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RON GOULART

THE PANCHRONICON PLOT

The time-nappers of Washington, D.C.!



TIME TRAVEL TIME

"Here we are roaming the picturesque streets of one of the world's fabled cities, two centuries away from our own era. Do you realize who's alive in Vienna at the moment? There's Sigmund Freud, Richard Strauss, Arthur Schnitzler . . . and we might run into any one of them."

"I want to run into Secretary of Health Toomey before any of the president's goons come looking for us. Outside of the name Panchronicon I still don't know what they are using to dump people . . ."

"Panchronicon?"

"Name mean anything? I think it's what President Bisbiglia calls the clandestine time machine he's using."

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Chapter 1

Okay, so the President of the United States has gone completely cuckoo and you're the only one who knows about it. On top of which, the Time Travel Overseeing Committee won't allow you to use any of their machines. What would you do about it?

Probably just what Geer, the rumped, frazzled little boss of the Wild Talent Division did on that crisp autumn morning in September of 2021. He teleported out to the small coastal town of Organic, California.

Organic is a deliberately rustic and quiet town in California North, about a hundred miles down the coast from the state capital of San Francisco. The Vegetable Patch restaurant and market consists of three seablue neoglass buildings, each roofed with slanting red shingles. The place sits on a plateau a hundred feet above the Pacific and a narrow twist of sandy beach.

Geer, wearing one of his wrinkled 2-piece worksuits, came trudging up the ramp to the entrance of the Vegetable Patch a few minutes after 10 AM, Pacific Rational Time. His hair was looking especially frizzled and disordered, teleportation seemed to do that, and his slightly protruding eyes had extra circles under them. Geer glanced back over his shoulder several times before pushing at the door. "Don't be a yoohoo," he warned himself. "They're not on to you, not yet anyway."

Trying to avoid the eye of the slim brunette girl who stood in the kitchen doorway, Geer moved to a table which would give him a view of the beach. There were a dozen or so other customers scattered around, including a black man in a 1-piece lycra running suit who was sharing his breakfast with his pet squirrel.

She saw Geer anyway. He could feel the recognition on the back of his neck. Nevertheless he sat down, began fiddling with the menu dial. "Mother of mercy, what kind of yoohoo food do they serve here? Carrot cakes? Squash toast? Pumpkin danish?"

"Go away."

Geer hunched, then turned to face the dark girl. "I have to talk to him."

"No, you don't. Jake doesn't work for you anymore, he's not a WTD agent anymore."

"Ah, now technically he is, Mrs. Conger," said Geer. "He's been on Temporary Retirement Pay ever since that Sandman fiasco last—"

"I suppose you do consider it a fiasco," said Angelica Conger. "Since Jake decided to save my life rather than—"

"I personally don't think it a fiasco, no," protested Geer. "I'm merely passing along the feelings of some of the people at the United States Remedial Functions Agency. After all, like it or nay, RFA can still tell the Wild Talent Division what to do. You don't realize how I had to romance those RFA yoohoos to get Jake those checks."

"Yes, we appreciate that," said Angelica, sitting opposite the WTD boss. "We put most of the money into our restaurant-market operation here. But, Mr. Geer, Jake doesn't—"

"I'd appreciate it if you didn't make too much of my name. This visit isn't exactly clandestine, but there's no need to—"

"All right, okay. We appreciate what you did. Could you leave now before Jake gets back?"

"Where is he?" Geer looked around anxiously.

"Jake doesn't get a chance to jog until this hour most mornings," explained Jake Conger's wife. "This is one of the quiet spots in our day."

Geer hunched further in on himself. "I have to see him," he said, almost whispering. "It's vital, urgent, important to the fate of the nation."

The dark girl eyed him. "You almost sound as though you want Jake to work for the Wild Talent Division again."

"I do," said Geer. "I do."

Angelica shook her head. "I don't want him to."

"Jake hasn't changed that much in a year. He's not the kind of yoo-hoo who'd let his wife make his decisions."

Sighing, she said, "No, you're right. Walk down our neowood ramp to the beach. You should be able to see him jogging from there."

Geer pushed back his chair. "Thanks."

Angelica caught his gnarled hand. "This is something that might get Jake killed, isn't it?"

Geer said, "Yes."

"No," said Jake Conger.

"Listen awhile before you go refusing."

Conger, a lean tan man of thirty-two, was sitting on a huge black boulder, frowning down at his ex-boss. "You saw the Vegetable Patch, saw Angelica," he said. "Don't go asking me to—"

"Jake, you know I'm not the kind of yoo-hoo who bullshits his agents."

"No, that's true. I also know I'm no longer your agent." He wiped perspiration from his forehead with a plyotowel.

"Well, you are and you aren't."

"If I know RFA they want to keep me on the Temporarily Retired list forever."

"They might, I don't," said Geer. "I can still do what I want with the Wild Talent Division. You know, you wouldn't be getting any dough at all if I hadn't set it up."

"Yeah, I know. You're not going to try to use my gratitude to get me to—"

"Just simply listen a minute, Jake. I wouldn't have teleported out from Manhattan if I had an ordinary problem," Geer said up at him. "I've got a couple of other agents who have your particular talent. Neither of them is as good as you, but I—"

"Ripley is. Matter of fact, Ripley is the best invisibility man you've got in WTD."

"He used to be, maybe. Right now . . . well, I don't know if I can trust him." Geer did further damage to his frizzled hair by running a hand through it. "I don't trust anybody. But I do trust you, Jake."

Conger asked, "What the hell's going on? You always felt your men were honest and—"

"Let me explain." Geer took a few deep breaths, snorted. "What do you think of President Bisbiglia?"

"He's okay as presidents go. Didn't vote for him. Why?"

Geer's head swiveled and he scanned the deserted stretch of morning beach. "He's gone goofy, completely bonkers."

"It doesn't show. I heard part of his fireside chat the other night and he seemed about as usual," said Conger. "If he is crazy wouldn't the Secretary of Mental Health know about it? That's one of his main functions, to test the president every so often."

"Bisbiglia has sent the Secretary of Mental Health to Vienna."

"So? Can't you get in touch with him there?"

"Vienna, 1897."

Conger's eyebrows rose. "How'd he do that? The Time Travel Overseeing Committee wouldn't sit still for that."

"I don't know, Jake. I can't get anybody at TTOC to say anything. And they turn down my requests to use one of their machines."

Conger shifted his position, scratched at his ankle. "Where did you get the idea Bisbiglia was actually crazy? How do you know he sent the MH Secretary backwards in time?"

Geer inched closer to the rock. "The head of the Federal Time Bureau came to me with his suspicions, about six weeks ago, Jake. He'd been getting odd reports from Time Police agents all through history. He developed the idea somebody was dumping people in time, to get rid of them."

"You figure it's not only the MH guy then?"

"The FTB head estimated about thirty people have been marooned in time since the start of this year," answered Geer. "When he, very casually, mentioned it to the Mental Health secretary he was told that President Bisbiglia is behind it. The president's got a plan to ship all his enemies and detractors off to suitable periods in history."

"Okay, so maybe Bisbiglia's crazy. TTOC isn't. How'd he get them to co-operate?"

"The bureau head was certain TTOC time machines aren't being used. Which means we're talking about a private setup."

"But TTOC licenses all private machines; watches them."

"Maybe. The head was going to run a check and get back to me."

"You've been using the past tense quite a lot. What's happened to him?"

"I don't know for sure, Jake. His office says he's on leave. I figure he was sent somewhere, too." Geer, grunting and puffing, pulled himself up onto the rock next to his former agent. "Jake, I'm maybe the only one left who knows what's going on. If those yoohoos on the other side, the goofy president's side, find out maybe I'll end up carrying a club in the mesozoic Era."

"No human life back then."

"So maybe I won't need a club. The point, Jake, is I'd like you to help out."

Conger poked his tongue into the inside of his cheek and watched the calm ocean. "The president absolutely crackers, the Secretary of Mental Health stranded in Vienna two centuries back. . . . It's an interesting situation."

"Interesting? It's the kind of thing to make your nuts drop into your boots."

"I've pretty much promised Angelica I was retired." From his running jacket pocket he took a phial of orange vitamin capsules. After shaking three into his palm, Conger said, "We're doing damn well with the Vegetable Patch. I hate to abandon it even for a few—"

"Wouldn't \$100,000 keep things going while you're on the assignment for me?"

Conger asked, "The Wild Talent Division is going to pay me \$100,000?"

"WTD and me. Don't ask too much about where the dough's coming from. I've found a way of hoodooing the petty cash computer."

"If the president of the United States is really crazy . . ."

"He is. I assure you. Balmy."

"Okay, then we'd better do something," said Conger. "I'll take the job."

Geer chuckled. "Splendid," he said. "First off you have to do a little recruiting. There's a guy I've heard about whom we're going to need."

"What's his particular knack?"

"He's a time traveler."

Chapter 2

"You remind me of my Uncle Giacomo."

"Small swarthy fellow, wasn't he?"

"All my uncles were," said Angelica, "but Uncle Giacomo was the one who was very devout."

Conger swept most of the pill bottles off the top of his bureau. The midday ocean glowed down below the wide one-way window of their bedroom. "He's the one they buried in a kneeling position?"

"That was Uncle Federico," replied his wife, "which was mostly because no one could figure out how to unbend him after he got himself assassinated at that crap game. Uncle Giacomo was the one who believed a man's talents came from God."

"Uncle Giacomo," said Conger while he packed the vitamins in his suitcase, "was a plumber."

"No, you're thinking of Uncle Antonio, the cyborg with a monkey wrench for a right hand."

"I thought it was a plunger."

"He had both. You could screw off one and screw on the other one," said his slim dark wife. "Uncle Giacomo was the telekinetic thief."

"Oh, yeah, I remember your telling me." Conger shut the suitcase. "He's the guy who moved five hundred cantaloupes from New Jersey to Connecticut entirely by mental effort."

"That's him. He thought you were obliged to use your God-given gifts. So he became a telek thief."

"My gift," Conger told her, "isn't exactly God-given. It came to me by way of WTD. And I wasn't struck suddenly with a talent for invisibility, I volunteered to be processed by the Wild Talent Division of the US Remedial Functions Agency." He, avoiding coming too close to her, carried his packed suitcase to the doorway of the large oval room.

"You're not, surely, implying you owe RFA something?"

Conger didn't look at her, but he felt certain she was standing with one hand on her hip and the other tangling through her dark hair. "I owe Geer something," he said.

Angelica made the sedate snorting sound she sometimes made. "That little frightwiggled son of a bitch really knows how to manipulate you."

"It's not a wig, Geer's hair really—"

"He just has to sniffle and dab at his baggy eyes with a lace hanky and you scoot in and pack a bag."

Conger faced her. Yep, hand on hip and the other one twisting a strand of hair. "I explained to you already, Angelica, what the setup was. There's a damn large fee involved, don't forget. And I didn't rush right in to pack, Geer left to go back to Manhattan over an hour ago," he said. "If he's right, if President Bisbiglia has gone goofy then—"

"Suppose it's Geer who's got a screw loose?"

"Possible, but I doubt it."

"No, it's much more logical to you that the President of the United States is a loony and that instead of simply being shackled up someplace with a cooch dancer the Secretary of Mental Health is back in Vienna in the late 19th Century. Sure, much more sensible than accepting the fact Geer's finally crossed the line between sanity and out and out goofiness." She shook her head. "Any man who, from what you've told me, eats so much pastry is bound to go sugar-nutty sooner or later."

"I think he's cutting down on sweets."

"He reeked of glucose when he came lurching into the restaurant this morning."

"Even so I tend to believe him." Conger moved close to his wife. "This whole business can probably be cleaned up in a few days."

"Or quicker," said Angelica, "depending on how soon they kill you."

"Well, be sure to tell the undertaker I wish to be buried in a jogging position, so when the final trump sounds I can get off to a good start."

She hesitated a few seconds, then came running across the bedroom to him. "Jake, I don't want you to go." Her arms took hold of him, her head rested against his chest. "Death separated us once already, I don't—"

"We overcame that," he reminded. "Trust me. I'll be back here in less than a week."

"All right," she said finally, letting go, backing away from. "Your first stop is the New Mexico Free Colony?"

"Yeah, that's where Buford True resides."

Angelica said, "He's really supposed to have the ability to travel through time?"

"According to what Geer told me. Buford True can, without the aid of gadgets or gimmicks, move back and forth along the time stream," said Conger. "Only about a dozen guys in the world with that particular wild talent. Anyone else who wants to time travel has to go through approved TTOC channels."

"If," said Angelica, "the president is really up to what your old boss suspects . . . some people may not want you to recruit Mr. True."

"Same thought occurred to me," admitted her husband. "Geer, though, says Wild Talent is the only government agency which knows about True so far. If I'm fast, and lucky, I can get him to agree to help."

"Help by going back into time to hunt for these people Geer thinks have been dumped?"

"Go back, and maybe take me along."

"Can Buford True do that?"

"So it is rumored."

"Then not only will you be in line to get knocked off, Jake, but you'll stand a good chance of being left behind in the middle of the past someplace."

"Oh, Vienna back in 1897 wouldn't be so bad."

Angelica placed both hands on her hips. "I don't want to stand in the way of your rushing off to do your best for Geer and country," she said. "However, I'm thinking if you do get stuck back in old Vienna or end up like my Uncle Emmanuel, why then—"

"What happened to your Unc . . . no, never mind. I don't want to hear about him. Get to your proposition."

"I think we ought to sleep together once more before you go."

"That's a very good idea," Conger decided.

Chapter 3

He was still visible when he arrived in the New Mexico Free Colony. The doomed teleport platform sat out on a dry flatpatch of brown and yellow desert. It was circled by many-elbowed cactus plants, fat and spikey in the hot yellow afternoon.

Two greenish middle-aged Venusian lizard men had teleported in immediately ahead of Conger and were waiting in the shade of one of the large candystripe umbrellas for someone to come and do something about their luggage. Suitcases, steamer trunks, duffel bags made a considerable mound under the umbrella with them.

"Travel light you said," the greener of the scaly lizard men was saying. "Pop off for a few days from the embassy you said. Simply look at the pile of rummage you've burdened us with, Lars."

"Don't hector me, Klaus. You know how irritable I get when I'm changing my skin."

"You're irritable all the time, Lars. Promise me a leisurely desert vacation with nothing to do but sit on a rock and bask in the sun and then you insist on dragging all this rubble with us."

"I certainly wasn't coming to a resort town without my party dresses, Klaus."

"Party dresses, okay. But why so many wigs?"

"I don't have manageable hair like yours. I really wish you wouldn't chide me over. . . ."

Conger, his single light suitcase swinging in his hand, walked away from the teleport oasis. A moderately large complex of buildings loomed some five hundred yards ahead of him. A hand-painted neocanvas sign tied to the central dome-building announced: Primitive Facilities Inn! All Human Help! Recapture The Leisurely Life Patterns Of the 20th Century! Vacancy!

A man who might be an Indian was behind the registration desk. "Boy, I wouldn't want to be a Martian catman on a day like this. It's bad enough having feathers."

"Are those your own feathers?" Conger dropped his bag in front of the angled realwood desk.

"No, no, they only make me wear this headpiece to add to the atmosphere. Hotter than Billy Jesus." The clerk pushed a registration card toward him. "Sometimes I wish I were a lizard man, heat doesn't seem to bother them. Except I get the feeling most of them are . . . you know, a little . . . you know . . ." He wagged his left hand in the air.

"Customs on Venus are different than ours." Conger signed the card with the name Frank S. Shawn.

"I guess so. There was a liz in here last week going around in a ballgown and a long blonde wig. A guy. That must be one strange planet." He checked the cubbyholes behind him. "I can put you in 201 or 206."

"Any difference?"

"You might possibly have some trouble with the bathtub in 206. We had a catman in there until yesterday, fellow with some sort of guilt compulsion which prompted him to take a lot of baths. Result is the drain's somewhat clogged with wads and tufts of fur."

"I'll take 201."

"We hope to get a plumber up to 206 within the week." He tossed a key to Conger. "We use only human help here, gives the Primitive Facilities Inn a real old-fashioned charm."

Conger picked up his suitcase. "I've heard a good deal about the Free Colony Free School Kibbutz. How far is that from here?"

"Ten miles south." The clerk adjusted his Indian chief headdress. "Funny none of our guests have been interested in that before and then this week you're the third to evidence curiosity."

"Oh, really? I'm in education myself, which is why I'd like to drop out there during my vacation," said Conger. "Who were the other interested guests? Perhaps they're colleagues of mine."

"First off it was Dr. Madrid, he's the cyborg chiropractor. That is to say, he's not a cyborg himself but he treats cyborgs in need of the chiropractic art. You should have seen his luggage, a mixture of nostrums and lubricating oil, medical instruments and garage tools. A very strange era we live in, Mr. Shawn."

"It is, yeah. Who else asked about the kibbutz school?"

"The Hellroarers."

"The Hellroarers?"

"Actually it was only half of them," amplified the befeathered clerk. "As you probably know the group split up some nine or ten years back. We have Neddy and Nobby staying with us.

"The old electroshock-bluegrass musical group of the 10s?"

"Yes, many's the Hellroarers concert I'd used to port to in my youth. I was telling Neddy about a Tangier concert whereat he introduced his cardiac arrest hoedown number. Difficult to believe it was ten long years ago. Little did I dream while I sat there holding hands with the virginal—"

"Maybe I'll encounter them during my stay." Conger walked away from the desk.

"No bellhops, no elevators," the clerk called after him.

"So I surmised." Conger went up a spongy ramp to the second floor, wondering if the others who were interested in the kibbutz school were also interested in Buford True who taught there.

"Oof! Ow! Ouch!"

"I sense a lingering tension, Mrs. Gurney."

"You near to broke me good leg, Dr. Madrid, tugging and pummeling it that way."

Dr. Madrid was a little chubby man, dressed in a white 1-piece doctorsuit. He was bent over the fat face-down naked woman on the floating massage table. "It isn't everyone I admit to my private quarters, Mrs. Gurney," he said. "The American Mechanical Medical Society frowns on its members plying their trade in their hotel suites whilst on desert vacations." He whacked her flesh leg with his fist.

"Owl Oof! It ain't I don't appreciate it, doc. I mean ter say I been in virtual agony, if yer know what I mean."

The chubby chiropractor poked at the woman's other, aluminum, leg with his finger. "Your main problem, dear lady, is this shoddy limb you chose to hook to yourself."

"What's 'at? I'll have yer know 'at's the finest fake leg money can buy." Mrs. Gurney scowled over her fat shoulder. "Once me and Bertie struck it rich in the frozen fish 'n' chips line, Bertie he says ter me, 'Bess, now you can buy yourself the best damn pseudoleg on the face of the bloody earth.' Which is exactly what I did."

"You've been hoodwinked, Mrs. Gurney. This limb is of Taiwan manufacture and can be purchased at any cyborg surplus depot for under \$300."

"Ain't so. Why with that leg I been able to jig and tapdance. You can't do 'at with no cheapjack limb. Ow! Ouch! Oof!"

The doctor returned to his treatment.

Conger was standing just inside the open balcony window. Neither the chubby doctor nor his prone patient could see him. He was invisible.

He watched Madrid work on the newly-rich woman for another moment or two before drifting, silently, across the living room and into the bedroom.

He'd already, using his considerable lockpicking skills, visited the rooms the Hellroarers were occupying. The two were out and Conger could find nothing to link them with any governmental agency or presidential conspiracy.

The chiropractor apparently slept on a grass mat. There was no bed in the room. Conger noticed a rectangular outline near the center of the mat. When he slid the mat aside he found a flat scramblephone hidden beneath it. He reached out to—

Bong!

