

WASP

Eric  
Frank  
Russell

# WASP

by Eric Frank Russell



# Chapter I

HE AMBLED INTO the room, sat in the indicated chair and said nothing. The baffled expression had been on his face quite a time and he was getting a bit tired of wearing it.

The big fellow who had brought him all the way from Alaska now departed, silently closing the door and leaving him alone with the man contemplating him from behind the desk. A small plaque informed that this character's name was William Wolf. It was inappropriate: he looked more like a bull moose.

Wolf said in hard, even tones, "Mr. Mowry, you are entitled to an explanation." A pause, followed by, "You will get one."

Then he stared unblinkingly at his listener.

For a long-drawn minute James Mowry suffered the intent scrutiny before he asked, "When?"

"Soon."

With that, Wolf went on staring at him. The gaze was unpleasantly piercing, analytical, and the face around it was about as warm and expressive as a lump of hard rock.

"Mind standing up?"

Mowry stood up.

"Turn around."

He rotated, looking bored.

"Walk to and fro across the room."

He walked.

"Tsk-tsk!" grunted Wolf in a way that indicated neither pleasure nor pain. "I assure you, Mr. Mowry, that I am quite serious when I ask you to oblige by walking bow-legged."

Splaying his knees as much as possible, Mowry stumped around as if riding an invisible horse. Then he resumed his chair and said pointedly. "There'd better be money in this.

I don't come three thousand miles and make like a clown for nothing."

"There's no money in it, not a cent," informed Wolf. "If lucky, there is life."

"And if out of luck?"

"Death."

"You're damnably frank about it," Mowry commented.

"In this job I have to be." Wolf stared at him again, long and penetratingly. "You'll do. Yes, I'm sure you'll do."

"Do for what?"

"I'll tell you in a moment." Opening a drawer, he extracted some papers, passed them across. "These will enable you better to understand the position. Read them through - they lead up to what follows."

Mowry glanced at them. They were typescript copies of press reports. Settling back in his chair he perused them slowly and with care.

The first told of a prankster in Roumania. This fellow had done nothing more than stand in the road gazing fascinatedly at the sky, occasionally uttering ejaculations and loud phrases such as, 'Blue flames!' Curious people had joined him and gaped likewise. The group became a crowd, the crowd became a mob, and the bigger the mob the faster it grew.

Soon the audience blocked the street, overflowed into side-streets. Police tried to break it up, making matters worse.

Some fool summoned the fire squads. Hysterics on the fringes swore they could see or had seen something weird above the clouds. Reporters and cameramen rushed to the scene.

Rumours raced around. The government sent up the air force for a closer look. Panic spread over an area of two hundred square miles from which the original cause had judiciously disappeared.

"Amusing if nothing else," remarked Mowry.

"Read on."

The second report concerned a daring escape from jail of two notorious killers. They had stolen a car, made six hundred miles before recapture. Their term of freedom had lasted exactly fourteen hours.

The third detailed an automobile accident. Three killed,.

one seriously injured, the car a complete wreck, the sole survivor had died nine hours later.

Handing back the papers, Mowry said, "What's all this to me?"

"We'll take those reports in the order as read," began Wolf.

"They prove something of which we've long been aware but, maybe you haven't realised yourself. For the first one, that Roumanian did nothing, positively nothing save stare at the sky and mumble. All the same, he persuaded a government to start jumping around like fleas on a hot griddle. It shows that in given conditions action and reaction can be hopelessly out of proportion. Also that by doing insignificant things in suitable circumstances one can obtain results monstrously in excess of the effort."

"I'll give you that." Mowry conceded.

"Now the lamsters, They didn't do much either; climbed a wall, grabbed a car, drove like mad until the petrol ran out, got caught' He leaned forward, continued with added emphasis,

"But for most of fourteen hours they monopolised the attention of six planes, ten helicopters, one hundred and twenty patrol-cars, eighteen telephone exchanges, uncountable phone lines and radio link-ups, not to mention police, deputies, posses of volunteers, hunters, trackers, forest rangers and National . Guardsmen to a grand total of twenty-seven thousands scattered over three states."

"Phew!" Mowry raised his eyebrows.

"Finally, let's consider this auto smash. We know the cause; the survivor was able to tell us before he died. He said the driver lost control at high speed while swiping at a wasp which had flown in through a window and started buzzing around his face."

"It nearly happened to me once."

Ignoring that, Wolf went on, "The weight of a wasp is under half an ounce. Compared with a human being its size is minute, its strength

negligible. Its sole armament is a tiny syringe holding a drop of irritant, formic acid, and in this case it didn't even use it. Nevertheless it killed four big men and converted a large, powerful car into a heap of scrap."

"I see the point," agreed Mowry, "but where do I come in?"

"Right here," said Wolf. "We want you to become a wasp"

Leaning back, Mowry eyed the other contemplatively, then commented, "The muscle-bound lug who brought me here was a Secret Service agent who had satisfied me as to the genuineness of his credentials. This is a government department.

You're a high-ranking official. But for those facts I'd say you're crazy."

"Maybe I am," gave back Wolf, blank-faced, "but I don't think so."

"You want me to do something?"

"Yes."

"Something extra-special?"

"Yes."

"At risk of death?"

"I'm afraid so."

"And for no reward?"

"Correct"

Mowry stood up, reached for his hat. "I'm not crazy either."



"You will be," said Wolf, in the same flat tones, "if you rest content to let the Sirians kick us out of existence."

Letting go the hat, Mowry sat down again. "What d'you mean?"

"There's a war on."

"I know. Everybody knows." He made a disparaging gesture.

"We've been fighting the Sirian Combine for ten months. The newspapers say so. The radio says so. The video says so. The government says so. I am credulous enough to believe the lot of them."

"Then perhaps you're willing to stretch your credulity a bit further and swallow a few more items," Wolf suggested.

"Such as?"

"The Terran public is complacent because to date nothing has happened in this sector. They know that already the enemy has launched two determined attacks against our solar system and that both have been beaten off. The public has great confidence in Terran defences. That confidence is justified; no Sirian task force will ever penetrate this far."

"Well, what have we to worry about?"

"Wars must be won or lost and there's no third alternative.

We cannot win merely by keeping the foe at arm's length.

We can never gain victory solely by postponing defeat."

Suddenly and emphatically he slammed a heavy fist on his desk and

made a pen leap two feet into the air. "We've got to do more than that. We've got to seize the initiative and get the enemy flat on his back while we beat the bejzus out of him."

"But we'll get around to that in due course, won't we?"

"Maybe," said Wolf. "Or maybe not. It depends."

"Depends upon what?"

"Whether we make full and intelligent use of our resources, especially people - meaning people such as you."

"You could be more specific," Mowry suggested.

"Look, in technical matters we are ahead of the Sirian Combine, a little ahead in some respects and far ahead in others. That gives us the advantage of, better weapons, more efficient armaments. But what the public does not know -

because nobody has seen fit to tell them - is that the Sirians also have an advantage. They outnumber us by twelve to one and outweigh us by material in the same proportion."

"Is that a fact?"

"Unfortunately it is, though our propagandists don't bother to mention it. Our war-potential is superior qualitatively. The Sirians have superiority quantitatively. That's a very serious handicap to us. We've got to counter it in the best way we know how. It won't be done by playing for time while we make the effort to breed like flies."

"I see." Mowry gnawed his bottom lip, looked thoughtful.

"However," Wolf went on, "the problem becomes less formidable than

it looks if we bear in mind that one man can shake a government, two men temporarily can put down an army twenty-seven thousands strong, or one small wasp can slay four comparative giants and destroy their huge machine into the bargain." He paused, watching the other for effect, continued, "Which means that by scrawling suitable words upon a wall, the right man in the right place at the right time might immobilise an armoured division with the aid of nothing more than a piece of chalk."

"You're concocting a pretty unorthodox form of warfare."

"So much the better."

"I am sufficiently perverse to like such methods. They appeal to me."

"We know," said Wolf. He took a file from his desk, thumbed through it. "Upon your fourteenth birthday You were fined one hundred Sirian guilders for expressing your opinion of an official, upon a wall, in letters twenty inches high. Your father apologised on your behalf and pleaded the impetuosity of youth. The Sirians were annoyed but let the matter drop."

"Razaduth was a scheming, pot-bellied liar and I say it again." Mowry eyed the file. "That my life-story you've got there?"

"Yes."

"Nosey lot, aren't you?"

"We have to be. Regard it as part of the price to be paid for survival" Shoving the file to one side, Wolf informed,

"We've a punched card for every Terran in existence. In no time worth mentioning we can sort out electronically all those who have false teeth, or wear size eleven shoes, or had red-haired mothers, or can

be relied upon to try dodge the draft.

Without trouble we can extract any specified type of sheep from the general mass of sheep and goats."

"And I am a specified sheep?"

"Speaking metaphorically, of course. No insult is intend."

His face gave a craggy twitch that was the nearest it could come to a smile. "We first dug out about sixteen thousand completely fluent speakers of the several Sirian dialects.

Eliminating the females and children brought the number down to nine thousand. Then, step by step, we cut out the elderly, the infirm, the weak, the untrustworthy, the temperamentally unsuitable, those too short, too tall, too fat, too thin, too stupid, too rash, too cautious, and so forth.

We weren't left with many among whom to seek for wasps."

"What defines a wasp?"

"Several things - but mostly a shorty who can walk slightly bandy-legged with his ears pinned back and his face dyed purple. In other words, one who can play the part of a native-born Sirian and do it well enough to fool the Sirians."

"Never!" exclaimed Mowry. "Never in a month of Sundays!

I'm pink, I've got wisdom teeth and my ears stick out."

"The surplus. teeth can be pulled. Surgical removal of a sliver of cartilage will fasten your ears back good and tight, leaving no visible evidence of the operation. Painless and easy, with complete healing

in two weeks. That is medical evidence; so don't argue it." Again the craggy twitch. "As for the purple complexion, its nothing startling: There are some Terrans a good deal more purple-faced than any Sirian, they having acquired the colour via many gallons of booze. We can fix you up with a dye guaranteed firm for four months, also a retinting kit that will enable you to carry on as much longer as may be necessary."

"But -"

"Listen to me. You were born in Masham, capital city of Diracta which is the Sirian home planet. Your father was a trader there at the time. You lived on Diracta until age seventeen when you returned with your parents to Terra. Luckily you happen to be a half-pint of just about Sirian size and build. You are now twenty-six and still speak perfect Sirian with a decided Mashambi accent which, if anything, is an advantage. It lends plausibility. About fifty million Sirians speak with Mashambi accents. You're a natural for the job we have in mind"

"What if I invite you to thrust the job right up the air-shaft?"

asked Mowry, with great interest.

"I would regret it," said Wolf, coldly, "because in time of war it is an old, well-founded adage that one volunteer is worth a thousand conscripts."

"Meaning I'd get my call-up papers?" Mowry made a gesture of irritation. "Damn! - I'd rather walk into something of my own accord than be frog marched into it"

"So it says here," informed Wolf, motioning toward the file.

"James Mowry, twenty-six, restless and pigheaded.- can be trusted to do anything at all-provided the alternative is worse."

"Sounds like my father. Did he tell you that."

"The Service does not reveal its sources of information."

"Humph!" He pondered a little while, asked "Suppose I volunteer, what follows?"

"We'll send you to a school. It runs a special course that is fast and tough ~ and takes six to eight weeks. 'You'll be crammed to the gills with everything likely to be useful to you: weapons, explosives, sabotage, psychological warfare, map reading, compass reading, camouflage, judo, radio techniques and maybe a dozen other subjects. By the time they've finished with you, you'll be fully qualified to function as a complete and absolute pain-in-the-neck."

"And after that?"

"You will be dropped surreptitiously upon a Sirian held planet and be left to make yourself as awkward as possible."

There was a lengthy silence at the end of which Mowry gave begrudgingly, "Once when my father was thoroughly aggravated he said, "Son, you were born a fool and you'll die a fool." He let go a long, deep sigh. "The old man was dead right. I hereby volunteer."

"We knew you would," said Wolf, imperturbably.

He saw Wolf again, that being two days after he had finished the arduous course and passed with satisfactory marks. Wolf arrived at the school, visited him in his room.

"What was it like?"

"Sheer sadism," said Mowry, pulling a face. "So almighty tough that

"I'm beaten up in mind and body. I feel like a half stunned cripple."

"You'll have plenty of time to get over that. The journey will take long enough. You're leaving Thursday."

"For where?"

"Sorry, I can't tell you. Your pilot carries sealed orders to be opened only on the last lap. In case of accident or successful interception he destroys them unread."

"What's the likelihood of us being grabbed on the way there?"

"Not great. Your ship will be, considerably faster than anything the enemy possesses. But even the best of vessels can get into trouble once in a while. We're taking no chances. You know the stinking reputation of the Sirian Security Police, the Kaitempi. They can make a slab of granite grovel and confess its sins. If they snatch you en route and learn your intended destination they'll take counter-measures and try to trap your successor on arrival."

"My successor? raises a question nobody here seems to answer. you can tell me, huh?"

"What is it?"

"Will I be entirely on my own? Or will other Terrans be operating on the same planet? If there will be others how shall I make contact?"

"So far as you're concerned you'll be the only Terran for a hundred million miles around," responded Wolf. "You will have no contacts. By the same token, you won't be able to betray anyone to the Kaitempi. Nothing they can do will extract from you information that you don't possess. Maybe you'll sweat and scream and invent stuff to make them lay off, but it won't be genuine information."

"It would sound better if you didn't smack your lips over the horrid prospect," reproved Mowry. "Anyway, it would be some comfort and encouragement to know that other wasps are similarly active even if only one to a planet."

"You didn't go through this course all on your ownsome, did you? The others weren't here merely to provide company for you." Wolf held out a hand: "Good hunting, be a curse to.

the foe - *and come back.* "

"I shall return," assured Mowry; "though the way be flinty and the road be long."

That, he thought as Wolf departed, was more of a pious hope than a performable promise. To be dropped single-handed upon a hostile planet was to be plunged neck-deep into a genuinely menacing situation. Casualties could be expected sooner or later. Indeed, Wolf's remark about 'your successor' showed that losses had been anticipated and steps taken to provide replacements..

It then occurred to him that perhaps his own status was that of somebody else's successor. Maybe on the world to which he was going some unlucky character had been trapped and pulled apart very slowly. If so, it would be a world fore-warned and ready for him. Right now the Kaitempi would be watching the skies, licking their chops in anticipation of their next victim, a dope named James Mowry, twenty-six, restless and pigheaded.

Oh, well, he had committed himself and there was no backing out. Looked like he was doomed to become a hero from sheer lack of courage to be a coward. Slowly he developed a philosophic resignation which still possessed him several weeks later when the



corvette's captain summoned him to the mid-cabin.

"Sleep well?"

"Not in the last spell," Mowry admitted. "The propulsors were noisier than usual, the whole ship shuddered and creaked. I spent most of the time lying in my bunk and inventing new cuss-words."

The captain gave a wry smile. "You didn't know it, but we were being chased by four Sirian destroyers. We hit up top speed and lost them"

"You sure they aren't still tracking us?"

"They've fallen behind range of our detectors, therefore we're beyond range of theirs."

"Thank heavens for that," said Mowry.

"I've opened the orders. We're due to arrive in forty-eight Earth-hours."

"Where?"

"On a planet called Jaimec. Ever heard of it?"

"Yes, the Sirian news-channels used to mention it every once in a while. It's one of their outpost worlds if I remember aright, under-populated and not half developed. I never met anyone from there and so don't know much about it." He registered mild annoyance. "This secretiveness is all very well, but it would help a fellow some to let him know where he's going and give him some useful information about the place before he gets there. Ignorance could prove damn dangerous; it might cost me my neck. Maybe I'm finicky but I value my neck."

"You'll land with all the data we've got," soothed the captain.

"They've supplied a stack of stuff along with the orders."

He put a wad of papers on the table, also several maps and a number of large photographs. Then he pointed to a cabinet standing against a wall. "That's the stereoscopic viewer. Use it to search these pics for a suitable landing place. The choice is wholly yours. My job is to put you down safely wherever you choose and get away undetected."

"How long have I got?"

"You must show me the selected spot not later than forty hours from now."

"And how long can you allow for dumping me and my equipment?"

"Twenty minutes maximum. Positively no more. I'm sorry about that but it can't be helped. If we sit on the ground and take it easy we'll leave unmistakable signs of our landing, a whacking big rut that can soon be spotted by air patrols and will get the hunt after you in full cry. So we'll have to use the antigravs and move fast. The antigravs soak up power.

Twenty minutes output is the most we can afford."

"All right." Mowry gave a shrug of resignation, took up the papers and started reading them as the captain went out.

Jaimec, ninety-fourth planet of the Sirian Empire. Mass seven-eighths that of Terra. Land area about half that of Terra's, the rest being ocean. First settled two and a half centuries ago. Present population estimated at about eighty millions. Jaimec had cities, railroads, spaceports and all the other features of alien civilisation. Nevertheless, much of it remained undeveloped, unexplored and in

primitive condition.

He spent a good many hours making close, meticulous study of the planet's surface as shown in the stereoscopic viewer, meanwhile wondering how the big photos had been obtained.

Evidently someone had taken a considerable risk to play close with an aerial camera. War had a hundred unsung heroes for every one praised and draped with medals.

By the fortieth hour he had made his choice. It had not been easy to reach a decision. Every seemingly suitable dropping place had some kind of disadvantage, proving yet again that the ideal hideout does not exist. One would be beautifully positioned from the strategic viewpoint but lack adequate cover. Another would have first-class natural concealment but dangerous location.

The captain came in saying, "I hope you've picked a point on the night-side, If it isn't, we'll have to dodge around until dark and that's not good. The best technique is to go in and get out before they've time to take alarm and organise a counter-blow."

"This is it" Mowry indicated the place on a photo. "It's a lot farther from a road than I'd have liked, about twenty miles and all of it through virgin forest. Whenever I need something out the cache it will take me a day's hard going to reach it, maybe two days. But by the same token it should remain safe from prying eyes and that's the prime consideration"

Sliding the photo into the viewer, the captain switched on the interior lighting and looked into the rubber eyepiece. He frowned with concentration.

"You mean that marked spot on the cliff?"

"No-it's at the cliff's base. See that outcrop of rock? What's a fraction north of it?"

The captain stared again. "It's hard to tell for certain but it looks mighty like a cave formation." He backed off, picked up the intercom phone. "Hame, come here, will you?"

Hamerton, the chief navigator, arrived and studied the photo, found the indicated point. He compared it with a two-hemisphere map of Jaimec, made swift calculations.

"We'll catch it on the night-side but only by the skin of our teeth"

"You sure of that?"

"If we went straight there we'd make it with a couple of hours to spare. But we daren't go straight; their radar network would plot the dropping-point to within half a mile. So we'll have to dodge around below their radar horizon. Evasive action takes time but with luck we can complete the drop half an hour before sunrise."

"Let's go straight there," prompted Mowry. "It will cut your risks and I'm willing to take a chance on being nabbed. I'm taking the chance anyway, aren't I?"

"Nuts to that," retorted the captain. "We're so close that their detectors are tracking us already. We're picking up their identification-calls and we can't answer, not knowing their code."

Pretty soon it will sink into their heads that we're hostile.

They'll send up a shower of proximity-fused missiles, as usual too late. The moment we dive below their radar horizon they'll start a full-scale aerial search covering five hundred miles around the point where we disappeared." He gave Mowry a warning frown. "And you,

chum, would be dead centre of that circle."

"Looks like you've done this job a few times before."

prompted Mowry, hoping for a revealing response.

Refusing to take the bait, the captain continued, "Once we're running just above tree-top level they can't track us radar-wise. So we'll duck down a couple of thousand miles from your dropping-point and make for there on a cockeyed.

course. It's my responsibility to dump you where you want to be put without betraying you to the whole lousy world. If I don't succeed the entire trip has been wasted. Leave this to me, will you?"

"Sure," agreed Mowry, abashed. "Anything you say."

They went out, leaving him to brood. Presently the alarm-gong clanged upon the cabin wall, he grabbed handholds and hung on while the ship made a couple of violent swerves, first one way, then the other. He could see nothing, hear nothing save the dull moan of steering-jets, but his imagination pictured a cluster of fifty ominous vapour-trails rising from below, fifty long, explosive cylinders eagerly sniffing around for the scent of alien metal.

Eleven more times the alarm sounded, followed at once by aerial acrobatics. By now the ship resounded to the soft whistle of passing atmosphere which built up to a faint howl as it thickened.

Getting near now.

Mowry gazed absently at his fingers. They were steady but sweaty. There were queer electric thrills running up and down his spine. His knees felt weak and his stomach felt weaker.

He prayed for enough resolution to land without spewing in plain sight of everybody. Hell of a hero he'd look if he did that.

Far away across the void was a planet with a fully comprehensive card-system and because of that he was about to have his pointed head shoved into the lion's mouth.

Mentally he damned card-systems, those who'd invented them, those who operated them. The cussing relieved his feelings somewhat but did not restore strength to his knees.

With the arrival so close the philosophic resignation that had sustained him had now evaporated. He fidgeted nervily around, occasionally grabbing the handhold heartily wishing the whole dirty business were done with and over.

By the time propulsion ceased and the ship stood silently upon its antigravs above the selected spot he had generated the fatalistic impatience of a man facing a major operation that no longer can be avoided. He half-ran, half-slid down the nylon ladder to ground. A dozen of the corvette's crew followed, equally in a hurry but for different reasons. They worked like maniacs, all the time keeping a wary eye upon the sky.



# Chapter II

THE CLIFF WAS part of an upthrust plateau rising four hundred feet above the forest. At bottom were two caves, one wide and shallow, one narrow but deep. Before the caves stretched a beach of tiny pebbles at the edge of which a small stream swirled and bubbled.

Cylindrical duralumin containers, thirty in all, were lowered from the ship's belly to the beach, seized and carried to the back of the deep cave, stacked so that the code numbers on their lids faced the light. That done, the twelve scrambled monkeylike up the ladder which was promptly reeled in. An officer waved a hand from the open lock, shouted a last word of encouragement.

"Give 'em hell, Sonny."

The corvette's tail snorted and whumped, making trees wave their tops in a mile-long lane of superheated air. That in itself added to the list of possible risks; if the leaves got scalded, withered and changed colour, a scouting aeroplane would view the phenomenon as a gigantic arrow pointing to the cave. But it was a chance that had to be taken. With swiftly increasing speed the big vessel went away, keeping low and turning in the distance to follow the valley northward.

Watching it depart, Mowry knew that it would not yet head straight for home. First the crew would take added chances for his sake by zooming in plain view over a number of cities and military strongholds. With luck this tactic might persuade the enemy to jump to the conclusion that it was engaged in photographic reconnaissance, that no surreptitious landing of personnel had been intended or performed.

The testing time would come during the long hours of daylight and



already dawn was breaking to one side. Systematic aerial search in the vicinity would prove that the enemy's suspicions had been aroused in spite of the corvette's misleading antics. Lack of visible search would not prove the contrary because for all he knew the hunt might be up elsewhere, in the wrong place far beyond his sight and hearing.

Full light would be needed for his trek through the forest the depths of which were dark enough even at midday. While waiting for the sun to rise he sat on a boulder and gazed in the direction in which the ship had gone. He wouldn't have that captain's job, he decided, for a sack of diamonds. And probably the captain wouldn't have his for two sacks.

After an hour he entered the cave, opened a container, drew from it a well-worn leather case of indisputable Sirian manufacture. There'd be no sharp eyes noting something foreign-looking about that piece of luggage; it was his own property purchased in Masham, on Diracta, many years ago.

Making an easy jump across the little stream he went into the forest and headed westward, frequently checking his direction with the aid of a pocket compass. The going proved rough but not difficult. The forest was wholly a forest and not a jungle. Trees grew large and close together, forming a canopy that shut out all but occasional glimpses of the sky.

Luckily, undergrowth was sparse. One could walk with ease and at fast pace providing one took care not to fall over projecting roots. Also, as he soon realised, progress was helped quite a piece by the fact that on Jaimec his weight was down by most of twenty pounds while his luggage was reduced in the same proportion.

Two hours before sunset he reached the road, having covered twenty

miles with one stop for a meal and many brief pauses to consult the compass. Behind a roadside tree he upended the case, sat on it and enjoyed fifteen minutes rest before making wary survey of the road. So far he'd heard no planes or scout-ships snooping overhead in frantic search of Terra's one-man task force. Neither was there any abnormal activity upon the road; in fact during his wait nothing passed along it in either direction.

Refreshed by the sit, he tidied himself, brushed dirt and leaves from his shoes and pants,. reknotted his typical neck-scarf as only a Sirian could knot it. Then he examined himself in a steel mirror. His Earthmade copy of Sirian clothes would pass muster, he had no doubt of that. His purple face, pinned-back ears and Mashambi accent would be equally convincing.

But his greatest protection would be the mental block in every Sirian's mind; they'd just naturally not think of an Earthman masquerading as a Sirian because the idea was too ridiculous to contemplate.

Satisfied that he fitted his role a hundred percent, he emerged from the shelter of the trees, walked boldly across the road and from the other side made careful study of his exit from the forest. It was essential that he should be able to remember it speedily and accurately. The forest was the screen of camouflage around his bolt-hole and there was no telling when he might need to dive into it in a deuce of a hurry.

Fifty yards farther along the road stood an especially tall tree with a peculiarly wrapped growth around its trunk and a very gnarly branch formation. He fixed it firmly in his mind and for good measure lugged a tablet-shaped slab of stone onto the grass verge and stood it upright beneath the tree.

The result resembled a lonely grave. He stared at the stone and with

no trouble at all could imagine words inscribed upon it: *James Mowry - Terran. Strangled by the Kaitempi*. Could be an omen, a forecast that already he had signed his own death warrant. There was a compensatory comfort: he did not believe in omens.

Dismissing ugly thoughts about the Kaitempi, he started trudging along the road, his gait suggestive of a slight bow-leggedness. From now on he must be wholly a Sirian, physically and mentally, name of Shir Agavan, a forestry surveyor employed by the Jaimec Ministry of Natural Resources, therefore a government official and exempt from military service.

Or he could be anyone else so long as he remained plainly and visibly a Sirian and could produce the papers to prove it.

He moved good and fast while slowly the sun sank toward the horizon. He was going to thumb a lift, wanted one with the minimum of delay but also wanted it as far as possible from the point where he'd left the forest. It would be wise to divert attention from the real scene of his appearance. Like everyone else, Sirians had tongues. They talked. Others listened. Some hard-faced characters had the full-time jobs of listening, putting two and two together and without undue strain arriving at four. His chief peril came not from guns and garrotting-cords but from over-active tongues and alert ears.

More than a mile had been covered before two dynocars and one gas-truck passed him in quick succession all going the opposite way. None of the occupants favoured him with more than a perfunctory glance. Another mile went by before anything came in his own direction. This was another gas-truck, a big, dirty, lumbering monstrosity that wheezed and grunted as it rolled along.

Standing by the verge, he waved it down, putting on an air of arrogant authority that never failed to impress all Sirians save those with more

arrogance and authority. The truck stopped jerkily and with a tailward boost of fumes. It was loaded with about twenty tons of edible roots. Two Sirians looked down at him from the cab. They were unkempt, their clothes baggy and soiled.

"I am of the government," informed Mowry, giving the statement the right degree of importance. "I wish a ride into town."

The nearest one opened the door, moved closer to the driver and made room. Mowry climbed up, squeezed into the bench seat which was a close fit for three. He held his case on his knees. The truck emitted a loud bang and lurched forward while the Sirian in the middle gazed dully at the case.

"You are a Mashamban, I think," ventured the driver, conversationally.

"Correct. Seems we can't open our mouths without betraying the fact"

"I have never been to Masham," continued the driver using the sing-song accents peculiar to Jaimec. "I would like to go there someday. It is a great place." He switched to his fellow Sirian. "Isn't it, Snat?"

"Yar," said Snat, still mooning at the case.

"Besides, Masham or anywhere on Directa should be a lot safer than here. And perhaps I'd have better luck there. It has been a bad day. It has been a stinking bad day. Hasn't it, Snat?"

"Yar," said Snat.

"Why?" asked Mowry.

"This soko of a truck has broken down three times since dawn. And it has stuck in the bog twice. The last time we had to empty it to get it out, and then refill it. With the load we've got that is work. Hard work."

He spat out the window.

"Wasn't it, Snat?"

"Yar." said Snat, still half-dead from the effort.

"Too bad," Mowry sympathised.

"As for the rest, you know of it," said the driver, irefully.

"It has been a bad day."

"I know of what?" Mowry prompted.

"The news."

"I have been in the woods since sunup. One does not hear news in the woods."

"The ten-time radio announced an increase in the war-tax.

As if we aren't paying enough. Then the twelve-time radio said a Spakum ship had been zooming around. They had to admit it because the ship was fired upon from a number of places. We are not deaf when guns fire, nor blind when the target is visible." He nudged his fellow. "Are we, Snat?"

"Nar," confirmed Snat.

"Just imagine that - a lousy Spakum ship sneaking around over our very roof-tops. You know what that means: they are seeking targets for bombing. Well, I hope none of them get through. I hope every Spakum that heads this way runs straight into a break-up barrage."

"So do I," said Mowry, squirting pseudo-patriotism out of his ears. He

gave his neighbour a dig in the ribs. "Don't you?"

"Yar," said Snat.

For the rest of the journey the driver maintained his paeon of anguish about the general lousiness of the day, the iniquity of truck-builders, the menace and expense of war and the blatant impudence of an enemy ship that had surveyed Jaimec in broad daylight. All the time. Snat lolled in the middle of the cab, gaped glassy-eyed at Mowry's leather case and responded in monosyllables only when metaphorically beaten over the head.

"This will do," announced Mowry as they trundled through city suburbs and reached a wide crossroad. The truck stopped, he got down. "Live long!"

"Live long!" responded the driver and tooled away.

He stood on the sidewalk and thoughtfully watched the truck until it passed from sight. Well, he'd put himself to the first minor test and got by without suspicion. Neither the driver nor Snat had nursed the vaguest idea that he was what they called a Spakum - literally a bed bug - an abusive term for Terrans to which he'd listened with no resentment whatsoever.

Nor should he resent it: until further notice he was Shir Agavan, a Sirian born and bred.

Holding tight to his case, he entered the city.

This was Pertane, capital of Jaimec, population a little more than two millions. No other place on the planet approached it in size. It was the centre of Jaimecan civil and military administration, the very heart of the foe's planetary stronghold.

By the same token it was potentially the most dangerous area in which a lone Terran could wander on the loose.

Reaching the downtown section, Mowry tramped around until twilight, weighed up the location and external appearance of several small hotels. Finally he picked one in a sidestreet off the main stem. Quiet and modest-looking, it would serve for a short time while he sought a better hideout. But having reached a decision he did not go straight in.

First it was necessary to make up-to-the-minute check of his papers lest anything wrong with them should put a noose around his neck. The documents with which he had been provided were microscopically accurate replicas of those valid within the Sirian Empire nine or ten months ago. They might have changed the format in the interim. To present for examination papers obviously long out of date was to ask to be nabbed on the spot.

He'd be trapped in an hotel, behind doors, with Sirians all around. Better the open street where if it came to the worst he could throw away his case along with his bandy-legged gait and run like the devil in pursuit of a virgin. So he ambled casually past the hotel, explored nearby streets until he found a policeman. Glancing swiftly around, he marked his getaway route and went up to the officer.

"Pardon, I am a newcomer." He said it stupidly, wearing an expression of slight dopiness. "I arrived from Diracta a few days ago."

"You are lost, hi?"

"No, officer, I am embarrassed." He fumbled in a pocket, produced his identity-card, offered it for inspection. His leg muscles were tensed in readiness for swift and effective flight as he went on, "A

Pertanian friend tells me that my card is wrong because it must now bear a picture of my nude body.

This friend is a persistent prankster. I do not know whether he is to be believed."

Frowning, the policeman examined the card's face, He turned it over, studied its back. Then he returned it to Mowry.

"This card is quite in order. Your friend is a liar. There is no such silly regulation. He would be wise to keep his mouth shut." The frown grew deeper. "If he does not he will someday regret it. The Kaitempi are rough with those who spread false rumours."

"Yes, officer," said Mowry, vastly relieved but looking suitably frightened. "I shall warn him not to be a fool. May you live long!"

"Live long!" said the policeman, curtly.

Hurrah! He went back to the hotel, walked in as though he owned it, said to the clerk, "I wish a room with bath for ten days."

"Your instrument of identity?"

He passed the card across.

The clerk wrote down its details, handed it back, reversed the register on the counter and pointed to a line. "Sign here."

On taking the room his first act was to have a welcome wash. Then he reviewed his position. He had reserved the room for ten days but that was mere camouflage since he had no intention of staying that long in a place so well surveyed by official eyes. If Sirian habits held good for Jaimec he could depend upon some snoop examining the hotel register and, perhaps, asking awkward questions before the week



was through. He had all the answers ready - but the correct wasp-tactic is not to be asked so long as it can be avoided.

He'd arrived too late in the day to seek and find better sanctuary. Tomorrow would be well-spent hunting and finding a rooming-house, preferably in a district where inhabitants tended to mind their own business. Meanwhile he could put in two or three hours before bedtime by exploring Pertane, studying the lie of the land and estimating future possibilities.

Before starting out he treated himself to a hearty meal.

To a native-born Terran the food would have seemed strange and somewhat obnoxious. But he ate it with gusto, its flavours serving only to remind him of his childhood. It wasn't until he had finished that it occurred to him to wonder whether some other less well-equipped wasp had ever betrayed himself by being sick at a Sirian table.

For the rest of the evening his exploration of Pertane was not as haphazard as it looked. He wandered around with seeming aimlessness, memorising all geographical features that might prove useful to recall later on. But primarily he was seeking to estimate the climate of public opinion with particular reference to minority opinions.

In every war no matter how great a government's power its rule is never absolute. In every war, no matter how allegedly righteous the cause, the effort is never total. No campaign has ever or will ever be fought with the leadership united in favour of it and with the rank and file unitedly behind them.

Always there is a disgruntled minority that opposes a war for a multitude of reasons such as reluctance to make necessary sacrifices, fear of personal loss or suffering, philosophical and ethical objection to warfare as a method of settling disputes, lack of

confidence in the ability of the leadership, resentment at being called upon to play a subordinate role, pessimistic belief that victory is far from certain and defeat very possible, egoistic satisfaction of refusing to run with the herd, psychological opposition to being yelled at on any and every petty pretext, a thousand and one other reasons.

No political or military dictatorship ever has been one hundred percent successful in identifying and suppressing the malcontents who, typically, conceal themselves behind a veil of silence and bide their time. By sheer law of averages Jaimec must have its share of such as these. And in addition to the pacifists and quasi-pacifists were the criminal classes whose sole concern in life was to snatch an easy profit while dexterously avoiding involvement in anything deemed unpleasant such as mass antics on a barrack square.

A wasp could make good use of all those who would not heed the bugle-call nor follow the beat of the drum, Indeed, even if it proved impossible to trace any of them and employ them individually he could still exploit the fact of their very existence. All that was necessary was first to satisfy himself that there really was such a minority on Jaimec.

By midnight he was back at the hotel confident that in Pertane there lived an adequate supply of scapegoats. On buses and in bars he'd had fragmentary conversations with about forty citizens and had overheard the talk of a hundred more.

Not one had uttered a word definable as unpatriotic, much less treacherous or subversive. Strong, deep-rooted fear of the Kaitempi was more than enough to deter them from condemning themselves out of their own mouths. But at least a tenth of them had spoken with that vague, elusive air of having more on their minds than they cared to state. In some cases two of this type conversed together and when that happened it was done with a sort of conspiratorial understanding that any onlooker could recognise from fifty yards away but could

never produce as evidence before a military court Yes, these - the objectors, the selfish, the greedy, the resentful, the conceited, the moral cowards and the criminals -

could all be utilised for Terran purposes. When it isn't expedient to use one's own strength, then is the time to exploit the enemy's weakness.

