

A Talent For The Invisible

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CHAPTER 1

Robots were chasing him.

It was a clean warm morning, about 6:30 AM, in the late spring of the year 2020 and Jake Conger was jogging along one of the high, wide, plastic ramps which connected the towers of Manhattan. Conger was a lean tan man of thirty one, wearing a one-piece running suit. The robots, a pair of them, were roughly humanoid, cocoa-colored, and about fifty yards behind him.

One of the brown robots had a pixphone screen mounted in his chest. "Assignment," he called to Conger, narrowing the distance between them to fifty feet.

Conger continued jogging along the lemon-yellow noryl plastic ramp. He was over a thousand feet above the ground level of the city. The dozens of other pastel-tinted pedestrian ramps above and below him made bright cat's cradles in the warming May morning.

"Assignment," repeated the pixphone robot as he and his partner caught up.

"So tell me," said Conger, still running.

The cocoa-brown robot gestured at a tufted air-float bench they were passing. "Wouldn't you like to stop by the side of the ramp while we confab."

"No," Conger told him. "I still have five miles to do."

"How many miles do you run every day?"

"Ten."

The brown robot nodded. "That sounds very good. Running is supposed to be splendid for your inner workings. Heart, lungs and similar mec . . ."

"What about the assignment?"

"Well, yes, all right." The robot matched his stride to Conger's. His partner dropped a few yards behind, being full of data he couldn't run as fast. "The Wild Talent Division of the United States Remedial Functions Agency sent us to fetch you, Agent Conger. They have a highly secret and vastly important job for you."

"This is supposed to be my layoff month."

"The boss specifically requested you."

"Why me?"

"You're the only invisible agent RFA has free and unassigned at the moment."

"I was planning to take a hopper tour of Connecticut today. There's a new seaweed restaurant in

Mystic I want to try." He ran silently for a few seconds. "Okay. I'll take the job. What's the problem?"

"People are coming back to life."

Conger slowed his jogging pace some. "Huh?"

"Be better if I let the boss explain." He poked two cocoa fingers into the finger holes in his side and the plate-size phone screen in his chest came alive.

A little rumpled frazzled man of fifty showed on the picture screen. He was wrapped in a tacky synth-fur bathrobe, slumped in the breakfast nook of his Wild Talents Division office. He blinked at Conger with his faded little eyes. "Yark," he said. "Why are you bouncing up and down, Jake?"

"I'm running," answered Conger. "Why are you spinning around and around?"

Blinking again Geer, the WTD boss, replied, "I had my breakfast nook designed to rotate so I'd always be facing a sunny window, remember?" He made a yawning face, biting at air. "The dingus is a little out of whack and keeps mistaking any bright object for the sun. Right now it's fascinated with the silver pendulum on my wall clock across the office."

Nodding, Conger asked, "Who's coming back to life?"

Geer ripped plyofilm off a self-heating waffleburger. "People who are supposed to be dead."

"Speaking of that," said Conger. "Didn't you read the Surgeon General's report on waffleburgers?"

"What's that yoohoo computer know about what it takes to wake me up in the morning," said the rumpled Geer as he bit into his breakfast sandwich. "Especially when I sleep in the office. I suppose I should give up soyjava, too?"

"It won't kill you," said Conger. "What dead people?"

Geer sipped his cup of soyjava with an exaggerated slurp. The rotation of his circular nook floor caused some of the grey-brown liquid to splash up against his sunken cheeks. "This is a spooky one, Jake." He took another slurp of the imitation coffee. "Even for the Wild Talents Division, where everything tends to be spooky, this is extra odd. These dead people seem to be coming back to life." He set aside his waffleburger to pick up a tri-op photo. "You know who this yoohoo is?"

"It's hard to recognize him with syrup on his face."

Geer squinted at the portrait, moistened his thumb and wiped at it. "I wish this was my layoff month. I'm tired of these business breakfasts. I've already had a go-round with Agent Katzman this morning. He's the one with the ability to walk through walls. Now he's developed a quirk."

"A quirk?" The lemon-yellow ramp made a sharp turn around the side of a blue pseudoconcrete tower and Conger slowed a little.

"Lately he only gets halfway through the walls and then gets stuck," said Geer. "He says it's because he has domestic troubles."

Conger leaned his head closer to the screen on the running robot's chest. "That's Colonel Macaco Cavala, isn't it?"

"Who?"

"In the photo."

Geer scowled at the tri-op picture he was holding up. "Yes. Colonel Macaco Cavala, the late Portuguese strongman."

"He's the guy who was going to overthrow the current dictator of Portugal," said Conger.

"Yeah, that's why they killed him last month," said Geer, letting the photo drop. It landed in his soyjava saucer.

"I remember seeing it on the news. He was shot down on the streets of New Lisbon by an unidentified sniper."

"Right," replied the boss. "You'll be talking to him."

"The unidentified sniper?"

"We'll give you his name and address," said Geer. "The data robot has it. The yoohoo lives in New Lisbon someplace."

Conger glanced sideways at the pixphone screen. "Wait now, boss. Did our Remedial Functions Agency have something to do with knocking off the colonel?"

"No." Geer shook his frazzled head. "I checked with the yoohoos in the head office in Washington. RFA is clean, for a change, in this one. But it is not impossible that National Security Office knows something about it. They never confide in us, those NSO bastards." The boss lifted the photo out of his saucer. "Jake, somebody has seen Colonel Macaco Cavala alive and walking around."

"CBS-NBC, Inc. saw him flat on his back in his coffin."

"It's perplexing," admitted the boss. "I want you to teleport to New Lisbon at 11 this morning, Jake. This Colonel Cavala thing fits in with some other rumors we've been hearing. Talk to this yoohoo that's supposed to have sniped the damn colonel, then contact the guy who swears he saw him alive not three days ago." Geer took another bite out of his waffleburger. "You realize how important this may be, Jake. Politically and, perhaps, to all mankind."

The phone robot reminded the boss. "Tell him why we need an invisible agent, boss."

"Oh, yeah." Geer took one further bite, chewed, swallowed. "If this yoohoo in New Lisbon saw the late colonel where he thinks he saw him you may have to turn invisible to get yourself in there." The boss waved a sheet of orange-colored fax paper. "We only have nineteen invisible agents now, Jake, since Agent Busino lost the ability to make the lower part of his body from the knees down invisible. It takes two long years to process an invisible agent, as you well know. If only Vincent X. Worth hadn't had that fatal hopper accident and . . ."

"I know," said Conger. Worth had been the quirky young scientist and researcher who'd developed many of the methods for manufacturing Wild Talent Division agents. He was only a couple years older than Conger and the two of them had been pretty good casual friends. Worth's private aircruiser had exploded six months ago while he was enroute to a WTD

conference in the Philippines. "Okay, where has the colonel been seen?"

"You'll find out all about that when you get over to New Lisbon."

Conger said, "What happened to the notion this was my layoff month?"

"Jake, we've got an emergency situation here," explained the boss.

"Think of how important this may be to the future of United States foreign policy and the prospect of a better life for all humanity. Think of all the good men and true who've given their all for the Wild Talent Division. Think of that ghostly echelon of good guys, which includes Marcus Jerico, Donald E. Tannenbaum and the aforementioned Vincent X. Worth, cut down in the very prime of life while they were unselfishly defending the wonderful people and institutions of this, their own their native land. Think, if you will, of the lonely bald eagle soaring . . ."

"Okay, okay," cut in Conger. "I'll take the damn job."

A single line of moisture zigzagged down the front of the pixphone oval. The robot sniffled, rubbed at his vinyl eyeballs. "Excuse me, Agent Conger. I'm programmed to be sentimental over patriotic speeches."

"That's okay." Conger took a plyochief from a slash pocket in his running suit to wipe off the phone screen. "Anything else, boss?"

Geer thought, his sunken face wrinkling. "No, that yoo-hoo data robot I sent will fill you in on the background, give you what names and addresses we have. The only other thing I can think of is a word of warning."

"About what?"

"If the National Security Office sticks any of their agents on this same problem, give them a wide berth and avoid them like the plague, Jake."

"I always do."

Geer was eating his breakfast sandwich again. "Aren't you winded yet?"

"Nope."

"Yark."

The aircab said, "Watch your step, sir."

Conger grabbed his all-purpose valise off the seat, then glanced out the cab window. "You're six feet above the passenger ramp."

"Which is why I cautioned you to watch out, sir."

"Better get a little closer."

"Geeze," muttered the cab's control box. The hovering craft ratcheted, snarled and bumped down to within six inches of the ramp leading into

the E65 St. teleport station. "A guy in good shape like you could jump a few feet."

Near the entrance of the station a chunky partially bald man, who had most of his hair on the backside of his head, was hitting a book vending machine. "You only printed me out chapters XXXVIII through LXVII of *Moby Dick*," he was complaining. "It says right on your front Two-Buck Klassics, Complete & Unexpurgated." When the half-haired man noticed Conger he blushed, stopped whacking at the book machine.

Giving him a nod, Conger passed on into the medium-sized station. He crossed to the reservation desk and said to the girl there, "Reservation for Jake Conger."

The girl behind the curving aluminum desk was blonde with upturned synthetic breasts. She smiled while she flicked the retrieval switches in front of her. "Yes, here we are. The 11 o'clock teleport for Lisbon. You've seventeen minutes before you have to hop onto the platform," she said, smiling still. "Would you like to sleep with me?"

Conger took his teleport chit, pasted it on the lapel of his two-piece travel suit. "No, thanks," he said, returning the smile.

"You probably aren't in the mood," the attractive blonde said. "Travel makes you nervous maybe."

"Seventeen minutes isn't nearly enough time," replied Conger. "Besides which . . ."

"That's exactly what I told Mr. Shellebarger," said the blonde. "This is his idea. He's, you know, the director of the Manhattan Office of Legalized Prostitution and he thinks OLP could take in even more revenue if he puts hookers into all the teleport stations on the island. OLP does so well at Grand Central Station that he figured . . ."

"Trains are more romantic," said Conger. "There's a kind of leisurely 20th Century feeling about trains and train depots."

"Precisely what I told Mr. Shellebarger. I was a \$200 girl on the Jersey Mono for six months. We did really well."

Across the room six people left their tin benches to climb up onto one of the three teleport platforms. Conger looked from them to the tag on his lapel.

"Oh, you needn't worry," the blonde assured him. "I may be a hooker, but I know the teleport business. I gave you the right tag. Would you at least like me to kiss you goodbye. Only \$1."

"I'm not too sentimental about travel, but thanks." Conger grinned and left the desk.

"10:50 teleport to Rio de Janeiro," announced the speakers up under the ceiling. "Platform 2, last call."

Another minute passed. A man bounded up the four steps to the middle platform. The other six people shuffled their feet, coughed, rubbed their elbows, scratched their noses.

A beeping came out of the mechanisms under the platform. There was a sizzling sound. The seven passengers were no longer there.

Conger took his suitcase, filled chiefly with vitamins and food supplements, and sat near the left-hand platform.

When the 11:00 teleport to New Lisbon was announced only Conger and the semi-bald man stepped onto Platform 1.

The man was stuffing fax book pages into his pullover overcoat. "Not only won't I know how it ends, I won't even know how it begins."

The platform beeped. Thirty seconds later Conger was in New Lisbon.

CHAPTER 2

The begging machine rolled along the dim dirty alley after Conger. Mud and offal and bits of bone splashed up on both of them. "One donation takes care of it all, senhor," the square chest-high mechanism said through its rusty voice grid. "Give me only a mere fifty escudos and I'll hand over a lapel pin which is guaranteed to keep all the real live wretched beggars of Old Lisbon away from you."

"Okay." Conger had had some of his money changed into Portuguese currency at the New Lisbon teleport station. "Here, now stop sloshing crap on me." He shoved a bill into the mechanism's donation slot.

"*Muito 'brigado,*" said the wheeled machine as it ingested the money. "Which means, much obliged or thank you very much."

"I know," said Conger.

"Here's your lapel pin, senhor. Forgive the grease on it." The machine bumped against one of the thousands of noryl plastic pillars which supported New Lisbon up above. Caked mud and bird droppings shook loose from the support struts, which were a hundred feet above them at this point, and sprinkled down on Conger's two-piece travel suit. "*Sinto*

muito," muttered the machine, reaching out an extendable hand to brush dove dung off Conger's shoulder. "Which means, I am very sorry."

"Why don't you apologize to me also?" complained a derelict sprawled in the mucky passway. "You just ran over my prosthetic device."

"Your what?" asked the machine, slowing to a stop.

The derelict clutched his ragged one-piece lounging suit to his frail body, then kicked the smudged machine in the side. "This, *tonto*, my false leg."

Conger pulled away from the squabble, turned down a cobblestone street. The roof of Old Lisbon had a light vent here, letting thin late afternoon sunlight cut down through the murk. Conger stepped over a dead dog, scattering the fat grey rats that had been at it. Near the corner, next to the ruins of a 16th Century cathedral rose the new looking dome of a building. Its light strip signs pulsed, advertising Pugilismo Mecanico! Roboxing! in two foot high script.

One of the rats had followed him to the box office of the prize fighting dome. Conger booted it toward a stuffed gutter with one of his synthleather tourist shoes.

Inside the tinted plastic ticket booth a humanoid robot who'd recently been repainted a bright flat pink was leaning far to the right. "How many, senhor?"

"One," said Conger, "in the private box section." He'd arrived in New Lisbon at 5 PM. The teleport trip from Manhattan took only a few seconds, but because of the time difference he'd jumped ahead six hours. When he checked in at the Novo America Hotel he'd found one of his coded messages directed him to descend into Old Lisbon and contact the sniper who had shot and killed Colonel Cavala. The sniper was to meet him in his box at the robot fight arena.

The climb ramps weren't functioning, so Conger had to walk up and around to the horseshoe row of hanging plastic boxes above the ring.

Inside Box #15 a plump man in parts of a military uniform was sitting back in a partially inflated cushion chair as he watched the robot bout below, munching on a thick link of black sausage wrapped in brown bread.

Conger crossed the catwalk to #15 and gave the prearranged knock on the door of the plastic box.

The plump man turned to blink at him, still chewing. "*Que deseja?*" he asked. "Which means . . ."

"What do I want, I know." Conger'd taken a sleep course in Conversational Portuguese only six months ago. Putting one hand near the smeared see-through wall, he made the prearranged highsign.

"Que?" said the plump man. He took another bite of his rough hewn sandwich, then slowly began to smile. "Oh, *sim*, yes, of course, the American spy. *Entre*, which means . . ."

Conger came into the booth. "Let's have the countersign," he told the plump man.

The man waved his sausage at him. "I am Captain Conti Delgado," he laughed. "Anyone here will assure you of that. I'm a well-known pugilism buff."

Up from below came the clang of two ancient boxing robots going at each other.

"Even so," said Conger.

Sighing, the plump man placed his sandwich on the lid of a realistic imitation wicker picnic basket which was sitting between his sneakered feet. He gave the countersign. "Now, *sente-se, por favor*, which means . . ."

Conger sat down on the hanging booth's only other chair. The air-filled chair gave a mild hiss and commenced to very slowly deflate. "What can you tell me about Colonel Cavala?" he asked.

Delgado retrieved his snack, reached his other hand into the basket. "Care for some blood sausage, senhor? Made from one of my own pigs." He cocked his head upward. "I have a pig farm up on the outskirts of New Lisbon."

"No, thanks." Conger took a vial of kelp pills from his pocket, shook four into his palm.

"These are the most healthy pigs you'll come by, senhor. They eat only organically grown slop and I myself give each one a shot of antibiotic once a month. Did you ever inject several thousand pigs inthe . . ."

"About the colonel," said Conger.

Giving a shrug, Delgado withdrew his hand from the picnic hamper. An immense clattering bang rose up from the ring. "Huh, the Masked Marvel fell down. That wasn't supposed to happen." He took a bite out of the sausage, turning to watch Conger. "Colonel Cavala is dead."

"You're certain?"

"I know who I shoot—after all, senhor."

"And it was Cavala you killed?"

Delgado laughed. "I make my living now as a freelance assassin, senhor, and have since I left the service, after many happy years on the front lines in Angola. To survive as a freelance, and perhaps the same is true in your rather specialized line of work, you have to be good and dependable. Were I to shoot more than one or two of the wrong people I'd be finished."

"You knew the colonel well?"

"At one time we were extremely close," said Captain Delgado. "That was of course before he turned into a wild-eyed radical and soft-hearted liberal. He served together in the unfortunately unsuccessful campaign to regain Goa from those wretched Indians."

"Then you can be sure it was him you shot."

"Of course," replied the plump man. "I did my job, I guarantee you. I don't know why NSO is so worried."

"I'm not with NSO." Conger ate two kelp pills. "I'm with RFA."

"Ah, you RFA people are not so . . . not so . . ." He made circles in the musty air with his sausage. "Not so daring and flamboyant as NSO. I rarely if ever get any work out of your organization." He returned to eating for a moment. "Well, senhor, whoever you are working for you can rest assured Cavala is dead and gone. I put a hole through him right here . . . no, a little higher . . . right here. In through here and out the back with the best laser rifle you can get, a Russian-made job your NSO people bought me on my last saint's day. Even the most gifted surgeons in the world can not patch up a man after that."

"Where do you think his body is now?"

"Poor Cavala is buried in the family plot at the New Relocated Sacred Ground of Our Blessed Lady Cemetery," said Delgado, jabbing a thumb toward the ceiling. "Up in New Lisbon."

There'd been a coded message about that waiting at Conger's hotel as well. "One of our RFA men in New Lisbon checked this morning," Conger told the assassin. "The coffin is empty."

"*Merde!*" Captain Delgado dropped his sausage and bread.

"You didn't know that?"

"Of course not, senhor. My work is more taken up with another phase of things," said the plump man. "I don't keep track of all of them after I finish with them. But in this case, due to my sentimental feelings over our once pleasant association in the military, I attended poor misguided

Cavala's funeral. I saw him in his coffin. With a chest wound like that, you can display them if you dress them just so. I know it was Colonel Macaco Cavala they put in the ground."

"Somebody took him out again."

"That's one on me," admitted the plump assassin.

CHAPTER 3

The gargoyle was horned and scaly, made of sandy-colored plastic nearstone, and weighed approximately four hundred and ten pounds. It came plummeting down from one of the towers of the New Relocated Church of Our Lady of Fatima and hit the walkway three feet to the left of Conger.

He had sensed the falling gargoyle a few seconds before it slammed into the twilight street of New Lisbon and thrown himself to the right. Conger lost his balance, kept himself from falling over completely by slapping a palm against the street. Tilted out like that, he glanced upward.

A large black man was still at the parapet where the gargoyle had been. He gave a disappointed shrug, a darn-it swing of the fist before he went climbing away over the spires of the transplanted cathedral. "Big Mac," said Conger, guessing who the statue pusher was. "So AEF is in on this, too."

A cluster of tourists, all in multi-color one-piece touring suits, had gathered around the fallen gargoyle. "You usually don't get to see one of these up so close," remarked a pleasant-looking man from Holland. He let his small robot camera loose and it began clicking off pictures, circling the ugly sprawled plastic statue.

Conger uprighted himself, rubbed his strained wrist against his side. He back stepped away from the half dozen curious people, spun and walked quickly on.

The Ritz-Mechanix Hotel was only two blocks from there, but Conger carefully walked a circular eight blocks before easing into a rear entrance of the twenty story building. He was to meet his other Portuguese contact here.

The long green corridor he found himself in at street level was full of loitering cleanup androids. Here in New Lisbon they still favored the Negro mammy model, long since outlawed in the United States and most

other English speaking countries.

Selecting an android-picking tool from the small kit he carried strapped to his side, Conger doctored a hefty bandana-wearing robot maid. Then he ordered her, "Take me up to floor 19A in one of the service elevators."

"Oh, yassuh. I'se gwine ter be bodacious glad ter do dat little thing, suh," replied the amiable android as she led him around a green bend. "Dis yere's our mostest nicest eley-vator, suh."

