

The Tactful Saboteur

Frank Herbert, 1965

Chapter I

'Better men than you have tried!' snarled Clinton Watt.

'I quote paragraph four, section ninety-one of the Semantic Revision to the Constitution,' said saboteur extraordinary Jorj X. McKie. 'The need for obstructive processes in government having been established as one of the chief safeguards for human rights, the question of immunities must be defined with extreme precision.'

McKie sat across a glistening desk from the Intergalactic Government's Secretary of Sabotage, Clinton Watt. An air of tension filled the green-walled office, carrying over into the screen-view behind Watt which showed an expanse of the System Government's compound and people scurrying about their morning business with a sense of urgency.

Watt, a small man who appeared to crackle with suppressed energy, passed a hand across his shaven head. 'All right,' he said in a suddenly tired voice. 'This is the only Secretariat of government that's never immune from sabotage. You've satisfied the legalities by quoting the law. Now, do your damnedest!'

McKie, whose bulk and fat features usually gave him the appearance of a grandfatherly toad, glowered like a gnome-dragon. His mane of red hair appeared to dance with inner flame.

'Damnedest!' he snapped. 'You think I came in here to try to unseat you? You think that?'

And McKie thought: *Let's hope he thinks that!*

'Stop the act, McKie!' Watt said. 'We both know you're eligible for this chair.' He patted the arm of his chair. 'And we both know the only way you can eliminate me and qualify yourself for the appointment is to overcome me with a masterful sabotage. Well, McKie, I've sat here more than eighteen years. Another five months and it'll be a new record. Do your damnedest. I'm waiting.'

'I came in here for only one reason,' McKie said. 'I want to report on the search for saboteur extraordinary Napoleon Bildoan.'

McKie sat back wondering: *If Watt knew my real purpose here would he act just this way? Perhaps.* The man had been behaving oddly since the start of this interview, but it was difficult to determine real motive when dealing with a fellow member of the Bureau of Sabotage.

Cautious interest quickened Watt's bony face. He wet his lips with his tongue and it was obvious he was asking himself if this were more of an elaborate ruse. But McKie had been assigned the task of searching for the missing agent, Bildoan, and it was just possible ...

'Have you found him?' Watt asked.

'I'm not sure,' McKie said. He ran his fingers through his red hair. 'Bildoan's a Pan-Spechi, you know.'

'For disruption's sake!' Watt exploded. 'I know who and what my own agents are! But we take care of our own. And when one of our best people just drops from sight ... What's this about not being sure?'

'The Pan-Spechi are a curious race of creatures,' McKie said. 'Just because they've taken

on humanoid shape we tend to forget their five-phase life cycle.'

'Bildoan told me himself he'd hold his group's ego at least another ten years,' Watt said. 'I think he was being truthful, but ... ' Watt shrugged and some of the bursting energy seemed to leave him. 'Well, the group ego's the only place where the Pan-Spechi show vanity, so ... ' Again he shrugged.

'My questioning of the other Pan-Spechi in the Bureau has had to be circumspect, of course,' McKie said. 'But I did follow one lead clear to Achus.'

'And?'

McKie brought a white vial from his copious jacket, scattered a metallic powder on the desktop.

Watt pushed himself back from the desk, eyeing the powder with suspicion. He took a cautious sniff, smelled chalf, the quick-scribe powder. Still ...

'It's just chalf,' McKie said. And he thought: *If he buys that, I may get away with this.*

'So scribe it,' Watt said.

Concealing his elation, McKie held a chalf-memory stick over the dusted surface. A broken circle with arrows pointing to a right-hand flow appeared in the chalf. At each break in the circle stood a symbol - in one place the Pan-Spechi character for ego, then the delta for fifth gender and, finally, the three lines that signified the dormant crèche-triplets.

McKie pointed to the fifth gender delta. 'I've seen a Pan-Spechi in this position who looks a bit like Bildoan and *appears* to have some of his mannerisms. There's no identity response from the creature, of course. Well, you know how the quasi-feminine fifth gender reacts.'

'Don't ever let that amorous attitude fool you,' Watt warned. 'In spite of your nasty disposition I wouldn't want to lose you into a Pan-Spechi crèche.'

