

SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES

A
Nova
Science Fiction
Magazine

No. 20

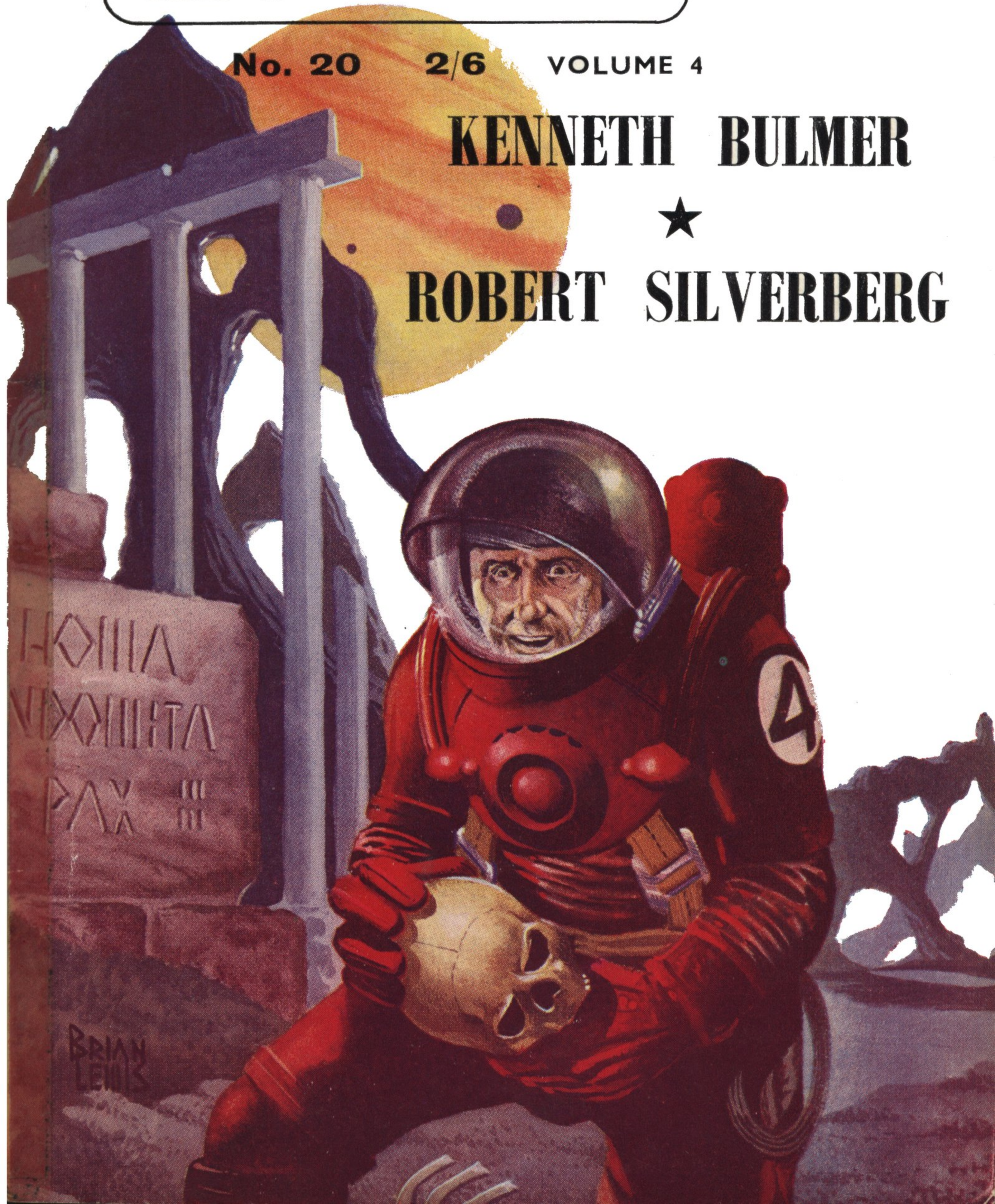
2/6

VOLUME 4

KENNETH BULMER



ROBERT SILVERBERG



Your Favourite Film is probably on 16mm! Fifty or more new films are released on 16mm every month. Unless you know what they are about and who they are available from, you may be missing something of great interest. With **FILM USER** to keep you in touch with the latest informational, training and general interest films this risk will never arise. **FILM USER's** monthly reviews of new releases—unique in its comprehensiveness—is but one of several reasons for taking out a subscription (20s. for twelve issues) today. Free specimen on request from Dept. F.U.E., **FILM USER**, 319 High Holborn, London, W.C.1.

The British Science Fiction Association

was formed to be of service to readers of the genre.

If you would like to meet or write to others who enjoy the same hobbies, have access to our rapidly expanding library service and be kept generally well informed on matters relating to S-F, why not join us?

A MONTHLY NEWSLETTER IS PUBLISHED AS WELL AS A QUARTERLY OFFICIAL JOURNAL

Write for all particulars to:—

Hon. Secretary, British Science Fiction Association
c/o 130 London Road (basement)
Cheltenham, Gloucestershire

SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES

Vol. 4 No. 20

1961

All Complete Science Fiction Stories

Short Novel :

WIND OF LIBERTY

Kenneth Bulmer 2

Vickery was the key man in the colonial world's bid for liberty — but he didn't know anything about psychology!

Novelette :

THE WAGES OF DEATH

Robert Silverberg 74

The weaklings had to make a 2,000-mile trek to liberty — or die. On the journey many things happened.

Short Story :

MACHINE RECORD

Tevie Cogswell 102

Edited by JOHN CARNELL

Cover by LEWIS

Published bi-monthly by NOVA PUBLICATIONS LTD., Maclaren House, 131 Great Suffolk Street, London, S.E.1 Tel. : HOP. 5712

Sole Agents for Australia : Gordon & Gotch (Australia) Ltd.

Sole Agents for North America : Gordon & Gotch (Canada) Ltd.

Annual Subscription 17/- post free (6 issues)

North America \$3.00

The entire contents of this magazine are Copyright 1961 by Nova Publications Ltd. and must not be reproduced or translated without the written consent of the publisher

The publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited material. All stories printed in this magazine are fiction, any similarity between the characters and actual persons is purely coincidental.

The colonial worlds were kept in check by—psychology ! When they arose in their might they didn't know what they were fighting against.

WIND OF LIBERTY

by KENNETH BULMER

Chapter One

The destiny of a planet trembled in the balance today, and though it was just one small world among so many, on the turn of events depended the lives of millions of men and women. Vickery was passionately concerned that their lives should not be wasted ; but, idealist though he was, he retained enough of his core of hard shrewdness to value his own life above any other.

Should he fail in this attempt at subversion here in the plush pent-house home of City Warden Armstrong, then the whole city of New Lincoln would explode into flames tonight. Should he be successful then perhaps only a tenth of the city would be destroyed. Either way, this night New Lincoln would burn.

He stood by the window looking down on the crowds hurrying about their last minute Christmas shopping in the cruel midsummer sun. The apartment was unobtrusively cooled and Vickery felt relaxed and competent despite the pressures of the moment.

"They seem happy, down there," he said in his rich orator's voice, not turning his head. "It might be—pleasant to be like that."

"Christmas Eve," Armstrong said. He was stout and highly coloured with staring blue eyes and a brain like chrome-steel. His casual lounging clothes in lilac and maroon failed to conceal his armoured vest; his fingers played with a crumpled message flimsy, balling it and smoothing it. "You and I, Vickery," he said with some deliberateness, "we'd never be happy just being one of the herd."

Vickery turned so that the sunlight fell across the stubble blueing his long jaw and set fanatical shadows along the hollows of his nose and eye sockets. A thrill of anticipation ran through him, chasing away the indolent relaxation, giving the awareness of challenge to his purpose.

"You would not, City Warden," he said politely. He left the rest of the dichotomy hanging.

Armstrong picked up the end brusquely. "And neither would you, Vickery. You've been on-planet what, now? A month? Six weeks?"

"Something like that," Vickery said vaguely.

"Tell me, why did you use your real name?"

Vickery laughed. His lean wolf-face broke and showed white fangs. His laughter bubbled in his throat.

"What do you know—or think you know—of me, then, City Warden?" The title now was used with contempt.

Armstrong did not flinch. "I have had a message from Larodin—"

"Ah!" breathed Vickery. "Larodin. A very sweet operation—"

"A million dead and five million injured and untold billions of damage—"

"Yes." Vickery glared now at Armstrong, his wolf-face saturnine and threatening. "But Liberty! Freedom! Larodin now owns its own soul—"

The City Warden had reached his high position not through preferment or bribe, but by hard-headed efficiency. But, faced with this fanatic, he felt for the first time in many years a twinge of apprehension, of indecision, of, he had to admit, of fear. He brushed that aside. His hand reached for the button inset in the arm of the chair.

Vickery said : " Don't ring for your guards yet, City Warden. If you do they will find only a dead man sitting in your chair."

Armstrong did not hesitate. He took his hand away from the button. He made the gesture unmistakable. Like any other man, he liked life.

" You told me you were an Earthman, a Terran, Vickery, and that was why I invited you to my home when you arrived." Armstrong's poise was admirable. " I cannot believe that now."

The fact had been hard enough to believe before ; Vickery smiled again. He was pushing this fat City Warden and enjoying pushing him, knowing that he and his sort had battered on the people of all the planets, bled them, bred them, profiteered in them and finally stolen their own souls. The F.C. employed high-grade leeches. Gradually, planet by planet, the F.C. were finding that there were others in the galaxy with blood-letting capacities, and they weren't liking it one little bit.

" I am an Earthman," he said harshly. " I was born in a little town called Ballintoy in the greenest island in all God's Universe. You wouldn't know of it, of course. Our great galactic business empire sucked me in early and I wasted my youth clerking with computers on some rat-bag planet out on the Rim. My parents were dead and buried before my first leave—"

" That is common enough in our modern galaxy," Armstrong interrupted. " With distances as vast—"

" And with instant communication reserved for you and your toadying class—and the long haul by starship for the underlings like me !" Vickery remembered the agony of that old starship journey, racing across the parsecs to arrive in Ireland in time only to be able to stand at the graveside and to order the headstone. He had really begun to hate the F.C. then.

Armstrong's hand remained on his knee, the other hand still crumpling the message flimsy. He made no attempt to reach the alarm button.

" I am sorry, Vickery. But you have come to my city of New Lincoln, the capital city of Sjalberg II, a fine city, a growing city, a city in very good standing with the F.C., and I hear reports that make it quite plain why you have come. You cannot expect me to sit by idly—"

"You?" The contempt lashed the City Warden. "What can you or your sort do now when the whole planet is ready and ripe for Liberty?"

"Are they? Isn't that rather quick judgment for a man who has been on-planet less than six weeks?"

Again Vickery laughed his wolf laugh.

"My friends have been active. I am merely the focal point, the spark to set the tinder alight, the catalyst. I, Armstrong, am going to set the match to your city tonight—unless you co-operate."

"That hardly appears likely."

Vickery crossed the room from the window, his feet soundless on the pile, and leant on the table, knuckles down and face thrust forward. Armstrong remained unmoved.

"I hope to convince you that it is very likely. In the galaxy there is a wind of liberty blowing!" Vickery gestured largely. "Ordinary men and women are tired of your authority, of your orders and directions that extend into every part of their daily lives. Word has spread of the worlds that have thrown off the yoke. You cannot suppress ideas, Armstrong. You cannot forever choke the dreams and aspirations of mankind."

"All this is very fine and fancy free." Armstrong had heard all this before from the various hotheads he had had from time to time to discipline. "But we have proved that our system is more efficient—"

"Efficient! Is that all, then, that your puny mind can conceive?"

"I think it something worth striving for."

"Look at Larodin. Now they are in command of their own destiny. They have thrown off the yoke imprisoning them. Now they are men again and can stand up in the galaxy and look out with clear eyes."

"Look, Vickery. Get on with your proposition. It is necessary that I hear it so that it may be read into your prosecution at your trial for treason."

"I am pleased you have a recorder running. Perhaps others may hear the truth and the whining excuses and pleas of the Wardens—"

Armstrong was stung into saying hotly: "The Wardens are a dedicated corps of men and women, Vickery. We run the planets for the F.C. It takes a man, Vickery to create. Any fool can destroy."

" Cheap words and cheap thought. I destroy the evils of the F.C. so that my friends may create better worlds for themselves and their children. Worlds, Armstrong, free from the oppressive blight of the F.C."

" Before we came to set the old empire aright— "

" Yes, yes ! I know it all. The great Terran Solar Empire crashed into ruins and anarchy blazed among the stars. And then the businessmen got together and organised their Friendly Combine. My God ! The F.C., the mighty and potent instrument that subjugates millions of planets the brain child of a group of grubby businessmen. It makes the blood of a fighting man run cold."

The two men glared at each other. The clash of wills was an almost palpable thing in that still room high in the sunshine of the tallest tower of New Lincoln.

" I have three legions under my hand," said Armstrong softly.

Equally softly, Vickery answered. " Not so, City Warden, not so. For the men of Legion Eighteen and nearly all of Legion Fifty-Five are with the common people."

The words rocked about Armstrong's ears ; but he rallied strongly. " I don't believe you. All the men of my three legions are loyal to the F.C. Every single damn one of them !"

The very vehemence of his words betrayed him, in his own eyes as in Vickery's.

" Remember Laridon, Armstrong," Vickery said gently.

The City Warden crumpled the message flimsy and tossed it pettishly on the floor. He swallowed to clear the dryness in his throat.

" How long—" he began.

Vickery cut him off.

" This is my proposition. It is a fair one. You know that the people of the galaxy are tired of being herded about, told to do this and ordered to do that, numbered, labelled, molly-coddled by your businessmen's combine as though they were infants. You know they grumble but obey—but what you will not admit is that you know that they are acting to free themselves, to take back into their own hands the right to make their own decisions, to live their own lives, to earn their own bread and to say goodbye forever to machine-law. Is freedom so weak a plant— "

"You said something about a proposition?"

"Forgive me, Armstrong. Of course, demagoguery is not necessary for a City Warden. You are a machine man, and you deal in machine facts. Well, Armstrong, my proposition is a simple one. I offer you the chance to work with me and with my friends on planet. We have Legion Eighteen and Legion Fifty Five in our pockets; they have seen the wisdom of our words. But Legion Five Two Seven, a new legion, I understand, is based out at Lesser Holm, right around the planet. A word from you would prevent much bloodshed."

"You expect me to turn traitor—?"

"Wait, wait. The alternatives are these. You join us and we take over the planet, free the bonds of the F.C. and set the world on its own feet, free. Or you refuse, and many lives will be lost, the legions will meet in battle—and you know what that's like—New Lincoln will go up in flames. And, City Warden, you, naturally, will be the first to lose your life."

Moving quite slowly but with the steady purpose of a lettuce-bound tortoise, Armstrong levered himself from his chair and stood up. His lounging robes slid down with a soft hiss of artificial silk to cover his armoured vest. He rested a hand negligently on the arm of his chair, well away from the alarm button. His square, fat face with the prominent blue eyes showed no readable expression; to Vickery he seemed the embodiment of all the gross privilege that had battered upon the people of the galaxy and enriched itself at the expense of sweated labour and starvation—enforced discipline. In that moment Vickery hated him and his like and rejoiced that he should have so large a share in their undoing.

Even so, Vickery was forced to speak first.

"Well, Armstrong? What do you say?"

"Just this, Vickery." The City Warden's tones were wine-rich and full, they belled in the room. "You have convicted yourself out of your own mouth. Yes, I have a tape running; and my guards have been listening to it. All right," he said, not speaking to Vickery. "Take him away."

Vickery laughed. They say that if you look closely into the eyes of a wolf you will find they are bright and full of merriment. So looked Vickery then.

The gun in his hand steadied on Armstrong's head.

"Call your guards," he said, mocking. "And they will find only a dead man. I promise you."

Between the chair before which bulked the gross form of Armstrong, the City Warden, and the table on which Vickery, the Freedom Fighter, had been leaning, lay a small space of carpet, perhaps five foot across.

The design of the carpet was gay and brightly coloured, with streaks and bars of ochre and emerald and crimson lying interwove in luxuriant profusion. From one single long strip of dark pile Vickery heard a thin whistling, as though plastic scraped fur. The gun remained steady ; but confusion caught at his throat.

Surely, there—a reflection of the window gleamed in mid air ? Surely—vaguely and malformed, hung a reflection of a tall, thin, saturnine man with a wolf face and a gun pointing at him ?

In that moment Vickery cursed and fired. The charge flared and recoiled from the transparent plastic shield.

Armstrong chuckled fatly. Before Vickery could turn, the doors, opening behind him, disgorged half a score of armed guards, who ran down on him like hungry hounds on the scent of blood.

Chapter Two

Vickery put up no resistance ; that would have been useless and might have resulted in his immediate death. That eventuality did not figure in his plans.

They took him away from the luxury of the penthouse and conducted him in an elevator down to the bowels of the building flanking New Lincoln's main shopping avenue. Down there the plumbing was not so efficient and the heat struck from all angles so that they were all, prisoner and guards alike, sweating. Vickery glanced at his wrist watch. If the plan went through as arranged and he had no reason to doubt Sevlon's word, the insurrection would break out in just four hours. After that, as he had known would happen and as he had warned that stuck-up fat prig Armstrong, the city would burn.

But in four hours a great deal might happen to a prisoner.

Sevlon had warned him of this. He had merely laughed in his wolfish way and shrugged it off. "It's an occupational

hazard, Sevlon," he'd told the old Freedom Fighter with the scar of a rising dead these twenty Terran years. "If I am taken—which is most unlikely—then the plans go on. It will mean merely that Armstrong has refused to throw in his lot with us and I have been foolish." And he'd laughed again. "But remember, I've had experience in managing these things. This world of Sjalberg II is easy, thanks to you and your friends. On Larodin I had to begin almost from scratch."

And look at him now, after those brave and boasting words—caught like the simplest mechanic in a trap as old as the Empire! And, down there in the foetid chambers beneath the great city building, Vickery, the galactic Freedom Fighter, laughed and laughed again.

They tossed him into a cell to cool off. The heat hammered at him from walls and floor and ceiling and he loosened the magneclaps on his shirt and opened the neck fully. He wasn't likely to cool off down there. The gaolers had the decency to slide a jug of water into him, cold and invigorating from a refrigerator. They weren't legionaries but men of Armstrong's private bodyguard. Tough, mean, highly-paid mercenaries, their upkeep accounted for much of the taxes Armstrong levied over and above the level laid down by the F.C.

There existed a small chance that Sevlon might begin the insurrection earlier; by this time he would be only too well aware that Vickery had failed to bring over Armstrong's doubtful legion.

The snag was that, despite all his proud boasting, the men of the legions were not altogether trustworthy from the Freedom Fighter's point of view. Oh, yes, they had said they would stand for liberty and freedom when the day came. That day was now. Legion Eighteen was pretty safe, considering. Legion Fifty Five was better than fifty per cent uncommitted. Any whisper in the wrong ears, of course, would have meant disaster.

Armstrong must have had some inkling of what was going on. Sevlon and the friends he had gathered about him had planned the revolt over seven years or more. Armstrong must have had spies out—despair and doubts began so to plague the prisoner that he stood up energetically and, with the sweat pouring off him, walked up and down the cell.

After Larodin where success had come so swiftly and completely he must have grown overconfident. Pride dug a wide pit for him and he had blindly fallen in. Well, there remained

his own wits. He could try to escape, slight though the chance appeared.

He hated the Friendly Combine. He had seen the way they took young men and women and put them through the sausage-machine schools and universities, turning out fine technicians and scientists who were that and nothing more. Their brains were filled with the details of their work, with sport and with lovemaking and without the slightest idea that such an animal as social science and politics existed. Politics. He'd never forget the day the old man had given him the tattered book with the sexy cover and he'd read Pillengarb's Treatise on a Free Economy. His whole horizon had expanded. Men were not meant to live huddled in great manufacturing cities, he'd realised ; they were born to be free, to roam among the worlds as they willed and not at the behest of the F.C.

Monopoly, Financial Trust, sheer money-grubbing trickery had built so contemptuous a power among the stars that even the old Terran Solar Empire was dwarfed by the modern colossus. The Friendly Combine ! What businessman's cankered twaddle it all was !

The members of the civilisation spawned among the stars by mankind were no better than slaves—they were slaves, in everything but name. The old man had been a friend of his father and had stood back when Vickery had mourned at the grave side. After that Pillengarb's book, aye, and many others, had fed the fuel waiting in his mind so that the death of his parents had come to symbolise for him all the hatred the name of the Friendly Combine conjured up, had fixed his resolve firmly to do all he could to harm them and so regain a little of what he had lost. He had worked hard for the Freedom Fighters, in small ways at first. A little sabotage here, the carrying of a message there, until he had risen through the ranks of the Freedom Fighters to his present position. Special Agent. Well, that was but a name, a mere appendage. He regarded himself as the devouring flame that cleansed the galaxy of the parasitical businessmen's monopolies brought world after world out of the shadows into the light of Freedom, Equality and Liberty.

Such a vast organisation as the F.C. could never have existed before the days of automation, of computers and indexes that could spew out facts and figures on a billion

people in a matter of seconds. All the old empires of the forgotten past had wilted and shrunk and died when their sizes grew too great for administration. With the facile instant travel facilities used by the big businessmen no world could not be reached in a matter of weeks instead of the months by faster than light starships.

Only the very costliness of the process saved the overlords from sending in many legions to win back for them in blood and steel the worlds and the money they had lost.

There was no chance at all that the high muck-a-mucks of the F.C. on their headquarters planet—where *that* was no one of the great gullible public had the slightest idea—would send in instant shells filled with legionaries. The whole concept was distorted. What the Freedom Fighters on Sjalberg II had to fear was Legion Five Two Seven right around the planet at Lesser Holm. As soon as the shooting began—before if City Warden Armstrong took energetic measures—they'd be flying in with tightened armour and the weapons' safeties clicked off.

Vickery finished the water which was already tepid and sat back on the narrow plastic-foam bunk. All four walls and ceiling radiated cold light which, even if it did not add to the suffocating heat of the cell, did provide a merciless illumination in which his every movement was immediately observed. His job as a special agent for the Freedom Fighters had landed him in awkward situations before ; but this one looked to be the trickiest to date.

Smuggling in the thermo-nuclear warhead had been childishly simple, a mere routine part of his assignment. If Sevlon chose to use it on any recalcitrants in New Lincoln, then Vickery would scarcely hope to survive.

He sweated a bit more.

When the rear wall of the cell fell outwards in a rumbling smother of masonry and plastic bricks he jumped hard for the opposite wall where the barred door bulged in the blast. His palms cracked hard against the wall. Dust billowed. He heard someone shouting ; but whether it was outside in the corridor or in rear, beyond that sudden destruction of the wall, he did not know.

The cell door opened on a squeal audible above the roar of handweapons and the rumble of collapsing masonry.

The mercenary bodyguard—tall, limber, with a full armour protection and flamboyant, plumed helmet—lunged in with grasping hands.

A freezer ray beamed in lambent green fire from the shattered wall and held the guard poised, standing tall and vicious for a tiny moment, and then tossing him stiff and frozen into a corner. Vickery looked around.

"Come on, Vickery!" The voice was light and cheerful.

Vickery scrambled over the wreckage on hands and knees, not caring that his clothes suffered, bundled himself down the far side. As he had half expected a mole lay there, shining bluely crimson in the remaining cell lights. A sharp crack sounded and a slug exploded on its hull.

"Snap it up, Vickery!"

He fell, gasping and clutching, into the round hatch which immediately snapped to behind him. With a great lurch the mole started off, flinging Vickery backwards to the scrap of decking at the rear of the pilot's chair.

The mole, a drill-snouted, matter-repellent underground beetle with blue-black toughened hull, set up its usual excruciating whining until it had worked itself up to full revolutions and was boring through the earth at a good ten miles an hour. Vickery crouched on the deck and got his breath back.

"Thanks, Tania," he said at last, still puffing.

Tania Sevlon kept her eyes on the periscopic mirror which gave her a view of the tunnel the beetle-like machine excavated in its progress. That tunnel showed that the machine was old-fashioned—the newer models, instead of compacting the removed earth into the sides of the tunnel simply fed it through ducts to pile up behind, like a worm. But Freedom Fighters had to make do with what equipment they could find to hand.

"Father could only spare Steve to drive and me as observer-mechanic," Tania said briskly, still looking rearwards. Her long pale hands hovered over the butts of twin machine cannon, aimed down the receding tunnel. "That arch-brute Armstrong struck first. He—"

"Damn," Vickery said, very mildly. "That was my fault."

"Perhaps. He tried to disarm Legion Eighteen. He picked the wrong one first. They marched out in a body and the shooting started almost at once."

Vickery touched his wristwatch and felt a comforting warmth go through him. "I'm glad my seeker was functioning okay. You found me easily enough?"

"Oh, yes. Steve took the mole right up to your back door without trouble. Ah! It looks as though they're reacting."

Her slender hands closed with a firm assurance on the machine cannon butts, her forefingers around the triggers. In her black leathers, with close fitting helmet and large armoured goggles and face mask she still contrived to look very feminine. Even in the oil and fume reek of the mole's cramped interior, like a submarine compressed to a miniature scale, her perfume wafted sweetly to him. The cannon began to stutter.

He wished he could see what was happening, yet he dare not ask her for fear of distracting her attention. She fired a short burst, and then another. She moved the aim of the cannon only fractionally.

"That's discouraged 'em from following," she said, clipping the cannon away. "And the tunnel's fallen in so until they fetch another mole they won't get far."