While lying in bed and waiting for sleep to come, he mentally enrolled the whole of this secret opposition in a mythical, dreamed-up organisation called *Dirac Angestun Gesept*, the Sirian Freedom Party. He then appointed himself the D.A.G.'s president, secretary, treasurer and field-director for the planetary district of Jaimec. The fact that the entire membership was unaware of its status and had no hand in the election did not matter a hoot. It was irrelevant.

Neither did it matter that sooner or later the aggravated Kaitempi would start organising the collection of members dues in the form of strangled necks, or that some members might be so lacking in enthusiasm for the cause as to resist payment. If some Sirians could be given the full-time job of hunting down and garrotting other Sirians, and if other Sirians could be given the full-time job of dodging or shooting down the garroters, then a distant and different lifeform would be saved a few unpleasant chores.

With that happy thought James Mowry alias Shir Agavan dozed off. His breathing was suspiciously slow and irregular for the purple-faced lifeform he was supposed to be, his snores were abnormally low-pitched and he snoozed flat on his back instead of lying on his belly. But in the privacy of this room there were none to hear and see a Terran with his defenses momentarily down.

When one man is playing the part of an invading army the essential thing is to move fast, make full use of any and every opportunity,

waste no effort. Mowry had to traipse around the city to find a better hideout. It was equally necessary to go hither and thither to make the first moves in his game. So he combined the two purposes.

He unlocked his bag, opening it carefully with the aid of a special non-conducting plastic key. Despite that he knew exactly what he was doing a thin trickle of sweat ran down his spine while he did it. The lock was not as innocent as it looked, in fact it was a veritable death-trap. He could never quite get rid of the feeling that one of these days it might forget that a plastic key is not a metal lock-pick. If ever it did so blunder the resulting blast-area would have a radius of one hundred yards.

Apart from the lethal can wired to the lock, the bag held a dozen small parcels, a mass of printed paper and nothing else. The paper was of two kinds: stickers and money. There was plenty of the latter. In terms of Sirian guilders he was, a millionaire. Or with the further supply in that distant cave he was a multi-millionaire.

From the bag he took an inch-thick wad of printed stickers.

Not too many of them. Just enough for a day's fast work and, at the same time, few enough to toss away unobserved should the necessity arise. That done, he refastened the bag with the same care, the same beading of perspiration.

It was a tricky business, this continual fiddling with a potential explosion, but it had one great advantage. If any official nosey-poke took it into his head to search the room and check the luggage he would destroy the evidence along with himself.

Moreover, proof of what had happened would be widespread enough to give clear warning to the homecomer: Mowry would turn into the street, take one look at the mess and discreetly fade from sight.

Departing, he caught a cross-town bus, planted the first sticker on the front window of its upper deck at a moment when all other seats were vacant. He dismounted at the next stop, casually watched a dozen people boarding the bus. Half of them went upstairs.

The sticker said in bold, easily readable print: *War makes wealth for the few, misery for the many. At the right time Dirac Angestun Gesept will punish the former, bring aid and comfort to the latter.*

That would hit the readers much harder than it would have done a month ago. It was sheer luck that he'd arrived coincidentally with a big boost in the war-tax. It was likely they'd feel sufficiently aggrieved not to tear the sticker down in a patriotic fury. Chances were equally good that they'd spread the news about this new, mysterious movement that had emerged to challenge the government, the military caucus and the Kaitempi. The tale would lose nothing in the telling: gossip is the same any part of the mighty cosmos in that it gains compound interest as it goes the rounds.

Within five and a half hours he'd got rid of eighty stickers without once being caught in the act of fixing them. He'd taken a few risks, had a few narrow squeaks, but never was seen actually performing the dirty deed. What followed the Planting of the fifty-sixth sticker gave him most satisfaction.

A minor collision on the street caused abusive shouts between drivers and drew a mob of onlookers. Taking prompt advantage of the situation, Mowry slapped number fifty-six bang in the middle of a shop window while backed up against it by the crowd all of whom were looking the other way. He then wormed himself forward and got well into the mob before somebody noticed the window's adornment and attracted general attention to it. The audience turned around, Mowry with them, and gaped at the discovery.

The finder, a gaunt, middle-aged Sirian with pop eyes, pointed an incredulous finger and stuttered, "Just l-l-look at that! They must be m-mad in that shop. The Kaitempi will take them all to p-p-prison."

Mowry edged forward for a better look and read the sticker aloud. "*Those who stand upon the platform and openly approve the war will stand upon the scaffold and weepingly regret it. Dirac Angestun Gesept.*" He put on a frown. "The people in the shop can't be responsible for this - they wouldn't dare."

"S-somebody's dared," said Pop Eyes, quite reasonably.

"Yar." Mowry gave him the hard eye. "You saw it first. So maybe it was you, hi?"

"Me?" Pop Eyes went a very pale mauve, that being the nearest a Sirian could get to sheet-white. "I didn't put it there."

You think I'm c-crazy?"

"Well, as you said, somebody did."

"It wasn't me," denied Pop Eyes, angry and agitated. "It must have been s-some crockpat"

"Crackpot," Mowry corrected.

"That's what I just s-said."

Another Sirian, younger and shrewder, chipped in with,

"That's not a looney's work. There's more to it than that."

"Why?" demanded Pop Eyes.

A solitary nut would be more likely to scribble things.

Silly ones too" He nodded indicatively toward the subject of discussion. "That's a professional print job. It's also a plain.

straightforward threat. Somebody risked his neck to plaster it up there but that didn't stop him. I'll bet there's an illegal organisation back of that stunt"

"It says so, doesn't it?" interjected a voice. "The Sirian Freedom Party."

"Never heard of it," commented another.

"You've heard of it now," said Mowry.

"S-s-somebody ought to do s-something about it," declared Pop Eyes, waving his arms around.

S-s-somebody did, to wit, a cop. He muscled through the crowd, looked on the pavement for the body, bent down and felt around in case the victim happened to be invisible. Finding nothing, he straightened up, glowered at the audience and growled, "Now, what's all this?"

Pop Eyes pointed again, this time with the proprietary air of one who has been granted a patent on the discovery. "S-see what it s-says on the window."

The cop looked and saw. Being able to read, he perused it twice while his face went several shades more purple. Then he returned attention to the crowd.

"Who did this?"

Nobody knew.

"You've got eyes - don't you use them?"

Apparently they didn't.

"Who saw this first?"

"I did," said Pop Eyes proudly.

"But you didn't see anyone put it up?"

"No"

The cop stuck out his jaw. "You sure of that?"

"Yes, officer," admitted Pop Eyes, becoming nervous. "There was an accident in the s-street. We were all watching the two d-d-d-" He got himself into a vocal tangle and choked.

Waving him away, the cop addressed the crowd with considerable menace. "If anyone knows the identity of the culprit and refuses to reveal it, he will be deemed equally guilty and will suffer equally when caught."

Those in front backed off a yard or two, those in the rear suddenly discovered they had business elsewhere. A hard core of thirty of the incurably curious stayed put, Mowry among them.

Mowry said mildly, "Maybe they could tell you something in the shop"

The cop scowled. "I know my job, Shortass."

With that, he gave a loud snort, marched into the shop and bawled for the manager. In due course that worthy came out, examined his



window with horror and swiftly acquired all the symptoms of a nervous wreck.

"We know nothing of this, officer. I assure you that it is no work of ours. It isn't *inside* the window, officer. It is outside, as you can see. Some passer-by must have done it. I cannot imagine why he should have picked on this window. Our patriotic devotion is unquestioned and ---"

"Won't take the Kaitempi five seconds to question it," said the cop, cynically.

"But I myself am a reserve officer in the ----"

"Shut up!" He jerked a heavy thumb toward the offending sticker. "Get it off."

"Yes, officer. Certainly, officer. I shall remove it immediately."

The manager started digging with his nails at the sticker's corners in attempt to peel it off. He didn't do so good because Terran technical superiority extended even to common adhesives.

After several futile efforts he threw the cop an apologetic looks, went inside, came out with a knife and tried again.

This time he succeeded in tearing a small triangle from each corner, leaving the message intact.

"Get hot water and soak it off," commanded the cop, rapidly losing patience. He turned and shoed the audience. "Beat it.

Go on, get moving."

The crowd mooched reluctantly away. Mowry glanced back from the

far corner, saw the manager emerge with a steaming bucket and get busy swabbing the notice. He grinned to himself, knowing that hot water was just the thing to release and activate the hydrofluoric base beneath the print.

Continuing on his way, Mowry disposed of two more stickers where they'd best be seen and cause the most annoyance.

It would take twenty minutes for water to free number fifty-six and at the end of that time he couldn't resist returning to the scene. Going back on his tracks, he ambled past the shop.

Sure enough the sticker had disappeared while in its place the same message was etched deeply and milkily in the glass.

The cop and the manager were now arguing heatedly upon the sidewalk with half a dozen citizens gaping alternately at them and the window.

As Mowry loped past the cop bawled, "I don't care if the window is valued at two thousand guilders. You've got to board it up or replace the glass. One thing or the other and no half-measures."

But, officer -"

"Do as you're told. To exhibit subversive propaganda is a major offence whether intentional or not. There's a war on!"

Mowry wandered away, unnoticed, unsuspected, with eighteen stickers yet to be used before the day was through.

By dusk he'd disposed of them all without mishap. He had also found himself a suitable hideaway.



# Chapter III

AT THE HOTEL he stopped by the desk and spoke to the clerk.

"This war, it makes things difficult. One can plan nothing with certainty." He made the hand-splaying gesture that was the Sirian equivalent of a shrug. "I must leave tomorrow and may be away seven days. It is a great nuisance."

"You wish to cancel your room, Mr. Agavan?"

"No. I reserved it for ten days and will pay for ten." Dipping into his pocket he extracted a wad of guilders. "I shall then be able to claim it if I get back in time. If I don't, well; that'll be my hard luck."

"As you wish, Mr. Agavan." Indifferent to the throwing away of good money so long as it was somebody else's, the other scribbled a receipt, handed it over.

"Thanks," said Mowry. "Live long!"

"May you live long." He gave the response in dead tones, not caring if the customer expired on the spot.

Mowry went to the restaurant and ate. Then to his room where he lay full length on the bed and gave his feet a much needed rest while he waited for darkness to become complete.

When the last streamers of sunset had faded away he took another pack of stickers from his case, also a piece of crayon, and departed.

The task was lots easier this time. Poor illumination helped cover his actions, he was now familiar, with the locality and the places most

deserving of his attentions, he was not diverted by the need to find another and safer address. For more than four hours he could concentrate single-mindedly upon the job of defacing walls and making a mess of the largest, most expensive sheets of plate glass that daytimes were prominently in public view.

Between seven-thirty and midnight he slapped exactly one hundred stickers on shops, offices and vehicles of the city transport system, also inscribed swiftly, clearly and in large size the letters D.A.G. upon twenty-four walls.

The latter feat was performed with Terran crayon, a deceitfully chalk-like substance that made full use of the porosity of brick when water was applied. In other words, the more furiously it was washed the more stubbornly it became embedded.

There was only one sure way of obliterating the offensive letters - to knock down the entire wall and rebuild it.

In the morning he breakfasted, walked out with his case, ignored a line of waiting dynocars and caught a bus. He changed buses nine times, switching routes one way or the other and heading nowhere in particular. Five times he travelled without his case which reposed awhile in a rented locker. This tedious rigmarole may not have been necessary but there was no way of telling; it was his duty not only to avoid actual perils but also to anticipate hypothetical ones.

Such as this: "Kaitempi check. Let me see the hotel register.

H'm! - much the same as last time. Except for this Shir Agavan. Who is he, *hi*?"

"A forestry surveyor."

"Did you get that from his identity-card?"

"Yes, officer. It was quite in order."

"By whom is he employed?"

"By the Ministry of Natural Resources."

"Was his card embossed with the Ministry's stamp?"

"I don't remember. Maybe it was. I can't say for sure."

"You should notice things like that. You know full well that you'll be asked about them when the check is made."

"Sorry, officer, but I can't see and remember every item that comes my way in a week."

"You could try harder. Oh. well, I suppose this Agavan character is all right. But maybe I'd better get confirmation if only to show I'm on the job. Give me your phone." A call, a few questions, the phone slammed down, then in harsh tones,

"The Ministry has no Shir Agavan upon its roll. The fellow is using a fake identity-card. When did he leave the hotel?

Did he look agitated when he went? Did he say anything to indicate where he was going? Wake up, you fool, and answer!

Give me the key to his room - it must be searched at once: Did he take a dynocar when he departed? Describe him to me as fully as you can. So he was carrying a case? What sort of a case, *hi?* "

That was the kind of chance that must be taken when one holes up in known and regularly checked haunts. The risk was not enormous, in

fact it was small - but it was still there.

And when tried, sentenced and waiting for death it is no consolation to know that what came off was a hundred to one chance. To keep going and to maintain the one-man battle the enemy had to be outwitted, if possible, all along the line and all the time.

Satisfied that by now the most persistent of snoops could not follow his tortuous trail through the city, Mowry retrieved his case, lugged it up to the third floor of a crummy tenement building, let himself into his suite of two sour-smelling rooms.

The rest of the day he spent cleaning the place up and making it fit to live in.

He'd be lots harder to trace here. The shifty-eyed landlord had not asked to see his identity-card, had accepted him without question as Gast Hurkin, a low-grade railroad official, honest, hard-working and stupid enough to pay his rent regularly and on time. To the landlord's way of thinking the unsavoury neighbours rated a higher I.Q. - in terms of that environment - being able to get a crust with less effort and remaining tight-mouthed about how they did it.

Housework finished, Mowry bought a paper, sought through it from front to back for some mention of yesterday's activities, There wasn't a word on the subject. At first he felt disappointed, then on further reflection he became heartened.

Opposition to the war and open defiance of the government definitely made news that justified a front-page spread. No reporter, no editor would pass it up if he could help it.

Therefore the papers had passed it up because they could not help it. They'd had no choice about the matter. Somebody high in authority

had clamped down upon them with the heavy hand of censorship. Somebody with considerable power had been driven into making a weak countermove.

That was a start, anyway. His first waspish buzzings had forced authority to interfere with the press. What's more, the countermove was feeble and ineffective. It wouldn't work. It was doomed to failure, serving only as a stopgap while they sat around and beat their brains for more decisive measures.

The more persistently a government maintains silence on a given subject of discussion, the more the public talks about it, thinks about it. The longer and more stubborn the silence the guiltier it looks to the talkers and thinkers. In time of war the most morale-lowering question that can be asked is,

'What are they hiding from us *now?*'

Some hundreds of citizens would be asking themselves that same question tomorrow, the next day or the next week. The potent words *Dirac Angestun Gesept* would be on a multitude of lips, milling around in a like number of minds, merely because the powers-that-be were afraid to talk.

And if a government fears to admit even the pettiest facts of war, how much faith can the common man place in the leadership's claim not to be afraid of anything? *Hi?*

A disease gains in menace when it spreads, popping up in places far apart and taking on the characteristics of an epidemic. For that reason Mowry's first outing from his new abode was to Radine, a town two-forty miles south of Pertane.

Population three hundred thousand, hydro-electric power, bauxite



mines, aluminum extraction plants.

He caught an early morning train. It was overcrowded with all those people compelled to move around by the various needs of war: sullen workers, bored soldiers, self-satisfied officials, colourless nonentities. The seat facing him was occupied by a heavy-bellied character with bloated, porcine features, a caricaturist's idea of the Jaimec Minister of Food.

The train set off, hit up a fast clip. People piled in and out at intermediate stations. Pigface contemptuously ignored Mowry, watched the passing landscape with lordly disdain, finally fell asleep and let his mouth hang open. He was twice as hoglike in his slumbers and would have attained near-perfection with a lemon between his teeth.

Thirty miles from Radine the door from the coach ahead slammed open, a civilian policeman entered. He was accompanied by two burly, hard-faced characters in plain clothes.

This trio halted by the nearest passenger.

"Your ticket," demanded the cop.

The passenger handed it over, his expression scared. The policeman examined it front and back, passed it to his companions who studied it in turn.

"Your identity-card."

That got the same treatment, the cop looking it over as if doing a routine chore, the other two surveying it more critically and with concealed suspicion.

"Your movement permit."

It passed the triple scrutiny, was given back along with the ticket and identity-card. The recipient's face showed vast relief, The cop picked on the passenger sitting next to him.

"Your ticket,"

Mowry, seated two-thirds the way along the coach, observed this performance with much curiosity and a little apprehension.

His feelings boosted to alarm when they reached the seventh passenger.

For some reason best known to themselves the tough-looking pair in plain clothes gazed longer and more intently at this one's documents. Meanwhile, the passenger developed visible signs of agitation. They stared at his strained face, weighing him up. Their own features wore the hungry expressions of predatory animals about to tear down a victim.

"Stand up!" barked one of them.

The passenger shot to his feet and stood quivering. He swayed slightly and it was not due to the rocking of the train.

While the cop looked on, the two frisked the passenger with speed and professional thoroughness. They took things out of his pockets, pawed them around, shoved them back. They patted his clothes all over, showing no respect for his person.

Finding nothing of significance, one of them muttered an oath then yelled at the victim, "Well, what's giving you the shakes?"

"I don't feel so good," said the passenger, feebly.

"Is that so? What's the matter with you?"

"Travel sickness. I always get this way in trains."

"It's a story, anyway." He glowered at the other, lost patience and made a careless gesture. "All right, you can sit"

At that the passenger collapsed into his seat and breathed heavily. He had the mottled complexion of one almost sick from fear and relief. The cop eyed him a moment, let go a sniff and turned attention to number eight.

"Ticket."

There were ten more to be chivvied before these inquisitors reached Mowry. He was willing to take a chance on his documents passing muster but he dared not risk a search. The cop was just a plain, ordinary cop. The other two were members of the all-powerful Kaitempi; if they dipped into his pockets the balloon would go up once and for all. And in due time, when on Terra it was realised that his silence was the silence of the grave, a cold-blooded specimen named Wolf would give with the sales talk to another sucker.

"Turn around. Walk bow-legged. We want you to become a wasp."

By now most of the passengers were directing their full attention along the aisle, watching what was going on and meanwhile trying to ooze an aura of patriotic rectitude.

Mowry slid a surreptitious look at Pigface who was still lolling opposite with head hanging on chest and mouth wide open.

Were those sunken little eyes really closed or were they watching him between narrowed lids?

Short of pushing his face right up against the other's unpleasant countenance he couldn't tell for certain. But it made no difference, the trio were edging nearer every moment and he had to take a risk. Furtively he felt behind him, found a tight but deep gap in the upholstery where the bottom of the backrest met the rear of the seat. Keeping his attention riveted upon Pigface, he edged a pack of stickers and two crayons out of his pocket, crammed them into the gap, poking them well out of sight. The sleeper opposite did not stir or blink an eyelid.

Two minutes later the cop gave Pigface an irritable shove on the shoulder and that worthy woke up with a snort. He glared at the cop, then at the pair in plain clothes.

"So! What is this?"

"Your ticket," said the cop.

"A traffic check, *hi?*" responded Pigface; showing sudden understanding. "Oh, well -" Inserting fat fingers in a vest pocket he took out an ornate card embedded in a slice of transparent plastic. This he exhibited to the trio as if it were the equivalent of the keys to the kingdom. The cop stared at it and became servile. The two toughies stiffened like raw recruits caught dozing on parade.

"Your pardon; Major," apologised the cop.

"It is granted," assured Pigface, showing a well-practised mixture of arrogance and condescension. "You are only doing your duty." He favoured the rest of the coach with a beam of triumph born of petty power, openly enjoying the situation and advertising himself as being several grades above common herd.

Eyeing him with concealed dislike, Mowry became obsessed with the

notion that some buttocks have been designed by Nature specifically to be kicked good and hard and that such a target was within foot-reach right now. His right shoe got the fidgets at the thought of it but he kept it firmly on the floor.

Leery and embarrassed, the cop switched to Mowry, said,

"Ticket."

Mowry handed it over, striving to look innocent and bored.

Pseudo-nonchalance didn't come easy because now he was the focal point of the coach's battery of eyes. Almost all the other passengers were looking his way, Pigface was surveying him speculatively and the two Kaitempi agents were giving him the granite-hard stare.

"Identity-card."

That got passed across.

"Movement permit."

He surrendered it, braced himself for the half-expected command of, "Stand up!"

It did not come. Anxious to get away from the fat Major's cold, official gaze, the three examined the papers, handed them back without comment and moved on. Mowry shoved the documents into his pocket, tried to keep a great relief out of his voice ras he spoke to the other.

"I wonder what they're after."

"It is no business of yours," said Pigface, as insultingly as possible.

"No, of course not," agreed Mowry.

There was silence between them. Pigface sat mooning through the window and showed no inclination to resume his slumbers. Damn the fellow, thought Mowry, retrieving the hidden stickers was going to prove difficult with that slob awake and alert.

A door crashed shut as the cop and Kaitempi agents finished with that coach and went through to the following one. A minute later the train pulled up with such suddenness that a couple of passengers were thrown from their seats. Outside the train and farther back toward the rear end voices started shouting.

Heaving himself to his feet, Pigface opened the window's top half, stuck his head out and looked back toward the source of the noise. Then with speed surprising in one so cumbersome he whipped a gun from his pocket, ran along the aisle and through the end door. Outside the bawling grew louder.

Mowry got up and had a look through the window. Near the tail of the train a small bunch of figures were running alongside the track, the cop and the Kaitempi slightly in the lead. As he watched, the latter swung up their right arms and several sharp cracks rang through the morning air. It was impossible to see at whom they were shooting.

Also beside the train, gun in hand, Pigface was pounding heavily along in pursuit of the pursuers. Curious faces popped out of windows all along the line of coaches. Mowry called to the nearest face.

"What happened?"

"Those three came in to check papers. Some fellow saw them, made a wild dash to the opposite door and jumped out.

They stopped the train and went after him."

"Was he hurt when he jumped?"

"Not by the looks of it. Last I saw of him he was diminishing in the distance like a champion meika. He got a pretty.

good start. They'll be lucky to catch him."

"Who was he, anyway?"

"No idea. Some wanted criminal, I suppose."

"Well," offered Mowry; "if the Kaitempi came after me I'd hotfoot it like a scared Spakum."

"Who wouldn't?" said the other.

Withdrawing, Mowry took his seat. All the other travellers were at the windows, their full attention directed outside. This was an opportune moment. He dug a hand into the hiding-place, extracted the stickers and crayons, pocketed them.

The train stayed put for half an hour during which there was no more excitement within hearing. Finally it jerked into motion and at the same time Pigface reappeared and dumped himself into his seat. His face was thunderous. He looked sour enough to pickle his own hams.

"Did you catch him?" asked Mowry, lending his manner all the politeness and respect he could muster.

Pigface bestowed a dirty look. "It is no business of yours."

"No, of course not," confirmed Mowry for the second time.

The previous silence came back and remained until the train pulled into Radine. This being the terminus, everybody got out. Mowry padded along with the mob through the station exit but did not make a beeline for punishable windows and walls.

Instead he followed Pigface.

Shadowing presented no great difficulty. Pigface behaved as though the likelihood of being trailed would be the last thing ever to enter his mind. He went his way with the arrogant assurance of one who has the law in his pocket, all ordinary persons being less than the dust beneath his chariot wheel. In this respect his strength was his weakness, a fatal weakness as he had yet to discover.

Immediately outside the station's arched entrance Pigface turned right, plodded a hundred yards along the approach-road to the car-park at the farther end. Here he stopped by a long, green dynocar, felt in his pocket for keys.

Lingering in the shadow of a projecting buttress, Mowry watched the quarry unlock the door and squeeze inside. He hustled across the road to a taxi-stand, climbed into the leading vehicle. The move was perfectly timed; he sank into the seat just as the green dynocar whined past.

"Where to?" asked the taxi-driver.

"Can't tell you exactly," said Mowry, evasively. "I've been here only once before and that was years ago. But I know the way. Just follow my instructions"

The taxi's dynamo set up a rising hum as the machine sped down the road while its passenger kept attention on the car ahead and gave curt orders from time to time. It would have been lots easier, he knew,



to have pointed and said, "Follow that green car." But that would have linked him in the driver's mind with Pigface or at least with Pigface's green dyno. The Kaitempi were experts at ferreting out such links and following them to the bitter end. As it was, the taxi-driver had no idea that he was shadowing anyone.

Swiftly the chaser and the chased threaded their way through the centre of Radine until eventually the leader made a sharp turn to the left and rolled down a ramp into the basement of a large apartment building. Mowry let the taxi run a couple of hundred yards farther on before he called a halt.

"This will do me." He got out, felt for money. "Nice to have a good, dependable memory, isn't it?"

"Yar," said the driver. "One guilder six-tenths."

Mowry gave him two guilders, watched him cruise away.

Hastening back to the apartment building, he entered, took an inconspicuous seat in its huge foyer, lay back and pretended to be enjoying a semi-doze while waiting for someone. There were several others sitting around none of whom took the slightest notice of him.

Sure enough he'd not been there half a minute when Pigface came into the other end of the foyer from a door leading to the basement garage. Without so much as a glance around he stepped into one of a bank of small automatic elevators. The door slid shut. The illuminated telltale on the lintel winked a succession of numbers, stopped at seven, held it awhile, then winked downward to zero. The door glided open, showing the box now empty.

After another five minutes Mowry yawned, stretched, consulted his watch and went out. He paced along the street until he found a phone

booth. From it he called the apartment building, got its switchboard operator.

"I was supposed to meet somebody in your foyer nearly an hour ago," he explained. "I can't make it. If he's still waiting I'd like him to be told I can't get along."

"Who is he?" asked the operator. "A resident?"

"Yes - but I've clean forgotten his name. Nobody is more stupid than me about names. He is plump, got heavy features, lives on the seventh floor. Major ... major ... what a soko of a memory I've got!"

"That would be Major Sallana," the operator said.

"Correct," agreed Mowry. "Major Sallana - I had it at the back of my mind all the time."

"Hold on. I'll see if he's still waiting." There followed a minute's silence before the operator returned with, "No, he isn't. I've just called his apartment and there's no reply. Do you wish to leave a message for him?"

"It won't be necessary-he must have given me up. It's not of great importance, anyway. Live long!"

"Live long!" said the operator.

So there was no reply from the apartment. Looked as if Pigface had gone straight in and straight out again. Unless he was lying in his bath and not inclined to answer the phone.

That didn't seem likely; he'd hardly had time to fill a tub, undress and get into it. If he really was absent from his rooms it meant that opportunity had presented itself so far as Mowry was concerned and

it was up to him to grab it while it was there.

Despite an inward sense of urgency, Mowry paused long enough to cope with other work. He looked through the booth's glass, found himself unobserved. Then he slapped a sticker on the facing window exactly where tireless talkers could contemplate it while holding the phone.

It said: *Power lovers started this war. Dirac Angestun Gesept will end it - and them!*

Returning to the apartments he strolled with deceitful confidence across the foyer, stepped into an unoccupied lift. He turned to face the open front, became conscious of someone hurrying toward the bank, glanced that way and was aghast to find Pigface approaching.

The fellow was wearing a ruminative scowl, hadn't yet seen him but undoubtedly would do so unless he moved fast. At once Mowry slammed the door and prodded the third button on the panel. The elevator glided up to the third floor, stopped.

He kept it there, the door still shut, until he heard the whine of an adjoining box passing him and going higher. Then he dropped back to ground-level, left the building. He felt thwarted and short-tempered and cursed his luck in a steady undertone.

Between then and mid-evening he worked off his ire by running around like mad, decorating Radine with one hundred and twenty stickers and fourteen chalked walls. On no occasion did anyone catch him at it though, as usual, he had several narrow escapes.

Deciding to call it a day for that kind of work, he dropped the remaining half-stick of crayon down a grid and thereby increased his safety margin to some degree. If stopped and searched they'd now

find nothing on him immediately recognisable as subversive material.

At the ten-time hour he champed through an overdue meal, having eaten nothing since breakfast. That finished, he looked up Sallana's number, called it, got no reply. Now was the time. Repeating his earlier tactic, he went to the building, took a lift to the seventh floor, this time without mishap. He trod silently along the heavy carpet of the corridor, looking at doors until he found one bearing the name he sought.

He knocked.

No answer.

He knocked again, a fraction louder but not loud enough to arouse others nearby.

Silence answered him.

This was where his hectic schooling came in. Taking from his pocket a bunch of keys that looked quite ordinary but weren't, he set to work on the lock, had the door open within precisely thirty-five seconds. Speed was essential for that task

- if anyone had chosen that time to enter the corridor he'd have been caught redhanded. Nobody did appear. He slipped through the door, carefully closed it behind him.

His first act was to make swift survey of the rooms and assure himself that nobody was lying around asleep or drunk.

There were four rooms, all vacant. Definitely Major Pigface Sallana was not at home.

Returning to the first room, Mowry gave it a sharp examination,

spotted a gun lying atop a small filing cabinet. He checked it, found it loaded, stuck it in his pocket.

Next, with expert technique he cracked open a big, heavy desk and started raking through its drawers. The way he did it had the sure, superfast touch of the professional criminal but was in fact a tribute to his college training.

The contents of the fourth drawer on the left made his hair stand on end. He had been seeking with the intention of confiscating whatever it was that made cops servile and even persuaded Kaitempi agents to stand to attention. Jerking open the drawer, he found himself gazing at a neat stack of writing paper bearing official print across its head.

This was more than he'd expected, more than he had hoped for in his most optimistic moments. To his mind it proved that despite his college lectures about caution, caution, everlasting caution, it pays to play hunches and take chances.

What the paper's caption said was:

DIRAC KAIMINA TEMPITI.

*Leshun Radine.*

In other words: the Sirian Secret Police - District of Radine. No wonder those thugs on the train had made ready to grovel. Pigface was a Kaitempi brasshat and as such outranked an army brigadier or even a space navy fleet leader.

This discovery upped the speed of his activity still further.

From the pile of luggage in the back room he seized a small case, forced it open, tossed the clothing it contained onto the floor. He

dumped all the Kaitempi writing paper into the case.

A little later he found a small embossing machine, tested it, found that it impressed the letters DKT surmounted by a winged sword. That also went into the case.

Finishing with the desk he started on the adjacent filing cabinet, his nostrils twitching with excitement as he worked at its top drawer. A faint sound came to his ears, he stopped, taut and listening. It was the scrape of a key in the door-lock.

The key failed to turn at the first attempt, tried again.

Mowry jumped toward the wall, flattened himself against it where he'd be concealed by the opening door. The key grated a second time, the lock responded, the door swung across his field of vision as Pigface lumbered in.

Pigface took four paces into the room before his brain accepted what his eyes could see. He came to a full stop, stared incredulously and with mounting fury at the ransacked desk while behind him the door drifted around and clicked shut.

Reaching a decision, he turned to go out and then saw the invader.

"Good evening," greeted Mowry, flat-voiced.

"You?" Pigface glowered at him with outraged authority.

"What are you doing here? What is the meaning of this?"

"I'm here as a common thief. The meaning is that you've been robbed."

"Then let me tell you -"

"When robbery is done," Mowry went on, "somebody has to be the victim. This time it's your turn. No reason why you should have all the luck all the time, is there?"

Pigface took a step forward.

"Sit down!" ordered Mowry, in sharp tones.

The other stopped but did not sit. He stood firm upon the carpet, his small, crafty eyes taking on a stubborn glint, his complexion dark. He spoke in manner suggesting that at any moment he might go bang.

"Put down that gun."

"Who? - me?" said Mowry.

"You don't know what you're doing," declared Pigface, conditioned by a lifetime of creating fear. "Because you don't know who I am. But when you do you'll wish."

"As happens, I do know who you are," Mowry chipped in.

"You're one of the Kaitempi's fat rats. A professional torturer, a paid strangler, a conscienceless soko who maims and kills for money and for the sadistic pleasure of it. Sit down when I tell you."

Still Pigface refused to sit. On the contrary, he refuted the popular belief that all bullies are cowards. Like many of his ilk he had brute courage. His eyes flared with hate, he took a heavy but swift step to one side while his hand dived into a pocket.

But the eyes that so often had calmly watched the death-throes of others had now betrayed him to his own end. The step had hardly been taken, the hand only just reached the pocket, when Mowry's gun

went *br-r-r-rup!* , not loudly but effectively. For five or six seconds Pigface stood wearing a stupid expression, then he teetered, fell backward with a thud that shook the room, rolled onto his side.

Gently opening the door a few inches, Mowry gazed into the corridor, remained listening awhile. There came no rush of feet toward the apartment, nobody raced away yelling for help. If anyone had heard the muffled burst of shots they must have attributed the noise to the flow of traffic far below.

Satisfied that the alarm had not been raised, he shut the door, bent over the body, had a close look at it. Pigface was as dead as he could be, the brief spray from the machine pistol having put seven slugs through his obese frame.

It was a pity, in a way, because Mowry would much have liked to have hammered, kicked or otherwise got out of him the answers to some cogent questions. Whether he could have gained his purpose in this respect was highly doubtful but it would have been worth the trying. There were many things he wanted to know about the Kaitempi, in particular the identities of its current victims, their physical condition and where they were hidden. No wasp could find supporters more loyal and enthusiastic than genuine natives of the planet rescued from the strangler's noose.

But one cannot thump information from a corpse. That was his sole regret. In all other respects he had cause for gratification.

For one thing, factual evidence of the methods of the Kaitempi was of such a revolting nature that to remove any one of them from the scheme of things was to do a favour to Sirians and Terrans alike. For another, such a daring, killing was an ideal touch in present circumstances: it lent murderous support to stickers and wall-scrawls.



It was a broad hint to the powers-that-be that somebody was willing and able to do more than talk. The wasp had done plenty of buzzing around. Now it had demonstrated its sting.

He searched the body and got what he had coveted from the moment that Pigface had basked in adulation upon the train. The ornate card set in thin plastic. It bore signs, seals and signatures, certified that the bearer held the rank of major in the Secret Police. Better still, it did not give the bearer's name and personal description, contenting itself with using a code-number in lieu. The Secret Police, it seemed, could be warily secret even between themselves, a habit of which others could take full advantage.

Mowry now returned attention to the filing cabinet. Most of the stuff within it proved to be worthless, revealing nothing not already known to Terran Intelligence. But there were three files containing case-histories of persons who had also been made to conform to the Kaitempi habit of hiding identities under code-numbers. Evidently Pigface had abstracted them from local headquarters and taken them home to study at leisure.

He scanned these papers rapidly. It soon became clear that the three unknowns had earned the enmity of the government by nursing political ambitions. They were potential rivals of those already in power. The case-histories said nothing to indicate whether they were now living or dead. The implication was that they were still alive, with their fate yet to be decided, otherwise it seemed hardly likely that Pigface would waste time on such documents. Anyway, the disappearance of these vital papers would aggravate the powers-that-be and possibly scare a few of them.

So he put the files in the case along with the rest of the loot. After that he made a swift hunt around for anything previously overlooked, searched spare suits in the bedroom, discovered, nothing more worth

taking. The last chore was to remove from the apartment all clues capable of linking him with the existing situation.

With the case in one hand and the gun in his pocket, he paused in the doorway, looked back at the body.

"Live long!"

Pigface did not deign to reply. He reposed in silence, his podgy right hand clasping a paper on which was inscribed: Executed by Dirac Angestun Gesept.

Whoever found the body would be sure to pass that message on. It would be equally certain to go from hand to hand, up the ascending scale or rank, right to the top brackets. With any luck at all it would give a few of them the galloping gripes.