'Bildoan wouldn't rob a fellow agent's identity,' McKie said. He pulled at his lower lip, feeling an abrupt uncertainty. Here, of course, was the most touchy part of the whole scheme. 'If it was Bildoan.'

'Did you meet this group's ego holder?' Watt asked and his voice betrayed real interest.

'No,' McKie said. 'But I think the ego-single of this Pan-Spechi is involved with the Tax Watchers.'

McKie waited, wondering if Watt would rise to the bait.

'I've never heard of an ego change being forced onto a Pan-Spechi,' Watt said in a musing tone, 'but that doesn't mean it's impossible. If those Tax Watcher do gooders found Bildoan sabotaging their efforts and ... Hmmm.'

'Then Bildoan was after the Tax Watchers,' McKie said.

Watt scowled. McKie's question was in extreme bad taste. Senior agents, unless joined on a project or where the information was volunteered, didn't snoop openly into the work of their fellows. Left hand and right hand remained mutually ignorant in the Bureau of Sabotage and for good reason. Unless ... Watt stared speculatively at his saboteur extraordinary.

McKie shrugged as Watt remained silent. 'I can't operate on inadequate information,' he said. 'I must, therefore, resign the assignment to search for Bildoan. Instead, I will now look into the Tax Watchers.'

'You will not!' Watt snapped.

McKie forced himself not to look at the design he had drawn on the desktop. The next few moments were the critical ones.

'You'd better have a legal reason for that refusal,' McKie said.

Watt swiveled sideways in his chair, glanced at the screenview, then addressed himself to the side wall. 'The situation has become one of extreme delicacy, Jorj. It's well known that

you're one of our finest saboteurs.'

'Save your oil for someone who needs it,' McKie growled.

'Then I'll put it this way,' Watt said, returning his gaze to McKie. 'The Tax Watchers in the last few days have posed a real threat to the Bureau. They've managed to convince a High Court magistrate they deserve the same immunity from our ministrations that a ... well, public water works or ... ah ... food processing plant might enjoy. The magistrate, Judge Edwin Dooley, invoked the Public Safety amendment. Our hands are tied. The slightest suspicion that we've disobeyed the injunction and ... '

Watt drew a finger across his throat.

'Then I quit,' McKie said.

'You'll do nothing of the kind!'

'This TW outfit is trying to eliminate the Bureau, isn't it?' McKie asked. 'I remember the oath I took just as well as you do.'

'Jorj, you couldn't be that much of a simpleton,' Watt said. 'You quit, thinking that absolves the Bureau from responsibility for you! That trick's as old as time!'

'Then fire me!' McKie said.

'I've no legal reason to fire you Jorj.'

'Refusal to obey orders of a superior,' McKie said.

'It wouldn't fool anybody, you dolt!'

McKie appeared to hesitate, said: 'Well, the public doesn't know the inner machinery of how we change the Bureau's command. Perhaps it's time we opened up.'

'Jorj, before I could fire you there'd have to be a reason so convincing that ... Just forget it.'

McKie's eyes lifted until the eyes were mere slits. The crucial few moments had arrived. He had managed to smuggle a Jicuzzi stim into this office past all of Watt's detectors, concealing the thing's detectable radiation core within an imitation of the lapel badge that Bureau agents wore.

'In Lieu of Red Tape,' McKie said and touched the badge with a finger, feeling the raised letters there - 'ILRT.' The touch focused the radiation core onto the metallic dust scattered over the desktop.

Watt gripped the arms of the chair, studying McKie with a new look of wary tension.

'We are under legal injunction to keep hands off the Tax Watchers,' Watt said. 'Anything that happens to those people or to their project for scuttling us - even legitimate accidents - will be laid at our door-. We must be able to defend ourselves. No one who has ever been connected with us dares fall under the slightest suspicion of complicity.'

'How about a floor waxed to dangerous slickness in the path of one of their messengers? How about a doorlock changed to delay -'

'Nothing.'

McKie stared at his chief. Everything depended now on the man holding very still. He knew Watt wore detectors to warn him of concentrated beams of radiation. But this Jicuzzi stim had been rigged to diffuse its charge off the metallic dust on the desk and that required several seconds of relative quiet.

