightly. "Just so we win."

"Relax," Braelow said.

"But those damned cameras—"

"You've always liked cameras," Braelow said. "Cool off. We're going to win this."

In another room in the courthouse, Libby turned to Harvey Alexander, her face drawn of color, lips trembling. "I'm afraid," she said. "I don't know if I can face him."

"Well," Alexander said, "this is a fine time to tell me." He put his hand on her shoulder. Her whole body was shaking. "Look," he said, more kindly. "We've led him down the garden path, so far. The minute he sees me out there, he'll *know* that something fishy is going on. He won't be worrying about you then. I'll be doing the court fighting, and either you have confidence in me, or you don't. . . ."

"It isn't that," Libby said miserably. "It's the whole idea. The thing we're going to do to him. It's a brutal thing to do."

"I know it."

"And it's a *lie* . . ."

Alexander shrugged. "I wouldn't do it if I knew any other way to make him break. But it doesn't matter now whether we like it or not. I've shown you the BRINT reports."

"I know, I know," Libby said. "I know we have to get

Julian out now. But what if you do knock him down? What will it do to him? He hits bottom when things go against him and he'll fight. But if he's really finished, he'll just go to pieces. That happened after his court-martial. He turned into a drunk." She looked helplessly at Alexander. "I hate him, believe me I hate him. But what will happen to him? And what if it doesn't work? What if we're wrong?"

"If it doesn't work, we've got nothing to lose anyway," Alexander said wearily. "He'll expand into Canada, and then Europe, and nothing you nor I can do then will make the slightest difference. We have to get him now, before he's entrenched so that he can never be shaken loose. Look, Libby, you're the one who has to decide. You've got to have the strength and will to do it, or we're through."

She was silent for so long, and looked so frightened and uncertain that suddenly he was frightened himself. Maybe he had given her too much rope, but he knew that at the heart of it she *had* to make up her own mind.

Watching her, he thought with a sudden pang of BJ, and wondered if he would ever see her again. He knew from a BRINT checkthrough that she was alive, under constant DIA surveillance ever since he had slipped the hounds that night at Wildwood. Now he realized what drew him to Libby: she was so much, very much like BJ, and he wondered if BJ would have the strength to do what he was asking Libby to do now.

"We got Tim out of the Playschool and into Canada like clockwork," he said, trying to sound confident. "BRINT folded up the kidnapping attempt without a hitch. So far we've blocked him at every turn. You must have known what you were doing then; now we've reached the critical point. Are you going to throw up your hands and give up now, just because Bahr may call you a couple of dirty names in public?"

"It's not that. I don't want Tim hurt."

"Don't duck the issue. You either want to fight Bahr, for what he's done to you and the things you believe in, or you want to give up, let him take you like he's always taken you."



Libby flushed, and her eyes blazed with anger.

"No," she said. "He'll never do that again. I'll fight him."

A clerk opened the door, and nodded to them. Alexander squeezed her hand, and she stepped to the door. A moment later they were walking down the hall and into the courtroom.

There was a hushed murmur across the room as she appeared, and the cameras of two continents swung toward her as she walked toward the long table near the front of the room. She saw Bahr's eyes meet hers, contemptuously, and then widen. His face turned a sudden angry red and he almost leaped to his feet when he saw that her counsel for the trial was a lean, bronzed Harvey Alexander, in the uniform of a General in U.S. Army Intelligence, complete with combat braid and decorations.

Alexander took the opening advantage by putting Bahr on the defensive about the kidnapping.

First he asked Bahr's attorney a few routine questions about why Bahr wanted the adoption, for which very reasonable and logical answers were presented. Then Alexander said, "And what was Mr. Bahr's reaction to the attempted kidnapping of Miss Allison's child?"

The attorney turned to Bahr, who indicated that he would answer without taking the witness chair. "I was naturally concerned," Bahr said, "and I would like to add that I am exceedingly grateful to the Canadian authorities, who were alert enough to prevent what might have been an anxious . . . or even tragic . . . incident."

"Can you think of any reason why someone should have wanted to carry out this kidnapping, Mr. Bahr?" Alexander asked, persistently ignoring Bahr's title.

"I cannot, unless they knew he was my son and intended to bilk me for ransom. Certainly a ransom attempt would have been aimed at me," he added, "because Miss Allison has no money at all."

"Then someone must have been aware of your earlier attempt to negotiate with Miss Allison?"

Bahr reddened. "That's possible. It was a domestic matter, I made no attempt at secrecy."

Alexander's voice was smooth. "Then possibly some overzealous people attempted the kidnapping, thinking they were acting in your interests."

"I think not," Bahr said sharply. "My people know I don't operate that way . . . and they are completely loyal."

Alexander let that remark sink home; then he thrust the knife. "In that case, I'm sure you can explain," he said, "why every member of the kidnapping group was an agent in the New York division of your own DIA."