When the elevator let him out on his contact's floor Conger ungimmicked the android and headed for room 1926A. All the doors along this stretch of wall had freshly painted portraits of the current dictator of Portugal on them at eye level. Conger halted before 1926A, knocked his prearranged knock on the dictator's broad nose.

On the other side of the door someone yelled, "*Voila!*" There was a good deal of metallic clacking, followed by a jittering crash.

Conger knocked again, this time on the triple chin.

Finally someone called, "*Momentito.*"

There was more clattering, followed by another zestful shout of "*Voila!*"

"Enough already," said the other voice. "Where's that nitwit turnoff switch? There."

"*Voila!*" was yelled once more, in a running down mechanical way.

"You're pretty tall for a spy," said a voice from immediately behind the door. "I'm giving you the once over through this nitwit spyhole. They didn't put it in the right place and I have to stand on tiptoe. There."

"How about the counter knock?" suggested Conger.

"Which?" asked the voice behind the door.

"When I knock like this," said Conger, knocking again, "you're supposed to knock a certain way in response."

"Wait a second, I'll try to remember. Is this it?"

"Nope."

"You're right. I can't keep all these nitwit knocks straight. They put too many beats in them. Nobody can remember a knock that goes on forever. This is it. Am I right?"

"You've got it."

"Okay, hold on and I'll try to get this nitwit door to let you in. I wanted to stay at the Novo American but they tell me the RFA budget is tight this

season and anyway the Ritz-Mechanix, being 90% automatic, will take better care of me. Is the door opening? No, it isn't. Just stay right there while I give it a couple good taps with my shoe. Hold on and I'll get my shoe off. Boy, the way they make shoes nowadays you can hardly remove the nitwit things. I don't know about you, but when I was a boy shoes had laces instead of these little electric seams. Did you have shoes with laces as a kid?"

"I went barefoot a lot."

"Oh, really? My parents would never sit still for barefeet. I was considered too fragile, being the runt of the family. There, now I'll wap it."

After a moment the door groaned, gave a chill sigh and slid aside.

Standing in the foyer, his electric-seam shoe still raised high, was a man not quite five feet tall. He had curly blond hair and a substantial curly blond moustache. He was thirty-nine years old, dressed in a one-piece white fencing suit with a red heart stitched to its chest. "How do you do, senhor. I'm Canguru, the master spy. Come in."

Fallen, arms-wide, over the floating air column coffee table was a fencing master android. Though the teaching mechanism was turned off, it still made a low dry buzzing. "Taking up fencing?" asked Conger.

"No, ballroom dancing, but the nitwit room service sent up the wrong machine. Since they did, and included this outfit, I gave the fencing a try." Canguru guided Conger to a tin sofa, then sat opposite him on an imitation rubber divan. "Besides being a highly successful spy, senhor, I now and then do a little highjacking." He leaned toward Conger, passing him a bowl of puffed potato balls. "Care for a snack?"

"No, thanks." Conger got a pillbox of vitamin B-Complex out of a side pocket, swallowed two capsules. "You're supposed to have seen Colonel Cavala up and around."

"Exactly what I'm leading up to," said the small spy. "A few days ago, while engaged in the highjacking facet of my career, I chanced to be behind the walls of the monastery of the San Joaquim Brothers."

"Where is it?"

"Near the town of Vinda, some fifty miles from us, to the south," replied Canguru. "It's where they make Mizinga."

"Beg pardon?"

"Have you never heard of Mizinga? It's a world-famous liqueur. These nitwit brothers turn the stuff out. It contains over one hundred herbs and

other ingredients. Only the San Joaquim Brothers, plus some six or seven robots, know the secret of Mizinga. Personally I don't think they're making it quite right, it could stand more anise, but you can't argue with the public taste."

"Can people from the outside walk right into the place?"

"No, senhor. The monastery is heavily guarded and well nigh impregnable. The thing is, being a religious order, the brothers don't go in much for electronic guard stuff. Which is why I told RFA to get me an invisible man," said Canguru. "In a while, when I find my nitwit electric pencil, I'll draw you a map of all their fortifications."

"How did you get in?"

"I had the assistance of a Mother Superior of my acquaintance," said the curly headed little spy. "However, we can't work the same dodge twice. Wait, I'm going to find that nitwit pencil right now." He left the imitation rubber divan and began hobbling around the long wide suite. "Boy, fencing didn't do me much good. Now I've developed a terrible limp."

"Probably because you only have one shoe on," suggested Conger. "Now what about the colonel, did you see him at the monastery?"

"You're anticipating the punchline. Let me track down my shoe."

"You set it on the aluminum table out in the foyer."

"You're very perceptive, senhor. Have you been an invisible man long?"

"What about the colonel?"

"It was there at the monastery of the San Joaquim Brothers that I saw him." Canguru located his other shoe. "He was in the chapel, dressed as a brother himself and lighting a candle at the shrine of St. Norbert the Divine."

"You certain?"

"Would I sell the RFA a false yarn for 1000 escudos? No. I'm absolutely sure I saw Cavala alive and well several days after his funeral."

"Speaking of selling information," said Conger. "Have you told anyone else about this?"

"You think I got my reputation as a master spy by double dealing?" He got his shoe back on his tiny foot, then stomped back toward Conger. "I told no one save your local RFA rep." "An AEF agent tried to drop a gargoye on me on my way over here," said Conger.

"A gargoye?" Canguru blinked. "That's very imaginative. Those

Agrarian Espionage Force agents aren't all nitwits."

"If AEF wants to kill me," said Conger, "it means China II must know something about why I'm here."

"*Sim, sim,*" muttered the little spy. "Yes. China II is cooling toward your country and they hate our dictator here. They supported Cavala, may even have been prepared to finance a coup. It would be to their advantage to have Cavala alive. Which gargoyle did they drop on you?"

"The one on the left hand parapet of the New Relocated Church of Our Lady of Fatima," replied Conger. "It's a homed scaly bastard with a face like this." He made a brief gargoyle face.

Canguru chuckled. "I know which one you mean. It must weigh five hundred pounds." He returned to the divan, bounced down on it. "You have a genuine gift for mimickry. A shame you have to spend so much of your time being invisible. How is that done exactly?"

"With a secret process."

"Actually you don't become truly invisible, do you?"

"It's mostly an illusion, but it works. Within a range of a quarter mile or so," said Conger. "Now you'd better draw me that floor plan of the Mizinga works."

"If Cavala was really dead," said Canguru, rising again to hunt for his pencil, "then it means we're dealing with something fairly awesome. To raise the dead is no mean feat."

"It's a first rate stunt," agreed Conger.

The black android bellhops were tap dancing in the lobby. One of them did a series of splits, while his associates clapped and chuckled. The android's highly-polished right shoe pointed at a man Conger recognized.

It was the man with half a head of hair who'd teleported from New York to New Lisbon with him yesterday. The man was hunched in a yellow celluloid chair, pretending to read loose random pages of *Moby Dick*. When he realized Conger had noticed him he blushed.

Conger had been striding toward the front exit. He was heading for the monastery of the San Joa-quin Brothers this morning. "I wonder who this guy's with," Conger said to himself. "AEF, NSO or maybe even RFA." He pivoted, walked into the hotel barbershop&gym.

Back in the lobby the bellhops were tap dancing up a stairway of piled luggage.

The robot head barber had been painted a glistening red and white. He

looked like a fat barber pole. "*Bom dia*, senhor," he said as he took hold of Conger by the arm. "Which means *dobry ráno* in your language."

"That's not my language." Conger pulled free of the sweet-smelling machine.

"You're not Czech? Then I'll bet it's Hungarian. Well, *jó reggel*."

"And the same to you." Conger walked on by a row of manicuring machines. "I'm in the mood for a steam bath."

"Ah, yes, *fürdo* as you Hungarians say."

"Exactly." Conger kept moving toward the steamroom door.

"I pride myself, you see, on being able to spot a man's native country at a glance," continued the candy-striped robot. "New Lisbon is, as you may know, something of an international crossroads, senhor. So one has to . . ."

The half-bald man had cautiously crossed the barbershop threshold. Pushing his fragments of *Moby Dick* down into the slash pockets of his tourist smock he sat down in front of the first manicure machine he came to. "Ouch," he said after a few seconds.

The foyer of the steamroom was misty. A small android, speckled with beads of condensation, sat at a round rubber desk near the entrance doors to the dressing rooms. "*Bom dia*, senhor," said the android. "Which means . . ."

"*Jó reggel*. I know." He went by the seated android into the dressing rooms.

"*Um momento*," called the android. "There's a fee of twenty escudos."

Conger jogged down a row of unused lockers, stopped at a deserted spot, and became invisible. Unseen now, he went back the way he had come. The damp-skinned android, who'd left his desk to search for him, didn't notice Conger at all.

Conger stopped just inside the foyer door. In about three minutes the door was opened by the chunky semi-bald man.

While the man was squinting into the blurred room Conger eased by him and went, invisibly, on his way.

CHAPTER 4

The squirrel stopped watching him. It eased out of the hole in the oak

tree and skittered, head down, along the trunk to the leafy ground of the forest. In chasing a twig, the dust-colored squirrel hopped over Conger's right foot.

Conger nodded to himself. He was invisible now. He could still see himself but no one else, including animals, could. It had taken him nineteen months, working in the Wild Talent Division's New England training school to acquire the knack. It was partially a mental control trick, adapted from an ancient Tibetan ritual by the late Vincent X. Worth. The rest of it depended on the careful use of a complex body lotion which, among other things, gave off highly pervasive mind-clouding fumes.

Prepared now to assault the monastery, Conger left the wooded hills above the home of the San Joaquin Brothers. The monastery resembled a walled town. Covering something like twenty acres, it was surrounded by a high many-turreted wall of yellowish brown stone.

The main entrance was equipped with electronic sensors, which would probably note his passing through. According to the map Canguru had penciled for him, the rear entrances to the monastery grounds relied entirely on armed brothers.

Conger strode clear of the woods, cutting down through ankle-high grass. He moved along through a flat field which skirted one wall of the place, headed for the back side of the monastery. A bell in the chapel inside bonged out eleven, white doves flickered up into the clear blue morning.

In the orchards beyond the monastery walls tan-colored robots, about a dozen of them, were spraying the peach and apricot trees with nozzle guns fitted to their wrists. A wooden wagon, pulled by a cyborg mare, came rolling across the orchard. A long-armed robot on the flatbed truck was snaking up the empty spray containers the robot tree dusters discarded.

The invisibility process worked on mechanical men, too. Conger, unseen and unnoticed, walked to the slow rolling wagon and boosted himself up. He sat in a spot where he was clear of the container gatherer.

Over at the nearest wooden gate a San Joaquin brother in a rough earth-brown cassock was pacing in the dust. He had a gleaming snubnose blaster rifle resting on his hip. He halted now, raised his cowl far back and stared at the bright orchards while he wiped the back of his hand across his forehead.

"Full load, full load," the long-armed robot told himself. He stretched an arm toward the partially mechanical horse, flicked the animal's tin ear.

The horse headed for the rear gate.

The monk scuffled over and swung the heavy wooden gate out and open. The wagon, with Conger sitting invisibly on it, entered the monastery grounds. As the gate slammed shut Conger dropped to the roadway. The road cut through formal gardens, leading to several concentric circles of buildings a thousand feet away.

Off to Conger's right three San Joaquim brothers were seated round a raw wood table among blossoming scarlet and gold flowers. None of the three was Colonel Cavala.

The eldest monk poured something from a beaker into a thimble-size glass, handing it to the brother next to him. "Well, what do you think, Brother Guilherme?"

Brother Guilherme, who was about forty three, took a careful sip. "Yum," he said, after sloshing the dark brown liquid in his mouth. "Yessir, Brother Joao, that's the old original incomparable Mizinga flavor sure enough."

Brother Joao tapped a ladle against the younger monk's temple. "*Tonto*, that's Coca Cola."

"You could have fooled me."

The third brother, a chubby red haired man, said, "He's never going to make it as a tester, Brother Joao. He's a loser in the tastebud department."

"What about you, Brother Jorge," demanded Guilherme. "You thought the lemonade left over from Brother Pedro's mop party was Mizinga. Don't go casting the first stone."

"Brothers, brothers," cautioned the old monk. "You both must pray for guidance. You must ask St. Norbert, the patron saint of taste, to send you more ability. Especially you, Brother Guilherme, who can't tell Mizinga from Coca Cola."

Brother Guilherme finished off his thimble of Coke. "How can one light candles, to St. Norbert, with that spurious monk Cavala always hanging around in the chapel. He gives me the heebie jeebies."

"Now, now, brother. We must all of us learn to relate to the newly risen. For does not our blessed Lord promise that on a day not too distant all the dead will rise up and walk again?"

Giving a shiver, Brother Guilherme said, "I'm going to have one gigantic case of heebie jeebies when that day comes. Ugh."

"Hey," suggested the red haired brother, "let's have a shot of the real Mizinga, Brother Joao. All this spooky talk makes my stomach feel funny."

Leaving the taste testing group, Conger walked toward the monastery buildings. They were all of the same brindly stone as the walls, tile roofed with wrought iron bars guarding all the windows.

The chapel lay in the second ring of buildings. A robot gardener was crouched in the flower beds in front of it, touching up the imitation roses with a small bottle of red enamel.

There seemed to be no one in the cool shadowy chapel. Up at the front was a wide altar with religious statues at each side. To the right of St. Joseph Conger noticed a door with a plaque. When he was nearer he read: Shrine of St. Norbert, Patron Saint of Taste & Author of "Quick Cooking With Wine," "The Fun With Liqueur Cook Book," etc.

The thick door stood inches open. Conger gave it a slow push.

Kneeling in the small alcove room before another altar was a husky man of fifty, wearing the rough brown San Joaquim robe. It was Colonel Macaco Cavala. "How about the new mattress I've been praying for?" he was asking the mansize statue of the saint. "A fellow who's been dead has to take especial care of himself."

Conger put a hand into the kit strapped to his side. He drew out what he thought was truth serum, then noticed he'd gotten vitamin A&D capsules instead. He swallowed a couple, before getting out the serum and a silver injection bug from his kit.

He made his way invisibly across the shrine, slapped the serum-loaded bug against the back of Cavala's thick neck.

"What kind of shrine are you running anyway, you let insects nibble on . . ." The resurrected colonel stopped, stiffened.

"Give me your name," ordered Conger. He rested his invisible buttocks against the rail guarding the statue of the patron saint of taste.

Cavala's dark eyes grew cloudy. "I am Macaco Jose Cavala, former colonel in the People's Army of Portugal, an unfortunate recent victim of . . ."

"You're supposed to be dead."

The husky Cavala gave a dazed grin. "I was, I was, unseen senhor. What an experience that was, let me tell you. I'm sure you, whoever you might be, have preconceptions as to what death will actually be like. I know I surely did. Well, in the first place you don't . . ."

"Who brought you back to life?"

"The Agrarian Espionage Force financed it, bless them," answered the truth-drugged colonel. "After which, they saw to it I was brought here to bide my time in safety, relative safety. We don't want to attempt a coup yet, or at least AEF doesn't. They feel this isn't the proper season for it. In Portugal summer is a better time for a coup d'état. I have to admit the coup attempted in New Lisbon a few weeks ago by some of my misguided rivals was a complete flopola. However, it seems to me what I have going for me is the miraculous . . ."

"Okay, the secret agents from China II picked up the bill," cut in Conger. "Who did the actual job of bringing you back to life?"

"They call him Sandman."

"Sandman?"

Cavala, becoming more lax, tipped over into the altar rail. His head banged against the old dark wood twice before he slid down to lie on his face on the bottom most altar step. "I assume Sandman is a nickname, an ironic nickname," he murmured. "Since, unlike the sandman of legend and lore, he brings not sleep but awakening. At least, so far . . ."

"Who is he?"

"That I do not know, senhor. I only heard about him after I came back to life. You see, I was dead when he did most of his wonderful work on me. When you're dead, if I can make myself clear to you on this point, your perceptions are somewhat . . ."

"Yeah, okay." Catching hold of the colonel, Conger propped him against a four-legged rack of votive candles. The tiny dancing flames spread quivering red light over the reanimated man's broad face. "Have you seen this Sandman guy?"

"To be perfectly truthful," said the drugged man, "I saw only his back as he was going out of the laboratory. A relatively tall thin man dressed in a white smock. I'd estimate his age as in the middle thirties, though, as you must understand, my unseen friend, having only just returned to the living I wasn't noticing all the fine details. You know who he reminded me of?"

"Who?"

"Not exactly, but there was a similarity in the gait and the build of Sandman. He reminded me of Sir Thomas Anstey-Guthrie, the noted British neobiologist. I met him at a world science fiction convention in Amsterdam a few years ago. Still, if it were Sir Thomas, why didn't . . ."

"Do you know anything about Sandman's methods, how he does it?"

"His methods are marvelous, if you ask me."

"I am asking you. Can you give me some specifics, some details!"

"Alas, no, my friend. I know only that he did things I wouldn't have thought possible. My wound, for instance, is almost completely gone. I was afraid a hole like that was going to leave a terrible unsightly scar. On the contrary, he was . . ."

"Specifically, how did he bring you back?"

Cavala sighed, sliding again down the steps, his cassock skirt raveling up around his chubby knees. "I was told no specifics."

"You mentioned a laboratory," Conger reminded him. "Does Sandman's process involve equipment, drugs, an operation or what?"

"*Sim*, yes. All that and more. As I told you, I was deceased during a good part of the proceedings. Even when one is alive it's difficult to take in all of what's going on in a medical situation. I know when I had my tonsils removed shortly after my confirmation I . . ."

"Where is Sandman's lab?"

"I don't believe I was at his own personal laboratory. He made use of borrowed facilities, is my impression."

"Where?"

"Some hundred miles from here, on the coast. It was at the lovely villa of Duke Ocasologo," answered Cavala. "Perhaps you recall the duke's long dedicated service to our country as Portuguese ambassador to the planet Venus?"

"Nope," said Conger. "Whereabouts in the villa did Sandman have his lab set up?"

"To the best of my recollection it was on the second floor, in a large room with a skylight."

"Tell me how to get to the duke's villa."

"Gladly, my friend." The colonel gave Conger a detailed and lengthy set of instructions on how to reach Duke Ocasologo's coastal estate.

Conger clutched the imitation monk under the arms, twisting him up and around. He left him propped in a praying position and went, invisibly, away from the guarded monastery.

CHAPTER 5

The lizard man kept discarding carnations. "No, not that one either," he said. "It clashes with my skin tone, don't you think?" He was six feet tall, dressed in a one-piece nearsilk tuxedo, and was a scaly seagreen.

"Perhaps because you're flushed with excitement," suggested his human bestman. He produced a purplish carnation from the large white cardboard box he was holding. "Try this one, prince."

The seagreen Venusian snorted through his snout. "Oh, it's even worse than the others."

The two men were standing in an arbor on the sunlit afternoon grounds of Duke Ocasologo's estate. It was the day after Conger's visit to the monastery and he had just climbed to the top of the unguarded white brick wall which ran along the ocean side of the fifty acre spread. He was invisible again.

"How about a speckled one? Or here's a nice chocolate-colored carnation."

"No, no." The lizard prince made a petulant sweep with his hand, knocking the flower box into the air. Two dozen carnations erupted.

One landed on Conger's invisible knee. He brushed it away.

The Venusian prince glanced upward, frowning. "All this shillyshallying over my boutonniere has upset my optic nerves. I have the impression that that ugly pinkish carnation stopped several seconds in midair before falling."

"Let's return to the villa, prince," said his bestman. "I'm sure we'll find a flower to your liking in there."

"I loathe outdoor weddings," complained the lizard man as the middle-sized human led him away across the neat grass. "Ah, the nonsensical things diplomacy leads us into." He rotated his large seagreen head to take one final look at the wall where Conger still sat invisible.

Dropping to the grass, Conger scanned the grounds of the duke's villa. About two thousand feet away, across rolling lawns and floral islands, rose the Ocasologo home. It was a castle-like building of a soft rose-pink stone. A dozen striped tents had been pitched near the villa and a mixed orchestra, part human and part Venusian, was already tuning up in a wide-floored white gazebo.