The men held themselves rigid in the staredown until Watt began to wonder at the extreme stillness of McKie's body. The man was even holding his breath!

McKie took a deep breath, stood up.

'I warn you, Jorj,' Watt said.

'Warn me?'

'I can restrain you by physical means if necessary.'

'Clint, old enemy, save your breath. What's done is done.'

A smile touched McKie's wide mouth. He turned, crossed to the room's only door, paused there, hand on knob.

'What have you done?' Watt exploded.

McKie continued to look at him.

Watt's scalp began itching madly. He put a hand there, felt a long tangle of ... tendrils! They were lengthening under his fingers, growing out of his scalp, waving and writhing.

'A Jicuzzi stim,' Watt breathed.

McKie let himself out, closed the door.

Watt leaped out of his chair, raced to the door.

Locked!

He knew McKie and didn't try unlocking it. Frantically, Watt slapped a molecular dispersion wad against the door, dived through as the wad blasted. He landed in the outer hall, stared first one direction, then the other.

The hall was empty.

Watt sighed. The tendrils had stopped growing, but they were long enough now that he could see them writhing past his eyes - a rainbow mass of wrigglers, part of himself. And McKie with the original stim was the only one who could reverse the process-unless Watt were willing to spend an interminable time with the Jicuzzi themselves. No. That was out of the question.

Watt began assessing his position.

The stim tendrils couldn't be removed surgically, couldn't be tied down or contained in any kind of disguise without endangering the person afflicted with them. Their presence would hamper him, too, during this critical time of trouble with the Tax Watchers. How could he appear in conferences and interviews with these things writhing in their Medusa dance on his head? It would be laughable! He'd be an object of comedy.

And if McKie could stay out of the way until a Case of Exchangement was brought before the full Cabinet ... But, no! Watt shook his head. This wasn't the kind of sabotage that required a change of command in the Bureau. This was a gross thing. No subtlety to it. This was like a practical joke. Clownish.

But McKie was noted for his clownish attitude, his irreverence for all the blundering self-importance of government.

Have I been self-important? Watt wondered.

In all honesty, he had to admit it.

I'll have to submit my resignation today, he thought. Right after I fire McKie. One look at me and there'll be no doubt of why I did it. This is about as convincing a reason as you could find.

Watt turned to his right, headed for the lab to see if they could help him bring this wriggling mass under control.

The President will want me to stay at the helm until McKie makes his next move, Watt thought. I have to be able to function somehow.

Chapter II

McKie waited in the living room of the Achusian mansion with ill concealed unease. Achus was the administrative planet for the Vulpecula region, an area of great wealth, and this room high on a mountaintop commanded a natural view to the southwest across lesser peaks and foothills misted in purple by a westering G₃ sun.

But McKie ignored the view, trying to watch all corners of the room at once. He had seen a fifth gender Pan-Spechi here in company with the fourth-gender ego-holder. That could only mean the crèche with its three dormants was nearby. By all accounts, this was a dangerous place for someone not protected by bonds of friendship and community of interest.

The value of the Pan-Spechi to the universal human society in which they participated was beyond question. What other species had such refined finesse in deciding when to hinder and when to help? Who else could send a key member of its group into circumstances of extreme peril without fear that the endangered one's knowledge would be lost?

There was always a dormant to take up where the lost one had left off.

Still, the Pan-Spechi did have their idiosyncrasies. And their hungers were at times bizarre.

'Ahh, McKie.'

The voice, deep and masculine, came from his left. McKie whirled to study the figure that came through a door carved from a single artificial emerald of glittering crème de menthe colors.

The speaker was humanoid but with Pan-Spechi multi-faceted eyes. He appeared to be a terranic man (except for the blue-green eyes) of an indeterminate, well-preserved middle age. The body suggested a certain daintiness in its yellow tights and singlet. The head was squared in outline with close-cropped blond hair, a fleshy chunk of nose and thick splash of mouth.

'Panthor Bolin here,' the Pan-Spechi said. 'You are welcome in my home, Jorj McKie.'

McKie relaxed slightly. Pan-Spechi were noted for honoring hospitality once it was extended ... provided the guest didn't violate their mores.