# Chapter IV

LUCK HELD. Mowry did not have to wait long for a train to Pertane. He was more than glad of this because the bored station police tended to become inquisitive about travellers who sat around too long. True, if accosted he could show his documents or, strictly as a last resort, arrogantly use the stolen Kaitempi card to browbeat his way out of a possible trap: But it was better and safer not to become an object of attention in this place at this time.

The train came in and he managed to get aboard without having been noticed by one of several restlessly roaming cops.

After a short time it pulled out again, rumbled into pitch darkness. The lateness of the hour meant that passengers were few and the coach he had chosen had plenty of vacant seats. It was easy to select a place where he'd not be pestered by a garrulous neighbour or studied for the full length of the journey by someone with sharp eyes and a long memory. He lolled back, tired and heavy-eyed, and hoped to heaven that if there should be another police check en route his papers, or the Kaitempi card, or his gun would get him out of a jam.

One thing was certain: if Pigface's body were found within the next three or four hours the resulting hullabaloo would spread fast enough and far enough to ensure a thorough end-to-end search of the train. The searchers would have no suspect's description to go upon but they'd take a look into all luggage and recognise stolen property when they found it.

Anyone of relatively low brain-power would have the sense to grab the owner of said luggage and disregard all protestations of innocence.

He dozed uneasily to the hypnotic thrum-tiddy-thrum of the train. Every

time a door slammed or a window rattled he awoke, nerves stretched, body tense. A couple of times he wondered whether a top priority radio-call was beating the train to its destination.

‘Halt and search all passengers and luggage on the 11.20

from Radine.’

There was no check on the way. The train slowed, clanked through the points and switches of a large grid system, rolled into Pertane. Its passengers dismounted, all of them sleepy and a few looking half-dead as they straggled untidily toward the exit. Mowry timed himself to be in the rear of the bunch, lagging behind with half a dozen bandy-legged moochers. His full attention was directed straight ahead, watching for evidence of a grim-faced bunch waiting at the barrier.

If they were really there, in ambush for him, there'd be only two courses open to him. He could drop the case and with it the valuable loot, shoot first and fastest, make a bolt and hope to get away in the ensuing confusion. As a tactic it would give him the advantage of surprise. But failure meant immediate death and even success might be dearly bought with a couple of bullets in the body.

Alternatively he could try to bluff by marching straight up to the biggest and ugliest of them, shoving the case into his hands and saying with dopey eagerness, ‘Pardon, officer, but one of those fellows who just went through dropped this in front of me. I can't imagine why he abandoned his luggage.’

Then somewhere in the resulting chaos should occur the chance for him to amble around a corner and run as if jet-propelled.

He was sweaty with reaction when he found his fears were not confirmed. It had been his first murder and it was a murder because

they would define it as such. So he'd been paying for it in his own imagination, fancying himself hunted before the hunt was up. Beyond the barrier lounged two station police eyeing the emerging stream with total lack of interest and yawning from time to time. He went past practically under their noses and they could not have cared less about him.

But he wasn't yet out of the bag. Police on the station expected to see people carrying luggage any time of day or night.

Cops in the city streets were different, being more inclined to question the reason at such an indecent hour. They were nasty-minded about burdened walkers in the night.

That problem could be solved by the easy expedient of taking a taxi only to create another problem. Taxis have to be driven. Drivers have mouths and memories. The most taciturn of them could become positively gabby when questioned by the Kaitempi.

"You take anyone off the 11.20 from Radine?"

"Yar. Young fellow with a case."

"Notice anything suspicious about him? He act tough or behave warily, for instance?"

"Not that I noticed. Seemed all right to me. Wasn't a native Jaimecan though. Spoke with a real Mashambi growl."

"Remember where you took him, hi?"

"Yar, I do. I can show you."

There was an escape from this predicament; he took it by dumping the case in a rented locker on the station and walking away free of the

betraying burden. In theory the case should be safe enough for one full Jaimecan day. In ominous fact there was a slight chance of it being discovered and used as bait.

On a world where nothing was sacrosanct from their prying fingers the Kaitempi had master-keys to everything. They weren't above opening and searching every bank of lockers within a thousand miles of the scene of the crime if by any quirk of thought they took it into their heads that to do so would be a smart move. So when he returned in daytime to collect the case he'd have to approach the lockers with considerable caution, making sure that a watch was not being kept upon them by a ring of hard characters.

Pacing rapidly home, he was within half a mile of his destination when two cops stepped from a dark doorway the other side of the street.

"Hey, you!"

Mowry stopped. They came across, stared at him in grim silence. Then one made a gesture to indicate the high-shining stars, the deserted street.

"Wandering around pretty late, aren't you?"

"Nothing wrong with that, is there?" he answered, making his tone slightly apologetic.

"We are asking the questions," retorted the cop. "Where've you been to this hour?"

"On a train."

"From where?"

"Khamasta."

"And where're you going now?"

"Home."

"You'd have made it quicker in a taxi, wouldn't you?"

"Sure would," Mowry agreed. "Unfortunately I happened to be last out. Someone always has to be last out. By that time every taxi had been grabbed."

"Well, it's a story."

At this point the other cop chipped in. He adopted Technique Number Seven, namely, a narrowing of the eyes, an out-thrusting of the jaw and a harshening of the voice. Once in a while Number Seven would be rewarded with a guilty look or at least a hopelessly exaggerated expression of innocence.

He was very good at it, having practised it assiduously upon his wife and the bedroom mirror.

"You wouldn't perhaps have been nowhere near Khamasta, hi? You wouldn't perhaps have been spending the night taking a nice, easy stroll around Pertane and sort of absentmindedly messing around with walls and windows, would you?"

"No, I wouldn't," said Mowry. "For the reason that nobody would pay me a bad guilder for my trouble. Do I look crazy?"

"Not enough to be noticed," admitted the cop. "But somebody's doing it, crazy or not."

"Well, I can't blame you fellows for wanting to nab him.



I don't like loonies myself. They give me the creeps." He made an impatient gesture. "If you're going to search me how about getting the job done? I've had a long day, I'm dog-tired and I want to get home."

"I don't think we'll bother," said the cop. "You show us your identity-card."

Mowry dug it out. The cop gave it no more than a perfunctory glance while his companion ignored it altogether.

"All right, on your way. If you insist on walking the streets at this hour you must expect to be stopped and questioned.

There's a war on, see?"

"Yes, officer," said Mowry, meekly.

He pushed off at his best pace, thanking heaven he had got rid of his luggage. If he'd been holding that case they'd have regarded it, rightly enough, as probable evidence of evil-doing. To prevent them from opening it and inspecting the contents he'd have had to subdue them with the Kaitempi card. He didn't want to make use of that tactic if he could help it until sometime after Pigface's killing had been discovered and the resulting uproar had died down. Say in at least one month's time.

Reaching his apartment, he undressed but did not go immediately to sleep. He lay in bed and examined the precious card again and again. Now that he had more time to ponder its full significance and obvious potentialities he found himself torn two ways - should he keep it or not?

The socio-political system of the Sirian Empire being what it was, a Kaitempi card was the prime scare-device on any Sirian-held planet. The mere sight of this dreaded totem was enough to make ninety-

nine percent of civilians get down on their knees and salaam, their faces in the dust. That fact made a Kaitempi card of tremendous value to any wasp. Yet Terra had not provided him with such a weapon. He'd had to grab it for himself. The obvious conclusion was that Terran Intelligence lacked an original copy.

Out there amid the mist of stars, on the green-blue world called Earth, they could duplicate anything save a living.

entity - and could produce a very close imitation even of that.

Maybe they needed this card. Given the chance, maybe they'd arm every wasp in existence with a mock-majorship in the Kaitempi and by the same token give life to some otherwise doomed to death.

For himself, to surrender the card to Terran authority would be like voluntarily sacrificing his queen while playing a hard-fought and bitter game of chess. All the same, before going to sleep he reached his conclusion: on his first return to the cave he would beam a detailed report of what had happened, the prize he had won and what it was worth. Terra could then decide whether or not to deprive him of it in the interest of the greater number.

The wasp buzzed alone, unaided, but was loyal to the swarm.

At noon he made cautious return to the station, hung around for twenty minutes as if waiting to meet an incoming traveller. He kept sharp, careful watch in all directions while appearing bored and interested in nothing save occasional streams of arrivals. Some fifty or sixty other people were idling about in unconscious imitation of himself, among them he could detect nobody maintaining a sly eye upon the lockers.

There were about a dozen who looked overmuscled and wore the deadpan hardness of officials but these were solely interested in

people coming through the barriers.

Finally he took the chance, ambled casually up to his locker, stuck his key in its door while wishing to God that he had a third eye located in the back of his neck. Opening the door he took out the case and had a bad moment as he stood with the damning evidence in his hand. If ever it was going to occur, now was the time for a shout of triumph, a sudden grip on his shoulder, a bunch of callous faces all around.

Still nothing happened. He strolled away looking blandly innocent but deep inside as leery as a fox who hears the dim, distant baying of the hounds. Outside the station he jumped a crosstown bus, maintained a wary watch for followers.

Chances were very high that nobody had noticed him, nobody was interested in him, because in Radine the Kaitempi were still running around in circles without the vaguest notion of where to probe first. But he could not take that for granted nor dare he underestimate their craftiness. There was one chance in a thousand that by some item he'd overlooked or hadn't thought of he'd given them a lead straight to the lockers and that they had decided not to nab him on the spot, hoping that if left to run loose he'd take them to the rest of the presumed mob.

So during the ride he peered repeatedly backward, observed passengers getting on and off, tried to see if he could spot a loaded dynocar tagging along somewhere behind. He changed buses five times, lugged the case along two squalid alleys, walked into the fronts and out the backs of three department stores.

Satisfied at last that there was no surreptitious pursuit he made for his apartment, kicked the case under the bed, let go a deep sigh. They'd warned him that this kind of life would prove a continual strain on the nerves. It sure was!

Going out again, he bought a box of envelopes and a cheap typewriter. Then using the Kaitempi paper he spent the rest of the day and part of the next one typing with forceful brevity. He didn't have to bother about leaving his prints all over this correspondence; Terran fingerprint treatment had turned his impressions into vague, unclassifiable blotches.

When he had finished that task he devoted the following day to patient research in the city library. He made copious notes, went home, addressed a stack of envelopes, stamped the lot.

In the early evening he mailed more than two hundred letters to newspaper editors, radio announcers, military leaders, senior civil servants, police chiefs, prominent politicians and key-members of the government. Defiantly positioned under the Kaitempi heading and supported by the embossed seal of its winged sword, the message was short but said plenty.

*Sallana is the first.*

*There are plenty more to come.*

*The list is long.*

*Dirac Angestun Gesept.*

That done, he burned the envelope-box and dropped the typewriter in the river where it ran deep. If he had occasion to write any more letters he'd buy another one and afterward get rid of it the same way. He could well afford to buy and scrap a hundred typewriters if he thought it necessary. The more the merrier. If the Kaitempi analysed the type on threatening correspondence and found a number of untraceable machines being used, they'd get the idea that a gigantic organisation was at work. Furthermore, every purchase helped inflate

the Jaimecan economy with worthless paper.

His next step was to visit a drive-yourself agency and rent a dynocar for a week, using the name of Shir Agavan and the address of the hotel where first he'd holed-up. By its means he got rid of five hundred stickers distributed over six small towns and thirty villages. The job was a lot riskier than it had been in Radine or Pertane.

The villages were by far the worst to handle, the smaller in size the more troublesome they proved. In a city of a quarter million to two million population a stranger is an insignificant nonentity; in a dump of less than one thousand inhabitants he is noticed, remarked upon, his every move watched.

On many occasions a bunch of yokels gave him the chance to slap up a sticker by switching attention from him to his car. Twice somebody took down the car's number just for the ducks of it. It was a good thing he'd given a blind-alley lead when hiring it because police inquiries about the widespread rash of subversive stickers would almost certainly make them relate the phenomenon to the laconic, fast-moving stranger driving dyno XC 17978.

He had been on Jaimec exactly four weeks when he disposed of the last of the stickers from his bag and thus reached the end of phase one. It was at this point he began to feel despondent.

In the papers and over the air officialdom still maintained complete silence about traitorous activities. Not a word had been said about the slaughter of Pigface Sallana. All the outward evidence suggested that the government remained bliss-fully unaware of waspish buzzings and was totally unconcerned about the existence of an imaginery *Dirac Angestun Gesept*.

Thus deprived of visible reactions Mowry had no way of telling what

results he had achieved, if any. In retrospect this paper-war looked pretty futile in spite of all Wolf's glib talk about pinning down an army with little more than gestures.

He, Mowry, had been lashing out in the dark and the other fellow wasn't even bothering to hit back.

That made it difficult to maintain enthusiasm at the first feverish pitch. Just one public squeal of pain from the opposition or a howl of fury or a tirade of threats would have given him a big boost by showing him that at last he had landed a real wallop on something solid. But they wouldn't give him the petty satisfaction of hearing them breathing hard.

He was paying the psychological penalty of working alone.

There was no companion-in-arms with whom to share stimulating speculations about the enemy's hidden countermoves.

Nobody to encourage or from whom to receive encouragement.

Nobody sharing the conspiracy and the danger and - as is usual among two or more - the laughs. In his waspish role he was thrown wholly upon his own moral resources which needed feeding with factual evidence that so far had not been forthcoming.

Swiftly he built up a blue spell so dismal and depressing that for two days he hung around the apartment and did nothing but mope. On the third day pessimism evaporated and was replaced with a growing sense of alarm. He did not ignore the new feeling. At training college they'd warned him times without number always to heed it.

"The fact that one is hunted in deadly earnest can cause an abnormal sharpening of the mental perceptions almost to the point of

developing a sixth sense. That's what makes hardened criminals difficult to catch. They get hunches and play them.

Many a badly wanted crook has moved out one jump ahead of the police with such timeliness that they've suspected a tip-off. All that had really happened was that the fellow suddenly got the jitters and took off good and fast. For the sake of your skin you do the same. If ever you feel they're getting close don't hang around and try check on it - just beat it someplace else !"

Yes, that's what they'd said to him. He remembered now that he had wondered whether this ability to smell danger might be quasi-telepathic. The police rarely pulled a raid without a stakeout or some sort of preliminary observation.

A hound hanging around a hole, sharp-eyed, sharp-toothed and unable to avoid thinking of what he was doing, might give the one in hiding his mental scent that would register not in clear thought-forms but rather as the inward shrilling of an alarm-bell.

On the strength of that he grabbed his bags and bolted out the back way. Nobody was loafing around at that moment, nobody saw him go, nobody tracked him as he went.

Four beefy characters stationed themselves within watching and shooting distance of the back a little before midnight. Two carloads of similar specimens drew up at the front, bashed open the door, charged upstairs. They were there three hours and half-killed the landlord before they became convinced of his ignorance.

Mowry knew nothing of this. It was the much-needed boost he was lucky to miss.

His new sanctuary a mile and a half distant was one long, narrow

room at top of a dilapidated building in Pertane's toughest quarter, a district where slatterns kept house by kicking the dirt around until it got lost. Here he'd not been asked for any name or identity-card, it being one of the more delightful customs of the country to mind one's own goddam business. All that proved necessary was to exhibit a fifty guilder note.

The money had been snatched, a cheap and well-worn key given in exchange.

Promptly he made the key useless by buying a cruciform multiward lock and fitting it to the door. He also fixed a couple of recessed bolts to the window despite that it was forty feet above ground and well-nigh unreachable. Finally he built a small hidden trap in the roof, this being his intended escape route if ever the stairs became solidly blocked with enemy carcasses.

For the time being, he reckoned, he stood chiefly in danger of the locality's small-time thieves - the big ones wouldn't bother to cut their way into one room in a slum. The locks and bolts should be plenty good enough to keep out the pikers.

He trusted his unsavoury neighbours as much as they trusted their own mothers which was as far as said mothers could be thrown with one hand against a strong wind.

Again he had to spend some time cleaning the joint and making it fit for Terran habitation. If ever he was caught by the Kaitempi he'd roll in the deep, stinking filth of a death-cell, naked, manacled and half-starved until they led him to the strangling-post. Dirt would then have to be endured because there'd be no choice about it. But so long as he remained free he insisted on his right to be fastidious. By the time he'd finished his housework the room was brighter and sweeter than ever it had been since the builders moved out and the proletariat



moved in.

By now he'd recovered from both his depression and his sense of impending disaster. In better spirits he went outdoors, walked along the road until he reached a vacant lot littered with junk. When nobody was looking he dropped Pigface's gun on the lot at a point near the sidewalk where it could easily be seen.

Ambling onward with hands in pockets, his gait a bow-legged slouch, he reached a doorway, lounged in it and assumed the look of bored cunning of one who sows not neither doth he reap. This was the fashionable expression in that area. Mostly his gaze was aimed across the street but all the time he was keeping surreptitious watch upon the gun lying seventy yards away.

What followed proved yet again that not one person in ten uses his eyes. Within short time thirty people had passed close by the gun without seeing it. Six of these walked within a few inches of it, one actually stepped over it.

Finally someone spotted it. He was a shrivel-chested, spindly-legged youth with splotches of darker purple on his face.

Halting by the gun, he stared at it, bent over for a closer look but did not touch it. Then he glanced hurriedly and, failed to see the watching Mowry who had retreated farther into the doorway. Again he bent toward the gun, put out a hand as if to grab it. At the last moment he changed his mind, hastened away. He crossed right in front of Mowry, his face wearing wearing a mixture of frustrated cupidity and fear.

"Wanted it but too. scared to take it," Mowry decided.

Twenty more pedestrians passed. Of these, two noticed the gun and pretended they'd not seen it. Neither came back to claim it when

nobody was near. Probably they viewed the weapon as dangerous evidence that someone had seen fit to dump - and they weren't going to be chumps enough to be caught with it. The one who eventually confiscated it was an artist in his own right.

This character, a heavily built individual with hanging jowls and a rolling gait, went by the gun and noted its existence without batting an eyelid or changing pace. Continuing onward, he stopped at the next corner fifty yards away, looked around with the air of a stranger uncertain of his whereabouts, dug a notebook from his pocket and put on a great play of consulting it. All the time his sharp little eyes were darting this way and that but failed to find the watcher in the doorway.

After a while he retraced his steps, crossed the vacant lot, dropped the notebook on top of the gun, scooped up both in one swift snatch and ambled casually onward. The way the book remained prominently in his hand while the gun disappeared was a wonder to behold.

Letting the fellow get a good lead, Mowry emerged from the doorway and followed. He hoped the other had only a short way to go. This, obviously, was a smart customer likely to notice and throw off a shadower if chased too long. He didn't want to lose him after the trouble he'd taken to find a willing gun-grabber.

Floppy Jowls continued along the road, turned right into a narrower and dirtier street, headed over a crossroad, turned left. At no time did he behave suspiciously, take evasive tactics or show any awareness of being followed.

Near the end of the street he entered a cheap restaurant with dusty windows and a cracked, unreadable sign above its door. A few moments later Mowry mooched past, gave the place a swift once-over. It had an ominous look about it, a typical rat-hole where underworld characters took refuge from the sunshine while they

waited for the night. But. nothing ventured, nothing gained. Boldly he shoved open the door and walked in.

The place stank of unwashed bodies, stale food and drippings of *zith*. Behind the bar a sallow-faced attendant eyed him with the hostile expression reserved for any and every unfamiliar face. A dozen customers sat in the half-light by the stained and paintless wall and glowered at him on general principles. They looked a choice bunch of apaches.

Mowry leaned on the bar and spoke to Sallow Face, making his tones sound tough. "I'll have a mug of coffee."

" *Coffee?* " The other jumped as if rammed with a needle.

"Blood of Jaime, that's a *Spakum* drink."

"Yar," said Mowry. "I want to spit it all over the floor."

He let go a harsh, grating laugh. "Wake up and give me a *zith*."

The attendant scowled, snatched a none too clean glassite mug from a shelf, pumped it full of low-grade *zith* and slid it across. "Six-tenths."

Paying him, Mowry took the drink across to a small table in the darkest corner, a dozen pairs of eyes following his every move. He sat down, looked idly around and ignored the grim silence. His manner was that of one thoroughly at home when slumming. His questing gaze found Floppy Jowls just as that worthy left his seat, came across mug in hand and joined him at the table.

The latter's move in apparently welcoming the newcomer caused a sudden relaxation in the place. Tension disappeared, toughies lost interest in Mowry, the bar attendant lounged back, general

conversation was resumed. That showed Floppy Jowls was sufficiently well-known among the hard-faced clientele for them to take on trust anyone known to him.

Meanwhile, he had squatted face to face with Mowry and introduced himself with, "My name is Arhava, Butin Arhava."

He paused, waiting for a response that did not come; then went on, "You're a stranger. From Directa. Specifically from Masham. I can tell by your accent."

"Clever of you," Mowry encouraged.

"One has to be clever to get by. The stupid don't. They choke in a rope." He took a swig of *zith*. "You wouldn't walk into this place unless you were a genuine stranger - or one of the Kaitempi."

"No?"

"No, I don't think so. And the Kaitempi wouldn't dare send just one man in here. They'd send six. Maybe more. The Kaitempi would expect trouble aplenty in the Cafe Susun."

"That," said Mowry, "suits me very well."

"It suits me even better." Butin Arhava showed the snout of Pigface's gun pver the edge of the table. It was pointed straight at the other's middle. "I do not like being followed.

If this gun went off nobody in here would give a damn. You wouldn't worry either, not for long. So you'd better talk. Why have you been following me, *hi*?"

"You knew I was behind you all the time?"

"I did. What's the big idea?"

"You'll hardly believe it when I tell you." Leaning across the table, Mowry grinned straight into his scowling face. "I want to give you a thousand guilders."

"That's nice," said Arhava, unimpressed. "That's very nice."

His eyes narrowed. "And you're all set to reach into your pocket and give it me, *hi*?"

Mowry nodded, still grinning. "Yes - unless you're so lily-livered that you prefer to reach into it yourself."

"You won't bait me that way," retorted Arhava. "I've got control of the situation and I'm keeping it, see? Now get busy dipping - but if what comes out of that pocket is a gun it's you and not me who'll be at the wrong end of the bang. Go ahead and dip. I'm watching."

With the weapon steadily aimed at him over the table's rim, Mowry felt in his right-hand pocket, drew out a neat wad of twenty-guilder notes, poked them across. "There you are."

"They're all yours."

For a moment Arhava gaped with complete incredulity, then he made a swift pass and the notes vanished. The gun also disappeared. He lay back in his seat and studied Mowry with a mixture of bafflement and suspicion. "Now show the string."

"No string," Mowry assured. "Just a gift from an admirer."

"Meaning who?"

"Me."

"But you don't know me from the Statue of Jaime."

"I hope to," said Mowry. "I hope to know you well enough to convince you of something mightily important"

"And what is that?"

"There's lots more money where that came from."

"Is that so?" Arhava gave a knowing smirk. "Well, where did it come from?"

"I just told you - an admirer."

"Don't give me that.

"All right. The conversation is over. It's been nice knowing you. Now get back to your own seat"

"Don't be silly." Licking his lips, Arhava glanced cautiously around the room, reduced his voice almost to a whisper. "How much?"

"Twenty thousand guilders."

The other fanned his hands as if beating off an annoying fly. "Sh-h-h! Don't say it so loud!" Another leery look around the room. "Did you actually say *twenty thousand*?"

"Yar."

Arhava took a deep breath. "Who d'you want killed?"

"One - for a start."

"Are you serious?"

"I've just given you a thousand guilders and that's not funny.

Besides, you can put the matter to the test. Cut a throat and collect it's as easy as that."

"Just for a start, you said?"

"I did. By that is meant that if I like your work I'll offer further employment. I've got a list of names and will pay twenty thousand per body." Watching him for effect, Mowry put a note of warning into his voice. "The Kaitempi will reward you with ten thousand for delivering me into their hands. That's money for the taking and with no risk attached.

But to get it you'll have to sacrifice all chance at a far bigger sum, maybe a million or more." He paused, finished with pointed sarcasm, "One does not flood one's own goldmine, does one?"

"Nar, not unless one is cracked." Arhava became slightly unnerved as his thoughts milled around. "And what makes you think I'm a professional killer?"

"I don't think anything of the sort. But I know you're a shady character, probably with a police record, otherwise you wouldn't have swiped that gun and neither would you dive into a crummy joint like this. That means you're just the type who'll do some dirty work for me or, alternatively, can intro-duce me to someone who is willing to do it. Personally, I don't care a hoot who performs the task, you or your Uncle Smatsy. I reek of money. You love the scent of it. If you want to go on, sniffing it you've got to do something about it."

Arhava nodded slowly, stuck a hand in his pocket and fondled the thousand guilders. There was a queer fire in his eyes. "I don't do that kind of work, it's not quite in my line.

And it needs more than one, but -"

"But what?"

"Not saying. I've got to have time to think this over. I want to discuss it with a couple of friends."

Mowry stood up. "I'll give you four days to find them and chew the fat. By then you'd better have made up your mind one way or the other. I'll be here again in four days time at this hour." Then he gave the other a light but imperative shove in the shoulder. "I don't like being followed either. Lay off if you want to grow old and get rich."

With that; he departed: Arhava remained obediently seated and gazed dreamily at the door. After a time he called for, another *zith*. His voice was strangely hoarse.

The barman dumped the drink at his elbow, said with no great interest, "Friend of yours, Butin?"

"Yar Datham Hain."

Datham Hain being the Sirian version of Santa Claus.





# Chapter V

IN THE EARLY morning Mowry went to another and different agency, rented a dynocar under the name of Morfid Payth with an address in Radine. He couldn't risk using the same agency twice in succession; it was highly likely that already the police had visited the first one and asked pointed questions. There they'd recognise him as the subject of official investigation, detain him on some pretext while they used the telephone.

He drove out the town carefully, with circumspection, not wanting to draw the attention of any patrol-cars lurking around. Eventually he reached the tree with the abnormal branch formation and the mock-tombstone beneath it. For a few minutes he stopped nearby pretending to tinker with the dynamo until the road became completely clear of traffic in both directions. Then swiftly he drove the car over the grass verge and in between the trees for as far as he could get it.

After that he went back on foot and satisfied himself that it could not be seen from the road. With his feet he scuffed the grass and thus concealed the tyre-tracks entering the forest. That done, he headed for the distant cave, moving as fast as he could make it.

He got there in the late afternoon. When still deep among the trees and eight hundred yards from his destination the ornamental ring on the middle finger of his left hand started tingling. The sensation grew progressively stronger as he neared. This caused him to make a straight and confident approach with no preliminary skirmishing around. The ring would not have tingled if Container-22 had ceased to radiate and that would happen only on the breaking of its beam by the invasion of the cave by something man-sized.

Yes, if accidentally or otherwise the enemy had found the hidden dump and made a trap of it, the quarry would have faded away with a half-mile running start. And they'd have been left to sit on their butts and wait for him who never arrives.

Also in the cave was something more spectacular than an invisible warning system. Probably the discoverers' curiosity would have got the better of them and they'd start prying open the stacked duralumin cylinders including Container-30. When they interfered with that one the resulting bang would be heard and felt in faraway Pertane.

Once in the cave he opened Container-2, got busy while daylight lasted and treated himself to a real Earth-meal concocted of real Earth-food. He was far from being a guzzle-guts but shared with exiles a delight in the flavours of home.

A small can of pineapple seemed like a taste of heaven, he lingered over every drop of juice and made it last twenty minutes. The feed gave quite a lift to his morale, made the growing forces out there among the stars seem not so far away.

Upon the fall of darkness he rolled Container-5 out the cave's mouth, upended it on the tiny beach. It was now a tall silver-gray cylinder pointed at the stars. From its side he unclipped a small handle, stuck it into a hole in the slight blister near the base, wound vigorously. Something inside began to murmur a smooth and steady *zuum-zuum*.

He now took the top cap off the cylinder, having to stand on tiptoe to get at it. Then he sat on a nearby rock and waited.

After the cylinder had warmed up it emitted a sharp click and the *zuum-zuum* struck a deeper note. He knew that it was now shouting into space, using soundless words far stronger and more penetrating

than those of any spoken language.

*Whirrup-dzzt-pam! Whirrup-dzzt-pam!*

"Jaimec calling! Jaimec calling!"

Now he could do nothing more save bide his time in patience. The call was not being directed straight to Terra which was much too far away to permit a conversation with brief time-lags. It was being squirted at a spatial listening-post and field headquarters near enough to be on or perhaps actually within the rim of the Sirian Empire. He did not know its precise location and, as Wolf had remarked, what he didn't know he couldn't tell.

A prompt response was unlikely. Out there in the dark they'd be listening for a hundred calls on a hundred frequencies and be held on some of them while messages passed to and fro. He'd have to wait his turn.

Nearly three hours crawled by while the cylinder stood on the pebble beach and gave forth its scarcely hearable *zuum-zuum*. Then suddenly a tiny red eye glowed bright and winked steadily near its top.

Again he strained on tiptoe, cursing his shortness, felt into the cylinder's open top and took out what looked exactly like an ordinary telephone. Holding it to his ear, he said into the mouthpiece, "JM on Jaimec."

It was a few minutes before the response came back in the shape of a voice that sounded as though speaking through a load of gravel. But it was a Terran voice speaking the wel-come-sounding Terran language. It said, "Ready to tape your report. Fire away."

Mowry tried to sit down while he talked but found the connecting cord too short. So he had to stand. In this position he recited as fast as he could. *The Tale of a Wasp* by Samuel Sucker, he thought wryly. He gave it in full detail and again had to wait quite a while for the come-back.

Then the voice rasped, "Good! You're doing fine!"

"Am I? Can't see any signs of it so far. I've been plastering paper all over the planet and nothing is happening."

"Plenty is happening," contradicted the Voice. It came through with a rhythmic variation in amplitude as it fooled Sirian detection devices by switching five times per second through a chain of differently positioned transmitters. "You just can't see the full picture from where you're standing."

"How about giving me a glimpse?"

"The pot is coming slowly but surely to the boil. Their fleets are being widely dispersed, there are vast troop movements from their overcrowded home-system to the outer planets of their empire. They're gradually being chivvied into a fix. They can't hold what they've got without spreading all over it. The wider they spread the thinner they get. The thinner they get the easier it is to bite lumps out of them. Hold it a bit while I check your planet" He went off, came back after a time.

"Yes, position there is that they daren't take any strength away from Jaimec no matter how greatly needed elsewhere. In fact they may yet have to add to it at the expense of Directa.

You're the cause of that."

"Sweet of you to say so," said Mowry. A thought struck him and he said eagerly, "Hey, who gave you that information?"

"Monitoring and Decoding Service. They dig a lot out of enemy broadcasts."

"Oh." He felt disappointed, having hoped for news of a Terran Intelligence agent somewhere on Jaimec. But of course even if there was one they wouldn't tell him. They'd lie about it. They'd give him no information that Kaitempi persuasion might force out of him. "How about this Kaitempi card and embossing machine? Do I leave them here to be collected or do I keep them for myself?"

"Stand by and I'll find out." The voice went away for more than an hour, returned with, "Sorry about the delay. Distance takes time in any terms. You can keep that stuff and use it as you think best. T.I. got a card recently. An agent bought one for them."

"*Bought* one?" He wagged his eyebrows in surprise.

"Yes - with his life. What did yours cost?"

"Major Sallana's life, as I told you."

"Tsk-tsk! Those cards come mighty dear." There was a pause, then, "Closing down. Best of luck!"

"Thanks!"

With some reluctance Mowry replaced the receiver, switched off the *zuum-zuum*, capped the cylinder and rolled it back into the cave. He'd have liked to listen until dawn to anything that maintained the invisible tie between him and that faraway lifeform. 'Best of luck!' the voice had said, not knowing how much more it meant than the alien, 'Live long!'

From yet another container he took several packets and small parcels, distributed them about his person, put others into a canvas shoulder-bag of the kind favoured by the Sirian peasantry. Impatience prevented him from waiting for the full light of day. Being now more familiar with the forest lie felt sure he could fumble his way through it even in the dark.

The going would be tougher, the journey would take longer, but he could not resist the urge to get back to the car as soon as possible.

Before leaving his last act was to press the hidden button on Container-22 which had ceased to radiate the moment he'd entered the cave and remained dead ever since. After a one-minute delay it would again set up the invisible barrier that could not be passed without betrayal.

He got out the cave fast, the parcels heavy around him, and had made thirty yards into the trees when his finger-ring started its tingling. Slowly he moved on, feeling his way from time to time. The tingling gradually weakened with distance, faded out after eight hundred yards.

From then on he consulted his luminous compass at least a hundred times. It led him back to the road at a point half a mile from the car, a pardonable margin of error in a twenty-mile journey two-thirds of which had been covered in darkness.

At two hours after dawn he arrived with tired eyes and aching feet, clambered thankfully into the car, edged it unseen from the forest and purred along the highroad to the dump called home.

The day of the appointment kicked off with a highly significant start. Over the radio and video, through the public-address system and in

all the newspapers the government came out with the same announcement. Mowry heard the miserably muffled bellows of a loudspeaker two streets away, the shrill cries of newsvendors. He bought a paper, read it over his breakfast.

*Under the War Emergency Powers Act, by order of the Jaimec Ministry of Defence: All organisations, societies, parties and other corporate bodies will be registered at the Central Bureau of Records, Pertane, not later than the twentieth of this month. Secretaries will state in full the objects and purposes of their respective organisations, societies; parties or other corporate bodies, give the address of habitual meeting places and provide a complete list of members.'*

*Under the War Emergency Powers Act, by order of the Jaimec Ministry of Defence: After the twentieth of this month, any organisation, society, party or other corporate body will be deemed an illegal movement if not registered in accordance with the above order. Membership of an illegal movement or the giving of aid and comfort to any member of an illegal movement will constitute a treacherous offence punishable by death.'*

So at last they'd made a countermove. *Dirac Angestun Gesept* must kneel at the confessional or at the strangling-post.

By a simple, easy legislative trick they'd got D.A.G. where they wanted it, coming and going. It was a kill-or-cure tactic full of psychological menace and well calculated to scare all the weaklings right out of D.A.G.'s ranks.

Weaklings are blabs.

They talk. They betray their fellows, one by one, right through the chain



of command to the top. They represent the rot that spreads through a system and brings it to total collapse. In theory, anyway.

Mowry read it again, grinning to himself and enjoying every word. The government was going to have a tough time enticing informers from the D.A.G. Fat lot of talking can be done by a membership completely unaware of its status. There are no traitors in a phantom army.

For instance, Butin Arhava was a fully paid up member in good standing - and didn't know it. Nobody had bothered to tell him. The Kaitempi could trap him and draw out his bowels very, very slowly without gaining one worthwhile word about the Sirian Freedom Party.

Around mid-day Mowry looked in at the Central Bureau of Records. Sure enough a queue stretched from the door to the counter where a couple of disdainful officials were dishing out forms. The line slowly edged forward, composed of secretaries or other officers of trade guilds; *zith*-drinking societies, video fan clubs and every other conceivable kind of organisation. The skinny oldster moping in the rear was Area Supervisor of the Pan-Sirian Association of Lizard Watchers. The podgy specimen one step ahead of him represented the Pertane Model Rocket Builders Club. There wasn't one in the entire stting who looked capable of spitting in a Spakum eye much less overthrowing his own government.

Joining the queue, Mowry said conversationally to Skinny,

"Nuisance this, isn't it?"

"Yar. Only the Statue of Jaime knows why it is considered necessary."

"Maybe they're trying to round up people with special talents," Mowry offered. "Radio experts, photographers and fo& like those. They can use all sorts of technicians in wartime."

"They could have said so in plain words," opined Skinny impatiently. "They could have published list of them and ordered them to report in."

"Yar, that's right."

"My group watches lizards. Of what special use is a lizard-watcher, *hi?*"

"I can't imagine. Why watch lizards, anyway?"

"Have you ever watched them?"

"No," admitted Mowry, without shame.