Conger jerked back, replaced the mat. The secret phone was starting to give off the very faint bonging which meant there was a call coming in for Dr. Madrid.

"Doc, you better go easy with 'at there thumping. I'm commencing to hear a ringing in me blooming ears."

"Nothing to worry about, Mrs. Gurney. There's a lot of that going around, should clear up in a few days."

Bong! Bong!

"I never 'ad anything like this here before. 'If there's one thing Bessie's got,' me Bert is always saying, 'it's a bloody fine pair of ears.' "

"Yes, I'd concur in that. Now if you'll try to relax completely, dear lady, I'll scamper into the next room for a piece of equipment. I'll return in no time."

Bong! Bong! Bong!

"I ain't budging out of here till that blessed ringing quits."

After shutting himself in the bedroom, Dr. Madrid squatted down, rolled up the mat and pushed the answer button on the scramblephone.

Invisible, Conger watched over the doctor's shoulder. A head covered with a synpaper sack appeared on the phone screen.

"You look foolish with that thing over your head," said Dr. Madrid.

"Don't tell me, tell him. It's a security measure, another new one."

"I've got to get back to a wealthy patient. So what is it?"

"He wants a report."

"When I have news, I report it."

"Don't tell me, tell . . . ah . . . ah . . . ahchoo! Kerchoo! Darn, I think I'm coming down with something."

"Nonsense," Dr. Madrid told him, "it's a simple synpape allergy. Take off that sack, massage your temples for about ten minutes, then take—"

"Do you have anything to report?"

"No more than I already have. I'm not going to call on True again until tomorrow," said Dr. Madrid. "These things have to be deftly handled."

"Don't tell me, tell him."

"I will tell him if he doesn't cease this bullyragging of me. I'm looking forward to being Assistant Secretary of Medicine, Bruce, but I won't put up with a whole lot of—"

"You shouldn't mention my name right out like that."

"Why not? No one can bug this type of phone, and besides you've got a bag over your head. What's more, there are millions of Bruces in the world."

"Do you have anything I can pass on to him?"

"Tell him there is nothing new to report, Bruce. Buford True has been offered what he thinks is a job as a consultant with the Time Travel Overseeing Committee. He turned it down, prefers to remain a teacher. Should he refuse again tomorrow, I'll let the exuberant Hellroarers try a more direct type of persuasion."

"You better watch yourself, not get too cocky," warned bagheaded Bruce. "He's liable to add you to his mumblespool."

"Not a man of my ability."

"That's what Plautz thought. Then he put his name and time destination on the mumblespool and off went Plautz to Chaucerian England."

"For Plautz that's a step up. Now I must get back to Mrs. Gurney." He broke the connection.

"At least the blooming ringing in me ears has ceased, doc," said the fat woman when Dr. Madrid returned to her backside.

"Very good, very good."

"Oof! Ow! Oh!"

Conger moved to the door of the suite, at the next series of yowls he let himself out.

Chapter 4

Conger waited until dusk so he wouldn't cast a shadow. Then he drove his rented landcar out along the arrow-straight road from the center of the adobe and neon New Mexico Free Colony toward the Free Colony Free School Kibbutz.

He got no closer than a mile of the place. Smack in the middle of the roadway a black and white landcar was lying belly-up and burning. Flames went wooshing up into the darkening day, smoke swirled and snaked. Neowood sawhorses blocked the road beyond the crackling car. At least ten cops, most of them human, were posted on the road a safe distance off.

Standing clear of the car and the barricades were nearly a hundred people. They carried sticks, agricultural implements, limbs torn off robots, torches.

Conger backed up, swung off the road to park in among a group of shaggy-armed joshua trees.

"You in favor of Linus Xavier DeWald or Virgilio Campos Gonzo?"

The question was shouted in his window by a large Mexican holding a fisted robot arm.

"I'm not even registered to vote in this area." Conger eased out of the car. "Merely a tourist taking a quiet drive through—"

"Suppose you did live around here? Would you want them to name the kibbutz school after a mealy-mouthed, mincing-stepped, arch quisling like the late departed, and none too soon, Linus Xavier DeWald or after a god-fearing, stand-up-and-fight, don't-give-an-inch national hero such as Virgilio Campos Gonzo?"

"When you put it that way I can see it would be folly not to select—"

"Gonzo was no patriot!" A hefty redhaired woman in a plaid jumpsuit intruded, clutching a chair-leg club, into the discussion. "Why they ran him out of Uruguay, which is why he ended up living out his wretched life in Redlight, Arizona, dispensing towels in an all-human pootang emporium known as—"

"Wait, wait now, Mrs. Basilica," put in a frail old man who came stalking over through the twilight. "We have no definite proof Virgilio Campos Gonzo was ever employed in such a place. Nor indeed do we know if Redlight was any more wide-open than any other late 20th Century small town."

"Redlight? Why in the puckey would you name a town Redlight unless you were going to raise cain there?"

"A counter theory has it that the little red lights used on the front of certain models of servo robots were once manufactured—"

"Hey! Where's that gringo?" asked the man with the arm in his hand. He'd suddenly realized Conger didn't seem to be there.

Actually he was. Only for the past two minutes Conger had been invisible. As soon as all three of the arguing bystanders had ceased looking at him, he'd used his special talent to become unseen. The complex body lotion required for the transition from visible to invisible he'd applied before calling on Dr. Madrid earlier in the day. The rest of the knack, acquired after working and studying for nearly two years at the Wild Talent Division training school in New England, involved mental

control and was adapted from an ancient Tibetan ritual. For as long as Conger willed it, no one could see him.

Well, almost no one. The National Security Office had discovered a way of overcoming the WTD invisibility trick and seeing invisible agents. In fact, when Angelica had been with NSO she'd spotted him that way, which was how they first met. That, however, is another story.

Conger hurried on and soon was away from the demonstrators and the police barricades. The last light of the day had dropped out of the sky. The blackness overhead was clear and sharp.

Conger, taking a deep breath, commenced a slow steady jog. Out here alone in the flat desert country he didn't have to worry about anyone hearing his breathing or the rhythmic swat of his shoes.

The kibbutz school stood atop a mesa, and was reached by a series of curving plastic ramps which seemed, in the new night, to be tinted earth-color shades. A high thick wall of real adobe bricks circled the entire fifty acres inhabited by the school. Some distance to his left was a lighted gateway and several men who must be guards. Conger went in an opposite direction.

He was moving along the outside of the high wall when he heard the Hellroarers.

"Shet, Neddy, I don't see how this is any better than the Federal Work Service."

"It sure as shet is, Nobby. For one thing, we don't have to paint no murals on this job."

"I rather like murals. I was getting good, pretty good, at work boots."

"Hush now. Let's us get this eavesdropping dingus hitched up to this here wall."

"You got the wrong end stuck in your ear."

"I ain't got nothing stuck in my ear."

"Well, there's some little bitty black thing in your ear."

Smack!

"That was a gnat."

"Looked like, to me, they was wires coming out of it."

"Shet, Nobby, be still."

The two men were kneeling. Some twenty feet from where Conger was halted. They were big and wide, wearing black 1-piece worksuits, and had a small satchel of equipment open on the ground between them.

"I liked it a lot better when we was public idols, Neddy."

"Everybody likes being an idol, but that can't last. We was on the summit once, more than most people ever get."

"I'd like another spell up there."

"If we do this job for the president, we'll get a damn good reward from him."

"Oh, that turd."

"Come on, Nobby, you shouldn't go calling the President of the United States a turd."

"He's Italian, too, ain't he? Who'd of thought we'd live to see the day. A dago in the White House. A crazy turd Italian at that."

"He's not exactly crazy."

"Oh, yeah? It ain't crazy to have us snooping around this Buford True? You don't actual believe, Neddy, a fellow can travel through time without no machine or nothing?"

"Lots of folks hereabouts think man can do anything a machine can."

"Sure, that's what the turd with the Indian hat says at the inn, but our toilet hasn't flushed for three days."

"Hush, I think I got this little thingum all fixed up to the wall. Let me give her a test."

"Another thing which is crazy, Neddy, is this Panchronicon idea. I mean, why's he have to go and—"

"Be still, Nobby," said his brother. "I'll flick this switch and we'll hear what Buford True is saying in his apartment right on the other side of this wall."

Buzz! Click!

". . . crazy, Neddy, is this Panchronicon idea . . ."

"Doggone if True don't have a voice damn similar to mine, Neddy."

"Shet, that is yours. I must of hooked this thing up not quite right. I been recording you instead of him."

"Gee, makes me sort of sad to have you talk about recording again. Been so darn long since we had us a goldie that I like to—"

"Hush up."

Conger left them to their work. He moved a distance off and sat down with his back against the adobe wall. An hour went by, the stars gleamed all across the night sky.

Finally, closing up their satchel, Neddy and Nobby went away into the darkness.

Conger waited a few more minutes. He went to the spot where the Hellroarers had been working. Bending, he studied the tiny listening monitor they'd attached. He'd seen many similar ones. It took him five minutes to adjust the gadget so the brothers would never hear anything but a low hum.

Chapter 5

The door of the kibbutz canteen whammed open. A keg of ale came rolling out and along with it smoke, splashes of pastel light, tatters of numerous exuberant conversations. A thirteen year old boy in a 2-piece dormsuit followed, not initially touching the exit ramp. He landed on his side, tumbled upright and went chasing after the rolling keg.

"That ale's for our nightcap, you stupid scrap heads," the boy shouted as he pursued.

Spong!

The cork left the keg. Frothy ale came swilling and sputtering out.

The boy tackled the keg, wrestling it into a position where the bubbling opening was pointing at the night sky. "Where's that trapping cork? Oh, you pro-Gonzo nerfs! Dorm #3 is going to stomp your arses."

The lost cork came floating through the air to poke itself back into the keg.

"Holy guff!" The astonished boy let go the keg. "It's a scrapping miracle. I haven't seen one since I went over the wall at St. Norbert's Evangelical Commando Academy."

Conger, continuing invisible, moved on toward Buford True's cottage.

The ale-soaked boy started pushing the keg along one of the ribbed ramps which led to the dorm area of the school grounds.

Before Conger reached True's cottage its door came bamming open. A Martian catman in a 3-piece scholarsuit came, swiftly, out backwards.

"Honestly, Tark, I wish you'd realize I mean it when I say I don't really care for arguments," said a voice from inside. "Same goes for you, Olaf."

This time it was a lizard man who pinwheeled out of Buford True's cottage into the clear chill night. "Nevertheless, Buford, you have to admit Gonzo's credentials are much more—"

"This is really a good example of what I'm always saying about visiting professors not knowing their backsides from their elbows when it comes to local issues." Buford shut his door.

Conger had been able to slip inside before that happened. The adobe cottage had whitewashed walls which were decorated with a mixture of bright Indian blankets and posters advertising 20th Century motion pictures.

True was large, very straight-standing, with short-cropped blond hair. Thirty-one, his face was long, chin prominent. He had on a 1-piece terry loungesuit. Apparently he'd thrown out the last of his guests and was now alone.

Conger cleared his throat.

Buford gave a hunch of his broad shoulders, turned in the direction of the sound. "What side are you on in this ridiculous debate?"

Fully visible now, Conger said, "I'm Jake Conger, with the Wild Talent Division of the US Remedial Functions Agency. I'd like to—"

"I suppose," said Buford, "I didn't make myself clear to you people during my last encounter. You see, I don't want to work for anyone except this particular school at the moment. I made a decision quite early to lead exactly the sort of life I want to. Quite often I'm dubbed a loner, which, I think, does sum up my character. It doesn't matter what others are up to so long as I can lead the sort of clean, useful life we were all meant to lead. Once, when I was working as a deacon in—"

"I'm not here simply to sign you up."

"You've no doubt heard of the concept of a vocation. I don't want to sound mystical about it, since I've always felt you have to be very down to earth about this sort of thing, yet I honestly believe I've had a calling. My mission, so to speak, is to teach. Not that I haven't been offered jobs which would pay a good deal more than this one. That's simply not my style, that's not the essential Buford True. No, I must follow my calling."

"My Uncle Giacomo used to say a man has to use his God-given gifts to their fullest."

"You don't look like the sort of fellow who ever had an uncle with a name like that."

"My wife's uncle actually," admitted Conger. "Point is, you're one of the few people in the world with a talent for unassisted time travel."

"You can be sure I've given this all a good deal of thought, Mr. Conger, and concluded my most important talent is for teaching young people," Buford told him. "I really don't care to use my timehopping for anything but my own purposes. It comes in handy once in awhile for going back to check some point we're covering in a history course, for instance." He glanced over at some of the movie posters. "I must admit I have a real weakness for last century motion pictures and so I sometimes go back to catch one at a theater in the past. That can be hazardous, as I was telling Tark and Olaf before we got into our little political disagreement. The other day, for instance, I'd decided to hop back to Chicago to take in a film called Manhattan Melodrama, which featured Myrna Loy, William Powell and Clark Gable. I don't imagine you've ever heard of them, but as I was coming out of the theater it so happened that a criminal named John Dillinger was also making his exit. Well, it wasn't until the federal men opened fire that I recalled—"

"A guy named Dr. Madrid has been to see you, hasn't he?"

Buford blinked. "Forgive me, my mind was starting to drift back in time. Some of my colleagues have remarked about that, but I tell them, 'Even in a daze I'm more alert than most of you.' Dr. Madrid? Yes, he made me a very handsome offer and flattered me a good deal. I explained to him I wasn't susceptible to either money or praise. Vanity isn't one of the sins Buford True has to rid himself of."

"Madrid is a fake."

"You mean he doesn't actually represent the president?"

"He works for President Bisbiglia sure enough, but not for the Time Travel Overseeing Committee," explained Conger. "He hasn't told you the real reason for their wanting you."

"The reason doesn't much matter, since I don't intend to—"

"Mostly they want you so nobody else, especially the Wild Talent Division, can get you at you."

"You'll find similar attitudes throughout history, rivalries between factions," said Buford.

"This is more than rivalry between government agencies." Conger told the big timehopper most of what Geer had told him this morning.

"Boy," remarked Buford when he'd finished. "You certainly spin a fascinating story, Mr. Conger. If I could believe even a portion of—"

"It's the truth," said Conger. "Only a few minutes ago I found Neddy and Nobby Hellroarer outside the walls of this place planting a listening bug. They mentioned they were working for President Bisbiglia, too."

"The Hellroarers. Huh, I haven't thought of them in years," Buford said. "There used to be four of them I think. I recall when I was managing a kid Softball team back in Connecticut I took off one day to attend a Hellroarers concert in Bridgeport. Did you inquire as to what's happened to Nicky and Nat?"

"I didn't ask them a damn thing. I just eavesdropped on them while they were eavesdropping on you."

"Why should they allow you to get away with that?"

"Because they didn't see me, because I was invisible."

"Invisible?"

"That's my particular talent."

"Although I'm hard to stun, you've nearly done it." Buford sat down, with a thunking thump, in a realwood and realeather chair. "Even though I have what you'd call a wild talent, I'm not used to running into other gifted people." He pointed a large thumb at Conger. "You were also invisible when you first entered, weren't you?"

"Yep."

Buford nodded. "Had to be. I was pretty much preoccupied tossing those fellows out, but I usually never get so preoccupied as to miss someone sneaking in." He nodded again, more slowly. "One of my few flaws is my temper. Cost me my job as chaplain with the—"

"From what I've been able to learn, True, Dr. Madrid is going to make you another pitch," Conger said. "Then he's going to have the Hellroarers grab you."

Laughing, Buford said, "You did mention there were only two of them, didn't you? Don't think I'll have to worry. I'm in excellent physical shape. You noticed how I handled Tark and Olaf, who are both substantially built fellows, Mr. Conger. By the way how do you spell your name? With a J in the middle?"

"Soft G," answered Conger. "Now how about worrying about the President of the United States being crazy as a quilt, misusing his authority and—"

"There have been a good many eccentric presidents. The fact is once you've done even a small amount of time travel, Mr. Conger, you notice there's a long tradition of goofiness in high places. I don't see there's much I can do about that, except to go on teaching and helping to produce a more aware generation to take over. The biggest mistake, one of them anyway, is thinking you can meddle too much in outside affairs."

"True, they've got bugging equipment stuck right out there, they're planning to cart you off. This is your affair."

Buford rose up. "I simply don't see it that way." he said. "I've always been able to take care of myself. I don't want to work for you or for anyone else."

Conger went to the door.

Buford took hold of the doorknob. "Would it make you nervous if I could watch you go invisible?" he asked. "I've never seen anything like that."

Conger gave him a thin little smile and disappeared.

"Damn," said Buford.

Chapter 6

"It sounds like they're rioting in the streets there," said Geer. "What's going on?"

"They're rioting in the streets," answered Conger. "A local issue, nothing to do with our troubles." He was sitting in a sprawlchair, using his room pix-phone, to which he'd attached an antibug.

Geer, back in the Manhattan offices of the Wild Talent Division, was munching on a pastry several layers high. "I've got a hideout ready for Buford True, a gatehouse over in a town named Allergen, Connecticut. Mostly hayfever sufferers live there, so we—"

"He says he won't come."

The pro-Gonzo, anti-Gonzo, pro-DeWald and anti-DeWald slogans were loud in the late afternoon streets directly outside the hotel.

"Eh? Did you say he said he won't come?"

"He says he won't come."

After licking a blob of syncream from a knuckle, the frazzled WTD chief asked, "Why"

"Buford would rather teach than timehop, he feels teaching is his real calling."

"What kind of yoohoo attitude is that?"

Splat!

A chunk of ripe fruit had come sailing through the open window to hit smack into the oval pixphone screen.

"He's a very independent guy," Conger explained.

"Jake, did you once tell me too many sweets could make you see spots?"

As he wiped the screen and the piclens with a plyochief, Conger said, "Those aren't spots, they're splotches."

"A very unsettling experience, visiting your Vegetable Patch joint yesterday. It put me to reexamining my values and my eating habits. I haven't been feeling as spry as—"

"Look into the background of a chiropractor name of Dr. George Madrid," Conger said. "Also Neddy and Nobby Hellroarer, who are 50% of the old shockrock group."

Geer, eyes increasingly wrinkle-ringed, was eying the pastry in his hand in much the same way Hamlet traditionally scrutinizes Yorick's skull. "Who might they be?"

Conger filled his boss in on what he'd learned since arriving in the New Mexico Free Colony yesterday. "Madrid did visit Buford again this morning, offered him \$200,000 to depart for Washington. Buford turned him down."

"What's his weakness?"

"Not quite sure, but money doesn't seem to be it."

After a few more second's hesitation Geer took another chomping bite of the multilayered pastry. "Then they'll move to snatch him next."

"Probably tonight," said Conger. "You might try to learn how come such a multitude found out about Buford and his talent. We were supposed to be the only agency with him on our list."

Chewing sadly, Geer said, "Leaks. The Wild Talent Division is developing more leaks than a sinking ship. I tell you, Jake, I get very depressed when—"

"Too much sugar," Conger told him. "Your glum moods have nothing to do with the lousy state of affairs. Keep that hideaway ready. I'll have Buford back to you by tomorrow sometime."

"I thought you said he wasn't volunteering?"

"He doesn't know he is," said Conger.

Zing!

"Shet, Nobby, will you quit at doing that."

"I'm simple protecting myself from some kind of snake-like creature which was lurking over by them rocks."

"A snake-like creature? What was it?"

"A snake." As big hulking Nobby dropped his stungun back into his belt holster he grinned up at the full moon. "Remember that midnight concert we done in Lisbon back in '11 when we stunned every danged soul in the first and second balcony. That was some event. Variety said as how—"

"Nostalgia don't boil no soup bones. Come on, it's your turn to lug this here mother humper."