'I'm honored that you've agreed to see me,' McKie said.

'The honor is mine,' Bolin said. 'We've long recognized you as a person whose understanding of the Pan-Spechi is most subtle and penetrating. I've longed for the chance to have uninhibited conversation with you. And here you are.' He indicated a chair-dog against the wall to his right, snapped his fingers. The semi-sentient artifact glided to a position behind McKie. 'Please be seated.'

McKie, his caution re-alerted by Bolin's reference to 'uninhibited conversation,' sank into the chairdog, patting it until it assumed the contours he wanted.

Bolin took a chairdog facing him, leaving only about a meter separating their knees.

'Have your egos shared nearness before?' McKie asked. 'You appeared to recognize me.'

'Recognition goes deeper than ego,' Bolin said. 'Do you wish to join identities and explore this question?'

McKie wet his lips with his tongue. This was delicate ground with the Pan-Spechi, whose one ego moved somehow from member to member of the unit group as they traversed their *circle of being*.

'I ... ah ... not at this time,' McKie said.

'Well spoken,' Bolin said. 'Should you ever change your mind, my ego-group would consider it a most signal honor. Yours is a strong identity, one we respect.'

'I'm ... most honored,' McKie said. He rubbed nervously at his jaw, recognizing the dangers in this conversation. Each Pan-Spechi group maintained a supremely jealous attitude of and

about its wandering ego. The ego imbued the holder of it with a touchy sense of honor. Inquiries about it could be carried out only through such formula questions as McKie already had asked.

Still, if this were a member of the pentarchal life circle containing the missing saboteur extraordinary Napoleon Bildoan ... if it were, much would be explained.

'You're wondering if we really can communicate,' Bolin said. McKie nodded.

'The concept of *humanity*,' Bolin said, ' - our term for it would translate approximately as *com-sentiency* - has been extended to encompass many different shapes, life systems and methods of mentation. And yet we have never been sure about this question. It's one of the major reasons many of us have adopted your life-shape and much of your metabolism. We wished to experience your strengths and your weaknesses. This helps ... but is not an absolute solution.'

'Weaknesses?' McKie asked, suddenly wary.

'Ahhh-hummm,' Bolin said. 'I see. To allay your suspicions I will have translated for you soon one of our major works. One of the strongest sympathetic bonds we have with your species, for example, is the fact that we both originated as extremely vulnerable surface-bound creatures whose most sophisticated defense came to be the social structure.'

'I'll be most interested to see the translation,' McKie said.

'Do you wish more amenities or do you care to state your business now?' Bolin asked.

'I was ... ah ... assigned to seek out a missing agent of our Bureau,' McKie said, 'to be certain no harm had befallen this ... ah ... agent.'

'Your avoidance of gender is most refined,' Bolin said. 'I appreciate the delicacy of your position and your good taste. I will say this for now: the Pan-Spechi you seek is not at this time in need of your assistance. Your concern, however, is appreciated. It will be communicated to those upon whom it will have the most influence.'

'That's a great relief to me,' McKie said. And he wondered: *What did he really mean by that?* This thought elicited another, and McKie said: 'Whenever I run into this problem of communication between species I'm reminded of an old culture/teaching story.'

'Oh?' Bolin registered polite curiosity.

'Two practitioners of the art of mental healing, so the story goes, passed each other every morning on their way to their respective offices. They knew each other, but weren't on intimate terms. One morning as they approached each other, one of them turned to the other and said, 'Good morning.' The one greeted failed to respond, but continued toward his office. Presently, though he stopped, turned and stared at the retreating back of the man who'd spoken, musing to himself: 'Now, what did he really mean by that?''

Bolin began to chuckle, then laugh. His laughter grew louder and louder until he was holding his sides.

It wasn't that funny, McKie thought.

Bolin's laughter subsided. 'A very educational story,' he said. 'I'm deeply indebted to you. This story shows your awareness of how important it is in communication that we be aware of the other's identity.'

Does it? McKie wondered. How's that?