"Then you don't know the fascination of it."

Podgy turned round and said with a superior air, "My group builds model rockets."

"Kid stuff," defined Skinny.

"That's what you think. I'll have you know every member is a potential rocket-engineer and in time of war a rocket-engineer is a valuable -"

"Move up," said Skinny, nudging him. They shuffled forward, stopped. Skinny said to Mowry, "What's your crowd do?"

"We etch glass."

"Well, that's a high form of art. I have seen some very attractive examples of it myself. They were luxury articles though. A bit beyond the common purse." He let go a loud sniff. "What good are glass-etchers for winning battles?"

"You guess," Mowry invited.

"Now take rockets," put in Podgy. "The rocket is essential to space-war and -"

"Move up," ordered Skinny again.

They reached the stack of forms, were each given one off the top. The group dispersed, going their various ways while a long line of later comers edged toward the counter. Mowry went to the main post office, sat at a vacant table, filled up the form carefully and neatly. He got some satisfaction out of doing it with a government pen and government ink.

Title of organisation : *Dirac Angestun Gesept.*

Purpose of organisation : *Destruction of present government and termination of war against Terra.*

Customary meeting place : *Wherever Kaitempi can't find us* Names and addresses of elected officers : *You'll find out when it's too late.*

Attach hereto complete list of members : *Nar.*

Signature : *Jaime Shallapurta.*

That last touch would get someone hopping mad. It was calculated insult to the much revered Statue of Jaime.

loosely translated it meant James Stoneybottom.

He bought an envelope, was about to mail it back to the bureau when it occurred to him to hot it up still more.

Forthwith he took the form to his room, shoved it into the embossing

machine and impressed it with the Kaitempi cartouche.

Then he posted it.

This performance pleased him immensely. A month ago it would have been too childish to bother with and the recipients would have dismissed it as the work of someone feeble-minded. But today the circumstances were vastly different.

The powers-that-be had revealed themselves as annoyed if not frightened. They were in poor mood to relish a raspberry.

With moderate luck the sardonic registration-form would boost their anger and that would be all to the good because a mind filled with fury cannot think in cool, logical manner.

When one is fighting a paper-war one uses paper-war tactics that in the long run can be just as lethal as high explosive.

And the tactics are not limited in scope by use of one material.

The said material is very variable in form. Paper can convey a private warning, a public threat, secret temptation, open defiance; wall-bills, window-stickers, leaflets dropped by the thousands from the roof-tops, cards left on seats or slipped into pockets and purses... *money*.

Yes, money.

With paper money he could buy a lot of the deeds needed to back up the words. With paper money he could persuade the Sirian foe to kick himself good and hard in the pants and thereby save the Terrans a tedious chore.

At the proper hour he set out for the Cafe Susun.

Not having yet received the D.A.G.'s thumb-on-nose registration the Jaimecan authorities were still able to think in a calculating and menacing way. Their countermoves had not been confined to that morning's new law. They had taken matters further by concocting a dangerous technique, namely, that of the snap-search.

It almost caught Mowry at the first grab. He did not congratulate himself on his escape, realising that to avoid one trap might be merely to fall into another. The risk was great, the trick being of such a type that none could tell when or where the next blow would fall.

He was heading for his rendezvous when suddenly a line of uniformed police extended itself across the street. A second line simultaneously did likewise four hundred yards farther on. From the dumbfounded mob trapped between the lines appeared a number of plainclothes members of the Kaitempi.

These at once commenced a swift and expert search of everyone thus halted in the street. Meanwhile both lines of police kept their full attention inward, watching to see that nobody ducked into a doorway and bolted through a house to escape the mass-frisk.

Thanking his lucky stars that he was outside the trap and being ignored, Mowry faded into the background as inconspicuously as possible and beat it home fast. In his room he burned all documents relating to Shir Agavan, crumbled the ashes into fine dust. That identity was now dead for ever and ever, amen. It would never be used again.

From one of his packages he took a new set of papers swearing before all and sundry that he was Krag Wulkin, special-correspondent of a leading news agency, with a home address on Diracta. In some ways it was a better camouflage than the former one. It lent added plausibility to his Mashambi accent. Moreover a complete check on it

would involve wasting a month referring back to the Sirian home planet.

Thus armed he started out again. Though better fitted to face awkward questions the risk of being asked them had been greatly boosted by this latest technique and he took to the streets with the queezy feeling that somehow or other the hunt at last had picked up the scent.

There was no way of telling exactly what the snap-searchers were seeking. Maybe they were trying to catch people carrying subversive propaganda on their persons. Or perhaps they were looking for treacherous sokos with D.A.G. membership cards.

Or could be they were haphazardly groping around for a dynocar renter named Shir Agavan. Whatever their reasons, the tactic proved that someone among Jaimec's big shots had become aggravated.

Luckily no more traps opened in his path before he reached the Cafe Susun. He went in, found Arhava and two others seated at the far table where they were half-concealed in dim light and could keep watch on the door.

"You're late," greeted Arhava. "We thought you weren't coming."

"I got delayed by a police raid on the street. The cops looked surly. You fellows just robbed a bank or something?"

"No, we haven't" Arhava made a casual gesture toward his companions. "Meet Gurd and Skriva."

Mowry acknowledged them with a curt nod, looked them over. They were much alike, obviously brothers. Flat-faced, hard-eyed with pinned-back ears that came up to sharp points.

Each looked capable of selling the other into slavery provided there was no comeback with a knife.

"We haven't heard your *name*," said Gurd, speaking between long, narrow teeth.

"You aren't going to, either," responded Mowry.

Gurd bristled. "Why not?"

"Because you don't really care what my name is," Mowry told him. "If the thing atop your neck has a steady tick it's a matter of total indifference to you who gives you a load of guilders."

"Yar, that's right," chipped in Skriva, his eyes glittering.

"Money is money regardless of who hands it over. Shut up, Gurd."

"I only wanted to know." mumbled Gurd, subdued.

Arhava took over with the mouth-watering eagerness of one on the make. "I've given these boys your proposition. They're interested." He turned to them. "Aren't you?"

"Yar," said Skriva. He concentrated attention upon Mowry.

"You want someone in his box. That right?"

"I want someone stone cold and I don't give a hoot whether or not he is boxed."

"We can tend to that." He fixed his toughest expression which told all and sundry that he'd kilt him a b'ar when he wuz only three. Then he said, "For fifty thousand."

Emitting a deep sigh, Mowry stood up, ambled toward the door. "Live long!"

"Come back!" Skriva shot to his feet, waved urgently.

Arhava had the appalled look of someone suddenly cut out of a rich uncle's will. Gurd sucked his teeth with visible agitation.

Pausing at the door, Mowry held it open. "You stupes ready to talk sense?"

"Sure," pleaded Skriva. "I was only joking. Come back and sit down."

"Bring us four *ziths*," said Mowry to the attendant who was blearing behind the counter. He returned to the table, resumed his seat. "No more bad jokes. I don't appreciate them."

"Forget it," advised Skriva. "We've got a couple of questions for you."

"You may voice them," agreed Mowry. He accepted a mug of zith from the attendant, paid him, took a swig; eyed Skriva with becoming lordliness.

Skriva said, "Who d'you want us to slap down? And how do we know we're going to get our money?"

"For the first, the victim is Colonel Hage-Ridarta." He scribbled rapidly on a piece of paper, gave it to the other.

"That is his address."

"I see." Skriva stared at the slip, went on, "And the money?"

"I'll pay you five thousand right now as an act of faith, fifteen thousand when the job is done." He stopped, gave the three of them the cold,



forbidding eye. "I don't take your word for the doing. It's got to be squawked on the news-channels before I part with another one-tenth guilder."

"You trust us a lot, don't you?" said Skriva, scowling.

"No more than I have to."

"Same applies on this side."

"Look," Mowry urged, "we've got to play ball with each other whether we like it or not. Here's how. I've got a list.

If you do the first job for me and I renege you're not going to do the others, are you?"

"No."

"What's more, you'll take it out of my hide first chance you get, won't you?"

"You can bet on that," assured Gurd.

"Similarly, if you pull a fast one on me you will cut off the flow of money, big money. You'll deprive yourselves of far more than the Kaitempi would pay for betraying me and a dozen others. I'm outbidding the Kaitempi by a large margin, see? Don't you fellows want to get rich?"

"I hate the idea of it," said Skriva. "Let's see that five thousand."

Mowry slipped him the package under the table. The three checked it in their laps. After a while Skriva looked up, his face slightly flushed.

"We're sold. Who is this Hage-Ridarta soko?"

"Just a brasshat who has lived too long"

That was a half-truth. Hage-Ridarta was listed in the city directory as officer commanding an outfit of space marines.

But his name had been appended to an authoritative letter in Pigface's files. The tone of the letter had been that of a boss to an underling. Hage-Ridarta was an officially disguised occupant of the Kaitempi top bracket and therefore would make a most satisfactory corpse.

"Why d'you want him out of the way? demanded Gurd, still sullen and suspicious.

Before Mowry could reply, Skriva said fiercely. "I told you before to shut up. I'll handle this. Can't you button your trap even for twenty thousand?"

"We haven't got it yet," persisted Gurd.

"You will get it" Mowry soothed. "And more, lots more.

The day the news of Hage-Ridarta's death is given in the papers or on the radio I'll be here at the same time in the evening complete with fifteen thousand guilders and the next name. If by any chance I'm held up and can't make it, I'll be here at the same time the following evening."

"You'd better be!" informed Gurd, glowering.

Arhava had a question of his own. "What's my percentage for introducing the boys?"

"I don't know." Mowry turned to Skriva. "How much do you intend to

give him?"

"Who? - me?" Skriva was taken aback.

"Yes, you. The gentleman thirsts for a rakeoff. You don't expect me to pay him, do you? Think I'm made of money?"

"Somebody had better fork out," declared Arhava, making the mistake of his life. "Or-"

Skriva shoved scowling features up against him and breathed over his face. "Or *what?* "

"Nothing," said Arhava, nervously leaning away. "Nothing at all."

"That's better," Skriva approved in grating tones. "That's a whole lot better. Just sit around and be a good boy, Butin, and we'll feed you crumbs from our table. Get fidgety and you'll soon find yourself in no condition to eat them. In fact you won't be able to swallow. It's tough when a fellow can't swallow. You wouldn't like that, would you, Butin?"

Saying nothing, Arhava sat still. His complexion was slightly mottled.

Repeating the face-shoving act. Skriva shouted, "I just asked you a civil question. I said you wouldn't like it, would you?"

"No," admitted Arhava, tilting back his chair to get away from the face.

Mowry decided the time had come to leave this happy scene.

He took his daring far enough to say to Skriva, "Don't get tough ideas about me - if you want to stay in business."

With that; he went. He did not worry about the possibility of any of

them following him. They wouldn't dare, being too afraid of offending the best customer they'd had since crime came to Pertane.

As he walked rapidly along he pondered the evening's work, decided it had been a wise move to insist that money did not grow on trees. They'd have shown no respect whatsoever if he'd been willing to shovel it out regardless as, in fact, he could afford to do should the necessity arise. They'd have put on maximum pressure to gain the most in return for the least and that would have produced more arguments than results.

It was also a good thing that he'd refused a cut to Arhava and left them to fight it out between themselves. The reaction had been revealing. A mob, even a small mob, is only as strong as its weakest link. Anyone capable of ratting to the Kaitempi. could blow the whole bunch sky-high. It was important to discover a prospective squealer before it was too late and, if one existed, to be warned accordingly. In this respect Butin Arhava hadn't shown up so good.

'Somebody had better fork out or-'

The testing-time would come soon after he'd paid over fifteen thousand guilders for a job well done and those concerned divided the loot. Well, if the situation seemed to justify it, that's when he'd give the Gurd-Skriva brothers the next name - that of Butin Arhava. He felt no compunctions about this decision, no qualms of conscience. So far as he was involved, all Sirians were enemies, any one of them being no more or less a foe than any other.

He continued homeward, deep in thought and not looking where he was going while he settled this matter in his mind.

He had just reached the final conclusion that Arhava's throat would have to be slit sooner or later when a heavy hand clamped on his

shoulder and a voice rasped in his ear.

"Lift them up, Dreamy, and let's see what you've got in your pockets. Come on, you're not deaf, lift 'em I said!"

With a sense of sudden shock he raised his arms, felt fingers start prying into his clothes. Nearby forty or fifty equally surprised walkers were holding the same pose. A line of phlegmatic police stood across the street a hundred yards away.

In the opposite direction a second line looked on with the same indifference. Yet again the random trap had sprung.



# Chapter VI

A flood of superfast thoughts raced through his startled brain as he stood with arms extended above his head. Thank heavens he'd got rid of that money; they'd have been unpleasantly inquisitive about so large a sum being carried in one lump. If they were looking for Shir Agavan they were dead out of luck. In any case, he wasn't going to let them take him in, even for questioning. Not if he could help it. Most people who survived a Kaitempi interrogation did so as physical wrecks. It would be better at the last resort to break this searcher's neck and run like blazes.

*If the cops shoot me down it'll be a quicker and easier end.*

*When Terra gets no more signals from me, Wolf will choose my successor and feed the poor sap the same -'*

"Hi?" The Kaitempi agent broke his train of thought by holding Mowry's wallet open and gazing with surprise at Pigface's card reposing therein. The tough expression faded from his heavy features as if wiped away with a cloth. "One of us? An officer?" He took a closer look at the other. "But I do not recognise you."

"You wouldn't," informed Mowry, showing just the right degree of arrogance. "I arrived only today from H.Q. on Directa." He pulled a face. "And this is the reception I get."

"It cannot be helped," apologised the agent. "The revolutionary movement must be suppressed at all costs and it's as big a menace here as on any other planet. You know how things are on Directa well, they're not one whit better on Jaimec."

"It won't last," Mowry responded, speaking with authority.

"On Diracta we expect to make a complete clean-up in the near future. After that you won't have much trouble here.

The movement will collapse from sheer lack of leadership.

When you cut off the head, the body dies."

"I hope you're right. The Spakum war is enough without an army of traitors sniping in the rear." He closed the wallet, gave it back. His other hand held the Krag Wulkin documents at which he had not yet looked. Waiting for Mowry to pocket the wallet, he returned the remaining material and. said jocularly, "Here are your false papers."

"Nothing is false that has been officially issued," said Mowry, frowning disapproval.

"No, I suppose not. I hadn't thought of it in that light" The agent backed off, anxious to end the talk. "Sorry to have troubled you. I suggest you call at local headquarters as soon as possible and have them circulate your photo so that you'll be known to us. Otherwise you may be stopped and searched repeatedly."

"I'll do that," promised Mowry, unable to imagine anything he'd less intention of doing.

"You'll excuse me - I must tend to these others." So saying, the agent attracted the attention of the nearest police, pointed to Mowry. Then he made for a sour-faced civilian who was standing nearby waiting to be searched. Reluctantly the civilian lifted his arms and permitted the agent to dip into his pockets.

Mowry walked toward the line of police which opened and let him pass through. At such moments, he thought, one is supposed to be cool, calm and collected, radiating supreme self-confidence in all



directions. He wasn't like that at all.

On the contrary he was weak in the knees and had a vague feeling of sickness in the stomach. He had to force himself to continue steadily onward with what appeared to be absolute nonchalance.

He made six hundred yards, reached the next corner before some warning instinct made him look back. Police were still blocking the road but beyond them four of the Kaitempi had clustered together in conversation. One of them, the agent who had released him, pointed his way. The other three shot a glance in the same direction, resumed talking with vehement gestures. There followed what appeared to be ten seconds of heated argument before they reached a decision.

"Stop him!"

The nearest police turned round startled, their eyes seeking a fleeing quarry. Mowry's legs became filled with an almost irresistible urge to get going twenty to the dozen. He forced them by an effort of will to maintain their steady pace.

There were a lot of people in the street, some merely hanging around and gaping at the trap, others walking the same way as himself. Most of the latter wanted no part of what was going on higher up the road and considered it expedient to amble someplace else. Mowry kept with them, showing no great hurry. That baffled the police; for a few valuable seconds they stayed put, hands on weapons, while they sought in vain for visible evidence of guilt.

It provided sufficient delay to enable him to get round the corner and out of sight. At that point the shouting Kaitempi realised that the police were stalled. They lost patience, broke into a furious sprint. Half a dozen clumping cops immediately raced with them, still without knowing who was being chased or why.

Overtaking a youth who was sauntering dozily along, Mowry gave him an urgent shove in the back. "Quick! -

they're after you! The Kaitempi!"

"I've done nothing. I -"

"How long will it take to convince them of that? *Run*, you fool!"

The other used up a few moments gaping sceptically before he heard the oncoming rush of heavy feet, the raucous shouts of pursuers nearing the corner. He lost colour, tore down the road at velocity that paid tribute to his innocence. He'd have overtaken and passed a bolting jackrabbit with no trouble at all.

Unhurriedly entering an adjacent shop, Mowry - threw a swift look around to see what it sold, said casually, "I wish ten of those small cakes with the toasted-nut tops and -"

The arm of the law thundered round the corner fifty strong.

The hunt roared past the shop, its leaders baying with triumph as they spotted the distant figure of him who had done nothing.

Mowry stared at the window in dumb amazement. The corpulent Sirian behind the counter eyed the window with sad resignation.

"Whatever is happening?" asked Mowry.

"They're after someone," diagnosed Fatty. He sighed, rubbed his protruding belly. "Always they are after someone. What a world! What a war!"

"Makes you tired, *hi*?"

"Aie, yar! Every day, every minute there is something. Last night, according to the news-channels, they destroyed the main Spakum space-fleet for the tenth time. Today they are pursuing the remnants of what is said to have been destroyed. For months we have been making triumphant retreats before a demoralised enemy who is advancing in utter disorder." He made a sweeping motion with a podgy hand. It indicated disgust. I am fat, as you can see. That makes me an idiot. You wish-?"

"Ten of those small cakes with the toasted-nut -"

A belated cop pounded past the window. He was two hundred yards behind the pack and breathless but plain stubborn.

As he thudded along he let go a couple of shots into the air just for the heck of it.

"See what I mean?" said Fatso. "You wish-?"

"Ten of those small cakes with the toasted-nut tops. I also wish to order a special celebration-cake to be supplied five days hence. Perhaps you can show me some examples or help me with suggestions, *hi?*"

He managed to waste twenty minutes within the shop and the time was well worth the few guilders it cost. If he'd wanted he could have stayed longer. Twenty minutes, he estimated, would be just enough to permit local excitement to die down while the pursuit continued elsewhere. But the longer he extended the time the greater the risk of falling into the hands of frustrated huntsmen who'd returned to comb out the area.

Halfway home he was tempted to donate the cakes to a mournful looking cop, but refrained. The time for having fun had gone by and

some restraint was called for. The more he had to dodge authority's frantic fly-swattings the harder it was to play like a wasp and get a laugh out of it.

Within his room he flopped fully dressed on the bed and summarised the day's doings. He had escaped a trap but only by the skin of his teeth. It proved that such traps were escap-able - but not for ever. What had caused them to take after him he did not know, could only guess at. Probably the intervention of an officious character who had noticed him walking through the cordon.

"Who's that you've let go?"

"An officer, Captain."

"What d'you mean, an officer?"

"A Kaitempi officer, Captain. I do not know him but he had a correct card. He said that he had just been drafted from Diracta."

"A card, *hi*? Did you notice its serial number?"

"I had no particular reason to try remember it, Captain.

It was obviously genuine. But let me see ... yar ... it was SXB80313. Or perhaps SXB80131. I am not sure which."

"Major Sallana's card was SXB80131. You half-witted soko, you may have had his killer in your hands!"

"STOP HIM!"

Now, by virtue of the fact that he had evaded capture, plus the fact that he had failed to turn up at headquarters to gain photographic identification, they'd assume that Sallana's slayer really had been in

the net. Previously they had not known where to start looking other than within the ranks of the mysteriously elusive D.A.G. But they had gained three welcome advantages. They knew the killer was in Pertane. They had a description of him. One Kaitempi agent could be relied upon to recognise him on sight.

In other words, the heat was on with every likelihood of getting hotter. Numberless eyes would be keeping watch for anyone bearing close resemblance to himself. The snap-search technique would be intensified, the net spread wider and with greater frequency. In these conditions he'd have to go around daytimes carrying stuff guaranteed to make the Kaitempi lick their chops like hungry tigers. Some evenings he'd have to go to the Cafe Susun bearing a load of money that no searcher in his right mind would regard as a beggar's alms.

Henceforth, in Pertane at least, the going would be tougher with the pressure-cell and the strangling-post looming ever nearer. He groaned to himself as he thought of it. He had .

never asked much of life and would have been quite satisfied merely to sprawl on a golden throne and be fawned upon by sycophants. To be dropped down a Sirian-dug hole, dead cold and dyed purple, was to take things too much to the opposite extreme.

But to counterbalance this dismal prospect there was something heartening - a snatch of conversation.

'The revolutionary movement ... as big a menace here as on any other planet. You know how things are on Diracta -

well, they're not one whit better on Jaimec.'

That told him plenty; it revealed that Dirac Angestun Gesept was not merely a Wolf-concocted nightmare designed to disturb the sleep of

Jaimecan politicos. It was empire-wide, covering more than a hundred planets, its strength or rather its pseudo-strength greatest on the home-world of Diracta, the nerve-centre and beating heart of the entire Sirian species.

It was more than a hundred times greater than had appeared to him in his purely localised endeavours.

To the Sirian powers-that-be it was a major peril hacking down the back door while the Terrans were busily bashing in the front one.

Cheers! Blow the bugle, beat the drum! Other wasps were at work, separated in space but united in purpose. And in this sense he was not alone.

Somebody in the Sirian High Command - a psychologist or a cynic - worked it out that the more one chivvied the civilian population the lower sank its morale. The constant stream of new emergency orders, regulations, restrictions, the constant police and Kaitempi activity, stoppings, searchings, questionings all tended to create that dull, pessimistic resignation demonstrated by Fatty . in the cake shop. An antidote was needed. The citizens had bread. They lacked the circus.

Accordingly a show was put on. The radio, video and newspapers combined to strike up the band and draw the crowds.

GREAT VICTORY IN CENTAURI SECTOR.

*Yesterday powerful Terran space-forces became trapped in the region of A. Centauri and a fierce battle raged as they tried to break out. The Sirian fourth, sixth and seventh fleets, manoeuvring in masterly manner, frustrated all their efforts to get free and escape. Many casualties were inflicted upon the enemy. Precise figures are not yet available but the latest report from the area of conflict states*

*that we have lost four battleships and one light cruiser, the crews of which have all been rescued. More than seventy Terran warships have been destroyed.*

And so the story went on for minutes of time and columns of print, complete with pictures of the battleship Hashim, the heavy cruiser Jaimec, some members of their crews when home on leave a year ago, Rear-Admiral Pent-Gurhana saluting a prosperous navy contractor, the Statue of Jaime casting its shadow across a carefully positioned Terran banner and -

loveliest touch of all - a five centuries old photograph of a scowling, bedraggled bunch of Mongolian bandits authoritatively described as 'Terran space-troops whom we snatched from death as their stricken ship plunged sunward.'

One columnist, graciously admitting lack of facts and substituting so-called expert knowledge, devoted half a page to a lurid description of how heroic space-marines had performed the snatch-from-death in vacuo. How fortunate were the lousy Terrans, he proclaimed, in finding themselves opposed by so daring and gallant a foe.

Mowry absorbed all this guff, found himself unable to decide whether casualty figures had been reversed or whether a fight had taken place at all. Dismissing it with a sniff of disdain, he sought through the rest of the paper without really expecting to find anything worthy of note. But there was a small item on the back page.

*Colonel Hage-Ridarta, officer commanding 77 Company S.M. was found dead in his car at midnight last night. He had been shot through the head. A gun was lying nearby. Suicide is not suspected and police investigations are continuing.*

So the Gurd-Skriva combination worked mighty fast; they'd done the

job within a few hours of taking it on. Yar, money was a wonderful thing especially when Terran engravers and presses could produce it in unlimited supply with little trouble and at small cost. Money was a formidable weapon in its own right, a paper totem that could cause losses in the enemy's ranks millions of miles behind the fighting front.

This unexpected promptitude set him a new problem. To get more such action he'd have to pay up and thereby risk falling into another trap while on the way to the rendezvous.

Right now he dare not show Pigface's card in Pertane though it might prove useful elsewhere. His documents for Krag Wulkin, special correspondent, might possibly get him out of a jam provided the trappers didn't search further, find him loaded with guilders and ask difficult questions about so suspiciously large a wad.

Within an hour the High Command solved the problem for him. They put on the circus in the form of a victory parade.

To the beat and blare of a dozen bands a great column of troops, tanks, guns, mobile radar units, flame-throwers, rocket-batteries and gas-projectors, tracked recovery vehicles and other paraphernalia crawled into Pertane from the west, tramped and rumbled toward the east.

Helicopters and jetplanes swooped at low level, a small number of nimble space-scouts thundered at great altitude.

Citizens assembled in their thousands, lined the streets and cheered more from habit than from genuine enthusiasm.

This, Mowry realised, was his heaven-sent opportunity.

Snap-searches might continue down the side streets and in the city's tough quarters but they'd be wellnigh impossible on the east-west



artery with all that military traffic passing through. If he could reach the crosstown route he could head clean out of Pertane with safety. After that he could dance around elsewhere until the time was ripe to return attention to the capital.

He paid his miserly landlord two months rent in advance without creating more than joyful surprise. Then he checked his false identity papers. Hurriedly he packed his bag with guilders, a fresh supply of stickers, a couple of small packages and got out.

No sudden traps opened out between there and the city centre; even if they ran around like mad the police could not be everywhere at once. On the east-west road he carried his bag unnoticed, being of less significance than a grain of sand amid the great mob of spectators that had assembled. By the same token progress was difficult and slow. The route was crowded almost to the walls. Time and again he had to shove his way past the backs of an audience which had its full attention on the road.

Many of the shops he passed had boarded-up windows as evidence that they had been favoured by his propaganda.

Others displayed new glass and on twenty-seven of these he slapped more stickers while a horde of potential witnesses stood on tiptoe, stared over their fellows at the military procession. One sticker he plastered on a policeman's back, the broad, inviting stretch of black cloth proving irresistible. The cop gaped forward along with the crowd, ignored pressure behind him and got decorated from shoulder to shoulder.

*Who will pay for this war?*

*Those who started it will pay.*

*With their money - and their lives.*

*Dirac Angestun Gesept.*

After three hours of edging, pushing and some surreptitious sticker-planting he arrived at the city's outskirts. Here the tail-end of the parade was still trundling noisily along.

Standing spectators had thinned out but a straggling group of goon-fanciers were walking in pace with the troops.

Around stood houses of a suburb too snooty to deserve the attentions of the police and Kaitempi. Ahead stretched the open country and the road to Radine. He carried straight on, following the rearmost troops until the procession turned leftward and headed for the great military stronghold of Khamasta. Here the accompanying civilians halted and watched them go before mooching back to Pertane. Bag in hand, Mowry continued along the Radine road.

Moodiness afflicted him as he walked. He became obsessed with the notion that he had been chased out of the city even if only temporarily and he didn't like it. Every step he took seemed like another triumph for the foe, another defeat for himself. Given the free choice he'd have stayed put, accepting increasing risks as they came, glorying in meeting and beating them. He didn't have a free choice, not really.

At the training college they had lectured him again and again to the same effect. 'Maybe you like having a mulish character. Well, in some circumstances it's called courage, in others it's downright stupidity. You've got to resist the temptation to indulge unprofitable heroics. Never abandon caution merely because you think it looks like cowardice. It requires guts to sacrifice one's ego for the sake of the job. Those are the sort of guts we want and must have. A dead hero is of no earthly use to us.'

Humph! easy for them to talk, hard for those who have to listen and obey. He was still aggrieved when he reached a permasteel plaque standing by the roadside. It said: Radine -

33 den. He looked in both directions, found nobody in sight.

Opening his bag he took out a package and buried it at the base of the plaque.

That evening he checked in at Radine's best and most expensive hotel. If the Jaimecan authorities succeeded in following his tortuous trail around Pertane they'd notice his penchant for hiding out in overcrowded, slummy areas and tend to seek him in the planet's rat-holes. With luck a high-priced hotel would be the last place in which they'd look for him if the search spread wider afield. All the same he'd have to be wary of the routine check of hotel registers which the Kaitempi made every now and again regardless.

Dumping his bag he left the room at once. Time was pressing.

He hurried along the road, unworried about snap-searches which for unknown reasons were confined to the capital, and had not yet been applied to other cities. Reaching a bank of public phone booths a mile from the hotel, he made a call to Pertane. A sour voice answered while the booth's tiny screen remained blank.

"Cafe Susun."

"Skriva there?"

"Who wants him?"

"Me."

"That tells me a lot. Why've you got that scanner switched off?"

"Listen who's talking," growled Mowry, eyeing his faceless screen. "You fetch Skriva and let him cope with his own troubles. You aren't his paid secretary, are you?"

There came a loud snort, a long silence, then Skriva's voice sounded. "Who's this?"

"Give me your pic and I'll give you mine."

"I know who it is-I recognise the tones" said Skriva. He switched his scanner, his unpleasing features gradually bloomed into the screen. Mowry switched likewise. Skriva frowned at him with dark suspicion. "Thought you were going to meet us here. Why are you phoning?"

"I've been called out of town and can't get back for a piece."

"Is thar so?"

"Yar, that is so!" snapped Mowry. "And don't get hard with me because I won't stand for it, see?" He paused to let it sink in, went on, "You got a dyno?"

"Maybe," said Skriva, evasively.

"Can you leave right away?"

"Maybe."

"If you want the goods you can cut out the maybes and move fast." Mowry held his phone before the scanner, tapped it suggestively, pointed to his ears to indicate that one never knew who was listening-in these days and might perhaps have to be beaten to it. "Get onto the Radine road and look under marker 33-den. Don't take Arhava

with you."

"Hey, when will you -"

He slammed down the phone, cutting off the other's irate query. Next he sought the local Kaitempi H.Q. the address of which had been revealed in Pigface's secret correspondence.

In short time he passed the buildings, keeping as far from it as possible on the other side of the street. He did not give close attention to the building itself, his gaze being concentrated above it. For the next hour he wandered around Radine with seeming aimlessness, still studying the areas above the rooftops.

Eventually satisfied he looked for the city hall, found it, repeated the process. More erratic mooching from street to street while apparently admiring the stars. Finally He returned to the hotel.

Next morning he took a small package from his bag, pocketed it, made straight for a large business block noted the previous evening. With a convincing air of self-assurance he entered the building, took the automatic elevator to the top floor. Here he found a dusty, seldom-used passage with a drop-ladder at one end.

There was nobody around. Even if somebody had come along they might not have been unduly curious. Anyway, he had all his answers ready. Pulling down the ladder he climbed it swiftly, got through the trap-door at top and onto the roof.

From his package he took a tiny inductance-coil fitted with clips and attached to a long, hair-thin cable with plug-in terminals at its other end.

Climbing a short trellis mast, he counted the wires on the telephone junction at its top, checked the direction in which the seventh one ran.

To this he carefully fastened the coil.

Then he descended, led the cable to the roof's edge, gently paid it out until it was .dangling full length into the road below. Its plug-in terminals were now swinging in the air at a point about four feet above the pavement.

Even as he looked down from the roof half a dozen pedestrians passed the hanging cable and showed no interest in it.

A couple of them glanced idly upward, saw somebody above and wandered onward without remark. Nobody questions the activities of a man who clambers over roofs or disappears down grids in the street providing he does it openly and with quiet confidence.

He got down and out without mishap. Within an hour he had performed the same feat atop another building and again got away unchallenged. His next move was to purchase another typewriter, paper, envelopes, a small hand-printing set.

It was still only mid-day when he returned to his room and set to work as fast as he could go. The task continued without abate all that day and most of the next day. When he had finished the hand-printer and typewriter slid silently into the lake.

The result was the placing in his case of two hundred and twenty letters for future use and the immediate mailing of another two hundred and twenty to those who had received his first warning. The recipients, he hoped, would be far from charmed by the arrival of a second letter with a third yet to come.

*Hage-Ridarta was the second.*

*The list is long.*

After lunch he consulted yesterday's and today's newspapers at which he'd been too busy to look before now. The item he sought was not there: not a word about the late lamented Butin Arhava. Momentarily he wondered whether anything had gone wrong, whether the Gurd-Skriva brothers had jibbed at his choice of a victim or whether they were merely being slow on the uptake.

The general news was much as usual. Victory still loomed nearer and nearer. Casualties in the real or mythical A.

Centaury battle were now officially confirmed at eleven Sirian warships, ninety-four Terran ones. That data was given a front-page spread and a double column of editorial hallelujahs.

On an inner page, in an inconspicuous corner, it was announced that Sirian forces had abandoned the twin worlds of Fedira and Fedora, the forty-seventh and forty-eighth planets of the empire, 'for strategic reasons.' It was also hinted that Gooma, the sixty-second planet, might soon be given up also, in order to enable us to strengthen our positions elsewhere.'

So they were admitting something that could no longer be denied, namely, that two planets had gone down the drain with a third soon to follow. Although they had not said so it was pretty certain that what they had given up the Terrans had grabbed. Mowry grinned to himself as words uttered in the cake-shop came back to his mind.

'For months we have been making triumphant retreats before a demoralised enemy advancing in utter disorder.'

He went along the road, called the Cafe Susun. "Did you collect?"

"We did," said Skriva, "and the next consignment is overdue."

"I've read nothing about it"

"You wouldn't nothing having been written"

"Well, I told you before that I pay when I've had proof.

Until I get it, nothing doing. No proof, no dough."

"We've got the evidence. It's up to you to take a look at it."

Mowry thought swiftly. "Still got the dyno handy?"

"Yar."

"Maybe you'd better meet me. Make it the ten-time hour.

same road, Marker den-8"

The car arrived dead on time. Mowry stood by the marker, a dim figure in the darkness of night with only fields and trees around. The car rolled up, headlights glaring. Skriva got out, took a small sack from the trunk, opened its top and exhibited its contents in the blaze of the lights.

"God in heaven!" said Mowry, his stomach jumping.

"It's a ragged job," admitted Skriva. "He had a tough neck, the knife was blunt and Gurd was in a hurry. What's the matter? You squeamish or something?"

"I'd have liked it less messy. A bullet would have been neater."

"You're not paying for neatness. If you want it done sweet and clean



and tidy say so and jack up the offer."

"I'm not complaining"

"You bet you're not. Butin's the boy who's entitled to gripe."

He kicked the sack. "Aren't you, Butin?"

"Get rid of it," ordered Mowry. "It's spoiling my appetite."

Letting go a grim chuckle, Skriva tossed the sack into an adjacent ditch, put out a hand. "The money."

Giving him the package, Mowry waited in silence while the other checked the contents inside the car with the help of Gurd. They thumbed the neat stack of notes lovingly, with much licking of lips and mutual congratulations.

When they had finished Skriva chuckled again. "That was twenty thousand for nothing. We couldn't have got it easier."

"What d'you mean, for nothing?" Mowry asked.

"We'd have done it anyway, whether you'd named him or not. Butin was making ready to talk. You could see it in the slimy *soko's* eyes. What d'you say, Gurd?"

Gurd contented himself with a neck-wringing gesture.

Leaning on the car's door, Mowry said, "I've got another and different kind of job for you. Feel like taking it on?"

Without waiting for response he exhibited another package.

"In here are ten small gadgets. They're fitted with clips and have thin

lengths of cable attached. I want these contraptions fastening, to telephone lines in or near the centre of Pertane.

They've got to be set in place so that they aren't visible from the street but the cables can be seen hanging down."

"But," objected Skriva, "if the cables can be seen it's only a matter of time before somebody traces them up to the gadgets.

Where's the sense of hiding what is sure to be found?"