"Shet, I toted him all the way from the school wall to the oasis," complained Nobby. "And that's like to be three miles."

"One point three," said his brother, who had the unconscious Buford True slung over his shoulder. "You got to carry him the rest of the way to the secret hanger."

"Shet, it was just like this when we was idols. I used to play the bass and you got the goshdarn tambourine." He grabbed hold of the stunned Buford, transferring him to his broad back.

"That was daddy's idea. He figured as how I was a naturalborn tambourine man."

"Lot he knew, running off with that bearded lady from the hydroelectric circus."

"Weren't a real beard."

"Well, any girl who'd wear something like that just for fun's got to be a mite strange."

"Were merely a prop, same like your bass fiddle."

"I didn't know I had a choice. I'd of rather—"

Zing!

Nobby, shifting Buford slightly, glowered at his brother. "Now you're taking to stunning snakes."

"That weren't no snake."

"One of them lizards then."

"Could of swore I seen a shadow right over there by them cactus things. Like the shadow of a feller."

"Aw, all them cactus plants make shadows like fellers, cause they got arms and all."

"Yeah, but this shadow didn't have prickly arms."

Nobby grunted, redistributed the weight of the big timehopper and continued trudging across the night desert.

After several minutes Neddy said, "Ever get the feeling you're being followed?"

"Well, sure. When we were idols we got followed all the time. Remember when them Campfire Girls from Kamensk Uralski tracked us all the way to—"

"Don't mean that." He was twisting his shaggy head from side to side. "I mean I got the feeling like there's somebody right on our tail."

Nobby glanced around. "Don't see nobody."

"Nor me neither, but I got that feeling."

Nobby said, "There's the shed where we got the skycar stashed. Let's get this guy inside and take off."

Scanning the area around the old neotin hut, Neddy took hold of the new printlock and stuck in his thumb and forefinger. After the lock clicked open he tugged the doors apart. "Spooky," he muttered.

The skycar was a deep shade of blue, almost as dark as the night. Nobby got Buford tumbled into the rear of the vehicle's cabin.

His bulky brother circled the craft once, then a second time. Finally he nodded his head and crossed to shove the shed doors completely open. "Spooky," he repeated.

Inside the skycar, with the cabin lights on at the dim-setting, Nobby arranged Buford across the two rear passenger seats. "He ain't going to wake up till after we get him to the president's hideaway, so ain't no need to truss him up." Backing off, he looked at the far corner and chuckled. "Glad I didn't donate this to the Popular Culture Shrine at Mentor, Ohio." His famous silver-plated, jewel-encrusted bass was leaning against the cabin wall. "Going to pass away the travel hours by playing me some . . . Hey!"

Thunk!

The heavy musical instrument had risen up, floated across the cabin and bonged him over the head. Nobby stumbled, legs forming odd angles.

Thunk! Bong!

Two more hearty swats over the skull and he went out flat, strewn between the front and rear seats.

Zing!

"I'm going to damage you!" shouted Neddy. He'd climbed into the ship in time to see the floating bass thump his brother the final time.

The blast from his stungun caused the bass to quiver, its strings to hum. The instrument fell over.

Noticing there was no one behind it Neddy said, "Spooky." He stayed very still, listening. "Even if I can't see you none, I'm going to probable hear you."

Zing!

Zing!

Neddy lowered his gun, intent on hearing his invisible opponent fall. He heard nothing.

Now his brother seemed to be getting up. "Shet, you trying to stun your own kin?"

"How come your lips don't move when you talk?" inquired Neddy. "How come, for that matter, your eyes ain't hardly open?"

"Well, shet." Nobby's body came hurtling at him.

Neddy saw it was coming, but he hadn't enough time to dodge. "Oof," he said at the instant of collision.

Both the Hellroarers went toppling through the open cabin door. The door was shut before they were finished settling into the grey shed floor.

"Might as well make use of this thing," said Conger. Visible, he dropped into the pilot seat. A moment later the skycar went roaring out of the shed.

Chapter 7

Conger was sitting out on the hermetically sealed sundeck taking in the midday view of the surrounding Connecticut countryside. There were six pyramid-shaped cottages in this section of Allergen, each with an allergen-proof suntower at its apex. There were no trees, no grass, no plants or flowers. Only paving, tinted pale green, filling in the acreage between cottages. And one piece of popkult sculpture at the center of each acre, made of safe materials. The statue nearest their hideaway pyramid represented a cowboy hat and was 20 feet high at the crown.

A seagull, strayed from the nearby Long Island Sound, came flying over. It hit the force screen, which was 300 feet up, made an awking noise and flew off.

"I'd rather wheeze. I'd rather wheeze and sneeze and whoop." Geer crossed the threshold from the den to the deck. His 2-piece bizsuit was unusually rumpled and disordered, pocket flaps were askew, zipperseams undone.

"You've lost a little of your dapperness," observed Conger, rising from his lycra slingchair.

"Those yoohoos at the townline," said the WTD chief. "They frisked me before they let me in just now. Security robots, not androids. Got the coldest hands I've encountered since I broke the contract with wife #2. They confiscated five maplebars, three jam tarts, a brioche and a Venus-crepe. Then they sprayed me with something to make the dust on me settle. I've never been dusty in my life, but tell these yoohoos."

Conger, frowning, went to the edge of the deck and glanced down. "Nobody following you?"

"Am I a yoohoo? Don't I know how to elude the most gifted gumshoes in the universe?"

Shrugging, Conger said, "You took a look at True."

"Yeah, how'd you know?"

"You don't think you could walk in here, peek into his bedroom and prowl the kitchen without my being aware."

"Kitchen? All I found in the way of food was a sack of granola and three loathsome looking things labeled seajacks. Resembled something you'd scrape of the underside of a barge which—"

"True should be coming out of it fairly soon."

"He's going to start howling." Geer slunked into the chair his agent had abandoned. "He looks, unconscious anyhow, like the sort of rube who'll yell 'Kidnap' and 'Violation of my civil rights' and other such yoohoo sentiments."

"Maybe." Conger took another look down at the flat pale blue paving which surrounded their solid triangle cottage. "I've a hunch, however, he's going to be mad at Dr. Madrid and the Hellroarers. Mad enough to lend us a hand."

Geer fidgeted. "What's a seajack taste like?"

"Kelp."

"Yang." His lips puckered. "I'll fast." After rubbing his gnarled hands across stomach and kneading further wrinkles into the fabric of his bizsuit, Geer said, "I think you better get down to Washington, Jake."

"Thought you wanted me to accompany Buford back to old Vienna to retrieve our missing Secretary of Mental Health."

"If he agrees to help, we'll send him alone."

"Was looking forward to a timehop. Why Washington?"

"For one thing you're going to have to get into the Fax vaults in Arlington."

"Can't we go through Fax Central in Manhattan?"

Geer's frizzled hair danced as he shook his head "Somebody's been playing tricks in Manhattan. According to them neither Dr. George Madrid or any of the four Hellroarers exist."

"Oh, so?"

"Plus which I don't want to push this inquiry any further openly. I'm starting to feel very twitchy."

"Okay, I'll slip into our nation's capital and find out what I can about Dr. Madrid and associates," said Conger, commencing to grin. "Might as well drop in on the president, too."

"He's sure to have an invisibility-spotter on his staff by now," Geer warned. "NSO worked out a way to see you boys over two years ago, remember?"

"Bisbiglia won't take the guy with him wherever he goes. I'd like, too, to find some of his mumble-spoons."

"Ah, yes, I've heard rumors about his fabled electronic shit list. But, like the Holy Grail, it's going to be damned hard to find even a trace of them."

"The grail is in the seeking, as—"

"I can't say I'm really very happy about this. Usually I'm pretty easygoing, but I don't really like being kidnapped." Buford True, slightly unkempt, tottered out onto the deck.

"We didn't kidnap you," Geer assured him. "We saved you from your kidnappers."

Buford scowled at the little wrinkled Wild Talent Division chief, then at Conger. "This sure isn't the kibbutz school. It's not, for that matter, even New Mexico."

"It's Connecticut," Conger told him. "Neddy and Nobby used stunguns on you. I grabbed you away from them."

Straightening, Buford slammed a fist into his palm. "Say, that's right," he said. "I know darn well I could take them in a fair tussle. I'm awfully good at physical combat, which perhaps you noticed when—"

"Quit acting like a yoohoo," suggested Geer. "Are you naive enough to think those bastards are going to fight fair?"

"Well, now you mention it, that does seem rather an innocent assumption on my part." He shook his head. "I'll be frank with you, I was vain enough to believe I could disarm them before they—"

"Next time those Hellroarers get a chance at you," persisted Geer, "they may decide it's simpler to knock you off. Their main concern, no matter what kind of foolishness Dr. Madrid tried to pass off on you, is to keep you from working for us."

"Well, I think if you can persuade me you're really honest, I will go to work for you," said Buford, scratching his head. "I've been getting a little restless in New Mexico lately. I'm absolutely certain it's my destiny to be a teacher, though lately I've had rambling on my mind once again."

"Sit down," said Geer. "I'll fill you in on what we'd like you to do."

Conger said, "I'll be heading for Washington."

"Good. Come back to this place when you're through, it's safer than our Manhattan office."

"Let's hope so," said Conger.

Chapter 8

"Me no likeum," said the Vice President of the United States. "Me maybe go on warpath, paleface."

"Now, now, Mr. Runningwater, try to view this from my side."

"Wait minute. Me wantum guzzle more firewater."

"Well, now, Mr. Runningwater, that's part of the problem. I'm not supposed to let in anyone who's at all tipsy."

"You callum VP of US, first redman ever to holdum such high office, you callum me tipsy."

"I might even go so far as to say you were three sheets to the wind, sir." The guard was seated, uneasy, behind a curved aluminum desk. "Which is part of the problem. Another part being I'm not supposed to allow naked or undressed people into the Fax vaults down here."

"You callum this lovely squaw naked?"

"Well, let us say partially clothed at best."

"She wearum work clothes. You know who this is, paleface?"

"I believe I do. Judging by the recent stories in the press linking her name with yours, this must be Dynamo Daisy, billed in the most fashionable nightspots here and abroad as the Girl With The Electric Tits."

"Are you a fan of mine?" asked the bare-chested Dynamo Daisy. "I'm always so happy to meet fans."

"I can't say as how I've even seen any—"

"Enough all this senseless powwow. Me wantum go into Rooms 6H and 17M."

"Well, I don't possibly . . . oh, my, isn't that interesting."

Dynamo Daisy had caused her left nipple to glow a bright green. "I don't mind entertaining fans for nothing," she said with a smile. "Ever since I had my chaboobies electronically enhanced I've felt I had a calling, an obligation to—"

"Shutum mouth, turnum off tits," ordered the vice president, a huge bronze-toned man in a 1-piece yellow and blue funsuit. "Me wantum in, fella, wantum no more delays." He paused to guzzle more peace brandy from the 1/2-gallon jar he was clutching. "Otherwise me scalpum you."

"You're putting me in an awkward position, Mr. Runningwater," said the guard of this subterranean wing of the vast fact-storage vaults. "Not only are you a shade under the influence, not only are you accompanied by a nearly unclothed young lady, but you furthermore have dragged a group of unruly blackamoors with you."

"Them not people, them androids," explained the annoyed vice president. "Them is Louis Armstrong and his Hot Five. Me buyum in New Orleans last month. If you makeum little wampum on side, spendum. That's what my daddy, Chief Flyingleap, always tell—"

"Runny, maybe you ought not to boast about having your fingers in the till," cautioned Dynamo Daisy. "You know how the media jumps on things like that."

"Screwum media."

"Hey, all you cats," asked the Louis Armstrong android, "how'd you like to hear *Struttin' With Some Barbecue*?"

"They oughtn't to play music down here, Mr. Runningwater."

"You ready to swing it, Kid Ory?"

"Oh, yeah, Pops."

"How 'bout you, Johnny Dodds?"

"Ready when you are, Satch."

"Let's hear you whip that piano, Lil."

"Here I goes, Satchelmouth."

"No pianos!" The guard jumped up, pointing. "They should never have allowed you to bring all these minority mechanisms down here in the first place, Mr. Runningwater. Not to mention a piano."

"One two, one two three go," said the Louis Armstrong android.

"They let me in because me stunum."

"Beg pardon? I can't hear you with all this caterwalling."

"Stunum." The vice president nudged Dynamo Daisy.

"Do I have to?"

"Stunum."

After the girl made an unhappy face, a beam shot out of her right breast and hit the guard in the chest.

"Isn't that amaz—" He flopped over onto his desk.

"You stay here playum music. Me and squaw go do job."

"Okay, Pops," called the Armstrong andy as Runningwater and the nearly naked girl hurried down a corridor.

Conger, invisible, followed the couple.

The Wild Talent Division invisibility process assured that most androids and robots wouldn't see him either. Still Conger glanced back over his shoulder, because he'd had the feeling ever since he arrived in Washington, DC, early this afternoon that . . . No, it was unlikely anyone was trailing him.

He hadn't followed the vice-president down here. Their arriving at the underground facilities at about the same time was a coincidence. Conger felt, though, he'd better follow Runningwater now.

"Oh, darn," said Dynamo Daisy up ahead.

"What wrong?"

"My left kaboobie is starting to spark. I told that repair man and I told him it didn't feel quite right, but he swore up and down there wasn't anything wrong. And the fees they charge, \$420 an hour plus parts."

"Me scalpum."

"You know, Runny, I wish you wouldn't do this Indian talk every time you belt down a few. It really grates on my nerves."

"Me Indian, talkum like Indian."

"I never heard an Indian talk like you do. Where'd you learn this jargon?"

"Watchum old movies in National Film Archives," replied the vice president. "Here Room 6H. We destroyum all Hellroarers records, keepum noseyspies from findum out anything."

"Can you simply just do that, Runny?"

"Why not, squaw? Me VP. Me plenty important, and once that goofy paleface Bisbiglia goes completely loco, me takeum over country." He pushed the green plastic door open.

Conger eased in before the door wooshed shut. The big room was walled with rows of factbins, each packed with microfiles.

"I remember seeing those Hellroarers when I was a little bitty girl," said Dynamo Daisy. "Matter of fact, Runny, it was seeing them light up their private parts for the grand finale which gave me the inspiration to have my kaboobies augmented."

"Shutum face while me lookum."

"You really can't hold your drinks."

This reminded the vice president to sip from the jar he was carrying. After drinking and wiping his mouth on his sleeve, he headed for the eye-level drawer which held the Hellroarers' records. Everything that was known about each of the four brothers was recorded here, and duplicated in the Fax Central tower in Manhattan. Runningwater located, setting down his jar first, the file cards he wanted and extracted them. "Now they no existum no more." The cards went into a floppy yellow pocket of his funsuit for safe keeping.

Or so he thought. While the vice president was stooping to retrieve his liquor, Conger picked the yellow pocket. Once the cards were under his coat they, too, were invisible.

"Seems to me," said Dynamo Daisy, "if you were so proud of your heritage and this country of ours you wouldn't allow President Bisbiglia to do all these bizarre things. You'd expose his machinations to the cold scrutiny of the public, Runny."

"Me gottum method to madness," he told her while moving for the door. "Helpum now, but afterwhile . . ." He chuckled. "When time right me going to use the numblespools got dupes of, too. Be big chief of whole—"

"I don't think any of this is right," said the girl. "And he shouldn't be using that . . . what do they call it?"

"Callum Panchronicon."

Conger halted in midroom. He remembered all at once he'd heard the name before. One of the Hellroarers had used it. "Should have caught it then," he told himself. "The Panchronicon could be the name of the gadget they're using for their time dumping."

Vice President Runningwater and Dynamo Daisy had stepped out into the green plastic corridor. The door hushed shut after them.

Conger sprinted, caught the door handle and turned it.

Chapter 9

Buford True poured another slurp of honeysub syrup onto his freshly-toasted seajacks. "I pride myself on being able to eat anything," he told Geer. "During my stretch as a missionary in Africa 32 I was invited to join in a feast where the main course consisted of some fellows I'd graduated from divinity—"

"Yang," remarked Geer, turning away. Wrinkle-framed eyes on the waning day, he continued with the briefing. "Let's get on with this."

Chewing, running his tongue over his teeth, swallowing, Buford said, "I think I've got a relatively retentive mind, Mr. Geer. Fact of the matter is, when I was a boy growing up in Michigan my Uncle Dutch used to say, 'That dadgum boy don't forget nothin', goshdarn him.' Uncle Dutch had an odd way of expressing himself, for a nukepower technician. At any rate, I believe I've assimilated all I need to know." He forked another section of the seajack into his mouth. "I'm to hop back to Vienna, to Vienna of mid-August, 1897, and I find this Mr. Wardell Toomey. Mr. Toomey, the Secretary of Mental Health, is a tall paunchy man of forty-six, dark-haired. He has a small crescent shape scar near his left eye and a large strawberry birthmark on his right buttock . . . I really doubt I'm going to get a look at that last one. I suppose most of your agents will do anything to make certain a mission is a success. Buford True, however, draws the line at pulling down the pants of some middle-aged—"

"You don't have to look at his god damned backside," Geer told him. "I give you details, along with the pictures, because I'm thorough. You never know what little detail is going to prove helpful in the field."

"Well, I really doubt having detailed information about what a man's rear end looks like is going to be much help." Buford set his empty plate on the sundeck floor. "You know, Mr. Geer, while I've never been a secret agent before, I'm very confident I can do a darn good job for you."

"The very confident ones are the ones who end up dead the soonest."

Buford laughed. "An old secret agent maxim, huh? I appreciate it, but you won't have to worry." Leaning forward, he rested elbows on his knee. "One thing I've been puzzling over while you've been briefing me, Mr. Geer. The Time Travel Overseeing Committee has got time cops spotted here and there through the past, and they've also got them roaming through time. Why doesn't Mr. Toomey simply contact one, tell him he's been marooned and get a lift home?"

"There's a hell of a lot of past time, Buford, and not all that many time cops," answered Geer. "It's also possible Secretary Toomey had his brains diddled before they tossed him back there."

"Oh. He may not know who he is then, may have amnesia."

"Or a new imposed identity."

"Going to make my job a little harder," said Buford. "I enjoy an extra challenge. Things get too easy and Buford True gets restless."

"You can speak the language, you can talk to them in Vienna?"

"I speak German, yes. Also French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese and a dozen or so dead and gone tongues. Always have had a knack for language. In fact, my Uncle Dutch used to say, 'You stop that dad-burned tad from jawing in one lingo, he's sure to start blabbing in another.' "

Geer said, "I wish we weren't in Allergen, I wish I could trust somebody. Then I could send out for donuts."

"There's donuts in the kitchen, Mr. Geer. I found some way in the back of the food box."

Geer left his slingchair. "Donuts? What kind, jelly-filled or glazed or . . . Wait, the only kind of donuts they'd have here would be—"

"These are non-sweet no-flour donuts. More like bagels actually, but if you're starving you might—"

"I'm not starving." Geer sat. "Now, about this time travel ability of yours, Buford. You really don't need any equipment?"

"Nope, just me."

"Do you work like a time machine? Can you leave here and pop in Vienna, 1897? Or do you just go back to Connecticut in 1897?"

"I seem to have, don't ask me why, all the advantages of the most sophisticated machines. Although I hear this Dr. Stewart Peralta is working on—"

"Peralta's a yoohoo, forget him. Been working on his new type of time machine for years, getting all kinds of government grants. A yoohoo. So you can, snap like that, hop from here to Vienna."

"Yes, I can do that. Only side effect is a slight headache right across here, which may be nothing more than an allergic reaction to air from another century. Like once when I was in Venice during the late 15th Century I kept sneezing through most of my stay."