And McKie found himself caught up by his knowledge of how the Pan-Spechi could pass a single ego-identity from individual to individual within the life circle group of five distinct protoplasmic units. He wondered how it felt when the ego-holder gave up the identity to become the fifth gender, passing the ego spark to a newly matured unit from the crèche. Did the fifth gender willingly become crèche nurse and give itself up as a mysterious identity-food for the three dormants in the crèche? he wondered.

'I heard about what you did to Secretary of Sabotage Clinton Watt,' Bolin said. 'The story

of your dismissal from the service preceded you here.'

'Yes,' McKie said. 'That's why I'm here, too.'

'You've penetrated to the fact that our Pan-Spechi community here on Achus is the heart of the Tax Watchers' organization,' Bolin said. 'It was very brave of you to walk right into our hands. I understand how much more courage it takes for your kind to face unit extinction than it does for our kind. Admirable! You are indeed a prize.'

McKie fought down a sensation of panic, reminding himself that the records he had left in his private locker of Bureau headquarters could be deciphered in time even if he did not return.

'Yes,' Bolin said, 'you wish to satisfy yourself that the ascension of a Pan-Spechi to the head of your Bureau will pose no threat to other human species. This is understandable.'

McKie shook his head to clear it. 'Do you read minds?' he demanded.

'Telepathy is not one of our accomplishments,' Bolin said, his voice heavy with menace. 'I do hope that was a generalized question and in no way directed at the intimacies of my ego-group.'

'I felt that you were reading my mind,' McKie said, tensing himself for defense.

'That was how I interpreted the question,' Bolin said. 'Forgive my question. I should not have doubted your delicacy or your tact.'

'You do hope to place a member in the job of Bureau Secretary, though?' McKie said.

'Remarkable that you should've suspected it,' Bolin said. 'How can you be sure our intention is not merely to destroy the Bureau?'

'I'm not.' McKie glanced around the room, regretting that he had been forced to act alone.

'Where did we give ourselves away?' Bolin mused.

'Let me remind you,' McKie said, 'that I have accepted the hospitality you offered and that I've not offended your mores.'

'Most remarkable,' Bolin said. 'In spite of all the temptations I offered, you have not offended our mores. This is true. You are an embarrassment, indeed you are. But perhaps you have a weapon. Yes?'

McKie lifted a wavering *shape* from an inner pocket.

'Ahhh, the Jicuzzi stim,' Bolin said. 'Now, let me see, is that a weapon?'

McKie held the *shape* on his palm. It appeared flat at first, like a palm-sized sheet of pink paper. Gradually, the flatness grew a superimposed image of a tube laid on its surface, then another image of an S-curved spring that coiled and wound around the tube.

'Our species can control its shape to some extent,' Bolin said. 'There's some question on whether I can consider this a weapon.'

McKie curled his fingers around the *shape*, squeezed. There came a pop, and fumaroles of purple light emerged between his fingers accompanied by an odor of burnt sugar.

'Exit stim,' McKie said. 'Now I'm completely defenseless, entirely dependent upon your hospitality.'

'Ah, you are a tricky one,' Bolin said. 'But have you no regard for Ser Clinton Watt? To him, the change you forced upon him is an affliction. You've destroyed the instrument that might have reversed the process.'

'He can apply to the Jicuzzi,' McKie said, wondering why Bolin should concern himself over Watt.

'Ah, but they will ask your permission to intervene,' Bolin said. 'They are so formal. Drafting their request should take at least three standard years. They will not take the slightest chance of offending you. And you, of course, cannot volunteer your permission without

offending them. You know, they may even build a nerve-image of you upon which to test their petition. You are not a callous person, McKie, in spite of your clownish poses. I'd not realized how important this confrontation was to you.'

'Since I'm completely at your mercy,' McKie said, 'would you try to stop me from leaving here?'

'An interesting question,' Bolin said. 'You have information I don't want revealed at this time. You're aware of this, naturally?'

'Naturally.'

'I find the constitution a most wonderful document,' Bolin said. 'The profound awareness of the individual's identity and its relationship to society as a whole. Of particular interest is the portion dealing with the Bureau of Sabotage, those amendments recognizing that the Bureau itself might at times need ... ah ... adjustment.'