During the recess Bahr had a background check run on Alexander, on a crash priority, intent on discrediting him as an imposter. Alexander was a passed-over major in the Army, a deserter, and wanted by the DIA for stability check and alien contact. A General! Bahr snorted.

The background check altered his plans. The Army records were complete and perfect. Alexander, they said, had been on special CI assignment since the Wildwood raid; his promotion had been reconsidered, and he had been spot-promoted to General after directing a raid on Chinese Intelligence headquarters in Hong Kong two weeks before when an attempt had been made to blow up the White Sands rocket installation. Bahr remembered seeing the report on that raid, carried out with terrific daring and precision in Hong Kong and well publicized. He had even commended it publicly himself, though the names of the participants had not been noted. Bahr did not like it. It put Alexander in too strong a position, a military hero.

The escape from Kelley was no help, since Alexander had been registered there under a John Smith label, for Bahr's convenience. As far as the records were concerned, the incident had never happened, and Alexander was legally scot-free. The recess was short, but by the time he went back into court Bahr was certain that some forgery and conniving had been carried out with the Army files. He smelled a rat, but he didn't know what to do about it at that time.

After the recess, the unpleasantness of the opening session intensified. Bahr presented his claims for the boy. Alexander parried every inference against Libby's character and qualifications, but felt that he was losing ground nevertheless. Bahr's confidence was returning; he nodded to his counsel, and they began the long string of male witnesses testifying to Libby's immoral conduct during the past weeks. Alexander appeared confused as the picture developed inexorably. Finally, as though at a loss, he put Libby herself on the stand.

She tensed herself for the ordeal, to do what she had to do. "I could deny what these men have been saying, but I can't see what difference their testimony could make in this matter anyway," she said sharply. "When DEPCO was closed down my apartment was looted, my bank account frozen, and I was turned out on the street and hustled around by the police for vagrancy. My education kept me out of low-skill jobs, and my red security card, a present from Mr. Bahr, kept me out of highly skilled jobs. When the currency was changed . . . well, show me one person in Federation America who didn't go through hell during that change-over. . . ."

She saw Bahr's face go red with anger, saw him lean over to whisper to Braelow, saw the camera eyes watching her from four angles across the room, and she went on. Her voice was low before; now she raised it so it carried clearly across the courtroom. "But we're not talking about me, we're talking about this man's claim on my son, and there's one thing I'd like to make clear, and it just makes me furious. I've been insulted, and attacked, and my private life has been put under the spotlight, all on the strength of sanctimonious claims that Julian Bahr wants to do the right thing by his son and take him away from my evil influence. Well, I would like to ask Mr. Bahr if he has one shred of proof, even a single scrap of paper, that will prove that he is the father of my child."

There was a stunned silence. Then Bahr was on his feet. "This is ridiculous," he roared. "There are the paternity

papers . . .” And then he broke off suddenly, staring at the cameras, his mouth still open.

He remembered then.

There *were* no paternity papers.

The judge adjourned for the day, to quiet the courtroom and give Bahr time to re-form his case.

The following day, a barrage of evidence: blood typing, flesh and hair tests, fingerprint whorls, eye color. Alexander dismissed it all, pleasantly but firmly. “Hundreds of men could have produced a child with these characteristics,” he said. “This is not conclusive evidence; it isn’t even evidence at all.”

More testimony, not in especially good taste, but Bahr was desperate. He was committed now, he would not turn back. He would not lose a public battle to that red-headed slut. He was Julian Bahr, he had dragged himself up from nothing to the leadership of a continent, and she was nothing more than a common whore, like . . . A wave of anger shut his mind against the past. That didn’t matter now. All that mattered was that he was going to win.

He verified the skiing vacation they took when Libby had become pregnant. Witnesses testified that they shared the same room.

Libby shook her head. “What difference does that make?” she asked Braelow. “All you’re proving is immorality, not paternity.”

“You admit you went on weekends with Mr. Bahr?”

“Certainly.”

“That he was intimate with you?”

“You mean that he slept with me?”

“That’s what I mean,” Braelow said, beginning to color.

“So have other men,” Libby said, “according to you. You ran a regiment through this courtroom to prove it. Who was in bed with me doesn’t matter. What matters is who got me pregnant. It was not Bahr.”

Braelow turned back to the table, confused. “All right,” Bahr said angrily, “you’ve messed around long enough.” He

stood up and strode to the center of the room, glaring at Libby, raising his head to the cameras. He knew the eyes that were watching him, now, but he didn't care any longer; all he could see was her face, her eyes watching him with hatred; all he could feel now was the violent, overpowering urgency to break her, to beat her down and pound her into the ground. He didn't care if all the world was watching, she couldn't do what she was doing to him and get away with it. "Now," he said, his voice thick with repressed anger, "let's straighten out a few simple facts. I know what you've turned into in the last few weeks—that's why I'm involved in this filthy affair—but just for the record let's talk about the year 2022. That is when you became pregnant, right?"