"Where's the sense of me giving you good money to do it?"

Mowry riposted.

"How much?"

"Five thousand guilders apiece. That's fifty thousand for the lot"

Skriva pursed his lips in a silent whistle.

"I can check whether you've actually fixed them," Mowry went on, "so don't try kidding me, see? We're in business to-gether. Better not kiss the partnership goodbye."

Grabbing the package, Skriva rasped, "I think you're crazy but who am I to complain?"

Headlights brightened, the car set up a shrill whine and rocked away. Mowry watched until it had gone from sight, then he tramped back into Radine, made for the public booths and phoned Kaitempi H.Q. He was careful to keep his scanner switched off and try give his voice the singsong tones of a native Jaimecan.

"Somebody's been decapitated."

" Hi?"

"There's a head in a sack near Marker 8-den on the road to Pertane."

"Whos' that talking? Who-"

He cut off, leaving the voice to gargle futilely. They'd follow up the tip, no doubt of that. It was essential to his plans that authority should find the head and identify it. In this respect he was persuading the Kaitempi to help play his game and he got quite a bit of malicious satisfaction out of it. He went to his hotel, came out, mailed two hundred and twenty letters.

*Butin Arhava was the third.*

*The list is long.*

*Dirac Angestun Gesept.*

That done, he enjoyed an hour's stroll before bedtime, pacing the streets and as usual pondering the day's work. It would not be long, he thought, before someone became curious about hanging cables and an electrician or telephone engineer was called in to investigate. The inevitable result would be a hurried examination of Jaimec's entire telephone system and the discovery of several more taps.

Authority would then find itself confronted with three unanswerable questions, all of them ominous: who's been listening, for how long, and how much have they learned?

He did not envy those in precarious power who were being subjected to this mock build-up of treachery while elsewhere the allegedly defeated Terrans were gaining sanctuary by taking over Sirian planets one after another. Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown -

but infinitely more so when a wasp crawls into bed with it.

A little before the twelve-time hour he turned into the road where his high-class hideout was located, came to an abrupt halt. Outside the hotel stood a line of official cars, a fire-pump and an ambulance. A number of uniformed cops were meandering around the vehicles. Tough looking characters in plain clothes were all over the scene.

Two of the latter appeared out of nowhere and confronted him hard-eyed.

"What's happened?" asked Mowry, behaving like a Sunday school superintendent.

"Never mind what's happened. Show us your documents.

Come on, what are you waiting for?"



# Chapter VII

CAREFULLY MOWRY SLID a hand into his inner pocket. They were tense, fully alert, watching his movement and ready to react if what he produced was not paper. He drew out his identity-card, handed it over knowing that it bore the proper cachet of Directa and the overstamp of Jaimec. Then he gave them his personal card and movement permit. Inwardly he hoped with all his heart that they would be easily convinced.

They weren't. They displayed the dogged determination of those under strict orders to make someone pay dearly for something or other. Evidently whatever had occurred was serious enough to have stirred up a hornet's nest.

"A special correspondent," said the larger of the two mouthing the words with contempt. He looked up from the identity-card. "What is special about a correspondent?"

"I've been sent here to cover war news specifically from the Jaimec angle. I do not bother with civilian matters. Those are for ordinary reporters."

"I see: He gave Mowry a long, sharp, penetrating look. His eyes had the beady coldness of a sidewinder's. "From where do you get your news about the war?"

"From official handouts - mostly from the Office of War Information in Pertane."

"You have no other sources?"

"Yes, of course. I keep my ears open for gossip and rumours."

"And what do you do with that stuff?"

"I try draw reasonable conclusions from it, write it up and submit the script to the Board of Censorship. If they approve it, I'm lucky. If they kill it, well" - he spread his hands with an air of helplessness - "I just put up with it."

"Therefore," said the Kaitempi agent, cunningly, "you should be well-known to officials of the Office of War Information and the Board of Censorship, hi? They will vouch for you if requested to do so, hi?"

"Without a doubt," assured Mowry, praying for a break.

"Good! You will name the ones you know best and we will check with them immediately."

"What, at this time of night?"

"Why should you care what time it is? It is your neck-"

That did it. Mowry punched him on the snout, swiftly, fiercely, putting every ounce of weight behind the blow. The recipient went down good and hard and stayed down. The other fellow was no slouch. Wasting no time in dumbfoundment, he took a bow-legged but quick step forward, shoved a gun into Mowry's face.

"Raise them high, you *soko*, or I'll -"

With the speed and recklessness of one who is desperate, Mowry ducked under the gun, seized the other's extended arm; got it over his shoulder and yanked. The agent let out a thin, piercing yelp and flew through the air with the greatest of ease. His gun dropped to ground. Mowry scooped it up and started the sprint of his life.

Round the corner, along the street and into an alley This took him by the back of his hotel and as he tore past he noted out the corner of one eye a window missing and a great ragged hole in the wall. Hurdling a pile of smashed bricks and splintered timber, he reached the alley's end, shot across the next street.

So that was it. Somehow they had smelled him out, possibly as a result of one of those infernal registration checks. They had searched his room and tried to open his bag with a metal master-key. Then had come the big bang. If the room had been crowded at the time the explosion would have enough force to kill at least a dozen of them. It would be a blow sufficient to get their blood up for a month. If ever they laid hands on him ...

He kept going as fast as he could make it, the gun in his grip, his ears straining for sounds of pursuit. Pretty soon the radio alarm would be going over the air, they'd close every exit from the town, blocking trains, buses, roads, everything.

At all costs he must beat them to it by getting outside the cordon before it was formed-if it could be done.

As far as possible he tried to race through lanes and alleys, avoiding main roads on which patrol-cars would be running to and fro loaded with guns and eyes. At this late hour there were few people about, no crowds in which to hide. The streets were almost empty with most folk abed and an armed man sprinting through the night was mighty conspicuous. But nothing could be done about that. To mooch with an air of innocence was to give time for the trap to close about him.

Darkness was his only help, not counting his legs. He pounded through alley after alley, bolted across six streets, halted in deep shadow as he was about to jump the seventh.



A car bulging with uniformed cops and plainclothes Kaitempi slid past, its windows full of faces trying to look everywhere at once.

For a short time he stood silent and unmoving in the shadow, heart thumping, chest heaving, a trickle of sweat creeping down his spine. Immediately the hunters had gone he was across the street, into the opposite alley and racing onward. Five times he paused in concealment, mentally cursing the delay, while prowls cars, snooped around.

The sixth stop was different. He lurked in the alley's corner as headlights came up the street. A mud-spattered dyno rolled into view, stopped within twenty yards of him. The next moment a solitary civilian got out, went to a nearby door and shoved a key into its lock. Mowry came out the alley like a

quick-moving cat.

The door opened just as the car shot away with a shrill scream from its dynamo. Struck with surprise, the civilian wasted half a minute gaping after his vanishing property. Then he let go an oath, ran indoors and snatched up the telephone.

Luck has got to be mixed decided Mowry as he gripped the wheel. There must be good to compensate for bad, a turn for the better to balance a change for the worse. Swinging the car into a broad, well-lit avenue, he slowed it to a more sedate pace.

Two overloaded patrol-cars passed him going in the opposite direction, another overtook him and rocked ahead. They weren't interested in a dirty dyno trundling home late; they were hunting a breathless fugitive assumed to be still galloping around on two feet. He estimated that it would be no more than another ten minutes before the radio made them change their minds. It might have been

better if he had shot the car's owner and thus gained himself extra valuable minutes. But he hadn't. Too late to regret the omission now.

After seven minutes he passed the last houses of Radine and headed into open country along an unfamiliar road. At once he hit up top speed to make maximum distance while the going was good. The car howled along, headlight beams dipping and swaying, the den-needle creeping close to its limit.

Twenty more minutes and he shot like a rocket through a long, straggling village buried deep in slumber. One mile farther on he rounded a bend, got a brief glimpse of a white pole across the road, the glitter of buttons and shine of metal helmets grouped at each end. He set his teeth, aimed straight at the middle without reducing speed by a fraction. The car hit the pole, flung the broken halves aside and raced on.

Something struck five sharp blows on the back, two neat holes appeared in the rear window, a third where the windshield .

joined the roof.

That showed the radio-alarm had been given, that forces had been alerted over a wide area. His crashing of the road-block was a giveaway. They now knew in which direction he was fleeing and could concentrate ahead of him. Just where he was going was more than he knew himself. He'd never been on this road before, the locale was strange and he had no map to consult. Worse, he had little money and no documents of any kind. The loss of his case had deprived him of everything save what was upon his person, plus a hot car and a stolen gun.

Soon he reached a crossroad with a marker dimly visible on each corner. Braking violently, he jumped out, peered at the nearest one in

the poor light of night. It said Radine-27

den. The opposite marker said Valapan-92 den. So that's where he'd been heading-to Valapan. Doubtless the police there were out in full strength, a reception committee too well prepared to permit another crash-through.

The marker on the left-hand road read Pertane-51 den.

He clambered back into the car, turned left. Still no signs of close pursuit were visible but that meant nothing. Somebody with radio contact and a big map would be moving cars around to head him off as reports of his position filtered in.

At the marker indicating 9 den he found another crossroad which he recognised. The sky-glow of Pertane now shone straight ahead while on his right was the road leading to the cave in the forest. He took an added risk of interception by driving the car a couple of miles nearer Pertane before abandoning it. When they found it there they'd probably jump to the conclusion that he'd sought refuge somewhere in the big city. It would be all to the good if they wasted time and manpower scouring Pertane from end to end.

Walking back, he reached the forest and continued along its fringe. It took him two hours to arrive at the tree and the tombstone. During that period he dived into the woods eleven times and watched carloads of hunters whine past. Looked like he'd got a veritable army to chasing around in the night and that was a worthwhile result if Wolf was to be believed.

Entering the forest, he made for the cave.

At the cave he found everything intact, undisturbed. He arrived thankfully, feeling that he was as safe here as he could be anywhere

upon a hostile world. It was hardly likely that the hunt would succeed in tracking him through twenty miles of virgin forest even if it occurred to them to try.

For a short time he sat on a container and let his mind indulge a wrestling match between duty and desire, Orders were that on each visit to the cave he must use the transmitter and send an up-to-the-minute report. There was no need to guess what might happen if he were to do so this time. They'd order him to stay put and indulge no further activities. Later they'd send a ship, pick him up and dump him on some other Sirian planet where he could start all over again. On Jaimec they'd leave his successor.

The idea of it riled him. All very well them talking about the tactical advantages of replacing a known operator with an unknown one. To the man who suffered replacement it smacked of incompetence and defeat. He flatly refused to consider himself either inefficient or beaten. Hell with 'em!

Maybe the Kaitempi had gained a smell at his whiskers but that didn't make him as good as theirs.

Besides, he had carried out phase one and part of phase two. There was yet phase three, the build-up of pressure to the point where the foe would be so busy defending the back door that he'd be in no condition to hold the front one.

Phase three involved strategic bombing both by himself and by anyone he could pay to do it. He had the necessary material for the former and the money for the latter. In yet unopened containers lay enough money to buy a dozen battleships and give every man of their crews a large box of cigars. Also forty different kinds of infernal machines, not one of them recognisable for what it was, and all guaranteed to go *whump* in the right place, at the right moment.

He was not supposed to start offensive action of the phase three type until ordered to do so because usually it preceded full-scale attack by Terran space-forces. But in the meantime he could work his way up to it by keeping *Dirac Angestun Gesept* in the public eye, arranging a few more executions and in general performing his proper function of being a pain in the neck.

No, he would not signal them just yet. He would play around a bit longer, long enough to establish his right to re-main to the bitter end regardless of whether or not the Kaitempi had him taped. He'd been run out of Radine but he wasn't going to be chased right off the planet. That would be too much for his self-esteem.

Opening a couple of containers, he undressed, put on a wide belly-belt that made him corpulent with guilders. Then he donned ill-cut, heavy clothes typical of the Sirian farmer.

A couple of cheek-pads widened and rounded his face. He plucked his eyebrows into slight raggedness, trimmed his hair to comply with the current agricultural fashion.

With purple dye he gave his face the peculiar mottling of a bad complexion. The final touch was to give himself an injection alongside his right nostril; within two hours it would create that faint orange-coloured blemish occasionally seen on Sirian features.

He was now a middle-aged, coarse looking and somewhat overfed Sirian farmer and again he had documents to match.

This time he was Rathan Gusulkin, a grain-grower. His papers showed that he had emigrated from Diracta five years ago.

This served to explain his Mashambi accent which was the only thing he could not successfully conceal.

Before setting out in his new role he enjoyed another real Earth-meal and four hours of much-needed sleep. When two miles from the outskirts of Pertane he buried a package holding fifty thousand guilders at the base of the southernmost left-hand buttress of the bridge across the river. Not far from that point, beneath deep water, a typewriter lay in the mud.

From the first booth in Pertane he called the Cafe Susun.

The answer was prompt, the voice strange and curt, the distant scanner not operating.

"That the Cafe Susun?" Mowry asked.

"Yar."

"Skriva there?"

A brief silence followed by, "He's somewhere around.

Upstairs or out back. Who wants him?"

"His mother."

"Don't give me that!" rasped the voice. "I can tell by your-"

"What's it got to do with you?" Mowry shouted. "Is Skriva there or not?"

The voice became suddenly subdued and sounded completely out of character as it cajoled. "Hold on a piece. I'll go find him for you."

"You needn't bother. Is Gurd there?"

"No, he hasn't been in today. Hold on, I tell you. I'll go find Skriva. He's

upstairs or -"

"Listen !" ordered Mowry. He stuck his tongue between his lips and blew hard.

Then he dropped the phone, scrambled out the booth and beat it at the fastest pace that would not attract attention.

Nearby a bored shopkeeper lounged in his doorway and idly watched him go. So also did four people gossiping outside the shop. That meant five witnesses, five descriptions of the fellow who had just used the booth.

`Hold on!' the strange voice had urged, striving but failing to conceal its normal note of arrogant authority. It wasn't the voice of the barkeep nor the careless, slangy tones of any frequenter of the Cafe Susun. It had the characteristic bossiness of a plainclothes cop or a Kaitempi agent. Yar, hold on, Stupid, while we trace the call and pick you up.

Three hundred yards along the road he jumped a bus, looked backward, could not discern whether the shopkeeper and the gossips had noticed what he had done. The bus lumbered forward. A police car rocked past it and braked by the booth. The bus turned a corner. Mowry wondered just how close a close shave can be.

The Cafe Susun was staked, no doubt of that. The cops'

prompt arrival at the booth proved it. How they had got a line on the place and what had induced them to raid it was a matter of sheer speculation. Perhaps they'd been led to it by their investigations of the bloody head in a sack.

Or perhaps Gurd and Skriva had been nabbed while tramping heavy-footed all over a roof and waving cables across a street. He could readily imagine them fixing a mock telephone tap with a thumping

noisiness fit to arouse the street. On a rooftop, blinded by easy money, they were liable to make themselves as conspicuous as a pair of drunken elephants.

If they had been caught they'd talk, tough as they were.

The Kaitempi would make them talk. When fingernails are peeled off one by one with a pair of pliers, or when intermittent voltage from a battery is applied to the corners of the eyeballs, the most granite-hard character becomes positively garrulous.

Yes, they'd talk all right but they couldn't say much. Only a weird tale about a crackpot with a Mashambi accent and an inexhaustible supply of guilders. Not a word about Dirac Angestun Gesept. Not a syllable about Terran intervention on Jaimec.

But there were others who could talk and to better effect.

"You see anyone leave this booth just now?"

"Yar. A fat yokel. Seemed in a hurry"

"Where'd he go?"

"Down the road. Got an a 42 bus."

"What did he look like? Describe him as accurately as you can. Come on, be quick about it!"

"Medium height, middle-aged, round-faced, got a bad complexion.

Quite a belly on him, too. Had a red falkin alongside his nose. Wearing a fur jacket, brown cord pants, heavy brown boots. Looked the farmer type if you get what I mean."



That's enough for us. Jalek, let's get after that bus. Where's the mike - I'd better broadcast this description. We'll nail him if we move fast"

"He's a cunning one. Didn't take him long to smell a trap when Lathin answered his call. He blew a dirty noise and ran.

Bet you the bus-jump is a blind-he's got a car parked someplace."

"Save your breath and catch up with that bus. Two callers have escaped us already. We'll have a lot of explaining to do if we lose a third."

"Yar, I know."

Mowry got off the bus before anyone had time to overtake it. He caught another one running on a transverse route. But he did not play tag all over the city as he had done in the past.

Right now things were a lot livelier, the pursuers almost certainly had a description. of him and it looked like he'd got most of Jaimec on the hop.

His third change put him on an express bus heading out of town. It dropped him a mile beyond the bridge where he had hidden fifty thousand guilders for the benefit of those who, for all he knew, might not have another fifty hours to live. Once again he was heading back to the forest and the cave.

To retrace his steps to the bridge and try unearth the money would be stupid and dangerous. Police cars would be heading this way before long. The hunt for a pot-bellied farmer would not be confined to Pertane. Anytime now they'd start probing the rural areas immediately outside the city limits. So long as daylight remained the best thing for him to do was to get out of sight and stay out until such time as he could assume yet another new guise.

Moving fast he reached the edge of the forest without being stopped and questioned. For a short time he continued to use the road, seeking shelter among the trees whenever a car approached. But traffic increased and vehicles appeared with such frequency that eventually he gave up hope of further progress before dark. He was pretty tired too, his eyelids were heavy, his feet had taken a beating.

Penetrating farther into the woods he found a comfortable, well-concealed spot, lay on a thick bed of moss and let go a sigh of satisfaction. For a while he reposed in thoughtful silence while his eyes idly surveyed small patches of sky visible through leafy gaps.

Wolf had asserted that one man could pin down an army.

He wondered how large a number he'd fastened and what real good it had done, if any. The most frustrating thing about this solitary wasp-life was that he had no way of obtaining a glimpse behind the scenes, of looking into the enemy's head-quarters and measuring his multiple reactions, of seeing for oneself how widespread and crippled they became.

How many precious man-hours had his presence cost the foe? Thousands, tens of thousands, millions? To what forms of war service would those man-hours have been devoted if he had not compelled the enemy to waste them in other directions? Ah, in the answer to that hypothetical question lay the true measure of a wasp's efficiency.

Gradually he gave up these unprofitable musings and drifted into sleep. Night was upon him when he awoke refreshed and energetic. He was also less soured with events. Things could have been worse, lots worse. For example, he could have gone straight to the Cafe Susun and walked into the arms of the trappers like a prize chump. The Kaitempi wouldn't know what they had grabbed but they'd hold

him on general principles and in their own effective way they'd squeeze him of every item of information he possessed. Thinking it over, he doubted his ability to hold out once they really got to work on him. About the only captives from whom the Kaitempi had extracted nothing were those who had managed to commit suicide before questioning.

As he trudged steadily through the dark toward the cave he blessed his luck, wisdom or intuition in making a phone call. Then his thoughts became occupied with Gurd and Skriva. If they had been caught, as seemed likely, it meant he'd been deprived of valuable allies and once again was strictly on his own. He'd have to find some way of replacing them and that wouldn't be easy.

But if, like himself, they had escaped the trap, how was he going to find them? The crummy cafe had been their only recognised point of contact. He didn't know where they lived and it would be foolhardy to go around asking. They didn't know his address, either. They'd want to meet him fully as much as he wanted to meet them. Both sides could waste weeks or months fumbling at random for each other in a city as big as Pertane. Somehow the problem had to be solved.

Arriving at the cave as dawn was breaking, he took off his shoes, sat on the pebble beach and soaked his aching feet in the stream. Still his mind chewed unceasingly at the question of how to find Gurd and Skriva, if they were still free.

Eventually the Kaitempi would remove the stakeout from the Cafe Susun either because they were satisfied that they had exploited it to the limit, or because their patience had run out, or because of pressure of other business. It would then be possible to visit the place and find someone able to give all the information he needed. But heaven alone knew when that would be; perhaps as far off as a year next Christmas.

In new and radically changed disguise he could mooch around the neighbourhood of the cafe until he found one of its regular customers and used him as a lead to Gurd and Skriva. It would be a risky' tactic, a highly dangerous one.

Chances were high that, for the time being, the Cafe Susun was the focal point of Kaitempi activity over the entire district with plainclothesmen keeping watch for suspicious looking characters lounging around anywhere within a mile of the place.

After an hour's meditation he decided that there was one possibility of regaining contact with the brothers. It depended not only on them being on the loose but also having their fair share of brains and imagination. It might work. They were crude and ruthless but not stupid and a steady flow of guilders must have greatly stimulated their natural cunning.

He could leave them a message where he'd left one before, hoping they'd have the sense to think of the same thing them-selves and go take a look. On the Radine road under Marker 33 den: If they had successfully completed their last job they had fifty thousand guilders owing to them. That should be more than enough to sharpen their wits.

The sun came up, spreading its warmth through the trees and into the cave. It was one of those days that beguiles a man into lying around and doing nothing. Succumbing to temptation he gave himself a holiday and postponed further action until the morrow. It was just as well: constant chasing around, uneasy sleeps and much nervous tension had combined to thin him down and tax his resources.

All that day he loafed in or near the cave, enjoying peace and quietness, freedom from pursuit, cooking himself large and succulent

Earth-meals. No prowlers came sneaking through the forest, no scout-planes snooped low overhead.

Evidently the enemy was obsessed with the notion that the quarry sought sanctuary only in heavily populated places; it just hadn't occurred to them that anyone would take to the wilds. This was logical enough from their viewpoint, they having accepted Dirac Angestun Gesept as a large, well-organised opposition too big and widespread to lurk in a cave.

The wasp had magnified himself to such elephantine proportions that they weren't going to waste time looking down rabbit-holes for him.

That night he slept like a child, soundly and solidly, right around the clock. He spent the next morning in total idleness, had a bathe in the stream during the heat of noon. Toward evening he cropped his hair in military fashion, leaving himself with no more than a stiff bristle covering his skull. Another injection obliterated the falkin. He retinted himself all over, making his colour a fresher and slightly deeper purple. Dental plates filled the gaps where his wisdom teeth had been and made his face appear wider, heavier, with squarer jaw-line.

A complete change of clothing followed. The shoes he donned were of military type, the civilian suit was of expensive cut, the neck-scarf was knotted in space-marine fashion.

To this ensemble he added a platinum watch-fob and a platinum wrist-bangle holding an ornamental identity-disc.

He now looked like somebody several cuts above the Sirian average. The new set of documents he pocketed confirmed this impression. They vouched for the fact that he was Colonel Krasna Halopti of the Military Intelligence Service and as such entitled to claim the assistance of all Sirian authorities anytime, anywhere.

They could execute him out of hand for masquerading as a high-ranking officer. But what matter? - they'd strangle him anyway. A man cannot die twice.

Satisfied that he now looked the part one hundred percent and that he bore little resemblance to any of his previous appearances, he sat on a container and wrote a brief letter.

I tried to get in touch with you at the cafe and found the place full of K-sokos. The money had been buried in readiness for you at the base of the southernmost left-hand buttress of the Asako Bridge. If you are free, and if you are able and willing to take on more work, leave a message here saying when and where I can find you.'

Leaving it unsigned, he folded it, slipped it into a damp proof cellophane envelope. Into his pocket he dropped a small, silent automatic. The gun was of Sirian manufacture and he had a fake permit to carry it.

This new role was more daring and dangerous than the others had been, but had its compensations. A check with official records would expose and damn him in double-quick time. Against this was the average Sirian's respect for authority and reluctance to challenge it. Providing he conducted himself with enough self-assurance and sufficient arrogance even the Kaitempi might be tempted to accept him at face value.

Two hours after the fall of darkness he switched Container-22

and set forth through the forest bearing a new case larger and heavier than before. Yet again he found himself regretting the distance of his hideout from the nearest road. A twenty mile march each way was tedious and tiring. But it was a cheap price to pay for the security of his supplies.

The walk was longer this time because he did not cut straight through to the road and thumb a lift. To beg a ride in his new guise would have been sufficiently out of character to draw unwelcome attention to himself. So he followed the fringe of the forest to the point where two other roads joined on. Here, in the early morning, he waited between the trees until an express bus appeared in the distance. He stepped out onto the road, caught it and was carried into the centre of Pertane.

Within half an hour he had acquired a car. This time he did not bother to rent one; it wasn't worth the trouble for the short period he needed it. Ambling around until he found a parked dyno that suited his purpose, he got in and drove away. Nobody ran after him yelling bloody murder. The theft had gone unobserved.

Making it out to the Radine road, he stopped, waited for the artery to clear in both directions, buried his letter under the marker. Then he returned to Pertane and put the car back where he had found it. He had been away a little over an hour and it was probable that the owner had not missed his machine, would never know that it had been borrowed.

Next, he went to the crowded main post office, took half a dozen small but heavy parcels from his case, addressed them and mailed them. Each held an airtight can containing a cheap clock-movement and a piece of paper, nothing else. The clock-movement emitted a sinister tick just loud enough to be heard if a suspicious-minded person listened closely. The paper bore a message short and to the point.

*This package could have killed you.*

*Two different packages brought together at the right time and place could kill a hundred thousand.*

*End this war before we end you!*

*Dirac Angestun Gesept.*

Paper threats, that was all. But effective enough to eat still further into the enemy's war effort. They'd alarm the recipients and give their forces something more to worry about.

Doubtless the military would provide a personal bodyguard for every big wheel on Jaimec and that alone would pin down a regiment.

Mail would be examined and all suspicious parcels would be taken apart in a blast-proof room. There'd be a city-wide search with radiation-detectors for the component parts of a fission-bomb. Civil defence would be alerted in readiness to cope with a mammoth explosion that might or might not take place. Anyone on the streets who walked with a secretive air and wore a slightly mad expression. would be arrested and hauled in for questioning.

Yes, after three murders with the promise of more to come authority dare not dismiss D.A.G.'s threats as the idle talk of some crackpot on the loose. For safety's sake they'd have to assume that fake bombs might soon be followed by real ones and act accordingly.

As he strolled along the road he amused himself by picturing the scene when the receiver of a parcel rushed to dump it in a bucket of water while someone else frantically phoned for the bomb squad. He was so engrossed with these thoughts that it was some time before he became conscious of a shrill whistling sound rising and falling over Pertane. He stopped, looked around, gazed at the sky, saw nothing out of the ordinary. Quite a lot of people seemed to have disappeared from the street but a few, like himself, were standing and staring around bewilderedly.





# Chapter VIII

THE NEXT MOMENT a cop shoved him in the shoulder. "Get down, you fool"

"Down?" Mowry eyed him without understanding. "Down where? What's the matter?"

"Into the cellars," shouted the cop, making waving motions.

"Don't you recognise a raid-alarm when you hear it?" Without waiting for a reply he ran forward, bawling at other people,

"Get down! Get down!"

Turning, Mowry scrambled after the rest down a long, steep flight of steps and into the basement of a business block.

He was surprised to find the place already crowded. Several hundred people had taken refuge without having to be told.

They were standing around, or sitting on wooden benches or leaning against the wall. Upending his case, Mowry sat on it.

Nearby an irate oldster looked him over with rheumy gaze and said, "A raid-alarm. What d'you think of that?"

"Nothing," answered Mowry. "What's the use of thinking?"

"There's nothing we can do about it"

"But the Spakum fleets have been destroyed," shrilled the oldster, making Mowry the focal point of an address to everyone.

"They've said so time and again, on the radio and in the papers. The Spakum fleets have been wiped out. So what has set off an alarm, *hi*? What can raid us, *hi*? Tell me that!"

"Maybe it's just a practice alarm," Mowry soothed.

"Practice?" He spluttered with senile fury. "Why do we need practice and who says so? If the Spakum forces are beaten we've no need to hide. There's nothing to hide from. We don't want any practice."

"Don't pick on me." advised Mowry, bored with the other's whines. "I didn't sound the alarm."

"Some stinking idiot sounded it," persisted the oldster. "Some lying *soko* who wants us to believe the war is as good as over when it isn't. How do we know how much truth there is in what they're telling us?" He spat on the floor, doing it viciously.

"A great victory in the Centauri sector-then the raid-alarm is sounded. They must think we're a lot of-"

A squat, heavily built character stepped close to him and snapped, "Shut up!"

The oldster was too absorbed in his woes to cower, too pigheaded to recognise the voice of authority. "I won't shut up. I was walking home when somebody pushed me down here just because a whistle blows and -"

The squat man opened his jacket, displayed a badge and repeated in harsher tones, "I said shut up!"

"Who d'you think you are? At my time of life I'm not going to be --"

With a swift movement the squat man whipped out a rubber

truncheon, larruped the oldster over the head with all the force he could muster. The victim went down like a shot steer.

A voice at the back of the crowd shouted, "Shame!" Several others murmured, fidgeted but did nothing.

Grinning, the squat man showed what he thought of this disapproval by kicking the oldster in the face and again in the belly. Glancing up, he met Mowry's gaze and promptly challenged, "Well?"

Mowry said evenly, "Are you of the Kaitempi?"

"Yar. What's it to you?"

"Nothing. I was only curious."

"Then don't be. Keep your dirty nose out of this."

The crowd muttered and fidgeted again. Two cops came down from the street, sat on the bottom step and mopped their foreheads. They looked nervous and jumpy. The Kaitempi agent joined them, took a gun out of his pocket and nursed it in his lap. Mowry smiled at him enigmatically. The oldster still lay unconscious on the floor and breathed with bubbling sounds.

Now the silence of the city crept into the cellar. The crowd became peculiarly tense as everyone listened. After half an hour there sounded in the distance a series of hisses that started on a loud, strong note and swiftly faded into the sky.

Tenseness immediately increased with the knowledge that guided missiles weren't being expended for the fun of it.

Somewhere overhead and within theoretical range must be a Spakum ship, perhaps bearing a lethal load that might drop at any

moment.

Another volley of hisses. The silence returned. The cops and the agent got to their feet, edged farther into the basement and turned to watch the steps. Individual breathing could be heard, some respirating spasmodically as if finding difficulty in using their lungs. All faces betrayed an inward strain and there was an acrid smell of sweat. Mowry's only thought was that to be disintegrated in a bomb-blast from his own side was a hell of a way to die.

Ten minutes later the floor quivered. The walls vibrated.

The entire building shook. From the street came the brittle crash of breaking glass as windows fell out. Still there was no other sound, no roar of a great explosion, no dull rumbling of propulsors in the stratosphere. The quietness was eerie in the extreme.

It was three hours before the same whistling on a lower note proclaimed the all-clear. The crowd hurried out, vastly relieved. They stepped over the oldster, left him lying there.

The two cops headed together up the street while the Kaitempi agent strode the opposite way. Mowry caught up with the agent, spoke pleasantly.

"Shock damage only. They must have dropped it a good distance away."

The other grunted,

"I wanted to speak to you but couldn't very well do so in front of all those people."

"Yar? Why not?"

For answer, Mowry produced his identity-card and his warrant, showed them to the agent.

"Colonel Halopti, Military Intelligence: Returning the card, the agent lost some of his belligerence, made an effort to be polite. "What did you want to say-something about that garrulous old fool?"

"No. He deserved all he got. You're to be commended for the way you handled him." He noted the other's look of gratification, added, "An ancient gab like him could have made the whole crowd hysterical."

"Yar, that's right. The way to control a mob is to cut out and beat up its spokesmen."

"When the alarm sounded I was on my way to Kaitempi H.Q. to borrow a dependable agent," explained Mowry. "When I saw you in action I felt you'd save me the trouble. You're just the fellow I want: one who's quick on the uptake and will stand no nonsense: What's your name?"

"Sagramatholou."

"Ah, you're from the K17 system, hi? They all use compound names there, don't they?"

"Yar. And you're from Diracta. Halopti is a Diractan name and you've got a Mashambi accent"

Mowry laughed. "Can't hide much from each other, can we?"

"Nar." He looked Mowry over with open curiosity, asked,

"What d'you want me for?"

"I hope to nab the leader of a D.A.G. cell. It's got to be done quickly

and quietly. If the Kaitempi put fifty on the job and make a major operation of it they'll scare away the rest for miles around. One at a time is the best technique. As the Spakums say, "Softly, softly, catchee monkey."

"Yar, that's the best way," agreed Sagramatholou.

"I'm confident that I could take this character single-handed without frightening away the others. But while I'm going in, the front he may beat it out the back. So it needs two of us." He paused to let it sink in, finished, "I want a reliable man to grab him if he bolts; you'll get full credit for the capture."

The other's eyes narrowed and gained an eager light. "I'll be glad to come along if it's all right with H.Q. I'd better phone and ask them."

"Please yourself," said Mowry with a studied carelessness he was far from feeling. "But you know what will happen for sure?"

"What d'you think?"

"They'll take you off it and give me an officer of equivalent rank." Mowry made a disparaging gesture. "Although I shouldn't say it, being a colonel myself, I'd rather have a tough, experienced man of my own choice."

The other swelled his chest. "You may have something.

There are officers and officers."

"Precisely! Well, are you in this with me or not?"

"Do you accept full responsibility if my superiors gripe about it?"

"Of course."

"That's good enough for me. When do we start?"

"At once."

"All right," said Sagramatholou, making up his mind. "I'm on duty another three hours anyway."

"Good! You got a civilian-type dyno?"

"All our dynos are ordinary looking ones - they have to be."

"Mine bears military insignia," lied Mowry. "We'd better use yours."

The other accepted this statement without question. He was completely hooked by his own eagerness to get credit for an important capture. Being what they were, the Kaitempi suffered from their own peculiar form of cupidity; the prospect of finding another victim for the strangling-post was something difficult to resist.

Reaching the car-park around the corner, Sagramatholou took his seat behind the wheel of a big black dyno. Tossing his case into the back, Mowry got in beside him. The car snored onto the street.

"Where to?"

"South end, back of the Rida Engine Plant. I'll show you from there."

Theatrically the agent made a chopping motion with one hand as he said, "This D.A.G. business is sending us crazy.

High time we put an end to it. How did you get a lead on them?"

"We picked it up on Diracta. One of them fell into our hands and talked."



"In great pain?" suggested Sagramatholou, chuckling.

"That's the way to handle them." He turned a corner, let go another chuckle. "They all blab when the suffering gets too cruel to endure. After which they die just the same."

"Yar," repeated Mowry with becoming gusto.

"We snatched a dozen from a cafe in the Laksin quarter,"

informed Sagramatholou. "They're talking, too. But they aren't talking sense-yet. They've admitted every crime in the calendar except membership of D.A.G. About that organisation they know nothing, so they say."

"What took you to the cafe?"

"Somebody got his stupid head knocked off. He was a regular frequenter of the joint. We identified him after a lot of trouble, traced him back and grabbed a bunch of his ever-loving friends. About six of them have confessed to the killing."

"Six?" Mowry frowned.

"Yar. They did it at six different times, in six different places, for six different reasons. The dirty sokos are lying to make us ease up. But we'll get the truth out of them yet."

"Sounds like a mere hoodlum squabble to me. Where's the political angle, if any?"

"I don't know. The higher-ups keep things to themselves.

They say they know for a fact that it was a D.A.G. execution and therefore whoever did it is a D.A.G. killer."

"Maybe somebody tipped them," offered Mowry.

"Maybe somebody did. And he could be a liar too." He let go a snort of disgust. "This war is enough without traitors and liars making things worse. We're being run ragged, see? It can't go on for ever."

"Any luck with the snap-searches?"

"There was at first. Then the luck petered out because everyone became wary. We've stopped making them for ten days.

The lull will give the dodgers a sense of false security. When they're ripe for the taking, we'll take them."

"That's a good idea. One has to use one's wits these days, hi?"

"Yar."

"Here we are. Turn left and then first right"

The car shot past the rear of the engine plant, entered a narrow, rutted road, switched into another little better than a lane. All around was an unsavoury, semi-deserted area full of old buildings, vacant lots and garbage dumps. They stopped, got out.