Now what's he driving at? McKie wondered. And he noted how Bolin squinted his eyes in thought, leaving only a thin line of faceted glitter.

'I shall speak now as chief officer of the Tax Watchers,' Bolin said, 'reminding you that we are legally immune from sabotage.'

I've found out what I wanted to know, McKie thought. Now if I can only get out of here with *it!*

'Let us consider the training of saboteurs extraordinary,' Bolin said. 'What do the trainees learn about the make-work and feather-bedding elements in Bureau activity?'

He's not going to trap me in a lie, McKie thought. 'We come right out and tell our trainees that one of our chief functions is to create jobs for the politicians to fill,' he said. 'The more hands in the pie, the slower the mixing.'

'You've heard that telling a falsehood to your host is a great breach of Pan-Spechi mores, I see,' Bolin said. 'You understand, of course, that refusal to answer certain questions is interpreted as a falsehood?'

'So I've been told,' McKie said.

'Wonderful! And what are your trainees told about the foot dragging and the monkeywrenches you throw into the path of legislation?'

'I quote from the pertinent training brochure,' McKie said. "A major function of the Bureau is to slow passage of legislation."

'Magnificent! And what about the disputes and outright battles Bureau agents have been known to incite?'

'Strictly routine,' McKie said. 'We're duty bound to encourage the growth of anger in government wherever we can. It exposes the temperamental types, the ones who can't control themselves, who can't think on their feet.'

'Ah,' Bolin said. 'How entertaining.'

'We keep entertainment value in mind,' McKie admitted. 'We use drama and flamboyance wherever possible to keep our activities fascinating to the public.'

'Flamboyant obstructionism,' Bolin mused.

'Obstruction is a factor in strength,' McKie said. 'Only the strongest surmount the obstructions to succeed in government. The strongest ... or the most devious, which is more or less the same thing when it comes to government.'

'How illuminating,' Bolin said. He rubbed the backs of his hands, a Pan-Spechi mannerism denoting satisfaction. 'Do you have special instructions regarding political parties?'

'We stir up dissent between them,' McKie said. 'Opposition tends to expose reality, that's

one of our axioms.'

'Would you characterize Bureau agents as troublemakers?'

'Of course! My parents were happy as the devil when I showed troublemaking tendencies at an early age. They knew there'd be a lucrative outlet for this when I grew up. They saw to it that I was channeled in the right directions all through school - special classes in Applied Destruction, Advanced Irritation, Anger I and II ... only the best teachers.'

'You're suggesting the Bureau's an outlet for society's regular crop of 'troublemakers?''

'Isn't that obvious? And troublemakers naturally call for the services of troubleshooters. That's an outlet for do-gooders. You've a check and balance system serving society.'

McKie waited, watching the Pan-Spechi, wondering if his answers had gone far enough.

'I speak as a Tax Watcher, you understand?' Bolin asked.

'I understand.'

The public pays for this Bureau. In essence, the public is paying people to cause trouble.'

'Isn't that what we do when we hire police, tax investigators and the like?' McKie asked.

A look of gloating satisfaction came over Bolin's face. 'But these agencies operate for the greater good of humanity!' he said.

'Before he begins training,' McKie said, and his voice took on a solemn, lecturing tone, 'the potential saboteur is shown the entire sordid record of history. The do-gooders succeeded once ... long ago. They eliminated virtually all red tape from government. This great machine with its power over human lives slipped into high speed. It moved faster and faster.' McKie's voice grew louder. 'Laws were conceived and passed in the same hour! Appropriations came and were gone in a fortnight. New bureaus flashed into existence for the most insubstantial reasons.'

McKie took a deep breath, realizing he'd put sincere emotional weight behind his words.

'Fascinating,' Bolin said. 'Efficient government, eh?'

'Efficient?' McKie's voice was filled with outrage. 'It was like a great wheel thrown suddenly out of balance! The whole structure of government was in imminent danger of fragmenting before a handful of people, wise with hindsight, used measures of desperation and started what was called the Sabotage Corps.'

'Ahhh, yes, I've heard about the Corps' violence.'

He's needling me, McKie thought, but found that honest anger helped now. 'All right, there was bloodshed and terrible destruction at the beginning,' he said. 'But the big wheels were slowed. Government developed a controllable speed.'