She stretched and turned to face him, pushing the facemask up and smiling. Her dark, heart-shaped face with the dewy mouth stirred him—as always.

"Thanks again, Tania. Now—what happened aloft?"

"The legion from Lesser Holm failed to arrive on time and by then Legion FiftyFive had been cleverly taken over by the legionaries loyal to us. Legion Eighteen moved out to meet Legion Five Two Seven when it showed up. I was ordered off to rescue you then. I can tell you though that the citizen bands were out in full strength. All the morons and zombies doing their Christmas shopping were in a frightful panic. We took over all the main centres and the spaceport is in our hands."

"Good. I can imagine the panic in the streets. Many casualties?"

"No, thank God. The loudspeaker fliers kept up a continuous propaganda barrage and everyone hurried home. At least, so I believe. By then we were well underground and had lost audio contact."

For the first time since his arrest Vickery began to feel that perhaps this mission hadn't turned out so badly for him. He was well aware that the Freedom Fighters would not look with great satisfaction on the sight of one of their special agents languishing in gaol when the work went forward and he knew that his career would have suffered in consequence. If he could get above ground and into the fray before it was all over he could yet redeem the situation.

A new thought struck him. "Do you know if your father intends to use the—the thing I brought on planet?"

"The thermo-nuclear bomb?" There was no false softness about Tania. "I do not think so. If the insurrection goes as well as it was when I left, then there will be no need."

To himself, Vickery had to own that that pleased him. Certainly, he felt convinced, Sevlon wouldn't use the bomb whilst his daughter was still in the target area.

The mole juddered and bounced along, steadily eating its way through the ground. Steve, up front, concentrated on his controls. He was probably, Vickery considered, a little put out and annoyed that he'd been sent on this rescue mission when he might have been out on the streets fighting in the ranks of the Freedom Fighters.

The fighting, when at last the mole broke surface, had long since finished. Steve brought the machine up on the city outskirts, guided by the inpouring audio waves from a transmitter with Sevlon's headquarters. Freedom Fighters had taken over a suburban hotel and from the roof were watching the conflagration. Sjalberg II boasted no sizeable Moon and so the night sky was driver black and in its wild vastness flaring spumes of fire burst thunderously from the city and the northern approaches.

Out there somewhere, encased in their armour, the men of Legion Eighteen met, fought and blasted the men of Legion Five Two Seven. Legion Fifty Five had secured half its intractables and had gone on to take over the city. Citizen forces patrolled—where the flames from the brief, fierce fighting allowed—and took over key points. As he sprinted for the hotel's beehive of industry, Vickery was feeling pleased that it was all over and annoyed that he'd missed it.

Sevlon, brusque, confident, filled with good humour, met him with a smile and outstretched hand.

"Good to see you safe, Vickery. Can't afford to lose you."

"Thank you for arranging it, Sevlon. Now. Tell me."

"Everything under control. Those who were not firm in their decision to join have now decided. Those who remain intractable have been beseiging the spaceport—"

"Let 'em go," Vickery said expansively. "We don't need—"

"Precisely. Unfortunately, Armstrong has also gone. When his mercenary bodyguard failed him he took instant shell for well, wherever it is they go, these high and mighty overlords."

"A pity. Still, the less bloodshed we start a new world with the better. If you'll let me have my—ah—package, I'll move on to the next world. Custer, I think." He laughed his wolf laugh. "You made it easy here, Sevlon. Armstrong was rather right, after all. But perhaps Custer won't be the same." His bright wolf eyes caught the distant flames. "And I warned Armstrong the city would burn. See how it burns!"

Chapter Three

"The proper study for Man is Man," declaired Gerald Wain in his rich, throaty voice, seasoned by fine cigars and mellow port. "But not in this day and age and not, most certainly not, for any man or woman of the public. And not for any member of the F.C. below the rank of System Executive."

"Come now, Gerry," chided his wife—she'd been a cyberneticist of galactic fame before she'd married "aren't you being a little too pedantic, a little too cautious?"

The other four guests around the dinner table smiled at the host and hostess. The remains of a sumptuous meal had been cleared away by robot table-servants, and even as the conversation rattled on the robots were dismantling the table and wheeling the chairs—meanwhile converting them to armchairs—into a semi-circle before the wall screen. At each guest's elbow stood a table for personal belongings. The robots took care of every other need.

The dinner had been good and, indeed, with a galactic larder to call upon, why shouldn't it be? Legate Executive Barny Roth dispensed himself a couple of pills to aid his digestion. At eighty-one he was still a young man in a society that looked on three hundred Terran years as a normal span; but commanding a hundred legions told on any man's constitution. His wife smiled fondly at him and contrived to make the smile into a little warning frown.

Roth received the message well enough. Show no weakness before Cluster Executive Gerald Wain. True! Wain was the most important man in space for over a hundred light years, and only three other Cluster Executives commanded between him and Earth. Everyone knew of Wain's ambitions. The Board might summon him to take Terrestrial Executive powers one day. If that happened he might prefer his own Legate Executive over anyone else's.

The fifth member of the dinner party sat and sipped his wine and smoked his cigar and said very little. Judge Owens ruled his courts with a rod of beryllium steel and he brought the same quality into his treatment of himself. A strong, self-willed, arrogant man, very dangerous. Legate Executive Barney Roth had always found it difficult to meet Judge Owens' eyes.

"Cautious?" said Gerald Wain. "Pedantic? My dear Marie, surely you are talking about any man other than your devoted husband? Explain yourself."

Marie Wain laughed softly. "I meant, Gerald, that it might be well advisable to allow a little more psychological aptitude to planetary Wardens—"

"Nonsense," said Wain. "The system we have is well-nigh perfect."

"No system," said the Judge in his scratchy voice, "devised by man can be that. Even those processes of the law that are the nearest we have yet come."

"Ah, quite so, Judge," said Wain, refraining from pointing out that he had said: "Well-nigh." The Judge was two hundred and ninety and might, with judicious handling, last long enough for Wain's ambitions. To humour the old man was a minor penance in the greater scheme.

Wain was smooth cheeked, fresh-looking, alert and well-scrubbed, with a thinned mouth and pitiless eyes. He loved his wife and children—and nothing else apart from his ambition. And that, he felt sure, loved him. Now he went on speaking: "To allow the ordinary run of humanity too much knowledge of self, destroyed too many empires for us to allow it here. Men work and play, are born, marry and die. What else do they need to know? Any soul-searching must be done for them by their priests—of whatever religion they choose—who are themselves rudely skilled in applied psychology. The galaxy was saved much toil and bloodshed and agony of mind when the art of psychology was lifted from the hands of ordinary men and reserved for System Executives and above."

"You do not then, Gerald, account it a science?"

The speaker was the sixth guest. He was completely ordinary and unremarkable in appearance, with heavy hooded eyes. The only betraying feature about him was his mouth, as thin, as tightly compressed, as utterly ruthless as the mouths of Wain and Roth.

Gerald Wain dismissed the thought in a graceful gesture of one hand. "A science, Vance? Hardly. Even the greatest practitioners under the old Solar Empire hardly elevated it to that eminence."

"Perhaps," Vance Archer said softly, "if they had the Empire might not have decayed and fallen."

"Well," boomed Legate Executive Barney Roth, feeling himself on safe ground. "If they had then perhaps we might not be here this night as we are."

"They still required Judges," Judge Owens snapped.

"True, my dear Judge." Wain was smooth. "And I venture to believe that had the Terran Solar Empire continued to exist then we here would have found high position. We might have been belted earls and dukes instead of business executives. What matters the name? The power is the central core of being."

Vance Archer sipped his wine and mentally agreed with Gerald Wain. Although, he felt a twinge of amusement that did not touch the steely eyes beneath the heavy lids, perhaps Wain would find surprise and a jolting unease if he knew just how the power was distributed in this room tonight. Wain, as a Cluster Executive, was a very powerful man indeed. Everyone in his sphere a hundred light years in diameter owed him service. Archer had wondered often about Wain's antecedents—oh, yes, it was common knowledge that his father and mother had been System Executives in their own right, and might have gone farther. As it was, Wain was the embodiment of the tough man of business who had made his own way in life and had risen to high position.

As for the old Judge; his days were almost numbered, senile before his time, and again it was common knowledge that he retained his present post under Wain only because he was pliant to Wain's wishes. And Legate Executive Barney Roth was just a puff-ball, a big tough soldier with a soldier's brain and hands and the business aptitude of a bench mechanic. Rising through the legions with only his dominant will power to drag him along—the son of a legion which meant that his parents were unknown—he had made his mark. His ruthlessness matched that of Wain and of Archer himself; but he was a tool, a weapon, and must be directed and guided.

Now Barney Roth was booming away, retelling some old story of a stellar affray. The others listened politely. Archer,

lolling in his chair, found the general picture amusing. Here was a little court, as it were, paying homage to its king. And Gerald Wain had the dark ambition for that. Amusing to notice the little items, like Roth's nervous wife sending him a constant string of signals to make him sit up and toe the line and fall in with Wain's plans. There was a strong and amusing possibility, too, that Wain and Freda Roth might be more to each other than either Roth or Marie Wain suspected.

That would fit the pattern on both their fates. One, to dally with a subordinate's wife, as a right ; and the other, to give her favours where they would do her husband the most good. Amusing, without a doubt.

The screen which they all faced began to light up slowly and the symphony to which they had gathered after dinner to listen and admire would not long be delayed in its planet-to-planet hook-up. Here on Wain's Executive World of Guienne—the only planet to orbit its parent sun—many others in the administrative webwork would also be settling down to enjoy great music.

At that moment, with Legate Executive Barney Roth's voice rumbling away and the wide screen flushing to life and sound, the alarm bell trilled. A robot trotted forward.

For anyone—or anything—to disturb Cluster Executive Gerald Wain during his off-duty hours was not an unheard of event ; but it meant only one thing. Trouble. Trouble of a big and ominous kind.

The robot toned down the orchestra volume as they appeared on the screen and handed the seated Wain a golden key. Wain grunted resignedly as he took it. He reached over and unlocked the robot's chest, withdrawing a plain telephone handset. He spoke briefly, and listened long.

Archer, watching his face as the great man spoke on the scrambled private line, did not like what he saw. Barney Roth, likewise watching, felt a chill rustle through the pleasant room. Judge Owens went on sipping his wine.

When at last Wain replaced the telephone and slid it back into its robotic receptacle and locked the door, handing the golden key to its guardian, his face had set into a cold mask of hate. Two white patches showed beside his nose.

"Vance," he said gently, "there is more work for you."

"Freedom Fighters ?"

"Yes. The misguided, destructive fools. They have successfully brought off another coup. Place called Sjalberg II—I can't place it altogether at the moment ; but the cybers are turning up the details now."

"I know it," Roth said heavily. "A flea bitten little place, something like eighty light years off. Not important—"

"Every planet is important !" Wain said viciously.

"Yes, Gerald, of course. I meant merely that they are still striking at—"

"Yes, yes. Larodin two months ago, Now Sjalberg II. Where next ?"

Barney Roth looked uncomfortable.

Archer said, smoothly : "It would seem that I was the one at fault, Gerald."

"Perhaps, Vance. Perhaps. If only we could adapt the instanter shells for mass transportation—"

Judge Owens cackled nastily. "A dream, a dream."

"Who was Legate Executive of the area, Barney ?"

"Varnum." No one had missed the Cluster Executive's use of 'was' in describing the Legate Executive of that area.

"Legion Eighteen mutinied to a man. Legion Fifty Five destroyed itself. Legion Five Two Seven only remained loyal. They were new men, and were destroyed by Legion Eighteen." Wain's fist came down on the arm of his chair. "Old, reliable legions, mutinying ! It doesn't make sense."

Legate Executive Barney Roth, very red in the face, stood up. "I'll see about sending half a dozen legions. Make them sit up—"

"You'd better sit down, Barney. We've been through all this before. The whole planet is behind the revolt now. No half a dozen legions—no force save anything short of a planetary force—is going to make even a landing on Sjalberg II now. And we don't have a planetary force of legions to spare."

Roth sat down. "That is unfortunately true, Gerald. But we might drop a few bombs, bring these mad people to heel."

Archer did not speak. Wain banged his fist down again; but this time in a more gentle, resigned way. "No. That won't do. Won't do at all."

Archer knew very well that Wain was considered a fine Executive by the Board, back on Earth. What effect the bombing of a planet would have on them was only too plain to

conjecture ; and with the big bang of the explosions would go bang Gerald Wain's high hopes.

Briefly, Wain told them of the revolt on Sjalberg II.

"This man Vickery," said Roth thoughtfully when Wain had done. "One man—to set a planet alight?"

"He is merely the catalyst to set the fire," said Archer sourly. "I have had dealings with him before."

"Well, this time, Vance," said Wain in an icy tone, "you would do well to settle with him once and for all."

Marie Wain leaned forward as though startled. She started to say : "You wouldn't set the—" Something in the set of her husband's jaw stopped her. She sat back in her chair and her hands were shaking.

"No, Marie," Wain said with soft savagery. "Not yet. I hope it may never be necessary. But if it is then I shall give Vance the order to assassinate this man Vickery without the slightest compunction."

That cold wind up Barny Roth's spine spread to encompass the room.

Then Vance Archer rose lithely. "With your permission, then, Gerald, I'll set about laying this fellow by the heels."

"Don't worry about being too gentle with him—"

"It isn't that that is the problem." Archer was already moving to the door. "The big trouble is finding him."

"Armstrong said he used his own name."

"I doubt that he'll do that again."

"If you need any legion help, Vance—" Roth offered with no expectation that the Chief of Intelligence would accept the offer of legions in his nefarious undertakings.

"Thank you, Barny. My organisation does things in—ah—shall we say, a less flamboyant manner than the legions?"

Barny Roth showed for a moment that he was a true business executive, surprising Archer. "No matter how the man is found and brought to trial, Vance. For the good of the F.C. his rabble rousing must stop."

"And the men behind him," growled Wain. "Let me have a report as soon as you can, Vance."

"I'll do that, Gerald. As of now I believe that the only lead we have is still on Sjalberg II. I shall send a girl there."

"You have someone in mind?"

Archer chuckled sourly. "Oh, yes. I know who will go, well enough. Someone who, Gerald, might surprise you with her knowledge of psychology—she doesn't, of course, know it

by that name—even though she is only an F.C. secret service operative. Elaine Caitlin. A charming name for a wildcat. She'll scratch this fellow Vickery up."

"She'd better. The poison of their so called Liberty, Equality and Fraternity is spreading. It has been proved a fallacious creed in the long ago. We just cannot afford another stupid thousand years of darkness to try it again when the Mongs spread so fiercely upon us." Mongs. Why the aliens were called that no one knew. The name created such a chill that Barny Roth poured more wine with reckless extravagance. No men of the Friendly Combine cared to figure in the Mongs when they totted up their balance sheets.

"Elaine Caitlin will start within two hours." and Vance Archer, Chief of Intelligence, went swiftly from the room.

Chapter Four

Elaine Caitlin had never met Cluster Executive Gerald Wain. She had seen his ruthless features on the tridi hookups often enough, of course, and a message from him featured as part of the passing out ceremonies after the long grind in Intelligence Academy. For a girl, however favoured in looks and intelligence, who had been born of a lowly nuclear physicist and a pool typist, she had risen high in the service of the F.C. to stand and speak face to face with a Planetary Warden.

Old Bill Bowen, Planetary Warden of New Terra, was a kindly man and one who did not relish the choice of his planet as the training ground for secret service operatives. Now he spoke to Elaine as a father might, knowing that hers had died in a nuclear flare fifteen years ago.

"You come to me, my girl, and demand an instant shell ! Do you know what they cost ?"

"Oh, Bill," said Elaine, aggrieved. "Don't go on so. I've had special instructions from no less a person than—"

"Yes. I can guess. From Vance Archer. He's a tough man, Elaine. Why don't you give up the intelligence branch and go into the civil administration ?"

"Perhaps because I'm a girl. My father wanted a boy and if I'd been one I expect I'd have gone into the legions."

"I don't know, I don't know," said Bill Bowen, in the privacy of his home allowing his usual businessman's mask to

drop. "You've been working for Archer for, how long now, six years?"

"Yes, and he says I'm one of his best men."

"Ha. Then he's never looked at you with proper eyes."

"Flattery will get you nowhere." But Elaine's eyes were bright and her flushed cheeks and tumbled blonde hair showed all too clearly that she was alive to male compliments. Even from an old Planetary Warden who stood in loco parentis to her.

"Well, well, if you must have a planetary shell, you must. It'll mean that a whole city will be without power the rest of the night. Where are you going?"

"Little planet called Epsilon Smith."

"Never heard of it. Anyway, the techs will fix that up. You're in a hurry?"

"Terrible rush. Be a dear and tell your techs to get a wiggle on."

Old Bill Bowen glared at her, the twinkle in his eye pronounced. "Remember, young lady, that I'm a Planetary Warden."

"And I'm an Intelligence secret service operative."

They both laughed. At times like this titles, however sonorous, meant little. She kissed his bristly cheek and then walked with her lithe swinging pace to the instanter transmitter hall.

"Good luck, Elaine," Bowen called after her.

At the hall everything had been prepared in response to Bowen's imperious call. The techs fussed over their meters and chuckled snide asides about the lack of power the city would experience. Elaine eyed the shell with disfavour. It crouched in its web of wires like the dead body of a fly caught in a web. Inside she found an apartment fitted completely for four people to live in absolute luxury. No one else was travelling to Epsilon Smith or was ever likely to by instanter, and she had the shell to herself.

She selected the screened compartment she would use as her bedroom and slung her holdall down on the bed. Then she wandered out into the main compartment and looked at the screen in the forward wall. A tech's face showed. He smiled encouragingly.

"Pretty short one, miss. You won't find it too bad."

"I've travelled by instanter before," she said distantly.

His smile remained ; but another look appeared in his eyes. " Five minutes to maximum boost," he said in a severely practical tone.

Despite her brave words, Elaine felt the usual tremors of apprehension. So much could go wrong in instanter travel. She sat down on a low armchair and crossed her long legs and let her silver slippers dangle. The chair pressed for a moment against the gun at her side, and then gave to conform to her contours. She watched the minute hand on the big clock set atop the screen.

At four and a half minutes the tech said : " Cutting off exterior lines, miss."

" Very well."

" Good luck."

Now she could imagine the householders looking at their watches and clocks and grumbling about the surge of power that, taken from them to fling the instanter shell across space, would deprive them of light and heating and cooking and television for the rest of the night. And she chuckled.

The surge, when it came, was surprisingly gentle. She watched the meters and saw that she was building up to maximum speed rapidly. A short hop ; only eighty light years. Epsilon Smith, she said to herself, bravely, here we come. Then she popped three tablets into her mouth and went to lie down on the bed.

The sickness built up gradually, insidiously, so that for the first two days she could eat nothing and was sick most of the time. Her head ached. Her limbs felt twice as large and charged with acid. Her eyes were red and pained her. And, in between being sick—or trying to be—she kept sneezing.

When the third day passed the robot attendant brought her a soft drink which she managed to keep down. From then on until the end of the journey on the fourth day, she felt a little better. She even had a meal at the last, and when the green light went on and the valves opened, she walked out jauntily.

She staggered a little as her instanter trained legs felt a solid planetary surface beneath.

The techs had sighted the shell on to the Planetary Warden's luxurious gardens that ringed his low, ranch-style home in greenery. That shell was now merely a burned out hunk of metal, fitted up as an apartment. What the Planetary Warden

would do with it was his business. It could never again be used to cross space at a speed of eighty light years in four days.

Warned of her coming by subradio, the Planetary Warden waited on her and escorted her to his home. He was surrounded permanently by a mean-faced bodyguard, ten or a dozen men in full armour and with itchy trigger fingers. Elaine looked askance at them. But perhaps this force was really necessary out on a wild planet like Epsilon Smith where the insurrectionists might seek to subvert and overturn all legal government. The Planetary Residence was comfortable ; but Elaine made it clear from the first that she was not staying.

"I must take the first starship out to Uruguay Nueva," she said firmly.

So that within twenty four Terran hours she was settling down in her cabin for the two week trip across the starlanes. The journey was far more comfortable than by instanter shell ; but the fortnight taken to cross a mere ten light years bored her indescribably. On Uruguay Nueva she went straight to the Planetary Warden. He was grizzled and long-gone in the promotion stakes ; but he also hired and paid a tough mercenary bodyguard.

"I am trying to get through to Sjalberg—" she began.

"Impossible, Miss Caitlin." He brushed his grey moustache.

"That whole system has now been taken over by these damned revolutionaries."

"All of it ? I was hoping to hire a small cruiser and—"

"Not from here. You'd reach Sjalberg more easily from Custer and I advise you to go there. A starship leaves tomorrow and you could hire a cruiser yacht quite easily there."

So, fuming at the delay, Elaine took ship for Custer.

These sparsely settled outworld planets were nearly all the same ; sleepy, indolent, not caring for the bustle and throb of life that possessed the busy planets nearer to the cluster capital. The neighbouring planets of the next-door cluster, ruled by Cluster Executive Hashem Khan, would be just the same. The segment of the galaxy so far opened up by Earthmen—and Earthwomen, too, Elaine thought proudly—was frighteningly small when looked at in relation to the galaxy as a whole. And the Mongos were pressing in—Elaine forgot her feelings of a moment ago and shivered as she thought of the Mongos. They were not like people. They were alien, indecently alien, hostile and implacable and merciless.

One day, Elaine supposed, along with the rest of the humans inhabiting the Friendly Combine, the people from Earth would have to arise in their wrath and deal with the Mongols, once and for all. That day could be regarded by no one with any satisfaction ; but only with a dread despair that in no way would detract from the determination of everyone unfortunate to be caught up in it. Elaine had not married and she had no children and, truly, she sometimes doubted the wisdom of bringing children into a galaxy that might explode about them.

She made planetfall on Custer in an oddly chastened frame of mind. Custer was a wild and woolly sort of place, with a wild and woolly look in the eyes of its inhabitants. The planet was well populated, though, considering its location, and industry was booming. She booked in at a good hotel in the capital city, called, like the planet, simply Custer. After a bath and a good meal she set off with more circumspection than she had hitherto shown to see the Planetary Warden.

The Planetary Warden was dead. He had died exactly an hour before, and his mercenary bodyguard had been sacked in a body by his irate successor.

The assassin had reached the Planetary Warden as he was stepping from his flier atop a big new spaceship yard's landing platform. The schedule had been for flag waving and a speech and the opening ceremony, followed by a large luncheon. Now the Planetary Warden, what was left of him, lay decently shrouded by a sheet in the yard's sick bay. At his residency, Elaine asked questions.

The City Warden, the dead man's successor, had no time to spare for a slip of a girl—no matter how attractive, no matter that she was some sort of secret agent—away from the awful weight of responsibility for a whole planet. And that planet riddled with subversion as a cheese is riddled with maggots. "Sorry, miss," the legionaries who had been brought in as emergency guards, told her. "He isn't seeing anyone apart from the government officials. Sorry."

Apart from annoyance, Elaine realised that she wasn't over bothered. She would simply have to use the funds she had brought and hire herself a craft. At once she ran slap into trouble.

Only after a lengthy period was she released. Of course, she told herself angrily, she ought to have realised that all flights from Custer would be halted and that anyone trying to hire a

ship for a private journey would fall under the gravest suspicion.

She came out of the waiting room of the spaceport where police and legionaries had at last been convinced that she was not a revolutionary and headed straight for the bar. She needed a quick pick-me-up before thinking again.

Sitting at the bar with her long legs swinging from a high stool, she sipped a Zodiac Zinger—a devilish concoction—and let the liquor start her brain processes again. She did not hear the man who sat beside her ; but when he spoke she was aware at once of a quality of magnetism that was uncomfortably compelling. She returned his look with composure.

"I'm sorry," she said with a freezing grace, "were you speaking to me?"

He laughed, showing a length of brown throat above his yellow open-necked shirt. His eyes were bright and merry and his long jawline promised courage and anger and a dedication to any single aim he might choose.

"Yes, miss. I merely said it was a shame you couldn't hire a ship."

The warning bells trilling in Elaine's mind for once, she decided arbitrarily, she would ignore. This wolfish looking stranger was in all probability a local wide-boy with a tinpot ship ready—for a price—to run her out into space. He might, of course, be one of the subversives it was her duty to hunt and if this was so then it became her duty to talk to him.

She'd have talked, anyway. She was like that, when it came to having her own way.

"Name's Francis," the stranger said, smiling, "but I'm usually called Fray." He looked at her glass and with a fine imperiousness of manner ordered two more. "You'll wind up strapped to a board, drink too many of those Zodiac Zingers," he said pleasantly.

Elaine decided to thaw a trifle. She allowed the sort of smile that a young, eager but inexperienced girl would unknowingly adopt, frightened to get her toes wet in the grown-up world. "Really? I was told they were what everyone was drinking nowadays."

"Who can say what everyone's doing these days, when everyone's spread around most of the galaxy? Look—it's just past Christmas on most planets ; yet this dump is just thinking of counting the days to. And if things go on as

they are," he finished sourly, "I'll have to get me a job as Father Christmas outside some store."

"At least it's not snowing. Beautiful Spring day. And, anyway, things aren't so bad as that, surely?"

Fray drank. "Ha! Don't you believe all they tell you."

"All who?"

"Why," he gestured largely. "The bosses. That's who."

"Oh. The F.C. Well, I must say that—"

"That what?" His casualness was ruined by the ferocity of the eye he fixed upon her.

"That they're acting like tinpot gods," Elaine went on evenly. Her heart was racing. This seemed to be it.