Geer asked, "If you spend a day in the past, can you come back to the minute you left here or—"

"A day back there means a day gone by. If I leave now and spend a day in Vienna, then I'll be back tomorrow afternoon at this hour. Same way the TTOC and private time machines work, Mr. Geer. Although Dr. Peralta was claiming he—"

"Dismiss that yoohoo from your thoughts."

Sitting back, Buford slapped his knee. "Guess I'll take off."

"No." Geer shook his head. "I want you to wait until Jake Conger comes back. He may dig up something we should know about the exact whereabouts of Wardell Toomey."

"I don't really think I need any more information. I'm willing to take my chances."

"I'm not." Geer stood. "I'll teleport to Manhattan. When Conger shows up here ask him to fill you in on anything he's got about Toomey, then have him call me in Manhattan."

"Isn't it safe for him to go to your Manhattan offices?"

"I don't know what's safe anymore," said Geer.

Chapter 10

The squirrel fell out of the tree.

Dry leaves came swirling down with it.

The stunned animal would have landed directly at Conger's feet, except that he had gone diving into the brush when he heard the faint hum of the stungun. The gun itself he saw only briefly, only after it had fired at him and missed. Then it vanished back under the clothes of the invisible agent who was waiting up ahead for him.

Conger knew the other invisible man could see him. But, once the gun had been put away, he had no idea where his antagonist was.

Crouched behind the bole of a wide tree he listened. "Vice President Runningwater can't have an invisible guard hereabouts all the time," he said to him. "So this has to be somebody who's anticipating me."

The faint twinges of apprehension, the flickering hunches that he was being followed were valid. He was being stalked. Somebody knew he was coming here to search the vice president's mansion for the mumblespool dupes.

"Meaning someone followed me into the Fax vaults."

Very slowly and carefully Conger reached up and caught hold of a low branch of the tree which was, probably, shielding him from view.

He chinned himself, pulled up into the tree. He climbed high enough to be screened from below by the branches and remaining leaves, then bellied out onto a strong branch. Breathing with considerable care, Conger watched the leafy ground below. The Runningwater estate was surrounded on all sides by acres of forest. Since this was autumn there was a considerable quantity of dead leaves underfoot.

"Here he comes."

No matter how invisible you are, how much you cloud a watcher's mind, you can't walk across a bed of leaves without making an indentation. It was one of the hazards of invisibility, a distinct limitation of the WTD process.

Another footprint, closer, and another.

Conger inched further along the branch. He waited until a footshaped hollow formed directly beneath him. He dropped from his perch.

"Damn it to hell," said the invisible man as Conger landed on his back.

"Ripley," he said, recognizing the voice.

"Damn right and I'm going to fix you good, Jake."

Conger managed to get a bearhug on his unseen opponent. From the feel of it he had both Ripley's arms pinned to his unseen sides. "Why'd you sell out?"

"No business of yours." Ripley kicked back, spiking one of Conger's ankles. "You should have stayed in the vegetable business." He kicked again, yanked an arm free and then elbowed Conger in the pit of the stomach.

Conger bent, his hold relaxing.

"Going to freeze you and put you out of the way," promised the struggling Ripley. "Then I'll handle that sodkicker you got stored in Connecticut."

Conger saw the butt of a stungun materializing. He grabbed, around the invisible bulk of Ripley, for it and got a finger onto the trigger. He squeezed.

"Damn it to . . ." Ripley materialized directly in front of Conger, unconscious and falling toward the crackly, leafy ground.

Conger, who'd kept hold of the stungun, stepped clear. Pocketing the weapon, he dragged Ripley behind the tree he'd used. After frisking the thickset, bald Ripley and finding no nothing of interest, Conger carefully covered him with leaves. Ripley should stay there, if no one came hunting for him, several hours.

The rest of his trek to the vice presidential mansion was made even more cautiously.

"It's your fault, lady. You haven't been sticking to your maintenance schedule."

"Huh? I've poured out 2300 bucks to you people in the past six months and still my kaboopies are on the fritz."

"There's nothing wrong with the mummies, lady. Look, I'm touching one with my voltage meter and—"

Zizzle! Zzit!

Yowling, the furry Martian repairman went hopping around Dynamo Daisy's large oval bedchamber.

"Ah, see?"

"Wowsie," remarked the catman. "My fur is all on end. Wowsie, what an experience."

"Suppose you were one of my ringside customers? A jolt like you just got would knock off some of those ancient bastards."

"Wowsie." He was patting at his fur with both paws, attempting to get it flat.

Conger, completely unseen, continued on his way through the room.

Bingo! Bing! Bingy!

"Beg pardon, lady?" The repairman was still hopping some.

"That wasn't me speaking, it was my right boopie. See the sparks?"

"Maybe I'm going to have to call the shop."

"I don't want them sending that lizard son of a bitch out again. Those scaly hands."

The living room area was full of reporters, at least ten of them, including Tars Tarkas of the Martian edition of *Timelife*.

Sobering up, Vice President Runningwater was shedding most of his earlier style of speech. "I can assure you, boys, whatever rumors you've been hearing about Bisbiglia are merely that. He's in complete control of himself, not suffering from any sort of mental disorder. Secretary of Mental Health Toomey will confirm that soon as he gets back from a much needed vacation. The president is no goofier than I am. You betchum."

Conger continued on into the vice president's den. "Where'd he be likely to hide those dupes of Bisbiglia's mumblespools?" he asked himself as he scanned the big circular room.

In one corner was a display of Indian artifacts. A warbonnet, a quiver of arrows, a bow and a decorated drum. Conger picked the drum up and, gingerly, shook it. Something rattled inside. He knelt, pried the leather skin off the drum and dropped out three spools of talktape.

He put those in an inside pocket, repaired the drum and left the office.

"What's all that sizzling and crackling?" Tarkas was asking the vice president when Conger crossed the room.

"We're having trouble with one of the appliances," chuckled Runningwater.

Chapter 11

They were under the hat.

Two of them hunkered down inside the hollow 20-foot high popkult sculpture, taking turns watching out of a tiny spyhole.

Holding his breath, Conger walked directly in front of the hole.

Neither of the watchers inside seemed to notice. "So they haven't got the NSO stuff for spotting me," Conger decided. "They can't see me at all."

Night had spread across the paved acres. The lights in the pyramid cottage were on, Buford was lounging in a slingchair out on the sundeck. Conger had arrived in Allergen nearly a half hour ago, ditched his skycar and come here on foot. He circled the area in narrowing circles and finally, five minutes ago, heard one of the watching agents inside the hat mutter something. Edging closer, he stood listening.

"Didn't you tell them we were government men?" one of them was saying inside the big hollow hat.

"Of course I did. Why do you think we were allowed to climb up through the secret entrance into this monstrosity."

"Secret entrance, Buzz? It's a sewer actually, that's not my idea of a concealed passway."

"You really have a very complaining nature, Phil. You never ever look on—"

"I bet if an NSO agent came to Allergen, Connecticut, they wouldn't confiscate his Baby Ruth bars at the town line."

"They do it to everybody, Phil."

"You should have told them we were working directly for the president."

"Nobody's supposed to know that. You can't be a secret agent for President Bisbiglia if you go around telling everyone. There wouldn't be any secret."

"Boy, they even found the Chiclets I had in my shoe."

"A sugar detecting machine is built to do exactly that, Phil. No use lamenting."

"I like to snack on these stakeouts."

"Be quiet now so I can test this soundgun. Determine if we're getting what's being said in there."

"Nothing's being said. The guy's by himself. Unless he's a loony he's not going to go around mouthing off when he's all alone."

"Lots of people talk to themselves. It isn't, Phil, a symptom of lunacy. For instance, I always talk to myself while I use my depnoz on my beard in the morning."

"That's daft. What do you say?"

"Small talk mostly, I don't know."

Something inside the big hat, the soundgun no doubt, gave off a faint keening sound.

Phil asked, "Couldn't we simply go in and grab this guy?"

"We're to wait for the okay and then nab both of them, True and Conger."

"I've heard of Conger. Married some strange girl who eats nothing but vegetables. I hear she . . ."

Conger left them. He walked through the night to the cottage and let himself in, the printlock having been set to admit him, Geer and Buford.

Reaching the sundeck he took out a markstik. On the flooring he printed, "Don't talk."

Buford straightened in his chair. "What?"

"Agents are listening down below," wrote Conger.

The timehopper nodded.

"Inside. John."

"Huh?"

"Meet me in the can."

"The what?"

"The toilet!"

"Oh," mouthed Buford. Very leisurely he stretched, yawned, stood and walked into the cottage from the deck.

Conger got to the bath area first and had all the water outlets going. He next switched on the depnoz, the hairblower and the toilet music. "I don't think their equipment is good enough to filter out all this other noise," he said, materializing once Buford had shut the opaque door to the long narrow room.

"How can there be agents? No one is supposed to know we're here."

"They know," said Conger.

"I'm still going back to Vienna?"

"Sure."

"Did you learn anything else I ought to know while you were in Washington, Mr. Conger?"

From his now visible side pocket Conger pulled out the three talktape spools. "These are Vice President Runningwater's copies of President Bisbiglia's mumblespools."

"I've heard about the president's habit of carrying a talkwriter around with him, mumbling reminders to himself and his staff."

"I played these on the way home." Conger lined them up on the washstand. "There's a list of ten people he's unhappy with, and the places he's sent them. Also quite a bit about what he has in mind for the country."

"Goofy?"

"Even for a politician, yeah. But Bisbiglia seems to have several top government people in with him, including the vice president. Runningwater figures eventually to doublecross the president, the others may feel it's better to co-operate with a wacky president than take a time trip."

Buford tapped each spool in turn. "You better pass these on to Mr. Geer."

"Soon as I give you the names and locations, and a few more clues as to where exactly in Vienna Secretary Toomey is."

"Can you get out of here once I leave?"

"The only guy who can see me when I'm invisible is reposing under a blanket of autumn leaves on the outskirts of our nation's capital. So there's—"

Wham!

The bathroom door slapped open. "Not exactly, Jake." Ripley was standing there, a new stungun in his hand. "I had my weapon set for a shorterterm shock when you turned it on me."

"This the fellow you've been talking about, Mr. Conger?"

Conger got a tight grip on Buford's arm. "Old Vienna," he said, "and step on it."

Chapter 12

Splash!

"My aim was a little off," said Buford.

"Is this the Danube?" asked Conger, lifting a soggy foot. They were standing up to their knees in the chill black waters of a river.

"Yep, that's what it is all right. I was intending to land us over there on the Praterstrasse." He went wading for the nearest shore.

"We're in 1897?"

"Can't you tell? Sniff the air, we don't have air like this anymore." Buford spread his arms wide, inhaled.

The night was misty, up ahead ornate buildings of stone, iron and tile glowed fuzzily, the street lamps wore blurred halos.

Conger sloshed after Buford. "I imagine Geer gave you what you need for this visit."

"He told me what I need to know."

"I meant money and such."

"Darn." Buford slapped his side. "I left all that stuff behind. I'm usually very efficient whenever I travel anywhere, but since you led those agents to us I—"

"They were already there, some of them anyhow. They probably trailed Geer."

"Whoever's to blame, I left all the antique currency, all the kreuzers and shillings back at our hideout."

A horse-drawn carriage went rattling by on the cobblestone lane they'd turned onto. Two whiskered men in cloaks and top hats rode inside.

After a puff on his cigar one of the men remarked, "Dot vas sure a dodgasted outrage. Dey got to do sometink about dem dodboggled anarchists."

"Ven it giffs mit explosions at der doddrotted opera, der cultural liff uff old Vienna ain't going to be vorth nix."

The carriage went clopping away into the mist.

"You understand German?" inquired Buford.

"Yeah. Looks like we arrived on top of some kind of anarchist outrage."

"I think, not having had time to look it up before we rushed off, tonight saw the premiere of Ulrich Strauss' *The Singing Despot*. Ulrich is a distant cousin of the waltz Strausses, and his operetta has a propaganda motive. Franz Josef is rumored to have financed it, and apparently some of the anarchists with which this city abounds tossed a bomb on stage. One of them may have been the notorious Otto Strumpfband himself."

"History isn't our main concern," said Conger. "We'll need some cash, and some clothes."

"Mr. Geer also brought me a very nice suit and a homburg. Our hasty departure meant I had to leave those behind, too." He shrugged, slid his hands into his pockets. "No use complaining, let's enjoy this."

"I've got, from listening to Bisbiglia's mumblespools, a lead on where they ditched Wardell Toomey," Conger told him. "They apparently used a brainscrambler on him, then stuck him at a place called the Enormous Strudel."

"Oh, sure, I've heard of the Enormous Strudel, a very famous cellar cafe here in Vienna, right off Felberstrasse. A hangout of the more liberal intellectuals, noted for its singing waiters."

"That's what Secretary Toomey's doing, working as a singing waiter there."

Buford grinned. "He doesn't seem the type, from the impression I got watching him on the news."

"A brainscrambler can work wonders."

"Well, the Enormous Strudel should still be open," said Buford. "How about if he isn't there, though. Do you know where Mr. Toomey's supposed to be living?"

"No, but I have the name of the guy who works as a presidential agent here. Runs a puppet and automaton shop near the Stadtpark. We'll try him if we can't get hold of Toomey at the cafe."

"Hey, dere. You two fellers mit der funny clothes. You un der mood for a little dodgosted fun?" A girl with a black feather boa over her bare powdered shoulders, her pale blonde hair piled high, was standing beneath a lamp post.

"Thank you very much for your interest, miss," said Buford in German. "We have urgent business elsewhere."

"Dot's vun funny accent you got dere," observed the girl. "Vhere'd you learn dot, darlink?"

"I'm from out of town, miss," explained Buford. "Now allow me to wish you a cordial good evening."

When the girl was some distance behind them Conger said, "We have to get clothes and money now. Don't want to attract any more attention than necessary."

"How do you intend to acquire what we need? Our credit obviously isn't going to be very good back here almost a hundred years before we were born."

"I'll steal what we need."

Buford stopped, his wet shoes making a squeegee sound on the pavement. "Can we do that? I mean, suppose you steal something which is essential to the flow of history? The whole course of Western civilization might go blooey so when we—"

"Don't give me time paradoxes, Buford. We've got a job to do. We need money to spend, something to wear. I'll get what we need." He sniffed at the late night air. "Bakery shop over there, still open."

"You can't take back any pastries to Mr. Geer, since again it could well—"

"I should be able to borrow a little something out of their cashbox."

"Let's not be hypocrites, Mr. Conger. Borrow isn't quite the word. We're really not going . . . Mr. Conger?"

Conger had become invisible. "Wait here," his voice requested. "Try not to look too much like an outlander."

The rich smells of cinammon, vanilla and butter mixed with the prickly mist. Conger stood outside the bakery until a man in a plaid inverness coat came striding out with a white paper package in his hand, then he dived inside the brightly gaslit shop before the glass door closed.

There were several marble top tables at the rear of the place. Only one was occupied, by a moustached man in a black double-breasted dinner coat and a weary-looking girl in an evening gown of white satin and black velvet. The man, thickset and perspiring, was smoking a cigar, eating cream puffs and browsing through a three-week-old copy of *Simplicissimus*. "It's stuff like dis vot giffs dose dodbusted anarchists like Strumpfband ideas," he remarked. "Imagine blowing up nearly a sinker of Gurke's stature smack in der middle uff *Der Sinkink Despot*. Ain't dot awful?"

"Chess, Ludwig, dot's a dingblasted shame."

There was no one behind the glasstop counter. Through an open door the smells of honey, almonds and powdered sugar, all warm, came pouring.

"Ach, giff a look at dese apfelstrudels. Ain't dot some-tink, mama?"

"You seen vun apfelstrudel you seen dem all."

"Ven you going to realize, voman, I got a calling? Und mine dodgasted calling is pastry."

The cash drawer was directly under the roller of white wrapping paper. Conger slid it slowly open, took half of the paper money and a few coins. Once these were in his pocket they were as unseeable as he was.

Buford was chatting with a redhaired girl who had a large scarlet star painted next to her left eye. "I'm certain there are other choices open to a girl of your obvious attractiveness," he was saying when Conger nudged his elbow.

The girl said, "Dot's very interestink."

"You see, education is the answer to most of the world's problems. In fact, I'd say education, coupled with a good diet, can change—"

"You ain't vun of dem anarchists, is you?"

"Not at all, although I can see how anyone growing up with a man like Franz Josef on the . . . oof!"

Conger had provided a more severe nudge.

"Well, been nice talking with you, miss. I have to hurry on."

A half block from the pastry shop, in a shadowy stretch of street, Conger materialized. "Here's some cash," he said, dividing it between them.

"Smells like apples."

"No doubt." Conger was glancing around. "Ha, there's a second hand clothing shop."

"Shut up tight."

"Not to us."

Money still in his hand, Buford said, "Nothing much hits you, does it? Here we are roaming the picturesque streets of one of the world's fabled cities, two centuries away from our own era. Do you realize who's alive in Vienna at the moment? There's Sigmund Freud, Richard Strauss, Arthur Schnitzler . . . and we might run into any one of them."

"I want to run into Secretary Toomey before any of the president's goons come looking for us. Outside of the name Panchronicon I still don't know what they're using to time dump people on their shitlist. I don't know where they keep the damn thing either."

"Panchronicon?"

"Name mean anything? I think it's what President Bisbiglia calls the clandestine time machine he's using."

Scratching at his ear, Buford said, "I have a feeling; I've heard the word before, but I can't place it."

Conger had led him down a narrow alley between the clothing shop and bootery. He located the rear door, crouched and picked it. "One advantage of this period, no burglar alarms to speak of." He pushed the door gently open. "Let's collect our new wardrobe."

"You're not a very scrupulous person, Mr. Conger."

"I'm not," agreed Conger.

Chapter 13

"Vhoopee!" exclaimed the heavy man in the black cloak.

"Hush up der mouth," advised his companion, a gaunt man with a black beard.

The pair was seated near the entrance of the Enormous Strudel. The long underground room was low-ceilinged, thick now with bluish smoke and yellow light. On the plaster walls an intricate mural unfolded, mixing the Siegfried legend with the conspicuous consumption of strudel in all its forms. Armed warriors frolicked with wood maidens, crumbs on their lips, valkyries descended across storm-wracked skies waving both weapons and nut-crust ed pastries.

"I bet that's an original Zwack," observed Buford as he and Conger came down into the crowded cellar.

"Zwack?"

"Obscure 19th Century painter, but quite good. He'll eat himself to death in 1906, unable to shake an incredible craving for apple strudel." Buford was now attired in a dark suit and vest. "In fact, that appears to be Zwack himself over there at the table near the orchestra platform."

Conger, visible again and looking vaguely British in a tweed suit and bowler hat, glanced at the huge redface man who had two plump blondes with him, one on each broad knee. "Let's locate Toomey."

"I guess you don't appreciate the ambiguities of travel through time. There's Zwack full of life and talent, enjoying himself. Yet where we come from he's nothing but a couple of bones and a handful of dust."

Conger said, "If I was the kind of guy who paused and reflected, I'd do that now."

A swinging oaken door swung open and a tall paunchy man with a halfmoon scar near one eye came out of the kitchen area with a heavy tray balanced on his palm.

"Giff us one uff dem odd songs, Oscar," requested a bearded patron.

The waiter said, "Sure tink."

"That's him," said Conger, slowing.

"He's got the accent down perfectly, speaks German like a native."

Secretary of Mental Health Toomey, as he carried his tray of assorted strudel among the tables, commenced singing. "Oh, I ain't going to giff nobody none of mine chelly roll." He wiggled his hips. "No, I von't giff nobody none of mine chelly roll."

"You think maybe we're too late?" asked Buford "His poor brain may be adled beyond repair."