Gazing about him, the Kaitempi agent remarked, "A typical vermin-run. A couple of years ago we smoked a gang of god-worshippers out of an old warehouse in this district"

Mowry put on a look of revulsion, "You mean a bunch infected with Terran religion?"

"Yar, true believers. When the noose tightened their praying tongues stuck out and went black the same as any sinners."

He laughed at the recollection of it, glanced at the other.

"Where now?"

"Along this alley."

Mowry led the way into the alley which was long, dirty and had a dead end. They reached the twelve-foot wall that blocked further progress. There was nobody in sight, nothing could be heard save a distant hum of traffic and the nearer squeak of a hanging sign, old and rusty.

Pointing to the door set in the wall, Mowry said, This is the bolt-hole. It will take me two or three minutes to get round the front and go in. After that you can expect anything." He tried the door. It refused to budge. "Locked."

"Better unlock it so he can make a clear run;" suggested Sagramatholou. "If he finds himself balked he's liable to try shoot it out with you and I'll be in no position to take part.

These sokos can become dangerous when desperate." He felt in a pocket, produced a bunch of master-keys. Grinning, he added, "The easiest way is to let him rush straight into my arms."

With that, he faced the door, turning his back on Mowry while he meddled with the lock. Mowry looked back along the alley. Still nobody in sight.

Taking out his gun, he said in calm, unhurried tones, "You kicked the old geezer when he was down."

"Sure did," enthused the agent, still trying the lock. "I hope he dies slowly, the half-witted -" His voice broke off as the incongruity of Mowry's remark sank into his mind. He turned round, one hand braced upon the door, and looked straight into the gun's muzzle.

"What's this? What are you -"

The gun gave a *phut* no louder than that of an air-pistol.

Sagramatholou remained standing, a blue hole in his forehead.

His mouth hung open in an idiotic gape. Then his knees gave way and he plunged forward face first.

Pocketing the gun, Mowry bent over the body. Working fast, he searched it, replaced the wallet after a swift look through it but confiscated the official badge. Hastening out the alley, he got into the car, drove it downtown to within a short distance of a used car lot.

Walking the rest of the way he looked over the big assembly of badly beaten-up dynos. A thin, hard-faced Sirian immediately sidled up to him, his crafty eyes noting the well-cut suit, the platinum fob and wrist-band. This, obviously, was harvest time.

"Lucky you!" announced the Sirian, greasily. "You have found the best place on Jaimec for a genuine bargain. Every car a real sacrifice. There's a war on, prices are going to jump and you just can't go wrong. Now take a look at this beauty right here. A gift, a positive gift. It's a -"

"I've got eyes," said Mowry.

"Yar, sure. I'm pointing out -"

"I've got a mind of my own," Mowry informed. "And I wouldn't drive around in any of these relics unless I was in a hurry to be struck dead."

"But -"

"Like everyone else, I know there's a war on. before long it's going to be mighty tough getting bits and pieces. I'm in-terested in something I can strip down for parts." He pointed.

"That one, for instance. How much?"

"She's a good runner," expostulated the salesman, donning a look of horror. "Purrs along like brand new. Got current plates -"

"I can see it's got current plates."

"... and is good and solid from front to back. I'm giving it away, just giving it"

"How much?"

"Nine-ninety," said the other, again eyeing the suit and the platinum.

"Robbery," said Mowry.

They haggled for half an hour at the end of which Mowry got it for eight-twenty. He paid and drove it away. It creaked, groaned and lurched in a manner that showed he'd still been soaked for at least two hundred, but he wasn't resentful about that.

On a lot littered with scrap-iron a mile away, with nobody watching, he parked the car, smashed its windshield and lamps, removed its wheels and number plates, took all detach-able parts from the motor and effectively converted the machine into what any passer-by could see was an abandoned wreck. He walked off, returned in short time with the dead agent's car, loaded the loose parts into it.

Half an hour later he slung the wheels and other items into the river. With them went Sagramatholou's plates. He drove away bearing the plates taken from the wreck; the exchange had cost him eight-twenty

in counterfeit money and was cheap at the price. A police patrol or another Kaitempi car could now follow him for miles without spotting the number for which undoubtedly they'd be seeking.

Assured of no more snap-searches for the time being he idled around town until the sky went dark. Dumping the car in an underground garage, he bought a paper and perused it during a meal.

According to this news-sheet a lone Terran destroyer -

described as a 'cowardly sneak-raider' - had managed to make a desperate dash through formidable space defences and drop one bomb upon the great national armaments complex at Shugruma. Little damage had been done. The invader had been blown apart soon afterward.

The story had been written up to give the impression that a sly dog had got in a harmless bite and been shot for its pains. He wondered how many readers believed it. Shugruma was more than three hundred miles away - yet Pertane had shuddered to the shock-waves of the distant explosion. If that was anything to go by, the target area must now be represented by a crater a couple of miles in diameter.

The second page stated that forty-eight members of the traitorous Sirian Freedom Party had been seized by forces of law and order and would be dealt with appropriately. No details offered, no names given, no charges stated.

This was normal among a species with a secret judicial system, on worlds where any suspect could be snatched from the street and never seen again. There were no judges and juries holding public trials anywhere within the Sirian Empire.

If lucky, the arrested one eventually was released, physically

enfeebled, without apology or compensation. If out of luck, his next of kin did not so much as receive a jar containing his ashes.

The forty-eight were doomed, whoever they were or whoever they were thought to be. Alternatively, the whole yarn could be an officially concocted lie. The powers-that-be were quite capable of venting their fury on half a dozen common crooks and, for public consumption, defining them as D.A.G.

members while multiplying their number by eight. Authority is maintained and wars are fought by propaganda, a cover word for cynical perversion of the facts.

One of the back pages devoted a few lines to the modest statement that Sirian forces had now been withdrawn from the planet Gooma "so that they can be deployed more effectively in the actual area of combat." This implied that Gooma was far outside the area of combat, a transparent piece of nonsense to any reader capable of independent thought. But ninety percent of the readership could not endure the awful strain of thinking: they were content to look and listen and swallow whatever guff got dished out.

Far and away the most significant item was the leader-writer's contribution. This was a pompous sermon based on the thesis that total war should end only in total victory which could and must be gained only by total effort. There was no room for political division within the Sirian ranks. Everyone without exception must be solidly behind the leadership in its determination to fight the war to a successful conclusion.

Doubters and waverers, dodgers and complainers, the lazy and the shiftless were as much traitors to the cause as any spy or saboteur. They should be dealt with swiftly, once and for all. They should be slaughtered without mercy.

Clearly it was a yelp of agony although *Dirac Angestun Gesept* was not mentioned in plain words. Since in time of war all such lectures were officially inspired, it was reasonable to assume that the brasshats were experiencing acute pains in the buttocks. In effect they were shouting out loud that a wasp could sting. Perhaps some of them had received little parcels that ticked and did not approve of this switch from the general to the personal.

Now that night had fallen Mowry lugged his case to his room. He made the approach warily. Any hideout could become a trap at any time, without warning. Apart from the possibility of the police or Kaitempi lying in wait after having got a line on him, there was also the chance of encountering a landlord who'd become curious about the use of the room by another and more prosperous looking character. True, the landlord was a tightmouth typical of slumdom but even he would curry favour with the Kaitempi if he thought it necessary to save his own neck. The landlord was not to be trusted.

On a hostile world nobody was to be trusted.

The building wasn't watched, the room was not staked. He managed to sneak in unobserved. Everything proved to be exactly as he had left it, showing that nobody yet had found reason to come nosing around. Thankfully he sprawled on the bed and gave his feet a rest while he considered the situation.

It was evident that as far as possible he would have to enter and leave the room only during hours of darkness. The alternative was to seek another hideout, preferably in a better-class area more in keeping with his present character. He didn't want to start another time-wasting search for a rat-hole unless he was driven to it.

The following day he regretted the destruction of his first case and all its contents in Radine. This loss piled up the work, made it tedious



and boring. But it had to be done. As a result he spent all morning in the public library compiling a list of names and addresses to replace the previous one.

Then with plain paper, envelopes and a small hand-printer he used another two days preparing a stack of letters. It was a relief when they were finished and mailed.

*Sagramatholou was the fourth.*

*The list is long.*

*Dirac Angestun Gesept.*

Thus he had killed several birds with one stone. He had avenged the oldster, a motive that gave him a good deal of satisfaction. He had struck another blow at the Kaitempi.

He'd acquired a car not traceable through renting agencies or usual sales channels. Finally he had given authority further proof of D.A.G.'s willingness to kill, maim or otherwise muscle its way to power.

To boost this situation he mailed at the same time another six parcels. Outwardly these were identical with the former ones. They emitted the same subdued tick. There the resemblance ended. At periods varying between six and twenty hours after sending, or at any moment that someone tried pry them open, they were due to go off with a bang sufficiently forceful to plaster a body against the wall.

On the fourth day after his return to the roam he slipped out unseen, collected the car and visited Marker 33-den on the Radine road. Several patrol cars passed him on the way but none betrayed the slightest interest in him. Reaching the marker, he dug at its base, found his own cellophane envelope now containing a small card. All it

said was: Asako 19-1713.

The trick had come off.

Forthwith he drove back to the first booth he could find, switched off its scanner and called the number. A strange voice answered while the visiscreen remained blank. Evidently there was similar caution at the other end.

"19-1713," it said.

"Gurd or Skriva there?" asked Mowry.

"Wait," ordered the voice.

"One moment and no more," retorted Mowry. "After that goodbye!"

The only answer was a grunt. Mowry hung on, watching the road, ready to drop the phone and beat it immediately his intuition told him to get away fast. The college had told him times without number never to disregard the strange, indefinable smell of an ambush. There must be something in it seeing he was still alive and fancy free.

He was nearing the point of taking alarm when Skriva's voice came through and growled, "Who's that?"

"Your benefactor."

"Oh, you. I'm not getting your pic."

"I'm not getting yours either. What's the matter - are you windy?"

"This is no place to talk," said Skriva. "We'd better meet.

Where are you?"

A swift series of thoughts flashed through Mowry's mind.

Where are you? Was Skriva allowing himself to be used as bait? If he'd been caught and given a preliminary taste of rough treatment it was just the sort of crafty trick the Kaitempi would play. They'd get Skriva's full co-operation after showing him the consequences of refusal.

On the other hand it wasn't likely in such circumstances that Skriva would bother asking for his location. The Kaitempi would know it already, having traced the call. Moreover they'd want the conversation prolonging as much as possible to hold Mowry there. Skriva was trying to cut it short. Yes, the betting was against a trap.

"You struck dumb?" shouted Skriva, impatient and suspicious.

That settled the matter from Mowry's viewpoint and he replied, "I was thinking. How about meeting me where you left your phone number?"

"That's as good as anywhere."

"By yourself," warned Mowry. "Nobody else with you excepting Gurd. Nobody following and nobody hanging around."

"Who's windy now?" said Skriva. "I'm coming right away."

Driving back to the marker, Mowry parked his car on the verge and waited. Twenty minutes afterward Skriva's dyno rolled up, parked behind. Skriva got out, approached him, halted in mid-step, scowled uncertainly, slid a hand into a pocket and looked hurriedly up and down the road. There were no other cars in sight.

Mowry grinned at him. "What's eating you? Got a guilty conscience or something?"

Coming closer, Skriva eyed him with slight incredulity, then commented, "So it is you. What have you been doing to yourself?"

Without waiting for a reply he walked around the bonnet, climbed in, took the other seat. "You don't look the same.

It was hard to recognise you."

"That's the idea. A change for the better wouldn't do you any harm, either. Make it harder for the cops to get you."

"Maybe." Skriva was silent for a moment, then, "They got Gurd."

Mowry sat up. "How? When was this?"

"The damn fool came down from a roof straight into the arms of two of them. Not satisfied with that he gave them some lip and went for his gun."

"If he'd behaved like he'd every right to be up there he could have talked his way out of it."

"Gurd couldn't talk his way out of an old sack," opined Skriva. "He's not made like that. I spend a lot of time keeping him out of trouble."

"How come you weren't collared too?"

"I was on another roof halfway down the street. They didn't see me. It was all over before I could get down to help Gurd."

"What happened to him?"

"What you'd expect. The cops were already beating him over the head before he got his hand in his pocket. Last I saw of him was when they flung him into the wagon."

"Tough luck!" sympathised Mowry. He meditated a while, asked, "And what happened at the Cafe Susun?"

"Don't know exactly. Gurd and I weren't there at the time and a fellow tipped us to stay clear. All I know is that the Kaitempi rushed the place twenty strong, grabbed everyone in sight and staked it. I've not shown my face near there since.

Some *soko* must have talked too much."

"Butin Arhava, for instance?"

"How could he?" scoffed Skriva. "Gurd took his head off before he'd a chance to blab."

"Maybe he talked after Gurd had tended to him," Mowry suggested. "Sort of lost his head about it."

Skriva narrowed his eyes: "What d'you mean?"

"Oh, forget it. Did you collect that roll from the bridge?"

"Yar."

"Want any more - or are you now too rich to care?"

Studying him calculatingly, Skriva asked, "How much money have you got altogether?"

"Enough to pay for all the jobs I want done."

"That tells me nothing."

"It isn't intended to," Mowry assured. "What's on your mind?"

"I like money."

"That fact is more than apparent," said Mowry.

"I'm really fond of it," Skriva went on, as if speaking in parables.

"Who isn't?"

"Yar, who isn't? Gurd loves it too. Most everybody does."

Skriva stopped, added, "In fact the chump who doesn't love it is either daft or dead."

"If you're leading up to something, say so," Mowry urged.

"Cut out the song and dance act. We've not got all day."

"I know a fellow who loves money."

"So what?"

"He's a jailer," said Skriva pointedly.

Twisting sidewise in his seat, Mowry eyed him carefully.

"Let's get down to brass tacks. What's he willing to do and how much does he want?"

"He says Gurd's in a cell along with a couple of old pals of ours. So far none of them have been put through the mill though they'll be worked over sooner or later. Fellows in clink usually are given plenty of time to think over what's coming to them and let their imaginations operate. It helps them break down quicker."

"That's the usual technique," Mowry agreed. "Let them become

nervous wrecks before making them physical wrecks."

"Yar, the stinking sokos." Skriva spat out the window before he continued, "Whenever a prisoner's number comes up the Kaitempi call at the jail, present an official demand for him and take him to their H.Q. for treatment. Sometimes they bring him back several days later, by which time he's a cripple.

Sometimes they don't return him at all. In the latter event they file a death warrant to keep the prison records straight."

"Go on."

"This fellow who loves money will give me the number and location of Gurd's cell. Also the timing of Kaitempi visits and full details of the routine they follow. Finally he'll pro-vide a copy of the official form used for demanding release."

He let that sink in, finished, "He wants a hundred thousand."

Mowry pursed his lips in a silent whistle. "You think we should try get Gurd out?"

"Yar."

"Didn't know you were so fond of him."

"He could stay there and rot for all I care," said Skriva.

"He's paying the price of his own stupidity. Why should I worry about him, hi?"

"All right, let him stay and rot. We'll save a hundred thousand that way."

"Yar," Skriva approved. "But -"

"But what?"

"I could use the dope and the two with him. So could you if you've more work in mind. Furthermore, if Gurd's kept in he'll talk. They'll make him talk - and he knows too much.

But if he escapes they won't be able to force him to say anything. And what's a hundred thousand to you?"

"Too much to throw away on a glib story." Mowry told him bluntly. "Prize fool I'd be to hand you a huge, wad just because you say Gurd's in the clink."

Skriva's face darkened with anger. "You don't believe me, *hi*?"

"I've got to be shown," said Mowry, undisturbed.

"Maybe you'd like a specially conducted tour through the jail and have Gurd pointed out to you?"

"The sarcasm is wasted. You seem to forget that while Gurd may be able to put the finger on you for fifty or more major crimes, he can do nothing whatsoever about me. He can talk himself black in the face without saying anything worth a hoot so far as I am concerned. No, when I spend money it'll be my money and it'll be spent for my reasons, not yours."

"So you won't splurge a guilder on Gurd?" demanded Skriva, still thunderous.

"I don't say that. What I do say is that I won't throw money away for nothing. But I'm willing to pay for full value received."



"Meaning what?"

"Tell this greedy screw that we'll give him twenty thousand for a genuine Kaitempi requisition-form - after he has handed it over. Also that we'll pay him a further eighty thousand after Gurd and his two companions have got away."

A mixture of expressions crossed Skriva's unlovely features, surprise, gratification, doubt and puzzlement. "What if he refuses to play on these terms?"

"He stays poor."

"Well, what if he agrees but refuses to believe I can find the money? How am I going to convince him?"

"Don't bother to try," Mowry advised. "He has to speculate in order to accumulate, same as everyone else. If he won't do it let him remain content with grinding poverty."

"Maybe he'd rather stay poor than take the risk."

"He won't. He's running no real risk and he knows it.

There's only one chance he could take and he'll avoid it like the plague."

"Such as?"

"Suppose we arrive to make the rescue and are jumped on before we can open our mouths or show the requisition-form, what will it prove? It'll show that this fellow fooled you for the sake of the reward. The Kaitempi will pay him five thousand apiece for laying the trap and tipping them off. He'll make an easy and legal ten thousand on top of the twenty thousand we've already paid him. Correct?"

"Yar," said Skriva, uneasily.

"But he'll lose the eighty thousand yet to come. The difference is plenty big enough to ensure his absolute loyalty up to the moment he gets it in his hot little hands."

"Yar," repeated Skriva, brightening considerably.

"After that - *zunk!*" said Mowry. "Immediately he's got his claws on the lot we'd better run like hell."

"Hell?" Skriva stared at him. "That's a *Spakum* curse-word."

Mowry sweated a bit as he replied offhandedly, "Sure it is."

One picks up all sorts of bad language in wartime, especially on Diracta."

"Ah, yes, on Diracta." echoed Skriva, mollified. He got out the car. "I'll go see this jailer. We'll have to move fast. Phone me this time tomorrow, hi?"

"All right."

Mowry remained where he was until the other's dyno had gone from sight. Then he jockeyed his own off the verge and drove into Pertane.



# Chapter IX

THE NEXT DAYS work was the easiest to date though not devoid of danger. All he had to do was gossip to anyone willing to listen. This was in accordance with the step-by-step technique taught him by the college.

‘First of all you must establish the existence of an internal opposition. Doesn't matter whether it is real or imaginary so long as the enemy becomes convinced of its actuality.’

He had done that much.

‘Secondly, you must create fear of that opposition and provoke the enemy into striking back at it as best he can.’

He'd done that too.

‘Thirdly, you must answer the enemy's blows with enough defiance to force him into the open, to bring his reaction to public attention and to create the general impression that the opposition has confidence in its own power.’

That also had been achieved.

‘The fourth move is ours and not yours. We'll take enough military action to make hay of the enemy's claims of invincibility. After that the morale of the public should be shaky. One bomb on Shugruma had done the shaking.

‘You then take the fifth step by sowing rumours. Listeners will be ripe to absorb them and whisper them around - and the stories will lose nothing in the telling. A good rumour well planted and thoroughly

disseminated can spread alarm and despondency over a wide area. But be careful in your choice of victims. If you pick on a fanatical patriot it may be the end of you! In any city in any part of the cosmos the public park is a natural haunt of idlers and gossips. That is where Mowry went in the morning. The benches were occupied almost entirely by elderly people. Young folk tended to keep clear of such places lest inquisitive cops ask why they were not at work.

Selecting a seat next to a gloomy looking oldster with a perpetual sniff, Mowry contemplated a bed of tattered flowers until the other turned toward him and said conversationally,

"Two more gardeners have gone."

"So? Gone where?"

"Into the armed forces. If they draft the rest of them I don't know what will happen to this park. It needs someone to look after it."

"There's a lot of work involved," agreed Mowry. "But I suppose the war comes first"

"Yar. Always the war comes first" Sniffy said it with cautious disapproval. "It should have been over by now. But it drags on and drags on. Sometimes I wonder when it will end."

"That's the big question," responded Mowry, making himself a fellow spirit.

"Things can't be going as well as they're said to be,"

continued Sniffy, morbidly. "Else the war would be over. It wouldn't drag on the way it does."

"Personally, I think things are darned bad." Mowry hesitated, went on

confidingly, "In fact I know they are."

"You do? Why?"

"Maybe I oughtn't tell you-but it's bound to come out sooner or later."

"What is?" insisted Sniffy, consumed with curiosity.

"The terrible state of affairs at Shugruma. My brother came home this morning and told me."

"Go on-what did he say?"

"He tried to go there for business reasons. but couldn't get to the place. A ring of troops turned him back forty *den* from the town. Nobody except the military, or salvage and medical services, is being allowed to enter the area."

"That so?" said Sniffy.

"My brother says he met a fellow who'd escaped the disaster with nothing but the clothes he was wearing. This fellow told him that Shugruma was practically wiped off the map. Not one stone left upon another. Three hundred thousand dead.

The stench of bodies would turn your stomach. He said the scene is so awful that the news-sheets daren't describe it, in fact they refuse to mention it."

Staring straight ahead, Sniffy said nothing but looked appalled.

Mowry added a few more lurid touches, brooded with him for a short time, took his departure. All that he'd said would be repeated, he could be sure of that. Bad news travels fast.

A little later and half a mile away he had another on the hook, a beady-eyed, mean-faced character only too willing to hear the worst.

"Even the papers dare not talk about it," Mowry ended.

Beady-eyes swallowed hard. "If a Spakum ship can dive in and drop a big one so can a dozen others."

"Yar, that's right"

"In fact they could have dropped more than one while they were at it. Why didn't they?"

"Maybe they were making a test-run. Now they know how easy it is they'll come along with a *real* load. If that happens there won't be much left of Pertane." He pulled his right ear and made a *tzzk!* sound between his teeth, that being the Sirian equivalent of showing thumbs down.

"Somebody ought to do something about it," declared Beady.

unnerved.

"I'm going to do something myself," informed Mowry. "I'm going to dig me a deep hole way out in the fields."

He left the other half-paralysed with fright, took a short walk, picked on a cadaverous individual who looked like a mortician on vacation.

"Close friend of mine - he's a fleet leader in the space-navy

- told me confidentially that a Spakum onslaught has made Gooma completely uninhabitable. He thinks the only reason why they've not given Jaimec the same treatment is because they're planning to grab the place and naturally don't want to rob themselves of the fruits of

victory."

"Do you believe all that?" demanded the Embalmer.

"One doesn't know what to believe when the government tells you one thing and grim experience tells you another. It's only his personal opinion anyway. But he's in the space-navy and knows a few things that we don't."

"It has been stated authoritatively that the Spakum fleets have been destroyed."

"Yar, they were still saying so when that bomb fell on Shugruma," Mowry reminded.

"True, true - I felt it land. In my own house two windows collapsed and a bottle of *zith* jumped off the table."

By mid-afternoon thirty people had been fed the tale of the Shugruma and Gooma disasters, plus allegedly first-hand warnings of bacteriological warfare and worse horrors to come. They could no more keep it to themselves than a man can keep a tornado to himself. By early evening a thousand would have the depressing news. At midnight ten thousand would be passing it around. In the morning a hundred thousand -

and so on until the whole city was discussing it.

At the arranged time he called Skriva. "What luck?"

"I've got the form. Have you got the money?"

"Yar."

"It's to be paid before tomorrow. Shall we meet same place as last?"



"No." said Mowry. "It's not wise to create a habit. Let's make it someplace else."

"Where?"

"There's a certain bridge where you collected once before.

How about the fifth marker past it going south?"

"That's as good as anywhere. Can you go there at once!"

"I've got to pick up my car. It'll take a little time. You be there at the seven-time hour."

He reached the marker on time, found Skriva already waiting.

Handing over the money, he took the requisition-form and examined it carefully. One good look told him that the thing was well-nigh impossible for him to copy. It was an ornate document as lavishly engraved as a banknote of high denomination. They could cope with it on Terra but it was beyond his ability to duplicate even with the help of various instruments of forgery lying in the cave.

The form was a used one dated three weeks ago and obviously had been purloined from the jail's filing system. It called for the release to the Kaitempi of one prisoner named Mabin Garud but had enough blank spaces for ten names.

The date, the prisoner's name and number had been typed.

The authorizing signature was in ink.

"Now we've got it," prompted Skriva, "what are we going to do with it?"

"We can't imitate it," Mowry informed. "The job is too tough and will take too long."

"You mean it's no use to us?" He registered angry disappointment.

"I wouldn't say that."

"Well, what do you say? Am I to give this stinker his twenty thousand or do I cram the form down his gullet?"

"You can pay him." Mowry studied the form again. "I think that if I work on it tonight I can erase the date, name and number. The signature can be left intact."

"That's risky. It's easy to spot erasures."

"Not the way I do them. I know how to gloss the surface afterward. The really difficult task will be that of restoring the broken lines of engraving." He pondered a moment, went on, "But that may not be necessary. There's a good chance the new typing will fill in the blanks. It's hardly likely that they'll put the form under a microscope."

"If they were that suspicious they'd grab us first," Skriva pointed out.

"I need a typewriter. I'll have to buy one in the morning."

"I can get you a typewriter for tonight," offered Skriva.

"You can? How soon?"

"By the eight-time hour."

"Is it in good condition?"

"Yar, it's practically new."

Mowry eyed him and said, "I suppose it's no business of mine but I can't help wondering what use a typewriter is to you."

"I can sell it. I sell all sorts of things."

"Things you just happened to find lying in your hands?"

"That's right," agreed Skriva, unabashed.

"Oh well, who am I to quibble? You get it. Meet me here at eight."

Skriva pushed off. When he'd gone from sight Mowry followed into the city. He had a feed, drove back to the marker. Soon afterward Skriva reappeared, gave him the type-writer.

Mowry said, "I want Gurd's full name and those of his two companions. Somehow or other you'll have to discover their prison numbers too. Can you do that?"

"I've got them already." Taking a slip of paper from his pocket, Skriva read them out while the other made a note of them.

"Did you also learn at what times the Kaitempi make their calls to collect?"

"Yar. Always between the three and four-time hours. Never earlier, rarely later."

"Can you find out about noon tomorrow whether Gurd and the others are still in the jail? We've got to know that - we'll get ourselves in a fix if we arrive and demand prisoners who were taken away this afternoon."

"I can check on it tomorrow," Skriva assured. Then his face tautened. "Are you planning to get them away tomorrow?"

"We've got to do it sometime or not at all. The longer we leave it the bigger the risk of the Kaitempi beating us to the draw. What's wrong with tomorrow, hi?"

"Nothing except that I wasn't counting on it being so soon."

"Why?"

"I thought it'd take longer to work things out."

"There's little to work out," declared Mowry. "We've swiped a requisition-form. We alter it and use it to demand release of three prisoners. Either we get away with it or we don't."

"If we do, well and good. If we don't, we shoot first and run fast."

"You make it sound too easy," Skriva objected. "All we've got is this form. It isn't enough -"

"It won't be enough, I can tell you that now. Chances are ten to one they'll expect familiar faces and be surprised by strange ones. We'll have to compensate for that somehow."

"How?"

"Don't worry, we'll cope. Can you dig up a couple more helpers? All they need do is sit in the cars, keep their traps shut and look tough. I'll pay them five thousand apiece just for that"

"Five thousand each? I could recruit a regiment for that money. Yar, I can find two. But I don't know how good they'd be in a fight."

"Doesn't matter so long as they can look like plug-uglies."

By that I don't mean the Cafe Susun kind of roughneck, see?

They've got to resemble Kaitempi agents." He gave the other an imperative nudge. "The same applies to you. When it's time to start the job I want to see all three of you clean and tidy, with well-pressed suits and neatly knotted neck-scarves. I want to see you looking as if about to attend a wedding. If you let me down in that respect the deal is off so far as I'm concerned.

You can count me out and go pull the stunt on your own. I don't intend to try kid some hard-faced, gimlet-eyed warden with the aid of three scruffy looking bums."

"Maybe you'd like us decked out in fashionable jewellery," suggested Skriva sarcastically.

"A diamond on the hand is better than a smear of dirt,"

Mowry retorted. "I'd rather you overdid the dolling-up than mooched along like hoboes. You'd get away with a splurge because some of these agents are flashy types." He waited for comment but the other said nothing, so he continued, "What's more, these two helpers had better be characters you can trust not to talk afterward - else they may take my five thousand and then get another five thousand from the Kaitempi for betraying you."

Skriva was on firm ground here. He gave an ugly grin and promised, "One thing I can guarantee is that neither of them will say a word."

This assurance and the way it was made bore a sinister meaning but Mowry let it pass and said, "Lastly, we'll need a couple of dynos. We can't use our own unless we change the plates. Any ideas on that?"

"Pinching a pair of dynos is as easy as taking a mug of zith.

The trouble is keeping them for any length of time. The longer we use them the bigger the chance of being picked up by some lousy patrol with nothing better to do."

"We'll have to cut the use of them to the minimum." Mowry told him. "Take them as late as you can. We'll park our own cars on that lot the other side of the Asako Bridge. When we leave the jail we'll beat it straight there and switch over to them."

"Yar, that is best," Skriva agreed.

"All right. I'll be waiting outside the east gate of the municipal park at the two-time hour tomorrow. You come along with two cars and two helpers and pick me up."

At that point Skriva became strangely restless and showed suspicion. He fidgeted around, opened his mouth, shut it.

Watching him curiously, Mowry invited, "Well, what's the matter? You want to call the whole thing off?"

Skriva mustered his thoughts and burst out with, "Look, Gurd means nothing to you. The others mean even less. But you're paying good money and taking a big risk to get them out of clink. It doesn't make sense."

"A lot of things don't make sense. This war doesn't make sense - but we're in it up to the neck."

"Curses on the war. That is nothing to do with the matter."

"It has everything to do with the matter," Mowry contradicted.

"I don't like it. A lot of people don't like it. If we kick the government in

the rumps often enough and hard enough, they won't like it either."

"Oh, so that's what you're up to?" Skriva stared at him in frank surprise, thoughts of purely political reasons never having entered his mind. "You're chivvyng the authorities?"

"Any objections?"

"I couldn't care less," informed Skriva, and added virtuously,

"Politics is a dirty game. Anyone who plays around in it is crazy. All it gets him in the end is a free burial."

"It'll be my burial, not yours."

"Yar, that's why I don't care." Obviously relieved at having got to the bottom of the other's motives; Skriva finished, "Meet you at the park tomorrow."

"On time. If you're late I won't be there."

As before, he waited until the other had gone from sight before driving to town. It was a good thing, he thought, that Skriva had a criminal mentality. The fellow just wasn't interested in politics, ethics, patriotism or anything similar except insofar as it provided opportunity to snatch easy money. It was highly probable that he viewed his recent activities as profitably illegal but not as treacherous. It simply wouldn't occur to him that there are criminals and there are traitors.

Any one of Skriva's bunch would surrender his own mother to the Kaitempi, not as a duty to the nation but solely for five thousand guilders. Similarly, they'd hand Mowry over and pocket the cash with a hearty laugh. All that prevented them from selling him body and soul was the fact they'd freely admitted, namely, that one does not flood one's goldmine.

Providing the cars and helpers could be obtained Skriva would be there on time tomorrow. He felt sure of that.

Exactly at the two-time hour a big, black dyno paused at the east gate, picked up Mowry and whined onward. Another dyno, older and slightly battered, followed a short distance behind.

Sitting four-square at the wheel of the first car, Skriva looked neater and more respectable than he had done for years. He exuded a faint smell of scented lotion and seemed self conscious about it. With his gaze fixed firmly ahead, he jerked a manicured thumb over his shoulder to indicate a similarly washed and scented character lounging beetle-browed in the back seat.

"Meet Lithar. He's the sharpest *wert* on Jaimec."

Mowry twisted his head round and gave a polite nod. Lithar rewarded him with a blank stare. Returning attention to the windshield, Mowry wondered what on earth a *wert* might be.

He'd never heard the word before and dared not ask its meaning. It might be more than an item of local jargon, perhaps a slang word added to the Sirian language during the years he had been away. It wouldn't be wise to admit ignorance of it.

"The fellow in the other car is Brank," informed Skriva.

"He's a red-hot *wert* too. Lithar's right-hand man. That so, Lithar?"

The sharpest *wert* on Jaimec responded with a grunt. To give him his due, he fitted the part of an agent of the typically surly type. In that respect Skriva had chosen well.

Threading their way through a series of side-streets they reached a



main road, found themselves held up by a long, noisy convoy of half-tracked vehicles crammed with troops.

Perforce they stopped and waited. The convoy rolled on and on like a never ending stream. Skriva began to curse under '

his breath.

"They're gaping around like newcomers," observed Mowry, watching the passing soldiery. "Must have just arrived from somewhere."

"Yar, from Directa," Skriva told him. "Six shiploads landed this morning. There's a story going the rounds that ten set out but only six got here."

"That so? It doesn't look so good if they're rushing additional forces to Jaimec despite heavy losses en route"

"Nothing looks good except a stack of guilders twice my height," opined Skriva. He scowled at the rumbling half-tracks.

"If they delay us long enough we'll still be here when a couple of boobs start bawling about their missing cars. The cops will find us just waiting to be grabbed."

"So what?" said Mowry. "Your conscience is clear, isn't it?"

Skriva answered that with a look of disgust. At last the procession of military vehicles came to an end. The car jolted forward as he rushed it impatiently into the road and built up speed.

"Take it easy" Mowry advised. "We don't want to be nailed for ignoring some petty regulation."

At a point a short distance from the jail Skriva pulled in to the kerb

and parked. The other dyno stopped close behind.

He turned toward Mowry.

"Before we go any farther let's have a look at that form."

Extracting it from a pocket, Mowry gave it to him. He pored over it, seemed satisfied, handed it to Lithar.

"Looks all right to me. What d'you think?"

Lithar eyed it impassively, gave it back. "It's good enough or it isn't. You'll find out pretty soon."

Sensing something sinister in this remark, Skriva became afflicted with new doubts. He said to Mowry, "The idea is that a couple of us walk in, present this form and wait for them to fetch us the prisoners, hi?"

"Correct."

"What if this form isn't enough and they ask for proof of our identities?"

"I can prove mine."

"Yar? What sort of proof?"

"Who cares so long as it convinces them?" Mowry evaded.

"As for you, fix this inside your jacket and flash it if necessary."

He gave the other Sagramatholou's badge.

Fingering it in open surprise, Skriva demanded; "Where'd you get

this?"

"An agent gave it me. I've influence, see?"

"You expect me to believe that? No Kaitempi soko would dream of -"

"It so happened that he had expired," Mowry put in. "Dead agents are very co-operative, as perhaps you've noticed."

"You killed him?"

"Don't be nosey."

"Yar, what's it to us?" interjected Lithar from the back seat.

"You're wasting time. Put a move on and let's get the whole thing over - or let's throw it up and go back home."

Thus urged Skriva started up and drove forward. Now that he was rapidly coming to the point of committing himself his edginess was obvious. He knew that if the rescue failed and he was caught he'd certainly pay for the attempt with bulging eyes and protruding tongue. If it succeeded there would follow a hue and cry that would make all of them cower in their rat-holes for a month and all he'd have gained would be three henchmen who, for the time being, would be more nuisance than asset.

Inwardly he regretted the idea that had made him suggest this stunt in the first place, namely, that there is safety in numbers. Perhaps he'd be better off without Gurd and his fellow jailbirds. Sure, four heads are better than one, four guns are better than one, but he could do without the official hullabaloo that the escapees would drag behind them like the tail of a meteor.

It was too late to retreat. The jail was now in sight, its great steel

doors set in high stone walls. Rolling toward the doors, the two cars stopped. Mowry got out. Skirva followed suit, thin-lipped and resigned.

Mowry thumbed the bell-button set in the wall. A small door which formed a section of the bigger one emitted metallic clankings and opened. Through it an armed guard eyed them questioningly.