"You're right." He finished the drink and ordered two more. Elaine's second stood untouched. "They're ruining this fine planet. All those people—morons! Slaves! Working blindly, like ants—for what? I'll tell you for what. For a nice six by two and a half box at the end, that's what. And they won't even own the ground they're buried in."

"Why tell me?" said Elaine. "I'm just a working girl."

"Yes?" Then he added hastily: "So am I. That is—I'm a working man." And he laughed again, eyes bright.

"Y'know, Fray, if the police heard you talking like that—"

"So what? You're not police. I know that. You wouldn't be trying to reach Sjalberg II if you were, now would you?" And he winked profoundly.

"Could you take me to Sjalberg II?"

"Depends."

"On what?"

"Number of things. Main one would be your reason for going."

"Oh, that." Elaine deliberately put a sound of falsehood into her voice. "Uncle and aunt there. Have to see them. Likely to die before I'm this way again."

"I'm sure. Sorry to hear it." He twirled the empty glass between long fingers. "Now if you'd said that you wanted to go to join up with people who know where they are going, I might—"

"You think I'd ever say that? To a stranger?"

"As to that, I suppose not. But who says I'm a stranger?"

"We've just met—"

"And I feel—and I know you feel it, too—that we've known each other all our lives."

"Isn't that an out-of-date line, Fray?" But, disturbingly, annoyingly, Elaine admitted its truth. This man Fray did feel like an old friend, an old friend and something more . . .

A disturbance at the door caught her attention and she turned casually to look. A group of legionaries in half-armour and police with ready freezer beams had entered and now their leader stepped forward.

"Everybody stay still !" he shouted arrogantly. "Nobody move."

Women screamed and one or two glasses smashed. A man jumped up from a far corner seat and bolted for the door. A freezer beam bit into him in a flare of green and he fell, frozen. Utter silence descended.

In that silence, Elaine heard Fray say : " Y'know, I expect it is me they're after. And they're likely to drag you along because you're with me."

Elaine seized the chance at once. She could have talked her way out of trouble later ; but this was an opportunity, and she did not believe in letting those slip by.

" We're at the bar, Fray. We can slide down and remain unobserved for perhaps one minute. Could we make a dash for the bar flap in that time ?"

Fray's wolfish smile broadened. " We can try."

Elaine waited for the critical moment before making her play. Her face felt hot. Her hands felt icy cold. She wetted her lips, said, very softly : " Go, Fray !" and then, spinning so her skirt flared, collapsed in a dramatic, flamboyant and smothering faint.

Chapter Five

Vickery dropped out of the spaceport's restaurant window and sprinted for the nearest flier. His heart was pumping easily and the blood coursing through his body gave him superhuman strength—or so it felt. Even his disgust at being saved by a woman's skirts was mitigated by thought of the woman. Here on Custer every man's hand was against him, save for the small, the pitifully small, group of insurgents. And those men who had seen the devil lurking behind the smiling mask of the F.C. had been harried, driven underground, killed mercilessly over the past years.

The flier was powered by a standard engine and Vickery's key switched on and soon the mill was turning over and lifting him swiftly away from the spaceport. Down there the signs of chase were still absent and he smiled. Maybe that girl—Elaine?—yes; he'd heard her give that name when the police had been quizzing her—had managed it after all. When he'd ducked and run he'd expected her to follow him. She hadn't. One last flashing glimpse from the bar flap had shown her spread in an enchanting picture on the floor, her skirts flared out and blonde hair trailing.

That last look had also shown him her face, hidden from the legionaries, and her wide eyes—and the one almighty wink. Then she had closed those eyes and composed herself: a frightened girl who had fainted.

The flier although a mass-produced family model could turn out a fair rate of knots and Vickery's problem was in getting down safely through the barrage of traffic lanes entwining over the city beneath him. He felt around with his radar and encountered enough traffic wardens and police to remind him that this day the Planetary Warden of Custer had been assassinated. And that, of course, reminded him of Wheeler.

When he had reached his destination he strapped on the flier's emergency anti-grav descent pack, set the throttle wide open, tumbled out and let the flier go hell for leather away and up. The pack let him down swiftly. He couldn't help the flier passengers who might see him fall; chances like that had to be accepted. He landed on the roof of a tenement block, among parked fliers, battered and rusty, lines of refuse bins awaiting collection and a bunch of kids playing Terran and Mong. He went quickly through the door leading to the stairs; kids had eyes and memories and quick tongues.

He left the tenement and, five streets later, turned in at Wheeler's block. His ring was answered and he stepped into Wheeler's apartment.

Wheeler was short, verging on the squat, with a purple face and angry eyes and a mouth that curved permanently into downdrawn sneer lines. His life had been one long cops and robbers chase, and he knew intimately the interiors of all Custer's prisons. Now he sat in a rickety armchair, cleaning and polishing a flamer.

"And that, I suppose," Vickery said sarcastically, "is the murder weapon?"

"This," Wheeler said with morose pride, "is the weapon that cleaned up another louse drinking the people's blood."

Vickery could not laugh. Wheeler spoke the truth, if in highly coloured form. Instead, Vickery said: "You shot the Warden without authority from me, Wheeler. You've wrecked our chances of a quiet takeover."

"Wrecked hell! The man was a menace—"

"Yes. But you've made him a martyr. Now we'll have to fight a bloody war—"

"Well, that ain't so bad. Custer could do with losing a few more of its blood-gutted citizens."

Vickery began to wonder if the Freedom Fighters at HQ quite realised the man they had working for them here on Custer. Wheeler appeared to have a one track mind.

Now if he'd been working with Sevlon again . . . He found a memory of Tania Sevlon in his mind and immediately another picture superimposed itself—a picture of this girl Elaine, winking at him bewitchingly from the floor of the spaceport's bar. Well, business must come first. "What report have you on the legions here, Wheeler?"

"Legion Seventy is all for us. Legion One Four Two is very dodgy. The damn fools won't make up their minds."

An idea Vickery had been germinating crystallised illogically. He would not let Wheeler take control of the thermo-nuclear device Vickery had brought in from Sjalberg II. The man was a fanatic—they were all near-fanatics in the Freedom Fighters—but Wheeler had passed the bounds of common sense; or so Vickery believed. He said: "And your lieutenants? The citizen bands?"

Wheeler gestured grandly. "All okay, Vickery. All in tip-top condition, awaiting my orders."

The nagging worry in Vickery sharpened. This man was dangerous; to his own friends. An insurrectionist might be driven by fiery ideals; but he must keep his brain icily detached from his emotions to succeed. Wheeler was rapidly proving to be a liability.

"Wait until you hear from me again, Wheeler," Vickery said with heavy authority, his wolf face grim and unsmiling. "I have to co-ordinate—"

"Co-ordinate what?" Wheeler's thick lips sneered and he snapped the gun up and said: "Bang! Bang! Let me get at 'em. I'll soon cut the F.C. down to size."

"You'll do as I tell you, Wheeler," Vickery said evenly; "I'm off. Keep your nose clean until you hear from me."

As he left Wheeler was refilling a whisky glass.

The Spring day was closing in as Vickery stepped briskly along the pavement, heading towards Custer's main hotel. A little wind blew in off the hills, a dun semi-circle ringing the city, and he relished the feel of blood thrumming through his arteries. Elaine. A nice name. And she'd be bound to be staying at the best hotel. That fitted.

She was. She was sitting in the lounge watching a TV play presentation. Vickery ordered two Zodiac Zingers and sat down beside her. He knew he was running a risk; but that only made life more interesting.

"What happened?" He handed across the drink as he spoke.

Elaine controlled her start of surprise; she had not expected to be crept up on in the dimmed hotel lounge by the man she had last seen scuttling away from legionaries and police. She took the drink—she needed it—and said: "Is it safe? I mean—"

"Safe enough. I checked this hotel for police, outside, and they don't know me. I'm just a friend. Talk."

"Well," Elaine said, feeling a little helpless despite her own sense of mission against this man's dominance. "When I thought it time to wake up from my faint there was no sign of you and the legionaries didn't seem to miss you."

"You covered me well, Elaine. Thanks—"

"Elaine?"

"Heard you telling those goons at the spaceport. What happened then?"

"Nothing. They questioned us all and let us go. They were looking for someone, I imagine—"

"Yes. And it's easy enough to guess who."

Elaine decided to press a little harder. "You?"

Vickery laughed softly. "Me? Good Lord, no! I mean the person who killed the Planetary Warden."

If Elaine had thought that Vickery had killed the Warden, she was no nearer having her suspicions confirmed or denied.

They sat for a time, talking quietly, filling in backgrounds. That both were highly fictitious each may have suspected. Certainly, Elaine was feeling with more and more certainty, this man Fray could very easily be an insurgent. He had a wild

and raffish way with him so unlike the more prissy manners of the men nearer to the more civilised planets.

She felt an invigorating sensation of excitement as she took the plunge. "If you can smuggle me to Sjalberg II, Fray, that must mean your friends are my friends, too." It was elliptical ; but in this grey half-world where men and women worked for ideals that grew tenuous with shifting loyalties nothing could ever be said outright. That wasn't the way of those who gambled secrets for money, their lives for ideals.

Vickery smiled lopsidedly. "I might, Elaine, I might."

The television screen informed those listening that the System Executive was spacing from his headquarters world of Keogh, at the moment diametrically across the sun from Custer, and would arrive in the morning.

"Now things will be cleaned up," a fat man with a cigar and a gold ring said from the dimness, importantly.

"About time too," Vickery said loud enough to be heard.

The murmur of assent was what could be expected from the lounge of the best hotel. What the men and women of the factories and sweat shops would be saying was another matter. For a short time the conversation became general and Vickery and Elaine gave convincing performances as solid respectable citizens of the businessmen's Friendly Combine. For Elaine the experience was merely an extension of her normal point of view and she was more worried over not sounding too pat and convincing to Fray than of the effect on the other guests. On Vickery the hogwash he was talking made him feel sick.

Elaine kept repeating to herself : "I must secure this man's confidence. I feel sure he is mixed up with the insurrectionists, else how could he guarantee a passage to Sjalberg when all ordinary citizens are planetbound?" Vickery's ideas were similar : "I must get to know this girl better ; she strikes me as far too competent to be what she seems. An F.C. secret agent ? Hmm—could be, could be." And that would make life just that little more exciting.

The ship in which Vickery had arrived on Custer lay excellently concealed among friends on the interplanetary spaceport. There had been no difficulty in making planetfall for then that maniac Wheeler had not killed the Planetary Warden. Now, Vickery could anticipate problems in reaching space again. He left Elaine with a smile and a promise to meet her the following

morning, and was touched strangely by her smile and slight gesture as she bade him goodnight.

He walked along the street not really seeing where he was going, filled with a new discovery that was going to make life far more complicated than was healthy for an undercover agent of the Freedom Fighters.

Since leaving Wheeler earlier in the day he had disconnected the seeker in his wristwatch. His doubts of Wheeler were strong enough to force through his other dreams into the forefront of his consciousness ; as the acknowledged leader of the Freedom Fighters on Custer, Wheeler would be implicitly obeyed by his subordinates even though the majority of them had never seen him. Had they done so, Vickery thought sourly, they might not be so ready to obey.

The position was delicate. As the accredited representative from the galactic leaders of the Freedom Fighters, Vickery brought the thermo-nuclear bomb—which he always hoped would never be used—and the final authority for a rising. He made up his mind, walking along in the dusk with the unearthly constellations spangling the sky above him, that he would not give that authority to rise here on Custer.

Wheeler must have been thinking along the same lines.

Just when they picked him up, Vickery could not be sure. Certainly long before he reached the disreputable area down by the interplanetary spaceport where he had taken cheap lodgings. He paused at a corner where a shuttered shop showed shadowed lights and looked back, unease prickling his neck. A flickering glimpse of a man flattening in a doorway confirmed his suspicions and brought him grimly to the present, away from thoughts of Elaine, and to the business in hand.

That the men following were police he dismissed at once. Wheeler had felt strong enough to have Vickery put out of the way. Vickery could guess what that meant.

Close darkness down at this end of the city was not dispelled by luxurious street lighting found in other, richer sections, and Vickery hurried. He had discarded the antigrav pack from the flier and he regretted that now ; it was very likely that one of his pursuers wore an antigrav pack. Vickery would have to face an attack in three dimensions. Well, he'd done that before.

His lean wolf face was smiling as he turned into the first doorway past the lighted shopfront. The door was locked.

He hunkered down, waiting. The shrouding darkness past the light concealed him ; of that he was sure. If he was wrong then he needn't bother about anything else.

The first attacker drifted by ten feet above the pavement, ghostly, a flicker of blackness in blackness, thinking himself unseen against the darkened buildings. Vickery let him go. The second slithered past on soundless feet and him, too, Vickery let go. The third, walking silently along the shop fronts with a quick spurt to cross the dangerous lighted area, slowed as he reached Vickery's doorway. Him—him Vickery took.

Two raking arms speared out, a hand crunched down on a windpipe, another clenched at the back of the neck—and the man slumped, paralysed. Vickery dragged him into the shadows.

A quick glance showed the two other attackers stealthily patrolling the street, following a man who was no longer there. Vickery did not feel there was time to leave his concealment with his captive before they discovered the trick and turned. He slid his hand gun out.

Chapter Six

The feel of the plastic and metal in his hand, at once cool and warm, brought his senses fully alert. He had been acting since leaving Elaine like a tyro instead of the ace Freedom Fighter he was. Now the feel and weight of the gun sobered him.

How could Wheeler, the local Freedom Fighter chief, be trying to kill or capture the representative from his headquarters? These men could not be Wheeler's. Vickery remembered the legionaries who had chased him, who had searched the spaceport restaurant when Elaine had given him time to escape—they could not have been men already swayed to the side of the insurrectionists. He levelled the gun and waited to see if they would react as predicted.

In that moment of meditation, waiting, quiet and as dangerous as a timberwolf, Vickery heard another faint slither of foot on stone. A dark, slender shape flitted past the lighted shop front on the opposite side of the street ; fleet, it vanished into a doorway across from him. Vickery's heart gave one

gigantic lunge—and then his wolfish smile creased his face. The minx ! But he might have guessed.

The man on antigrav swung down, keeping below the rooftop horizon. The two men stopped and their dark shapes merged. Vickery could guess what they were saying. When they began to retrace their steps he felt a sardonic amusement, at their thoughts and their concern over their missing comrade. They should have their worries, in plenty.

His own worry centred now on Elaine, crouching in that doorway across the street. No time now to measure what this act in following him meant, time only to act. He fired a short burst clear of the two men and watched with laughter brightening his wolf eyes their panicky lunges for cover. He fired again just before they reached the shadows and the brilliance of the exploding charge threw everything out in the street into garish highlights.

There was no need for a third shot. Without answering the shooting, the antigrav man seized his comrade and together they catapulted into the air and over a rooftop to safety. Vickery chuckled. He slid the weapon away and rose to his feet, slinging the unconscious man across his shoulders.

"You can come out now, Elaine," he called, but softly.

She walked out into the street and she was blazingly angry.

"Very clever, Fray," she said. "Very clever."

"Are you all right ?"

"Of course. You weren't pointing that damn great cannon my way." She was angry ; but bubbling laughter sounded in her words. "I see you snaffled one of 'em."

"I like to know who's trying to kill me."

"Very sound principle."

"Come on. They might be back. Never can tell."

They began to walk along the darkened street. Vickery said: "Very dark. Wonder if there's been a power failure ?"

"It is strange. D'you think—?"

"I think nothing, yet." But unease caught at him and he hurried. The darkness at least cloaked the sight of a girl and a man with another man slung over his shoulders walking down the middle of the street.

The first explosions they heard sounded from the interstellar spaceport, miles away. Vickery halted.

At first he did not believe what his brain told him. It was inconceivable. Wheeler would not dare !

But Wheeler would—and Wheeler had.

The crashing thunder of warfare grumbled and growled all along the horizon and Vickery knew that one legion out there was springing in sudden savagery upon another. Already lights were going on in houses along the street. He had to act, and act fast. A door opened a hundred yards along the street and a man's black shape showed against the light.

"Citizens !" He had a mike and loudspeaker and his voice rolled and boomed between the houses and shops. "Citizens ! This is the day ! Arise in your wrath ! Turn out ! Turn out !"

Down here, in the dingy quarter near the interplanetary spaceport, the Freedom Fighters had found many recruits, a ripe area for revolution. The street began to fill. Vickery felt the man over his shoulder twitch. He moaned. Vickery dumped him in a darkened angle of wall and pavement and slapped him into consciousness.

"Why were you after me ?"

Mumble-mumbled. Groan. Then : "Orders."

"Wheeler's orders ?"

"Yes." The man was not fully awake, despite Vickery's ministrations, and he was answering without thinking.

"Why ?"

"Dunno. Nuisance. Old man Wheeler told us you wasn't wanted no more." His blurred hearing must have picked up the noise and shouting, the exhortations to the citizens to rise. "Great day !" he said, loudly. "Rise up today ! Kill all those bloodsuckers of the F.C."

"The damn fool !" Vickery said savagely. He wasn't talking about the man on the ground. "Well, Wheeler's action against me means more and less, now." He did not bother about the captured would-be-assassin again. "Come on."

They kept close together and they walked warily. The street was in a ferment now, men and women shouting and running, bringing out weapons, passing around drinks. The men began to form up into bodies that were recognisably military formations. From a group with a command radio, orders were passed out and groups left about various errands. If this sort of organisation had been perfected all over the city then perhaps, just perhaps, Wheeler's coup might succeed. Vickery did not believe it would. He and Elaine hurried through the throng—

they passed the dead bodies of two policemen—a part of the fever of excitement in the air and yet aloof from it, strangers and therefore in danger.

Among so many weapons Vickery could grasp his gun in his fist as he went up the six steps into the sleazy lodging house. Ordinarily he would not have dreamed of asking Elaine in a place of this nature ; he couldn't leave her alone on the street. His room had been unvisited ; was as he had left it. He took the package from the ventilation shaft where it had lain concealed since his arrival. He put it in a cheap plastic suitcase and smiled at Elaine.

"This was what Wheeler was after. He won't get it from me—not while I'm alive to stop him, that is."

Elaine did not ask what the package was. She had a good idea of her own on that. Caught up in events, she could now do nothing but tag along with Fray as her duty indicated.

"Have you anything on this planet—at your hotel—that you particularly cherish and wouldn't want to leave?"

"Why—why, no, Fray."

"Good. Just in case we have to leave fast. Now, Elaine, listen. I know enough about you not to trust you—"

"Fray ! Really !"

"You could be sent here direct from the devil himself, all the way from the headquarters of the F.C. and I wouldn't know. But, I feel responsible for you. A revolt has broken out on this planet and people have got to take sides. Which side are you on, Elaine?"

It was easy, it was pat. Elaine did not fall into the trap.

"I thought my intentions to reach Sjalberg made my feelings plain, Fray. Apparently you don't trust an honest person—"

Vickery laughed his wolf laugh. "I trust no one."

A crash shook the building and lurid scarlet light flamed in the window, washed the walls in dripping colour. More explosions followed, creeping closer from that northern battlefield. The legions would be using their tactical nuclear weapons probably ; little pipsqueaks compared with the monster—in power, not in size—that lay so innocently in Vickery's cheap plastic case.

"Hadn't we better get out of here, Fray?"

"Nervous ? Well, you've every right." He laughed, looking at her. She stood lightly, hands on hips, her face upturned to his, challengingly. She looked trim and efficient

and very dangerous—and she was also looking all woman. Vickery stopped laughing. He said : “ This is to seal our unwritten and unspoken compact.” He had his arms around her before she was aware and he kissed her long and satisfyingly. She responded in a way that shook them both.

The building jumped and jumped again and part of the roof fell off. They ignored it.

When they parted, Vickery said : “ We’re partners in this now, Elaine. This maniac Wheeler has begun the revolt far too early, in my opinion. But it is my duty to assist him in every way possible. You’ll help, too.”

Elaine fought away the feel of Fray’s arms about her and his lips on hers, sealing a bargain she could never keep. She found an amused anger in her that at last she had penetrated to the heart of the insurrection by the side of a man high in the counsels of the Freedom Fighters—too late to warn anyone, too late now to do anything but take an apparently willing part in that very revolt. Vance Archer would laugh ; but his laughter would be of the guillotine.

There was no need to warn anyone of the revolt now ; the legions were locked in combat and that could be seen and heard for a thousand miles.

“ What are you going to do, Fray ?”

“ I have administrative functions to perform during a revolt—”

“ But, Fray, surely this is different ?” She clung to him and it was not all play-acting. “ My—that is the authorities will seek to kill you, and this man Wheeler has already tried to kill you. Neither side wants you here.”

Vickery considered this. It was true. Nonetheless he was aware of his duty as a Freedom Fighter to further this revolt. This girl, so pliable, so freshly innocent, could damned easily be a spy and if so then that was another good reason for him to keep her close by him. And what she said was true. Win or lose on Custer now, the die had been thrown and his position—as he was uncomfortably aware—was precariously unsure. If Wheeler won then everything would be all right. If he lost then the Freedom Fighters would be in no position to work on Custer for a long time to come.

“ My work is being done now by Wheeler or one of his men,” Vickery said slowly, reluctantly. “ So I suppose—”

"Your ship, Fray. We must get away before one or the other side kills you."

Elaine knew deeply that she said that because she didn't want this reckless, wolf-faced man killed or hurt. Oh, sure, in line of duty to get him off planet and away where she could watch him in operation, find out his next planet assignment and stymie him, she should go with him. But there was more than duty involved in this now . . .

They left the house together, Vickery carrying the case, Elaine with her right hand resting on his left arm. The street although still lurid with fires from the northern perimeter and filled with the bustle of busy men and women was emptier than before ; many men had left to go about the duties for which they had long waited. As a good Freedom Fighter Vickery hoped passionately that the revolt would be successful. The Freedom Fighter chiefs could always send in another man to replace Wheeler when they had read Vickery's report. Elaine, as an F.C. agent hoped with equal passion that the revolt would fail. She thought of Vance Archer and had a mental stab of sympathy with him at thought of his next meeting with Cluster Executive Gerald Wain.

The spaceport lay shrouded in darkness ahead, relieved only by a few fitful handtorches. A bomb in the main dynamos had seen to the power supplies this night. Overhead clouds had been massing, obliterating the unfamiliar stars and now a light dismal rain began to fall. The temperature was well down after the bright Spring day and Elaine shivered. Neither of them was wearing a coat. Vickery stepped up the pace and they were almost running as they debouched on to the perimeter road around the port.

The darkness was intense. It seemed to press in on eyes and nose and mouth, suffocating, numbing. A few specks of light in the distance might have been cities ablaze on the horizon or a lighter flame six feet away.

"My ship was in berth seven-eleven," Vickery said, holding firmly to Elaine. "She's an interstellar job ; but I landed in here as a camouflage—"

"I follow. Can you find her ?"

"I don't know," Vickery said honestly. "What a mess ! Can't find my own ship because it's too dark. This way."

They went down into the darkened area that was spaceport through the open gates, guardless, and along a concrete track they could not see.

"One could almost wish the legions would brew up a few more big ones," Vickery growled. "Might let us see then."

"The fighting has died down," agreed Elaine. "I wonder who won?"

Neither of them felt like answering that question.

They stumbled on. No one challenged them. "Berth seven eleven," mumbled Vickery to himself. "Damned if I can find it."

They began to pass interplanetary ships, lined up neatly, visible only through the occasional and intermittent burst of flame, accompanied by the rumble of explosions, from the northern horizon. The rain drifted down persistently.

At last Vickery halted. "We'll have to wait for dawn," he said flatly. "Unless we find a torch."

"No one is about at all," Elaine said. "That must mean the guards have either gone to the fighting or have been killed. Don't you revolutionaries usually try to seize the spaceports along with the important public buildings?"

"A maniac called Wheeler is running this particular revolt tonight, not me," Vickery said.

"Oh."

"But I expect you're right. So we look for a dead guard?"

"He'd have a torch, wouldn't he?"

Before Vickery could reply they both heard the hum of an approaching flier. Then its lights swept into view beyond the curve of a hangar roof. The lights swept like brooms across the ground, flickering over ships, buildings, installations, jumping crazily, as the flier swooped down.

"Quick! Into the shadow of this ship."

As they ran some stray ray impinged on the ship ahead and Vickery shouted: "By God! That's her—I think." For the light had shown an interstellar ship and the big figure following the berth number, 'seven.' But he could not be sure that the following letters had spelled eleven and the ship loomed bulky before him suddenly so that there was no time to do anything but leap up the ramp and jump inside the open lock.

As soon as he stepped through into the corridor Vickery knew that this was not his ship. She was much too large. He turned back, clutching Elaine and saw the flier drop to the ground directly before the open air lock. Lights blazed everywhere, stinging his eyes. He jumped back, dragging Elaine, into the shadows.

They ran quickly to a side observation port, open now the ship was on planet, and peered out.

From the flier men and women came at the run, They brandished weapons ; but the weapons were not aimed at the ship ; rather, Vickery saw, they were aimed out into the darkness of the night, at pursuit. The group of people fairly stampeded up the ramp and into the ship.

Vickery had recognised one man. A man with the unmistakable stamp of authority. He was giving orders in a crisp, incisive voice. His face was stiff with anger and rage and humiliation.

"That's the System Executive," Vickery said quietly. "He's been chased off and this is his ship—"

"And we're trapped aboard," Elaine said.

The sound of running feet reached them from the airlock.

Chapter Seven

With that ominous noise in his ears, Vickery whirled to search the blue-lit dimness of the System Executive's starship. He caught Elaine's arm and hurried her along a corridor away from the airlock—and away, too, from the nose and the control sections.