"We'll assume it isn't." Conger was nearly to Toomey's side. "Secretary Toomey." He reached out, caught his arm.

The waiter blinked, lowering his tray, and stared at Conger. "You got der wronk dodgosted feller. Mine monicker vos Oscar."

"No, it's Wardell Toomey."

"Hey, dummoX," shouted the bearded man who'd requested the song. "Let's get on mitt der damboozled sinkink."

"You know who that may be who's heckling us?" said Buford. "I really believe that has to be Sigmund Freud, though none of his biographers mention—"

"We're going to get you out of here," Conger told the dazed Secretary of Mental Health.

"I don't get off vork till three . . . vot vos der name vot you called me again?"

"Wardell Toomey."

"Chentlemen, dot's funny . . . lately I been thinkink about chust dot name? Vhy?"

"Because it's your name."

"No, mine name vos Oscar . . . and yet . . . vould you know alzo anybody vot is named Dr. Stewart Peralta?"

"The time travel researcher," said Buford.

"I been thinkink they ought not to have stuck him vhere dey did. Especial since he done inwented der dodgosted Panchronicon."

"Peralta did that?" asked Conger.

"Less dadgozzled chin vaggging," called out the man who might be Sigmund Freud, "and more sinkink, Oscar!"

"Ches, I better get back to vork," said the secretary. "Can't imagine vhy I been thinkink such strange stuff."

"The reason is—"

"Chust a moment, ladies and chentlemen!" One of the men near the door had stood up. There was a revolver in his hand. "I must ask all you radical lummoXes to come mit us."

"A dodgosted raid!" exclaimed Toomey.

Uniformed men were rushing in at every door.

"I don't recall," said Buford, "reading about the Enormous Strudel's being an anarchist hangout."

"Can you carry both of us back home to our time?"

The confusion around them mounted, tables toppled, chairs crashed, homburXs fell off heads, strudel slipped off plates, sudsy beer splashed.

Buford scowled, thoughtful. "I don't think I can take the two of you at the same time. I might be able to, but there's a risk of—"

"Never mind then. Grab Secretary Toomey and haul him back to someplace safe. Come back for me."

Buford's face brightened. "A good idea, Mr. Conger. You wait here and I'll hop right back for you. Shouldn't take me more than a couple minutes each way." He clutched Toomey's arm. "Best leave the tray and the strudel behind, Mr. Secretary, so as not to chance altering the course of future history."

"Vot's dot?"

Then they were gone, not in 1897 any longer. No one in the tussling, struggling crowd noticed.

Conger pivoted, made his way to the orchestra platform. The musicians had deserted it, there were no police or anarchists up there.

He sat and waited. He had to duck a flung chair, and push off a waiter who mistook him for a police agent.

Five minutes went by.

The police were winning.

Another five minutes.

No sign of Buford.

The police had subdued most of the anarchists they'd come for.

Two more minutes.

No Buford.

A policeman spotted Conger. "You dere, come along mit us."

"I'm a neutral," he explained. "Out of town, merely passing through your fair city."

"Enough small talk, lummo." The policeman was large. He started to climb up onto the platform.

"Better turn invisible," decided Conger.

Klonk!

Someone hit Conger from behind, and he didn't become anything but unconscious.

Chapter 14

"Otto Strumpfband," said the bearded man who resembled Freud, "dot's I'm."

"Ah, der noted anarchist?" inquired one of the men who was sharing the floor with him.

"Der same." Strumpfband held out his hand. "Pleased to meet up mit you."

"Likewise alzo."

Conger winced, yawned, shook his head a few times. He made his eyes go wide, rubbed at the back of his neck, coughed.

"You see dot feller?" Strumpfband pointed at Conger. "Dot's der kind uff feller ve are out to help. An innozent bystander vot gets a smack on de coco. Dot feller is a valking indictment uff der police."

A man with a dented tophat said, "How about me? I got bonked on der skonce alzo, und I vas only at dot dodgasted cellar to deliver five gallons uff cream."

"You tink dot's bad? I vas merely dere to touch up der wood nymphs," said Zwack, who was leaning against one of their cell's grey stone walls.

Strumpfband poked Conger. "Don't you vorry, chum. Ven ve topple Franz Josef you innozent bystanders vill get a better shuffle from der deck uff life," he promised. "Vot line uff vork you in anyhow? From your clothes I'd guess you vas a vageslafe."

Far down the shadowy stone corridor which led to their barred door keys jangled.

"Actually," said Conger as he rose, shaky, to his feet, "I'm in the entertainment field."

"How'd dot again? You got a funny agzent on you."

"Der show bitzness." Strumpfband gave a nod of understanding. "Could be you might vork some propaganda in mitt your show. Vot does you do eggsactly?"

"I'm a magician, a conjuror."

"Does dot pay any better dan der dodgasted mural line?" asked Zwack.

A jailer was approaching their cell, trailed by a man in a tophat who must be some kind of attorney.

"When you have tricks such as I have, you can earn a pretty fair living," Conger told his cellmates.

"Let me show you the particular illusion which has been, albeit slowly, making me the toast of Europe. I call it the Famous Vanishing Magician Trick."

"Dot zounds like fun," said the anarchist.

"That it is." Conger lifted both hands above his head, made a few circles in the air with each. "Lando El Carim Zatarra," he recited, lowering one hand and snapping his fingers.

He became invisible just as the jailer unlocked the cell and swung the iron door open.

"Vot der . . . ?" gasped Strumpfband.

"Golly," said Zwack, "ain't dot something?"

"How did you done dot?"

The jailer ushered the attorney into the stone room. "Vot giffs mit you chailbirds?"

"You couldn't see him neither?"

"See who?"

"Poy, vot a dandy bomptrower I could be mit a stunt like dot." Strumpfband reached out to touch Conger. His inquiring fingers connected with air.

"Hey, vere's dot other chump vot was here?" the jailer wanted to know.

"Der magician? He just done vun uff his tricks for us."

"Ain't dot right, Mr. Magician? Tell did feller vot you done done."

Conger was halfway down the corridor now and before the shouting commenced in the cell he was out on the chill dawn streets of Vienna.

The Gypsy fortune teller bowed lower over the checkered tablecloth, one leathery old hand ticking over the cards spread out there. She selected a card, held it up and gave a gap-tooth grin. The card was the ace of spades.

"Looks like I'm in for more good luck," Conger said to himself. He was, still invisible, standing in front of the shop of Zeitschrift The Puppetmaster, Also The Finest Automaton In All Europe.

From a cafe across the twisting cobblestone lane the smells of breakfast, pastries, sausage, strong coffee and chocolate, were drifting.

In the narrow shop window in front of him the robot Gypsy held up another card. Next to this half-size automaton dangled a ballerina puppet with beautiful blonde hair and splendid legs. Two small mechanical woodmen were sawing at a plaster tree, a grinning foot-high Negro boy was munching on a slice of wooden watermelon, a jester made of cloth and wire was sprawled near the lovely ballerina's feet and a golden-haired cherub floated back and forth above the Gypsy, its tiny pink eyes seeming to see the invisible Conger.

A bell jingled, a thin young girl opened the shop door from inside and set a bucket and mop out on the pavement.

Conger was inside the place before the door closed.

A clutter of puppets and mechanical people greeted him, glistening glass eyes, smiling metal lips, cotton-stuffed hands.

"I'm getting as bad as Geer." Conger's stomach began to growl when he smelled breakfast cooking in the rear room of Zeitschrift's shop. A little thing like that could give you away. He waited beside a 2-foot high violin prodigy automaton until the inner sounds had subsided.

"They're here someplace," a familiar voice was saying in clumsy German. "I know this is where they were coming."

"Dot could be zo, mine friend. But old Zeitschrift don't know from nuttink about dot."

"You've got it pretty soft, Zeitschrift," Ripley told him. "Help us stash a couple enemies of President Bisbiglia now and then and you get a, too big to my way of thinking, salary and a safe place to hide your own carcass."

"Zo der cops vant me in 2021," said the puppetmaster, a small fragile man with a realistic white wig, "Dot don't mean I got to kiss your bummy, mine boy. You do me a favor, I do you vun."

"Keep wising off and you're liable to get dumped back in Devil's Doorknob like Doc Peralta," warned Ripley. Dressed in 1890s businessman's garb, he was resting his elbows on the clawfoot table, hands circling a cup of coffee.

"Der autumn of 1897, or der autumn of 1879," said the old puppetmaster with a shrug. "Sigs uff vun, have dozen uff der udder."

"You've got people working for you, natives of this time period," Ripley said. "Put them to work finding Conger and this Buford True. I'll get over and check on Secretary Toomey, make sure he's still singing in that dump."

"A ferret like you, mine boy, how come you needs help? Und how come dey got quits from you anyvay?"

"Don't you pay any attention to what I tell you? Buford True is a natural time traveler, he doesn't need the Panchronicon or one of these damn things."

Thunk!

His foot tapped the portable time machine which rested on the floor beside him. "By the time I got hold of this thing they had quite a head start on me."

"Veil find dem." Zeitschrift went tottering toward his wood stove. "I figs you some sausage."

"My god, Zeitschrift, how can you eat this 19th Century food? Don't you know how much animal fat there is in—"

"Nutrition ain't zo important as der right attitude in der upstairs." The old man concentrated on frying several fat links of sausage.

Thud!

"All you chents in dis segred agent line got too much vorrying you," Zeitschrift said. "Minezself, I don't vorry about nuddink."

After a few more seconds of silence from Ripley, the puppeteer turned away from his sizzling sausages.

Ripley was fallen forward, head resting in the pool of coffee from his cracked cup. His portable time machine was floating out the rear door.

Chapter 15

He buried the time machine deep in the sandy ground. The night sky above him was incredibly clear, rich with bright stars. "Buford's right about 19th Century air," Conger said, inhaling deeply as he tapped down the dirt on the mechanism's temporary grave.

It was a few minutes past 9 PM in the middle of August, 1879, and he was roughly a mile outside of the wideopen town of Devil's Doorknob, Arizona. Whenever he had the choice Conger favored working alone. Rather than wandering through time trying to find out why Buford True hadn't returned to old Vienna for him, Conger had used his borrowed time machine to come directly here. Here to the place where, from what he'd overheard at the puppeteer's, they'd probably dumped Dr. Stewart Peralta. If Peralta had indeed built the damn Panchronicon, then he knew where it was. Finding him and getting his mind unscrambled seemed a lot simpler than chasing all the people on President Bisbiglia's shitlist through the centuries.

"Autonomy," said Conger, getting the grit off his hands by rubbing them together, "no job's any good unless you've got autonomy. The freedom to—"

"Suppose you grab a little sky, pard."

"Those are very quiet horses you've got," observed Conger.

"Among the very few horses in the whole county who can tiptoe," said the large redhaired and freckled young man on the nearest of the three horses. He was dressed in a suit of pale buckskin, gave off the aroma of strong soap and had a six-gun pointed at Conger.

Growl! Gruff! Gruff!

"Your dog's pretty sneaky, too."

"Old Tex is silent as they come." The redheaded young man grinned down at the huge black German shepard who was bristling at Conger. "Let me introduce myself, pard. I happen to be Collin Stamm."

"Pleased to meet you. I'm Jake Conger, from out of town."

Stamm hunched slightly in his saddle. "Don't my name strike terror in hour heart?"

"No, but being from out of town it's—"

"I'm Marshal Stamm. The one they call Six-Gun Lightning, the man who whupped Devil's Doorknob into shape, the man who brought law and order to Dog's Leg, the man who—"

"Him no crook," said the marshal's companion.

Stamm indicated his companion with a thumb.

"Help me on a little test, pard," he said to Conger. "Who do you think this is?"

"An Indian in drag," answered Conger.

"Darn." The lawman spit at the ground.

Growl! Gruff!

"Sorry, Tex." Stamm took off his high-crown Stetson, fanned at his knee with it. "Doggone, I sure thought we'd fool you into believing he was sure enough the schoolmarm, what with the long blonde curls and that there pretty gingham dress."

"No foolum anybody," said the dressed up Indian.

"See, I'm trying to turn him into a master of disguise," Stamm explained. "Be a real help in my law and order work to have a sidekick who's a master of disguise. Don't look at all like a schoolmarm to you, huh?"

"Nope."

"Not even a little some?"

"Looks like an Indian with a lopsided wig."

"Maybe it's your attitude that's wrong, Burt . . . This is Burt the Indian, by the way, my faithful Indian companion and sidekick."

"Glad to meet you, Burt. In fact, it's been pleasant chatting with you both. Now I'd like to—"

"You honest and true don't figure him for one of them outlaws, Burt?"

"Me good judge of character," said Burt the Indian. "Him Eastern dude."

"We figured you for a member of the notorious Fresco Kid gang."

"You figureum, me no do."

Conger said, "Actually I'm out here from Washington, DC, looking for a missing man."

"Could be we maybe seen him. Got a poster?"

"No, but I can describe him." Conger had met the missing Dr. Peralta back when he'd worked more frequently for the Wild Talent Division. "He's about forty-three, short, no more than five foot four and weighs around a hundred fifty pounds, got dark hair worn short and a scraggly moustache. Never smiles much, is a brilliant inventor and is given to sarcasm."

"Doggone now," said Marshall Stamm, "if that ain't a perfect description of the Fresco Kid." From inside his buckskin jacket he brought a wanted poster. "This your man?"

"Him most sarcastic outlaw we ever chaseum, all the time makeum snide quips," added Burt the Indian, adjusting his wig.

Unfurling the poster, Conger saw a sketch of Stewart Peralta wearing a low-crown black hat. "This is him. How long's he been operating in the vicinity of Devil's Doorknob?"

"Hardly more than a week, though he's raised more hell in that time than a dozen other owlhoots combined," said Stamm. "Robbing banks, holding up stage coaches, blowing up trains and looting them, making insulting remarks. Gathered himself a gang of five truly rotten saddle buddies to help him."

"Any idea where he is?"

"Wellsir, Burt got a tip as how one of the gang is going to be in Devil's Doorknob tonight at the Couchant Viper Saloon. Which is why he's disguised, so's he can sneak in and gather information for us."

"Lookum like sissy."

"We'll try another disguise."

Conger nodded toward their extra horse, which was lightly loaded with only two knapsacks. "Can I ride along with you?"

Stamm glanced again at his Indian sidekick. "He's positively not a sidewinder, Burt?"

"Him okay."

Arf! Gruff! Woof!

Tex trotted over to lick Conger's hand.

"That dog seems to like you, too," observed Stamm.

"Could just be the strudel."

"Beg pardon?"

"You understand Washington has first claim on the Fresco Kid." Conger petted the dog before working around him and moving to the empty horse.

"I don't know, Jake, I sort of had my heart set on bringing that snake to justice."

"Letum Big Chief in Washington haveum," suggested Burt the Indian.

"All right then, since you're always right in these diplomatic matters, Burt."

When Conger swung up into the saddle one of the knapsacks made rattling glass noises.

"Don't break nothing in the makeup kit, Jake." Stamm poked his tongue into his freckled cheek, studying Burt the Indian in the moonlight. "We're going to have to come up with a more foolproof disguise for you."

"No disguise best."

"We had pretty good luck with that preacher disguise in Sod Hills last month, until the beard fell off."

"No convinceum anybody," said Burt the Indian.

"Sure that's the same stick," said Stamm as Tex dropped a damp branch at his booted feet.

"It's longer." Conger was sitting on a boulder, one of several which surrounded their small cook fire.

"Tex, is this the same stick?"

Gruff! Rump!

"Your word's good enough for me." The marshal straightened up, squinted again into the darkness beyond their waiting place. "Been working with Tex near to two years, training him. He's got a danged wide repetoire of tricks."

"I think," said Conger, "I'd better ride into town."

"Nope, we'll give Burt another hour or so. He's very slow and patient, like many of his race."

"Two and a half hours in Devil's Doorknob," said Conger, "he should have found out something by now." Conger had wanted to go into the town himself and, using his talent for invisibility, learn what he could about the whereabouts of Dr. Peralta alias the Fresco Kid. Not wanting to confide in Marshal Stamm about his ability, though, he'd been unable to persuade him he was better suited for the job that the newly disguised Burt the Indian.

Stamm lifted the coffee pot off the small fire and refilled his cup. "At least we're sure of one thing."

"Which is?"

"No one can penetrate Burt's disguise. That Traveling Bible Salesman outfit and whiskers really looked convincing on him."

"A bible would have helped."

"What?"

"He should have had a bible or two for props."

After sipping at his coffee, Stamm said, "Think that would have helped?"

"Well, if an Indian with red whiskers and a derby walked up to me and claimed to be an itinerant bible salesman I think a bible in his hand would push me little into the area of accepting him."

"Chestnut was the color of the whiskers, Jake."

"Seemed red by moonlight."

"Now I realize they're all up to date back in Washington on the latest techniques in disguise. But I know my territory Jake, know what'll pass muster in these parts when—"

Gruff! Gruff! Arff!

Stamm's right hand swung toward his holster. "Somebody coming."

"Toldum beard no good," someone was complaining out in the night.

"It's Burt. How'd it go, Burt?"

"Whoa, whoa," said Burt the Indian, reigning up. He dropped out of his saddle, patted his horse on the flank. "Told you disguise him no good."

The Indian's derby was missing most of its brim, half of his chestnut beard was gone and he had no sleeves in his coat.

"Don't tell me they penetrated your disguise?"

"Beard fallum into beer," explained the Indian. "Patrons of Couchant Viper jumpum on me, stompum good. Even hookers gettum in a few good whacks."

Off came the marshall's Stetson to fan his leg. "Dang, now we ain't no further than we was."

"Fresco Kid him hide out in line camp up at Flying DAW Ranch," said Burt the Indian. "Me findum out that before they lowerum boom."

Stamm laughed. "Doggone, Burt, if you ain't got a real knack for finding out things," he said, giving the Indian's shoulders a hug. "Soon as we polish up your disguises some, you're going to be the best darn sidekick a man could want."

Conger dropped off the boulder. "Shall we go get the Kid?"

"Soon as we work out our disguises," replied Stamm.

Chapter 16

"I think that moustache would have looked right handsome on you, Jake."

On foot, the three men, accompanied by the dog, were moving through the woods below the adobe brick cabin where the Fresco Kid and his gang were rumored to be holed up.

"Made you look older," continued Marshall Stamm, "more mature."

Conger suddenly began to laugh, stopping beside a tree and punching its trunk a few times.

Stamm fussed with his bonnet strings. "You find my disguise amusing, is that it?"

Getting control of himself, Conger said, "If we're any good at this, disguises won't be necessary. We've got to sneak up on these guys."

"They're going to have a guard posted, and in case they spot us they're going to think it's simply a schoolmarm and a train conductor going for a stroll with a friend and his dog."

"No trains round here." Burt the Indian was clutching his silver-plated change maker tightly so it wouldn't rattle.

"We're only about eight miles from the tracks."

"Lookum stupid, giveum Fresco Kid chance to hurl barbs of sarcasm at us."

The night was, very gradually, turning gray. The surrounding trees and bushes were growing lighter.

"Don't know if you Washington folks are familiar with the rest of the members of this brutal gang or not, Jake." Marshall Stamm absently twirled his parasol as they moved quietly through the woods. "I'll give you a rundown on the rotters your boy's in cahoots with at the moment. First there's Sodomy Slim. Know him?"

"Only by reputation."

"A mean cuss, and got himself some mighty strange ideas about romance. He's the one outdrew 6-Finger Frank over in Hellspawn last winter, later ruined Fargo Nell's reputation in a rather disgusting way," the lawman continued. "6-Finger Frank, by the way, has twelve fingers. Six on each hand. Anyways, the next member of the gang is the Nutshot Kid. Kind of interesting how to come by his nickname. Seems whenever he's in a shootout with anyone he always aims for the crotch."