"In March, to be exact," Libby said.

"And you recall I was on a special assignment in California during most of that month?"

"Yes, I recall."

"You recall that I phoned you every night, from California?"

"Very clearly."

"Specifically, did you not plead with me to come back to New York, because you were . . . lonesome?"

"I didn't use those exact words," Libby said.

"Did you arrange to meet me at the ski resort in Sun Valley, and did you not fly out there?"

"Yes."

"We were together for two week ends?"

"Yes."

"And it was during this time that you became pregnant?"

"Well, a woman has to calculate backwards, but I'm certain I became pregnant during that ten days in Sun Valley."

"Then it couldn't have been anybody but me," Bahr said, and stepped back triumphantly.

Libby's answer was mocking laughter. "So I led you to believe . . ."

"You slut!" Bahr screamed, and smashed his hand across her face. She fell out of the chair, and Bahr reached down, grabbed her by the shoulder, drawing his fist back savagely.

Someone seized his wrist, twisted it and threw him off balance, and he was glaring into Alexander's face. Suddenly Bahr remembered the cameras. He gripped the table edge. "You're a dead man," he said to Alexander, in a voice so low only Alexander could hear. Then he shrugged loose from Alexander's grip and turned back to Libby. The 3-V lens caught a closeup of his face, hideous with the anger of death, facing Libby's scornful mask.

Then Libby was turning to the judge, speaking in a voice that carried to the farthest corner of the courtroom, to every person there, to every microphone. "He could *never* have been the father of my child." She looked around the room, drawing full attention, and then looked at Bahr, and made a slow, deliberate gesture. There was a gasp from the courtroom; as Libby spoke, facing directly into the 3-V lenses, her mouth twisted in contempt.

"He is a fraud," she said, "a magnificent fake. Julian Bahr is impotent."

## EPILOGUE . . .

IT HAD BEEN predictable, and yet unpredictable; he had headed for the border, and then, abruptly, the BRINT patrol had lost him, and it was almost an hour before they realized that he had doubled back, that he had never intended to go to the border at all.

Emergency Director Harvey Alexander arrived in his Volta just as the BRINT men were breaking down the door to Libby's apartment. "The guard," he groaned, "my god, didn't she even have a guard?"

"She did have," MacKenzie told him. "The guard was killed by a silent stunner. A couple of DIA men who were still loyal to him blocked our way up here for fifteen minutes." The BRINT man put a hand on Alexander's shoulder. "I'm sorry," he said. "We thought Bahr would try to get across the border when he slipped away from our patrol."

In the dark hallway the axe-blows on the door shredded

the silence, and finally the door crashed in. Two BRINT men pushed through inside, stunners ready. Alexander tore away from the aides who tried to restrain him, and followed them in.

They were too late. Alexander saw her on the floor, and he turned white, and closed his eyes with a sudden dizzy feeling of pain and loss.

Her face had been beaten to jelly, the flesh and bones mashed beyond recognition as if some blunt heavy maul had been used. She was naked, until they put a sheet over her. Even in death her body was twisted in agony.

Julian Bahr sat in darkness in the next room. The BRINT men surrounded him with drawn guns, but it was a needless gesture. He sat dull and silent, staring at the floor, and his hands were broken and swollen and bloody.

Later, as they were strapping Bahr onto a stretcher, Alexander half listened to the aide speaking into his ear. ". . . rounded up most of the top DIA men, except those who got to the Southern Continent. No question about your confirmation in the appointment. The engineering people at White Sands have pledged loyalty."

He nodded, but he was not hearing. He knew that presently he would have to think about it. There was so much work to be done. The frontier had been reopened; gradually, the pace would have to be slowed, the starvation economy improved, Project Tiger converted from a crash war operation to a long-range program of progress that would ultimately take men out to the stars. He would not have to do it alone; he would have able hands helping him. There was MacKenzie and a dozen, a hundred, men like MacKenzie.

There were other details, and soon he would have to begin thinking about them, but now he could think only of Julian Bahr, and Libby Allison. Bahr was there, but Bahr did not see him. He did not see Alexander weeping silently and alone over Libby's body, nor turning back to the world and the overwhelming task he had undertaken—to hold the reins of power in firm and dedicated hands.

Julian Bahr would not see the great spaceships rise, months

and years later, nor would he see his son grow tall and strong. He did not die, but still he was not alive; something had broken within him. The world changed, the days went by, but he did not see, nor understand, for the eyes of Julian Bahr were the eyes of a madman.

But someday, Alexander hoped, Bahr's son would see . . . and understand.



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