"In here," he said at last, flinging open the door marked : 'Engineers Only.'

Inside, the door firmly closed behind them, Vickery looked around quickly—not so much as a hunted rat looks but as a hunted man quite ready to kill his pursuers looks for a hiding place that can bite back—and saw quite clearly that this ship was much larger than he had supposed. Only the frantic waverings of the light outside could have caused him to believe for one moment that she was his own interstellar ship. No matter. They were aboard and they couldn't get off without being seen. Vickery liked life ; he had plans for his future. He very much wanted that future to happen.

His eyes raked the blue-lit engine room. He recognised the engines—Cowan Ninety Ones—and he searched his memory for all the information about them he had on his mental file. Shadows crawled in the blank bays between banks of power units, wiring looped neatly stranded from the overhead, everything was spick and span, painted and shone and polished

He tried not to feel like that cornered rat he had disavowed a moment before.

"They're bound to come here and go to the control room first, Elaine," he said quickly. "If we can escape detection for the first hour, then we stand a chance."

"Do you think—" Elaine's voice shook and she bit down hard and started again. "Do you think the System Executive is leaving the planet, Fray?"

"I don't know. He might just be flipping around the world to pick up reinforcements from somewhere. He might be leaving." He began to run down the engine room, his feet making little noise on the diamond-patterned plastic flooring. Elaine's shoes pitter-pattered. "We must hide for the first hour, whatever happens."

They found a shadowed space between silent bulks that Vickery's memory told him were auxiliary engines, used when the ship took on and discharged cargo or stores. They hunkered down in the shadows. Vickery felt the gun in his pocket and knew it would be of no use at all if they were seen.

The door opened and men entered, subdued, chilled, men with an aura of defeat and despair strong upon them. Silently they set about starting up the Cowans and feeding power through into the ship's arteries. Lights blazed up but, thankfully, none reached the hiding place where a Freedom Fighter and an F.C. secret agent cowered.

Elaine's thoughts at this time were confused. She realised that if she could elude Fray and find the System Executive on her own she would be safe. But she felt strongly that duty held her by Fray's side, to go through what might befall with him so that, at the end, she could entrap the whole Freedom Fighter's headquarters. She was muzzy on her thinking, and she knew the risks she ran; but she had the impossible task of trying to forget the feel of this wolfish man's arms about her, his lips on her own.

As for Fray Vickery, he bent his whole mind on waiting out that first hour. But he could not prevent his memory from swinging back, from taking him once again to the greenest little island in all God's universe, to the little town of Ballintoy—still growing at the rate of about one new house per twenty years—to the far off golden time of his youth and a period when responsibility had meant nothing beyond caring for his dog. And, just as inevitably, his memories took him to that

graveside and to the bitter hate, and to Pillengarb's book and all the other books that had opened his eyes to the corruption and misery and slavery of the galaxy. A book, and the intelligence to understand its message, was probably the most powerful weapon ever invented, rendering the thermo-nuclear bomb he carried in the cheap plastic case into a mere toy for mindless idiots.

He was glad he hadn't had to use the bomb on Custer.

The days when whole civilisations had lived in fear of nuclear weapons were past—dimly recalled only by musty historians—but the potency of the weapons and the relative fallibility of the defences against them could never be left out of any equation of strength and weakness in the galaxy. Should the Mongs decide at last to attack in strength, for instance . . . Why, then nuclear weapons would be used for a purpose which every man—or nearly every man—could not condemn. The Mongs' avowed intent was to wipe out and utterly destroy every human being in the galaxy. Beside their threat what Vickery and his comrades were doing might so easily appear trifling, a childish fracas among infants; but Vickery knew very well that it was not, that it was of paramount importance in preparing the human race to face the Mongs, that the aliens would never be beaten by a corrupt and slave-society of the order of the monstrosity created and maintained by the businessmen's Friendly Combine.

The ship's antigravs must have been in impeccable condition for Vickery could never have sworn as to the moment of takeoff. His watch showed him that twenty minutes—good, honest Terrestrial minutes—had elapsed since he and Elaine had hunkered down here behind the banks of silent auxiliary engines; yet men still worked on the main Cowans. Their shadows rose and fell, swarming up the bulkheads, reaching like thunderheads above them and then swiftly receding, giving a continuous pattern of light and shadow to the hollow engine room.

"How much longer?" Elaine whispered.

He pressed her arm reassuringly but did not reply. He moved his watch arm so that she could see. They waited on, in silence, their mouths and throats going dry.

After forty minutes there was less coming and going among the engineers and after sixty the last man left, the yellow lights

sloughed to black and only the dimmed blue inspection lamps glowed eerily around the walls and overhead.

Vickery stretched.

"They've put the Cowans into action and now they won't be back until next shift inspection. Men are valuable aboard a spaceship and automatic slaves do most of the work."

"So I'd gathered," Elaine said, thinking of her trip aboard that instant shell. Spaceships were so slow.

"We must now look at the reality of our position," said Vickery precisely. He stared at Elaine, trying to see past that beautiful face and figure, trying to assess what strengths and weaknesses lay unsuspected in his comrade on this adventure. Spy or not, enemy agent or not, she was apparently willing to go along with him and follow his lead and because of that he had to figure the angles as though he could fully trust her. He didn't mind doing this ; but he told himself very seriously that he must not allow his feelings to blind him to the dangers.

"How do you mean, Fray?"

"How far is this ship going? We have no food or drink. We'll have to take turn watching when the other sleeps. We may have to give ourselves up if we can't last—and we can't last without supplies."

Elaine cleared her throat. "I—ah, um—I was once aboard a ship something like this," she said, diffidently.

"Oh? Vickery stared his surprise.

Elaine, thinking of her long and happy associations with Bill Bowen, Planetary Warden of New Terra, so far away now, extemporised hastily. "You've never been inquisitive about me, Fray—

"True. Nor you about me. . .

"That can be rectified," she said, with her best smile.

Vickery answered that smile and the brightness of his eyes lacked their usual wolfish glitter.

"My father," said Elaine truthfully, "was a cyberneticist—my mother a typist before she was married—and I was trained for computer work. I was on a job once where a ship something like this had a snarl-up in her main astrogation banks and I was one of the team to put 'em right."

"Successful?"

"Oh, yes. I was a junior tech then."

Recalling what he had often said about the machine-trained

scientists and technicians of the F.C. Vickery chuckled ; he hadn't known Elaine then. "Go on."

"Well, Fray—" Elaine swallowed. "The air plant is our chance—"

"You mean we can crawl into the ducting and clamber our way around the ship ? Yes, I'd thought of that. And so have the designers. They put up tough screen shields every hundred feet or so. The trick's been worn out."

"Not if you carry clippers. A big pair. A pair such as there must be in the engineers' tool racks here."

"True." Vickery considered. "All right. It's the least we can do. But we ought to wait until we're sure the ship isn't just making a planetary destination. If she is we can sneak out. If not, then we're going somewhere else in the galaxy and that may take time."

Elaine shook her head. "Doubtful. When the high brass go anywhere far they usually take instant shell."

"This particular specimen of high brass is fleeing from a planet-wide rebellion. He may be lucky to escape at all."

"You sound as though you're licking your lips."

Vickery laughed. "Come on. Let's find a pair of snippers and stash them handy."

By the time three changes of watch had taken place, each fresh watch entering to check manually that the automatics were doing their jobs, Vickery had decided that their destination was not on Custer. They might be going back to the System Executive's headquarters world of Keogh, they might be going anywhere. His main concern at the moment was his hunger. He picked up the snippers.

"We'll go through the nearest inspection plate and we'll screw it up behind us—I'll show you how—and then if you know the layout head us for the galley."

Elaine was suddenly very conscious of the blue lighting of the engine room, of the shrouded bulks of the Cowans spinning their faster than light magic with noiseless certainty, of the maze of wiring and conduits, of the diamond-patterned floor, of this man Fray, smiling wolfishly down on her and a fear caught at her and made her smile back, dazzlingly, and say : "Righto, Fray. Here we go."

They entered that strange otherworld of the air plant, and as they groped their way along, guided by the omnipresent blue inspection lamps, Elaine could not stop herself wondering what Vance Archer, the chief of F.C. Intelligence, would say if he could see her now.

Chapter Eight

Vance Archer, at that moment, was just replacing the callset on which he had been talking to Cluster Executive Gerald Wain. The interview had been strained. Larodin. Sjalberg. Custer. Where next?

And these three were only the latest of this man Vickery's triumphs. There were others, sparked by other men working for the Freedom Fighters. The whole planetary boil-up within the Friendly Combine was seething and bubbling, writhing in its pangs to be free of the graft, corruption and hate that the businessmen had grafted on to the old Terran Stellar Empire's methods.

Or so said the Freedom Fighters.

Gerald Wain saw the revolt in a different light. He saw it merely as a direct threat of anarchy against the law and order so painfully garnered by the F.C. from the smashed debris of the old Empire. He saw clearly that solar systems had to live together in the galaxy, or that part of it colonised by Terrans, so that friendly commerce could pass from one to another, so that tariffs and customs and excise and all the hindrance to free trade could be swept away, so that there would be no wars between man and man.

And, again, Vance Archer saw the problem in yet a third light.

He sighed and patted his hair down, turning from the callset robot and walking slowly out on to the glass roof of his apartment high in the hills of New Terra.

"No news of Elaine, I suppose, Vance?" Planetary Warden Bill Bowen stood up out of courtesy as the Chief of Intelligence approached. Bill Bowen still looked the very antithesis of a businessman; he looked as though he had been a fortnight out on a rough and ready hunting trip. But the clear cold glitter of his eyes in the westering sunshine brought sudden realisation that this man, too, was fit to rule and govern.

"No news at all, Bill. That was Gerald Wain—"

"Ah," said Bowen meaningfully.

"And 'ah' to you, too," said Archer. He sat down and picked up his half finished drink. A robot freshened it at once. "I hope Elaine isn't in trouble. I liked that girl."

"She's cut from good material, Vance. I didn't like it at all when you brought your Intelligence operative training school here. But it brought in some fine folk."

Archer nodded without listening. He said : " Suppose I told you Elaine was sent out on a fool's errand, Bill ?"

Bowen did not smile. " Suppose you did ?"

The restlessness in Archer had not communicated itself to the old Planetary Warden ; yet Bowen clearly sensed that the Chief of Intelligence was remarkably unsure, was groping, was—amazingly—seeking for reassurance from someone outside himself. The effect was like that of a bulldog asking a canary how to bite.

" You remember, Bill," Archer said suddenly, " old Matthew ? You know when he died he left certain instructions in his will ?"

" That's common knowledge—to the Warden Corps. Matthew almost but not quite took over complete control of the F.C. I've often wondered why he failed, and what he would have done had he succeeded. Twenty, twenty-five years ago, wasn't it ?"

" All of that. Matthew saw that the F.C. could become stagnant, petrified, overbalanced by its own authority. It's a common story in any large organisation. The instructions in his will led me—led me and others to certain actions. Bill—we must never forget the Mongs."

The apparent change of subject did not deceive Bowen.

" Could we ever," he said, his whiskery cheeks downdrawn, his mouth a sour curve. " Another five, ten years, Terran, and they'll burst like a ripe boil all over us."

" Could we fight 'em ?"

" We'd have to, wouldn't we ?" The puzzlement was assumed. Bowen knew what Archer meant. So he said slowly : " Yes. I think we could. But it would be a terrible affair. Touch and go. We already know what their fighting capacity is like."

" Yes, and our legions are fine when it comes to fighting on planet, putting down a revolt—"

" When the Freedom Fighters haven't got to 'em first and subverted them."

" True. But for a spatial conflict against the Mongs, well, I'm not so happy with their capabilities. They use small tactical nuclear weapons, armour, fighting vehicles, rockets, all the plethora of the weapons' cabinet ; but, put 'em out in space fighting with man's weapons—"

Bowen interrupted cautiously : " Barny Roth was working on those special legions of his and Wain's—"

" Those. Well, yes, they should prove effective against the Mongs. But how many are there ? Of all the thousands of legions that the F.C. maintain, how many score have been trained for real dirty interstellar fighting against the Mongs ?"

Not being able to answer that question Bowen sensibly remained silent.

" And now," Archer said, his drooping eyelids opening to allow his eyes to glare fiercely upon Bowen, " now these damned Freedom Fighters are causing legions to mutiny, to fight among each other, it makes you sick."

" There must be some basic reason for legions to act like that."

" There is ! And Matthew saw what it was."

" Y'know," Bill Bowen offered, placatingly, " we have a nice set-up in our portion of the galaxy. As businessmen we created order out of the chaos left over from the old Empire, we organised and put the galaxy on a steady footing. Not being soldiers we ordered that those who were should organise fighting men into legions and staff and train them so that we could appoint legates from the ranks of the business executives to command and direct. That has worked well. Very well."

" Agreed. So ?"

" So now the Mongs are baying at our heels we have to retrain our fighting men to handle undesirable aliens. I fail to see that we need panic stations for that." He stood up again and stumped across to the glass parapet to watch the sunset. " We have large and fast and efficient spaceships, we have the instant shells for rapid travel by the higher ranks of the hierarchy. Everyone has a job and a full belly and a roof over their heads. We're all happy—or reasonably so. Only personal problems bring unhappiness and those sort of troubles will never be cured by edict of the Board. But we have now to face the Mongs, and we have the canker of these misguided Freedom Fighters undermining all the work we have done."

Vance Archer walked across to stand by Bill Bowen's side and for a moment both men watched as the alien sun of New Terra sank below the serrated skyline. The first stars began to flash out in the green afterglow.

At last Archer ordered a cigar from a robot and turned to go below into his apartment. "Matthew had the answer. In his will he charged all men to carry on his work. It might surprise you, Bill, to know that the Freedom Fighters believe that they are carrying out that order."

"That I cannot believe." Both men left the rapidly darkening roof and entered the luxurious apartment. "Oh, yes, they may believe they are doing right. But how can they be when they seek to destroy the very fabric of the civilisation we have built up?"

"Perhaps," Archer said softly, "destruction must always precede construction?"

"The answer to that was in the transcript we had from that City Warden Armstrong on Sjalberg. Those were the arguments used by that man Vickery. I just cannot trust a man and his friends who believe that now is the time to cut off from the F.C. planets and make them independent. Not, Vance, with the Mongs breathing down our necks!"

"And that, Bill, is the only reason you and the rest of the F.C. are right. And that, too, in a way is why Elaine is on a wild-goose chase."

Bill Bowen had only spared a half day to come up to this mountain eyrie to see Vance Archer because he wanted to know what had happened to Elaine Caitlin. He felt in some obscure way responsible for her. He recognised it as ridiculous; but the habit of being a Warden, and a Planetary Warden at that, had given him an empathy for others. His understanding of other people's ways of thought had grown over a lifetime and, although he was well enough versed in the secrets of the Warden Corps to know that his next step up—that of System sub-Executive—would bring him the study of something called 'psychology' he was long enough in the head to have grasped more perhaps than was proper for his station.

And he didn't like being given the run around.

"I'd like to know what you mean, Vance," he said quietly. "About Elaine, I mean. Is she safe? Is she still alive, even?"

Chapter Nine

To that question even Elaine would have been hard put to it to have answered coherently. She lay on her back, the clothes once so neat and smart stripped off her back and lying in a streaming tattered banner between her slender legs. Her hands were clasped limpet-tight around a cross-bar in the overhead. By her side Fray Vickery lay on his face, his clothes and hair dragged down towards his booted feet, gripping ferociously to a ringbolt in the floor of the air duct.

Both of them looked as though they were being stretched on the rack.

Air whined and howled over them. It poured over their heads, blinding them, screamed along their bodies, lifting torn clothes and shredding them and streaming them away to the mesh. Behind that mesh, visible only as a furtive flicker of silver, the great fan turned. It turned fast. It consisted of eight blades and each blade was razor thin and sharp.

The mesh was flimsy—one section had been badly cracked by one of Elaine's shoes which, stripped from her foot, had pelted into the wire. It clung now, a high heel through one mesh straining visibly.

Talking was impossible in the pandemonium uproar of the air and the fan.

Vickery had seldom felt more frightened in his life. He thought of what those wickedly revolving blades of the fan could do to him. He found himself speculating sickly on what part of his anatomy they would descend, scythelike, to rip away in blood and agony. As to Elaine ; he had not the courage to imagine what she was suffering.

The fan would not be switched off.

They had to retrieve this situation themselves, without outside help ; or die.

Vickery, lying there, his face inches from the strained and terror distorted mask of the girl at his side, began to feel anger seeping through his numbed faculties. Hell, they ought to be able to beat a senseless revolving chunk of steel !

The sight of Elaine's shoe fascinated him. He could only see it by tucking his head down into his shoulder and peering angularly down along his body. His clothes rippled fiendishly in the wind. Elaine's smart clothes were gradually being stripped from her ; parts clung over the mesh, straining inwards. As he looked some white garment broke free and

streamed away like smoke caught up by a ventilator. It crashed against the mesh and a strap went through and the broken end began flailing beyond.

Vickery began to work his legs. He worked hard and heavily, panting as the wind tore at his hair and eyes and nose and filled his gaping mouth. He could not move himself forward an inch. Beyond the ring bolt to which he clung and the overhead transverse bar supporting Elaine there were no handholds.

He knew that well enough ; they'd both cascaded down here when they had thought themselves so near the galley that they'd been talking in whispers and creeping stealthily. Then, just how he could never be sure, they'd been sucked down into this vortex.

Damn the confounded thing ! His anger smashed through into action. By a convulsive effort that almost dislocated his spine, he brought one leg up under him. Then he had to force himself to let go with one hand. Fortunately the air stream was comfortably warm ; had it been cold his hands would have been more uselessly numbed than they now were. He felt pains strike through his fingers as he prised his left hand off the ringbolt and reached down. The boot, a soft leather upper and toughly wear-resisting plastic sole, wouldn't come off and he tugged and tugged in a silent writhing desperation. The thing came away in his hand with such abruptness that for a moment he thought he'd wrenched his foot off as well. The boot crumpled in his hand.

He bent his arm and hurled it as hard as he could down wind, towards the mesh and the fan.

It crashed against the wire, the wire bent, then shivered and then there was a noise that the oldtime god Mars might have made, falling head over heels down Mount Olympus in full armour.

Pieces of fan flew wickedly up the duct. He felt a glancing blow on his leg and then, suddenly, breathtakingly, blessedly, silence fell on the world.

After that it was a question of working their way back along the duct and through into the main distribution channels. Before they went Vickery retrieved his boot and as many of the shredded scraps of clothing as he and Elaine could find in the short time he allowed them.

"They'll be having a looksee to find out what smashed up their fan in no time," he said. "We'll have to find another hiding place."

"I still fancy the galley," said Elaine. "I like to be near food."

She had been badly shaken by the episode. She had made up her mind, back there, clinging to that bar and hearing that awful fan turning and feeling the wind battering at her, that if she was spared to go free and live she'd report at once to the captain of the ship and this man Fray with his wolfish smile could go hang.

As he very well would, of course.

Now that she was once more in command of herself she repented of that thought. She must, to follow her avowed line of duty, follow this man until he led her to his chief, to the leaders of the Freedom Fighters. Failing that, she must find out what planet he next intended to visit and warn the legions.

Vickery pushed his plastic suitcase into a more comfortable position. He had tied it around his chest and back with a strip of wire from the engine room. He had had to reassure Elaine that there was absolutely no chance of the thing going off unless he performed some positive and delicate work on the controls. "It's safe as a lump of lead," he'd said, reassuringly.

There was no room to stand fully upright in the sheet metal ducting and they made some sort of bent, swaying progress, negotiating corners on all fours, scrabbling along like drunken coffin bearers, and all the time desperately afraid of making too much noise. Funnels of blue fire streaked toward them from the lambent glow of the emergency lamps, and shadows of angle-brackets and stanchions and welded joints fled across the metal.

"The galley trunking branch must be near here," Elaine said. "I think."

"No one could expect you to be sure. We'll have to try until we find it."

When, after some nerve-crumbling peering from slatted ventilators into cabins, they looked into the galley, Vickery realised they had received their first slice of luck in a long time. Because of smell and fume ventilation the gallery was equipped with a wide-bore air duct. They could slip through easily.

After that it was a question of waiting until the galley was empty between watches, to unscrew the fastenings of the grille

and fix them so that they could be snapped back into position instantly, and to creep out and steal what food they could take without leaving obvious signs. Toilet facilities were taken care of by branch trunkings further down the ship. The warm air was fresh and uncontaminated in the ducts in which they chose to live ; they left the return branches alone. Their patched clothes were ample. By careful stealing they even contrived to accumulate sacks for bedding and—a great trophy—Elaine found a torch.

They lived in the air-breathing intestines of the starship for two weeks without let or hindrance.

During that time, although they grew to know each other with some degree of intimacy, neither acknowledged any suspicion of the other openly ; they remained comrades in an adventure that was strange enough on its own account to keep them from quarrelling and fretting and trying to pry. Primarily, Elaine was glad that she had stuck it out—that gave her a warm glow of pride—and secondarily that she was well on the way to gaining full confidence of Fray and an open invitation into his schemes. Then she would select her moment and bring in Vance Archer.

Vickery, whilst still cherishing his suspicions of this wonderful girl, felt them to be groundless as day succeeded day. No one in their right mind would undergo what they were suffering in the air ducts of a starship—he thought—if by a mere word they could be seated at the captain's right hand at the captain's table.

For his own plans he was bubblingly optimistic. At first he had cursed his luck in being trapped aboard a System Executive's spaceship and being carted off to God knew where in the galaxy. But now he had seen the value of this, the potential for some really valuable work for the Freedom Fighters. They might even, gloriously, wonderfully, prayerfully, be going to the headquarters world of the F.C. Just to know the planet's name would be worth—well, worth the life of a man of the Freedom Fighters. Vickery hoped that price would not be his own life. He was still the shrewd, self-first man who had taunted Armstrong.

Three weeks passed and the food situation was becoming serious. For one horrible period of twenty-four hours they had eaten nothing, because a crewman had sat stolidly with his

back to the bulkhead, chewing, a different one each four hours, guarding the galley. Evidently the Number One had had reported to him food losses and was determined to catch the thief. They'd fortunately—or through foresight—a good supply of drinking water. Each reconnaissance of the galley showed the crewman sitting there, chewing, watching the door.

Vickery, at last, so desperate for Elaine that he knew he'd do murder for her, suggested they give themselves up.

"Not on your life, sonny-boy," Elaine said in a fashion so strange and comical that Vickery thought she was light-headed. "We'll just have to find a cabin or something and sneak in there."

Luck stayed with them. They found a two-pound block of chocolate on a shelf just within arm's reach below a ventilator in a cabin. A half hour's work when the cabin was empty—and they feasted on the chocolate like cannibals.

Looking at Elaine, sitting in one of the trunking junctions cross-legged, her head brushing the metal above, Vickery realised how well she was holding up. Her tattered clothing, even more ripped and torn by this life, as was his, showed him perhaps more of a young lady than was proper in mixed company. She didn't seem to mind and, anyway, there was little she could do about it. Her skin was a clear peach colour, incredibly soft and yet firm. Quite how it happened neither of them knew; but one moment they were licking the chocolate off their fingers and the next the were lying in the air ducting with their arms about each other, gasping, and if the whole legionary strength of the Friendly Combine had seized them they would neither have known nor cared. They wouldn't have been able to stop, either.

The ship lurched and swayed and the lights flickered. Lying there, content and surfeited, Vickery thought it was his emotions catching up with him.

Then Elaine said: "It looks as though we've made it."

"Huh?"

"We're landing."

"By God," said Vickery, sitting up and taking his arms away from Elaine. "You're right. We've made planetfall."

"And now, darling," she said with malicious pleasure, "having got us into this mess, you can proceed to get us out of it."

"I'll do that," said Vickery, feeling ten times the man he had been half an hour ago. "I'll do that."

Chapter Ten

The ship lay empty in her berth. Careful inspection from a port showed a small spaceport with minimal facilities and no other starships berthed down. The sky glowed a clear lemon with high thinning streaks of chocolate-brown cloud. Sunset must just have passed and the world—whatever world it was—would lie in darkness inside twenty minutes. Vickery wondered if this alien planet possessed any moons.

"I'm hungry," Elaine said with feminine practicality.

"Me, too." They went back to the gallery and ate the best meal in weeks. Then a foray on the cabins disclosed suitable clothing—civilian attire that the ship's officers might not miss for some time. "We'll just have nice time to slide down the ramp in full darkness before anyone returns." Vickery spoke confidently. "The high and mighty blasted goons of the F.C. do not expect any trouble at all on their own spaceport. Why should they?"

Elaine let that one go by and, silently and with a careful look-out, they walked calmly down the ramp and into the expectant darkness shrouding this alien world.

Both of them had been busily working out what planet it might be lying at a distance of three weeks starship passage from Custer. There were about nine suitable planets and until they had seen more they had no way of telling.

Under his arm, beside the plastic suitcase, Vickery carried a small paper parcel. Elaine had seen him with it first after he had emerged from a passenger cabin; but in her desire to get free of the ship she had not questioned. They walked swiftly and quietly over the concrete until they reached the perimeter track. A few yellow lights showed at the admin block but the rest of the field lay in total darkness. A little wind soughed past them and Vickery thought he could hear the tinkle of running water.

"There's bound to be a guard," he said cheerfully. "So we work the old one-two on him."

"Lead on," said Elaine.

The memory of that blue-lit moment aboard the ship, in the air ducting, fractionally before they'd made planetfall was giving them both a buoyance, a confidence, a zest that knew no obstacles and no despair. With what lay between them now they could overturn mountains.