Wedding guests were rolling in through the main gate in immense

landcars, while more guests dropped out of the gentle blue sky in silver and gold hoppers. Conger noticed the official sky-car of the US ambassador to New Lisbon bouncing in for a landing on the hopper pad to the right of the rose-pink villa.

Freshly oiled robot serving carts were moving out of a lower doorway in the villa. A lizard man in a fawn tuxedo reached for a canape and was warned, "Not until after the ceremony."

Conger drifted unseen through the growing crowd, careful not to nudge anyone. A jovial fat Venusian roared happily at the sight of the newly disembarked US ambassador. He extended a blue green hand, which Conger had to dodge, toward him.

Near the Venusian, her eyes on the warming up orchestra, was a slim young girl. She was about twenty-four, dark, wearing a midhigh formal shift. The dark girl was pretty, in an unconventional way, and Conger had the notion he knew her. Not from a meeting, but from some past briefing at RFA. He gave an invisible shrug and moved on.

The lizard prince, shouting and waving his scaly hands in the air, was roaming the great entrance hall of the villa. "On my planet we often stick geraniums in our buttonholes."

"Very well, very well, *principe*," a bent old man told him. "We'll teleport you some geraniums in. What shade?"

"Oh, that would take hours and hours and I'm due to marry that slatternly princess in less than a half hour."

"I am the Duke of Ocasologo," the old man reminded the lizard. "I can procure geraniums, of any shade you so desire, in the winking of an eye."

"Scarlet, then," said the prince.

Conger climbed a curving marble staircase leading to the villa's second floor.

A very thin young lizard woman in a suit of black lace all-season underwear came running down the long carpeted upper hallway. "I can't go through with it! I can't go through with it!"

To avoid her, Conger threw himself against a paneled wall.

From out a room at the far end of the corridor two plump women, one lizard and one human, came galloping. They gained on the escaping princess, made grabs at her.

"The orchestra is already tuning up," reminded the plump lizard woman as she tackled the princess and brought her to her knees.

"The sandwiches are all made, too," added the human matron. "1400 of the things."

"Ugh, ugh," said the princess.

Conger eased by the tangle of women.

The princess' mother said, "The prince is very handsome."

"He's a sissy."

"That's only palace scuttlebutt, dear."

The corridor branched into two more corridors. Conger chose the one leading to the left. None of the rooms in this wing were occupied. He searched each one. Finally he found the large white room with the vast skylight. Three mourning doves were waddling across the streaked glass. The big room was empty.

"What's Sandman do?" he asked himself. "Teleport the whole works around with him?"

Conger sniffed. There was still a faint medical odor in the room and on the bare floor a single tread mark which might have been made by a movable operating table.

On his second circuit of the room he saw a small green pill lying against the wall next to a puff of dust. It was a kelp pill, like the ones he carried. He rubbed it once across his chin, then put it in his kit.

The rest of the second floor yielded nothing further. Going back to the fork of the corridors, Conger checked out the right hand turning. Only guest rooms there, no skylight, no lab.

Touching at the kit strapped to his side, he said, "Let's talk to the old duke."

The Duke of Ocasologo was gone from the hall below, as were the prince and his best man.

Conger heard the prince complaining out on the lawn.

He spotted the bent old Ocasologo near the band gazebo handing a bundle of sheet music up to the brown lizard band master. "The *principe* insists you include some Venusian twelve tone wedding tunes," the duke was saying. Conger moved, unseen, in the direction of the duke. He suddenly had an odd feeling. He halted near a robot sandwich table, frowning invisibly. Somebody was staring at him. Slowly turning his head Conger saw the slim brunette girl. She was looking directly at him. Smiling cautiously, she came carefully across the lawn to him and caught hold of his arm.

CHAPTER 6

Barely moving her lips, the slim brunette said, "We ought to talk." She let go of Conger, turned and walked away.

He followed.

The dark girl led him far from the wedding guests, through a grove of lime and lemon trees and into an immense greenhouse. The steamy glass house was filled with tropical plants in long rows of boxes and wood-rib pots. Vines and leaves curled up the walls, tangled round the roof beams. The sunlight was mixed with intricate shadow patterns.

Stopping near the far end of the greenhouse, the girl said, "I take it you didn't find anything either?"

"How come you can see me?"

She held up both hands and made an identifying gesture. "You recognize that?"

"It's the National Security Office highsign," answered Conger. "How come you can see me?"

"My name is Angelica Abril. My ID number is 762-3342-AO."

"Pleased to meet you, Miss Abril. I'm Jake Conger."

"Yes, I know," said Angelica. "Well, NSO has had a way to overcome the Wild Talents Division's invisibility trick for nearly six months now."

"Splendid."

"Didn't you know that?"

"Nope."

The pretty girl frowned. "That's sort of odd, Jake. NSO has a policy of informing RFA of everything relevant."

"How do you work it?"

"I'm not really sure. They just gave me a shot." She rubbed slender fingers along her upper arm. "My theory is they made me immune. You're one of the better looking invisible men, by the way. I had to work alongside Agent Tate in Upper Montreal last week and he's a schmuck."

Conger got a packet of vitamin C tablets out. "Does anybody on the other side have this immunity to me?"

"Which other side?"

"China II, for instance. One of their agents has been tailing me off and on."

"Oh, you mean Big Mac and his sidekicks," said Angelica. "No, they can only see you when you're visible. So far as we know, and NSO has a pretty good infallibility record, we're the only ones so far who've got a way of seeing you invisible agents. Big Mac dropped something on you, didn't he?"

"A plastic gargoyle."

"What an age we live in. Gargoyles used to be made of stone."

"Stone ones do a better job of flattening you all right," said Conger. "Do you know how Big Mac got on to me?"

"AEF has tagged a couple of your RFA people in New Lisbon and vicinity. There could be a leak there, or they may have picked you up when you talked to Captain Delgado at the boxing matches."

"NSO has been tailing me, too?"

"Now and again," admitted the dark girl agent. "I didn't follow you here, though. I arrived independently, pretending to be on the US embassy staff." She tried a tentative smile on him. "Would you want to co-operate with me?"

"On what?"

Angelica laughed. "On this job, on the Sandman business," she said. "NSO doesn't care what sort of concessions we agents make, as long as we get results. I thought, since we're probably going to keep on bumping into each other, we might as well pool information. It would be more efficient."

Conger asked, "Do you know who Sandman is?"

"No. I imagine you don't either.

"I was on my way to try a truth shot on the duke."

"Oh, he shouldn't have more than one every four hours, at his age."

"You used something on him?"

"An hour or so ago, while you were searching the villa. The duke wanted to pinch me and I led him to a secluded spot."

"Did he pinch you?"

"Once before I got the truth stuff into him."

"What does he know?"

"Nothing much," said Angelica. "He loaned out his house on the night Sandman did the resurrection, loaned it for a fee. The duke is not politically involved in this. He wasn't even here when the lab was set up."

"Where's the lab now?"

"They teleported everything in and out, by way of a bootleg system," she said. "We're trying to trace the progress of the stuff."

"Who paid the duke for the use of his upstairs?"

"In this particular resurrection most of the money came from the Chinese, from the Agrarian Espionage Force. From them and a few of Colonel Cavala's old army buddies who passed the hat."

"In this case," repeated Conger. "Do you know of others?"

"We know of five other Sandman revivals. Four of them radical political figures and one a liberal Norwegian poet." The pretty girl smiled again at him. "Okay, I've shared some confidences with you. Do you want to co-operate and tell me what you know?"

The pathways between the rows of tropical plants were paved with sea-colored mosaic tiles. Conger watched the tile, pacing a few yards away from the girl. "I don't know any more than you do about Sandman," he said finally. "As to working together, no. I like to work alone."

"Do you? That'll please your boss, Geer."

Conger didn't reply.

Angelica walked on by him, halting beside a dwarf palm. "We'll probably be meeting again in Rio. Think about my offer."

"Why Rio?"

"Late yesterday a leftist guerrilla leader known as Machado was gunned down while on a supposedly secret visit to Rio," replied the girl. "There are indications Sandman will be hired to resurrect Machado. So as soon as I finish up here I'm going to teleport over to Brazil. Want a lift to the teleport station?"

"I don't know where I'll be going next."

"Probably Rio." Angelica went to the glass door. "Well, be seeing you."

CHAPTER 7

On the phone screen Geer, the boss of the Wild Talent Division, was

eating jelly donuts and craning his neck. "Move aside, Jack. I haven't been in Rio in five years and I want to get a good look."

Conger stepped away from the pixphone, leaned against the force screen guarding his 20th floor balcony. Rio de Janeiro was a blur of white marble, green foliage and mosaic tile far below. The afternoon air had a faintly chocolate color. "What meal are you supposed to be eating now?"

"Lunch of course," said Conger on the pix screen. "It's high noon in Manhattan. I make it a practice always to dine right on time so as not to upset the delicate balance of my body."

Conger lifted a glass of fortified orange juice off the servotable nearby. "Anything more on this resurrected guerrilla?"

Rubbing a gob of grape jelly back into his mouth from his cheek, Geer said, "I've hired that little yoohoo to do some more digging for you."

"Which little yoohoo?"

"The little curly locked Portuguese yoohoo."

"Canguru. Is he in Brazil?"

"He'd better be. I just vouchered his teleport bill," said the boss. "He was due to hit Rio last night. I figure you can use somebody who knows the language, and he seems to be good at sniffing out these resurrected yoohoos. He should be reporting in to you shortly, Jake."

"Did you check on the man Cavala said Sandman reminded him of, Sir Thomas Anstey-Guthrie?"

"He certainly would be qualified to be Sandman. Exceptionally gifted neobiologist, longtime head of the Limehouse Life Extension Research Center in England and onetime Whip MP," said Geer. "Except . . ."

"Except what?"

"He's dead."

"A lot of people who're supposed to be dead are walking around these days."

"Actually," said Geer, "Anstey-Guthrie is believed to be dead. What happened, he stepped into a teleport booth in Livermore, California, nearly two years ago and never showed up at the other end, which in this case was to be Barchester, England."

"So he could still be alive someplace."

"He could," admitted the boss. "I've put a man to nose around further."

"Anything else out of New Lisbon?" Conger sat on an air float hassock near the phone stand.

"We may have a lead on one of the yoohoos who dug up Colonel Cavala's body," said Geer, starting in on a fresh jelly donut. "We've got the monastery staked out, but so far no one suspicious looking has tried to contact Cavala. The sound monitors we've planted haven't overheard anything much out of him except prayers and some opinions on liqueur making."

"What about the China II agents who tried to squash me with the gargoyle?"

Geer made a growling sound, then waved a pink fax sheet at him. "Do you know what it costs to put a yoofoo plastic gargoyle back in place?"

"No."

"\$290," said Geer. "In cash."

"How come we got stuck with the bill?"

"My field man wasn't discreet enough and the yoofoo US ambassador suggested RFA pick up the tab as a good will gesture," said Geer. "I've got a gesture for him."

"What about Big Mac?"

"He, and a partner or two, was in New Lisbon the same time as you," said Geer, consulting a yellow memo. "There are still some AEF agents moping around New Lisbon, eyeing the monastery and so on. But Big Mac appears to have departed. I guess he may turn up in Rio de Janeiro, too."

After finishing his orange juice, Conger asked, "What does our National Security Office say?"

"Nothing," answered the boss.

"Their girl seemed to be co-operative."

"The field is one thing. Around Washington and Manhattan it's the code of the yoofoo which prevails."

"So NSO won't even admit they have a way of beating our invisibility process."

Geer shook his wrinkled head. "I've been dictating memos and plaguing officials ever since you told me the girl agent could see you, Jake. NSO won't officially admit anything," he said. "We'll probably have to hold a whole pot of hearings and conferences to get anything out in the open."

"NSO people being able to see me is annoying," said Conger. "I'm

worried, though, about China II getting hold of a way to spot me."

"They haven't," the boss assured him. "There's nothing to indicate that."

"Three days ago there was nothing to indicate NSO had a way either."

Geer poked the last bite of the last jelly donut into his mouth. "It's not going to help your morale if you start having doubts about the fallibility of the Wild Talents Division, Jake. Remember, if you will, that within the bosom of WTD beats the intricate credo of all the brave and courageous generations of Yankee knowhow mingled with the blood shed in the hallowed . . ."

"How about the pill I found where the lab had been?"

Geer scowled, picking a small plyo envelope between his thumb and forefinger. "Are you sure you're not getting balmy? It cost us \$27 to teleport this here and it turns out to be one of those kelp pills you're always chewing on."

"It is, huh?"

"You must have a hole in your pocket," said Geer, letting the pill envelope drop. "You ought . . ."

Conger looked up and noticed two tiny feet coming down through a trap door in the floor of the balcony above. "Hold on a second," he told the boss. His right hand went to the kit strapped to his side, where there was a small pistol. "I think my freelance spy is arriving. I'll call you later."

As he dropped through the slightly muggy air Canguru said, "The elevators in this hotel are set for Brazilian Portuguese and not the real thing. The nitwit robot took me two floors up beyond you, senhor." He landed wide-legged and grinning. "*Como vai?*"

"Okay." Conger went back into his suite. "Found out anything?"

"NSO has some very lovely agents." Canguru followed him, stopping in the middle of the large pale living room. "I see they've arranged your furniture all wrong."

"What lovely agent are you talking about?"

"This girl was over in New Lisbon, too." After frowning a few seconds Canguru decided to seat himself on a see-through sofa filled with turquoise water and bright tropical fish. "She's staying at the Intellectual Ritz Hotel, using the name Angelica Abril."

Conger wandered around on the grass-green rug. "How about Machado the guerrilla?"

The little blond spy was sitting with his knees wide apart, watching the tiny flickering fish beneath him. "Machado is alive again."

"Where did Sandman do it this time?"

"I haven't been able to learn that as yet," said Canguru. "The way they run bribery in this country, it costs a lot more than in Portugal. I've spent almost \$500 already."

"Where is Machado?"

"Submitting these vouchers in code is a nitwit procedure," said Canguru. "I risk life and limb and then RFA only pays on the 1st and 15th. The good thing about NSO, they pay every Tuesday and Thursday." He watched a zebra-striped fish disappear beneath his crotch. "Of Machado's whereabouts at this moment I'm not certain. However, I learned where he will be tonight."

"Where?"

"Here in Rio," replied the little spy. "At the inaugural ball."

Conger stopped pacing. "Who's being inaugurated?"

"No one. President Barco de Pesca is throwing the dance. Actually he was inaugurated over a year ago and it simply hasn't been safe to hold a big formal affair until now. With Machado dead they figured some of the urban terror would slow."

"Machado's not showing up simply to waltz."

Canguru dropped off the see-through sofa to kneel beside it. "They shouldn't put this kind of fish—those orange spotted ones—in with these nitwits here. They're natural born enemies," he said. "As I gather it, Machado intends to pass his return to life off as a religious miracle. He intends to make a flamboyant public appearance and grab control of the government away from Barco de Pesca."

"Okay, I'll attend the ball, invisible, and get to Machado before he can try anything. He may be able to lead us to Sandman." Conger slumped into a pseudoglass chair filled with shooter-size gold marbles. He took two kelp pills. "NSO suspected Sandman would resurrect Machado. Didn't they have agents watching the damn body?"

After poking a tiny forefinger at a double-tailed fish, Canguru rose to face the WTD agent. "I'm glad you reminded me, senhor," he said. "I learned all the NSO men on the around the clock watch of the disreputable funeral parlor swear no one came near the body, except a few courageous leftwing mourners. All the agents, and the secret police to boot, further

swear that at no time did Machado's corpse leave the simple pine box in which it reposed. Yet when rumors of his resurrection reached them late last night and they pried off the simple pine lid Machado was gone."

"I know that part," said Conger. "RFA got an agent on to it about the time everybody realized Machado had come back to life."

"To my way of thinking," observed Canguru, "Sandman has come up with a new and improved way to cloud men's minds and flummox them. Obviously NSO agents are immunized against the more obvious hypnotics and reason-depressants. This Sandman, whoever he is, is very gifted."

"He's tricky anyway."

Canguru asked him, "You sure you don't want to attend the dance as your visible self?"

"Yeah, I'm going unseen."

"I was going to offer you a few tips on ballroom dancing," said Canguru. "Free of charge."

CHAPTER 8

The presidential palace floated three hundred feet above the ground, held by columns of air. It was a circular building, an enormous silver donut, glistening up there in the dark.

On the ground palace troops made an arm to arm circle around the area immediately beneath the floating palace. Guests were being scrutinized at three entry spots in the ring of troops. Butlers in crimson realsilk suits were requesting invitations, then inserting them in squat clearance machines to make sure they were authentic. From the butlers guests went up temporary ramps to a platform where they were frisked and scoped by special security robots.

Conger had prepared himself in a public flower garden near President Barca de Pesca's floating palace. He was now invisible. Invisible to everyone except National Security Office agents.

He'd left Canguru crouched behind early tulips to watch approaching guests, through night binoculars, for the resurrected Machado.

The fragile white-haired butler at the ramp Conger chose rubbed at his small pinkish eyes as Conger went by him. The gunmetal security robot paid him no heed. Conger had anticipated that. These were discarded US robots, used in Washington back at the end of the 20th Century. They

weren't sophisticated enough to detect him.

All three guest ramps converged on an ascension chute of clear rose-tinted plastic. A high-ranking Martian cat man elbowed into Conger, blinked his narrow green eyes, and stepped into the chute. He went wooshing up toward the presidential ball, his orange fur standing on end. After him a lovely black princess from Third World Temporary Country #6 went shooting upward, holding down the short skirt of her formal gown.

Conger waited at the arched chute entrance. When a lizard dowager turned on the threshold to disentangle her pearls from the sword handle of an Urbanian general, Conger leaped around her and made his ascent.

Two hundred guests were already dancing to the music of a 19-piece silk-suited robot orchestra. The waltz was a craze in Rio at the moment and the robots were playing Strauss.

Angelica Abril, the pretty NSO secret agent, came whirling by in the arms of a burly black man. It was Big Mac, the agent from China II who'd tried to hit Conger with a gargoyle.

Noticing Conger, Angelica gave a brief wink.

Conger thumbed his nose. He wished the girl wasn't able to see him. And he didn't much like the idea of her dancing with the AEF agent.

Still, if you were a visible spy you had to work under different rules, Angelica was wearing a short-skirted off the shoulder gown, looking very tan and smooth.

Conger stopped watching her and worked his way invisibly around the ballroom. Being an invisible man in crowds was especially difficult. If more than a couple of people bumped into nothing it could cause surprise and screw you up.

He leaped back suddenly to avoid a robot cart of champagne which was heading for one of the air palace's balconies.

The US ambassador to Brazil began to run alongside the low wheeled cart. He snatched two glasses and returned to the lizard duchess he'd been waltzing with. The ambassador toasted the scaly green woman in fluent Venusian. She grinned widely and replied, "God bless America!"

Toward the center of the vast black dance floor a tight circle of eight people were waltzing. That would be President Barca de Pesca and his plainclothes security people.

Conger noticed an obvious wig and false moustache waltz by. He followed, but it was only an aging Peruvian diplomat and not Machado in

disguise.

Something booted him in the knee and he spun to see Angelica pass again.

When the waltz ended the robot orchestra leader, tugging at his white waistcoat, announced, "Now we will favor you with a medley of Brazilian folk dances." He tapped his baton in the palm of his realistic hand and the mechanical orchestra began playing *When The Saints Go Marching In*.

"*Que! Quern! Por que!*" shouted someone in the heart of the presidential cluster.

"Take it easy, Senhor Presidente," called the American ambassador. "I gimmicked your orchestra to give out with a little downhome American music. Didn't think you'd mind. The duchess here has never heard any American jazz."

"Oh, of course," said President Barco de Pesca. He was a man about the same height as Canguru, though substantially wider. He had chosen to wear his full uniform as Commander-in-Chief to his ball, including the high-peaked gold-trimmed hat. "I only cried out in surprise because I was prepared to indulge in some of my favorite dances, the rhythms of my people. The old venerable beat which is the true pulse of the humble but proud man in the street and . . ."