'Sabotage,' Bolin sneered. 'In lieu of red tape.'

I needed that reminder, McKie thought.

'No task too small for Sabotage, no task too large,' McKie said. 'We keep the wheel turning slowly and smoothly. Some anonymous Corpsman put it into words a long time ago: "When in doubt, delay the big ones and speed the little ones."'

'Would you say the Tax Watchers were a 'big one' or a 'little one?'' Bolin asked, his voice mild.

'Big one,' McKie said and waited for Bolin to pounce.

But the Pan-Spechi appeared amused. 'An unhappy answer.'

'As it says in the Constitution,' McKie said. "The pursuit of unhappiness is an inalienable right of all humans."

'Trouble is as trouble does,' Bolin said and clapped his hands.

Two Pan-Spechi in the uniforms of system police came through the crème de menthe

emerald door.

'You heard?' Bolin asked.

'We heard,' one of the police said.

'Was he defending his bureau?' Bolin asked.

'He was,' the policeman said.

'You've seen the court order,' Bolin said. 'It pains me because Ser McKie accepted the hospitality of my house, but he must be held incommunicado until he's needed in court. He's to be treated kindly, you understand?'

Is he really bent on destroying the Bureau? McKie asked himself in sudden consternation. *Do I have it figured wrong?*

'You contend my words were sabotage?' McKie asked.

'Clearly an attempt to sway the chief officer of the Tax Watchers from his avowed duties,' Bolin said. He stood, bowed.

McKie lifted himself out of the chair, assumed an air of confidence he did not feel. He clasped his thick-fingered hands together and bowed low, a grandfather toad rising from the deep to give his benediction. 'In the words of the ancient proverb,' he said, "The righteous man lives deep within a cavern and the sky appears to him as nothing but a small round hole."

Wrapping himself in dignity, McKie allowed the police to escort him from the room.

Behind him, Bolin gave voice to puzzlement: 'Now, what did he mean by that?'

Chapter III

'Hear ye! Hear ye! System High Court, First Bench, Central Sector, is now in session!'

The robo-clerk darted back and forth across the cleared lift dais of the courtarena, its metal curves glittering in the morning light that poured down through the domed weather cover. Its voice, designed to fit precisely into the great circular room, penetrated to the farthest walls: 'All persons having petitions before this court draw near!'

The silvery half globe carrying First Magistrate Edwin Dooley glided through an aperture behind the lift dais and was raised to an appropriate height. His white sword of justice lay diagonally across the bench in front of him. Dooley himself sat in dignified silence while the robo-clerk finished its stentorian announcement and rolled to a stop just beyond the lift field.

Judge Dooley was a tall, black browed man who affected the ancient look with ebon robes over white linen. He was noted for decisions of classic penetration.

He sat now with his face held in rigid immobility to conceal his anger and disquiet. Why had they put him in this hot spot? Because he'd granted the Tax Watchers' injunction? No matter how he ruled now, the result likely would be uproar. Even President Bindley was watching this one through one of the hot-line projectors.

The President had called shortly before this session. It had been Phil and Ed all through the conversation, but the intent remained clear. The Administration was concerned about this case. Vital legislation pended; votes were needed. Neither the budget nor the Bureau of Sabotage had entered their conversation, but the President had made his point - *don't compromise the Bureau but save that Tax Watcher support for the Administration!*

'Clerk, the roster,' Judge Dooley said.

And he thought: *They'll get judgment according to strict interpretation of the law! Let them argue with that!*

The robo-clerk's reelslate buzzed. Words appeared on the repeater in front of the judge as the clerk's voice announced: 'The People versus Clifton Watt, Jorj X. McKie and the Bureau of Sabotage.'

Dooley looked down into the courtarena, noting the group seated at the black oblong table in the Defense ring on his left: a sour-faced Watt with his rainbow horror of Medusa head, McKie's fat features composed in the look of someone trying not to snicker at a sly joke - the two defendants flanking their attorney, Pander Oulson, the Bureau of Sabotage's chief counsel. Oulson was a great thug of a figure in defense white with glistening eyes under beetle brows and a face fashioned mostly of scars.