They heard the guard talking before they saw him or his box. In the palpitating darkness they crept closer and listened.

"... and I say the Hornet will slay 'em!" A pause "All right. Fifty. Yes. Tomorrow. Goodbye!" The phone went down with a crash. A cough. Then the door of the box opened and lights splashed down over the wire gate and the crisscross iron supports. A man lumbered out, still talking to himself. "Blasted idiot! The Hornets'll eat 'em alive. Well, more fool him. Fifty smackers coming to me tomorrow—huh? Who's that?"

For Elaine—the one—had walked hesitantly out into the light, smiling uncertainly. She looked very appealing.

And Vickery—the two—went behind the man and struck him and caught him in his arms.

After that it was only necessary to prop him in his box, open the gate, walk through, close the gate after them and walk away into the windy darkness of the night.

"Choosing a small postern was wise," Vickery said. "We couldn't have done that at the main gate."

"Save your breath for walking," Elaine said. "Those city lights look a long way ahead."

In his absolute confidence, Vickery said: "We'll reach the city before the pursuit catches up with us. Never fear."

But Elaine wasn't walking in fear of that. She had other problems now, problems that, she thought, would have brought a flush of anger to the face of Vance Archer.

The city proved to be small with neat pre-fabricated plastic single-story houses, a church or two, garages, shops and three hotels. They chose the hotel in the middle, both in price and location. Street lighting was adequate but not lavish and the people walked in casual but expensive clothes; there were quite a few fliers and ground cars.

"I'd guess gravity at point nine nine," Vickery said. "And the air smells wonderful. Could be a nice planet."

"Remember, Fray," Elaine said in her small voice, "we were brought here by a System Executive and yet we know this world is not in his system. There's a feeling, something in this air, that tells me this is a special planet. Do you feel it too?"

"I feel only the demands of another planet to be freed from the F.C. I wonder if there is a Freedom Fighter cell here? There damn well ought to be."

Slowly, Elaine said : " I don't think there is, Fray. I really don't."

He was too pre-occupied with trying to guess what the reactions out on the spacefield to the unconscious guard would be to take her up on that at the moment. Men were so small, so fleshly organic and weak, to go rummaging out among the stars. They needed protection, metal shells, air pumping machinery, astrogation devices, supplies, a reassurance that they were carting a semblance of their own little home world out with them into the darkness. Single worlds could live and support life and be everything there was to a man ; but the men of Terra hadn't thought that enough and so the Terran Solar Empire had arisen, to fall through over-bureaucracy, over-control and the lethargy that attacks and destroys organisms too large and unwieldy to be managed. So the damned businessmen had come along and calmly put their economic theories to work and set up their Friendly Combine almost as they would a department store. It sickened Vickery. Those men out there on the spacefield, finding the unconscious guard, would react just like a shop assistant finding a kleptomaniac loose in the store.

They'd scream blue bloody murder for the store detective.

The store detective—detectives—were the legions. If there should be no Freedom Fighter cell on this planet, Vickery considered it best for Elaine and himself to leave immediately. Together they walked out of the hotel in search of a quiet eatery.

They knew now on which planet they had landed—a remote world called Suria, unimportant with little local industry and only its availability as land for homesteading to recommend it—and both were feeling cut off from the main stream of galactic events.

" Booking in that hotel was only a blind," Vickery told Elaine. They walked along the street, mingling inconspicuously, through the benefit of the stolen clothes, with other passers-by. " We told the clerk we'd be back. But we won't."

" But how do we get off—"

" Difficult," said Vickery. " But we can only try."

Over a reasonable meal they discussed their future. It did not make happy talk. The night was barely noticeable within the building ; but outside they were at once reminded of that fatal blackness that had struck in the hours before Custer had erupted into violence and revolution.

" No," Vickery said. " Not just like that. Too pat."

The night was warm and friendly despite the writhing of unfamiliar constellations in the sky and they walked until they found a park in which they spent the night. First thing in the morning, after a freshener at the fountain, they went into town for breakfast. All that day they prowled, spending a great deal of time reading the books that Vickery produced from the paper package under his arm.

Now that Elaine was able to read one of these books, the existence of which she had not suspected until Fray produced them out of the paper package, she understood his preoccupation and reluctance to make proper plans. The books were stored thermonuclear bombs—on a mental level.

"I sneaked them from that passenger cabin," Vickery was turning pages as he spoke, sitting on a bench in the park. "I expect it was the System Executive's suite. Read, woman. This stuff is incredible."

"Psychology," Elaine said. "Doesn't mean a thing to me, never heard of it. Psychology." She pronounced it correctly through the other scientific words with which she was familiar conditioning her tongue. "Seems to be a system for controlling human beings."

"It is. If you know what these books contain you can hold a whole civilisation in the hollow of your hand. My God ! No wonder the businessmen can run the morons ragged."

Elaine still had most of the money Archer had equipped her with and she even had the temerity to remark to Fray that at least having a united galaxy did allow common currency. He grunted absently and read on about experiments conducted on rats to make them behave. The next chapter told how to make humans behave.

They spent a whole week—Suria time—loafing about, reading the books. At its end Vickery was possessed of a cold, savage, soul-shaking rage against the F.C. that transcended anything he had experienced before. Elaine, too, could not control her own thoughts. For this, then, she had been fighting, this callous system of herding men and women, of calculating just how they would behave and of forestalling their own genuine desires by artificially implanted desires that ran in the grooves the high and mighty of the F.C. ordained. She was aware that her anger against people like Vance Archer and Gerald Wain was strong and boiling ; they knew all this ! They must do. They'd used it on her, turned her into a secret service

operative when all she'd really wanted was a good cybernetics job, a husband, home and family. The next time she saw Archer, she'd . . .

"It all started with a character called Freud, or Jung, or Adler, the old records are confused," Vickery said, thumping a book on his knee. They were sitting in the last glow of their seventh Suria day on planet. "But this modern stuff is vitriolic. A System Executive can just talk to you for half an hour and you agree to everything he says! No wonder they've done what they have—"

"And surprising that the Freedom Fighters have done what they have—"

In answer Vickery pulled the last book from the package. "Pillengarb," he said. "It's all in here, the reason why I fight the F.C. This I took so you could read and see a little more clearly just what I am trying to do." He opened the book. His fingers poised, and then flattened a page—a well-remember page—slowly. Someone had annotated the book in a miniscule hand. Neat, precise writing commented in the margins on the text.

"Looks as though the System Executive read this and wrote down his comments," he said. His head felt sore. His hands were steady on the page; but he felt they must be trembling with the anger that rushes, disastrously, from self-doubt.

He read: "It is the manifest destiny of every man, woman and child to choose their own life and to pursue happiness, liberty, freedom of thought, word and deed, without interference from regulating bodies who seek to exalt the state—nation or galaxy—above the individual. The individual sanctity of life is of paramount importance—"

He was breathing heavily, forgotten was the macabre situation that found a man and a girl on the run from the police and legionaries walking about a city reading books denied to humanity for a thousand years. He was conscious only of the glorious truths that he read again, feeling again the rush of certainty and purpose that had taken him when he had first read them after standing at the graveside of his parents in far off Ireland. Now those words had been commented on in the neat hand of a System Executive.

"Freedom as an ideal is above reproach but the F.C. denies the sort of freedom that is prevalent today and leads only to a freedom to be inefficient, a freedom to wage war, a liberty to murder when the whim takes one, a freedom of thought that

thinks only of self and self-aggrandisement and devil take everyone else. The F.C. must struggle to bring out of this chaos of liberty an order and a regulation of systems so that everyone may live together without falling periodically into a darkness that lasts a thousand years."

There was more. Lots more. Each powerful point punched by Pillengarb was coldly dissected and shown up to be demagoguery on a grandiose scale. Example: "Two men living with their families in adjacent caves and fighting sabre-tooths with stone clubs also fight each other when they meet in defence of their liberty. Result: One is killed and the other injured and the sabre-tooths devour all." Example: "Fifty million people live on a single island and look at another island on which live ten million. They fight, one in search of lebensraum, the other in defence of home and hearth. Result: An enduring hatred that blasts all hope of mutual progress. This is freedom gone mad."

"At least, the last has proved not altogether true," said Vickery.

And as he spoke he realised that he was accepting the annotations in this book. He knew it must be very old. It was evident that the notes had been written in when the F.C. was trying to take over the remnants of the old Empire and to bring order out of chaos. And he, Vickery, had been seeking to return each individual world to a state of isolation, in pursuit of Pillengarb's diction of: Liberty, Equality, Fraternity.

He clutched hold on his cherished ideals, desperately striving to negate in his mind the insidious arguments put forward by this long-dead writer—for the book surely was older than any man now alive, must have been written when the last of the Terran Solar Empire's fleets reeled back from the darkness. Perhaps, his mind whispered, Pillengarb had helped to tear down that old Empire. Perhaps the men of the Freedom Fighters had merely resurrected an ancient and potent spectre in their struggle against the modern colossus.

He glanced at Elaine. He felt deflated, worn-out, perfectly unsure—perfectly empty. She was sitting bolt upright, staring straight ahead. Twin spots of colour burned in her cheeks. Her eyes were very bright.

In the last of the lemon sunset, with flat brown clouds drifting, she turned her face to him. She was crying.

"Oh, Fray, Fray—I'm sorry!"

He was bewildered. "Ideas are the life-stuff of men and women who think beyond the television screen," he said, roughly. "We can work this out. I still believe I'm right—"

"Fray, Fray—don't you see? Don't you see?"

He did not. He put a hand on her knee and pressed "What is it, Elaine? What—"

"Tell me, Fray. Is your name Vickery?"

Shocked, for he had not used his own name since Sjalberg, Vickery said: "Yes."

She did not move but her body seemed to shrink.

A park guard, accompanied by an armed policeman, walked along the path, some distance off. They were walking casually, talking, taking the evening air, relaxed.

"Help!" Elaine screamed, standing up. She could not have looked at Fray—Fray Vickery!—then for all the rewards that Vance Archer could heap on her.

"Help! Police—"

Vickery made not the slightest attempt at resistance when they took him away.

Chapter Eleven

"Yes. Yes, I understand perfectly. I shall leave at once."

Cluster Executive Gerald Wain turned from the screen where the image of the Board's spokesman faded. He looked exultant, triumphant. Absolute confidence radiated from him. In the air the smell of fine cigar smoke met and mingled with the aroma of banked flowers his wife liked to have about their apartment. Wain's face was slightly flushed, as though he had drunk just enough for him; he kept wetting his lips as though they were dry, through fear or excitement or both.

"It's come at last," he said, his voice fractionally unsteady.

"Gerry! My dear!" said Marie Wain, running up to kiss him. She acted like a woman who has been told her daughter is to marry into the Board Director's family—only more so.

"Congratulations, Gerald." Legate Executive Barney Roth advanced, red-faced, smiling, hand outstretched. Wain shook hands, laughing. It had struck him hard.

Barney Roth smiled as his wife congratulated the Cluster Executive—Cluster Executive no more. He was now Board Director and no wonder Marie Wain looked as radiant as she did. As for Roth, he'd kept his nose clean, there had been no

rebellion in the hundred legions for which he was responsible and so he could anticipate confidently that Wain would take him back to Earth as his Legate Director.

Very nice.

"The threads are spinning out as we planned," Wain said with bubbling good humour. He called for drinks and toasted the Friendly Combine with the air of a proprietor. They all joined him. "A shame that Judge Owens did not live to see this day," Wain said. "But we have confidence in our future. Now, instanter shell for Earth and then the great work that lies under our hands—"

A robot ran subserviently in and switched on the screen. At once Vance Archer's face flashed out, strong, drooping-eyed, mouth curving in what might, in a lesser man, have been a smile. He saw the assembled company, saw their faces, the drinks raised in toast—and guessed.

"I had thought, Gerald," he said mildly, "to give you good news. But it seems that anything I might say would be anticlimax."

Wain was happy to include Archer in his fortune. "Vance!" Just in time! And just the man." With a chameleon rapidity Wain's air changed. "News has reached me that two more planets—Lerwick and S'rinaga—have been turned over by the Freedom Fighters. That's bad, Vance. Damned bad."

"I've a shrewd idea they'll be the last, Gerald." Still Archer held to that mild tone.

"Oh?"

"Yes. You see, although this man Vickery was not responsible for these latest two defections from the F.C., he was in many respects the most important agitator—"

"Was?" Despite his abrupt elevation to a larger sphere, Wain was too good an executive to lay down too sharply the burdens of the post he was leaving.

"Fray Vickery has been captured. He is in custody on Suria. I'm having him brought to New Terra."

Wain thawed at once. "That is good news, Vance. Wonderful news! I'd like to meet this man—"

"He was trapped by Elaine Caitlin—as I promised you he would be. When do you leave?"

"Tomorrow, early. Can you instanter shell them to Earth?"

"I'll send a re-route order at once."

To Barney Roth, standing as usual solid in the background, there was an odd aura about Vance Archer, as though some event for which he had been waiting had broken and yet not quite in the way he had anticipated. Everyone knew that the Intelligence officers were outside the normal jurisdiction of the businessmen's combine ; but, even so, Archer was acting in a very independent fashion. Perhaps he was hoping that Wain would ask him to be his Intelligence Chief, once the ex-Cluster Executive became Board Director on Earth ?

Despite all this rigorous suppression of his own ideals, Roth felt a twinge of envy. As a soldier he had fought down the contempt he felt for businessmen running the galaxy. They did all right and with their control of psychological methods they could enforce their will. The Freedom Fighters found it hard going. But even Barney Roth had read Pillengarb's book. That explained a great deal.

Still—it would be nice to be able to break free just once, to act as he suspected Vance Archer habitually acted.

"There is just one other thing, Gerald." Archer's voice was non-committal and his face expressionless. Despite that, everyone looking at him pictured on the screen sensed at once that what was to come was perhaps the more serious news of the two.

"Yes ?"

"Elaine went along with this man for a time. As you might have suspected, an emotional entanglement resulted—"

Wain chuckled. "You insisted on using female operatives, Vance. Now you can sort that one out." He laughed again.

"They stowed away in a System Executive's personal star ship." Archer went on speaking smoothly and the tension shocked back into the room. "No one suspected—pilfering of food had been explained by hungry crew-members—and these two were able to get into the System Executive's private cabin when the ship made planetfall. I'm not seeking to excuse the System Executive and, anyway, Gerald, that is your pigeon ; but they merely followed normal routine. One expects a private businessman's spaceport to be security tight," he added, drily.

"I'll discipline the man," Wain promised with quiet ferocity. "Go on."

"They took books—books they had time to read before they were taken into custody—"

"Both of them ? I thought the girl was your agent ?"

"She is. But she read the books, too."

"Ah, I—see—"

"Yes, Gerald. They both are now aware that such a thing as psychology exists. They also studied it so thoroughly that the results are rather—frightening."

"I'll see them both on Earth. You'd better come, too, Vance. We'll sort this thing out from beginning to end. If this man Vickery doesn't co-operate and tell us all we want to know about the Freedom Fighters—well, I feel sorry for him."

The menace in Wain's voice chilled his listeners.

As Vance Archer cut the connection and prepared to take instant shell for Earth, Gerald and Marie Wain, accompanied by Barny and Freda Roth also finalised their preparations and ordered an instant shell for Earth.

Two great cities would be drained of their power for a night, the hospitals forced to go on to their own emergency generators, all public transport stilled and the street lamps dead in their standards, as the great ones of the new business combine posted with all speed for the planet that had spawned their like across the face of the galaxy.

And a third city had been drained of its energy and a third instant shell had been flung across the uncurved planes of space-time to arrive on New Terra within a matter of days instead of the weeks and months it would have taken by starship. In that third shell, under observation of two uncommunicative guards—one a man and the other a woman—Fray Vickery and Elaine Caitlin were miserably aware of each other, and aware that the precious bloom that had flowered between them had wilted, browned, decayed.

They barely spoke. After the first days of nausea the flight was over, anyway. They greeted the news that they must take a fresh instant shell—for the one in which they had travelled was forever useless now—for Earth, with a phlegmatic acceptance that gave concern to both guards and made them doubly alert.

Vickery's cheap plastic suitcase with the thermonuclear bomb within had been taken away from him rather as an adult might take away an air pistol from an unruly child. The books had been taken away and placed in a strong-box and guarded by grim-faced men wearing a device unfamiliar to Vickery. The guards had taken the padlocked box of books back to the

Executive's suite. They took more care of them than they did the thermonuclear bomb.

They knew very well which of the two was the more powerful.

The feeling of being encased in ice persisted as Vickery made planetfall on Earth, on his own home planet, and was led docilely into an armoured flier. He made no protest when Elaine was led in a different direction. He was sitting in much the same position a man must be in when a million volts is shot through his body; stunned, stupefied, ready to slough into death. But his brain was working as, perhaps, it had never worked before, even when he was learning to be an operative for the Freedom Fighters. The numbness persisted, yes; but his mind was busily working away in an attempt to retrieve the situation.

For a start: Why bring him to Earth? Could the dear old Terra Firma be the secret headquarters world of the F.C.?

For another: Why bring Elaine too, unless they considered her unreliable?

He found he couldn't really blame her for her action. She had been indoctrinated into the inner mysteries—or some of them—of the F.C. Secret Service and, love or not, she couldn't be expected to throw over that sort of training, backed as it had been by this new-fangled psychology he'd read. The businessmen told their morons what to do and the morons jumped to obey. Only those who had read Pillengarb's book and who had been re-trained by the Freedom Fighters could resist . . . And then he thought of those damning annotations of Pillengarb's book, and wondered and cursed and felt the doubts flood in.

He was taken to a windowless, white-lit room, and told to make himself at home.

As a prison he had seen lots worse.

A voice said: "Why did you become a Freedom Fighter?"

Vickery lay down on the bunk, crossed one leg over the other, put his hands behind his head and relaxed. He closed his eyes and snored, deeply and realistically.

The voice: "Vickery! Why are you a Freedom Fighter?"

"Go away." Vickery re-crossed his legs and snored harder.

"Was it the money, Vickery?"

The sheer banality of that question annoyed Vickery. "I know your sort," he said, the words tumbling out despite himself. "You've only ever met people who do things for

reward. So you work on the old principle that every man has his price. That may be true—”

“We think so—”

“It doesn’t alter the fact that some men will do certain things without seeking reward. You cannot understand that.”

The ice in his head was breaking up now. He spoke more warmly than he remembered in a long time. “Suppose the sun was going nova and some project or other had to be built to save the Earth. Your sort would offer big money to try to get men to work for that money. You’d think that anyone who offered to help without reward was a crank, a fanatic. I tell you, you disembodied voice, that so many men would volunteer that you could spit on your monetary enticements.”

“Why—”

“So run away and play in your own dirty little backyard where everything is judged by golden standards. I need some sleep.”

Thereafter Vickery refused to listen to the unseen interlocuter. He’d had some of this prison technique before ; and his reading of psychology had broadened his outlook.

He wished he could see Elaine and try to explain.

What lay in store for him he could not, of course, be absolutely sure ; that it would be unpleasant was one certainty. He just hoped he had the strength of mind and the courage of believing despite everything that had happened in the essential truth of his work. The Freedom Fighters with their battle against the entrenched forces of might and corruption and money-grubbing must be right. They must ! Despite what that long-dead annotator of Pillengarb’s book had written, a man was entitled to personal freedom and the choice to go to the devil in his own way. That was what liberty and equality meant.

Guards wearing that unfamiliar device met him as he was escorted from the cell by his first gaolers and after half an hour’s flight by armoured flier and a smooth landing on a rooftop decking, he was taken down antigrav shafts and told curtly to stand still. He found no surprise to see Elaine, wan but neatly clothed in nylon coveralls, led in and told, equally curtly, to stand still. They smiled at each other. They did not speak. But some tenuous link, some bond that had almost parted, had been reformed, stronger than ever.

The need he had felt for explanations died the death.

Elaine and he stood quite still on the shining marble floor. Around them walls of some plastic that glowed a soft pink reached up to arch over gracefully into a blued and distant prospect, a miniature impersonation of the sky. The room, wide and spacious, contained no single item of furniture. A large sized television screen faced them. The screen, fixed to the wall, and obscuring the doorway through which they had entered, was all of twenty feet high. Vickery felt a dim glimmer of amusement at the thought that the owner of this place relished grandeur for its own sake.

A voice issued from the wall below the screen.

"Francis Vickery. Elaine Caitlin. You have been brought here to stand trial for subversive activities." The screen remained blank. It began to get on Vickery's nerves. Then he told himself angrily that it was all a part of the intimidation technique; that he and Elaine were meant to feel insignificant and therefore frightened and, as a consequence, blurt out all this unseen interrogator wished to know. The prison cell technique, only stepped up in realisation. He smiled with his old wolfish grin and remained silent.

The wall began to change colour. The soft pink faded to a dull brown, then an angry purple flush spread across the glowing plastic. Elaine's face looked puce. Vickery calmly reached across and took her hand. He pressed.

"F. Vickery and E. Caitlin. The charges have now been fed into the judgment computer. Have you anything to say why judgment should not be passed on you both?"

They—whoever the 'they' was in this instance—were cunning. Vickery couldn't let that one by.

"Sure," he said flippantly. "Sure, I've something to say. I'm a Freedom Fighter and I'm proud of that. Proud to have been of some little help in sweeping away the rottenness you represent—whoever you are, skulking behind a wall like a dirty eavesdropper."

He was allowed to speak without interruption.

"But Miss Caitlin is not as I am. She's not a Freedom Fighter. She's an operative for the F.C. Secret Service, as you damn well know. She did her job and brought me in. So I see no reason why, even in your contemptible little twisted mind, she should stand sentence with me."

Silence. Elaine gripped his hand hard. Then: "Your comments have been noted. Through association with you E. Caitlin is now no longer trustworthy, and she must be punished with you and because of you."

Vickery began to sweat. He was being pushed. He recognised clearly enough what was going on ; but he knew, too, that there was only one thing for him to do.

They stood defiantly on that glistening marble floor, surrounded by tall walls that glowed angrily through the red end of the spectrum, facing a twenty foot television screen that remained blank, talking to a voice that was disembodied and almost unhuman—and the effect sawed at their nerves like rusty files. Vickery swallowed. He made an effort. He stretched one leg and then the other.

Then he sat down on the floor.

Elaine glanced down, horrified. He winked, and tugged her arm. "I do not like talking to invisible louts without the courtesy of good manners to let me see them. I suppose that is part of the code of conduct among businessmen, among the filthy and pitiful little money grubbers."

Sitting in his luxurious chair facing the small screen surrounded by controls beyond the wall, Gerald Wain felt a stab of annoyance and indignation. This squirming Freedom Fighter squirmed with fangs. Vance Archer, who was due to arrive any moment, had not spoken idly when he'd talked of this man Vickery's prowess among the stars. Wain made up his mind and gave a low voiced instruction to a robot.

On his little screen he saw the man and girl look up, with a start, and knew his own features were staring down on them from the gigantic screen facing them.

Wain said in measured tones : "You have no excuses for your conduct. There can be no mercy shown a man who deliberately foments rebellion. You were the cause of a million deaths on a single planet. What sentence can you expect ?"

Elaine gave a little cry, and sank down to grasp Vickery tightly. He flung back his wolfish smile at the screen.

"You don't look much to be a big boy in this outfit," he said.

Thinking of his new position, Wain could afford to smile indulgently. Board Director ! There was so much to do that he had already overshot his time with this man. Archer would learn all he wanted. He'd merely wished to see the man out of curiosity. He rose—and Vance Archer opened the door and walked quietly in.

Elaine said : "Vance Archer !" Then, on a sob : "You know I wouldn't betray the F.C.—"

"Quiet!" a disembodied voice boomed. Both Archer and Wain jumped; then smiled as they realised the controlling robot had detected unfamiliar overtones in Elaine's voice and had automatically reacted. This court of law, the robot seemed to be saying, would be conducted in an orderly fashion.

Wain smiled smoothly. "You are just in time, Vance, to hear the sentence passed on these two. The computer jury has found them both equally guilty and the court now awaits sentence."

"I see." Archer found a seat and sat down heavily. He felt very tired, and there was still so much to do. He looked into the screen with very great interest, a consuming interest, to see this man Vickery. This was the first time he had seen him face to face and he waited the experience with something of amused awe. What he saw confirmed him in his belief; Francis Vickery was dangerous. Damn old Matthew, anyway! Mental dynamite shouldn't be left lying about.

Out in the centre of the empty room, seated on the marble floor, Fray Vickery glared back at the giant screen. "You can't sentence Elaine for what I did," he said. "Even slimy woodlice like you can't be that bad and remain human."

Archer smothered a chuckle. Perhaps he was lightheaded after his exertions; perhaps the sheer effrontery of this wolfish-looking character squatting on the floor out there tickled his funny bone. Wain turned to glare at him.

A situation had developed between these people and of them all only Vance Archer felt he knew all there was to know. He would have liked to have known more. But Matthew had been too precise and he had to unravel some of those threads before he could get down to the Mongs. That reminded him. "Want a private word," he said to Wain, softly.

Wain shut off the big screen. "Yes?"

"Just this: The Mongs have decided to attack. They have been hitting at starlanes between Sjalberg and Hindemith—"

"The legions based on Sjalberg ought to handle—" Wain began. Then he remembered about Sjalberg, and cursed.

He flung the big screen on again. "Listen to me, you stupid Freedom Fighter. The Mongs are attacking—"

"What?" said Vickery. He sat up, looking alert and worried.

"Yes. And they're smashing at ships near Sjalberg—and of course through your confounded interference there are no legions and no ships near at hand to fight them off."