"Shootum in balls," added Burt the Indian.

"The other members of the group will be Doc Loco, Zigzag and the Yonkers Kid. This last waddie, he's from back East somewheres."

"Watchum out for Zigzag's knife."

"Yep, Zigzag is fond of carving long jaggedy scars into people. I got posters on the whole dang bunch. Let me reach into my bosom and—"

"Not necessary," said Conger.

Burt the Indian, who was leading the procession through the dawn woods, swung out an arm. "Stopum," he suggested in a whisper. He had his head drawn in, ears nearly touching the high stiff collar of his conductor coat. Frowning, he sniffed at the beginning morning. "Lilac water."

"Sodomy Slim always spreads that stuff on his hair," said Stamm.

After motioning them to remain where they were, Burt the Indian moved silently forward.

Nothing further occurred for more than five minutes.

"Slow and patient," murmured the marshal.

A muffled groan sounded up ahead.

Marshal Stamm said, "That's not Burt groaning."

"Never heard him groan before."

"I know his groan, that's not his. What do you think, Tex?"

Gruff! Growr!

"That confirms it then. Burt's coldcocked Sodomy Slim. We'll move up."

Some thousand feet further along they encountered a brutish-looking man sprawled among nettles. His black Stetson had fallen off to reveal tow-colored hair slicked down with lilac water.

Burt the Indian, minus his cap, was trussing up the outlaw with leather cord. He'd already gagged the big man with his own bandana.

"Your disguise would be a whole lot tougher to penetrate, Burt, if you'd keep your conductor hat on."

"Cap encumberum me." The Indian stood, discarded his change maker in the brush.

Shaking his head, Stamm said, "Sodomy Slim must be their lookout. So we should have a clear chance at the cabin now. Here's what we'll—"

"Me sneakum up on cabin."

"I think I ought to make all the executive decisions on these raids, Burt. Isn't that the way they do back in Washington, Jake? . . . Jake?"

"Him vanishum in thin air." Puzzled, Burt the Indian was turning his head from side to side.

Conger, invisible, was working his way closer to the adobe cabin. The woods were thinning, the dawn brightening and he could see the place clearly now. A squat yellow cube with a slanting tile roof, one greasy window and a plank door.

The ground in front of the cabin was dry and dusty, the kind of ground which would pick up footprints. He skirted that, deciding to approach the cabin from behind.

The front door swung open, a fat man in wooly chaps and a checkered shirt emerged. He gripped a knife in his teeth.

"Must be Zigzag."

Behind Zigzag came a lanky man, all in black. He wore his black gunbelt very low. "No sign of nothing, Zig," he said while he studied the morning.

"I tell you, Nut, I done heard coins jingling out in the woods there," Zigzag insisted, around his knife.

"I didn't hear nothing. And Doc Loco didn't even wake up."

"Also I heard somebody a-groaning."

"Might be Slim counting his change and complaining to hisself."

"Slim don't never carry no pocket money, claiming it spoils the lie of his clothes."

"For a man who sheds his clothes so often, Slim sure is fastidious about 'em," said the Nutshot Kid. "Maybe you just heard Yonkers coming back home from Devil's Doorknob."

"He never comes back with no money left."

Conger was at the side of the brick cabin by this time. He slowed, inching his way up to the small window in that wall.

"That'll be about enough moving for today, hombre. And where'd you get that suit? My Uncle Lem looked better than you when they exhumed him six months after he kicked off."

A short dark man with a scraggy moustache was pointing two six-guns at Conger. He'd come around from the back of the cabin.

"You're not supposed to see me."

"I got to admit you ain't much of a sight, but I see you plain."

"NSO," realized Conger. "They must have treated you, same as Ripley."

Dr. Peralta's face showed concern. "NSO? Them there three letters cause a shock of recognition to run through me, hombre," he said. "Would that be the brand of some notable cattle spread?"

"Stands for National Security Office, Dr. Peralta. Apparently before you got on President Bisbiglia's shitlist they processed you so you'd be able to see any WTD invisible agents."

The doctor's guns lowered some. "WTD? Doggone, if them letters don't strike a responsive chord, too."

"The Wild Talent Division. I work for them, and I came from the year 2021 to find you, Peralta."

"Got my tag wrong, hombre. I'm the notorious Fresco Kid."

"You're Dr. Stewart Peralta, inventor of the Panchronicon."

The six-guns fell a few inches closer to their holsters. "I swear you got to be talking loco, hombre, and yet them there names . . . Who'd you say I was?"

"Dr. Stewart Peralta. You were dumped here in 1879 about a week ago, on orders from President Bisbiglia. I imagine that was because you'd had second thoughts about the way they were using your time machine."

"You going plumb loco, Frez?" the Nutshot Kid had joined them. "Jawing away at thin air."

"I'm talking to this here hombre right smackdab in front of me, Nut."

One of the Nutshot Kid's gold-trimmed pistols came spinning out of its holster. "I don't see nobody," he said. "But whereabouts is his grabbag?"

"Don't go shooting him yet, he appears to know something about my mystery-clouded past."

Crouching, the Nutshot Kid stalked nearer to Conger. "He about there?"

Blam!

A bullet ripped at a brick two feet to the left on Conger's head. "Hey, let's have a moratorium on gunplay."

"Dogies!" exclaimed the Nutshot Kid. "That's downright spooky, ain't it?"

Peralta cautioned, "Don't shoot no more. I wants to chat with him."

"You actual can see him?"

"Plain as day. It's because the National Security Office people thought I'd . . . Doggone, where'd that notion come from? I'm pure and simple the Fresco Kid, don't know nothing 'bout no NSO or no Wild Talent Division of the US Remedial Functions Agency."

"You're remembering," Conger told him.

"What kind of dumb dude game you two galoots a-playing?" Zigzag came trotting around a corner of the cabin. "Here we might be surrounded and you two is making like that ventriloquist I saw one time in San Francisco."

"Ain't a trick," said the Nutshot Kid, pointing in the general direction of Conger with his gun. "There's some kind of unvisible waddie a-standing there."

"Unvisible? Oh, buffaloshit!"

"They're correct," Conger assured Zigzag. "Now if you two guys will let me talk to the Fresco Kid for a few minutes, I'll try to save you from the law."

"The law!" said Zigzag.

"The law!" said the Nutshot Kid.

"The law!" said Dr. Peralta.

Zigzag transferred his knife from mouth to throwing hand. "This here unvisible hombre must be a lawman. Let's fix him."

"Me first," said the Nutshot Kid. "Can you give me an idea about where his balls is hanging, Frez?"

"Well, you see that brick with the spider setting on it?" said Dr. Peralta. "His nuts are approximately three bricks over."

"Knife'll be surer," said Zigzag.

"You fellows all better drop your weapons and get away from Mr. Conger. That is you they're planning to kill and maim, isn't it, Mr. Conger?"

Buford True had come walking up behind the trio of outlaws.

Chapter 17

"Usually I'm not stupid," said Buford.

"Usually," Conger agreed.

"I have to admit, being new to this sort of work, I don't have your aplomb under pressure. Possibly because I'm still fresh enough to the world of intrigue to feel some emotions when I'm in a tense situation. A man of your icy reserve can no doubt—"

"Is this an apology or a critique?" Conger tugged his recently buried portable time machine up out of its hole.

"Apologies aren't actually the Buford True style. What I'm attempting is an explanation of why I failed to get back to you immediately in Vienna."

"You hombres sure enough galavant," remarked Dr. Peralta, who stood nearby, handcuffed.

"What I did," Buford went on, "when I dragged Secretary Toomey away from the Enormous Strudel I was—"

"Dadburn my britches," said Peralta, "if that ain't another naggingly familiar name. Toomey . . . Toomey . . . what outfit's he ride with?"

Conger was brushing sand off the time machine. "Wardell Toomey is Secretary of Mental Health in Bisbiglia's cabinet," he said. "Your Panchronicon time machine was used to maroon him in 1897."

"Ain't that strange." Peralta narrowed his eyes, straining to remember more.

"What happened," Buford resumed, "is this, Mr. Conger. In the heat of the moment, with the Viennese law officials closing in on us, I'm afraid I failed to think clearly. The result was I transported Mr. Toomey and myself back to Allergen, Connecticut rather than to some safer place."

"An unhandy thing to do." Conger strapped the time machine to his chest.

"I'm aware a man of your sort, untouched by the emotions of the moment, would have popped off to some safer place, my Uncle Dutch's retirement home in Vermont, for instance, or—"

"Some of Bisbiglia's agents were still at the hideout in Connecticut, huh?"

"Exactly, Mr. Conger, and by the time we fought our way out of there . . . just convincing Mr. Toomey he had better fight rather than sing . . . Well, by the time we got away clear and I contacted Mr. Geer and we got the secretary to a safe hideaway in New Jersey a few hours had passed. I did go back to Vienna but you'd already left." Buford shifted his position on the bright morning ground. "I was able to determine, though a bit of fairly clever detective work, that you most probably had gone off following a new lead. Not being, like me, a sentimental sort you weren't even much concerned about my fate. If it even occurred to you I might be in trouble in 2021 you—"

"The trouble you were in, you got out of," Conger said. "I expected you would."

"I see. Well, I suppose that's something of a compliment," said Buford. "When I returned once again to the Jersey hideaway the brainscramble expert Mr. Geer'd procured had succeeded in bringing Secretary Toomey back to his full senses."

"He told you where Dr. Peralta was."

"Exactly. He'd learned about it from that old puppetmaster in Vienna, but when Zeitschrift had taunted him about it the information hadn't meant anything to him. When he had all his faculties restored of course he remembered." Buford paused, grinning. "I was happy my arrival coincided with an opportunity to save you from death. Naturally an agent as calm and unemotional as yourself probably doesn't go in for expressions of grat—"

"Thanks," cut in Conger. "Now tell me where the new hideout is."

Buford did, then asked, "You sure this time machine is good enough for precision time travel? I'd be willing to come back for you after I drop Dr. Peralta off."

"I'll rely on the machine," said Conger.

President Bisbiglia tried on the blonde wig. "A perfect fit," he announced and the crowd on the sunny beach applauded. Bisbiglia, a chunky man in his late fifties wore a 1-piece white funsuit. Underneath the wig he was bald.

Next to him on the Southern California beach stood a tall handsome man with a deep tan. He hugged the president now and they both laughed.

The Venusian lizard man ambassador, wearing a complete 6-piece diplomat suit, laughed, too. "It is an extreme pleasure, Mr. President, to make you, on this auspicious day, an Honorary Venusian Transvestite and to welcome you to the venerable order to which the cream of Venusian society has belonged for many generations."

"It's a real pleasure to me also," said the president, tugging at his new blonde curls. "As my friends will tell you, Mr. Ambassador, I'm a real joiner and I sincerely feel this is the best group I've ever joined."

"Our esteemed emperor has expressed the fond hope you will honor our humble planet with another visit very soon," said the lizard. "Indeed, it is his fondest hope you will be able to attend the next Gala Transvestite Ball in Venusburg and serve as Grand Marshal and Cotillion Queen."

"Hey now, that sounds like fun."

"What are the president's motives in this situation?" An image of a sad-faced blackman replaced that of the president on the newscreen. "He appears to be making a strong and concerted effort to scotch rumors that he's going goofy. He is striving to appear the same jovial, simple man who ran up such a landslide victory in the last election. What do you think, Waldo?"

The camera pulled back to show a large floating aluminum desk with several newsmen behind it.

"It's obviously a calculated bid for approval, Tank," said a whitehaired commentator. "President Bisbiglia, who prides himself on being up to date, is obviously aware that dressing up like a lady is a very popular fad in America right now."

"I agree there, Waldo," said yet another newsman, a Chinese midget at the table end. "But the very fact dressing up like a lady is so popular . . . one recalls here it was only last week Major General Bonfigli parachuted over Brazil while wearing black lace panties and frilly garters . . . Yet this may be too obvious a bid for public favor on Bisbiglia's part What do you think, Rollo?"

"It's a lovely gesture," said the man beside him. "Makes our prez seem quite quite human, certainly it scores those who've been dubbing him nuttier than a fruitcake in the so-called news media."

"Oh, horsecock," observed a bearded reporter, "How can you pass judgment anyway, Rollo? Sitting there in a lace-trimmed neochiffon nightie with a shawl of delicate Spanish pseudolace over your scrawny shoulders. You've been traipsing around Washington in lady's clothes since before there was a fad. And as for you, Wu Fang, I don't see where some miniature—"

"Let's not get into personalities," warned the black moderator.

"What fascinates me," said Waldo, "is the presence of Trix Tropicana, the frozen fruit tycoon. We saw him embrace President Bisbiglia, taking an active part in this impressive ceremony. Obviously the president is also intent on squashing criticisms that he can't afford to be linked publicly with this multimillionaire any longer."

"They're both swishy," said the bearded Dex, pounding the metal desk and producing a bong! "That's why Trix Tropicana is there."

"You seem to equate dressing up like a lady with some kind of unacceptable sex outlook," remarked the black moderator. "Certainly in the years since relations have been established with Venus we've come to realize many of our sex taboos are nothing more than—"

"They're all swishy, too, those Venutes." Dex made spitting in disgust sounds. "I think most of my esteemed colleagues on this panel are a little—"

Click!

Secretary Toomey moved away from the offswitch, turned his back on the wallsize newscreen. "Perhaps I was better situated as a singing waiter in old Vienna."

"Nonsense, Toomey," said the slim Negro girl in the neowood lounging chair across from him. "We all have an obligation to our own time."

"I really was happy there at the Enormous Strudel," the Secretary of Mental Health said. "I mean, I enjoy strudel and beer. Then to discover, at my age, a real vocation for singing in public . . . Ah, those were the good old days."

"You're back home," the girl said, her name was Dr. Rosetta Mwavuli. "Your brain's been unscrambled, you have—"

"Oh, don't think I don't appreciate your help, Dr. Mwavuli. No, indeed, I'm pleased to have my own thoughts and memories back. Still, when I remember those funfilled nights in the exciting atmosphere of—"

"I can remove all those Vienna memories."

"No, no. I wouldn't want that, Dr. Mwavuli." Toomey settled into a purple slingchair.

Clunk!

A floating lamp fell to the floor when Conger materialized too close to it. "Oops," he said.

The black girl was on her feet, stungun sliding out of her waist holster. "You must be Conger."

"Yeah, fresh back from Devil's Doorknob, 1879."

The secretary stood. "You're with WTD, aren't you?"

"I am. Why?"

"I'm glad you returned. We may have a new little problem to take care of."

"What is it?"

"I think perhaps Geer has disappeared."

Chapter 18

The android was beautiful. Golden haired and blue eyed, she sat behind the copper desk and smiled out of the pixphone screen. "Mr. Geer is perfectly fine," she told Conger.

"Glad to hear it. Where is he?"

"Taking a much-needed vacation."

"I'd like to contact him."

"I'm afraid he doesn't wish to be disturbed. He's been looking forward to this well-deserved vacation for a long time and now—"

"Okay, thanks." Conger turned off the phone.

"Doesn't quite ring true to me, Mr. Conger," said Buford. "Of course you're better versed than I at sensing lies, falsehoods and subterfuges. Not that I don't have a knack for detecting such things myself. My Uncle Dutch used to say, 'You simple can't con the little varmint. Why, he—' "

"They've got Geer," said Conger.

He, Buford and Secretary Toomey were in the den of the New Jersey hideaway house. It was early afternoon, Dr. Mwavuli was working on Peralta up in the rumpus room.

"Then Mr. Geer could be anywhere," said Buford, "Anywhere in time. No telling where they've dumped him."

"Or even if," said Conger. "They may simply have killed him."

Buford made a sad sound and sat on a tin divan, "I'd hate to think so."

"Bisbiglia has the destinations all picked out in advance," said the secretary. "It amuses him to contemplate where he's going to send his enemies."

"There was nothing about Geer on any of the mumblespools I swiped."

"Dr. Peralta might know," suggested Toomey. "I'm certain, before he fell into disfavor, the president talked over all his plans with him."

"Peralta won't have his mind unscrambled completely for another hour or so." Conger returned to the phone. Making sure the antibug and antitrace devices were connected, he punched out a California number.

"Jake," smiled Angelica when she appeared on the oval screen. "You're alive and contemporary. I'm glad."

"At the moment. You okay?"

"There was someone lurking in the restaurant yesterday, looked very Washington to me. Nobody's bothered me as yet. Is it safe to call me like this?"

"Yeah, it should be. You haven't heard from Geer by any chance?"

"No. Haven't you?"

"He seems to have vanished. Since I was out of town when he did, I thought he might have tried to leave a message with you."

Angelica was rubbing at her cheek with her forefinger. "I'm not as bright as I used to be."

"Happens as we grow old. What prompts this insight?"

"Someone did call," his wife answered. "It was early this morning, while I was in the kitchen programming the andies and the computercook. Anyway, the screen never showed me a picture. I saw a blank, heard someone say, 'He's going to like it there,' and someone else said, 'Plenty to eat there, if you're in the right class.' That was all, neither of the voices was Geer. Call ended at that point. I should have realized they were most likely talking about time travel, or time dumping rather."

"Could be Geer was putting the call through when they came in and stunned him."

"Doesn't help very much," Angelica said. "No clue as to time period or country."

"We've got somebody here who, once he's unscrambled, may know," said Conger. "Okay, I'll talk to you soon. I love you."

"I know," said Angelica.

Dr. Peralta sighed. "I never intended it to be used in the way it's being used."

"That's what they all say," remarked Buford. "All through history, you find inventors and—"

"Where is the damn thing?" asked Conger.

Peralta, who was still wearing most of his Fresco Kid attire, answered, "Up in Alaska. You see, originally I was led to believe the Panchronicon was being financed entirely by private moneys. More specifically, by Trix Tropicana." He rubbed his shoulders against the back of his red lycra sling chair. "In reality, President Bisbiglia was tunneling government funds into the project. When I finally learned of the fact I, due to a long-standing resentment against the Time Travel Overseeing Committee, did not feel obliged to mention it to anyone. If the president of the United States wanted to sidestep TTOC and build a new and better type of time machine, all well and good. I was delighted to co-operate. After many years of trying to gain TTOC's attention and approval, I was bitter."

"One of Tropicana's estates is up in Alaska," said Secretary Toomey. "Is that where the Panchronicon was built?"

Nodding, Peralta said, "Yes, he's got a vast domed spread up there. The Panchronicon is in a detection proof chamber under the polo field."

"We ought to mobilize a force," said Buford, "and get up there to smash that—"

"Smash it?" Peralta bounced up. "Oh, sure, that would be very smart. Smash the Panchronicon after I—"

"Whoa," said Conger. "Nobody's going to smash it. We're not even ready to raid Trix Tropicana's place."

"Don't see," said Buford, "why not."

"Because we don't know who's on President Bisbiglia's side and who isn't. If we call in NSO or TTOC or even the RFA . . . the very guys we contact may be some of the president's secret agents."

Remember now, he's promised a lot of people better positions and more dough once he gets rid of his major enemies and is able to extend his term of office beyond the conventional four years."

The Secretary of Mental Health asked, "What are our alternatives?"

"First we bring home the rest of the time marooned guys," Conger said. "Then we can start to put together a group to raid that Tropicana estate. You can temporarily disable your Panchronicon, can't you, Peralta?"

"Temporarily? Yes."

"If we can do that, and at the same time get all the details of Bisbiglia's wacky plans out in the open, that should scuttle the whole Panchronicon plot. Do you have any idea where he was going to dump Geer?"

"Mr. Geer of the Wild Talent Division?"

"That Geer, yes. Looks like Bisbiglia's people have grabbed him, possibly sent him off into time."