"Kaitempi call for three prisoners," announced Mowry with becoming arrogance.

With a brief glance at the waiting cars and their *wert* occupants the guard motioned the two inside, closed the door, slid home its locking-bar. "You're a little early today."

"Yar, we've got a lot to do. We're in a hurry."

"This way."

They tramped after the guard in single file, Skirva last with a hand in a pocket. Taking them into the administration building, along a corridor and past a heavily barred sliding gate, the guard led them into a small room in which a burly, grim-faced Sirian was sitting behind a desk. Upon the desk stood a small plaque reading: Commandant Tornik.

"Three prisoners are required for immediate interrogation,"

said Mowry officiously. "Here is the requisition-form, Commandant. We are pressed for time and would be obliged if you'd produce them as quickly as possible."

Tornik frowned over the form but did not examine it closely.

Dialling an intercom phone he ordered somebody to bring the three to his office. Then he lay back in his chair and regarded the visitors with

complete lack of expression.

"You are new to me."

"Of course, Commandant, There is a reason."

"Indeed? What reason?"

"It is believed that these prisoners may be more than ordinary criminals. We have reason to suspect them of being members of a revolutionary army, namely, Dirac Angestun Gesept.

Therefore they are to be questioned by Military Intelligence as well as by the Kaitempi. I am the M.I. representative."

"Is that so?" said Tornik, still blank-faced. "We have never had the M.I. here before. May I have evidence of your identity?"

Producing his documents, Mowry handed them over. This wasn't going so swiftly and smoothly as hoped for. Mentally he prayed for the prisoners to appear and put a quick end to the matter. It was obvious that Tornik was the type to fill in time so long as everyone was kept waiting.

After a brief scrutiny Tornik returned the papers and commented,

"Colonel Halopti, this is somewhat irregular. The requisition-form is quite in order but I am supposed to hand prisoners over only to a Kaitempi escort. That is a very strict rule that cannot be disobeyed even for some other branch of the security forces."

"The escort is of the Kaitempi," answered Mowry. He threw an expectant look at Skriva who was standing like one in a dream. Skriva came awake, opened his jacket and displayed the badge. Mowry added, "They provided me with three agents saying their

attendance was necessary."

"Yar, that is correct," Pulling open a drawer in his desk, Tornik produced a receipt-form, filled it in by copying details from the requisition. When he had finished he studied it doubt-fully, complained, "I'm afraid I cannot accept your signature, Colonel. Only a Kaitempi official may sign a receipt for prisoners."

"I'll sign it," offered Skriva, sweating over the delay.

"But you have a badge and not a plastic card." Tornik objected. "You are only an agent and not an officer."

Mentally abusing this infernal insistence upon rigmarole, Mowry interjected, "He is of the Kaitempi and temporarily under my command. I am an officer although not of the Kaitempi."

"That is so, but -"

"A receipt for prisoners must be given by the Kaitempi and by an officer. Therefore the proper conditions will be fulfilled if both of us sign."

Tornik considered this, decided that it agreed with the letter of the law. "Yar, the regulations must be observed. You will both sign."

Just then the door opened, Gurd and his companions shuffled in with a rattle of wrist-chains. A guard followed, produced a key, unlocked the manacles and took them away.

Gurd, now worn and haggard, kept his gaze on the floor and maintained a surly expression. One of the others, a competent actor, glowered at Tornik, Mowry and Skriva in turn. The third, who was subject to attacks of delight, beamed around in happy surprise until Skriva bared his teeth at him. The smile then vanished. Luckily neither

Tornik nor the attendant guard noticed this by-play.

Mowry signed the receipt with a confident flourish; Skriva appended his hurried scrawl beneath. The three prisoners silently stood by, Gurd still moping, the second scowling, the third wearing the grossly exaggerated expression of one in mourning for a rich aunt. Number three, Mowry decided, was definitely a dope who'd ham his way to an early grave.

"Thank you Commandant" Mowry turned toward the door.

"Let's go."

In shocked tones Tornik exclaimed, "What, without wrist-chains, Colonel? Have you brought no manacles with you?"

Gurd stiffened, number two bunched his fists, number three made ready to faint. Skriva stuck his hand back in his pocket and kept full attention on the guard.

Glancing back at the other, Mowry said, "We have steel anklets fixed to the floors of the cars. That is the M.I. way, Commandant" He smiled with the air of one who knows. "A prisoner runs with his feet and not with his hands."

"Yar, that is true," Tornik conceded.

They went out, led by the guard who had brought them there. The prisoners followed with Skriva and Mowry bringing up the rear. Through the corridor, past the barred gate, out the main door and across the yard. Armed guards patrolling the wall-top sauntered along and eyed them indifferently.

pairs of ears strained for a yell of fury and a rush of feet from the administration building, five bodies were tensed in readiness to slug

the guide and make a dash for the exit door.

Reaching the wall, the guard grasped the locking-bar in the small door and just then the bell was rung from outside.

This sudden, unexpected sound jolted their nerves, Skriva's gun came halfway out of his pocket. Gurd took a step toward the guard, his expression vicious. The actor jumped as if stung. Dopey opened his mouth to emit a yelp of fright, converted it into a gargle as Mowry rammed a heel on his foot.

Only the guard remained undisturbed. With his back to the others and therefore unable to see their reactions he lugged the locking-bar. to one side, turned the handle, opened the door. Beyond stood four sour-faced characters in plain clothes.

One of them said curtly, "Kaitempi call for one prisoner."

For some reason best known to himself the guard found nothing extraordinary about two collecting parties turning up in close succession. He motioned the four inside, held the door open while the first arrivals went out. The newcomers did not head straight across the yard toward the administration block.

They took a few steps in that direction, stopped as if by common consent, stared at Mowry and the others as they passed into the road. It was the dishevelled look of the prisoners and the chronic alarm on the face of Dopey that attracted their attention.

Just as the door shut Mowry, who was last out, heard an agent rasp at the guard, "Who are those, hi?"

The reply wasn't audible but the question was more than enough.

"Jump to it!" he urged. " *Run!* "



They sprinted to the cars, spurred on by expectation of immediate trouble. A third machine now stood behind their own two, a big ugly dyno with nobody at the wheel. Lithar and Brank watched them anxiously, opened the doors in readiness.

Scrambling into the leading dyno, Skriva started its motor while Gurd went through the back door and practically flung himself into Lithar's lap. Behind, the other two piled into the rear of Brank's car.

Mowry gasped at Skriva, "Wait a moment while I see if I can grab theirs - it'll delay the chase."

So saying he raced to the third car, frantically tugged at its handle. It refused to budge. Just then the jail's door opened and somebody roared, "Halt! Halt or we --" Brank promptly stuck an arm out his open window, flicked four quick shots toward the door-gap and missed each time. But it was sufficient to make the shouter dive for cover. Mowry pelted back to the leading dyno and fell in beside Skriva.

"The cursed thing is locked. Let's get out of here."

The car surged forward, tore down the road, Brank accelerated after them. Watching through the rear window, Mowry saw several figures bolt out the jail and waste precious moments fumbling by their dyno before they got in.

"They're after us," he told Skriva. "And they'll be bawling their heads off over the radio."

"Yar, but they haven't got us yet."



# Chapter X

GURD SAID, "Did nobody think to bring a spare gun?"

"Take mine," responded Lithar, handing it over.

Cuddling it in an eager fist, Gurd grinned at him unpleasantly.

"Don't want to be caught with it on you, *hi?* Rather it was me than you, *hi?* Typical *wert*, aren't you?"

"Shut up!" snarled Lithar.

"Look who's telling me to shut up," Gurd invited. He was talking thickly, as if something had gone wrong with his palate. "He's making a stack of money out of me else he wouldn't be here at all. He'd be safe at home checking his stocks of illegal zith while the Kaitempi belted me over the gullet. And he tells me to shut up." Leaning forward, he tapped Mowry on the shoulder with the barrel of the gun. "How much is he making out of this, Mashambigab? How much are you giving-"

He swayed wildly and clutched for a hold as the car rocked around a corner, raced down a narrower road, turned sharp right and then sharp left. Brank's car took the same corner at the same speed, made the right turn but not the left one.

It rushed straight on and vanished from sight. They turned again into a one-way alley, cut through to the next road. There was now no sign of pursuit.

"We've lost Brank," Mowry told Skriva. "Looks like we've dropped the Kaitempi too."

"It's a safe bet they're chasing Brank. They were closer to him and they had to follow someone when we split up. Suits us, doesn't it.?"

Mowry said nothing.

"A lousy *wert* tells me to shut up," mumbled Gurd.

Swiftly they zig-zagged through a dozen side-streets, still without encountering a radio alarmed patrol-car. As they squealed around the last corner near to where their own cars were parked there sounded a sharp, hard crack in the rear.

Mowry looked back expecting to find a loaded cruiser closing up on them. There was no car behind. Lithar was lying on his side apparently asleep. He had a neat hole above his right ear. A thin trickle of purplish blood was seeping out of it.

Gurd smirked at Mowry and said, "I've shut him up, for keeps."

"Now we're carrying a corpse," complained Mowry. "As if we haven't trouble enough. Where's the sense-"

Skriva interrupted with, "Crack shots, the Kaitempi. Pity they got Lithar - he was just the sweetest *wert* on Jaimec."

He braked hard, jumped out, ran across the lot and clambered into his own dyno. Gurd followed, the gun openly in his hand and not caring who noticed it. Mowry stopped by the window as the machine started up.

"What about Brank?"

"What about him?" echoed Skriva.

"If we both beat it he'll get here and find no chance to switch over."

"What, in a city crammed with dynos?" He let the car edge forward. "Brank's not here. That's his woe. Let him cope with his own troubles. We're beating it someplace safe while the going is good. You follow us."

With that he drove off. Mowry gave him a four hundred yards lead, droned along behind while the distance between them slowly increased. Should he let Skriva lead him to a hideout or not? There seemed little point in following to yet another rat-hole. The jail job had been done and he'd achieved his purpose of stirring up a greater ruckus. There were no *werts* to pay off; Brank had got himself lost and Lithar was dead. If he wanted to regain contact with Gurd and Skriva he could use that telephone number or if, as was likely, it was no longer valid he could employ their secret post-office under the marker.

Other considerations also decided him to drop the brothers for the time being. For one, the Colonel Halopti identity wouldn't be worth a hoot after they'd wasted a few hours checking through official channels to establish its falsity. That would be by nightfall at latest. Once again Pertane was becoming too hot to hold him. He'd better get out before it was too late.

For another, he was overdue to beam a report and his conscience was pricking him about his refusal to do so last time.

If he didn't send one soon he might never be able to transmit one at all. And Terra was entitled to be kept informed.

By this time the other car had shrunk with distance. Turning off to the right, he circled back into the city. At once he noticed a great change of atmosphere. There were far more police on the streets and now their number had been augmented by fully armed troops. Patrol-cars

swarmed like flies though none saw fit to stop and question him. On the pavements were less pedestrians than usual and these hurried along looking furtive, fearful, grim or bewildered.

Stopping by the kerb outside a business block he lolled in his seat as if waiting for someone while he watched what was taking place on the street. The police, some uniformed and some in plain clothes, were all in pairs. The troops were in groups of six. Their sole occupation appeared to be that of staring accusatively at everyone who passed by, holding up any individual whose looks they didn't like, questioning and searching him: They also took particular note of cars, studying the occupants and eyeing the plate-numbers.

In the time that Mowry sat there he and his car were given the sharp lookover at least twenty times. He endured it with an air of complete boredom and evidently passed muster because nobody took it further and questioned him. But that couldn't go on for ever. Somebody more officious than the rest would pick on him merely because the others had not done so. He was tempting fate by staying there.

So he moved off, driving carefully to avoid the attention of numerous cruisers. Something had broken loose, no doubt of that. It was written on the moody faces of the public. He wondered whether the government had been driven to admit a series of reverses in the space-war. Or perhaps the rumours he'd spread about Shugruma had come close enough to the truth to make authority concede the facts. Or maybe a couple of exceedingly important bureaucrats had tried to open mailed packages and splattered themselves over the ceiling, thus creating a tremendous wave of panic among the powers-that-be. One thing was certain: the recent jailbreak could not be solely responsible for the present state of affairs though possibly it may have triggered it into existence.

Slowly he made his way into the crummy quarter where his room was

located, determined to pick up his belongings and clear out as quickly as possible. The car nosed its way into his street. As always, a bunch of idlers loafed upon the corner and stared at him as he went by. There was something not quite right about them. Their ill-kept clothes and careless postures gave them the superficial appearance of lazy bums but they were a little too well-fed, their gaze a little too haughty.

With hairs itching on the back of his neck and a peculiar thrill down his spine, he kept going, trying to look as if this street were only part of a tiresome drive and meant nothing to him whatsoever. Against a lamp-post leaned two brawny specimens without jackets or scarves. Nearby four more were shoring a wall. Six were gossiping around an ancient, decrepit truck parked right opposite the house in which his room was at top. Three more were in the doorway of the house. Every one of these gave him the long, hard look as he rolled by with an air of total indifference.

The entire street was staked, though it didn't look as if they had a detailed description of him. He could be wrong in this belief, perhaps fooled by an over-active imagination. But his instinct told him that the street was covered from end to end, that his only chance of escape lay in driving on non-stop and displaying absolute lack of interest. He did not dare look at his house for evidence of a Radine-type explosion. Just that small touch of curiosity might have been enough to bring the whole lot into action.

Altogether he counted more than forty beefy strangers hanging around the road and doing their best to look shiftless. As he neared the street's end four of them came out of a doorway and walked to the kerb. Their attention was his way, their manner that of those about to stop him on general principles.

Promptly he braked and pulled in near two others who were squatting on a doorstep. He lowered the window, stuck his head out. One of the

sitters got to his feet, came toward him.

"Pardon," said Mowry, apologetically, "I was told first right and second left for Asako Road. It has got me here. I must have gone wrong somewhere."

"Where were you told?"

"Outside the military barracks."

"Some people don't know one hand from the other," opined this character. "It should have been first right, second left, turn right again after going through the archway."

"Thanks. One can lose a lot of time in a city this size."

"Yar, especially when dopes point with the wrong hand."

The informant returned to his doorstep, sat down. He had not nursed even a dim suspicion.

Evidently they were not on the watch for someone easily recognisable, or, at any rate, not for somebody who looked exactly like Colonel Halopti. Could be that they were in ambush for another badly wanted specimen who happened to live in this street. But he dared not put the matter to the test by returning to the house and going up to his room. If wrong, he would be finally and conclusively wrong to the last choke of breath.

Ahead, the four who'd waited at the kerb had now resumed their leaning against the wall, lulled by Mowry's open conversation with their fellows. They ignored him as he drove past. Turning right, he thankfully speeded up. However, he did not congratulate himself. He had still a good way to go and the entire city had become one gigantic trap.



When nearing the city's outskirts a patrol-car waved him down. For a couple of seconds he debated whether to obey or try outrace it. He decided in favour of the former. Bluff had worked before, might do so again. Besides, to run for it would be a complete giveaway and every cruiser in the area would take up the chase. So he braked and hoped for the best.

The car drew alongside, the co-driver dropped his window.

"Where are you heading for?"

"Palmare," answered Mowry, naming a village twenty den south of Pertane.

"That's what you think. Don't you listen to the news?"

"I haven't heard it since early this morning. Been too busy even to get a square meal. What's happened?"

"All exits barred. Nobody allowed out the city except with a permit from the military. You'd better go back and get yourself informed. Or buy an evening paper."

The window went up, the patrol-car whined into top speed.

Mowry watched it go with mixed emotions. Yet again he was sharing all the sensations of a hunted animal. Nobody could stop him or even show undue interest in him without giving him a nervy this-is-it feeling. If it kept up long enough a time must inevitably come when this would be it.

He stooged around in the car until he found a news-stand carrying the latest editions still damp from the press. Then he parked a few minutes while he scanned the headlines. They were big enough and

likely to give the readership a few unpleasant jolts.

PERTANE UNDER MARTTAL LAW.

TRAVEL BAN - MAYOR DECLARES POPULATION WILL STAND FIRM.

DRASTIC ACTION AGAINST DIRAC ANGESTUN GESEPT.

POLICE ON TRAIL OF MAIL BOMBERS.

TWO KILLED, TWO CAPTURED IN DARING JAIL-BREAK.

Rapidly he read the brief report under the last heading.

Lathin's body had been found and the Kaitempi had grabbed the credit for the kill. That made Skriva something of a prophet. Dopey had been shot to death, Brank and the other had been taken alive. These two survivors already had confessed to membership of a revolutionary force. There was no mention of any others having got away. and not a single word about the mock Colonel Halopti.

Probably authority had clamped down on some items in the hope of giving the escapees a sense of false security. Well, he'd better not fall into that trap; from now on he must not show his documents to any cop or Kaitempi agent. Neither could he substitute any other papers. The only ones near to hand were locked in his case and surrounded by a horde of agents: The only others were in the forest cave with a ring of troops between here and there.

A ring of troops? Yes, that could be the weak point that he might break through if he put a move on. It was highly likely that the numerically strong armed forces were not yet as well-primed as were the police and Kaitempi. And the average trooper is not inclined to argue with a colonel, even one in plain clothes. The chance of being

cross-examined and bullied came only from an individual of equal or higher rank.

He could not imagine any colonels or major-generals manning the road-blocks. Anyone outranking a junior lieutenant was more likely to be warming an office chair or boozing and boasting in the nearest *zith*-parlour. At once he decided that here lay his best opportunity to break out of the net. It wasn't a decision difficult to reach. He'd little choice about the matter. He must find freedom in the open country or remain in the city until caught.

About sixty routes radiated from the perimeter of Pertane.

The main ones - such as the wide, well-used roads to Shugruma and Radine - were likely to be more heavily guarded than the secondary roads or potholed lanes leading to villages or isolated factories. It was also possible that the biggest, most important road-blocks would have a few police or agents in company with the troops.

Many of the lesser and sneakier outlets were quite unknown to him; a random choice might take him out of the frying-pan and into the fire. But not far away lay a little-used side road to Palmare with which he was familiar. It twisted and wound in direction more or less parallel with the big main road but it got there just the same. Once on it he could not get off it for another forty den. He'd have to continue all the way to Palmare, turn there onto a rutted cross-country lane that would take him to the Valapan road. At that point he'd be about half an hour's drive from where he usually entered the forest.

Cutting through the suburbs he headed outward toward this lesser road. Houses gradually thinned away and ceased. As he drove through a market-gardening area a police cruiser whined toward him, passed without pause. He let go a sigh of relief as it disappeared. Presumably it had been in too great a hurry to bother with him or

perhaps its occupants had taken it for granted that he possessed a military permit.

Five minutes later he rounded a blind corner and found a road-block awaiting him two hundred yards beyond. A couple of army trucks stood side-on across the road in such a position that a car could pass provided it slowed to less than walking pace. In front of the trucks a dozen soldiers stood in line, coddling their automatic weapons and looking bored. There was no cop or agent anywhere in sight.

Mowry slowed, stopped, but kept his dynamotor rotating.

The soldiers eyed him with bovine curiosity. From behind the nearest truck a broad, squat sergeant appeared, marched up to the car.

"Have you got an exit permit?"

"Don't need one," responded Mowry, speaking with the authority of a four-star general. Opening his wallet, he displayed his identity-card and prayed to God that the sight of it would not produce a howl of triumph.

It didn't. The sergeant looked at it, stiffened, saluted.

Noticing this, the nearby troops straightened themselves and assumed expressions of military alertness.

In apologetic tones the sergeant said, "I regret that I must ask you to wait a moment, Colonel. My orders are to report to the officer in charge if anyone claims the right to go through without a permit"

"Even the Military Intelligence?"

"It has been emphasised that this order covers everyone without exception, sir. I have no choice but to obey."

"Of course, Sergeant," agreed Mowry, condescendingly. "I will wait"

Saluting again, the sergeant went at the double behind the trucks. Meanwhile the twelve troopers posed with the rigid self consciousness of those aware of a brasshat in the vicinity.

In short time the sergeant came back bringing with him a very young and worried looking lieutenant.

This officer marched precisely up to the car, saluted, opened his mouth just as Mowry beat him to the draw by saying,

"You may stand easy, Lieutenant"

The other gulped, let his legs relax, fumbled for words, finally got out, "The sergeant tells me you have no exit permit

-- Colonel."

"That's right. Have *you* got one?"

Taken aback, the lieutenant floundered a bit, said, "No sir."

"Why not?"

"We are on duty outside the city."

"So am I," informed Mowry.

"Yes, sir." The lieutenant pulled himself together. He seemed unhappy about something. "Will you be good enough to let me see your identity-card, sir? It is just a formality. I'm sure that everything will be all right"

"I know that everything will be all right," said Mowry, as though giving

fatherly warning to the young and inexperienced.

Again he displayed the card.

The lieutenant gave it no more than a hurried glance. "Thank you, Colonel. Orders are orders, as you will appreciate." Then he curried favour by demonstrating his efficiency. He took one step backward and gave a classy salute which Mowry acknowledged with a vague wave. Jerking himself round like an automaton, the lieutenant brought his right foot down with a hard thump and screamed at the top of his voice, "Pass one!"

Opening out, the troops obediently passed one. Mowry crawled through the block, curving around the tail of the first truck, twisting the opposite way around the second. Once through he hit up maximum speed. It was a temptation to feel gleeful but he didn't. He was sorry for that young lieutenant who, before long, would be taking a prize lambasting. It was easy to picture the scene when a senior officer arrived at the post to check up.

Anything to report, Lieutenant?

`Not much, sir. No trouble of any sort. It has been very quiet. I let one through without a permit.`

`You did? Why was that?`

`He was Colonel Halopti, sir.`

`Halopti? That name seems familiar. I'm sure I heard it mentioned as I left the other post.`

Helpfully, `He is in the M.I., sir.`

`Yar. yar. But that name means something. Why don't they keep us

properly informed? Have you a short-wave set?

`Not here, sir. There is one at the next main road block.

We have a field telephone.`

ÀAll right, I'll use thatÀ little later, `You hopeless imbecile! This Halopti is wanted all over the planet! And you let him slip through your hands - you ought to be shot! How long has he been gone? Did he have anyone with him? Will he have passed through Palmare yet? Sharpen your wits, fool, and answer me! Did you note the number of his car? No, you did not - that would be too much to expect.ÀAnd so on and so on. Yes, the balloon would go up most anytime. Perhaps in three or four hours, perhaps within ten minutes. The thought of it made Mowry maintain what was a reckless speed on such a twisting and badly surfaced road.

He shot through small and sleepy Palmare half expecting to be fired upon by local vigilantes. Nothing happened except that a few faces glanced out of windows as he went by.

Nobody saw him turn off the road a little beyond the village and take to the crude track that led to the Pertane-Valapan artery.

Now he was compelled to slow down whether he liked it or not. Over the terrible surface the car bumped and rolled at quarter speed. If anything came the other way he'd be in a jam because there was no room to pull aside or turn. Two jetplanes moaned through the gathering dusk but carried straight on, indifferent to what was taking place below. Soon afterward a 'copter came low over the horizon, followed it a short distance, dropped back and disappeared. Its course showed that it was circling around Pertane, possibly checking the completeness of military positions.

Eventually he reached the Pertane-Valapan route without having encountered anything on the track. Accelerating, he made for the forest entry-point. A number of army vehicles trundled heavily along but there was no civilian traffic to or from distant Pertane. Those inside the city could not get out, those outside did not want to go in lest they be detained there for weeks.

At the moment he reached the identifying tree and tombstone the road was clear in both directions. Taking full advantage of the opportunity he drove straight over the verge and into the forest as far as the car could go. Jumping out, he went back and repeated his former performance of carefully eliminating all tyre tracks where they entered the forest and checking that the car was invisible from the road.

The dark of night now was halfway across the sky. That meant he had to face another badly slowed-down traipse to the cave. Alternatively he could sleep overnight in the car and start his journey with the dawn. The latter was preferable; even a wasp needs rest and slumber. On the other hand the cave was more peaceful, more comfortable and a good deal safer than the car. There he could enjoy a real Terran breakfast, after which he could lie full length and snooze like a child instead of rolled up with one ear and one eye open. He started for the cave at once, trying to make the most use of the fading light while it lasted.

With the first streaks of morning he came wearily and red-eyed through the last of the trees. His finger-ring had been tingling for fifteen minutes so that he made his approach with confidence. Clumping along the pebble beach he went into the cave, fixed himself a hearty meal. Then he crawled into a sleeping-bag and surrendered consciousness. The transmission of his report could wait. It would have to wait: communication might bring instructions impossible to carry out before he'd had a good spell of slumber.



He must have needed it because he lay without stirring through the entire day. Dusk again was creeping in when he awoke. Setting up another feed, he ate it, felt on top of the world, expressed it by flexing his muscles and whistling badly off-tune.

For a short while he studied the massed containers and nursed a few regrets. In one of them reposed material for repeated changes of appearance plus documents to cover no less than thirty more fake identities. The situation being what it was he'd be darned lucky to get through three of them.

Another container held publicity stuff including the means to print and mail more letters.

*Ait Lithar was the fifth.*

*The list is long.*

*Dirac Angestun Gesept.*

But what was the use? The Kaitempi had claimed that kill.

Moreover he needed to know the names of any mail-bomb victims so that D.A.G. could exploit those too. He lacked this information. Anyway, the time for that kind of propaganda had now gone past. The entire world was on the jump, reinforcements had been poured in from Directa, battle-stations had been taken up against a revolutionary army that did not exist. In such circumstances threatening letters had become mere fleabites.

Dragging out Container-5 he set it up, wound it into action and let it run. For two and a half hours it operated silently.

*Whirrup-dzzt-pam! Whirrup-dzzt-pam!*

"Jaimec calling ! Jaimec calling !"

Contact was established when the gravelly voice said, "Come in. Ready to tape."

Mowry responded, "JM on Jaimec," then babbled on as fast as he could go and to considerable length. He finished,

"Pertane isn't tenable until things quieten down and I don't know how long that will take. Personally, I think the panic will spread to other towns. When they can't find what they're seeking in one place they'll start raking systematically through all the others."

There was a long silence before the faraway voice came back with, "We don't want things to quieten down. We want them to spread. Get working at once on phase nine."

"Nine?" he ejaculated, "I'm only on four. What about five, six, seven and eight?"

"Forget them. Time is running short. There's a ship getting near to you with another wasp on board. We sent him to tend phase nine thinking you'd been nabbed. Anyway, we'll beam instructions that he's to stay on the ship while we pick him another planet. Meanwhile you get busy."

"But phase nine is strictly a pre-invasion tactic."

"That's right," said the voice, drily. "I just told you time is running short."

It cut off. Communication had ended. Mowry stacked the cylinder back in the cave. Then he went outside and gazed at the stars.

Phase nine was designed to bring about a further dispersal of the enemy's overstretched resources and to place yet another great strain upon his creaking war-machine. It was, so to speak, one of several possible last straws.

The idea was to make panic truly planet-wide by spreading it from land to water. Jaimec was peculiarly susceptible to this kind of blow. On a colonial world populated by only one race of only one species there had been no national or inter-national rivalries, no local wars, no development of navies.

The nearest that Jaimec could produce to a sea-going force consisted of a number of fast motor-boats, lightly armed and used solely for coastal patrol work.

Even the merchant fleet was small by Terran standards.

Jaimec was under-developed and no more than six hundred ships sailed the planet's seas on about twenty well-defined routes. There wasn't a vessel larger than fifteen thousand tons.

Nevertheless the local war effort was critically dependent upon the unhampered coming and going of these ships. To delay their journeys or ruin their schedules or bottle them up in port would play considerable hob with the entire Jaimecan economy.

This sudden switch from phase four to nine meant that the oncoming Terran spaceship must be carrying a load of periboobs which it would scatter in the world's oceans before making a quick getaway. Almost certainly the dropping would be done by night and along the known sea-lanes.

At college Mowry had been given full instruction about this tactic and the part he was expected to play. The stunt.

had a lot in common with his previous activities, being designed to make a thoroughly aggravated foe hit out left and right at what wasn't there.

He'd been shown a sectionalised periboob. This deceitful contraption resembled an ordinary oil-drum with a twenty-foot tube projecting from its top. At the uppermost end of the tube was fixed a flared nozzle. The drum portion held a simple magneto-sensitive mechanism. The whole thing could be mass produced at low cost.

When in the sea a periboob floated so that its nozzle and four to six feet of tube stood above the surface. If a mass of steel or iron approached to within four hundred yards of it, the mechanism operated and the whole gadget sank from sight. If the metal mass receded, the periboob promptly arose until again its tube poked above the waves.

To function efficiently this gadget needed a prepared stage and a spotlight. The former had been arranged at the outbreak of war by permitting the enemy to get hold of top secret plans of a three-man midget submarine small enough and light enough for an entire flotilla to be transported in one spaceship. Mowry now had to provide the spotlight by causing a couple of merchant vessels to sink at sea after a convincing bang.

Jaimecans were as capable as anyone else of adding two and nothing together and making it four. If everything went as planned the mere sight of a periboob would cause any ship to race for safety while filling the ether with yells for help.

Other ships, hearing the alarm, would make wide, time-wasting detours or tie up in port. The dockyards would frantically switch from the building and repair of cargo vessels to the construction of useless destroyers. Numberless jetplanes, copters and even space-scouts

would take over the futile task of patrolling the oceans and bombing, periboobs wherever they might be found.

The chief beauty of this form of naughtiness was that it did not matter in the least if the enemy discovered he was being kidded. He could trawl a periboob from the depths, take it apart, demonstrate how it worked to every ship's master on the planet and it would make no difference. If two ships had been sunk, two hundred more might go down. A periscope is a periscope, there's no swift way of telling the false from the real and no captain in his right mind will invite a torpedo while trying to find out.

Alapertane (little Pertane) was the biggest and nearest port on Jaimec. It lay forty den west of the capital, seventy den north-west of the cave. Population a quarter million. It was highly likely that Alapertane had escaped most of the official hysteria pervading elsewhere, that its police and Kaitempi were less suspicious, less active. Mowry had never visited the place and therefore neither had *Dirac Angestun Gesept*. So far as Alapertane was concerned he had little grief to inherit.

Well, Terra knew what it was doing and orders must be carried out. He would have to make a trip to Alapertane and get the job done as soon as possible. On his own, without the dubious help of Gurd and Skriva who - so long as the hunt was on - remained dangerous liabilities.

Opening a container, Mowry took out a thick wad of documents, thumbed through them and carefully considered the thirty identities available. All of them had been devised to suit specific tasks. There were half a dozen that established his right to roam around the docks and peer at shipping. He chose a set of papers that depicted him as a minor official of the Planetary Board of Maritime Affairs.

Next he made himself up for the part. It took him more than an hour. In the end he was an elderly, bookish bureaucrat peering through steel-rimmed spectacles. That done, he amused himself blinking at his image in a metal mirror and talking nonsense in characteristically querulous tones.

Long hair would have perfected his appearance since he still had the short military crop of Halopti. A wig was out of the question; except for spectacles, the strict rule of facial disguise was to wear nothing that could be knocked, blown or taken off. So he shaved a patch of cranium to suggest approaching baldness and left it at that.

Finally he found himself another case, inserted its plastic key and opened it. Despite all the risks he had taken and might again take this was the action he detested most. He could never get rid of the notion that explosive luggage was highly temperamental, that many a wasp had been blown to the nether regions with a phantom key in his hand and that Terran authorities had kept silent about it.

From yet another container he took three limpet mines, two for use and one as a spare. These were hemispherical objects with a heavy magnetic ring projecting from the fiat side, a timing-switch on the opposite, curved side. They weighed eleven pounds apiece and together made a load he'd rather have been without. Putting these in the case, he stuffed a pocket with new money, checked his gun. Switching Container-22

he set forth, again through the dark.

By now he was becoming more than fed up with the long, trying journey from the cave to the road. It hadn't looked much on an aerial photograph when seen through a stereoscopic viewer but the actual doing of it was tough. Especially when trudging through the dark and carrying a load.

Repeatedly he cursed his choice of a hideout while reluctantly admitting that his cache had been protected by its very remoteness.

He reached the car in broad daylight, thankfully dumped the case on the back seat, checked the road for passing vehicles. The coast was clear. Racing back to the car he got it out fast, parked it while he scuffed tire-tracks from the verge. There he headed for Alapertane, choosing a route that kept him as far as possible from the angry capital.

Fifteen minutes later he was compelled to pull up. The road was filled with a convoy of army vehicles that were bucking and rocking as they reversed one by one into a treeless space.

Troops who had dismounted were filtering in ragged lines between the trees on both sides of the road. A dozen glum civilians were sitting in one truck with four soldiers to guard them.

As Mowry sat watching a captain came alongside the car and asked, "Where're you from?"

"Valapan"

"Where d'you live?"

"Kiestra, just outside Valapan"

"Where're you going?"

"Alapertane."

This seemed to satisfy the other. He made to move off.

Mowry called, "What's happening here, Captain?"

"A round-up. We're collecting the windy and taking them back where they belong."

"The windy?" Mowry looked baffled.

"Yar. The night before last a lot of yellow-bellied *sokos* bolted out of Pertane and took to the woods. They were worried about their skins, see? More followed early yesterday morning. By now half the city would be gone if we hadn't pinned them in. Civilians make me sick."

"What got them on the run?"

"Talk," He gave a sniff of contempt. "Just a lot of talk."

"Well, there's no rush from Valapan," offered Mowry.

"Not yet," the captain gave back. He walked away, bawled out a slow-moving squad.

The last trucks got off the road and Mowry forged ahead.

Evidently the jailbreak had coincided with strong governmental action against a jittery populace as well as against subversive forces. The city would have been ringed in any event, whether Gurd had been wangled out the jug or not.

Speculations about the fate of Gurd and Skriva occupied his mind as he drove along. Had they been caught or were they lying low somewhere within the ring? As he passed through a village he was tempted momentarily to stop, call their telephone number and see what response he got. He resisted the notion as profitless but he did pause long enough to buy a morning paper.

The news was little different, the usual mixture of boastings, threats, promises, directives and warnings. One paragraph stated



categorically that more than eighty members of *Dirac Angestun Gesept* had been hauled in including one of their so-called generals.' He wondered how this could be and which unfortunate character had been burdened with the status of a revolutionary general. There was nothing about Gurd and Skriva, no mention of Colonel Halopti.

Throwing the paper away, he continued his journey. Shortly before noon he reached the centre of Alapertane and asked a pedestrian the way to the docks. Though hungry once more he did not take time off for a meal. Alapertane was not surrounded, no snap searches were taking place, no patrol-car had halted and quizzed him. He felt it wise to cash in on a favourable situation that might soon change for the worse.

So without bothering about a feed he made straight for the waterfront.

Planting the dyno in the private car-park of a shipping company, he approached the gates of the first dock on foot, blinked through his spectacles at the policeman standing by the entrance and asked, "Which way to the harbour-master's office?"

The cop pointed. "Right opposite the third set of gates."

Going there, Mowry entered the office, tapped on the counter with the impatience of an oldster in a hurry. A junior pen-pusher responded.

"You wish?"

Showing him his papers, Mowry said, "I wish to know which ships will depart before dawn tomorrow and from which docks they will leave."

Obediently the other dug out a long, narrow book and sought through its pages. It did not occur to him to question the reason for this request. A piece of paper headed *Planetary Board of Maritime*

*Affairs* was more than enough to satisfy him and, as any fool knew, neither Alapertane nor its ships were menaced by the Spakum forces.

"Destinations as well?" asked the youth.

"No, those don't matter. I wish only the names, the times of departure and the dock numbers." Mowry produced a stub of pencil, a sheet of paper and peered fussily over his glasses.