"I thought," put in the tall ambassador, "to show the duchess a little trucking."

Conger continued to circle the ball room. Another fifty guests, none of them resembled Machado, had added themselves to the crowd since he'd arrived. He decided to check the balconies.

None of the balconies had a railing, each was protected by an invisible force screen. Two cat girls were leaning against the force screen on the first balcony Conger inspected. They were talking in Portuguese to a man Conger guessed was a US embassy security android.

From here he could see the garden where Canguru lurked. He took a pair of specially tinted glasses from the kit strapped to his side. The little blond spy was supposed to send him periodical flash signals to let him know when and if Machado appeared.

As soon as he had the glasses on he saw Canguru's signal light flashing far below. The tiny specks of light spelled out a coded message.

Translated it said, "What a nitwit code this is. No logic to it at all. Tedious, too, after a few thousand blinks. They made the button on this light in such a way that your thumb starts to ache in no time at all. Well,

in case you're watching . . . This is to let you know I've just received word from one of my sources that Machado will not show tonight. Repeat. Machado is not coming to the dance. Don't ask me why. You know how these revolutionaries are. It's a wonder they ever pull off any coups at all. I'll repeat this nitwit message every ten minutes for awhile and then I'm going to call it a night."

Giving an invisible shrug, Conger left the balcony. He didn't see Angelica in the ball room now. Well, he was on orders not to fraternize anyway. Still, he might as well tell her, if he could do it unobtrusively, what he'd found out about Machado.

She was out on the third balcony beyond the bandstand. A smiling Chinese was chatting at the girl, his champagne glass cupped in both plump hands.

Between Conger and the two of them stood an entertainment android mounted on a box-like pedestal. The mechanism was softly playing flamenco music on his silver guitar.

Conger watched the pretty slim Angelica for a moment, deciding it wasn't safe to talk to her now. He sealed up his invisible coat against the chill wind which came blowing across the balcony terrace. He turned to re-enter the dancing area.

"Wind?" he said to himself.

The force screen wasn't supposed to let in anything but the view.

Conger carefully crossed to the edge of the balcony. The dots of guards and still-arriving guests moved through the ritual of admittance hundreds of feet down. He stretched out his hand and it continued out beyond the lip of the balcony and into chill dark night. Someone had turned off the guarding system.

He looked toward Angelica just in time to see the smiling red-cheeked Chinese toss his glass away into the night and grab the girl around the waist.

"Hey now!" cried Angelica.

"I wouldn't do this if it were up to me alone," apologized the amiable Chinese.

Conger was there beside them now. He caught hold of the girl's shoulders, pulling back.

Surprised at the unseen force, the Chinese assassin let go of Angelica. He wobbled back two steps and his heels went over the edge of the

balcony. He stayed there on the edge, ticking, arms flapping, neither safe nor falling.

Conger shoved the girl toward the ball room entrance. "Get back inside."

He lunged, catching at the teetering Chinese's suit front. He dug in his heels, yanking the plump man in.

When the Chinese was back on the balcony completely he said, "Must be one of those invisible American bastards." He kicked out at where he guessed Conger's groin to be.

The estimate was off, but the pointed boot connected with Conger's stomach anyway. Conger grunted out air, doubling. He got himself straight and moving after a few seconds.

The Chinese ran, swinging out to topple the flamenco android into Conger's probable path.

Conger swerved. Not soon enough to keep the falling machine from tripping him. He fell on top of it, banging his chin on the sharp metal strings of the guitar.

Angelica let the Chinese run on by her. She then came over to help Conger untangle himself.

The US ambassador and the green duchess were still trucking inside, joined by many others.

The noise of that plus the music of the robot orchestra had kept the sound of Conger's struggle from attracting attention. No one came out onto their balcony. "Those China II agents aren't men of their word," said Angelica, dusting at Conger's clothes.

"You don't have to do that. Nobody can see me except you."

"Well, I don't like looking at grimy spies."

"Was that guy Big Mac's partner?"

"Yes, his name is Jerry Ting," replied Angelica. "I assumed we had a truce for tonight. I wouldn't have danced with them, though Big Mac is a pretty fair ball room dancer, if I'd known they had orders to kill me tonight. Those guys never let down."

"How are you?"

The pretty girl raised her eyebrows. "Me? Oh, I'm in excellent shape," she said. "Thanks, by the way, for rescuing me."

"I figure I can co-operate with NSO that much."

Angelica reached out, smoothing down Conger's hair. "There. Are you here anticipating

Machado?"

"I was."

"You've already heard then that he's not going to show."

"Yeah, I was hunting for you to tell you about it."

"That was very thoughtful," said Angelica. "Though I'm sure it won't endear you to your home office. Want to escort me home to my hotel?"

Conger watched her. The night wind came drifting across the unprotected terrace and gently flicked at her hair. "Okay," he told her.

The Gypsy violinist said, "Hey, cut that out."

Conger stepped back from him, frowning. "Don't you have a turn off switch?"

"Well, certainly not," the middle-sized violinist replied, lowering his fiddle and adjusting his crimson head scarf. "I'm a living breathing human being, not a robot."

"You play like a robot." Conger returned to the green plyo hammocksofa he'd been sitting in when the Gypsy fiddler entered Angelica's hotel suite and commenced an air.

"Boy, are you a grouch," said the middle-sized man. "Miss Abril ordered the Intimate Dinner

For 2, you know. Which includes two Gypsy musicians."

"Where's the other one?"

"I thought, you big sourpuss, you didn't want any Gypsies."

"I don't," replied Conger. "I'm just making small talk before I throw you out."

"I'm glad Muscha came down with the Etruscan flu and didn't come along with his tambourine," said the Gypsy, working his way across the living room toward the exit door. "Oh, before I go, do you want me to punch up the candles?"

"Candles?"

"Yes, grumpy, you get two authentic romantic real tallow candles to go on the table when you order the Intimate Dinner For 2. They come out of a slot in the dining room," explained the slowly retreating man. "I'm supposed to punch the candle button after I do my Romany medley."

"I'll take care of the candles."

The Gypsy shook his head and his golden earrings tingled. "Well, I'll get back to the soccer match I was watching." He let himself out.

Conger rocked gently in the hammock sofa, watching the black Rio night and then the door of Angelica's bedroom.

After a few moments more the lovely dark girl reappeared, wearing a fresh short-skirted evening dress. "Jerry Ting tore a couple holes in my other dress trying to assassinate me," she said.

"Who were you talking to?"

"A Gypsy."

Angelica sat on the edge of a suspended redwood chair. "Anyone I know?"

"He comes with the dinner," said Conger. "You apparently ordered the Intimate Dinner For 2."

"I'm not very hungry. The intimate dinner has small portions," said the slim dark girl. "Or were you particularly starving?"

"Nope."

"I didn't order it because of the intimate business, but because of the small portions. You understand?"

Nodding, Conger said, "You also get two candles."

"In addition to the Gypsy?"

"Two candles and two Gypsies actually, but one of them is sick."

"Where are the candles?"

"I have to push a button." Conger rose, walked in the direction of the dining room.

The girl reached out a hand.

Conger slowed, stopped beside her.

She said, "We don't really need candles."

"They're not essential, no."

"As a matter of fact, I had two or three little sandwiches at the president's doings. And you're always swallowing some kind of food pill."

"So?"

"So we could forget about dinner all together."

"Yeah, we could."

"Good."

Conger took hold of her.

CHAPTER 9

Angelica was holding tightly to him. Conger opened his left eye, then his right. The large round bedroom was starting to fill with early morning sunlight. On the other side of the one-way drapes artificial birds were clicking on to twitter.

The room noticed Conger was awake, sent a fat silver coffee machine rolling over the blue floor to him. "*Bom dia*, good morning," whispered the coffee pot. "How do you like your fresh-ground real Brazilian coffee, senhor? With rich thick cream and a heaping spoon full of . . ."

"No coffee," answered Conger out of the right side of his mouth.

The lovely dark Angelica murmured in her sleep, sliding her palm higher up his bare chest.

"What then, senhor? The Intellectual Ritz Hotel can offer you fresh-brewed China I tea, made .

. ." "Usually," Conger told the machine, "I don't drink anything until after I jog and do my exercises."

Angelica woke. "Who are you talking to, Jake?"

"The coffee pot."

"Oh." She rested her head against his shoulder.

Another machine had popped out of the wall to come rolling, rattling, up to the bedside. "*Bom*

dia, senhor. Would you like a stack of American-style flapjacks made from enriched bleached flour and smothered in artificial . . ."

"No." Conger sat up, carefully, and made a shooing motion at the tank-shape breakfast machine. "I don't eat anything until after I jog and do my exercises."

"I can take your order, senhor, and serve you on the completion of your activities," suggested the machine. "Perhaps you'd rather have succulent pork links deep fried in . . ."

"No." Swinging out of bed, Conger pushed at the mechanism.

"Ah," said the breakfast machine, "I see it all now. You are in love, so your appetite is gone. You have been smitten with the arrow of what you Americans call Don Kewpie."

"Dan Cupid," said Angelica. She rolled onto her back, stretching her arms. "Why don't you guys get back in the wall? I'll call you when I need you."

"But of course," said the coffee pot. "We only appeared when we did because it is the policy of the Intellectual Ritz to . . ."

"Back," said Conger.

When the servomechanisms were all away Angelica remarked, "Well."

Walking round to her side of the bed, Conger sat.

"I hadn't," said Angelica, "really anticipated." She waved one slender hand sideways.

"Neither had I," he said, "exactly."

She drew her knees up and the all-season sheet fell away. "When I suggested we co-operate, back in Portugal, I didn't exactly . . ."

"Yeah, I know."

From the living room of the hotel suite the door called, "There's a suspicious character lurking out in the hall, senhorinha."

"Oops." Conger ran to his side of the bed to grab his kit off the night table. He strapped it on, went running into the living room.

"Put some clothes on before you tangle with anybody," called Angelica.

"Take a look at this rascal," said the door. "Should he be someone you know, which is hardly likely, I will admit him. Otherwise it's the house dick for him."

The door's view hole irised open to reveal Canguru in a white two-piece tourist suit and off-white shoes. The blond little spy was carrying a bunch of tulips, shifting from foot to foot. "What a way to build a door," he was saying. "The bell push way up there and when I ring it my finger gets all smudgy."

The door told Conger, "I took the precaution of fingerprinting him, senhor, in case you want to run a check on him with the International FBI."

Conger approached the talk hole. "What is it, Canguru?"

"I assume," said the little agent, "you're not in there against your will."

"No," said Conger. "How did you find me?"

"How do I find anybody? I work at it." Canguru moved closer to the door. "I have a couple of important messages for you."

"I'll meet you back in my hotel in an hour or so."

"Too important to wait that long."

Frowning, Conger said, "Okay, hang on. I'll let you in shortly."

"They keep this hall much too warm, especially on such a fine, for Rio, spring morning as this."

Back in the bedroom Conger started to get into his clothes. "Mind if I talk to my contact out in your living room for a few minutes?"

"Not at all." The pretty Angelica was still sitting in bed with her knees drawn up. "Is it that curly-haired little one?"

"He's the only contact I have."

"You really ought to ask for a bigger field allowance."

Dressed, Conger kissed the girl.

As Canguru stepped into the living room, he handed over the flowers. "For the young lady. I picked them last night in the public gardens, figuring you can always find something to do with a bunch of tulips."

"What are the messages?" Conger dropped the yellow and red flowers on a floating coffee table.

"Your boss, Senhor Geer, is unhappy about your being friendly with the young lady," said Canguru. "He says to knock it off or he'll tie a can to your tail."

"How did Geer find out about it?"

"*Sinto muito*, senhor." The little spy locked his tiny hands over his waist, watching them. "I'm afraid I told him when I answered your phone this morning."

Conger's left eye narrowed. "How did you come to answer my phone?"

"It kept ringing," said Canguru. "Your shower stall is equipped with a phone, you know. All that buzzing began to interfere with my singing, so I answered."

"You took a shower in my shower?"

"The one in my room at the Ultimo Splendido Hotel doesn't work right," explained Canguru. "I can get only tepid water and maple syrup. What they must have done when they connected the . . ."

"You mentioned two messages. What's the other one?"

In a much quieter voice than he had been using Canguru said, "I know where they revived Machado."

"Sandman's lab?"

"At least one of his temporary labs. I think you should be able to find out something by visiting the site."

"Okay," said Conger. "Wait for me down in the lobby."

"I prefer the street. They keep the lobby way too chilly here," said Canguru. "How long will you be?"

Conger said, "I don't know." He walked toward the door of Angelica's bedroom.

CHAPTER 10

The jungle was creeping higher up the giant dome which covered the town. Shaggy ropey vines, dark green, had crawled thirty feet up the curve of the pale yellow dome. Thin tendrils, rich with spadelike leaves, snaked and snarled among the vines. Wide flat scarlet flowers seemed splashed against the clear wall which protected The American Colony from the Brazilian jungle. Fist-size spiders jittered in and out of the intricacies of foliage. Multi-color birds fluttered down and then away, down and away.

The midday sun burned a crisp gold straight up. Under the dome the air was cool, smelling faintly of Midwest prairies and farmhouse kitchens.

Conger tossed one of his robot cameras on its feet, gave it an encouraging pat. "Go get a picture of that statue."

The camera hopped to the statue, which consisted of three late 20th Century landcars mangled together and sprayed with puffed rice.

While the robot camera snapped, Conger looked around the Colony. He was visible, dressed in a three-piece tourist suit and a narrow brim pseudo-straw tourist hat. This town was several hundred miles inland from Rio, made up chiefly of the houses and shops of expatriate artists, writers and communicators from the United States.

According to Canguru, who had stayed behind in Rio de Janeiro, the lab used to revive Machado had been set up here. Nearly a hundred tourists were roaming the streets with Conger.

As far as he knew Angelica was in Rio, too. She hadn't been angry when

he told her he'd better start working alone again. She'd smiled quietly, said something about love and duty. The thing was, Conger missed the slim pretty girl. He was thinking about her now, when his mind should be on . . . what's his name. Machado. On Machado and Sandman.

Whistling to his camera, Conger started walking for the studio of the artist he wanted to see.

At the corner a man with a thin dark moustache smiled at him. "You're going to be very interested in my work," he said. Behind him were a row of pleasant white cottages.

"Oh, so?" Conger bent to allow his camera to jump into his arms.

"I'll save you a lot of time by explaining I'm the finest artist in the colony."

From the opposite direction two middle-aged women in flowered tourist suits were approaching.

Conger halted beside the artist. "Well sir," he said, "I want to get a look at everything, but I might as well start off with the best."

The two women turned onto the path leading to one of the cottages. When one of them reached out to turn the doorknob, the moustachioed artist called out, "Don't touch, ladies."

Freezing, the women both asked, "Are you Mr. Hovarth?"

"Yes, I am ladies. The one and only Hovarth."

"Isn't this your shop?"

"Nono, ladies," explained Hovarth, "that's one of my works of art. I'm the leading house artist in the Western Hemisphere. In fact, the only other rival I have in the whole world is Mok of China I and he works mainly in pagodas." To Conger he said, "I smell a cash transaction here. See you later."

Conger continued on. The first gallery in the next block was devoted to living tableaux. The leading man in the biggest pastoral was suffering from hay fever and kept dropping his sheep. Next came a shop devoted to laminated garbage, then a gallery offering giant gag cartoons and miniature billboards.

"See the invisible man!" shouted someone around the corner.

Slowing his pace, Conger turned the corner and discovered a gallery called Orlando's Invisible Art Boutique. The shop looked to be empty of artworks, though fifteen tourists were inside browsing.

In the middle of this block was the place Canguru had told him about. It was a long thin two story building, with a gallery below and a loft studio above. On the one small ground level window was printed *Inza's/Gadget Art*.

The first small room of Inza Day-Lewis' gallery was given over to what a dangling sign described as Responsive Paintings. The paintings were large oils. About a dozen of them hung round the egg-colored room.

"Hello, boob," said a large portrait of a 19th Century American Cavalry officer. "What can I do you for?"

Conger ignored the painting, strolling on through the room. Most of the other paintings were Western scenes, roundups, buffalo hunts, roping contests.

"Oh, I get it," said the responsive oil. "The old cold shoulder, huh. You probably go in for garbage art or maybe those godawful houses of Hovarth's."

The next room was filled with hand-painted appliances. There was no one here either. Stopping beside a Hawaiian scene vacuum cleaner, Conger, turned to look at the general. "Where's Miss Day-Lewis?"

"How's that again, jerko?"

Conger approached the painting again. "I'm looking for the girl who runs the place."

A stream of salty liquid squirted out of the general's decorations and into Conger's right eye. "Ho ho," responded the painting. "Right in the puss."

Stepping back out of range, Conger said, "I like a picture with a sense of humor. How much?"

"You couldn't afford it, clunk. I'm out of your class. Why don't you settle for a waffle iron with views of Vermont in winter painted on it."

"I'd like to talk it over with Miss Day-Lewis. Where is she?"

"Upwards," said the general. "Mucking around in her atelier. She's built like a couple of sacks of modeling compound that have been left out in the rain. Your best bet is to stick around down here and chew the fat with me, dumbbo."

Conger found the stairs and climbed up to the loft.

Inza Day-Lewis' studio was bright and cluttered. Responsive paintings, with their inner workings in various stages of completion, leaned on easels and against walls, gutted appliances sprawled all over the realwood

flooring, random gadgets were heaped in three separate mounds.

Spread out on the floor at the foot of the nearest easel was a fat girl in her late twenties. She lay on her back, breathing in slow dry breaths. A bright stain that wasn't paint was spreading on the chest of her smock.

Conger knelt beside the dying girl. "Who?"

"You can't," rasped Inza, "you can't . . . trust a Chinaman . . . I promised to keep quiet . . . but . . . some bastard from Am . . . America is coming . . . couldn't trust . . . me . . ."

"Do you know where Sandman is?"

Now there was a pause between each breath in and each breath out "I know . . . I know where the Chinaman is going . . . I know . . ."

"Where?"

"They. . . they don't know I know. . . I wasn't there . . . when they talked . . . but . . . but they told the Indian . . . they . . ." The pause after the last breath out grew longer and longer. The girl sank into herself as her life faded out.

Conger stepped up and back.

The detached handle of a heavy vacuum came swishing down to crack against the side of his head.

CHAPTER 11

He answered one more question before he awoke. "I don't know what she meant by the Indian," Conger said as he opened his eyes. He was still in the dead girl's studio, but the day had lengthened.

Jerry Ting, the China II agent, was crouched a few feet in front of him, smiling, his chubby fingers flicking over the contents of Conger's kit. "You've got to hand it to American ingenuity," he said. "This truth stuff of yours works better than ours."

From a flat on his back position Conger elbowed up until he was face to face with the smiling Chinese. Immediately behind Conger rose a man-high pile of discarded appliances. Far across the room sat Big Mac, a stungun resting on his knee and a blaster pistol further up on his lap.

"Next time I'll leave you teetering," Conger said to Ting.

"Oh, listen, Jake," said the smiling Chinese, "I appreciate that. I admire a guy who can save a sworn enemy even after he's tried to do away with

his girl. You American spies tend to be sentimental. If you rated spies on a scale of 1 to 10 for sentimentality I'd have to . . ."

"Stop the horsecrap," put in Big Mac. He had a deep voice which rattled in his throat as he spoke. "Give him another truth shot and let's find out what else he knows before we skrag him."

"The Agrarian Espionage Forces has its best people on this," said Conger as he sat up and inched back toward the pile of undecorated appliances. "Does Sandman work exclusively for AEF?"

"He's in it as a business," replied Ting, smiling still. "AEF pays good, so he does a few jobs for us. But as I understand it he's also worked for 1/2 Ethiopia, New Newfoundland . . ."

"Shut up, peckerhead," said Big Mac from his wing chair. "He's supposed to tell us things. That's how an interrogation works."

"You've met Sandman, huh?" Conger asked the Chinese.

Ting smiled more broadly, pressed a finger to his lips. "He gets cranky if I talk too much."

"Jesus," said the black agent. "Do I have to give this jerkoff his next shot myself?" He rose up out of his pseudowicker seat.