"But of course there are!" Vickery said hotly. He scrambled to his feet and stood glowering at the giant screen. "Sjalberg will send men, ships—"

"Sjalberg is cut off from the galaxy, like Larodin and Custer and S'rinaga. Your people see to that. Sjalberg just doesn't know!"

"Well, tell 'em! They'll co-operate in this fight—"

"A pity you couldn't get co-operation into focus before, isn't it, Vickery?" put in Archer. "What did you think of Pillengarb's famous book when it had been dissected?"

Vickery was betrayingly aware of a dull flush seeping along his cheekbones; he clenched his fists. "You can't convince me now, pal, any more than you could have before . . ."

"We'll see," said Archer calmly. "We'll see."

The other three were oddly aware that the centre of attention had in some subtle way shifted. Their eyes rested now on Archer and it was to him that they turned for the next step in this drama. Although, for Elaine and Vickery, the drama was a tragedy; neither would come out of this the same person they had gone in; so Vickery felt, and felt too annoyance and anger and frustrating rage. It just wasn't fair that Elaine should be punished for him.

But fairness as far as Vickery understood the word had not been built into the businessmen's Friendly Combine.

Gerald Wain rose to his feet. For him, the interview was over. He had satisfied his curiosity and seen this man Vickery and heard the judgment of the computer jury. Sentence was still to be passed; but that would be a mere formality best left to the robots assigned the task.

"I'll see you later, then, Vance," he said softly. "Right now I have to tackle a hundred different operations and the Board is meeting in four hours—"

"I know." Archer still stared at the screen. "I convened it."

"You convened it? But—" Wain was amazed.

"Sit down again, Gerald," Archer said gently. "I have to tell you one or two things now that you have reached the eminence you desired."

Slowly, as though disbelieving what he heard, Wain sat.

Archer spoke towards the screen. "You two mischief makers know what psychology is now?"

"Yes," Vickery answered, still angry. "Just another damned tool for your sort to cow the masses—"

"Partly right. There was a man called Matthew who saw that what the F.C. was doing wasn't quite right and he sought to improve conditions in the galaxy. He wasn't altogether successful."

"Matthew," said Wain spitefully, "was an idealistic bungler."

"True," Archer nodded largely, "up to a point. He clearly foresaw that the F.C. as it is currently constituted was rotten, corrupt, with men in power who sought only for power and the rewards it brought. He was terribly anxious to remedy this and also he was aware that the F.C. couldn't hope to meet, fight and beat the Mongs unless it was drastically shaken out of its rut."

Wain's eye's opened scornfully. "I suppose you're going to tell me that old Matthew originated the Freedom Fighters?"

Vickery and Elaine leant forward, conscious that Vance Archer wouldn't let them listen to this unless it was in some way connected to themselves.

"No, Gerald, I'm not going to say that. Matthew had his ideas and his will specifies some of them. He felt that a complete re-organisation of the F.C. was overdue. What he did not foreshadow was the application of his ideas by men who wanted immediate freedom for individuals. The Freedom Fighters grew out of Matthew's teachings; but they were not true to his ideas. He would have been horrified could he have known."

"Second-rate minds inaugurate ideas they can never hope to follow up," Wain said with the vehemence of a man paying lip service to an outdated notion. "Matthew has caused enough trouble for one man. Now I suggest we get rid of these two here and see about the Mongs. They—"

"All in good time, Gerald."

"Now see here, Archer—I've had enough of your insolence. You seem to forget that I'm a Board Director—"

"No, Gerald, I do not. As a Board Director you owe allegiance to the other Board Directors—and to the Chairman. Never forget that."

Wain did not sneer; his voice did that for him. "The Chairman! No one has ever seen him, as far as I can make

out. He's a figment of the Board's to keep small-minded men in order—"

"He's no figment, Gerald. Matthew was the Chairman. When he died with his work incomplete someone had to take over. Then the Freedom Fighters became active and I had to bend most of my energies on to quelling them. That has now been done. Francis Vickery here will be told the truth and sent to his chiefs to convince them. The time has at last come when I can say outright that the abuses of the F.C. will be rectified." Archer half turned to the screen. "You hear that, Vickery? As Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Friendly Combine I promise your chiefs that what they fight for will come without bloodshed. Today we must all combine—if you will pardon the term—to fight the Mongs."

Vickery felt the red tide of confusion washing over him and he grasped Elaine's arm hard in an effort to cling on to something real, something he could understand. "We want freedom for the people of the galaxy," he said at last, in a muffled voice.

"Freedom to go your own way in separate selfish mobs so that the Mongs can lick you all up piecemeal? Freedom to be traitors to the rest of humanity in the galaxy? Freedom, Vickery, to deny your responsibilities?"

Vickery stood numbed. He couldn't find the words. All the fine phrases he had learned, parrot-fashion, were turned in on him as wounding weapons; what Archer said was right. Men had to stick together out in the blackness of space; they had to help each other. A lonely path was a path straight to suicide.

"Your word—?" he mumbled.

"Of course. Elaine knows me. So does Bill Bowen. You're going back to him now. Then you can go on to your chiefs and tell them. We haven't much time. The Mongs press in and once they have started they won't stop. It's them or us—them or us, Vickery! You can't get much more basic than that."

"No. I suppose not."

"All right, then." Archer pressed a button. The door behind him opened and Legate Director Barny Roth marched in. "Look after Gerald, Barny. He's learned a few things. Keep him under observation. Once he's convinced that we have to treat the people of the galaxy as human beings and not

as pawns in a game of power he'll be valuable. You learned, didn't you, Barney?"

Roth was a changed man. Now he could expand his own personality and become a good citizen of the galaxy as well as a good soldier. The legions would be trained to fight the Mongos as they had never been trained before. "Come on, Gerald," he said, taking Wain's arm. "There are some things to be explained."

Archer watched them go and then turned back to the screen with the eagerness crackling out of him.

"When you get back from your chiefs, Vickery, you will be of great help to me. We need fighting men. The Mongos are going to be the toughest proposition the men of Earth have ever faced."

Vickery held Elaine close. He was feeling the strength seeping back not only into his body but into his mind.

"We'll fight 'em, Archer," he said slowly. "We'll fight 'em and—by God!—we'll win."

"We'll win," Elaine said. "We'll win—because we'll be a team."

—Kenneth Bulmer

Missed Any Issues ?

The first issues of this magazine
are still available, each one packed
with exciting action adventure
science fiction stories

Nos. 1 to 18 2/- each (35 cents)

No. 20 2/6 (40 cents)

post free

NOVA PUBLICATIONS LTD

Maclaren House, 131 Great Suffolk Street, London, S.E.1

In any branch of fiction the escape story is always an exciting one. In science fiction it can usually be expected to produce some unexpected twists.

THE WAGES OF DEATH

by ROBERT SILVERBERG

Chapter One

Macintyre stopped at the intersection of Lincoln Boulevard and Jefferson Street, looking in all directions for the Truthmen. The wind was from the north. It was past the hour of sundown, and two of the moons were in the bleak twilight sky.

His eye fell involuntarily on the street-sign. *Independence Avenue*, it said, in neat yellow script. Macintyre still thought of it as Jefferson Street, although it was nearly two years since the split-up with Earth.

Half a block to the north a grey-clad figure appeared, carrying a swinging torch to light his way through the gathering gloom. Macintyre recognised the figure as one of Lumley's Truthmen, out on a prowl in search of enemies of the state. Macintyre stared bitterly at the chunky advancing

figure; then, realising his danger, he hurried down the street he still called Jefferson Street.

He moved silently and swiftly. He was used to running. It had been a hard life, these two years since the Decree of Separation. Macintyre had surprised himself then by remaining loyal to the mother world. In the succeeding two years he had continued to surprise himself by surviving Lumley's persecution of the dwindling Loyalists.

He reached the alleyway between Numbers 322 and 324 Jefferson, glanced round once to make sure the coast was clear, and ducked through. He scaled a low fence, trotted over a much-trampled backyard garden, and slipped into a beckoning opening in the ground. Instantly the door closed behind him, and a familiar voice said, "We were worried about you. You're a half hour late."

"Couldn't help it," Macintyre said. He was hoarse; he poured himself a glass of water from the tap in the corner. Familiar faces surrounded him: nine frightened men. All the Loyalists left in Maynard City. *There are so few of us left, Macintyre thought. And is it worth it, all the running and hiding?*

It was a strange group, these remnants of the Loyalist Party. Norman Maynard, great-great-great-grandson of the man who had discovered this world—Norman Maynard, a ratty-looking little man with ulcers. Vitello, once a dramatist, who now looked like a ragpicker. Christie, once Professor of Terran History at Maynard University, enamoured of his own textbooks and unable to relinquish loyalty to the mother world. Bryson. Hallert. Fugitives.

"Well?" Maynard demanded. "What did you find out? Did you see the proclamation? Is it true?"

Macintyre nodded. "I saw the proclamation. It's posted in half a dozen places downtown. Everything we were told is true."

He crossed the room and sat down on the battered old couch. He stared at his too-thin, too-sensitive hands. "According to the proclamation, every citizen of the Free World of Maynard must carry with him at all times a card declaring he has sworn the Oath of Allegiance to the Republic. Without taking the oath you can't hold citizenship. And then at the bottom of the proclamation it says that for the duration of the emergency jury trial is suspended and all

non-citizens are under automatic sentence of death." Macintyre looked up. "That's all there is. Either get yourselves a card or be ready to run, and run fast."

The room was very quiet. Finally Vitello said, "What do we do now?"

"What do you think we do?" Hallert demanded. He was a thin watery-eyed man who had been Secretary of Outworld Relations in the last Loyalist cabinet. "Either we go down to the post office and swear allegiance to Lumley, or we stay here and wait for them to flush us out. It can't take long. Either way our course is pretty simple."

"We could call Ritterheim and accept his offer," said Christie in a mild voice.

Nine pairs of eyes focused suddenly on the ex-Professor of Terran History. Macintyre felt a muscle in his cheek begin to twitch. He had been thinking along the same lines himself, ever since he had seen the proclamations posted in Government Square. Ritterheim was their only hope. Ritterheim was their sole chance.

But there were uncomfortable truths to be faced if they were to accept Ritterheim's offer. And it was not easy for a man to face those truths.

Macintyre's mind drifted back to the day—was it only three days ago?—when the radio set in the corner of their hideout had come bleeping to life. Bryson, the electronics technician who had built the set during the days when there still was some talk of a Loyalist counter-revolution and hence some need of communication between the bands of fugitives, sprang to the controls.

The call had come via subradio from the neighbouring world of Haxley—a world staunchly Loyalist, one which had flatly refused to take part in the Separatist uprising. Charles Ritterheim, Haxley Minister of Foreign Affairs, was calling. He had learned that the Separatist government on Maynard was soon to publish a declaration prescribing the death penalty for any remaining Loyalists. Would they, Ritterheim wanted to know, care to flee to Haxley and take sanctuary there?

"How would we get there?" Bryson asked.

"There's a ship of ours ready to leave Maynard now," Ritterheim said. "A mercantile ship. We're putting down at Dillard Spaceport on the 19th of the month. If there hap-

pened to be a dozen or so Loyalists in the area at that time, we might look the other way."

"But Dillard's two thousand miles from here," Bryson objected. "Couldn't you arrange a landing somewhere closer to us? The dangers of a continental crossing—"

"I'm sorry. But we're booked in at Dillard. I'm afraid that a landing anywhere else would be construed as an act of war by the Maynard government, and we're not anxious to go to war with your friend Lumley just yet. Well? Will your group be at Dillard on the 19th?"

"I—don't know. There are so many aspects we have to consider—"

"Very well," Ritterheim said, a trifle coldly. "Consider them. Our offer still goes, if you're interested. Call me back within a week or else forget about it."

Bryson had discussed the conversation with them. For two days and two nights the group had considered it; on a purely theoretical level, of course, since no official word had come down about a death penalty for Loyalist beliefs. Finally Macintyre had volunteered to leave the shelter and try to discover if any such proclamation had been made.

It had.

The choices were clear-cut now.

They could abandon the last shred of loyalty to Earth, admit that Lumley's government was *de jure* as well as *de facto* in control of Maynard, and swear allegiance. Of the thirty million people of Maynard, all but a few hundred had done so. Lumley promised immediate amnesty for any recusants who swore allegiance.

Or they could take the opposite stand, and remain in hiding, surreptitiously writing and spreading pamphlets opposing the Separatist movement, urging a return to affiliation with Earth. But that was the way of martyrdom.

Ritterheim offered a third alternative—flight. They could take sanctuary on Haxley and wait there for the inevitable moment when the forces of Earth would exact vengeance on Lumley for his treason against the mother world.

Round and round and round the discussion went, as it had almost constantly since the moment Ritterheim's call had come through. Macintyre watched silently, feeling curiously detached from himself. He flexed his fingers. He wished he could sculpt this group, mould its confusions in

living plastic, express in tangible form the cross-currents of bewilderment and cowardice that his nine comrades were creating. But it was more than a year since he had last worked at his art; these troubled times had no use for poets or painters or sculptors.

Naturally, none of the group advanced the suggestion that they give up and swear the Oath. They were too deeply committed for that; this was the hard core of the Loyalist movement, and for them there was no turning back.

But yet it was hard for them to accept Ritterheim's offer. Macintyre listened as the stale, insincere arguments were advanced one by one: that it was cowardly to flee, that our work demanded that we stay here and continue the fight on the home world, that it would be betraying our ideals—

Finally Macintyre grew tired. Putting some edge in his voice for the first time in weeks, he said, "Gentlemen, may I speak?"

Startled by the authority in his voice, they grew quiet. Macintyre looked around at them.

"We've been discussing this matter for three days, friends. At least *you* have. I've just been listening. But now I want to talk.

"The prevailing sentiment among you seems to be that we should turn down Ritterheim's offer, stay here, and go gloriously to our deaths whenever Lumley's Truthmen happen to stumble over our little hideout. You, Hallert, and Maynard over there—you've been holding out for martyrdom, haven't you? You think it's noble. Do you mind if I tell you what's really on your minds?"

"Hold on, there, Macintyre," Maynard broke in roughly. "If you think—"

"I don't think anything. Shut up and listen." Macintyre locked his hands together. "You're picking martyrdom because it's the easy way out. We can't go back; we're too far out on the limb to turn around and swear allegiance to Lumley. It sounds paradoxical, but doing that requires *real* courage, the kind none of us has. The courage to admit we might have been wrong all along."

"Are you suggesting, Tom, that Lumley's right and we're wrong?" Christie asked.

"Of course not. I'm just as firmly pro-Earth as any of you. What I'm saying is that none of us, myself included, would ever have the guts to *admit* Lumley was right, if we ever began thinking so. Okay. So the only paths open for us

are staying on Maynard, which means inevitable execution, or fleeing to Haxley, which means we may live to fight some other day. And you all seem to be holding out for staying here and going gloriously to the gas chamber. How damned brave!"

Macintyre stared bitterly at the nine puzzled faces and felt a current of excitement welling up inside him. He had never spoken this way before, never felt the urge to get up on his back legs and tell people what lay behind their pretences.

Only now his life was at stake, his and all theirs—and he didn't intend to give it up easily.

"You know why you're all so keen on letting Lumley execute you?" he asked. "Not because you feel your mission is here on Maynard. No. The gas chamber is an easy way out, a *noble* way out. It's an end to struggle, and it's a praiseworthy end in the eyes of others. It's a way of giving up."

"So you want to turn down Ritterheim. That's interesting. Tell me this: suppose Ritterheim offered to put a ship down in our back yard and take us all away to Haxley? Would you turn him down then? Like hell you would! You'd scramble aboard that ship so fast—"

Hallert was white-faced. He seemed ready to explode. Macintyre stood up and pointed. "I'm almost done. I just want to say one more thing. The reason you all want to turn Ritterheim down—me, too, I feel that way—is that you all want to stay here in this cozy cellar until you're caught. You know that Dillard Spaceport is two thousand miles from here, and you're scared stiff of making the trek. It takes courage to run halfway across a continent, even if you're only running away."

He sat down and looked at his hands again. They were trembling. His face was flushed. No one was saying anything. After a while he looked up at them. One minute went by, and another, and still no one spoke.

"I take it from your silence that you agree with me. I expected it. Hell, I'm enough like you to know what's in your minds—only I threw it out in the open to show you."

"You know we'd never survive a trip across the continent," Vitello said reproachfully. "We're soft, Tom. We can't kill men. We can't lie very well. We can't fight back. We wouldn't get more than ten miles before they found us

out. Isn't it better to stay here and try to spread our pamphlets than to go to certain death on the trek to Dillard?"

"We could make it," Macintyre said. "Even a bunch of soft-headed arty types like ourselves. All we need is a guide. A shepherd, you might say. Someone to keep the wolves away—a strong man."

"Are you suggesting yourself?" Bryson asked.

Macintyre blinked. "Are you kidding? I'm no tougher than any of you, despite my size and the way I just spoke. No. I've got a man in mind, though. His name is Wallace. He'll take us to Dillard for a fee, and he'll see to it we get there alive."

Vitello's sensitive features wrinkled in distaste. "A mercenary, you mean?"

Macintyre nodded. "Call him that, if you like. He isn't a pleasant sort. But he'll get us there. Anybody interested in the deal?"

Chapter Two

For the second time that day, Macintyre left the shelter of the hideout—this time bearing the task of locating Wallace and offering him the job.

They had been unwilling, at first, just as Macintyre himself had been unwilling to bring the matter up. Wallace was known by name and by reputation to most of them. He was a freebooter, a footloose member of the mercenary class that had sprung up on Maynard during its three centuries of existence as a Terran colony. He had the reputation of being willing to do anything—for a price.

But as Macintyre had won his inward battle, so did he convince his friends that hiring Wallace was essential to their survival. They were surely doomed if they remained in Maynard City; just as surely, they would never reach Dillard Spaceport alive on their own exertions. With Wallace, they stood a chance.

Macintyre headed northward to the bar where Wallace spent much of his free time. All three of Maynard's moons had risen, now, and the streets were uncomfortably bright. Macintyre's throat felt dry. There was a bounty of one hundred credits on his head—no fortune, but enough to make it worthwhile for someone recognising him to turn him in to the Truthmen.

He paused outside the bar, peering in. He made out Wallace's face; the mercenary was sitting alone, near the back. Macintyre shattered the photonic beam and stepped through the opening door.

It seemed to him that the hum of conversation in the bar dropped off perceptibly as he came in. For a moment he heard no sound but the raucous wailing of the musicbox; then the interrupted conversations were resumed. Macintyre made his way toward the back, toward Wallace.

"Mind if I sit down here?" he asked.

The mercenary looked up. He was a broad-faced man, heavy-bearded, with deepset dark eyes and a thick sprawling nose. A pale scar lanced diagonally across his left cheek, beginning at the tip of the jawbone and terminating a fraction of an inch from his eyeball.

"You better have a good reason for it," Wallace growled.

"I do." Macintyre slipped into the seat. "You know who I am?"

"I know your politics, friend. Not your name. What are you drinking?"

"Ale," Macintyre said. Wallace ordered a mug. Macintyre stared closely at the other's seamed face. "My name is Tom Macintyre," he said slowly. "That bit of information is worth a hundred credits to you, cash on the line, if you feel like yelling for a Truthman."

"I've been thinking that very thing, Mr. Macintyre. I don't know what you want with me, but it better be worth more than the price on your head."

"It is." Macintyre took a deep sip. The ale was cold, dark, and potent. "I've got a job for you. It involves acting as a sort of guide for ten Loyalists, including myself. We have to be at Dillard Spaceport by the 19th of the month."

Wallace nodded. "Dillard's a couple of thousand miles from here. And today's the 8th."

"There's plenty of time, if we leave immediately," Macintyre said. "Interested?"

"Maybe."

"How much would it be worth to you?"

Smiling, the mercenary said, "I could sell the lot of you to the Truthmen for a thousand credits. You better outbid that by plenty."

Macintyre moistened his lips. "Two thousand five hundred is what we offer. How does that sound?"

"In cash?"

"In cash. One thousand down immediately, fifteen hundred more when and if we reach Dillard safely and on time. I'm talking in hard money, Galactic crown pieces, not Lumley scrip."

Wallace looked thoughtful. He intertwined thick stubby fingers, coughed, scowled. "I don't know how much I like doing business with Loyalists. How come you need a guide, anyway? Can't you find your way to Dillard by yourselves?"

Macintyre went red; he felt his cheeks steaming. With an effort, he forced the words out. "We don't think we can make it ourselves. It's a dangerous trip. We're peaceful men. We—" He stopped. He heard voices just behind his back.

"That's Macintyre," someone said, in a dull menacing tone. "Go get a Truthman. We'll split."

Macintyre half-rose; Wallace's hand shot out, caught his wrist, dragged him back down into his seat. From somewhere a gleaming little needlegun appeared in the mercenary's hand. Quietly Wallace said, "You stay right here and let the Truthmen alone, chum. You're making a big mistake. This man's name isn't Macintyre. It's Smith. Theodore H. Smith. And he's a very good friend of mine."

Instantly tension subsided in the bar; the would-be informer tossed a surly look at Wallace and vanished into the crowd. Wallace smiled coldly at Macintyre.

"Don't let these ruffians upset you, Mr.—ah—*Smith*. I can understand how someone of your delicate sensibilities can get ruffled by talk like that." Wallace grinned savagely. "Back to business, now. One thousand now, one and a half later. I think I'll accept, Mr. Smith. It ought to be a very amusing trip."

They left in the cold grey hours just before dawn, after Bryson had put through a call to Haxley to let Ritterheim know they were accepting the offer of sanctuary. It was at that vague time when the moons had set and the sun was still below the horizon, when a ghostly pale light illuminated the rain-washed streets.

Macintyre felt a dull sense of regret as the little party of eleven set out. Up ahead of them, swaggering a little, Wallace led the way; in his pocket were ten crown pieces, each one of them worth ten eagles — one thousand credits of their

money. Fifteen hundred more awaited him at completion of the journey.

To be reduced to this, Macintyre thought—to hiring a man like Wallace, a paid killer, a man with the morals of a snake and the muscles of an ape—that hurt more than anything. There he was, and on him their lives depended.

It was all part of the pattern, the pattern that had begun when Claude Lumley first appeared on the Maynard political scene. Before Lumley, all had been well. Maynard was one of the eighty-six Earth-type worlds strung through the galaxy. It corresponded to Earth-norm within two decimal places. It had a population of thirty million Terran-descended settlers. And until Lumley, it had been unquestioningly loyal to the mother world.

The ties had been mild ones. Earth required that a Resident Adviser live on a colony world and aid in planetary administration; that a token sum be paid in taxes to the mother world each year; that the colony grant certain trifling trade privileges to Earth. At one time the relationship had been of great significance to Earth, but the centuries had passed, and the colonies had evolved into self sufficiency, while Earth herself no longer had need of the sort of socio-cultural stimulus colonizing afforded. The relationship became one of purely symbolic value, a gesture of gratitude toward the world that had first sent its peoples forth to the worlds of the galaxy.

As a symbol, it was a loved thing. No one grudged the pittance paid in taxes, and no one objected to the presence of a Resident Adviser so long as he performed a purely ceremonial function. The peoples of the colony worlds maintained a warm and pleasant mock-subservience toward the mother world. One took for granted the fact that a certain amount of respect was due the parent planet.

Until Lumley. The ambitious young politician had been swept into the Chancellorship of Maynard by a landslide vote—and had promptly announced that he intended to discontinue paying the tithe to Earth.

Resident Adviser Humphries had objected on the grounds of tradition, and Lumley had seized his chance. Ordering Humphries back to Earth on charges of wanton interference with local sovereignty of Maynard, Lumley declared the planet a Free World, owing no further allegiance to Earth.

setting forth in his Decree of Separation the doctrine that the tie with Earth was a potentially unhealthy one that should be severed before it became diseased.

There was an immediate uproar of protest from the people of Maynard—but a surprising volume of agreeing voices was audible. Slowly the force of opinion swung toward Lumley. Earth herself made no comment on Lumley's rash decree, and many on Maynard took Earth's silence for assent. The Separists were a minority one day, a roaring majority the next.

There were those who objected, Macintyre among them. The artists, the poets, the sculptors, the teachers—gentle people, most of them, who valued the old traditions and were not anxious to see them die. They proclaimed continuing loyalty to Earth, and urged Lumley to retract his decree.

It was only natural that Lumley should regard these protests as direct attacks on his regime. He initiated a campaign to bring about 100% acceptance of the Decree of Separation, and when more than three-fifths of the population had sworn allegiance to the new government he pushed through the first of the anti-Loyalist laws.

It became punishable by five hundred credits fine and thirty days' imprisonment to publicly advocate restoration of the relationship with Earth. Most of the wavering Loyalists yielded and took the Oath; others went defiantly to prison, emerging with their opinions unchanged.

Gradually the anti-Loyalist laws became more stringent, and the Loyalist number dropped away. Two years after his accession, Lumley dared to make Loyalism punishable by death—but by that time only a few hundred remained on all of Maynard, and those few remained well hidden.

And it had come to this, now, Macintyre thought. The last few of us in the capital city of Maynard, fleeing desperately to another world, being shepherded to safety by a ruthless killer who laughs at our ideals but who willingly takes our money.

He wiped rain from his face and brows and glanced up ahead. Wallace set a steady pace, down the Old River Road that led out of Maynard City via the South Bridge. He was a big man, this Wallace, broad-shouldered and heavy-muscled, but Macintyre knew he himself was just as big, perhaps even an inch taller, five pounds heavier. Bigger on the outside, that was.