Peralta worried his chin with the knuckle of his thumb. "Yes, I did hear some talk about Geer," he said. "Before the president and Tropicana realized my real feelings, they did discuss some of their plans with me. What they had in mind for Geer was . . . England. Yes, England."

"England, okay. When, and where?"

"I seem to recall something about . . . Yes, Barsetshire and the year . . . the year was 1749. Barsetshire in early April of 1749. President Bisbiglia felt that was an appropriate time and place for Geer."

Conger said, "I'll use the portable and go get him."

"Better let me do it," offered Buford.

"You concentrate on the others. I'll fetch Geer."

Buford watched him a few seconds before grinning. "It can't be you have some sentimental feelings about your boss, can it?"

Chapter 19

The night wind made lazy harmonica sounds with the inn sign. The sign showed a lion and a lamb in a pose apparently intended to convey the idea they were lying down together. Yellow light inside the stone and timber building made its leaded windows glow. Conger's traveling cloak, acquired with the rest of his 18th Century outfit by some friends of Dr. Mwavuli's in Newark, was caught by a gust of wind and flapped several times. A chunk of thatch came flying off the nearby stable to skim his tricorn hat. Several horses stirred and snorted in the shadowy hollow of the barn.

Conger opened the heavy oaken door of the inn and entered.

There were a dozen men in the taproom, drinking, singing, playing cards, pinching the ample red-cheeked barmaid. They all fell silent before Conger had taken three steps into the smoky room.

The barmaid, who had swirling blonde hair, spoke first. "Ar, it can't be him."

The innkeeper, who was clutching the bar counter and scrutinizing Conger with his single eye said, "Don't be too certain, Doll. For they do say Johnathan Nighthound is a master of disguise."

"Ar, no man could forge the glow of kindness I see in this lad's eyes," said Doll. "He's no highwayman."

Conger said, "I'm no highwayman. I am, in point of fact, one Jacob Conger, a simple government clerk."

"Worse than a highwayman says I," muttered the grizzled man who'd been pinching Doll's buttocks until the advent of Conger.

"Now, now, Roland," said the innkeeper. "Keep your sedition to yourself."

"What brings you to the Lion & Lamb in Barset, lad, from London far?" Doll approached him, lifted his black three-cornered hat off his head.

"A mission of little import to anyone save the gentle tyrant for whom I toil," said Conger as her nipples dug at his chest. "I seek a man my office is anxious to locate."

"What sort of man? A great strapping darling such as yourself?"

"Not quite as darling, no," Conger told her. "He's a small man, with a look of great weariness about him. Many wrinkles are etched in his face, circling his eyes. His hair gives one the impression he's but recently come from a conflict with a lightning storm. Further he has an inordinate fondness for sweetmeats."

"Ar, 'tis the changeling you speak of, sure as I'm born."

"Changeling?"

Most of the patrons of the Lion & Lamb had resumed their activities. Cushioned by noise Conger and the barmaid continued their conversation.

"Aye, for he claims he's not of this century," said Doll, "that he has been deposited among us by some strange and wondrous magic."

"That's got to be Geer. They didn't even bother to scramble him."

"Why, bless me, Geer is the very name he uses. Can it be he's escaped from Bedlam?"

"A different place than that," said Conger. "Do you know where I can find him?"

"He's like to be over in Baddely this night, performing."

"He's a performer?"

"Aye, that he is. For Master Firebrand, the grand and glorious manager of Firebrand's Traveling Theatre of Classic Drama and Uplifting Morality, was much taken with our changeling and hired him on first meeting to journey with his much esteemed band of roving players. Geer takes the role of the fool in most of their entertainments," Doll explained. "Tonight at the Baddely Globe they do perform *The Most Illuminating Tragedy of the Duchess of Westlake*. Geer will of course appear in the role of Buffone."

"Of course. How far is Baddely from here?"

Someone tugged at Conger's cloak. "Forgive me, sir, but I unavoidably heard a portion of your discourse with this fair nymph." A lean, sharp-edged man dressed in a darkbrown habit and vest had risen from a nearby table. "I myself must shortly journey to Baddely, since I am much interested in the unfortunate festivities planned for tomorrow. Might I offer you a ride in my carriage?"

" 'Tis Windershins," said Doll into Conger's ear. "You would be better advised to walk the dozen miles."

"Why so?"

"Windershins is a very odd man, his head filled with many strange ideas. 'Tmight spoil your joyful nature to travel in such company, lad."

"I'll have to risk it. Mr. Windershins, I accept your kind offer."

"Ah, splendid, sir," said Windershin. "I anticipate a most interesting ride."

The rain caught them eight miles outside of Baddely. A heavy, warm rain tumbling straight down out of the night sky, thumping the musty, swaying carriage.

"So you see, sir," Windershins was saying, "I consider myself to be a pioneer. For in all of London, indeed in all of England, there is none other who calls himself a detector."

"Why are you going to Baddely?"

"I fear it is on a hopeless errand," the lean man said. "I have determined, alas only to my own satisfaction, that the poor lass who is to be hanged on the morrow is completely innocent. She is not the Witch of the High Road, nor is she the paramour of Johnathan Nighthound."

"That's who they thought I was."

"Yes, many of the locals fear Nighthound will lead a band of his bravos to rescue the girl. That will not happen, since she does not even know the man."

"Who is Nighthound exactly?"

Removing his spectacles, Windershins wiped them on his habit sleeve and replaced them. "Surely you've heard of the infamous Nighthound?"

"My clerkly duties, sir, shelter me from many of the harsher facets of life. A highwayman, is he?"

Windershins gave out a dry, crackling laugh. "Bless me, sir, Johnathan Nighthound is *the* highwayman, the very quintessence of knights of the road."

"This girl . . . they're going to hang her?"

"Have you not, man, heard of the Baddely Hanging Fair. 'Tis an annual event and the reason Master Firebrand has dragged his disreputable band of players to the town. Ah, 'tis a festive day for these simple folk and one which draws in many visitors. Built on a false foundation, for I am certain this young girl is innocent. She has, at the worst, been friendly with a local poacher, but an unfortunate chain of circumstances has placed her in gaol."

"Why are you interested?"

"Why, sir? Because that is what a detector does. He gets to the bottom of things, he comes to the aid of those wrongly accused, he unearths facts, he, and this is at the heart of it all, finds the truth, sir."

Conger watched the rainy night they were rolling through. "You're going to present the truth to the Baddely town officials?"

"That I am," replied Windershins. "Though no doubt they will ignore me, as they have thus far, and proceed with this great folly."

"Those facts you've gathered, you've got them written down?"

"I have." From a vest pocket he extracted a wad of papers. "Since I first passed through Baddely two weeks ago and realized they'd brought the wrong girl to trial, I've been at work. Fortunately I have an income and need not serve any man to earn my bread. Thus I am free to detect, to follow the trail of truth wherever it may lead me."

"Let me read what you've got."

"When we reach the town, sir, I shall be most honored to—"

"I can read it now." Conger pulled a palmflash out of his pocket, clicked it on.

Windershins inhaled. "What manner of magic is this?"

"Just something that gives me a slight technological edge," said Conger. He unfolded the packet and began to read.

Chapter 20

The man with the bristling whiskers strode toward the flickering footlights. "Ah, ungenerous stars which looked down upon my unsought birth," he cried out, "and now watch, unaffected, whilst my hardwon victories do, as sand at the first onslaught of the dark unfathomable sea, vanish." He held high a bloody dagger. "Is it but to this that all the twisted pathways of my life have led, is this the fell design the tangled threads of my destiny have been woven into? That I should slay her whom I did love best of all the things in this dreary world and upon this spinning globe of mud and filth. Ah, and what say you, Sir Fool?"

"Well, it was a pretty yooohoo thing to do."

"The script, sir, the script! You must be more faithful to the script." A huge man in a dark cloak was standing backstage, clutching several sheets of script in his thick fingers.

Conger stood next to him, although Master Firebrand was not aware of it. He was invisible, watching

Geer, in his fool's garb, and the author who was playing the Duke of Garfield.

"Aye, mock me, fool, as life doth mock me. Indeed I often think my life has been but a sorry jest constructed by the gods for their poor sport."

"There's your trouble," said Geer. "You go around feeling sorry for yourself, acting like a yooohoo. For instance, you should have realized the duchess didn't really write that note to Count Frittini. Instead you—"

"Gad, sir!" shouted Firebrand. "You've left the script many leagues behind. Stop babbling and turn to it at once."

Geer heard this, shrugged and said, "Aye, 'tis a sorry life we all lead, sir."

The audience, nearly two hundred people crowded into the narrow wooden theater building, were aware that Buffone the Fool was adlibbing. They began to laugh, clap, call out suggestions.

The actor playing the Duke of Garfield persisted in his part. "What a sad and forlorn thing is this life, that we can come to such a pass. All our steps, skipping so joyfully as babes and strutting with such confidence in our manhood, lead but to the tomb and the black earth. Worms and decay are the last, nay, the only, reward. Alas, had I but know—"

Splat!

"You yoohoos!" Geer, fool's bells jangling, walked nearer the footlights. "He's the one spouting all the dumb lines. Why hit me with a . . . what is this anyway?" He wiped his face on his motley. "Yang, a meatpie."

"Ah, ah, ah," Master Firebrand was saying, rising on tiptoe on each Ah. "I can not tolerate him any longer. I must forcibly remove him, assuming the role of Buffone myself. Yes, I must don the—"

Bong! Thump!

Conger had thrust out an invisible foot when the manager attempted to rush out onto the stage to drag Geer off. Firebrand fell, went skidding out to bowl into the Duke of Garfield's shanks.

"Ah, fate, what more can you send down from the unfeeling heavens to torm—"

He teetered, tumbled over into the glass-held candles and extinguished three of them before falling down into the audience.

"Let's leave." Conger grabbed his boss by the shoulder.

"Jake?"

"How many other invisible agents do you know?"

"More than I can trust. Boy, they're—"

"Come on." He guided Geer off the stage, out a rear door onto a brick-paved lane.

"What a century," complained Geer as they hurried along through the night rain. "Any little thing starts a riot."

"You shouldn't have strayed from the text."

"Why not?"

"Violates a prime rule of the theater," Conger told him. "I don't blame them for tossing things."

"Time travel has addled your wits, but thanks for coming back for me," said Geer. "Speaking of scrambled brains, those yoohoos who shipped me back here didn't tamper with my brain."

"Apparently they were in a bigger hurry in your case."

"Where's Buford True?"

Conger materialized, slipping out of his cloak and dropping it over Geer's shoulders to hide his fool costume. "I used a portable time machine, Buford is elsewhere and when."

"A machine? Can it get us back to 2021?"

"It's capable of that, yeah."

"Then let us leave right now."

"Not yet"

"Not yet?"

"There's a girl I want to see," said Conger.

"I feel like a Venusian." Geer pulled at the wig Conger had acquired for him.

"You look better than you did in cap and bells."

"These buckle shoes are too tight."

"I don't want to invade anymore bedrooms in this neighborhood. So settle."

They were sitting before a small fireplace in the room Conger had taken for them at an inn. The rain hit against the shuttered window.

"Our time is twelve miles away?"

"I hid it in a family tomb I landed near, big marble thing. Doesn't look as though anyone's visited it since the last century."

"We really, Jake, shouldn't tamper with past events."

"This event isn't past yet. They're not going to hang the girl until noon tomorrow."

"You're going to maybe alter the future, our own era," warned Geer. "We'll get home to 2021 and find everybody's wearing powered wigs and eating meatpies. Which reminds me, where's that serving wench with my tarts?"

"Did Buford lecture you about time?"

"My information comes not only from him, it's standard TTOC procedure, too. Remember, Jake? Don't tamper with time."

Conger grinned. "A little tampering isn't going to hurt."

"Or maybe the Venusians will be running the altered 2021. We'll all have to swish around in wigs and party dresses."

"Good, you've got a head start on that."

Knock! Knock!

"My tarts at last," Geer, hobbling some, ran to the door and yanked it open.

Windershins came in. "You must be the illustrious Mr. Geer. whose recent performance as Estomago in *The Tragedy of Umb*—"

"I'm Geer. You're the yooahoo detective, huh?"

"Detector, sir." He moved closer to the fire, opening his cloak.

Conger said, "I'd like my associate to read your report on this case."

"Gladly, sir." The packet of papers was again produced, held out to Geer.

He ignored it "I don't want to waste—"

"Read the damn thing," Conger said.

"I like something to nibble on while I read. Why don't those tarts arrive?" He unfolded the papers, scanned the first page. Then he read it again, slower, fresh wrinkles forming under his eyes. "She's only seventeen?"

"She is but that, sir."

Geer sat in a wooden chair. He read through Windershin's account in ten minutes, thereafter sitting quietly with the pages resting on his knee. "A frame up," he said finally. "Girl's obviously innocent, the local law has railroaded her."

"Although I am unfamiliar with your terms, sir, I infer you are in agreement with my estimate of the situation."

"Anyone but a yooahoo would have to be." Geer stood, reaching up to scratch his head. "Yang! What a spooky feeling, to anticipate your own hair and touch this. Jake, we'll have to spring this girl."

"Agreed," said Conger.

Chapter 21

A falling piano nearly hit him.

"I hope that wasn't Mr. Friedman's piano," said Buford glancing from the musical debris to the second floor bordello window. "No, that's not the right house of ill repute."

He continued on down the hilly cobblestone street. San Francisco Bay was thick with white-sailed ships, bright gulls wheeled through the late afternoon sky. Two men in stained pea coats came out of a saloon lugging a dead Chinese. Buford shook his head in disapproval as he stepped out of the way.

"Sodom and Gomorrah, Sodom and Gomorrah," a whitebearded man in a tattered blue suit chanted on the next corner while beating on a yellowed tambourine with the heel of his hand. "I tell you, brethren, San Francisco in 1852 is near as bad as Sodom and Gomorrah."

"Worse," Buford assured the old man. "I was there once and you people here are much worse shape."

"I'm working this corner, mate," said the evangelist. "Move along, be off."

"Would you know where the Fallen Angel Bordello is?"

"Next block, third on the left, green door."

"Much obliged." Buford resumed walking. He'd made several time hops already, the number of returned presidential enemies was growing. All were being rehabilitated by Dr. Mwavuli. There'd been little trouble so far, except when he'd rescued the Assistant Attorney General from ancient Persia and there he'd been able to convince them he wasn't really committing a sacrilege.

"In the mood for acrobats, bud?" A small man with a large cap was standing in the doorway of the place next to the Fallen Angel.

"I've always been a great fan of the circus. Matter of fact, when I quit my job as a chaplain on the . . . Sorry, no time right now."

"It ain't a bleeding circus I'm touting, bud. It's girls. Girls what can perform acrobatic feats the likes of which even the most lecherous sultans of old could not imagine."

"The sultans of old I've met were pretty tame."

"How's that again?"

Buford opened the green door and entered the Fallen Angel.

A girl dressed merely in a lace-trimmed petticoat was reclining on a fat divan. Across the room a gray-haired man was hunched over an upright piano.

"Ragtime hasn't been invented yet," the pianoplayer was muttering to himself. "So how can I be playing it?"

"Because you're from another century, Mr. Friedman." Buford placed his hand on the Post Office Chairman's arm.

Friedman frowned around at him. "You've obviously spent too much time in places of this sort, young man, and your brain's turned to mush."

"You want the pianoplayer instead of me, sport?" inquired the girl on the divan. "Because if you do it involves an extra fee."

Buford blushed. "I'm footloose and somewhat of a loner, miss," he told the girl. "I assure you, however, there is nothing quirky or odd about Buford True. No, the reason I've come to this low dive is—"

"Is that your name?" the girl asked. "Buford?"

"Yes, I was named after the noted 20th Century artist Buford Yates."

"A very whimsical name," observed the half-clothed girl.

"Would you like to hear *Maple Leaf Rag*?" asked the brainscrambled Friedman. "Even though it hasn't been written yet."

"Miss, would you mind stepping out of the room for a moment so I might have a private conversation with your pianist."

"For a fee."

"Oh, certainly." He reached into the pocket of his checkered coat, producing a coin. He crossed, dropped it into her palm.

"What the hell is this? A denarius? I never—"

"Oops, wrong period." Filling his hand with his pocket change, Buford examined it. "Here's a silver dollar . . . nope, that's 1856. Ah, here's one, miss."

The girl exchanged the denarius for the silver dollar, then examined the dollar for nearly a half a minute before departing the bordello parlor.

"What exactly did you want?" asked Friedman.

"Dropped in to take you home." Buford got a firmer grip of the man's arm.

They both vanished from the room.

Vip!

Vip!

Thun!

Buford raised both his hands and waved them. "I'm a peaceful pilgrim," he announced into the night.

The dockside street was thin, the slanting roofs of the buildings on each side almost touched, keeping out what little moonlight there was.

Vip!

Thun!

One more arrow hit the wood front of the building Buford had halted in front of.

"What ho," belowed someone inside the house. "What new indignities are being visited upon us? First our simple seaport town is thronged with daft crusaders and now . . ."

"No more arrows, if you don't mind," Buford suggested to the bowman who was approaching him.

"What is your business, sir?" He wore a leather doublet, green stockings, pointed-toe leather shoes.

"Am I too late to join the crusade?"

"The ship sails on the morrow. I am one of those chosen to guard the pilgrims against the townspeople. We are lodging in a great stone storehouse yonder."

"Oh, I'm not going to do any harm," Buford said. "I simply want to get to the Holy Land, fight a few infidels and such."

"A laudable aspiration," said the bowman as he lowered his bow.

"I thought also I might have a chance to see my old friend Felix the Hermit."

"Which Felix the Hermit?"

Buford blinked. "How many do you have?"

"There is Felix the Hermit from Navarre, Felix the Hermit from Genoa, Felix the Hermit from—"

"My Felix the Hermit is a man about my size, in his fiftieth year of life and rather fat."

"That would be the Felix the Hermit of Lisbon. Come, I will take you to him."

"He's the last one on my list," said Buford.

"What say you?"

"Nothing really, only an expression of joy," said Buford.

Secretary Toomey glanced up from the lap newsreader he was holding. "A very fast round trip, Buford," he said. "You're very . . . um . . . but who is this?"

"This is Felix Pastore, the Secretary of Religion," Buford answered.

"I am Felix the Hermit, heathen," said the fat, rough-robed man. "Felix the Hermit, known for my great piety."

Buford, letting go of his newest catch, asked Toomey, "This is Felix Pastore, isn't it? With his brain scrambled."

"There's a superficial resemblance," said the secretary. "But Pastore is a good two inches taller than this gentleman, not quite so portly."

"What fiendish place is this?" demanded Felix the Hermit. "Is this some new level of Hell?"

Swallowing, Buford ran to the window, unblanked it and stared out at the dusk. "Was there always that yellow house across the way?"

"As far as I know." Toomey put aside the newsreader. "What seems to be—"

"I ripped this fellow out of the fabric of time," said Buford, "so possibly the whole course of history since the 13th Century may be altered. You simply can't go jerking artifacts out of time, as I've tried to explain."

"Why is it you call me an artifact, heathen?" Felix the Hermit pounded on the plastic floor with his staff.

"They really scrambled this one, didn't they?" Dr. Mwavuli came down the entry ramp into the room. "He appears to be more deeply oriented to the past than—"

"He is oriented to the past," said Buford. "Boy, I really feel idiotic about this."

"Buford's brought back the wrong man," explained Toomey. "Which is understandable, since he's been popping back and forth in time all afternoon. Bound to make one mistake."

"I may have altered the whole entire flow of history."

"Doesn't feel like it," said the Negro girl.

"Listen, you heathens," said Felix the Hermit, "I vow I'll reach the Holy Land no matter what deviltry you attempt."