Conger went straight back on his buttocks into the pile of appliances. The junk—robot waffle irons, singing tea kettles, automatic bread boxes, 10-speed bun warmers, etc.—came toppling forward onto him and the smiling AEF agent.

Diving, Conger grabbed his kit away from the Chinese. He sent himself rolling away from the tangle of mechanisms.

"Don't move, wiseass," ordered Big Mac.

Conger moved, caught up an easel and hurled it.

Big Mac's blaster sizzled and an unfinished responsive painting, after crying "By jingo!", crackled into ashes.

"Don't kill him yet," said Ting from under the scatter of metallic junk.

"I forgot what hand I had the stungun in."

Conger was behind a high bookcase now, rubbing on the special lotion he needed to turn invisible.

"Get out from under that crud," Big Mac told his Chinese partner, "so we can stalk that whackoff."

In the nearest corner of the room was a kitchen area, partially screened

by canvas flats with incomplete buffalo hunts painted on them. Conger ran for there.

Big Mac shot again.

The robot stove yelped and turned red hot, then sooty black.

"Mac, be careful," cautioned Ting. "You used your blaster once again."

"Yeah, I'm sorry. Let me see. Left hand, stungun. Right hand, blaster. Okay, I got it straight," said Big Mac. "Hey, asswipe, come out before I make another error and fry your jelly."

Conger, probably because of the truth drug they'd shot into him, was having trouble bringing off the invisibility illusion. He gritted his teeth, made another try. "There," he said to himself, "that's got it." He moved away from the kitchen area, then reached back and tipped over one of the buffalo screens.

Big Mac fired the stungun this time. It made a low ponging sound. The other buffalo canvas toppled.

By then Conger, unseen, was at the clutter of discarded appliances closest to the black agent. He selected a heavy stew pot, lifted it up and swung it at Big Mac's skull.

"Hey, poltergeists," said Ting, getting to his feet in time to see the pot three inches short of Big Mac's head.

There was a thunk and Big Mac said, "Diddlysquat," before slumping to his knees.

Conger bicycled backwards to avoid the toppling agent. Suddenly he fell over. He'd tripped on the body of the dead girl. When his spine hit the floor Conger had an odd dizzy feeling.

"Hey, there he is," cried Ting. He scurried toward the collapsing Big Mac to borrow one of his guns.

Conger had turned visible. He didn't wait to try for invisibility again. Hopping up, he turned and ran.

He went down the loft stairs, jogged through the gallery.

Just short of the general he slowed, halted. There on the right hand wall was a responsive painting of a glum-looking Indian chief. "The Indian," said Conger. He jerked the large portrait free of the wall, stowed it under his arm.

"If you're going to thief something," remarked the general, "you ought to grab a picture with some class. Now I've never had anything against our

red-skinned brothers. However . . ."

Conger was out and on the walkway. He slowed, trying to look relaxed, give the impression he'd bought the huge unwrapped Indian.

He was nearly to the next corner before Ting hit the street. The Chinese agent ran about ten feet, became aware of the twenty or so people sharing the walk and decelerated to a brisk stride. His smile returned and he even paused an instant to pat a little golden-haired boy in a guerilla suit.

At the corner Conger turned right and ran for half a block. No one had paid him much attention so far. There was a throbbing light strip immediately above him. *Artists & Writers' Pub* the sign said, pointing into an alley. Conger went that way.

Overhead he heard a new sound, a hovering whine. He glanced up to see an aircruiser dropping down ahead of him, almost scrapping the plastic bricks on each side of the narrow alley.

A lyric poet and a muralist emerged from the pub. "Holy moley!" said the poet when he noticed the descending hopper.

Conger heard steps behind him and knew, without turning, that Ting had found the alley. The cruiser blocked him from going ahead.

"She has nice bone structure," said the painter.

"No, no, much too thin," said the poet. "I say, give me a Rubensesque woman every time. A Rubensesque woman, a loaf of sprouted-wheat bread, a flask of . . ."

"Come on and get in," Angelica suggested to Conger. She had opened the left hand boarding door.

Conger waved goodbye to the hesitant Ting and squeezed around the ship to climb in. "Nice seeing you again."

The hopper began rising. "I was going to come in after you in another few minutes. I figured you'd come up with a way to get out of the studio on your own, though. I don't like to be too intrusive."

On the control panel of the ship a monitor screen was mounted. It showed now Big Mac stumbling around the loft, rubbing at his head. "NSO knew about Inza, too," said Conger.

"Since about the time you did. One of our field men planted that scan bug in there early this morning. I got here after they'd killed her, too late to stop them," said Angelica. "By the way, why are you carrying that big picture of a Navajo Indian?"

"I'm hoping he can tell us where to go next," said Conger.

CHAPTER 12

As the hopper skimmed the twilight jungle Conger fiddled with the huge painting he had swiped.

Angelica, who had set her aircruiser on an automatic course back to Rio, sat turned toward him with one slender hand resting on his shoulder. "When I was watching that poor girl's studio on the monitor, Jake; I could see you," she said. "But that couldn't be, at that distance, because I'm immune."

"A good part of the time the invisibility trick doesn't fool television gear," said Conger, "or an assortment of other electronic devices. As the 21st Century progresses it gets tougher and tougher to be an invisible man."

"Did you volunteer?"

Conger poked another section of the Indian painting's frame. "Yeah, at the time it seemed like more fun than a desk job. You know how things look to you when you're still in your twenties. And then I'd gotten to know Vince Worth."

"He was killed, wasn't he?"

After several seconds Conger answered, "I guess he was."

"You're not sure Worth is dead?"

"Well . . ." The ornate picture frame made a low clicking sound, the speech box behind the canvas began to talk.

". . . seems like that's redundant, Mac," said the recorded voice of Jerry Ting.

"You'd get along a lot better in life, slopehead, if you didn't always question orders," said the black AEF agent.

"Still, Mac, AEF paid Sandman all that dough to bring Enzerto back to life. That wasn't— what?—not more than five months ago. Now they want him dead again."

"There's always a lot of fluctuation in politics, clutchbutt. As of today they want him knocked off."

"We could have saved a lot of money . . ."

"Soon as we finish up here in the colony we got orders to travel up to Central America, to

Urbania, and finish off Enzerto," said Big Mac. "Seems he's become real friendly with the junta there, which is not good."

"Okay by me, Mac. I was only . . ."

"Come on, buttwipe, we got to make another check of the streets. In case our invisible man or that beanpole broad show up."

"She's not so skinny, Mac. She's sort of cute in an odd sort of way," said Ting. "How are we going to see the . . ."

The gallery door opened and closed. Only silence came out of the painting.

Setting it away behind him, Conger said, "That would be Avo Enzerto, the old agronomy professor who led the opposition to the junta. I didn't know he was alive again."

"Why do men keep saying I'm skinny?"

"I haven't said that," Conger told her. "They have different tastes in China II."

"For my height I'm about the average weight. I don't want to be any heavier."

"Nobody wants a fat secret agent."

After frowning a while longer, the pretty girl smiled. "Yes, NSO knew Enzerto was alive, although we didn't hear about it until a week or so ago."

"Do you know where he is now?"

"Enzerto has sided in with the junta," answered Angelica. "At least to the extent of working on an experimental food set up the junta is running. Running with considerable aid from us, from the United States government. If only those money people would be a little more curious. We might have been onto this Sandman thing months ago."

"Whereabouts are the food experiments going on?"

"In northern Urbania, I think. They've got a series of dome farms out in a stretch of reclaimed swamp. The whole complex is known as Pharmz."

"Catchy," he said. A large dusk-colored bird flew across their path. Conger watched it flap safely away into the oncoming night. "There should be a teleport station around here someplace.

We can land there and get on to Urbania."

"We?"

His eyes still on the diminishing bird, Conger said, "I've decided I like working with you."

"It's those hairbreadth rescues that impress you." She leaned, kissed him once on the cheek.

"Why do you think Worth may not be dead?"

"He's probably dead. The description of Sandman I got . . ."

"A tall gaunt man in his middle thirties. That would fit Vincent X. Worth, wouldn't it?"

"Or Sir Thomas Anstey-Guthrie."

"Or Omar Kavak."

"Who added him to the list?"

"NSO. Kavak is another tall thin—in fact, some of his former colleagues at the Prague Life Cycle Study Center call him downright skinny—tall thin biologist. He disappeared during a foxhunt in Free Ireland #2, while chasing a robot fox. He could very well be Sandman, since his politics and abilities fit. He's a better bet than Sir Thomas, we think."

"Why?"

"There's a pretty good possibility Sir Thomas is living in the Bahamas someplace under the name of Juan Tizol with a very zoftig ex-lab assistant of his. We're investigating further."

Conger took the girl's hand. "Vince was a health nut. He's the one who got me started on jogging and health foods. This is a very small point, but when I searched the villa, the room Sandman has used as a lab, I found a kelp pill."

The pretty girl laughed. "A lot of people use those, Jake. Why at the New Lisbon teleport station you can get them out of a vending machine. A packet of kelp pills and a Portuguese fado all for one escudo."

"Yeah, that's true," admitted Conger.

"Maybe," suggested Angelica, "you're hoping Worth is alive because you miss him."

"I am awfully sentimental," he said. "According to Jerry Ting."

"He's perceptive. When I first met you I thought you were cold and aloof." She reached out and made adjustments to the controls. "There. That'll get us to the closest teleport station." Putting both her hands on his shoulders, she said, "But I think of you differently now."

Conger took hold of her as the hopper banked gently to the left.

CHAPTER 13

Conger wasn't sure if the gnats and mosquitoes could see him or not. Usually the complex body lotion which rendered him invisible also served as an insect repellent. The insects who inhabited the lush swamp surrounding the Pharmz complex seemed able to seek him out with no trouble.

He and Angelica had arrived in Urbania on the previous night. Urbania was a narrow, relatively new, country wedged between Nicaragua and Costa Rica and named after Pope Urban III.

Conger approached Pharmz invisible and alone. The dark girl National Security Office agent waited for him in a landcar at the edge of the swamp. It was midday, the air was hot and streaky.

Mammoth frogs, the size of bowling balls, harumphed in scummy ponds of green mossy algae. Two foot long orange lizards slithered over fallen logs. Insects hovered round Conger.

From ahead now came sound. A great chuffing, a low persistent binging, mismatched rattlings and scrapings.

Climbing over a rise, he saw the Pharmz complex bubbling up in front of him. Fifty or more large domes spread over a hundred acre clearing. Each dome was as large as a two story building, each was tinted a different shade of blue or green. Two dozen human guards in one-piece all-purpose repellent suits patrolled the clear strip of land around the dome city, a few of them accompanied by cyborg police dogs.

Conger avoided the dogs, crossed onto the experimental farm ground near a lean drowsy guard.

Immediately to his right were the domes making the chuffing. Stencilled on the walls, in both English and Spanish, was the designation *Leaf Protein Extraction Station* and then a number. After these domes came a row of them devoted to Intercropping. Then one, a quiet shade of underwater green, given over to Gossypol Extraction and a dome where anatoxin was removed from peanut oil.

Having obtained some background information on Avo Enzerto from Angelica, Conger knew the old scientist lived and worked in a dome set aside for Advanced Protein Research. After searching the Pharmz grounds

for ten minutes, Conger located the APR dome. It sat almost in the swamp, with one of its covered ramps extending, like a giant drinking straw, out into a wide slimy swamp pool.

Enzerto was wandering around by himself in his lab apartment up under the ceiling of the big dome. He was a large hefty old man with prickly white whiskers. He wore a loose white lab smock over all-season pajamas and a flapping pair of Japanese slippers. He was clutching a bundle of large dark green leaves to his chest, muttering happily to himself. "A great day for science," he said in Spanish. "A giant step ahead for protein, not to mention gourmet cooking. Ah, the junta's going to love this!"

Conger sat in a tin bucket chair. "Professor Enzerto," he said and became visible.

The large old scientist nodded at him. "Buenos dias, señor," he said. "Do you realize what I've done this day?"

"Nope."

"I've discovered a way to make skunk cabbage not only palatable but sweet-smelling," Enzerto told him. "Wait until they get wind of this over in the leaf protein extraction crowd. You see, they have the notion, now that I'm fast approaching ninety, that the brain is going blooey. Not so! A man who's devoted most of his life to protein—well, to protein and politics—such a man is not likely to have his brain go on the fritz, señor. Can I fix you a dish of skunk cabbage?"

"I just had lunch," said Conger. "Professor, I'm from the United States. I've come to warn you."

"Warn me? That's a laugh, señor, the way you Americans insist on eating. It's I who should warn you. Waffleburgers, jelly donuts . . ."

"The Agrarian Espionage Force is sending agents here to kill you."

"Again?"

"It was the junta who did you in last time."

"*Quien sabe?*" sighed the old professor. He dropped the skunk cabbage on a long white table which had several chutes and tubes suspended over it. "When I was engaged with political matters somebody was always trying to assassinate me. I'll tell you something. At your age a man thinks he can dabble in this and dabble in that. Time is not important to you yet. Dying taught me a great lesson. A man must have priorities. Once I came back to life I said to myself, 'Avo, phooey on politics! You belong in a laboratory working among your leaves and weeds.' So here I am and a

great deal happier, though I know I let down the AEF and some of my other supporters."

"The China II people think you're too friendly with the junta," Conger told him. "That you'll give away information about Sandman."

The old man chuckled. "I already have. What little I knew I told the junta long ago. Oh, except for a few particular facts."

"Such as?"

"I felt obliged to keep to myself the name of the double agent who set up the resurrection originally. Things like that, which I also do not intend to pass on to you," said Enzerto. "Who did you say you worked for?"

"I'm with the Wild Talent Division of the Remedial Functions Agency."

"Ah, Wild Talents, yes. Which would explain your materializing out of nowhere. Invisibility must be fun. If I wasn't single-mindedly dedicated to protein I might give invisibility a whirl. In my youth I was something of a voyeur and it's always seemed to be invisibility would be exceptionally handy for . . ."

One of the chutes over the work table made a blipping sound. A clear plastic container dropped onto the table. "Hey, Avo," said a metallic voice out of the chute, "wait until you taste this."

Conger sat up. There was something familiar about the voice, distorted as it was.

Enzerto read the label on the container lid. "Jute Brittle Protein Candy. Ah, this is indeed a day for breakthroughs. We've been trying for this for months." He thumbed the lid off, selected a chunk of the brown-green candy.

"Wait a second," said Conger, rising.

The old professor bit into the chunk, chewing thoughtfully for a few seconds. "No, no, this still doesn't make it. What can they be . . ." He pitched face forward to the floor.

"Big Mac," said Conger, realizing finally whose voice had come out of the chute. He turned the professor over, put one arm behind his shoulders.

"Krist," gasped Enzerto. "Krist with a K."

"What?"

"The double . . ." The old man was dead.

Conger let Enzerto sink back to the lab floor.

From out of the food chute came a deep metallic laugh. "Hey, prof. How'd you like your candy?" It was Big Mac again.

Conger watched the chute for a few seconds. Then he made himself invisible and left the dome.

CHAPTER 14

Geer bit a large chunk off the end of his beer-flavored popsicle. "Well, well, the prodigal agent," he said, crunching ice. "Where the yoohoo are you?"

"St. Norbert," said Conger. "The capital of Urbania." Beyond and behind the pixphone table Angelica stood in front of a semi-automatic wardrobe cabinet undressing. Conger looked from her to the phone screen. "I want some information."

"You're not the only one," said the boss of the Wild Talent Division. After another angry bite of popsicle he snatched up a sheaf of yellow and blue fax memos. "Tiefenbacher isn't happy."

"Tiefenbacher?"

"He's the acting chief of RFA," said Geer, "and hence my immediate superior."

"I thought that was Sinkovec."

"You're losing touch with reality out there in yoohoo land, Jake. The senate rejected Sinkovec last week when they found out he'd been sending obscene code messages to some of the lady agents in RFA. Speaking of which, are you still shackled up with that NSO girl?" His gnarled hand rattled memos.

Conger said, "Is Tiefenbacher bitching about that?"

"Tiefenbacher has joined *me* in complaining," said Geer. "Now, maybe NSO doesn't care if its best agent is sleeping around all over South America . . ."

"I'm in Central America now."

". . . but RFA does," continued the boss. "And WTD cares. Most of all, I care. You see, Jake, to be a Wild Talent Division agent is a singular honor. The stern hand of WTD duty falls on but few and thus those to whom . . ."

"I need some background information on somebody," cut in Conger.

Angelica had changed into a short night robe and was sitting on a

flower filled see-through chair, watching Conger and the backside of the pixphone. She smiled at him.

"Okay, okay, I can see you're not in the mood to be reminded of the splendid traditions of the corps in which we serve," said Geer. He flipped through the memos. "So I'll get to the yoohoo point. Here, we go. Tiefenbacher suggests that if Agent Conger doesn't improve his field conduct, both officially and morally, he . . . well, things will get tough for you, Jake."

"Meaning what?"

"I know that right now," Geer said, licking the empty popsicle stick, "while the sap of youth runs through your veins, you're in no mood to contemplate the future. Let me point out, however, that you may not have a future with RFA and WTD if you don't stop being frivolous."

Angelica stopped smiling and stood.

"Are you firing me?" Conger asked.

"Did I say that? Don't be a yoohoo," said the boss. "I'm merely giving you what my old General Semantics teacher Mr. Phelps used to call a word to the wise. Now, what progress are you making on the Sandman problem?"

Conger said, "What can you find out about an agent named Krist. That's Krist with a K. He may be working for us in this area."

"Which us?"

"The United States. He's not NSO."

"Oh, your lady friend is being helpful." Geer left his desk and his phone swerved to follow him. "We don't have a Krist in WTD either." The boss stopped in front of a compact computer mounted on an airstand.

"How come your computer's painted pink?"

"Ask Tiefenbacher. The day he took over he sent some yoohoo interior decorator to redo all the offices. You ought to see my icebox." Leaning, Geer murmured something to the pink computer. "And they laid a patriotic motif carpet in here. Can you see any of that?"

"Part of it, where you're standing. Looks like Molly Pitcher there and part of . . . Calvin Coolidge in an Indian headdress."

Geer lifted his foot. "Yes, I guess that's who it is. Actually it's inspiring in a way. I tripped and fell flat out on it earlier this morning and it was quite an experience."

"Krist," said the pink computer. "Klaus Krist, a lieutenant in the United States All Volunteer Army. Drafted in March of 2014. Also works as a part time agent for the US Counter Insurgency

Office."

"Their name's been changed to the Aid To Underdeveloped Lands Agency," put in Geer.

"Nobody told me," said the computer. "Anyway, Lt. Klaus Krist has been stationed in Urbania for the past year and four months as a Special Adviser at the Red Plume Mechanical Commando School."

"Where's that?" asked Conger.

"Where's that?" Geer asked the machine.

"The address is 87 Jungle Vista Road on the outskirts of St. Norbert, Urbania," the computer said.

"Who else is Krist working for?" Conger said.

Geer said, "Who else . . ."

"I heard him," said the pink computer. "Krist works for the . . . The Aid To Underdeveloped Lands Agency and for the Red Plume school. He has a spotless record, ranks especially high on attendance and personal hygiene."

Moving back toward his desk, Geer asked, "How does this Krist tie in?"

"I'll find out."

"Tonight?"

"Tomorrow," answered Conger.

"Uh huh. Okay, good luck, Jake, and try to shape up."

When he left the phone Conger went to stand beside the lovely dark Angelica. It was several minutes before the girl's smile returned.

A dozen robot commandos came charging at Conger.

He stopped still on the Red Plume school's dirt track and waited.

The big camouflage-colored robots ran on by him and assaulted the cluster of simulated peasant huts in the center of the soccer field which the dirt track circled. Half of the mechanical commandos had flame hands. They set about burning down the huts. The rest of the robots, with one exception, stood by, their three-pronged right hands ready to impale any imaginary peasants who might rush from the flaming shacks.

The exceptional robot was off from the group. He was tapdancing, his

tubular brown-green arms spinning.