Wallace carried less of a load, though. He was not weighted down with things like scruples or ethics or second thoughts. And that was why, thought Macintyre with a trace of bitterness, Wallace was leading the party and he was slinking along in the rear.

It was two thousand miles south-east to Dillard, second largest city of the planet. Maynard City was located in the heart of the broad western plain of Continent One; Dillard lay in fertile farmland beyond the great mountain-range that divided the continent.

There were regular commercial flights to Dillard each day—but for ten of them, such a flight would be the prelude to immediate arrest. Lumley screened the airports closely.

Instead they would have to make the trek overland. Wallace had planned their trip for them during the night, working out a detailed schedule that would bring them to Dillard in time to meet the Haxley spaceship on the 19th. They would take one means of transportation and another, assume false identities, and with Wallace's help they would lie and bribe their way across the continent.

They would never have managed the trip alone. Macintyre glared resentfully at Wallace's broad back, and stepped up his pace.

Chapter Three

The plan called for them to proceed on foot over the South Bridge and out of the city; at this hour, it was not likely that the bridge would be guarded. They moved along silently through the steady rain, over the bridge, into the brown farmlands that lay just to the south-east of the capital.

"All right," Wallace said gruffly. "Now the legwork begins." He pointed to the swiftly-flowing, turbulent waters of the Stinnis River. "We'll advance on foot five miles along the river, and pick up the riverboat at the town at the bend. From there it's up the river to Collins' Ford, and then overland due south sixteen miles. Just remember that you're soldier-mercenaries on your way east to seek a living in Dillard Province, and leave the rest to me."

The idea of posing as a soldier amused Macintyre in a dark way. Ten years before he had been one of the officers of a pacifist movement in the mountain town of Holister;

they had drawn up petitions, published muzzy pamphlets, and made much noise about disbanding the standing army maintained by the Maynard administration. After a while they had all lost interest in the campaign. Macintyre, seeking a career in the plastic arts, drifted off to Maynard City to study sculpture in the atelier of a famous Terran artist newly emigrated. And a decade later the ex-pacifist was pretending to be a soldier, to save his own skin.

At the village of Lester Falls, they boarded a small early-morning river-packet bound eastward on the Stinnis. They boarded the vessel without incident.

As he stood staring out over the rail, Hallert edged up to him. The watery-eyed little man looked frightened half to death; he had said nothing on the march out of Maynard City.

"How's your stomach?" Macintyre asked.

"I can manage. Do you think there'll be any trouble?"

"What kind of trouble?"

"Truthmen trouble," Hallert whispered. "I saw Wallace talking to someone in an Army uniform."

"So what? Probably an old buddy of his."

"I don't like it," Hallert whispered. "Suppose he's selling us out? He's already got a thousand of our money; if he turns us in he gets another thousand—"

Annoyed, Macintyre snapped, "I don't give two hoots what you think, Hallert! If you think Wallace is going to turn us in, jump overboard and finish the rest of the trip by yourself."

"You know I can't do that."

"Then keep shut," Macintyre said gloomily. "We're paying Wallace to do a job. We might as well assume he's halfway trustworthy."

They stayed that night in a cheap dreary hotel in the mining town of Collins' Ford, the ten of them crammed into two smoky rooms at a credit apiece. It was a mercenaries' hostelry; for half the night Macintyre lay awake, listening to the raucous, uninhibited laughter from below.

Wallace woke him with a shove in the ribs, just before dawn. The mercenary was bleary-eyed and dirty. He smelled of beer.

"We're pulling out now," Wallace said. "There's an 0700 train going south."

"Do we have time to wash."

Wallace glared at him half in amusement and half in scorn. "You're a soldier, Macintyre. Washing's for civilians. And the more filth and stubble you have on that pretty face of yours, the less chance there is somebody's going to recognize you. Come on, now."

The monorail station was just outside town, perhaps half an hour's walk from the hotel. Feeling drab and dirty, Macintyre let himself be hustled from the hotel and out on to the road with his companions. He touched his cheeks; a wiry stubble was growing there. This was the first day of his adult life on which he had gone without shaving and it annoyed him.

The sun was nearly up by the time they arrived at the depot. There was a long line waiting for tickets at the tube-mouth. Evidently trains did not run frequently out here in the flatlands. Macintyre noticed half a dozen grey uniforms in the long line, and went pale.

He nudged Wallace. "Truthmen."

"I see them. So what?"

"Aren't you afraid that—I mean—they might—" He stopped, abashed.

"They won't do anything unless you give the show away," Wallace grunted. "Keep to yourselves, don't look for trouble, and remember who you're supposed to be in case anybody asks you."

They joined the line. Fare was twenty units apiece; Macintyre drew one of his remaining credits from his pocket and idly fondled the small yellow coin. He had been fairly well-to-do before Lumley; now, after contributing two hundred and fifty credits towards Wallace's hire, he was down to sixty and a few units in change.

Suddenly he saw a familiar face in the line ahead of him—Roy Charters, a short bouncy man, a confirmed Loyalist and in the old days a generous patron of the arts. Now Charters was shabby, his hair uncombed. It was more than a year since Macintyre had seen him. He lifted his arm, waved, started to call out Charters' name.

Instantly Wallace seized his wrist and dug his nails in hard. "What do you think you're doing?" he whispered furiously. "You want to get us all killed?"

"I saw someone I knew," Macintyre said shamefacedly. He glanced at his companions. "It was Roy Charters," he explained to Vitello. "He's standing near the front of the line."

"Who's this Charters?" Wallace asked suspiciously.

Briefly Macintyre told him. Wallace frowned. "Loyalist, eh? Point him out to me."

Macintyre pointed him out.

Wallace squinted and nodded. "Okay. See that you keep away from him. It's too early in the trip to get into trouble."

Macintyre shrugged angrily and turned away. The line crawled forward; at last it was his turn. He gave his destination, scooped up his ticket and his eighty units change, and shuffled inside the station, toward the great single rail along which the train was due to come rocketing in the next ten minutes. He noticed an ominous little group of Truthmen standing near the edge of the track. Lumley's special police corps, grimly fanatical men.

The Truthmen boarded the same car as they did. Wallace seemed undisturbed; there were eighty or ninety people in the car, and there was no reason to suspect they were being followed.

Wallace curled up comfortably in the corner of their section of the car, took out a pocketknife, and began whittling and singing. Macintyre stared moodily out of the window. Bryson and Vitello broke into a salty argument over the girls of Collins' Ford. Hallert and Maynard played cards. It looked convincing enough: a group of unshaven, overhung mercenaries en route to a new job. Macintyre eyed the reflection of the Truthmen in his window. They showed no overt interest in the doings of the noisy group opposite them.

The warning light blinked, the departure hum sounded, and the train shot away from the Collins' Ford station. Their destination was Abramville, sixteen miles southward on the north bank of the Hastings River. The trip would take just eight minutes.

Despite the presence of the Truthmen, it looked to be a placid hop. But abruptly the door between compartments slid open and a small round figure advanced uncertainly from the next car. Macintyre stiffened. It was Charters.

He paused at the front of the car, looking around as if in search of someone. Then his eyes came to rest on Macintyre; he smiled, his face lit up, he pointed. He began to say something.

Began. But before he got a word out, Wallace was on his feet, letting shavings and whittling alike go tumbling to the floor. The big man crossed the car to where Charters stood, threw his arms around the other, and with a jovial pseudo-drunken outburst drowned out anything Charters might have been about to say.

Macintyre saw Charters draw back in surprise. He heard Wallace's booming voice: "Well, if it isn't old Joe Taylor! Haven't seen you since those days in Palmerston, Joe! Come on over and meet the boys!"

Charters went very pale. He drew away from Wallace, only to be playfully tugged across the car. Macintyre noticed that the Truthmen were watching the scene with considerable interest.

Macintyre heard Charters' thin protest: "I'm afraid I don't understand. My name isn't—"

It was drowned out by a drunken burst of song. Holding Charters firmly with one arm wrapped around his shoulders, Wallace reeled across the car, staggering past the suddenly silent group of Loyalists. Macintyre heard Charters murmur as they went past, "If you don't let go of me I'm going to notify the—"

And then they were gone, disappearing into the washroom at the far end of the car. A minute passed, two; the sound of drunken singing was audible from behind the closed door. The Truthmen lost interest; self-consciously, the Loyalists returned to their conversation and their card games.

Several minutes went by; the car roared into the Abramville station. Still neither Wallace nor Charters emerged from the washroom. Macintyre drummed impatiently on the windowledge, wondering what was going on in there.

The main door of the car swung open; the Abramville passengers filed out. Macintyre noticed that the Truthmen were remaining on the train. Shrugging, he said, in the rough voice he was trying to cultivate, "Those guys must've passed out in there. You make sure the train don't leave. I'll take a peek inside."

But there was no need for that. Wallace appeared suddenly and gestured for them to get off the train. They made it just in time; Hallert was the last one off, and hardly had he come through the hatch when the monorail car went swooshing off southward.

Macintyre turned to Wallace. "What was *that* all about? And where's Charters?"

"Tell you about it sometime," Wallace murmured. "Let's go hire a riverboat."

They found a pier and after some haggling Wallace made a deal with a sleazy old bargeman to take them fourteen miles upstream to the township of Miller Bridge. When the deal was closed, Wallace led them up the embankment to a cheap eatery where they breakfasted. On the way down toward the river again, Macintyre said a second time, "Would you mind explaining what took place aboard the train?"

"It won't interest you."

"It does. I want to know why you dragged Charters off to the washroom. I hadn't seen that man in a year, and now I may never see him again. I—"

"Stop asking me questions! And don't worry yourself over Charters."

Something in the mercenary's tone enraged Macintyre. It was Charters who had contributed most of the money Macintyre had needed to complete his statuary grouping, *Sons of Earth*, that had had the place of honour in Maynard Park until Lumley's hammermen smashed it to sand.

"But what did—"

Wallace's jaw-muscles flickered a moment. "Look, Macintyre, if I'd let that fellow talk to you those Truthmen would be dragging us away to the Abramville hoosegow right now. You know what a Judas ram is?"

"What does that have to do with it?"

"Plenty. Those Truthboys knew Charters; I could tell by the way they tried to look bored when he came in. If I had let him wave hello to you, we'd all be finished. So I made sure he wouldn't give the show away. It was him or us, and I said I'd get you to Dillard. I'd handle you the same way if necessary."

Macintyre felt cold. Obstinate he persisted: "What did you do to him?"

"I got him in the washroom and asked him where he was getting off. He said Donovan. I happened to have overheard those Truthmen when they bought their tickets, and they were going to Donovan too. So they would have interrogated your pal Charters the second they got him alone, and ten minutes after that there'd be a three-province alarm out for

us." Wallace took a deep breath. "I'm violating my Oath by helping you—so I'm subject to the same penalties you are. I don't want to get caught, and I knew if I left Charters alone I'd get caught. So I opened the washroom window and pitched him out. He's lying someplace near the track, nine miles back."

They reached the waterfront. "Come on," Wallace said, before Macintyre could manage to speak. "There's our boat. Let's get moving."

As they passed upriver, past the shipping towns and into the gathering uplands that led to the mountains, Wallace's calm, self-assured words echoed over and over: *I opened the washroom window and pitched him out.*

Just like that. It made sense, Macintyre thought numbly, on an abstract, utterly and remorselessly logical plane. The death of one man had temporarily insured the continued survival of eleven others. The survival of that one man would have meant death for all twelve. So poor Charters had to die.

Maybe it made sense logically. But for half a day Macintyre trembled at the thought that Wallace had been able so coldly to weigh one life against eleven, and then to kill. It was a pure calculus of survival. Macintyre realized for the first time how utterly alien Wallace was, how far from the set of specifications Macintyre had always thought applied to the class "*human being*."

Macintyre did not tell the others what Wallace had done. He felt responsible for having brought the mercenary to the group; and in an obscure way it was almost as if he had killed Charters himself. He penned the guilt within himself.

The 10th passed, and the 11th; they travelled by rented car overland toward the town of Hollister, the last town of any importance before they hit the mountain path. They reached Hollister on the 12th, half a day ahead of schedule. At this rate they would certainly reach Dillard—and safety—by the deadline of the 19th.

The day was warm and bright; Maynard's temperate zone was in its early summer season now. The seasons slipped by slowly on Maynard. It was a pleasant world. He would regret leaving Maynard behind for the less moderate world of Haxley.

His feelings toward Wallace subsided slowly. He, of all the group, was the only one who seemed ever willing to

speak to the mercenary. The others regarded him as an unavoidable evil, a kind of talking pack-animal. Macintyre wondered how they would feel toward Wallace if they were to learn of the incident aboard the monorail.

The morning they left Hollister and rode mountainward, Macintyre found himself at Wallace's side in the truck they had rented.

He said, "You think we're going to make it?"

"Probably. It's easier than I thought it would be. Like taking money for doing nothing. Twenty-five hundred for a trip to Dillard! Brother, that's work I like!"

"You won't get much more," Macintyre said. "There aren't many of us left."

"That's true enough. I'm surprised that ten of you lasted as long as you did. You Loyalists are stupid bastards. Ten grown men afraid of their shadows. Like that meeting in the monorail. As soon as Charters sang out, 'Well, if it isn't Tom Macintyre,' that would have been the end. But—

"I wish you hadn't brought that up," Macintyre said, as the truck went jouncing up into the heavily-wooded foothills. The sun was coming down stronger.

"Why? Still can't understand it, can you?"

"I can—*almost* see it," Macintyre admitted. "Dammit, Wallace, how could you coldbloodedly—"

Wallace laughed. "Cold blood? Hell, Macintyre, I just like to stay alive?"

"And you'd do anything to stay alive?"

"Wouldn't you?"

Stumped, Macintyre looked away. After a moment he said, "Let me set up a hypothetical situation. We cross the mountains and we come into a town where the people are on the lookout for Loyalists. Somehow they find out that—say, Hallert—has Loyalist leanings. They suspect the rest of us, but they're not sure. Okay. Tell me, Wallace: how would you get us out of that town safely?"

The mercenary frowned. "As long as we're playing games, Macintyre, let me suggest a better one. You put yourself in my shoes and tell me what I'd be likely to do."

"Don't you see, that's just what I *can't* do? Suppose I had to take charge of the party—what would I do? I don't know. I'd guess we'd all be finished."

"Not *all*," Wallace said. "Just Hallert."

"How would you save the rest of us?"

"I'd go to the mayor of that town. I'd tell him honestly enough that we'd picked up a Loyalist in our wanderings. I'd ask him if he'd be good enough to take him off our hands."

"You'd sacrifice Hallert?"

Wallace smiled grimly. "When your leg's caught in a trap, Macintyre, and you hear the hounds coming after you, the only thing you can do is cut your leg off and crawl away. There isn't any time to think about whether you're being fair to your leg."

Macintyre stared quietly at the road a long moment, wondering what had shaped this man, what had stripped all humanity away from him. They had been born on the same planet, they both came from pure Terran-descended stock—but yet, thought Macintyre, comparing the mercenary's short, strong hands with his own tapering fingers, there was as much difference between the two of them as if they hailed from opposite ends of the galaxy.

Chapter Four

Crossing the mountains took three full days and Macintyre was so concerned with the sheer physical problem of getting across that he let his mind move away from Wallace. It was tough, hard work crossing those mountains. There was no time for theoreticizing.

The weather dipped coldly as they ascended; the mountains were jagged ruffles in the planet's skin, seven thousand feet high at their heights. Macintyre was a warm-weather man and he felt the cold. Wallace did not seem to mind. They rode in open trucks, part of a supplies convoy crossing to the eastern provinces. Wallace had bought them into the convoy cheap, on a food-work exchange.

Each night they helped to make camp, fumbling with the tents and struggling with the chores. Wallace obviously was keeping tight rein on his patience as the well-meaning ex-sculptors and ex-professors tried manfully to look like tough mercenaries. One of the truckdrivers wandered over once on the first night and stood by, grinning, while Hallert and Macintyre puzzled out the technique of putting up a folding tentpole. The truckman snorted goodhumouredly.

"No wonder you're heading east for work!"

Macintyre looked up. "What's that? "

"I said it's small wonder you're out of work. If you two are any samples, you're the damndest bunch of amateur mercenaries this side of Blue Ocean."

Sudden rage thundered through Macintyre. Before he had time to consider he had brought his fist up and connected solidly with the man's chin. The impact bent one of his knuckles and sent pain shooting up his arm. The trucker took an uncertain step backward, wobbled, tried to muster his strength for a counterattack. Trembling from strain, Macintyre readied himself for a second punch.

Wallace leapt between them. The mercenary grabbed the burly trucker firmly and propelled him toward the truck; turning to Macintyre he said, "What was that all about? "

"He didn't like the way we were putting up the tent. He made some remarks." Macintyre looked at his hand. The knuckle of his middle finger was swelling, and the whole hand felt numb. "That's the first time I ever hit a man," he said. "And I didn't stop to think. I just swung."

He rubbed his aching hand. "I *had* to do it, though. No hire-soldier would take that sort of stuff from a trucker."

Wallace smiled slowly—and it seemed to the startled Macintyre that there was real friendliness in the mercenary's eyes for the first time. "You know," Wallace said, "I think you're beginning to understand."

The rest of the mountain trip was without incident, and Macintyre was greatly relieved when, on the afternoon of the 14th, they came down out of the Webster Hills that marked the extreme easternmost border of the continental divide, and said curt goodbyes to the trucking caravan. They had been on the road five days now. Filthy, ragged, unshaven, they looked not even remotely like the band of mild Loyalists that had set out from Maynard City early on the morning of the 9th.

Now they were in the flatlands of Webster Province, the mercantile centre of the continent; six hundred miles from Dillard Spaceport. Wallace's itinerary was drawn up to skirt the provincial capital, Webster. It was in Webster that Claude Lumley had been born, it was Webster that had started him on the road to power by electing him as their Assembly representative, and in Webster anti-Loyalist feeling

was at an almost hysterical peak. Only a madman would risk a passage through the city.

Instead they doubled back on their tracks, detouring north-north-west towards the small river town of Lorris, where they could pick up a boat travelling downriver toward the distant southern coast. It was forty miles to Lorris, and they reached it near nightfall. Wallace knew a good cheap hotel.

It was a rickety relic of the earliest settlement days, with flickering lumipanel castings an ugly grey light and dirty non-opaquing windows. Macintyre didn't care. He was tired and dirty, and any place would do.

The hotel had a bar, and they sat up drinking a while. Wallace was as boisterous as ever, but Macintyre, sitting by his side, noticed that the mercenary had had a total of just three beers during the evening. It was a point worth noting. Wallace always *seemed* to be drinking, and made a great show of being drunk; but in actuality he drank very little, and was always fully aware, fully on guard.

Shortly past midnight the group headed for their rooms. Macintyre was the last to leave the bar. As he started out into the dingy corridor, he felt a hand gently touch his shoulder and pull him back.

He turned. It was the barkeep-proprietor, a faded balding man of sixty or so. Whispering, the man said, "Come back and have one last drink with me, friend."

Macintyre frowned. The others were gone; throughout the trip he had followed a policy of staying close to the group. "I'm pretty tanked," he said. "Think I'll get some sleep, if y'don't mind."

"No." The barkeep tugged insistently. "Come back. Let me tell you some things you might want to know."

Macintyre went. As soon as he had recrossed the threshold the old man spun and shut the bar door firmly; then he looked up at Macintyre, bloodshot old eyes looking at gentle young ones, and said, "You're a Loyalist, aren't you? You and the bunch you came with."

Macintyre stiffened. "You're drunk, old man! I'm a free soldier. And—"

"Stop pretending," said the old one softly. "It doesn't come natural to you; you don't fool me. I won't turn you in. I want to warn you."

"Warn me of what? "

"That man Wallace. Get quit of him. He's deadly."

Macintyre drew the old man down next to him at one of the tables and said, "What do you know about Wallace?"

"He came through Lorris about two months ago with a party of five. Loyalists. They were paying him to get them to the coast—I guess they figured on taking a boat over to Ludlow Island and hide out. Only when they got to Dillard he collected his fee from them and sold 'em all to the Truthmen."

Macintyre felt the blood drain from his face. "Where'd you hear that?"

"Never you mind. But when I saw that same ugly fellow come through here again, and ten fellows with him, I knew he was pulling the same thing all over again. Watch for yourselves, friend. You're in rough hands."

"How am I supposed to believe this?"

The barkeep smiled indifferently. "I don't give a damn if you believe me. I'm trying to help you." His face darkened. "I know what you boys are going through. I'd be with you myself, except—well, I'm not young, and the hotel doesn't bring in much. When they came around asking me to sign the Oath I signed. But I keep a little globe of Earth upstairs." He rose. "It's getting late. You never know who's listening."

Macintyre nodded. "Thanks," he said shakily.

He had no chance to discuss this new information with the others until the morning of the 17th, when they were a hundred and fifty miles from Dillard. They stopped in a small town called Fleury. Wallace left them while he went into town to make arrangements for covering the remaining distance.

Macintyre told the group what the innkeeper had said, adding, "I guess it's my fault for having got us into this."

Hallert looked up owlishly. "How sure are you that the old man was telling the truth?"

"You can't be sure of anything. But I'm willing to believe that Wallace came this way once before and sold his clients to the Truthmen at the end of the trip. Let's assume that it's so. What do we do?"

"We could go up to him and ask him just what his intentions are when we reach Dillard," Bryson said.

The suggestion was so naive that Macintyre laughed. "And I guess we could get him to promise he won't hand us in. I suppose. Sorry, Mark. It won't go."

"Then what *do* we do?" Hallert asked desperately. "Just ride along and hand over our money and let him sell us to the Truthmen?"

"We go to Dillard by ourselves, now," suggested Vitello. "We haven't had any trouble so far, and we're practically there. If we hurry, before Wallace comes back from town—"

"Don't be a fool," Hallert snapped pettishly. "If he finds us gone he'll wire ahead to Dillard and notify the authorities. No, that won't work either. But suppose we—"

Macintyre listened impatiently. All they did was talk, he thought, and kick feeble suggestions around, none of them daring to approach the concrete. There was only one solution. He knew what it was.

Fifteen minutes more of discussion followed. It developed that the prevailing sentiment of the group was, Wait and See. Wallace's return ended the discussion. He had engaged three trucks to see them down the road toward Dillard, and they left.

Macintyre was seated near Wallace. He stared covertly at the mercenary as they pulled out of Fleury; the man seemed to take on more awesomely monstrous characteristics each day, as they saw more and more of him in action. Yet he had the knack of seeming good company, cheerful, quick-witted, bawdy of tongue, and Macintyre found himself forgetting that this was the man who had killed Charters and had sold five earlier Loyalists to the Truthmen. Who perhaps was going to do the same to them.

Macintyre stared at the yellow and purple splotches of shrubbery flanking the road. "You're almost safe," Wallace said. "Weren't you silly to hire me? You can see how easy it was."

"Easy for you, maybe. We'd never have made it."

Wallace nodded. "I guess you're right. You wouldn't have got through. You wouldn't have the guts."

Macintyre tensed, and forced himself to subside. Wallace grinned. "Easy, there. Don't go picking fights with me."

"Then don't make yourself any more offensive than you have to be," Macintyre snapped.

"There we go, there we go!" Wallace crowed. "Spoken like a man—for the first time in your spineless life! This trip has almost been the making of you, Macintyre."

Macintyre turned. "You enjoy taunting us, don't you? Because we're not coldblooded. You love to tell us that we think too much, that we stall instead of acting. I guess it never occurs to you that there are such things as moral codes, and ethical choices for a man to make. Eh?"

Wallace looked curiously serious. "What gives you that idea?"

"The way you act. The way you think. The way you pushed that harmless man off the train." *The way you sold those five to the Truthmen*, he added, silently. "Ruthlessness is a way of life with you isn't it?"

"It's a way of staying alive," Wallace admitted. "It's a hard world. It's a hard universe, brother. And the universe doesn't give a damn about you or me or Claude Lumley. You have to take care of yourself."

"Which means killing anyone who gets in your way," Macintyre said.

"It may look that way to you, but that's because you don't understand. Look, Macintyre: when I was very young I sat down and worked out my idea of the way the world worked. I figured out what I wanted out of life. I figured out what I had to do to get it. And I've been doing it ever since. I have my own code. I know my limits and I stick to them. And I guess to you I look like an ape, eh?"

Macintyre was silent. He stared at the bouncing road and tried to piece his thoughts together. "I—had a philosophy too," he said after a while. "I thought it worked. It didn't include killing people or betraying ideals. And—and—"

"And it ended up bringing you here, a miserable fugitive who has to hire a nursemaid to get you off the planet." With elaborate deliberateness Wallace spat; the stream landed an inch from Macintyre's boots. "Go ahead," Wallace urged. "Stand up and pitch me off the truck. You're big—just as big as I am. But you won't fight."

"No," Macintyre said, moving his feet. "I won't. I'm a human being."

Wallace merely laughed.

The next day was the 18th, and they approached the outskirts of Dillard now. Macintyre's mind dwelled only on the day to come. Tomorrow. They would pay Wallace the fifteen hundred credits they owed him, and they would leave for Haxley that night. Or would they? Would Wallace pocket his cash and phone the Truthmen?

Tomorrow was hazed round with doubts. But slowly, out of the haze, the answer presented itself, and Macintyre found himself unable to deny its validity.

The evidence showed that Wallace would betray them. Every sign of his character showed that, and the words of the innkeeper in Lorris. There was always the chance that he had no such intention, of course; but the cloud of doubt could not be dispelled. Macintyre knew he could take no chance.

No, Wallace was confident; *too* confident.

He looked at the whiteness of his hands. Yellowish, now, from callus. He wondered if he had the strength to kill.