Buford took a deep breath, slowly let it out. "Well, I'd better return him." he said.

Chapter 22

The thick wooden door groaned open, fat mice scattered for shelter in the wads of straw strewn on the floor of the cell.

"Ow! Yow! Zounds!"

Smack! Thwack!

"Dreadfully sorry, Squire Bridewell."

Thunk!

"I'll sorry you, Sedgwick! Step on my poor gouty foot will ye!" The enormous bewigged squire swung his cudgel at the jailer once more.

Thump! Spang!

Missed again, hit the cell door another sturdy blow.

"I am not Sedgwick, squire. I'm Blowort," the lank jailer explained as he ducked and dodged. "Tis so dark down here one has a bit of trouble making out faces . . . or feet."

"Bah!" The fat squire came limping, waddling, into the dim stone room. Dawn light was finding its way in through the single barred window. His left foot was stoutly bandaged with strips of white muslin. "How are ye this morning, eh, Elizabeth?"

"Very well, squire, considering this is the morn of my last day on earth." The girl, barely seventeen, was slim and blonde. She sat on a low wooden bench immediately beneath the tiny window.

"Ah, it need not be, dear child. Nay, it . . . are you still dogging my steps, Sedgwick?"

"I'm Blowort, sir," replied the jailer from the doorway. "I thought as how, because of your enfeebled condition, 'twas best to remain here whilst you discoursed with this dangerous outlaw."

"I'll dangerous you, Sedgwick!"

Swish!

"Oof!"

"Eh?" The squire blanched, lowering his cudgel. "What was that sound?"

"Perhaps a little flatulence on my part, sir. I deeply apologize, but my woman will serve mutton chops for—"

"Nay, I had the distinct impression I smacked someone in a vital spot, causing a expellation of breath."

"'Twas not I you thunked, squire," said Blowort.

"Nor I," added Elizabeth Salter.

"Of course, of course 'twas not you, fair child. I would not harm you." The squire scowled, tapping at the stone floor with his stick.

Mice scurried, changing piles of straw and cluttering.

"If you'll excuse me then, Squire Bridewell, there's more work to be done to prepare for today's festivities." Leaving the door open, he returned to the corridor.

"Yes, yes, be gone."

Jingle! Jingle!

Elizabeth opened her mouth slightly, but said nothing. From where she sat it appeared as though the jailer's keys had left his belt as he went away. Seconds later the keys vanished.

"You need not mount the scaffold, fair Elizabeth," the squire said.

"I'd rather," the girl said, "than do what you've proposed."

The squire's hold on his cudgel tightened. "Ah, I know full well what it is which bothers you, child. You've heard, no doubt from your disreputable highway companions, vile false-hoods about the doings at Bridewell Hall. You've probably been told about my pushing two of my former wives down the well. A false and most untrue tale."

"I had heard of only one of the unfortunate ladies," said Elizabeth, pressing her back to the stones.

"As for my three strapping sons, why, they swear that if you are mistress of the hall they'll harm you not." He patted his wig. "The terrible falsehood about those good natured lads ravaging the good sisters of St. Norbert's Priory is another vile slur spread by my jealous neighbors. 'Twas actually only the Mother Superior the boys had their way with, and she had few complaints afterward. Indeed, 'twere it not for—"

"Squire Bridewell, I will not become your wife. I will not reside at Bridewell Hall," Elizabeth told him. "Though I am innocent of the crimes I am charged with, I would rather be hanged than share your bed."

The enormous squire shook his head. "If only I could convince you not to believe these malicious yarns which are spread against me," he said, a note of pleading in his voice. "I can save you, child, and only I. Do you not realize what a power I am in Baddely? A word from me and, despite all the preparations and happy anticipation, you will be spared."

"I would like to be spared, for I have lived but a little time. Not at your price, however."

"Suppose I *could* convince the lads to quarter their horses no longer in the dining room? Further, I might even persuade them not to bring home any more maidens or serving wenches which take their fancy. I can't promise to eliminate the orgies at Bridewell Hall completely, since there is a centuries old tradition, but I will strive to hold them less than nightly, dear Elizabeth . . . Ow! Yow! Zounds!"

The squire started hopping, tears of pain sparkling out of his fat-trimmed eyes. Something unseen had stomped down hard on his ailing foot.

Elizabeth, puzzled, stood slowly up.

Wham! Thunk!

Squire Bridewell, his wig remaining where his head had been for a second, did a loop. His feet went up, his thick shoulders slammed into the cell floor.

Bop!

The cudgel, which had left his hand, bonked him one on his shaved skull. "Zounds," he muttered while slipping swiftly into unconsciousness.

"What," said the girl very quietly, "is happening?"

"Don't yell, don't scream. I'll get you out of here." Conger materialized, tipped his three-corner hat. The cudgel was in his hand.

"I never believed in demons and spirits, yet I see before me—"

"Not a demon," Conger assured her, "or a ghost. You know Windershins, don't you?"

"A Mr. Windershins was allowed to speak to me once," the girl replied. "He did promise to help me, but I have heard nothing further."

"You've got no family, except your aunt and —"

"It was she who suggested to them I was a highway robber in the first place."

"Okay, we're going to take you away from here. Windershins has arranged for a family in Kent to look after you," said Conger. "You'll be safe there, and we're setting up a fund to provide you a small income."

"Why?"

"You're innocent. It's something we decided to do, while passing through."

The girl said, "Should your intentions be akin to those of yonder squire, sir, I must refuse—"

"My intentions aren't akin," Conger said, smiling. "I've got a wife, in another era. Come on, they're already putting the bunting on the scaffold."

"Yes," said Elizabeth, coming to a decision, "I can trust you. There is something in your face, in spite of your strange powers, which—"

"There's a back way which leads to an alley." He caught her hand. "Windershins has his carriage waiting there."

"You have the keys to all the doors."

"Yeah, glad you didn't cry out when you noticed my swiping them."

"I was not capable."

The jailer was in the other end of the building. Conger removed Elizabeth from the place without his knowing.

The later shouts of "Zounds! Yow!" from the recovering squire were the first hint of trouble.

Chapter 23

"Shucks, I can take care of that there, too, hombre." Dr. Peralta gave an annoyed shake of his head. "Excuse me, I still seem to have a little Fresco Kid left in me."

"That should all pass out of your system in another twenty-four hours." Dr. Mwavuli was sitting in one of the room's floating lucite chairs, long black legs crossed, electric pencil held like a cigar.

"I surely do hope so, mam." The short, dark scientist took another look at the sketch of Trix Tropicana's Alaska estate which he'd drawn for them. "It's all here, Jake. See, the entrances to the Panchronicon room are at this spot . . . and at this one. I've explained how to activate the concealed unlocking jiggers."

Conger said, "Let's get back to this NSO thing."

"Hold it," said Geer from his chair near the snack table. "I don't know if you ought to have the ability to—"

"Ripley can see me," cut in Conger. "He may be up in Alaska at the Tropicana spread. I want to know it."

"But the National Security Office didn't think it wise to—"

"You're sounding like a bureaucratic yoo-hoo now." Conger said. "Ripley got the treatment, I want it."

"The basic serum is relatively simple to concoct," Dr. Peralta said. "When I got my shots I made it a point to find out exactly what the stuff was and how it was produced. I'm certain I can fix up a batch, if I can gain access to a relatively well-stocked lab."

"There's Ft. Caniff Military Hospital fifteen miles from here," said the black girl. "Can Jake fetch what you need, or do you have to get inside there yourself?"

Peralta thought. "I suppose I could give him a supply list."

Buford's chair made a squeaking twang as he shifted his weight. "Far be it for me to put forth a counterplan," he said. "After all, you people, despite the rather poor showing you've made lately, are all experts in political affairs and intrigues. Still I can't help—"

"Just a moment, young man."

"This sort of talk won't—"

"We were dupes at best, gulled by the president."

The rescued and unscrambled politicians there assembled were not happy with Buford.

"I certainly don't mean any offense," he said. "Those of you who've worked with me know I hate to offend anyone, even when I know more than he does. I simply feel it's unwise to send Mr. Conger into Trix Tropicana's stronghold alone and unaided."

"All Jake has to do," Geer pointed out, "is disable the damn Panchronicon Peralta's demonstrated exactly how to do that. Jake's talent for invisibility suits the job. Tropicana is tossing a big party for all his assorted political yoo-hoo friends tomorrow afternoon, President Bisbiglia is

supposed to be there. They won't be trying to pop anybody off into the past, they'll probably have a minimum staff around their damn time machine. So it's—"

"I wish, Geer, you'd not always use the word damn when you refer to my invention. The Panchronicon is, after all, the best time—"

"You invented it, you didn't get dumped in some ungodly century. You didn't have to slouch around in a clown suit spouting cheap tragedy."

"All this squabbling," said Buford, "is really only taking us further from the point. Now my idea is—"

"Our plans are already set, Buford," said Secretary Toomey. "Jake will disable the time machine in Alaska. Meanwhile we'll contact the people in the media whom we can trust. We'll see to it the whole unsavory story of the Panchronicon plot is brought before the public. When that breaks, when the nation becomes aware of what's, been happening, President Bisbiglia is finished."

"Do we," asked Felix Pastore, "want to make all of this public? Possibly we could persuade the president to mend his—"

"Don't be a yoo-hoo," advised Geer. "You almost wound up having your head lopped off by a Saracen blade. Bisbiglia isn't going to reform."

"I still think," said Buford, "I ought to go along with Mr. Conger to make—"

"Give me the list of what you'll need, Dr. Peralta." Conger was out of his chair. "I'll head over to Ft. Caniff."

"Well, I did my best." Buford spread his hands wide. "We'll simply have to trust fate."

"He's obviously dead," said the orange-haired woman in the 2-piece mourningsuit to the others in the pale blue hospital corridor. "Technically I mean."

"As dead as they come," said the lopsided young man at her side. "Dead as a doornail, dead and done for."

"If they had any vultures around Ft. Caniff they'd be coming in for a landing," said the other off-kilter young man in the party. "Pop is long gone, cut down."

"I am here to determine his situation," said the pinkish man in the 1-piece servicesuit.

"Pull the plug," urged one of the young men.

"Flip the switch," said the other young man.

"Oh, I'm going to miss him." The orange-haired woman commenced sobbing. "Such a loving man he was, for a general in the Elite Killer Commando Corps anyway. He never killed in anger. He was so gentle and loving with the boys. And now he's dying . . . I mean, he's dead."

"Mrs. Huff," said the pinkish man, "only the Right To Die Commission can determine whether or not your husband is dead. If, after the standard tests as spelled out in the RTD amendment of 2017 are performed, I will inform you whether or not his life supports can be withdrawn."

"Cripes, how long is that going to take?" one of Huff's lopsided sons asked.

"We must be thorough."

"Oy, that means hours," groaned the other son. "Poor dear Bloody," Mrs. Huff said with a burst of sobs. "To think he's dying . . . I mean, dead. That all the expenses of maintaining him will cease, that all his military benefits will come to us, that his various and sundry insurance policies will pay off at last and shower us with wealth. Oh, it's too dreadful and heartrending to contemplate."

"We'll soon know, madam," said the WTDC man.

"He's dead," insisted one of the sons. "Can't you just go in and unplug his electronic lungs and his automatic bowels and his artificial brain and—"

"In due time, my boy." The pinkish man reached for the room door. "Be brave, as I'm sure the son of General Bloody Huff can be."

"Oh, poor dear Bloody," said Mrs. Huff.

Conger moved along. Invisibly he walked down the hall, climbed the ramp and located the 3rd Level. There was no one in the chill blue supply room. He set about gathering what Dr. Peralta required.

Chapter 24

The fashionably-dressed catman asked, "Have you ever thought of writing a story about that?"

"No," replied the dapper lizard man.

"I should think you'd get a dandy story out of how nothing quite works." He squatted, struggling to upright the drink-serving robot which had fallen over at their feet. "It's not merely servos, for from it. My wife's artificial heart frequently beats in highly unusual tempos. A great story to be found in there."

"I don't write tripe."

"Oh, I didn't realize. I assumed any author as prominent as yourself would have had to write tripe."

"Things are different on Venus."

The robot went reeling off across the immense plaztone patio. It almost collided with the invisible Conger before skidding to a halt beside President Bisbiglia.

"Nothing for me, thanks," said the president of the United States. "I need a clear head for governing."

"Cheers," said the gold-plated robot out of its stomach voxbox. Gin began spouting out of its left ear, plashing on the patio.

"Watch out, Biz." Trix Tropicana pulled his friend out of range of the jet of gin. "You don't want, to go around reeking of strong drink."

Bisbiglia chuckled with Tropicana. "Right, Trixie. It would start more nasty media rumors."

"Toto!" Tropicana snapped his fingers, a very tall black man came hurrying over. "Toto, #26 seems to be on the fritz. Haul him to the repair wing, won't you."

"Rightyo, tuan."

"Bottoms up," said the robot as it was dragged off, with bourbon spraying out of its elbow.

The pearl-draped catwoman who made up part of the president's circle at the moment said, "Nothing seems to work exactly right on your planet, Mr. President."

"It's not my planet exactly."

"Not yet," added Tropicana in a low voice.

There were more than two hundred guests under the pink-tinted dome. Outside snow covered everything, inside it was tropically warm and palm trees and flowering plants made wide borders between the plaztone patio sections.

A buck-in-the-slot nostalgia-rock band was motionless on a floating platform near the president. Newscreens floated at various points, a few Gypsy androids circulated providing sad violin airs.

Bong! Bunk!

Another drink 'bot fell over some distance away.

"Hey, there's Ripley," said Conger to himself.

The renegade WTD invisible agent was standing beside a cluster of palm trees. Alone, scanning the afternoon crowd.

"The shots do work. I can see the bastard plain." Keeping people and decorative trees between himself and Ripley, Conger moved closer to the agent. "Trouble is, he can see me, too."

Silently, Conger came up behind Ripley through the palms.

". . . the president seems to be flaunting his friendship with the controversial frozen fruit tycoon, Tank. This cocktail party, which our robot cameras are bringing in—"

"No live newsmen allowed, remember, Waldo?"

A group of reporters showed on the newscreen which floated at eyelevel a few feet from Ripley's head.

Conger, careful not to disturb one frond, inched closer.

". . . President Bisbiglia is, in a sense, Waldo, thumbing his nose at the public. He's saying he feels in command, at the height of his powers therefore he can pal around with whomsoever he pleases. To put it yet another—"

"Wow! Boy, listen to this!"

"Dex, you're not supposed to be sitting in on this panel."

"Forget it. I rushed in to tell you guys what's breaking. It's momentous. We're going to be cutting to Secretary Toomey in a moment and then—"

"Toomey?" Ripley stiffened, saying the name aloud.

"He's home." Conger had his stungun out, poked into Ripley's back.

"Conger. Shit, I figured you were still marooned in Vienna."

"Nope, I—"

"Rip, what are you doing? Looks exactly like you're talking to yourself." A tall red-haired girl in a 1-piece partysuit was approaching with a small tray of sandwiches. "I had to wack that damn food 'bot on the cabeza thrice to get us this chow, and as it is I got three lox and one herring instead of three herring and . . . Honey, why does it appear as though there's a stungun floating behind your darling old back?"

"Greta, run and—"

Zzz! Humm!

Ripley fell down. The gun vanished into Conger's invisible side pocket.

Greta screamed.

No one came running. They were all, or almost all, preoccupied with what the newscreens were revealing.

"He wasn't even invisible," Conger told himself as he headed for one of the secret entrances to the Pan-chronicon room. "So I don't know if Peralta's version of the NSO serum works or not."

"Heap powerful magic."

"Runny, you're commencing to do the Indian lingo. Come on, let loose that robot."

"Me likeum."

Vice President Runningwater had an arm around a silver-plated diamond-studded drink-dispensing robot. Dynamo Daisy, more sedately attired than the last time Conger had seen her, was seated, mildly forlorn, in a floating tin chair.

"More firewater," Runningwater demanded.

"Bottoms up." The robot lifted one of its several arms to its right ear. Scotch spewed out into a large glass.

"Me gonna getum 'bot like this. Gotum plenty wampum, no reason no live as high as palefaces."

Zam! Zitt!

"Oh, darn, Runny." Dynamo Daisy clutched at her partially exposed breasts. "I'm getting some kind of feedback reaction, from being so close to your silly robot."

"Moveum your keaster then." The vice president sampled some of his latest scotch.

"I'd just as like get out of here and back to the party. An awful lot of important people are gathered up there, Runny. Why, I even saw that lizard who wrote the wonderful bestseller about migrant birddropping gatherers on Venus. It was so touching."

"Me bringum you down here to see Panchronicon. Not to jabber about bird crap."

"I don't care much about technical matters, unless they have some application to boopies."

The Panchronicon was small, much smaller than any other non-portable time machine Conger had ever seen. It sat in the exact center of this grey room, on a low dais. What it resembled was an antique phone booth which had been decorated some with chrome trim. Inside the booth was a seat, a bank of dials and switches. Dr. Peralta claimed it could do everything the much bulkier time travel units in the TTOC facility in Manhattan could. The Panchronicon was the most efficient of small machines, according to its inventor. With it you could, for instance, visit any spot in the past and then be brought back to almost the point in time from which you'd departed. No other time machine, of any size, could do that.

The Indian vice president had apparently decided to show Dynamo Daisy around the Panchronicon room while they were at Trix Tropicana's party. Except for a guard out in the underground corridor, there was no one else around. Possible the other guards were at the party.

"Me always likeum visit my people."

"Your folks are in Goleta, California. We can teleport out there any—"

"Me mean Indian ancestors." Runningwater eased his torso into the Panchronicon cabinet. "All gottum do . . ." He paused to finish his drink. ". . . all gottum do is set some dials. Then go back to days when redman no playum second fiddle. Back in . . . 1650 . . . back then me be chief, not vice chief."

"You shouldn't ought to fiddle."

Fitz! Frzz! Zit!

"Quiet, squaw."

"Turn it off," cried Dynamo Daisy. "It's causing my kaboobies to throw orange and blue sparks."

"What say we takeum little jaunt to better days?"

"No." Her breasts continued to spark and sizzle. "Anyway, how would we get back to the here and now?"

Chin thrust out, eyes narrow, Runningwater was studying the control panel. "Supposed to be controlum that."

Conger, meantime, was at the back of the Panchronicon. He'd be able to disable the time machine from back here without the vice president's being aware of it. With invisible fingers he located the small aluminum plate Dr. Peralta had alerted him to.

"There. Gottum set for summer of 1650, out West."

Dynamo Daisy backed away from the Panchronicon, still seated, taking her chair along with her. "I don't care for this at all."

"Cheers," said the robot.

Wham!

The metal door of the room came swinging open. President Bisbiglia, with Trix Tropicana close behind, rushed into the room.

"Out of the way," the president told his running mate.

"What wrong?"

"It's all up. That idiot Toomey is back, and he's got the ear of the media." He pushed Runningwater aside. "My dream castles are all tumbling down. The only answer is to lie low in the past for awhile till this blows over." He patted his middle, producing a jingling. "Money belt of gold nuggets, worn always in case of just such an emergency." The gold jingled again when he seated himself inside the machine.

"Room for me, Biz?"

"On my lap, Trixie."

Grunting, struggling, Tropicana managed to squeeze into the booth-size cabinet. "Where we going?"

"Doesn't much matter."

"Gottum set for Western USA in 1650."

"As good a time as any. Let's go, let's go." With slightly shaking fingers the president turned the appropriate dials and flipped the proper switches.

"Oh, that's unsettling," said Dynamo Daisy.

The two men disappeared from inside the box.

Conger removed the metal plate and proceeded to disable the Panchronicon.