"What the—hey, Ramirez!" shouted an angry American army sergeant at the other end of the field.

A dozen Urbanian Red Plume soldiers were spread out on the grass there, each working a round control box.

"I am very sorry, Sergeant Ferber," apologized Ramirez. "I pushed the wrong button by mistake."

"It better be a mistake, Ramirez," shouted Ferber. "From here it looks a heck of a lot like whimsy. I'd hate to be you, mister, if you're cracking whimsical with me."

"Oh, no, sir!"

Conger, invisible, walked along the gravel edge of the track where he wouldn't leave footprints. Out behind the field lay the officers' barracks.

Each American adviser had a small adobe and tile house of his own. According to the directory in the Academic Center building of the Red Plume Mechanical Commando School Lt. Klaus Krist occupied cottage #8.

A half-size android servant girl was setting out a breakfast tray in the walled patio behind the adobe cottage. After she'd deposited the tray on the tiletop table, the miniature servant dusted off the pseudorattan chair and fluffed its realfeather pillow.

Conger, unseen, stretched out atop the patio wall to watch.

A big wide blond man, freckled and brown from much sun, stepped out of the cottage. He stooped to pat the little android. "Good morning, Maria Carmen," he said in a tenor voice.

"Buenos dias." After she placed a fresh white plynapkin on Krist's big knee the half-size android went into the cottage.

Klaus uncovered his bowl of cornmeal mush, poured himself a glass of nearorange juice. He sipped the juice, smiling up at the midmorning sun.

Krist placed the juice glass back on the tile table, took a blaster pistol out of the holster at his side and aimed it up at Conger. "Better come down off there, mister. Else I'll have to shoot you off."

CHAPTER 15

Conger declined the offer to share the cornmeal mush with the big

blond lieutenant. "You can see me, huh?"

"Sure thing, bo," replied Krist in his high pitched voice. His gun rested sideways on the breakfast table. "An NSO agent I know bootlegged me an immunity shot a couple moons back. Krist likes to keep one or two jumps ahead at all times. It's the macho thing to do."

"You're working for Sandman?"

With his left hand Krist picked up his juice glass. "Correct, bo. Did you ever see a US Army paycheck? \$500 per week. Who can live on half a big one once a week. I had to get me a sideline or two to survive. Krist figures live once and do it up brown. You sabe?"

"Do you plan to turn me over to Sandman?"

Krist gave several tenor snickers into his tilted juice glass. "No chance, bo. You're no ways important. Big Mac and his slant buddy pumped you dry of info back down in Brazil, the way Krist hears it." He tapped the square tiles with the side of his pistol. "Nope, I got myself a free hand. Krist may look like nothing more than a jock but he's got mucho think power, bo. Just while we been sitting out here in the sunshine I worked out a plan for you. Soon's I'm done breakfasting I'll blast you. Come night time I'll tote you out to Acre 26."

"Acre 26?"

Krist laughed, snorted. "Wow! You secret agent types tickle Krist something awful. Here you are a cat's whisker away from cashing in for good and you're still in there asking questions."

"Habit." Conger rested his finger tips on the table edge.

The big blond lieutenant tilted his blaster so it was pointed directly at Conger. "Don't try to tip the morning repast on me, bo. Krist has reflexes like a snake."

Shrugging, Conger lifted his hands.

"Anyways, Acre 26 is a little private burying ground we maintain. Now and again one of these greaseballs fouls up while trying to learn to work the equipment. We have to hold a little private funeral on them occasions. Don't worry, bo, there's still plenty of room."

His eyes on Krist's Conger put one foot against the table leg. "You know who Sandman is?"

"There's a darn good question, bo," laughed Lt. Krist. "The answer being, I sure do. I've helped set up a couple resurrections, including the one Big Mac had to cancel."

"Oh, forgive me, senhor," said a voice from the doorway to the patio. "I completely forgot to serve your scones."

"Scones? What the hey, Maria Carmen!" Krist turned his big head to look at the cottage. "You know darn well I can't hardly abide . . ."

Conger kicked. The breakfast table went up and over. Its far edge swung in an arc and smacked the blaster free of Krist's hand.

"Doggone!" roared Krist in his tenor voice.

Conger sailed over the fallen table, catching the big lieutenant's left arm. He twisted, bringing the arm up behind Krist.

"Conserve your strength, senhor," said Canguru. He ran out onto the patio, wearing the little android maid's serving apron over his three-piece cocoa-brown tourist suit. He slapped a little silver bug against Lt. Krist's neck.

The lieutenant began snoring in midair as he fell toward the ground.

"I didn't know you were in Urbania." Conger stepped back to let Krist fall by.

"Boss Geer hired me to come here and back you up," explained the little curly-haired spy. "I've been unobtrusively watching you since late last evening. You ought to see how filthy they keep the alleys in the vicinity of your hotel. I've spent nights in a variety of alleys and these . . ."

"How'd you track me here? Can you see me, too?"

Canguru shook his blond curly head and took off the borrowed apron. "For a moment I toyed with the idea of putting on the nitwit maid's whole outfit. I decided it's going to take more than espionage pay to get me to go around in drag," he said. "You didn't become invisible until you reached the municipal forest, a mile from here. I knew, from my talk with Senhor Geer, who you were planning to see."

"How'd you get in?"

Canguru grinned. "I have my ways," he answered. "I hope I didn't upset some far-ranging plan you had. It looked to me as though this nitwit commando was going to kill you."

"That he was," said Conger. "Thanks for distracting him."

The little spy poked a toe into the slumbering lieutenant. "You want to question him?"

"Yeah, he says he knows who Sandman is." Conger reached for his kit.

"Allow me," offered Canguru. "I boosted this from an Armenian secret

agent. I want to see how it works." He stooped, tapping a tiny licorice-colored button to Krist's temple. "Go ahead, ask him something."

Conger squatted beside the big man. "Give me your name."

"Krist, Klaus N.," replied Krist, his eyes tight shut.

"You're working for Sandman."

"Yessir, I am."

"Who is he?"

"Why, his name is Sir Thomas Anstey-Guthrie," said Krist.

Conger made an O with his mouth, grunting. "You sure?"

"Yessir, I'm sure, bo. I work for the darn guy, don't I? Krist is what they call an important liaison man between Sandman and his potential customers."

"Guthrie's supposed to be dead."

"That there was merely a fakeout, bo. To leave him free to set up in business as Sandman."

Conger asked, "Where is he?"

"Hard to say. He flits around a whole lot doing jobs. There have been mighty near seventeen resurrections, you know, since Sandman hung out his sign." "Where's his home base?" "You mean where is he when he's not out working in the field?" "That's right." "Mexico," said Lt. Krist.

CHAPTER 16

A simple cleanup mechanism was humming around the hotel room.

Conger stepped around the squat mechanism, calling, "Angelica."

"Grump, grump," said the cleanup robot.

"Angelica," repeated Conger.

"Grump," said the squat machine. It tapped the top of a pseudomarble coffee table with one of its several arms.

There was a note on the table.

The note said: Jake, I have the notion I'm fouling up your life and your career. Especially after hearing your boss go at you last night. Maybe I'm even fouling up my own life some. I want to think about things for awhile. So let's go back to working solo. When this job is done we can get together

again, if you want to. Maybe we'll cross paths before then even. I love you I think. Be seeing you. Angelica.

"Grump," said the small robot, pointing at the note and then at the paper shredding hole on its top.

"No, I'll keep the letter," said Conger. "I'm sentimental about things like this." He folded the letter into a pocket, went scuffling around the suite.

Angelica really was gone, though a trace of the scent she used still hung in the air of the bedroom.

Conger sat on the newly made bed, listened to the robot humming and grumping out in the living room. "Damn," he said.

After a time Canguru's voice sounded out there. "Why are you using this kind of mopup machine? They're not nearly as efficient as they could be."

Conger returned to the living room. "Find out anything?"

"Your door was standing open," said the little blond spy. "Would you like me to fuss with the lock? They probably installed the wrong sort."

"I left it open," said Conger, crossing over to close the door.

"I'm sorry to hear Miss Abril has left," said Canguru. "She seemed to have fewer flaws than most women."

"How did you know she'd left?"

"Well, senhor," said Canguru, "just as you have me working under you, I have people working under me. One of them reported Miss Abril departed four hours ago."

"Does your man know where she went?"

"To the teleport station. He didn't pursue the matter further. I can find out perhaps."

Conger shook his head. "Never mind," he said. "Have you checked out the information we got from Klaus Krist?"

"The health spa the lieutenant alluded to is called the Mentex Institute. It is located, as he told us, in Olvidados, Mexico. That's a town roughly ten miles inland from Guaymas on the Gulf of California," said Canguru.

"Their motto is 'Think yourself young!' The clientele consists, as you might imagine, mostly of wealthy old nitwits."

"Who runs the place and who's behind it?"

"The man who fronts the Mentex operation is a Dr. Cazedessus. As to the owners, I still have an accountant tracing that down. Let's say the

ownership of the Mentex Institute is complicated. Meaning Sandman may well have a piece of it."

"Could this Cazedessus guy be Sir Thomas Anstey-Guthrie?"

"Not unless Guthrie has thought himself old and fat. Dr. Cazedessus is nearly sixty and weighs two hundred pounds," said Canguru. "However, the nitwit spa covers a good piece of land in a rural area and there are enough large buildings on the grounds to hide Guthrie and a laboratory or two."

"Okay," said Conger. "We'll go to Mexico now."

"You're sure," asked the little blond spy, "you don't want to wait a little in case Miss Abril changes her mind, as women often do, and returns here?"

"Yeah, I'm sure."

CHAPTER 17

The top of the laughing robot's head exploded and a plume of sparkling flame shot up. "Welcome to Guaymas! Welcome to Mexico!" The multi-colored machine laughed again, went dancing around Conger on the twilight steps of the Guaymas teleport station. "Welcome to the fiesta!"

Conger turned to Canguru. "I hadn't expected a fiesta."

Taking a whack at a ceramic pig a second fire-spouting robot was dangling in front of him, the little spy said, "I just remembered. It's the feast of St. Norbert. He's the patron saint of . . ."

". . . of taste. I know." Conger headed down the steps toward the pseudocobblestone street. "I visited his shrine, remember?"

The street was lined with synthetic olive trees, each one strung with twists of light strip. A good hundred festively decorated robots danced and tumbled on the crowded walkways and in the streets, some giving off fireworks, some spewing out tinted water. Mariachi bands, both real and android, paraded through the crowds of tourists and locals. Far down the street a string of huge floral floats, one depicting St. Norbert in the act of sampling a keg of wine, rolled by slowly through the thickly peopled crossway.

"Not enough cumin," said Canguru. He'd bought a tamale on a stick from a vendor robot with a steaming chest full of them. The curly-haired spy took another bite of tamale. "And you boiled your soybeans too long.

The best way to . . ."

Conger caught him by the elbow, pulling him along. "Where can we rent a landcar to drive out to Olvidados?"

"Around this next corner," said the little spy. Then he suddenly stopped.

"Come on, no more chatting with robots."

"Excuse me, I thought I recognized someone over beyond those girls doing the Mexican hat dance."

Conger looked, hoping to see Angelica. "Who?"

"An AEF agent I ran into once in Greater Singapore, a nitwit named Pronzini. No, I don't see him now."

"Angelica doesn't seem to be in the area," said Conger. "Neither do Big Mac and Jerry Ting."

"Remember, senhor, the best agents are the ones you don't notice. Besides, we have an exclusive on this lead to the Mentex setup."

"Angelica went someplace, though."

"Perhaps on a false trail, a wild goose chase."

"Yeah, maybe. Though she's too smart to be much conned."

Canguru pushed through the space between an overweight tourist and a maraca-shaking android street musician. "Down this way, senhor. There lies the place to rent a landcar."

Conger checked the rearview monitor and the sideview monitor on the car's dash. "Nobody's following us."

"We got a very good deal on this automobile," said Canguru, his right hand out the window toying with the floral decorations.

"It's unobtrusive."

"Even though it is decked with nitwit flowers," said Canguru. "We were lucky to get it at the height of the fiesta. As it is, if the bishop hadn't stubbed his knee, we . . ."

"You don't stub your knee, you stub your toe."

"But he was walking about on his knees at the time, as a part of . . . turn off the road here."

Conger swung the car the bishop had intended to rent and drive in the parade that night.

A half mile along the road to the town of Olvidados a huge float rumbled out of a field. It stopped a hundred feet in front of them and blocked their progress, a flatbed truck decorated with great piles of plywoodflowers which spelled out Guaymas Chamber of Commerce.

Conger fisted the brake button on the dash. The landcar swayed, squealed, shedding blossoms and streamers. "There's another one behind us," he said.

A second large fiesta float, this one with a tableau of peons struggling against tyranny, had run out of the field to box in their car.

Conger, rubbing on his invisibility lotion, said, "Stay here and try to stall them." After a moment he became invisible. He opened his door, as narrowly as possible, and dived out into the roadway.

"You nitwits have your parade in the wrong place," called Canguru as he slid into the control seat.

From under the front float crawled two men in one-piece worksuits. Each carried a stungun. Side by side, and in step, they approached the decorated landcar. The last of the day was fading away and a warm darkness filled the road and the sloping fields.

"The bishop isn't going to fancy this," Canguru yelled to the approaching men. "He's already blessed this vehicle. So if you nitwits fool around with it, you're committing a mortal sin."

The two agents, one of whom was a lanky Chinese, walked by Conger, not noticing him at all.

Conger went to the cab end of the float. Another man was sitting in there, drinking Mexican beer out of a plastic bubble. Conger swung silently up on the running board and stuck a stungun against the man's fat neck. The driver fell back, then over sideways.

When Conger passed the landcar the two men were ordering Canguru out, the thin Chinese asking, "Where's your sidekick?"

"I'm alone," insisted Canguru. "Except for the strong spiritual protection of the bishop of Guaymas."

"Stun him a little bit," suggested the second agent.

Conger found only one other man, a small bald black, in the vicinity of the peon float. He used a second stungun from his kit on him, left him stretched out at the side of the road.

He went back toward the landcar.

The Chinese had Canguru out on the roadway, clutching at his

cocoa-brown suit front. "I can keep stunning you and reviving you until you talk. How'd your friend get out of the car and away from us."

"Say, Benson," suggested his companion, "do you think the other fellow might be that invisible agent Big Mac warned us to . . ." He raised a hand toward the spot on his neck where Conger had slapped the stunbug before he went tumbling down.

The Chinese spun, firing his stungun in a circle. "It must be the invisible man."

Conger had ducked as the other man fell. He put a stunbug against the Chinese agent's ankle.

Becoming visible as soon as the second man hit the ground, Conger said, "These guys are AEF, huh?"

"Look at the way they stitched the lapels on this nitwit suit," said Canguru. "One of them is ripped nearly off after only a small amount of mild pummeling and tugging." He sighed. "Yes, that Chinese there is the partner of the fellow I noticed back in Guaymas."

"He must have noticed you, too, and alerted these guys. They must be here to keep people away from Mentex and Sandman," said Conger. "But apparently Big Mac and Ting aren't in this part of Mexico."

"Nor Miss Abril," added Canguru.

Conger nodded, went to move the float which blocked their path.

CHAPTER 18

The old people sat cross-legged in the field, twenty scattered across the flat dusty half acre, illuminated by floating white light balls. Some were thin and sinewy and dry, others fat and blotchy pink. At the edge of the bright-lit field a huge chubby man in a pullover white robe lounged in a water-filled chair. He was a cyborg, his screw-in right hand at the moment was a public address mike. "Once the thinking process contracts sufficiently into the self," he was saying in a tinny voice, "the control of the body's aging process is more nearly attainable. Let us therefore think inward, always inward."

Near the fat cyborg, who must be Dr. Cazedessus, a dark brittle old man giggled.

"You're not thinking in, Mr. Feldman," warned the Mentex head.

"Most sorry," apologized old Feldman. "I keep thinking of bawdy stories I read in the college humor magazines of my youth."

"That will not make you one whit younger."

Conger, invisible once more, walked along the edge of the field. It was now growing on toward eleven PM and he'd been prowling the Mentex Institute grounds for over two hours. Passing by the young-thinking outdoor session, he entered one of the large warehouses at the far edge of the field.

The air inside the giant room was chill, the light a dim grey. Cartons of food pouches, mountain spring water, dehydrated meat and instant brown gravy were stacked high throughout the warehouse.

Near a tower of nearbeer cases Conger slowed and sniffed. For a second or two he thought it was the scent Angelica used. No, this was a stronger, more musky smell. Conger knelt, noticed a hairline crack running under the stacked cartons.

"It's funny Angelica doesn't seem to be around at all," he said to himself as he moved the cartons. Conger had expected to encounter the lovely dark girl again before now. "She always turned up before. In Portugal, in Brazil. Damn."

There was a trapdoor here in the floor. Taking an amplifier-bug out of his kit, Conger listened to the floor. Some distance off he heard conversation, but there was no one down there in the vicinity of the trapdoor. And there was no evidence of an alarm system.

With careful invisible fingers Conger lifted the door. Below it dropped a ten foot flight of noryl plastic steps. The steps led to a palely illuminated tan corridor. Conger went down, closing the lid after him.

The musk and flowers scent was stronger in the twisting corridor.

From off to his right, a good two hundred feet away and around a bend, a girl said, "Ho hum."

"Stop your bloody nagging, Rose," complained a thin British voice, slightly nasal.

"How can I stop yawning?" asked Rose. "Yawning is a side effect of boredom."

"I told you to remain home in Barchester, did I not, Rose?"

"Ho hum," said Rose.

The corridor led to a doorless underground apartment. The room Conger entered was big, a living room, and decorated in the late Victorian

style of a century and a half ago. Thick brown draperies, heavy claw-footed furniture, a gleaming grand piano, many thick-set flower vases, bell jars and a dozen sad-faced ancestral paintings in intricate gold frames.

Rose was a plump, pale white woman in her late twenties. She sat, wearing a floor-length lounging robe, at the grand piano. Up on the piano top rested a plate containing a slice of reconstituted cheesecake. She was poking at the cheesecake with a fork while noodling at the bass keys with her other hand.

"Stop that bloody doodling," suggested the tall thin man seated on a tufted loveseat.

"You mean noodling," corrected Rose. "Doodling is what I do afternoons in my studio instead of painting."

The tall thin man was Sir Thomas Anstey-Guthrie. He wore a suit of candy stripe pajamas. "You wouldn't be bored if you made some sort of an effort not to be, Rose."

"I don't like the view here at all, Tommy," said the chubby Rose. "I mean, I throw open my boudoir windows of a morning and am confronted with a vista of solid earth. It's unsettling."

"I'm not all that keen on underground living myself, Rose," admitted the scientist. "The pay is so awfully good, though. \$300,000 a year plus a travel allowance. A good deal better than what I was pulling down with the Limehouse Center and I don't have to make any bloody trips to Livermore and Cleveland."

"Livermore would be a relief after a year underground." Rose brushed cheesecake crumbs off the white keys. "How much is \$300,000 in pounds?"

"About 120,000 at the current rate of exchange."

"For what you have to do, Tommy, I should think he'd pay you better. A lousy 120,000 pounds isn't all that terrific."

Conger walked quietly closer to the loveseat.

"The job itself is a breeze," said Guthrie. "It's your continuous bloody nagging which makes it unpleasant, Rose." "I have the feeling," said Rose, touching the tines of the fork to her large left breast, "that

Sandman is going to leave you holding the bag one fine day."

Conger stopped still.

"No, he won't."

"How do you know?"

"Sandman gave me his word."

Conger's unseen eyebrows lifted. Lt. Klaus Krist had told them Sir Thomas Anstey-Guthrie was

Sandman.

Rose said, "He didn't put it in writing I'll wager."

"Obviously not. You don't have written documents in a business like ours."

"You don't even know who he is, Tommy."

"No, not specifically," said Guthrie. "However, I've had many conversations with Sandman via the phone and . . ."

"He blacks out his side of the conversation."

"To protect his identity, yes."

"He has you running this clandestine resurrection way station, makes you do well over 60% of the resurrections in the field," said Rose. "You take most of the risks and he pays you a mere 120,000 pounds."