"There are four," informed the other. "The *Kitsi* at eight-time, dock three. The *Anthus* at eight-time, dock one. The *Su-cattra* at nineteen-time, dock seven. The *Su-limane* at nine-teen-time, also dock seven." He flipped a page, added informatively, "The *Melami* was due to leave at nineteen-time but is held up with some kind of trouble in the engine-room. It is likely to be delayed several days."

"That one doesn't matter."

Leaving, he returned to the car, got out the case and went to dock seven. The policeman on duty took one look at his documents and let him through the gates without argument.

Once inside he walked quickly toward the long shed behind which towered a line of cranes and a couple of funnels.

Rounding the end of the shed he found himself facing the stern of the *Su-cattra*.

One glance told him that at the present time he had not the slightest hope of fixing a limpet-mine unseen. The vessel lay against the dockside, its hatches battened down, its winches silent, but many workers were hand-loading late cargo by lugging it up the gangways from waiting trucks and a small mob of officials stood around

watching. Across the basin lay the *Su-limane* also taking cargo aboard.

For a short time he debated within himself whether to go after the *Anthus* and *Kitsi*. There was the disadvantage that they were in different docks a fair distance apart. Here, he had two suitable ships within easy reach of each other. And it was probable that the other vessels also were loading, thus being no easier to victimise.

It seemed that in his haste he had arrived too early. The best thing for him to do would be to go away and come back later after workers and officials had gone home. But if the cop on the gate or a waterfront patrol became nosey it would be hard to explain his need to enter the deserted dock area after all work had ceased. A hundred excuses could turn into a hundred self-betrays.

‘I have a personal message for the captain of the *Su-cattra*.’

‘Yar? What is his name?’

Or, ‘I have a corrected cargo manifest to deliver to the *Su-limane*.’

‘Yar? Let me see it. What’s the matter-can’t you find it?’

How can you deliver it if you haven’t got it? If it’s not in your pockets it may be in that bag. Why don’t you look in the bag? You afraid to open it, hi?’

Leaving the dockside he walked past the end of the huge shed which stretched the entire length of the dock. Its sliding doors stood three feet ajar. He went through without hesitation.

The side farthest from the dock was stacked roof-high with packing-cases of every conceivable shape and size. The opposite side was

part full. Near the main quayside doors halfway up the shed stood an array of cardboard cartons and bulging sacks which workers were taking out to the *Su-cattra*.

Seeing the name *Melami* stencilled all over the nearest stack of cargo, Mowry looked swiftly toward the distant loaders, assured himself that he had not been observed, dodged behind a big crate. Though no longer visible from inside the shed he could easily be seen by anyone passing the sliding doors through which he had entered. Holding his case endwise ahead of him, he inched through the narrow gap between two more crates, climbed over a big coffin-shaped box, squirmed into a dark alcove between the stack and the shed's outer wall.

It was far from comfortable here. He could not sit, neither could he stand erect. He had to remain half-bent until, tired of that, he knelt on his case. But at least he was safe. The *Melami* was held up and nobody was likely to heave its cargo around for the fun of it.

He stayed there for what seemed a full day. The time came when whistles blew and sounds of outside activity ceased.

Through the shed's wall sounded a muffled tramp of many feet as workers left for home. Nobody had bothered to close the shed's doors and he couldn't make up his mind whether that was a good thing or not. Locked doors would suggest an abandoned dockside guarded by none save the cop on the gate. Open doors implied the arrival of a night-shift or per-haps the protection of roving patrols.

Edging out of the alcove he sat on a crate and rubbed his aching knee-caps: He waited two more hours to let overtime workers and other eager beavers get clear. When his patience ran out he walked through the deserted shed, stopped behind its quayside doors that were directly opposite the middle of the *Su-cattra*.

From the case he took a limpet-mine, set its timing-switch to give a twenty-hour delay, threaded a length of thin cord through the holding loop. He peeped out the door. There was not a soul on the dockside but a few sailors were busy on the ship's top deck.

Boldly he stepped out of the shed, crossed the intervening ten yards and dropped the mine into the narrow stretch of water between ship and dockside. It hit with a dull plop and a slight splash, sank rapidly to the limit of its cord. It was now about eight feet below the surface and did not immediately take hold. He waggled the cord to turn the magnetic, face toward the ship. The mine promptly attached itself with a clang loud enough to resound all over the big vessel. Quickly he let go one end of the cord, pulled on the other and reeled it in through the holding-loop.

High above him a sailor came to the deckrail, leaned on it and looked down. By that time Mowry had his back toward him and was strolling casually toward the shed: The sailor watched him go inside, glanced at the stars, spat in the water and went back to his chore.

Soon afterward he repeated the performance with the *Su-limane*, sticking the mine amidships and eight feet down. That one also had a twenty-hour delay. Again the clang aroused careless attention, bringing three curious sailors to the side. But they took their time about it, saw nobody, shrugged it off and forgot it.

Mowry made for the exit gates. On the way he passed two officers returning to their ship. Engrossed in conversation, they did not so much as glance at him. If only they'd known of the long swim in store, he thought, they'd willingly have beaten out his brains.

A different policeman was on duty by the gates as he went through.

"Live long!"

"Live long!" echoed the cop, and turned his attention elsewhere.

Trudging a long way down the road and rounding the corner near to the gates of dock three, Mowry saw the car-park and came to a halt. A hundred yards away his car was standing exactly where he had left it but had become the subject of unwelcome interest. Its hood was raised and a couple of uniformed police were prying around the exposed dynamotor.

They must have unlocked the car with a master-key in order to operate the hood's release-catch. To go to that length meant they were not amusing themselves by being officious. They were on a definite trail.

Retreating behind the corner, Mowry gave swift thought to the matter. Obviously those cops were looking for the dynamotor's serial number. In another minute one of them would be crawling under the car to check the chassis number. This suggested that at last authority had realised that Sagramatholou's car. had changed its plates. So the order had gone out to inspect all cars of that particular date and type.

Right in front of him, hidden from the car-park, stood the unoccupied cruiser belonging to those nosey-pokes. They must have left it there intending to edge it forward a few feet and use it as a watching-post if necessary. Once they'd satisfied themselves that the suspected dynamotor was indeed a hot one, they'd come back on the run to set a stakeout.

Cautiously he took a peep around the corner. One was talking excitedly while the other scribbled in a notebook. It would be another minute before they returned because they would close the hood and relock the dynamotor in order to bait the trap.

Certain that no passer-by would question something done with casual confidence, he tried the cruiser's door-handle. It was locked. He had no key with which to open it, no time to pick it, and that put an end to any thought of taking one car in lieu of the other. Opening his case, he took out the spare limpet-mine, set it for a one-hour delay. He lay in the road, rapidly inched himself under the cruiser and stuck the bomb to the centre of its steel framework. Wriggling out, he brushed himself down with his hands. Seven people had seen him go under and emerge. Not one viewed his actions as extraordinary.

He snatched up his case and departed at a pace that was little short of a shambling run. At the next corner he looked back. One cop was now sitting in the cruiser and using its short-wave radio: The other was out of sight, presumably concealed where he could watch the dyno. Evidently they were transmitting the news that the missing car had been found and were summoning help to surround it.

Yet again adverse circumstances were chivvying him into a tight corner. He had lost the car on which he had relied so much and which had stood him in such good stead. All that he now possessed were his gun, a set of false documents, a large wad of counterfeit money and a case that was empty save for what was wired to its lock

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The case he got rid of by placing it in the entrance to the main post-office. That action would not help to cool things down. Discovery of his dyno had warned Alapertane that Sagiamatholou's killer was somewhere within its bounds.

While they were squatting around it in readiness to snare him a police cruiser would shower itself all over the scene. Then somebody would dutifully take a lost case to the nearest precinct station, a cop would try key it open and make an awful mess of the place.

Alapertane already was half-awake. Two big bangs were going to bring it fully awake and on its toes. Somehow he'd have to get out before they copied the Pertane tactic and ringed the town with troops.





# Chapter XI

THIS WAS A time when he regretted the destruction of Pigface's card in that explosion at Radine. He could do with it now.

Equally he was sorry that he'd given Sagramatholou's badge to Skriva. Despite looking as much like a Kaitempi agent as a purple porcupine, either the card or badge would have enabled him to commandeer any civilian car in town simply by ordering its driver to take him wherever he wished to go, shut up and do as you're told.

He had one advantage: the hunters had no real description of Sagramatholou's killer. Possibly they were shooting in the dark by seeking the elusive Colonel Halohti. Or perhaps they were chasing a purely imaginary description which the Kaitempi had tormented out of its captives. It wasn't likely that they'd be eagerly sniffing around for an elderly, slightly befuddled civilian who wore glasses and was too daft to know one end of a gun from the other.

All the same, they would quiz anyone they caught leaving town in a hurry at this particular time, even if he looked the soul of innocence. They might take it further by searching every outward traveller in which event he'd be damned by possession of a gun and a large sum of money. They might also hold any and every suspect pending a thorough check of identities. That also would get the noose round his neck. The Board of Maritime Affairs had never heard of him.

Therefore escape by train was out of the question. The same applied to long-distance buses. They'd all be watched. Ten to one the entire police network was ready to take up the relent-less pursuit of any car reported stolen; they would assume that the culprit might have dumped one dyno intending to steal another. It was too late in the day

to acquire another car by buying it outright. But... hah, he could do what he'd done before. He could rent one.

It took him quite a while to find a hire-and-drive agency.

The evening was drawing in, many businesses already had shut for the night, others were near their closing time. In one way that might be a help: maybe the lateness of the hour would cover his haste and get him prompt service.

"I wish to rent that bullnozed sportster for four days. Is it available at once?"

"Yar."

"How much?"

"Thirty guilders a day. That's one-twenty."

"I'll take it."

"You want it right away?"

"Yar, I do."

"I'll have it made ready for you and get you the bill. Take a seat. Won't keep you more than a few minutes." The salesman went into a small office at back. The door swung slowly and had not quite closed when his voice penetrated the gap, saying, "A renter in a hurry, Siskra. He looks all right to me.

But you'd better call and tell them."

Mowry was out the front, down the street and around two corners before the unseen Siskra had time to finish dialling.

He'd been out-thought. The hunt was a move ahead of him.

All renting agencies had been warned to report every applicant for a car. Only a narrow door-gap had saved him. If it had closed and silenced the voice he'd still have been sitting there when a carload of agents burst in.

'Why d'you want this dyno, *hi*? Where d'you plan to go with it? Where d'you live? Who are you, anyway? Hold your arms up while we have a look at your pockets.'

His back was sticky with sweat as he put plenty of distance between him and the dyno-dump. He threw away his glasses and was mighty glad to be rid of them. A bus came along bearing the sign: *Airport*. Now he remembered that he'd passed an airport on the road coming in. Wasn't likely that Alapertane had more than one of them. Undoubtedly the port itself would be staked right, left and centre, but he did not intend to ride that far. This bus would take him to the outer suburbs and in the direction he wanted to go. Without hesitation he jumped aboard.

Although his knowledge of the town was small his inward journey had given him a shrewd idea of how far he could go without reaching the fringes. A police check was likeliest immediately outside the town where the road left the built-up area and took to the country. At that point all those aboard '

could be regarded as leaving Alapertane and therefore fit subjects for questioning. He must get off the bus before then.

Dismounting in good time, he continued walking outward in the hope that on foot he could avoid the checking-post by sneaking past unobserved, say by taking to the fields. Day was almost done; the sun was half under the horizon and light was dimming fast.

He slowed his pace, decided that he'd stand a better chance of getting through in darkness. But he dared not draw attention to himself by mooching up and down the road or sitting on the kerb until nightfall. It was essential that he should look like a local citizen homeward bound. Turning off the main road he detoured at set pace through a long series of side-roads, circled back, regained the main one when the sky was black.

Continuing outward, he concentrated attention straight ahead. After a while the road-lights ended, the shine from many house windows ceased and in the distance he could see the sky-glow of the airport. It would be anytime now. He had a strong urge to walk through the darkness on tiptoe.

A bus overtook him, hummed into the heavy gloom, stopped with a brief blaze of braking lights. Cautiously Mowry advanced; got to within twenty yards of the bus. It was fully loaded with passengers and luggage. Three policemen were on board, two of them checking faces and documents while the third blocked the exit door.

On the verge and right alongside Mowry stood a cruiser, its doors wide open and its lights extinguished. It would have been almost invisible but for the glow from the nearby bus.

But for the present hold-up he might have sneaked to within grabbing distance before seeing it; they'd have sat in silence, listening to the faint scuffle of his feet, and jumped him as he came abreast of them.

Calmly he got into the cruiser, sat behind its wheel, closed the doors and started the dynamotor. On the bus an irate cop was yelling at a frightened passenger while his two fellows looked on with cynical amusement. The click of door-locks and the low whine of a motor went unheard during this stream of abuse. Rolling the cruiser off the

verge and onto the road, Mowry switched on the powerful headlights. Twin beams pierced the night, bathed a long stretch of road in shining amber, filled the bus with their glare. He accelerated past the bus, saw the three cops and a dozen passengers staring out at him.

He bulleted ahead feeling that the fates had been kind and compensated for recent ill fortune. It was going to be some time before the alarm went out and the pursuit commenced.

By the looks on the faces of those police they had not realised that it was their own car shooting past. Perhaps they thought he was a motorist who'd taken advantage of their preoccupation to slip by unquestioned.

But it was likely they'd take action to prevent a repetition.

Two of them would continue to browbeat the bus passengers while the thixd went out to catch any more sneakers. In that event the third could hardly fail to notice the absence of the cruiser.

That's when the fun would start. He'd give a lot to see their faces. No cruiser meant no radio either. They'd have to rush the bus to the far-off airport, or stir their lazy legs and run like mad to the nearest house with a telephone. Better still, they'd have to make a humiliating confession over the line and take a verbal beating-up from the other end.

This mental reminder that in seizing the car he had also acquired a police radio caused Mowry to switch it on. At once it came to life.

"Car Ten. Suspect claims he was examining parked cars because he's completely forgotten where he's left his own. He is unsteady, his speech is slurred and he smells of zith-but he may be putting on an act."

"Bring him in, Car Ten," ordered Alapertane H.Q.

Soon afterward Car Nineteen asked for help in ringing a waterfront warehouse, reason not stated. Three cars were ordered to rush there at once.

Mowry turned the two-way switch to get the other channel.

It was silent a long time before it said, "K-car. Waltagan calling. A seventh has now entered house."

A voice rasped back, "You'd better wait. The other two may turn up yet."

That sounded as if some unfortunate household was going to suffer a late-night raid by the Kaitempi. The motive was anyone's guess but it did not necessarily have anything to do with the finding of Sagramatholou's dyno. The Kaitempi could and would snatch anyone for reasons known only to themselves; they could draft any citizen into the ranks of D.A.G.

merely by declaring him in. The Kaitempi could do anything they pleased - except smack down a wasp, push away a Spakum space-fleet or win a war.

He switched back to the police channel because over that would come the howl of fury about a missing cruiser. The radio continued to mutter about suspects, fugitives, this, that or the other car, go here, go there and so forth. Mowry ignored the gab while he gave his full attention to driving at the best speed he could make.

When twenty-five den from Alapertane the radio yelped as the big long-range transmitter in Pertane itself let go with a powerful bellow.

"General call. Car Four stolen from Alapertane police. Last seen

racing south on main road to Valapan. May now be passing through area P6-P7."

Replies came promptly from all cruisers within or near the designated area. There were eleven. The Pertane transmitter started moving them around like pieces on a chess-board, using coded map-references that meant nothing to the listener.

One thing seemed certain: if he kept to the main Valapan road it wouldn't be long before a cruiser spotted him and caused every car within range to converge upon him. To take to minor roads and tracks wouldn't help any; they'd expect a trick like that and perhaps even now were taking steps to counter it.

He could dump the car on the other side of a field, all its lights out, and take to foot - in which case they would not find it before daylight tomorrow. But unless he could grab another car he'd be faced with a walk that would last all night and all next day, perhaps longer if he was forced to take cover frequently.

Listening to the calls still coming over the air, and irritated by the mysterious map-references, it struck him that this systematic concentration of the search was based on the supposition that if a suspect flees in a given direction at a given average speed he must be within a given area at a given time.

This area had a radius plenty large enough to allow for turnoffs and detours. All they needed to do was bottle all the exits and then run along every road within the trap.

Suppose they did just that and found nothing? Ten to one they'd jump to a couple of alternative conclusions: the fugitive had never entered the area because he had reversed direction and now was racing northward, or else he had made far better speed than expected, had



got right through the district before the trap closed and now was southward of it. Either way they'd remove the local pressure, switch the chase nearer to Valapan or northward of Alapertane.

He whizzed past a sideroad before he saw it, braked, reversed, went forward into it. A faint glow strengthened above a rise farther along the road he'd just left. Tearing along the badly rutted sideroad while the distant glow sharpened in brilliance, he waited until the last moment before stopping and switching off his own lights.

In total darkness he sat there while a pair of blazing headlamps came over the hill. Automatically his hand opened the door and he made ready to bolt if the lamps should slow down and enter his own road.

The oncomer approached the junction, stopped.

Mowry got out, stood by his car with gun held ready and legs tensed. The next moment the other car surged forward along its own road, dimmed into the distance and was gone.

There was no way of telling whether it had been a hesitant civilian or a police patrol on the rampage. If the latter, they must have looked up the gloom-wrapped sideroad and seen nothing to tempt them into it. They'd get round to that in due time. Finding nothing on the major roads they'd eventually take to the minor ones.

Breathing heavily, Mowry got back behind the wheel, switched on his lights, made good pace onward. Before long he reached a farm, paused to look it over. Its yard and out-buildings adjoined the farmhouse in which thin gleams of light showed the occupants to be still awake. Leaving the place, he pushed on.

He checked two more farms before finding one suitable for his purpose. The house stood in complete darkness and its barn was

some distance from it. With dimmed lights, moving slowly and quietly, he drove through the muddy yard, along a narrow lane, stopped under the open end of the barn.

Leaving the car he climbed atop the hay and lay there.

Over the next four hours the shine of distant headlights swept repeatedly all around. Twice a car rocked and plunged along the sideroad, passed the farm without stopping. Both times he sat up in the hay, took out his gun. Evidently it did not occur to the hunters that he might park within the trap.

On Jaimec fugitives from the police or Kaitempi did ~not behave like that - given a headstart they kept running good and hard.

Gradually surrounding activity died down and ceased.

Mowry got back into the cruiser, resumed his run. It was now three hours to dawn. If all went well he'd make it to the rim of the forest before daybreak.

The Pertane transmitter was still broadcasting orders made incomprehensible by use of symbols but responses from various cruisers now came through with much less strength.

He couldn't decide whether or not this fading of radio signals was an encouraging sign. It was certain that the transmitting cars were a good distance away but there was no knowing how many might be nearer and maintaining silence. Knowing full well that he was able to listen-in to their calls, the enemy was crafty enough to let some cars play possum.

Whether or not some cruisers were hanging around and saying nothing, he managed to get undetected to within nine den of his destination before the car gave up. It was tearing through a cutting

that led to the last, dangerous stretch of main road when the green telltale light amid the instruments faded and went out. At the same time the headlamps extinguished and the radio died. The car rolled a short distance under its own momentum and stopped.

Examining the switch, he could find nothing wrong with it.

The emergency switch on the floorboard didn't work either.

After a good deal of fumbling in the dark he managed to detach one of the intake leads and tried shorting it to the earth terminal. This should have produced a thin thread of blue light. It didn't.

It signified only one thing: the power broadcast from the capital had been cut off. Every car within considerable radius of Pertane had been halted, police and Kaitempi cruisers included. Only vehicles within potency range of other, faraway power transmitters could continue running - unless those also had ceased to radiate.

Leaving the car, he started to trudge the rest of the way.

He reached the main road; moved along it at fast pace while keeping his eyes skinned for armed figures waiting ahead to challenge any walker in the night.

After half an hour a string of lights bloomed far behind him and to his ears came the muffled whine of many motors.

Scrambling off the road, he fell into an unseen ditch, climbed out of it, sought refuge amid a bunch of low but thick bushes.

The lights came nearer, shot past.

It was a military scout-patrol, twelve in number, mounted on dynocycles independently powered by long-term batteries.

In his plastic suit, with night-goggles and duralumin helmet, each rider looked more like a deep-sea diver than a soldier.

Across the back of every trooper hung a riot-gun with a big pan-shaped magazine.

Those in authority, he decided, must be more than aggravated to stall all cars and let the army take over the hunt for the missing patrol-car and its occupant. Still, from their viewpoint they had good reason to go to such lengths. Dirac Angestun Gesept had claimed the execution of Sagramatholou and whoever had collared the agent's machine must be a real genuine member of D.A.G. They wanted a real member in their hands at any cost.

He speeded up, running short stretches, reverting to a fast walk, running again. Once he lay flat on his face in tall, fish-scented stuff that passed for grass on Jaimec. A patrol of six went by. Later he got behind a tree to avoid four more. To one side the sky had turned from black to gray and visibility was improving every minute.

The last lap to the forest was the worst. In ten minutes he leaped for cover ten times, each time uncertain whether he had been seen because now it was possible to observe movement over a considerable distance. This sudden increase in local activity suggested that at last the Alapertane patrol-car had been found. If so, they'd soon start seeking a fugitive doing it the hard way, namely, on his feet.

Chances were good that they would not concentrate on the immediate neighbourhood. Having no means of telling how long the car had been abandoned they'd credit him with being four hours ahead of where he really was and probably they'd look for him farther afield.

Thankfully he entered the forest, made good time in growing daylight. Tired and hungry, he was compelled to rest ten minutes in every hour but got along as fast as he could between times. By mid-day, when about an hour from the cave, he had to lie down awhile in a leafy glade and snatch a short sleep. Up to that point he had walked a total of thirty-seven Earth-miles helped by desperation, a sense of urgency and Jaimec's lesser gravitation.

Little refreshed, he resumed his journey and had reduced pace to a listless mooch when he reached the point where his finger-ring invariably began to tingle. This time it gave no response. He halted at once, looked all around, studied the branches of big trees ahead. The forest was a maze of light and shadow. A silent, motionless sentinel could remain high up in a tree for hours and not be seen by anyone approaching.

What he'd been told at college echoed in his mind. `The ring is a warning, a reliable alarm. Heed it! All very well them saying that. It's one thing to give advice, something else again to take it. The choice was not the simple one of going ahead or going back; it was that of finding shelter, food, comfort and necessary equipment or abandoning everything that enabled him to operate as a wasp. It was the choice between continuing as a solitary fighter or becoming a useless bum. He hesitated, sorely tempted to sneak near enough at least to get a good, long look at the cave.

Finally he compromised by moving cautiously forward, edging from tree to tree and taking full advantage of all available cover. In this way he advanced another hundred yards.

Still no response from the ring. Removing it from his finger he examined its sensitive crystal, cleaned the back of it, put it on again. Not an itch, not a twitch.

Half-hidden behind an enormous tree-root, he again considered the position. Had there really been intruders in the cave and, if so, were they in ambush around it? Or had Container-22

ceased to function because of some internal defect?

While he stood there in an agony of indecision a sound came from twenty yards ahead. Low and faint, he would never have heard it had his senses not been primed by peril. It was like a suppressed sneeze or a muffled cough. That was enough for him. Someone was hanging around and striving to keep quiet about it. The cave and its contents had been discovered and the finders were lying in wait for the owner to come along.

Trying to keep full attention on the trees, he backed away almost at a crawl. After that it took him an hour to make a mile, he moved so slowly and warily. Considering himself now at a safe distance he broke into a steady walk, not knowing where to go or what to do.

Though speculation was futile he could not help wondering how the cache had been found. Low flying scout-planes fitted with super-sensitive metal detectors could have pinpointed its exact location if they'd had reason to suspect its existence in that area. But they'd had no such cause so far as he was aware.

Most likely the cave had been stumbled upon by some of those who'd fled from Pertane and taken to the woods - they'd certainly curry favour with authority by excitedly reporting the find. Or perhaps the likely-looking hideout had been probed by an army patrol trying to round up refugees.

Anyway, it no longer mattered a hoot. He had lost the cache as well as further contact with Terra. All that he possessed were the clothes in which he stood; a gun and twenty thousand guilders. He was a rich

man who owned nothing but his life and that not worth much.

It was obvious that he must keep going away from the cave for as long as he retained strength to move. Realizing that they had found a Terran war-dump the powers-that-be wouldn't long rest content with a mere ambush around it. Just as soon as they could collect the troops they'd convert a large section of the forest into a gigantic trap. That process would start most anytime.

So with stumbling legs and empty guts he kept going, steering himself by sun and shadow, maintaining his direction steadily south-east. By dusk he'd had as much as he could take. Flopping into a patch of reeds, he closed his eyes and slept.

It was still dark when he awoke. He lay there until sunrise, dozing and waking at intervals. Then he started out with stronger legs, a fresher mind but weaker insides. His belly kept appealing to his gullet but there was nothing he could do about it yet.

Air activity was endless that day. Scout-planes and 'copters zoomed around within hearing distance all the time. The reason for all this display was a mystery since they'd little hope of spotting one man in that immense forest. Perhaps the presence and size of the cache had misled them into thinking that a Spakum task-force had landed.

It was, easy to imagine the state of wild alarm in the capital, with brasshats running to and fro while messages flashed back and forth between Jaimec and Diracta. The two lamsters Wolf had talked about had accomplished nothing like this. They'd tied up twenty-seven thousands for fourteen hours. By the looks of it he would preoccupy the entire planet for the next fourteen weeks.

At nightfall all that his belly had received was water and his sleep was made restless with hunger. In the morning he continued, still through

thick forest that stretched all the way to the equator.

After five hours he struck a narrow lane, followed it to a clearing in which were a small sawmill and a dozen cottages.

Before the mill stood two big, powerful trucks. From the shelter of the trees he regarded them enviously. Nobody was near them at the moment, he could jump into either of them and tear away with no trouble at all. But the news of the theft would get the entire hunt on his tail. Right now they'd no idea of where he'd got to or where he was heading. It was better to let their ignorance remain his bliss.

Snooping carefully between the trees, he bided his time, bolted into a nearby garden, hurriedly filled his pockets with vegetables, his arms with fruit. Back among the trees he ate the fruit as he went along. Later, as twilight fell, he risked a small fire, baked the vegetables, ate half of them and saved the rest for the morrow.

Next day he saw not a living soul, had no food except that reserved from yesterday. The day after was worse: just trees, trees and still more trees with not an edible nut or berry among the lot, no sign of habitation, nothing at all to eat. From far to the north still came the faint humming of aircraft and that was the only thing to suggest the presence of life on the planet.

Four days afterward he reached the sideroad to Elvera, a village south of Valapan. Still keeping to the trees he followed it until houses came in sight. The amount of traffic on the road wasn't abnormal and there were no signs of a special watch being kept.

By now he was in a bad way, haggard with lack of food, his clothing dirty and rumpled. It was fortunate, he thought, that he had darkened his complexion, that depilatory treatment had long abolished the need to shave, and that his last haircut had been the Halopti crop followed



by imitation balding. Otherwise he'd now look like nothing this side of Aldebaran.

He spent some time brushing his clothes with his hands and tidying himself as best he could. That done, he walked boldly into the village. If the price of a feed was a noose around the neck he was willing to pay it providing the meal was a good one and that he was given time to lug out his gun.

There were a dozen shops in the village including a cafe--bar of the kind favoured by truckers. Entering, he went straight through to the washroom, had a wash and saw himself in a mirror for the first time in many days. He looked sufficiently harassed to make a nosey cop give him the long, hard stare but at least he wasn't an obvious hobo.

Returning to the front, he sat at the counter, found it difficult to stop his mouth from drooling. The only other customers in the place were two ancient Sirians guzzling at one table and too intent to bother with the newcomer. A burly character in a white coat appeared behind the counter and eyed Mowry with faint curiosity.

"You wish?"

Mowry told him, got it, almost dribbled on it when it arrived. He set to, forcing himself to eat slowly because the other was watching. Finishing, he ordered the next item and disposed of it in the same bored manner. This play-acting was sheer hell; he could have bolted two more complete servings and asked the fellow to wrap up another six for him to take out.

As he shoved across the final drink, the burly one said,

"Come far?"

"Only from Valapan."

"Walk it, hi?"

"Nar, the dyno stalled two den back. I'll fix it after."

The other stared at him. "You came in a dyno? How'd you get out of Valapan?"

"What d'you mean?" countered Mowry, not liking the trend of conversation.

"No cars allowed into or out of Valapan today. A cop told me so himself."

"When was this?"

"Around the nine-time hour."

"I was away before seven," Mowry said. "I'd a lot of calls to make and got out early. Good thing I did, *hi*?"

"Yar," agreed the other, doubtfully. "But how're you going to get in again?"

"I don't know. They've got to lift the ban sometime. They can't maintain it for ever." He paid the bill, made for the door.

"Live long."

He sensed that he'd got out of there in good time. The burly one was vaguely suspicious but not sufficiently so to bawl for help, being the type who'd hesitate lest he make a fool of himself.

The next call was at a nearby grocery store. He bought J, enough of the most concentrated foods to make a package not s too heavy to

carry for miles. Here he was served without especial interest and the conversation was brief.

"Bad about Valapan, isn't it?"

"Yar." said Mowry, yearning to hear the news.

"Hope they nab every stinking Spakum in the place."

"Yar." Mowry repeated.

"Damn the Spakums!" the other finished. "That will be sixteen and six-tenths."

Going out with the package, he glanced along the road. The fellow at the cafe-bar was standing by his door looking at him. Mowry nodded familiarly, ambled from the village, shot another glance back as he passed the last house. Noseypoke was still standing there watching him.

With careful rationing the food lasted him ten days as he continued through the forest and saw nobody other than occasional lumberjacks whom he avoided. His direction was a now a westward circle that should bring him not far south of Radine. Despite any risks entailed, he was keeping to that part of Jaimec of which he had some knowledge.

He'd made up his mind that when he got near to Radine he was going to use his gun to acquire another car and a set of genuine documents at the cost of burying a corpse in the woods. After that he'd check the lie of the land and if things weren't too hot in Radine maybe he could hole-up there.

Something drastic had to be done because he could not roam the forests for ever. If he'd acquired the status of a lone outlaw he might

as well become enough of a thug to prosper.

He did not know it but bigger and wider events were overtaking him and he was no longer a pawn in the cosmic game or the master of his destiny.

Two hours after sunset on his last day of wandering he reached the main Radine-Khamasta road, paralleled it through the forest as he continued toward Radine. At precisely the eleven-time hour a tremendous flash of light yellowed the sky in the direction of the stronghold Khamasta. Beneath his feet the ground gave a distinct quiver. The trees creaked while their tops swayed. A bit later a prolonged, faraway growl came over the horizon.

Traffic on the road swiftly thinned out and finally ceased altogether. A thousand crimson serpents hissed up from darkened Radine and hungrily bored into the night sky. Came another great flash from the region of Khamasta. Something long, black and noisy bulleted low over the forest, momentarily blanking out the stars and sending down a blast of heat.

In the distance sounded faint, muffled rumblings, cracklings, thumps and thuds plus a vague, indefinable babble like the shoutings of a multitude. Mowry went into the empty road and stared up at the sky. The stars vanished wholesale as the thrice-wrecked and ten times decimated Terran fleets thundered overhead four thousand strong.

Below, Mowry danced like a maniac in the middle of the road. He shouted at the sky. He yelled and screamed and bawled tuneless songs with meaningless words. He waved his arms around, tossed twenty thousand guilders into the air so that it floated around like confetti.

As the black, snouty warships roared above a veritable torrent of stuff

sailed down, seeking ground with the pale, lemon-coloured legs of antigrav beams. He stood fascinated while not far away a huge, cumbersome shape with enormous caterpillar tracks fell featherlike atop twenty columnar rays, landed with squeaks of protest from big springs.

Heart pounding, he tore southward along the road, on and on until he bolted full-tilt into a waiting group of forty figures.

They were looking his way, ready for him, having been alerted by the frantic clomping of his feet. The entire bunch topped him by head and shoulders, wore dark green uniforms and were holding things that gleamed in the starlight.

"Take it easy, Blowfly," advised a Terran voice.

Mowry panted for breath. He did not resent this rude counterthrust to the Spakum tag. Every Sirian was a blowfly by virtue of his purple backside.

He pawed at the speaker's sleeve. "My name is James Mowry. I'm not what I seem - I'm a Terran."

The other, a big, lean-faced and cynical sergeant, said, "My name's Napoleon. I'm not what I seem - I'm an emperor." He gestured with a hand holding a whop-gun, that looked like a cannon. "Take him to the cage, Rogan."

"But I *am* a Terran," yelled Mowry, flapping his hands.

"Yeah, you look it," said the sergeant.

"I'm *speaking* Terran, aren't I?"

"Sure are. A hundred thousand Blowflies can speak it. They think it

gives them a certain something." He waved the cannon again. "The cage, Rogan."

Rogan took him.

For twelve days he mooched around the prisoner-of-war compound. The dump was very big, very full and swiftly became fuller. Prisoners were fed regularly, guarded constantly and that was all.

Of his fellows behind the wire at least fifty sly-eyed specimens boasted of their confidence in the future when the sheep would be sorted from the goats and justice would be done.

The reason, they asserted, was that for a long time they'd been secret leaders of *Dirac Angestun Gesept* and undoubtedly would be raised to power when Terran conquerors got around to it. Then, they warned, friends would be rewarded as surely as foes would be punished. This bragging ceased only when three of them somehow got strangled in their sleep.

At least a dozen times Mowry seized the chance to attract the attention of a patrolling sentry when no Sirian happened to be nearby. "Psst! My name's Mowry - I'm a Terran."

Ten times he received confessions of faith such as, "You look it!" or "Is zat so?"

A lanky character said, "Don't give me that!"

"It's true-I swear it!"

"You really are a Terran- *hi?*"

"Yar," said Mowry, forgetting himself.

"Yar to you, too."

Once he spelled it so there'd be no possibility of misunderstanding. "See here, Buster, I'm a T-E-R-R-A-N."

To which the sentry replied, "Says Y-O-U" and hefted his gun and continued his patrol.

Came the day when prisoners were paraded in serried ranks, a captain stood on a crate, held a loud-hailer before his mouth and roared all over the camp, "Anyone here named James Mowry?"

Mowry galloped eagerly forward, bow-legged from force of habit. "I am." He scratched himself, a performance that the captain viewed with unconcealed disfavour.

Glowering at him, the captain demanded, "Why the heck haven't you said so before now? We've been searching all Jaimec for you. Let me tell you, Mister, we've got better things to do. You struck dumb or something?"

"I-"

"Shut up! Military Intelligence wants you. Follow me."

So saying, he led the other through heavily guarded gates, along a path toward a prefab hut.

Mowry ventured, "Captain, again and again I tried to tell the sentries that."

"Prisoners are forbidden to talk to sentries," the captain snapped.

"But I wasn't a prisoner."

"Then what the blazes were you doing in there?" Without waiting for a reply he pushed open the door of the prefab hut and introduced him with, "This is the crummy bum."

The Intelligence officer glanced up from a wad of papers.

"So you're Mowry, James Mowry?"

"Correct."

"Well now," said the officer, "we've been primed by beam-radio and we know all about you."

"Do you really?" responded Mowry, pleased and gratified.

He braced himself for the coming citation, the paean of praise, the ceremonial stroking of a hero's hair.

"Another mug like you was on Artishain, their tenth planet,"

the officer went on. "Feller named Kingsley. They say he hasn't sent a signal for quite a piece. Looks like he's got himself nabbed. Chances are he's been stepped on and squashed flat."

Mowry said suspiciously, "What's this to me?"

"We're dropping you in his place. You leave tomorrow."

"Hi? Tomorrow?"

"Sure thing. We want you to become a wasp. Nothing wrong with you, is there?"

"No," said Mowry, very feebly. "Only my head"