They stopped that night at Brownston, twenty miles from the spaceport. They would be in plenty of time for their rendezvous with Ritterheim the next day, if—

The Loyalists buzzed with nervous tension. *Like so many little bees*, Macintyre thought.

He stood before a mirror, staring at the thin high-bridged nose, the soft eyes. Was this a killer's face? He took a deep breath.

Wallace had been necessary to the success of their journey. But the journey was over. Wallace had to be discarded, before he wrecked the entire crossing at the final moment.

Macintyre's hand gripped the knife. It felt cold and strange. He tiptoed from his room, down the hall, toward the room where Wallace and Bryson were booked.

He pushed open the door. They were asleep; the small man on a cot, Wallace on the bed. Macintyre felt almost calm. He crossed the room and stood over the slumbering Wallace.

So he's human after all, Macintyre thought. *He doesn't have an automatic danger-alarm built into his skull to wake him up.*

Macintyre unsheathed the knife and gently touched Wallace's shoulder. The mercenary grunted sleepily, opened one eye, and said, "What do you want, Macintyre?"

"I wanted to ask you about those five Loyalists you sold to the Truthmen last month."

"Huh? You having a nightmare, Macintyre?"

"Maybe I am. But tell me the truth or I'll cut you open, Wallace. I'm not kidding."

Wallace grunted. "Go back to sleep, will you?"

"Answer me!"

"What if I told you I did sell them? What if I told you I was going to do the same to you?" Wallace sat up suddenly in the bed. "If I told you that, Mac, *what could you do about it?*"

"This," Macintyre said, and brought the knife upward from his hip. Wallace saw it at the last moment; his reflexes asserted themselves, and he tried to block the blow, to seize Macintyre's arm. But the effort failed. The knife plunged; Wallace sank back. In an indistinct voice he muttered, "I guess I underestimated you, Mac."

And then the room was quiet.

Macintyre stood alone, holding the bloody knife. He heard the door open; he turned, saw them filing in, Hallert and Vitello and the rest. He forced himself to grin.

"He meant to turn us in," Macintyre said.

He saw them looking blankly at him, then to the knife, then to the body on the bed. Nobody was speaking.

"What's the matter?" he demanded. "He would have turned us in. We're safe now. We can go to Dillard in the morning."

But he saw that they did not understand. There was blank horror in their eyes, and he realized that he had never belonged with them at all. He was not their kind. He had pretended to be their kind, had fooled himself into thinking it, but he was not.

He looked toward the bed; his eyes, grown accustomed to the dark, sought the dead man's face. Wallace was smiling. Wallace had understood. The mercenary had had a code, and he had lived by it and died by it. Wallace had been a killer and a cheat and a traitor, but he had been a superb killer, a splendid cheat. They had hired him to do a job, and he had done it with magnificent competence.

You have to respect him for it, Macintyre thought leadenly. He let the knife drop.

Wallace had dealt out death; the wages of death is death. It was simple, neat, valid. But now something new was arising.

Macintyre looked at the nine awed statues. "There's a spaceship leaving for Haxley tomorrow," he said quietly. "It's blasting out of Dillard Spaceport. I want you all to make sure you're on it. You need to be. This isn't any world for you."

"And what are you going to do?" Maynard asked, in a hoarse, frightened voice.

"I'm going to stay here on your grandad's world," Macintyre said. "I made this trip for nothing. I'm not really a Loyalist, you know. I decided that last night. You people are, because you don't have the courage to step forward and change things. You don't like Lumley, so you hide in cellars and wait for him to come kill you."

"I guess I'm not like that. I just found that out, tonight. What I want to stay here and do is to keep an eye on Lumley, to work for the sort of planet I want."

Macintyre took a deep breath. He expected a reaction, the revolt of strained nerves, but he was calm. "The way to fight Lumley is to fight him out in the open. So I'll take the Oath of Allegiance first, and be a legal citizen again. And then I can try to do something."

He walked to the door. It was almost morning, and the sun was coming over the Eastern Ocean toward them, brightening the sky. "You know what I'm going to do now?" he asked. "I'm going to walk into town and wait for the post office to open. And then I'm going to take the Oath. And none of you will ever understand why, will you?"

He glanced at the man on the bed. "So long, Wallace. It's too bad we couldn't have known each other under different circumstances."

He opened the door and looked back at Maynard and Hallert, and the others—white, dumbfounded men. He smiled at them, but they did not smile back. He turned, closing the door carefully behind him, and started down the road, on the long walk toward the post office in Dillard.

—Robert Silverberg

The 'mad scientist' theme has been out of date for over 30 years (if, in fact, it ever belonged to science fiction in the first place) but Mr. Cogswell resurrects the idea to produce a delightful satire concerning world affairs.

MACHINE RECORD

by TEVIS COGSWELL

"Good heavens!" said the disreputable political affairs researcher, "you must be a madman!"

"Exactly," said the mad scientist, his eyes glittering with insane cunning.

"But . . . but what does this manifestly evil machine do?"

"Isn't it evident?" The scientist cackled gaily. "It's designed to conquer the world for me. What else?"

"Of course. What else."

"It is made of indestructible materials, has wheels, jointed legs, tractor treads, and seven death rays of different frequencies. It draws its energy from a little atomic engine, the size of your thumb nail, which produces about the same potential as Grand Coulee Dam."

"Remarkable," said the researcher, looking at his thumb nail.

The machine was, indeed, a sight to inspire dread. Pear-shaped, its gleaming body was topped with bristling, odd-

angled radar-like antenna. A few feet above its complex underpinnings was a double row of formidable looking muzzles, pointing in all directions. On one side was a small, push-button switch of insidious portent. Here, in this high vaulted dungeon of this ancient, blood-stained castle, high on a storm-beset mountain, in a small European principality, the effect was incredibly sinister.

The political affairs researcher, unscrupulous as he was, gasped with ill-concealed alarm.

"And what, sir," he said, "have I to do with all this?"

The scientist's eyes glittered. "You," he said, "are to help me organise my conquests into an empire."

"Good heavens," the other man said again. "And you have brought me here to this dank dungeon to ask my assistance in a fiendish plot to conquer the world?" His imagination had not as yet assimilated the grandeur of the scheme.

"It's *not* dank," the scientist said, waving his hand impatiently. "This dungeon is quite properly air-conditioned." And so it was. The mad savant had, in a moment of rare lucidity, equipped his castle cellar with a remarkably efficient air conditioning machine, together with do-it-yourself asphalt tiling and a portable bar that played "The Last Rose of Summer" when you pressed the hidden button that brought it swinging out from its artful concealment behind a bookcase.

"That's beside the point," said the other. "I'm not altogether certain that I approve of your plot. Anyway," he added primly, "I'm making forty a week where I'm working now."

The scientist snapped his fingers, with a carefree, yet macabre laugh. "I'll double it," he said. "What's more, I have a beautiful daughter."

The researcher peeped at the machine out of the corner of his eye. "When do we turn it on?"

"As soon as you work out a campaign for me," said the other. "I want to assume complete political control with a minimum of fuss and bother. A few days perhaps?"

The researcher stared at him blankly. "Where," he said, "have you been for the past ten years?"

"Here," said the scientist, rubbing his hands together, "perfecting my designs. Is something wrong?"

"Well . . . I rather thought you planned to just kill everybody."

"Everybody?" A new glint flickered momentarily in the madman's eye and he licked a speculative tongue over his lower lip. "I hadn't thought of that."

"It would be so much simpler." The other's tone was ingratiating.

The scientist thought for a moment, grinning evilly. Then he shook his head, which, I forgot to mention, sat somewhat crookedly upon his shoulders. "No," he said, "no, I'm afraid not. That way my empire would be a little shabby. Nobody to rule," he shook his head, "nobody to torture and all that. No, just work out a simple way for me to run things."

"Hmmm," said the researcher, who was, I also forgot to say, portly, bespectacled, and wearing a gravy spotted vest. "This will take some thought."

"Well take it," said the scientist, "but don't dawdle. I'm getting impatient." His eyes took on a dreamy look. "I want to have a harem, and a movie made about my life, *The Arnspiegle Story*—that's my name, Arnspiegle—starring Larry Parks and with Gordon Macrae's voice dubbed in. I also want an orchid-coloured Rolls-royce and a pear-shaped swimming-pool."

"That's reasonable," said the researcher, "but it's going to take a little doing." He frowned. "You'll have to give me a few days before we start blasting away."

"If it's absolutely necessary," said the mad scientist petulantly, his voice registering his annoyance. He walked over and patted the monstrous machine with affection. "I'm going to have Liberace play at all my weddings," he murmured.

Two weeks passed while the mad scientist tinkered with his machine, perfecting its lethal powers, and while the shabby political affairs researcher worked in a freshly Kemtoned upstairs chamber, surrounded by political research materials: editorial pages from *The Christian Science Monitor*, *Pravda*, and *The Boston Evening Transcript*. Every evening, glued to the short-wave receiver, with bated breath he listened to Edward R. Murrow.

Finally one day the mad scientist burst in on him, overflowing with impatience. "How's it going, Alfred?" he asked. The researcher's name was Alfred.

"Complete political control, did you say?" said Alfred evasively.

" Obviously. As Emperor of the World I have to have some simple central system for tax collection and young-virgin-tribute and all. Why ?"

" It's a tougher job than I thought," mumbled the other. " Or maybe I'm slipping. I used to be able to whip up a foolproof world government between the second and third Martini." His voice suddenly became pleading. " Look," he said, " let's just kill everybody."

" No," the scientist said, " definitely not. I've thought it all out and I've decided that it's all or nothing with me." He looked shyly at the great map of the world that covered the far wall. " I guess that's just the kind of a guy I am."

Two more weeks passed, and this time it was Alfred who came down to see the mad scientist. He found him busily installing a woofer in the far wall, trying, obviously, for a greater fidelity on the low notes of his Liberace records.

His eyes lit up with their old evil gleam when he saw Alfred. " Ready ?" he asked excitedly.

" Well . . ." Alfred said, ". . . not exactly. I think maybe, while I'm ironing out the last few wrinkles, that there's some reading you ought to do. You ought to pick up a little background from this Emperor business. You know, administrative problems and all that."

" Oh." The mad scientist's voice was filled with disappointment.

The political researcher took him upstairs, where he presented him with copies of selected works of Marx, Freud, Darwin, Mary Baker Eddy, Veblen, and David Reisman. Also a considerable pile of clippings from Westbrook Pegler, Joseph Alsop and Dr. Brady ; biographies of Joseph Stalin, Nikolai Lenin, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Bridey Murphy, Mao-tse-tsung, Mahatma Ghandi, Joseph McCarthy, Chiang-kai-chek. On top of the pile he placed a copy of *The Power of Positive Thinking*. There was also an assortment of books on metaphysics, cybernetics, phrenology, hydrostatics, the Rosicrucians, the destiny of Man, the meaning of History, the meaning of life, and the meaning of Poems.

" These will do for a starter," he said, throwing in a copy of *The Reader's Digest* for good measure.

" Hmmm," said the mad scientist.

Six weeks later a far wiser mad scientist purposively mounted the castle steps to Alfred's room. He found the portly gentleman beside the short wave set, listening to Gabriel Heatter, a look of abject horror on his face.

"Turn that thing off and come with me !" he commanded.

Alfred followed him down to the dungeon. It was dank ; the air-conditioner had blown a tube. Books, pamphlets, and newspaper clippings were scattered all over the asphalt-tile floor. Broken Liberace records lay everywhere. A rat scurried away, into the bowels of the hi-fi set, at their approach.

"Good heavens, man," said Alfred. "What happened."

The mad scientist looked at him and laughed a wicked, insane little laugh. "The scales," he said, "have dropped from my eyes."

"How's that ?"

"I have become politically enlightened."

"It's about time," said Alfred. His gambit had paid off.

The mad scientist seemed hardly to hear him. His eyes had become focussed, sternly, on some distant horizon. "I think what the situation calls for is a different approach."

"Like turning on the machine ?"

"Of course not !" The mad scientist's voice fairly oozed authority. "It's merely that there seems to be more to this thing—world-governmentwise, that is—than I had suspected." He waved a hand dramatically over the clutter of magazines, books, and badly mimeographed pamphlets that littered the floor. "I'm beginning to see that what you need, Alfred, is a fresh approach. A positive one. A totally new concept. You've been too much of a research man—not enough of a creative thinker."

Alfred began eyeing him suspiciously. "So ?" he said.

"I've decided that what we need is a middle man. Someone to handle the annoying administrative details," the mad scientist inserted his thumbs under his suspenders and began rocking back and forth on his heels, still gazing at the unseen horizon. He looked very important. "Why go to all the trouble of setting up a new political machine when there's one already in existence that is admirably suited to our purpose ?"

Alfred began to look uneasy. The mad scientist fished an old fashioned coin purse from his pocket and took out a crumpled wad of bills. "Here," he said, "go and buy yourself a Homberg. And a briefcase."

"Well?" said the mad scientist.

"Defeat," said the disreputable political affairs researcher, dusting his Homburg with the sleeve of his grey flannel suit.

"Did you present my ultimatum to the U.N.?"

"Well, I did finally get in to see the sub-secretary of the sub-secretary of a very important sub-secretariat."

"Wouldn't believe you, heh?" The mad scientist bristled angrily and took a step toward the monster. "I think I'll wipe out Leichtenstein. That'll show them we mean business!"

"Oh, he believed me all right," said Albert hastily. "I told him that if the U.N. didn't do what we wanted, we'd be forced to destroy the world."

"So?"

"The trouble is I got there a little late. It seems that in the last six months fourteen major powers have delivered the same ultimatum."

Two days later the mad scientist emerged from his crypt, red-eyed from lack of sleep but with his lips curled in a sneer of cold command. He had been thinking positively and it had paid off.

"The solution is obvious," he said curtly. "We'll just back one of the big countries. Shop around and see who'll make us the best offer."

When Alfred got back he found the mad scientist waiting impatiently by the drawbridge.

"What was Washington's offer?"

The disreputable political researcher didn't answer until they reached the dungeon. When they did he set down his attache case and then made a decisive thumbs down gesture.

"The Secret Weapons Division was so secret that nobody knew where it was. I did finally get in to see the President's Advisory Council on Weapons for Peace though. They were all very pleasant but they turned me down flat. They pointed out economic implications that we hadn't realized."

"Such as?" demanded the mad scientist.

"Well, as they explained it, if they let one little machine take over the whole job, they'd have to abandon the National Defense Effort, and if they gave up the National Defense Effort, they wouldn't be able to continue Deficit Financing, and without Deficit Financing to Keep the Wheels Turning, there would be Mass Unemployment and Rioting in the Streets." He took a long pause to get his breath back. "And Rioting

in the Streets might reflect on the Present Administration. Moscow said just about the same thing," he added, "and the NATO countries don't want to give up NATO because of discounts and things."

"Never Say Die," said the mad scientist, capitalizing without realizing it. "If the 'haves' don't want us, we'll just have to try the 'have nots.' There must be some little country left somewhere that still has mad dreams of empire—and can't raise the price of an H bomb." He wandered over to the large wall map and eyed it reflectively. Suddenly his face lit up and his forefinger stabbed down on a little purple blotch in the Arabian peninsula.

"Hagistan!" he announced triumphantly. "The last remnant of the Hashishite Empire. Go and kindle the flame of world conquest in the breast of Ibn-ad-Ibn."

"He didn't kindle," announced the disreputable political affairs researcher despairingly, his voice loud against the ominous sound of distant, rumbling thunder. "As a matter of fact, he threw me out." He dropped his leatherette attache case in one chair and then dropped himself wearily in another.

"Didn't kindle!" The mad scientist seemed frantic. "But why?" he said. "Why? Why? He must dream of glory and empire, remembering the blood of ancient desert kings in his veins."

"Not this one." Alfred began scraping absently at a gravy spot on his vest. Thunder rumbled again, closer now. "Hagistan is swarming with Hombergs from fourteen major powers, all packing books of blank cheques for Ibn-ad-Ibn to fill in. Each country's trying to get him on its side so they've got a contest going to see who can put in the most indoor plumbing, railroads, post offices, and airfields, who can give away the most Cadillacs to Crown Princes, and who can build the most dams and mix the driest Martinis. It's what you call Diplomacy." He shook his head sadly. "All deductible, too. I didn't have a chance. The delegation from Red China was installing high fidelity in the *seraglio* when I came in, and Ibn-ad-Ibn was lounging on an *ungalah* watching them doing it. I gave him a pitch about how he could conquer the world if he tied in with us. You know what he said?"

"How could I?" said the mad scientist sourly. "I wasn't there."

WHAT'S NEW FROM THE FUTURE ?

read all about it

in SCIENCE FICTION BOOK CLUB

Each SFBC choice is complete, library bound, and priced modestly at 5s. 6d. Our selection committee includes John Carnell of *New Worlds*, Dr. J. G. Porter, F.R.A.S., astronomer, and Kingsley Amis, famous novelist and critic. They pick the best s f you could hope to find. Here are the next six books on SFBC's wonderful list—saving you pounds!

THE CANOPY OF TIME

by *Brian Aldiss*

A collection of superb stories, ranged in chronological order from a century or two hence to the end of the galaxy.

May. 15s. for 5s. 6d.

TIME OUT OF JOINT

by *Philip K. Dick*

Appearance and reality keep changing places, and Ragle Gumm fears for his sanity until he can no longer ignore the evidence. A fascinating and unnerving story set in an ordinary town. (Never before published in book form in U.K.)

July. \$3.50 for 5s. 6d.

THE DRAGON IN THE SEA

by *Frank Herbert*

A winner of the International Fantasy Award, this brilliant story of a 21st century submarine is a spy story, "chase" thriller, psychological mystery, yet more than these; quite unusually gripping and realistic.

September. 13s. 6d. for 5s. 6d.

CITY

by *Clifford Simak*

The great s f classic now re-issued. The race of man, long since passed away, is only a legend to the civilisation of dogs which rules the world. The legends are recounted, and give an original and

intriguing picture of the world's history in the next ten thousand years.

October. 9s. 6d. (out of print) for 5s. 6d.

GALACTIC CLUSTER

by *James Blish*

Stories as brilliant and unusual as we have come to expect from this author.

"... continually inflicts an immeasurable impact on his readers. This collection of yarns is a fine example, all of them illustrating man's desire to solve the inexplicable, as in *Common Time*, a unique and indescribable tale... a sparkling cluster that cannot fail to please."—*Astounding*.

November. 15s. for 5s. 6d.

MUTANT

by *Henry Kuttner*

An established classic, long out of print, now re-issued by SFBC, this gripping novel tells how a new race of mutants emerged from the radioactive cities after the great Blow-Up and engaged homo sapiens in a desperate struggle for supremacy.

December. 9s. 6d. (out of print) for 5s. 6d.

THE STARS ARE TOO HIGH

by *Agnew H. Bahnson*

Another SFBC scoop! This story of how three men invent and built a spacecraft and use it to try and end the cold war, has never before been published in Britain. Rich in technological invention and political intelligence.

January \$3.95 for 5s. 6d.

**WONDERFUL
BARGAIN
OFFER**

**EVERYMAN'S
ENCYCLO-
PAEDIA**

**at almost
half-price**

**Details when
you join**

JOIN SFBC HERE

707

To, The Science Fiction Book Club, 10-13 Bedford Street,
London, W.C.2.

Please enrol me as a member of the Science Fiction Book Club. I will purchase six choices, commencing with the choice. After 6 books if I wish to discontinue my membership, I can give one month's notice.

- ☐ I will pay on receipt of each book 5s. 6d. (plus 9d. postage and packing).
- ☐ I enclose 33s. (plus 4s. 6d. postage and packing) for six books.
- ☐ I enclose £2 9s. 6d. (plus 6s. 9d. postage and packing) for a year's membership.

Eire and overseas members must send remittance for 6 or more books.

Name (Mr., Mrs., Miss)

Address

"He said, "why shoot Santa Claus?" I gotta admit I was stumped." He shook his head sadly again. "Why indeed?"

Through all this the mad scientist had been taking on the eerie, macabre look of a man possessed. Lightning now was flashing in abundance, sending weird, inhuman light through the casement, casting strange, half-real shadows on the walls of the dungeon. He turned and began to stare fixedly at the pear-shaped instrument of destruction, that instrument of prodigious lethality that embodied the very quintessence of his own twisted and brilliantly cunning mind.

And then, abruptly, there was a great clap of thunderous lightning, striking, seemingly, from the heart of heaven to the bowels of the very earth, and the whole ancient castle itself groaned with the mighty groan of Lucifer in Hell as the mad scientist began walking, fixedly, like a man in a dream, towards the machine.

Alfred look aghast. "What are you going to do?"

There was no reply, only the muted distant sound of the now thunderous sea, beating crazily at the jagged base of the cliff, thousands of feet below them.

Alfred rose to his feet. "*What are you going to do?*" he demanded.

The voice of the mad scientist was soft, but it echoed hollowly in the now silent room. "The only thing that is left to do." His movements were methodical, as if the whole grisly chain of events had been rehearsed many times for this one, ultimate performance.

Alfred stood frozen in wonder as the scientist unscrewed a plate from the side of the machine and with exquisite care disconnected some wires. Then he pushed a small lever all the way over to the left and replaced the plate. His hand poised itself over a large red button on the side of the machine, a button with the single, terse word ON engraved upon it. He hesitated, and then with a strong movement pushed down.

Instantly, one wall dropped away, revealing a sheer drop seven thousand feet to the sea. Wind and rain whistled into the room, soaking them both. There came a whirring noise from the machine and then the rumbling sound of rubber tyres, tractor treads, and metal feet against the asphalt tile. Pon-

derously the pear-shaped monster rolled up to the now open wall, its muzzles, as always, pointing in all directions. The radar mast quivered expectantly.

The diabolical machine rolled through the gap in the wall to the edge of the cliff and stopped, ready to spew instant death out over a defenseless world. It clicked malevolently, and then with a sub-sonic rumble, hurled itself off the cliff into the sea. There was a long moment of silence followed by a breathtaking splash, and then the distant sound of dead fish popping to the surface.

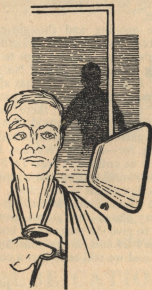
The two men stood quietly for a moment, staring down at the churning water far below, each lost in his own gloomy thoughts. The mad scientist was the first to recover.

"Well," he said, squaring his thin shoulders, "back to the old drafting board. The next time they can come to me!"

"Have you got an idea for a better model?" Alfred stroked his rain-soaked Homberg wistfully.

"No," said the mad scientist sanely. "A better mousetrap."

—Tevis Cogswell





THE EDITOR'S SPACE

It isn't often that space permits me to have a page for some editorial remarks—in fact, I was horrified to find that my last comment was just over two years ago ! Make-up of a magazine specialising mainly in long complete stories seldom leaves the odd page to fill. Hence the long silence from the guiding hand.

There is no doubt that the long stories presented in this magazine regularly are top favourites with all readers and this gives me an opportunity of publishing novelettes and short novels which are normally too long for *New Worlds Science Fiction* as single stories or too short for two-part serials. *New Worlds'* last *Survey* in 1958 showed an overwhelming preference for this length story so we virtually created a magazine to accommodate them.

There are some exciting and thought-provoking stories coming up in future issues—John Ashcroft's return from Service life in Norway has enabled him to recommence his interrupted writing career : he has "No Longer Alone" waiting to appear ; John Kippax, who has appeared regularly in our two companion magazines for years makes his debut in *SFA* shortly with "Stark Refuge" ; there is another long Lan Wright story on file, too—"Should Tyrone Fail," with Wright's inimitable galactic story background ; and something well worth waiting for—a long William F. Temple story written specially for us entitled "Trek To Na-Abiza," which has a fantastic other-world setting and a series of strange and completely unorthodox events taking place.

SFA has a wide international readership—it gets in some really out of the way places—but global coverage is extremely thin. If you want to give the magazine a boost recommend it to a friend, *but don't let him borrow your copy !* Send us his name and address and we will send him a complimentary one free.

—John Carnell

Another famous Nova Magazine

Science Fantasy

2/6

Bi-Monthly

Make certain of your copy of the next issue (No. 47) which contains the first novelette in an exciting new series of "out-of-this-world" adventures

The Dreaming City

by **MICHAEL MOORCOCK**

Elric, dabbler in the Black Arts, a mental giant of his day striding the Old World in search of a lost cause, omnipotent as a necromancer but a weakling when shorn of his powers.

Plus Short Stories and

The Veil Of Isis

by **JOHN RACKHAM**

Another adventure of Yalna, Jones and Pepper in their fight against satanic powers

and

STUDIES IN SCIENCE FICTION

No. 12. *Stanley G. Weinbaum*

by **Sam Moskowitz**

ORDER FROM YOUR NEWSAGENT

NOVA PUBLICATIONS LTD

Maclaren House, 131 Gt. Suffolk Street, London, S.E.1

Britain's Leading S-F Magazine

NEW WORLDS SCIENCE FICTION

Monthly 2/6

In the next issue (No. 106)

B L I N K

by **JOHN RACKHAM**

A gripping long novelette of a peaceful
invasion of Earth and the highly complex
manner in which it was defeated

★ Plus Short Stories by

★ **ALAN BARCLAY**

★ **DAVID ROME**

★ **PHILIP E. HIGH**

★ **JOHN ASHCROFT**

★ **ROBERT HOSKINS**

★ Articles

★ Features

Don't Miss This Outstanding Issue !

ORDER FROM YOUR NEWS DEALER

N O W

NOVA PUBLICATIONS LTD

Maclaren House, 131 Gt. Suffolk Street, London, S.E1