"There's not all that much risk, Rose. After all, resurrection is something I've always been quite keen on. I'm honored in a way that Sandman picked me to be his second in command."

"His patsy, you mean. His sitting duck." Rose pounded some piano keys with a plump fist. "Furthermore, Tommy, half of his people have been led to believe you yourself are Sandman."

Smiling a thin smile, Guthrie said, "That does no real harm, Rose. It's rather a clever subterfuge in fact."

"If you get nabbed you can't even blow the whistle on him. You don't even know where the man is."

"One doesn't blow the whistle on one's associates, Rose," said the lean scientist. "I do have some notion where he's at, by the way."

"You haven't mentioned it to me."

"You aren't always in the mood for confidences."

"Where is Sandman then?"

"I've learned Sandman's base headquarters are somewhere under Los Angeles."

"That's not a very specific address."

"There's a partially abandoned underground transportation and living system in the Greater Los Angeles area of California South," explained Guthrie. "I've found out, by subtle and roundabout means, our Mr. Sandman is down under there someplace."

"So he has to live underground, too?"

"When he's not somewhere in the world performing a resurrection."

Conger nodded to himself and left the Victorian-style living room. As he climbed toward the trapdoor he heard Rose say, "Ho hum."

CHAPTER 19

Angelica walked in during the briefing and Conger missed the next several minutes of it. She was wearing a simple tan daydress, her hair pulled back and tied with a paisley ribbon. She nodded at Conger, smiling quickly, then sat down by the big blond NSO agent across the room.

Conger watched her for a moment more before returning his attention to the Greater Los Angeles Police inspector up on the dais.

". . . then down on Level Three we have the off-track betting parlors, the legalized—excuse me, Miss Abril—prostitution cribs and the indoor dog tracks." Inspector Knerr of GLAP was saying. "About 75% of this level is still functioning. The dog track operations have been suspended because of repeated malfunctions of the mechanical rabbits which the dogs are supposed to chase. As I . . ."

"Excuse me, inspector," said Rowland Gull, the slight pale young man who'd been introduced as the Press Secretary of the governor of California South. "But Mad Governor Yerkzes has asked me to read this statement in the event any of his Underground Life System was criticized. The statement begins: 'My fellow Californians, good evening . . .' Well, we'll modify that to good morning, since it still lacks a few minutes of midday. 'My fellow Californians, good morning . . .'"

"We can skip the statement, Rowland," the short wide inspector told him. "We've got a killer to catch here."

"Wait a mo," said Linn Learmann, the big blond NSO agent. He was sitting now with his arm on the back of Angelica's chair. "Technically Sandman isn't a killer, inspector. All our info indicates the opposite. He brings people back to life, is what he does."

"Whether he kills them or revives them," said Inspector Knerr, "we want

to catch him. Am I correct in assuming that?"

"Sure thing," said Learmann, smiling. "It's simply that I like to keep the record straight."

"I think you ought to let me read this statement," said the governor's press secretary. "Mad Governor Yerkzes gets angry if he's thwarted in any way. I hate to go back to the state capital in Burbank and have him rip down all the drapes in his executive chambers again, or eat all the artificial flowers."

"I'll have it put into the minutes you read the statement and it was well received, Rowland," promised Inspector Knerr. "Now shut up." He pointed again to the row of blueprints taped to the wall beside him. "Below Level Three there lies Level Four, a real pesthole. Things have fallen apart there completely and drifters, deadbeats and bums rule. We think probably new and even lower levels of the Underground Life System have been dug by the scum who infest this particular area."

"Please remember, inspector," put in the pale press secretary, "that when this wonderful complex was conceived and built back in 2016 we feared impending attack from AngloRussia."

"No we didn't," said Knerr. "Mad Governor Yerkzes feared it and built this goofy mess under LA. I told him then it'd end up full of deadbeats."

"Just a mo." Learmann's fingers tapped on Angelica's far shoulder. "Miss Abril here, and Mr. Conger, too, aren't interested in all this local badinage, inspector. Let's get down to Sandman."

"I've been trying to explain," said Inspector Knerr, rapping at a blueprint with his lumpy knuckles, "that GLAP, which is the Greater Los Angeles Police for any of you out-of-towners, GLAP believes if this alleged resurrectionist is hiding beneath our city he has to be down in the Level Four area or deeper."

A lean sharp edged man sitting near Conger had not spoken before. He coughed and said, "Perhaps it's time we ask ourselves what motivates this self-styled Sandman." He rubbed at his sharp elbows, then his knees.

"What, as we often like to put it in the Cal South Psych Force, makes him tick."

"Wait a sec, Syd," said the blond NSO agent. "I think Angelica here may have some idea who you are, but for the benefit of Mr. Conger of WTD maybe you better introduce yourself."

"Oh, hi," said the lean man, turning to shake hands with Conger. "I'm Dr. Syd Poolhall of the Cal South Psych Force. My office frequently works,

as we like to put it, hand in hand with the inspector's."

Inspector Knerr sighed through his wide flat nose. "Okay, Syd. Where do you think the god damn guy is?"

"Wait now," said Dr. Poolhall. "It's not where I think he is, it's where he thinks he is. You see— and this may be particularly interesting to you, Mr. Conrad . . ."

"Conger," said Conger.

"Mr. Conger. I wonder why I think of you as a Conrad. There must be some facial trigger. At any rate, over in CSPF we use only the best computers and simulating equipment. When I fed the available data on Sandman into them . . ."

"Of which there isn't much," said Conger.

"Be that as it may, as we like to say. Our machines suggested to us Sandman would indeed be most likely to make his nest, shall we call it, down in Level Four or beneath." He coughed into a lean fist.

"This all jibes with the overall picture we've worked out here in the LA office of NSO," said Learmann. "Mr. Conger has come into this a day or so later than the rest of us and probably isn't filled in yet on what we intend to do."

"I'm trying to tell him," said the inspector, beginning to pace in front of his blueprints.

"I want to hear this, too," said the governor's press secretary. "I couldn't make it to your initial Sandman briefing last night because I had to get over to the Veterans of Wars of Liberation Hospital in Glendale to read them a little cheering statement from the governor. It seems when he was over there earlier he'd taken to playfully pushing some of the fellows in wheelchairs down stairs and it caused a little furor among . . ."

"What we intend to do," resumed Inspector Knerr, "is stake out Level Four. That is, implement the force we already have on duty down there. We have a very gifted Disguise Division in GLAP. When they get dressed up you can't tell them from real bums and deadbeats."

"I'll attest to that," smiled Learmann as he rubbed Angelica's back. "Of course NSO will have its best undercover people down there, too."

Conger looked away from them all and out the window of this tower room. Soft yellow smog was drifting by through the hot noon sky. "That's going to take time," he said.

"We're a patient lot in NSO," Learmann assured him.

"Perhaps," said Angelica, "Mr. Conger has some alternate idea."

Conger turned and spoke directly toward the lovely dark girl. "If we set up a fake assassination. Sandman might show himself."

Learmann said, "Too risky. Besides we haven't been able to track him from corpse to lab before."

"Because you weren't prepared for the hypnotics and so forth he was using," said Conger. "If you can anticipate those and also set up a better electronic surveillance, you should . . ."

"Sandman knows how to get around our monitors," said Learmann. "No, I'm afraid, Agent Conger, we'll have to fall back on patience and dogged persistence."

"Would you mind if I set up an alternate plan?"

Learmann's blond face puckered. "I wasn't going to bring this up, Conger," he said slowly. "I have an official memo from Washington, ordering you to defer to NSO. It's signed by Sinkovec."

"I thought Tiefenbacher replaced Sinkovec?"

"He did until the senate computers caught their little mistake and realized it was Tiefenbacher all along who'd been sending those blue messages."

"What sort of blue messages?" asked Dr. Poolhall.

"Dirty code messages," explained Learmann. "To girl agents."

"Fascinating," said the psychiatrist. "I once interviewed a computer who recited . . ."

"Okay," Conger said to the blond NSO agent. "I'll go along with you. What do I do?"

Learmann shook his head. "Right now, Conger, nothing. We may have need later on for someone with your peculiar gift. As of now, though . . ." He shrugged.

Dr. Poolhall asked, "What peculiar gift?"

"I recite dirty limericks." Conger got up and left the briefing room. He didn't look at Angelica as he went.

CHAPTER 20

Conger was looking down at the ocean. The water was black and faintly

phosphorescent. A few empty beer pouches bobbed in the night water, tapping against the pilings of his rented beach cabana. He left his airfloat chair, crossed the see-through floor. From the decorative mantle he picked up a bottle of B-complex capsules, shook two into his palm.

"How about a movie?" asked the large multientertainment unit which hulked in the center of the glass-walled room.

"No, thanks."

"I've got more than just current stuff," came the voice from the speaker grid, which was at stomach level. "You may not know it, sir, but Los Angeles was once known as the movie capital of the world. So when I ask, 'How about a movie?' I'm not alluding to simply the current run of tri-op crap, nor even to the now popular multi-sensual porno flix—though I can run one of those if you'd care to see it—no, I refer to the entire film archives of GLA, sir. I've got films from such last century giants as MGM, Warner Brothers, Paramount . . ."

"I don't want to watch anything." Conger returned to his chair, swallowing the B-complex capsules.

"Only this morning I got hold of the entire output of Monogram Pictures."

"Why don't you take the night off?" The big entertainment unit, giving a resigned snort, snapped itself off.

Conger resumed looking at the dark Pacific. Out on the balcony Canguru appeared and tapped on the glass. His one-piece GLA-style glowsuit was wet up to the knees. "What kind of front door do you have on this place?"

Sliding the balcony door open, Conger said, "Come on in."

"They don't keep your part of the ocean very clean." Canguru stood one-footed at the edge of the room, tugging off a soggy shoe. "Everytime I tried to come up your front path some robot arms rose out of the ground and heaved me back onto the sidewalk."

"This is a maximum security cabana," said Conger. "I forgot to turn all that off."

With his shoes hooked over two fingers of his right hand, the little blond spy walked over to sit opposite Conger. "They're very security minded in California South. I've been frisked by two municipal buses and an aircab today already. You look preoccupied."

"I look unoccupied."

Canguru carefully unwound seaweed from his ankle. "You're still working on the Sandman problem, aren't you?"

"According to Geer I am," answered Conger. "I talked to him on the pixphone an hour ago. I'm supposed to stay out of the way of NSO, though, let them try their stakeout idea for a while."

Canguru decided to take off his rainbow sox. "Knowing who Sandman is going to revive next," he said. "Could you work on an angle like that?"

"Yeah, I could. Do you know who he's going to resurrect?"

"It will probably be a man who was assassinated this morning, State Senator McSherry."

"He's from right here in California South. I saw his funeral on the Candlelight & Wine News Hour." The entertainment unit turned itself on. "Would you care to see a replay of that funeral footage, sir?" "No, go away." "I notice they put the wrong kind of casters under your entertainment unit," said the curly-haired spy. "These are perfectly okay," said the machine. "They're factory tested to withstand up to . . ." "Enough," said Conger. "Are you sure about this McSherry guy? The news implied he'd died after a long illness." "Two hours isn't a long illness," said Canguru. "He was poisoned while cutting the feathers at the grand opening of . . ." "Cutting feathers?" "At the grand opening of a drive-in fly-in chicken shack out in Woodland Hills," explained

Canguru. "They had a ribbon of real chicken feathers surrounding the landing pad and the senator cut it as part of the inaugural ceremonies. The ceremonial scissors had been dipped in a fatal skin contact poison."

"Who did it?"

"Probably someone working for Mad Governor Yerkzes. McSherry was a real critic of . . ."

"I have some footage," put in the entertainment unit, "of Rowland Gull reading a statement from the governor expressing deepest sympathy at the passing of State Senator McSherry. I have that in both tri-op and flat."

Canguru tangled his tiny toes together. "McSherry is one of the few outspoken liberals left in California South. He was particularly active in the movement to get the chicanos out of the relocation camps in Death Valley," he told Conger. "AEF doesn't want him to stay dead."

"Are they paying for his resurrection?"

"My sources think so."

Conger rubbed a capsule between his thumb and forefinger. "Have they got the body yet?"

"No, senhor. They'll pick up McSherry between midnight and dawn."

"Where is the body now?"

"Lying in state at the Forest Lawn #3 All-Faith Drive-In Fly-In Mortuary & Wee Kirk of the

Good Samaritan." "I'd better get out there."

"No need," said Canguru. "I know what sort of vehicle they'll be using, also where they'll enter the underground life setup." He wadded up his sox, began juggling them. "We can wait at the entry point, pick them up there."

Conger grinned. "Your briefings are more informative than NSO's."

"The trouble with the National Security Office," said Canguru, "is they expect to coast on their reputation and prestige. You ought to hear what skimpy bribes they've been offering around

Greater Los Angeles lately."

"The front door wants to talk to you," announced the hulking entertainment unit.

"What is it?"

"Well sir, there's somebody out here I hate to toss into the street," said the security door's high-pitched voice, coming out of the entertainment unit's speech box. "See, Los Angeles was once the domain of the Spanish and thus the noble tradition of deference to the . . ."

"Tell me who's out there."

"A young lady," answered the door. "A strikingly lovely young lady with raven tresses and eyes of flashing ebony. Which is why I hate to give her the old heaveho without you have a looksee."

"This is what the girl in question looks like," said the entertainment unit. It shifted its bulk, aiming a small monitor screen at Conger.

The girl was Angelica.

"You'll want to talk to her alone." Canguru jerked his GLA-style glowsox on his little feet. "I'll leave and we can rendezvous at midnight, giving you a margin of nearly four full hours to spend with Miss Abril should the occasion arise." He flat-footed to the open balcony door.

"Okay. Where shall I pick you up?"

"Near the downtown sector of Old Los Angeles, on Olvera Street." He put on his wet shoes. After giving Conger an address he went away into the darkness.

"Maybe the young lady will want to watch a movie," suggested the entertainment unit hopefully.

Conger opened the front door.

CHAPTER 21

"How's that?" asked the entertainment unit.

Angelica took a sip of the synthetic martini the hulking machine had handed her. "Satisfactory," she said.

"Only satisfactory? Usually my martinis are perfect. Why, only . . ." The big machine made a metallic gargling sound and ceased functioning.

At the master control box in the far wall Conger had switched him off. "You said," he said to the dark slender Angelica, "you wanted to talk."

She took another sip of the drink. "You're jealous of him," she said, rubbing a forefinger along the side of the entertainment unit. "Probably because he reminds you of Linn Learmann."

"His hair isn't as blond," said Conger. He walked around on the see-through floor, his footfalls too heavy. "You've been in Greater Los Angeles since you left Urbania?"

"Yes," said Angelica. "Though not with Linn, if that's what's making you gruff."

Conger didn't answer.

"After you went out to the Pharmz complex I got in touch with our NSO man in St. Norbert," the girl explained. "He told me to contact Dallas."

"Dallas?"

"NSO built its Overseas Coordinating Office there last summer. You must remember the frumus in congress about the cost of the thermal carpeting for the parking lots. Anyway, NSO had information indicating Sandman had a base, possibly his home base, up here under Los Angeles someplace. I decided to come see—alone and by myself."

Conger continued to walk around the room, his eyes on the black ocean beneath his feet.

Angelica stood still near the center of the clear floor. "It took me a long time to write that letter to you, you know."

"I figured. It's a fairly long letter, several sentences."

Angelica said, "Okay, maybe I shouldn't make decisions for you. After hearing Geer light into you that night though, I decided I didn't want to be the reason for your screwing up your career."

"I don't consider being an invisible man a career."

"Well, call it your present occupation then. Whatever. I have the feeling you're not ready to quit. Are you?"

Conger had stopped wandering. After a few seconds, he said, "I don't know."

The girl was standing near him now. "Listen, Jake, there's something else I wanted to talk about," she said. "Something besides the fact I've missed you, and something besides the fact I was upset when you went stalking out of the briefing today."

"Would you describe that as stalking?"

"What then?"

"Striding confidently, or strolling with determination . . ."

"Or traipsing nonchalantly." She smiled.

Conger, smiling, too, put his hands on her shoulders.

"Wait." Angelica backed away from his touch. "I have more to tell you."

"About what," he asked, "Sandman?"

"Yes, it's business," she replied. "When this case is closed I have some leave time coming. I want to spend it with you."

"So tell me about Sandman."

"You know about the assassination of State Senator McSherry, don't you?"

"Canguru told me. And I know where Sandman's bodysnatchers are going to be sometime between midnight and sunup."

"Then you already know where their drop down in Level Four is."

"No," said Conger. "What we know is the underground entrance near Olvera Street where the truck hauling McSherry is supposed to enter. I'm going to pick them up at that point."

"Well, I've found out the truck will deliver Senator McSherry's remains

to the storeroom behind a combination restaurant and horse parlor called Hal The Bookie's down on Level Four," said the dark girl agent. "From there, somehow, the body will get taken even further down. To one of the uncharted bootleg levels Inspector Knerr was telling us about this morning."

"What does Linn Learmann think about all this?"

"I don't have to report in to him," said Angelica. "The National Security Office isn't as paternalistic as you people."

"I thought we were all practicing patience and putting our faith in Linn's stakeout."

"Screw patience. Do you want to work with me on locating Sandman's Lab?"

"Sure."

Angelica bit her thumb knuckle. "Okay, to be on the safe side you may as well go ahead with your plan. You tag the truck when it heads underground. I'll go straight to Hal The Bookie's and wait there." She glanced sideways at the entertainment unit. "Did that clock in his backside turn off when you threw the switch?"

"No, it's autonomous."

"Then we don't have to leave here for two hours." She faced him, smiling again.

CHAPTER 22

The robot Mexican fell over and said, "*Merde!*"

Canguru dropped to his knees. A flung taco skimmed his curly hair, dripping chopped olives and imitation onion flakes. "They certainly have their riots at odd hours in your country."

"This looks to be a protest march not a riot," said Conger. He and the little spy were standing in an alley off Olvera Street.

Out on the synthetic Mexican Street two hundred young people were tramping up and down, waving tri-op signs, playing canned political messages.

"There's Father William Francis Nolan," pointed out Canguru.

"Where?"

"Oops, he fell off their shoulders and that cyborg cop with the tractor-tread is rolling over him."

Canguru winced in sympathy. "They call him the Guerrilla Priest of . . ."

"Does he have anything to do with Sandman?"

"No, but . . ."

"Then I don't want to clutter my mind with him."

"Bring back the real chicanos!" shouted Father Nolan, once the policeman's boot rolled off his neck.

"Shut down the detention camps!"

"Get rid of mechanical Mexicans!"

Conger scanned the short street. "The truck's going to have a tough time getting in there."

"The riot can't go on forever," said Canguru.

Leaning against a pseudoadobe wall, Conger asked, "Why did Yerkzes put away all the

Mexicans?"

"He feared an invasion of California South from Mexico as I understand it," said Canguru. "First he took away all their radios, TVs and home entertainment units, to keep them from communicating with any potential invaders from south of the border. That didn't seem sufficient to him after awhile, so he built camps in Death Valley. It's rumored he owns 60% of the detention camp contracting company."

"There's Rowland Gull in a bucket," said Conger, looking up.

A municipal hopper, painted a bright blue and gold, was humming down out of the midnight sky. In a swaying canvas bucket beneath it rode Mad Governor Yerkzes' press secretary. "Boys and girls," the pale young man said through a blue and gold bullhorn. "Boys and girls, I'd appreciate your attention. My name is Rowland Gull. I work for Governor Yerkzes."

"Boo, boo!"

"Screw you!"

"Shut down the detention camps!"

"Boys and girls, the governor has asked me to read a brief statement pertaining to the Mexican-American situation," continued Gull, swinging in a gentle arc. "Here it is. 'My fellow Californians, good afternoon . . .'

Well, let's amend that. 'My fellow Californians, good evening. This is your governor speaking to you from the bottom of my heart. Let me first assure you that no one will be reprimanded over this little incident, nor will you be punished in any way. After all, does not the great . . .'"

"Put this on," Conger told Canguru. He'd taken two lightweight gasmasks out of the kit strapped to his side. As the little blond spy strapped his on, Conger pulled him back into the alley with him. "Those two cops over by the Open-All-Night Cantina are breaking out canisters of stungas."

"Your floating friend is going to have to amend his statement again."

Gas mortars commenced chuffing out on Olvera Street

Canguru yawned, scratched his curly head. "Almost 2AM," he said.

They were at the mouth of the alley again. All the young protestors, plus Father Nolan, had been carted away in police landwagons over an hour ago. The allnight cantinas were functioning again, all the robot sidewalk Mexicans were upright, playing guitars and vending souvenirs. There were not too many tourists availing themselves of the street.

"There comes another truck now," said Conger.

Squinting, Canguru said, "It's them, senhor. A maroon landtruck with Gibson's Hobby House freshly lettered on the side."

Conger applied his invisibility lotion. "Okay, I'll grab on when they slow to drive into the warehouse over there."

"My sources assure me there's a concealed rampway which leads underground in that warehouse. I'll wait here a bit, then get myself down to Level Four by another . . . what's the matter?"

"There." Conger was perspiring across his forehead. He turned, more slowly, invisible. "Ever since Big Mac and Ting gave me those truth shots I've been having trouble with the transitions from visible to invisible and back."

"After we catch Sandman you ought to take some time off and have a complete physical," suggested the little spy. "Although most doctors don't know how to conduct a really first rate . . ."

Conger left the alley. Three fat teenage boys burst out of a tacoteria, licking chile gravy off their pudgy fingers. Conger pivoted to avoid colliding with them.

Moving fast, and unseen, he caught up with the grape-colored novelty truck as it rolled into the whitewashed brick warehouse at the far end of

Olvera Street.

A loading step hung beneath the back doors of the truck. Conger jumped, landed on that. He held on to the door handles.

The landtruck drove slowly across the nearly empty warehouse. After the street doors slid shut a section of the wall rose up and out of the way.

The truck and Conger shot ahead into darkness, headed underground.

CHAPTER 23

The tile walls of the tunnel were sweating, spotted with dingy brown beads of water. Now that the truck was nearing Level Four there was hardly any traffic on the underground road system. More graffiti appeared on the walls, several ambitious homemade murals. Under one glowcolor wall decoration, an allegorical painting of the history of California, a tattered old man with a bloody face was sleeping. He was huddled right on the rutted road. Further down there were some remnants of pedestrian catwalks and on these more ragged people sprawled, some sleeping, some drinking from plastic wine pouches, a few attempting to make love.

This far below Greater Los Angeles the lighting system was falling apart. For whole stretches of the tunnel roads the overhead light strips hung down in dark tangles from the ceilings. A few of the twisted dusty strips throbbed, giving off a thin speckled light. As the landtruck Conger was holding onto bounced around the curving roads its headlamps splashed light on the dark tunnel walls. The people crouching here were younger, most of them awake. They sat and watched the truck go by, the sudden illumination not even causing them to blink.

At last there was light all around. The truck carrying State Senator McSherry's body emerged onto the streets of Level Four.

The truck bounced even more on the potholed streets. All the low buildings glowed and flashed. There was an enormous loud mix of music all around. Every kind of popular music there had been for the last two centuries was being played. It roared out of the wide open doorways, came blasting from floating speakers over the clubs and bistros.

The novelty truck, with Conger on behind, went ten blocks straight through the underground city, then swung off to the right. The air on this new street was hot and muggy. There were mostly whorehouses along here, real and android. *Reconditioned Robot Hookers/Only \$5 Per 15 Minutes! Live Former Convent Girls/Reasonable Prices!*,

Cyborgs/Satisfaction Guaranteed! Conger noticed more tourists on the street. The derelicts slumped in the gutters were better dressed.

The truck rolled on. The bordellos thinned, giving way to betting parlors, a scatter of indoor dog and pony race tracks.

At the next corner stood Hal The Bookie's. *Eat & Bet! Booths For Ladies!* The land truck passed the place, turned into an alley leading to a tinroof storeroom behind it.

Big Mac was waiting for the truck. He sat on a carton of canned waffleburgers, a new laser pistol in his right hand. He guided the truck in to a stop with his empty left hand. "You took long enough, craphead," he said when the truck's engine turned off.

"We had to wait until a riot was over, Mac. Some kids had a riot," explained Jerry Ting as he jumped from the cab. "Isn't that right, Vic."

Inside the cab a low voice said, "It certainly . . ."

"No more gabble, buttwipe," said the black AEF agent. "Let's get the corpse into the car so I can drive it on to the descent point."

"Another reason we took a little extra time," said Ting. "Vic got squeamish about picking up the guy's body and sticking it into the plyosack."

"I voted for the guy in two elections," said Vic, still up in the truck. "It's like I know him."

Conger dropped silently to the floor of the storeroom.

"Get your fanny down here, peckerwood," ordered Big Mac.

"Everything else went smoothly." Ting came to the rear of the truck, climbed up and opened the doors. "Not one of the cops or NSO agents watching the Forest Lawn #3 All-Faith Drive-In Fly-In Mortuary tumbled to our being there. Those mind-dimming vapors of Sandman's really work well."

Vic, a large redheaded man of thirty, reluctantly followed Ting up into the truck. "It's very beautiful out there, that mortuary and cemetery," he said. "They got a water fountain which plays both the national and state anthem and a replica of the Last Supper made completely out of . . ."

"You'll be on view there, crumbum, if you don't get going." Big Mac waved his laser pistol.

"I told you he'd fall on the floor if you didn't pack those rugs tight around him, Vic."

"Gee, Jerry, you guys are always chewing me out. What difference does it make? A little plop onto the floor from a tabletop isn't going to do him all that much harm. He's already dead."

Conger explored the storeroom. Near the wide doorway they'd entered sat a compact black landcar. This would be the vehicle Big Mac was going to use to take the body of McSherry the final distance to Sandman.

Stacked high round the buff color walls were cases of canned sandwiches and party snacks. Near the door which led to the betting club stood a dozen broken down betting machines.

He heard a faint creak in the shadows near the machines. Angelica was there, ducked behind a low wall of cartons. Conger made a silencing motion, knowing she could see him, and went back toward the rear of the truck.

"He's what you'd call portly." Vic came backwards out of the truck, holding the feet end of the sacked body of the state senator. "Oh, gee!" The big redheaded man's foot slipped on the loading step. He fell to the floor, letting go of McSherry.

Ting came bicycling out of the truck. He still clutched the other end of the body. When it dropped he came dropping with it.

Big Mac took time to cuff Vic with his left hand. "Clutchbutt," he said. He bent to gather up the body. "Get away, I'll tote the mothering thing myself."

Conger walked over to stand near the car.

Halfway there Big Mac stopped, blinked, threw the body of McSherry aside. "You again!" He aimed his gun.

"Why it's the invisible man," said Ting.

Conger ran, diving behind a row of cartons. He'd lost control of the invisibility trick again.

Big Mac's pistol sizzled and five feet above Conger's head a carton of teabiscuits jumped and began to burn. "Come on out and surrender yourself, asswipe."

"Okay, Big Mac, that's enough shooting," said Angelica.

Conger couldn't see her from where he was.

"We got all kinds of mothering spies tonight."

"Put the gun down on the floor," ordered Angelica. "You too, Jerry, or . . . oh."

Big Mac's blaster crackled again. "You got to watch where you're stepping, honey, lest you trip." After a few seconds Ting said, "Why'd you go and do that, Mac? She's dead."

CHAPTER 24

"These motherjumps are all over," remarked Big Mac. "Let's get going." The engine in the car hummed on.

The doors to the street opened.

Ting and Vic ran across the storeroom floor, hefting the body of State Senator McSherry.

The car went away.

Conger heard it all from behind the wall of boxes. He stood in shadows, hunched, swallowing hard.

"*Deus!*" said Canguru's voice. "*Sinto muito.*"

Taking in air through his open mouth, Conger stepped out into the open. He stopped three feet short of Angelica. He didn't kneel, didn't try to touch her.

The slender dark girl lay, all knees and elbows, on her back. There was a dark hole, small, the size of a dime, just above her left breast.

Conger realized he was shivering, stopped himself. "Do you know where they're going from here?"

"No, senhor," said the little blond spy. "I had assumed there was some entry way to Sandman's lair concealed here at . . . ha!" He bent. Beside the dead Angelica on the floor were her gun and a palm-size square black metal box. "A cartrace monitor. She must have planted a tracebug on the car they took off in. I know she was here in this room long before Big Mac returned." He held the small box out to Conger.

Conger hesitated, then took it. It gave off faintly the smell of the scent the dark girl had used. Swallowing again, he said, "Stay here, Canguru. Watch her, don't let anybody move her. I'll be back."

The little spy said, "You're sure you can continue?"

"Yeah, I'm sure," answered Conger. "Look at me now. Can you see me?"

"*Sim, yes.*"

Fists clenched, Conger concentrated on becoming invisible once again,

"Now?"

"I still see you, although you seem a little less substantial."

"And now?"

"*Muito bem*," Canguru told him. "You are completely invisible. I can not even see the cartrace monitor in your hand."

"I should have been able to stay invisible before," said Conger. "Damn it." He looked once more at the dead girl, then left the place.

The clicking monitor box led Conger, invisible, to the outskirts of Level Four. The flare of lights, the slamming music was all dim and far behind him. Here there were unfinished buildings, twisting passways of raw earth, dusty mounds of unused grey construction blocks. The ceilings high above were incomplete, consisting partly of unfinished wood beams. The support pillars were unpainted, rusted over in jagged crusty orange streaks. Gobs of black puffy mildew grew on the walls of the blank buildings.

Lean dogs prowled, sniffing at the ruined men who slept on the incomplete stretches of sidewalk. On the last corner of the last chunk of pavement two men crouched, sharing a pouch of sweet white wine, laughing together. The one who laughed the loudest had no nose.

Conger passed by them, following the trail of Big Mac's car.

Out beyond everything stretched muddy fields. Here and there bonfires, made from building siding and smashed up cartons, burned. One fire, burning a thin pale yellow, illuminated a huddle of squatting old men. Another fire, further along, had been built by a cluster of mud-colored young people. Just outside the glare of the fire a young girl cried out, "Jesus, don't let these guys do this. Please!"

Conger continued on his way.

Finally he came to a house-size pile of junked landcars. A single derelict sat on a fat life-time tire, holding his hands to a small cook fire. As the man shifted his position the fire flashed on the blaster hanging under his raggedy coat.

Conger pushed a truthbug against the man's dirty neck. The monitor box indicated Big Mac's car had gone further underground at this spot.

"Yes, buddy," said the fake derelict when the truthbug took him over. "How can I oblige you?"

"I want to go down below."

"I'm only supposed to let authorized personnel do that," explained the

dazed guard. "Anyone else I send on their merry way. The scum who live around here, they're no trouble to keep away. More persistent people I shoot." He moved a convincingly filthy hand to tap at his gun. "Should the law approach, which, thank your lucky stars, they haven't to date, I push the alarm button." He pointed an ancient shoe in the direction of a partially concealed silver button.

"That's a nice job resume," said Conger. "Now how do you open the passage down, without setting off any alarms?"

"Easy as pie. Throw the switch beneath the bluebell blue fender right over there. After first inserting all your fingers in the whorl pattern indentifier under the portion of tractor right next to it."

Conger clutched the guard up, dragged him to the tractor. "I'll need your fingers. Stick them in where they're supposed to go."

The guard reached under the tipped over tractor. "Only to happy to be of service. Anything else I can do to please you? Do you have time for a bowl of slumgullion? I was about to brew . . ."

Conger dropped him beside the fender concealing the switch. The guard began sleeping. Conger located the switch, threw it.

The pile of metallic junk groaned. A stack of six mangled cars swung out toward him. A hood ornament, liberty holding two torches, snapped free and banged against his shoulder. After the doors of cars opened, he saw a ramp heading downward.

When Conger stepped onto the ramp the junk closed tight behind him.

CHAPTER 25

Everything was clean. The pale green walls, the soft-lit floors of the corridors. The air was cool, smelling of mild soap.

The tracks of Big Mac's car showed plainly, a chalky brown, on the otherwise spotless corridor floor.

Around the next bend a guard, dressed in a one-piece uniform which matched the walls, sat in a realwood chair. He didn't notice Conger.

Big Mac's black landcar was parked in an alcove further along the corridor. The cool green hallway slanted downward beyond the alcove. A ramp forked into three new corridors.

From the middle corridor drifted the sound of voices and the sharp

odor of antiseptics. Conger took that route.

Soon on his left he came to a large operating room with two-way see-through walls. The body of State Senator McSherry was on a white table under hanging lamps. He's been stripped and a Chinese girl in a white jumper and mask was going over the body with a small-nozzle air hose. Two other men stood by. Neither fit the description of Sandman.

Across the hall a door swung open to let Big Mac out. "Make sure you don't bump the price no higher," he warned back into the room. "China II is pretty close to solving the resurrection problem on their own, doc."

Someone inside the room laughed.

Conger knew the laugh. He waited until Big Mac went by, then stepped through the doorway.

"Something more to bitch about, my boy?"

Conger had his pistol out. He became visible, saying, "Hello, Vince."

Vincent X. Worth, the former Wild Talent Division scientist, grinned up from the copper chair he was lounging in. He'd grown a drooping moustache since Conger'd seen him last, his face was more tanned. He was long and lean, wearing a dark two-piece suit. "Hello, Jake."

"You son of a bitch," said Conger. "I sent flowers to your memorial service."

"Sit down, my boy," suggested Worth. "I'll tell you something about the resurrection trade. You don't meet too many people you feel like having an intelligent talk with." He kept on grinning. "You're one of the few people I could confide in while I was with WTD."

"You didn't confide much about your plans to fake your death so you could start playing Sandman."

"No, I didn't, my boy." Worth reach a boney hand toward a low table beside his chair.

"Keep your hands in your lap."

"I'm only getting this bottle of rose hip tablets, Jake. See?" He picked up the container. "Have you tried these? I've been taking a dozen each day and they . . ."

"You really are Sandman, huh?"

"Of course, my boy," said Worth, taking three tablets.

"I thought you might be another decoy, like Sir Thomas Anstey-Guthrie."

"Not very likely. I quit, made it look like I was lost in an accident, because I hate to work under anyone. Sit down, won't you, my boy? We haven't had a get-together in . . . how long has it been?"

"Since before you died."

Worth laughed. "Jake, suppose I'd told you what I was planning to do. You're too honest and upright to have kept quiet. You would have told Geer, who in turn would have told Sinkovec or Tiefenbacher or whatever buffoon he has to report to. Eventually the President of the United States would even have known about it. My process would be one more property of the American stockpile. I'd have spent the rest of my days bringing self-indulgent senators back to life, with possibly now and then, to avoid criticism, a Pulitzer prize winning playwright or two."

"Can't you do it on a large scale?"

"You mean keep everybody alive forever?" Worth chewed up a few more rose hip tablets. "Not very likely, my boy. It's much too expensive. Which is one reason why I decided to deal with clients like China II. They spend much more profusely than the US does. Besides which, Jake, for most of the buffoons in the world one life time is too much. I'll tell you something. I originally got onto the Sandman process while I was trying to work out something to thin out the world population a little."

Keeping his pistol leveled at Worth, Conger sat down and then pushed his chair back against the door.

Worth continued, "Of course I'd been fooling around with cryptobiosis for over a year before that, figuring I could switch it somehow to use for storing WTD agents when they weren't in use. You know about cryptobiosis, it's that death like state certain primitive animals, the tardigrade for example, can bring off. It's a sort of suspended animation. My god, van Leeuwenhoek was messing with this kind of thing back in the 18th Century. He was handicapped, however, in that he didn't know anything about prostaglandins. See, Jake, in general all prostaglandins are variants of a basic 20-carbon carboxylic fatty acid incorporating a five member cyclopentane . . . but you probably aren't following this. What you have to remember, my boy, is that I, working all by myself in that second-rate Wild Talent Division lab, came up with a way to revive the dead."

"A real first for you," said Conger. "And you've put it to splendid use. I've met a few of the guys you lifted up from the grave."

"Real buffoons most of them, aren't they?" grinned the lean Worth. "Though I got a favorable impression of . . . what was his name? Yeah, old

Avo Enzerto down in Urbania. He has the kind of quirky mind I admire."

"Enzerto is dead again."

"Oh? I hadn't heard," said Worth. "Someone must have killed him all over again, because my process doesn't fail. It's not like those brain transplants that were all the rage ten years ago. Only about 25% of those poor buffoons survived."

"Big Mac killed him."

Shrugging, Worth said, "He's a mean bastard. He was in here trying to talk me down to \$250,000 for the senator out there. I told him if he wants McSherry alive and kicking the price is \$350,000. As a matter of fact, I think AngloRussia is going to agree to \$400,000 per job. Think about that, Jake. Think of what I was making at WTD, my boy. I've done twenty-one of these resurrections so far. Multiply 21 . . ."

"I heard it was less than that."

"Since I don't, as Sandman, issue publicity releases, Jake, it's hard for you to get completely accurate information."

"Without it," said Conger, "I still found you, Vince. Now we'll go back up to Greater Los Angeles."

After nibbling at one tablet held between two fingers, Worth shook his head. "I don't believe so,

Jake."

"Don't get the idea I won't shoot if your people try anything."

"I'm sure you would," said Worth. "Mac told me about what happened earlier, Jake. I realize what you must feel."

"Okay, fine. Then let's get going."

"Wait, my boy," said Worth. "You're going to let me go. You're not going to bring in Sandman at all."

"Why not?"

"Because if you let me go, my boy, I'll bring the girl back to life."

CHAPTER 26

Conger was jogging along a strip of yellow sand. He was in California North, a few miles from the state capital of San Francisco, and the quiet morning Pacific was on his left. He put a hand into a pocket of his

two-piece beachsuit, drew out a bottle of kelp pills.

From the direction of his rented houseboat a robot came trotting. "Phone call for Mr. Conger, phone call for Mr. Conger."

Conger slowed his pace, letting the robot catch up with him. A dozen gulls were spinning high overhead in the clear blue sky.

"Long distance from Manhattan," the robot told him as it came near. "Very important."

When the robot was alongside him on his left Conger glanced at the phone screen built into its chest. "Good morning," he said.

"It's high noon back here," Geer pointed out. "That's why I'm trying to catch a bite of lunch while I straighten out this yoohoo Sandman business." The boss had a hotdog-chocolate cake sandwich in one hand. "I'm afraid the powers that be don't quite understand your final report, Jake. When I say powers that be, I mean Lupoff and Thompson, who have apparently replaced both Sinkovec and Tiefenbacher in the upper echelons of our respected organization. I might add while I have your attention, more or less, that I myself do not fully understand what . . ."

Conger thrust his foot between the legs of the phone robot. The mechanism toppled over, splashed face down in the surf. Conger jogged on.

Angelica smiled when he stepped onto the deck of the houseboat. She was wearing dark slacks and a high neck blouse which hid the small scar over her left breast. "Do your ten miles?"

"Twelve," said Conger. He took a shaggy towel from the boat rail to wipe his face and neck.

"The real estate man was by a few minutes ago," said the lovely dark girl. "With a complaint."

"About his phone robot?" Conger sat near her on the smooth deck.

"Exactly. He says he found it down on the beach a half hour ago full of sand and salt water," Angelica said. "When he turned it over a sour-faced man called him a yoohoo from the pixscreen. Was that Geer?"

"Uh huh."

"He's not happy?"

"He wasn't during the small portion of his conversation I heard, no."

"What do you think your status with the Wild Talent Division is," she asked. "Now you've let

Sandman go free?"

Conger smiled. "I figure I've joined the ranks of yoohoos," he said. "I'm probably fired from WTD. I may even be blacklisted."

"That doesn't bother you?"

"Nope," he answered.

"I didn't think so."

"In awhile I'll address myself to the problem of a new station in life."

Angelica smiled, touching his shoulder with one warm slender hand. "I'm glad, Jake, you let

Sandman talk you into making that deal." "If he hadn't suggested it," Conger told her, "I was going to."

The End