At the Prosecution table on the right sat Prosecutor Holjance Vohnbrook, a tall scarecrow of a man dressed in conviction red. Gray hair topped a stern face as grim and forbidding as a latter day Cotton Mather. Beside him sat a frightened appearing young aide and Panthor Bolin, the Pan-Spechi complainant, his multi-faceted eyes hidden beneath veined lids.

'Are we joined for trial?' Dooley asked.

Both Oulson and Vohnbrook arose, nodded.

'If the court pleases,' Vohnbrook rumbled, 'I would like to remind the Bureau of Sabotage personnel present that this court is exempt from their ministrations.'

'If the prosecutor trips over his own feet,' Oulson said, 'I assure him it will be his own clumsiness and no act of mine nor of my colleagues.'

Vohnbrook's face darkened with a rush of blood. 'It's well known how you ... '

A great drumming boomed through the courtarena as Dooley touched the handle of his sword of office. The sound drowned the prosecutor's words. When silence was restored, Dooley said: 'This court will tolerate no displays of personality. I wish that understood at the outset.'

Oulson smiled, a look like a grimace in his scarred face. 'I apologize, Your Honor,' he said.

Dooley sank back into his chair, noting the gleam in Oulson's eyes. It occurred to Dooley then that the defense attorney, sabotage-trained, could have brought on the prosecutor's attack to gain the court's sympathy.

The charge is outlaw sabotage in violation of this court's injunction,' Dooley said. 'I understand that opening statements have been waived by both sides, the public having been admitted to causae in this matter by appropriate postings?'

'So recorded,' intoned the robo-clerk.

Oulson leaned forward against the defense table, said: 'Your Honor, defendant Jorj X. McKie has not accepted me as counsel and wishes to argue for separate trial. I am here now representing only the Bureau and Clinton Watt.'

'Who is appearing for defendant McKie?' the judge asked.

McKie, feeling like a man leaping over a precipice, got to his feet, said: 'I wish to represent myself, Your Honor.'

'You should be cautioned against this course,' Dooley said.

'Set Oulson has advised me I have a fool for a client,' McKie said. 'But in common with most Bureau agents, I have legal training. I've been admitted to the System Bar and have practiced under such codes as the Gowachin where the double-negative innocence requirement must be satisfied before bringing criminal accusation against the prosecutor and proceeding backward the premise that ... '

'This is not Gowachin,' Judge Dooley said.

'May I remind the Court,' Vohnbrook said, 'that defendant McKie is a saboteur extraordinary. This goes beyond questions of champerty. Every utterance this man ... '

'The law's the same for official saboteurs as it is for others in respect to the issue at hand,'

Oulson said.

'Gentlemen!' the judge said. 'If you please? I will decide law in this court.' He waited through a long moment of silence. 'The behavior of all parties in this matter is receiving my most careful attention.'

McKie forced himself to radiate calm good humor.

Watt, whose profound knowledge of the saboteur extraordinary made this pose a danger signal, tugged violently at the sleeve of defense attorney Oulson. Oulson waved him away. Watt glowered at McKie.

'If the court permits,' McKie said, 'a joint defense on the present charge would appear to violate ... '

'The court is well aware that this case was bound over on the basis of deposes summation through a ruling by a robo-legum,' Dooley said. 'I warn both defense and prosecution, however, that I make my own decisions in such matters. Law and robo-legum are both human constructions and require human interpretation. And I will add that, as far as I'm concerned, in all conflicts between human agencies and machine agencies the human agencies are paramount.'

'Is this a hearing or a trial?' McKie asked.

'We will proceed as in trial, subject to the evidence as presented.'

McKie rested his palms on the edge of the defense table, studying the judge. The saboteur felt a surge of misgiving. Dooley was a no-nonsense customer. He had left himself a wide avenue within the indictment. And this was a case that went far beyond immediate danger to the Bureau of Sabotage. Far-reaching precedents could be set here this day - or disaster could strike. Ignoring instincts of self preservation, McKie wondered if he dared try sabotage within the confines of the court.

'The robo-legum indictment requires joint defense,' McKie said. 'I admit sabotage against Ser Clinton Watt, but remind the court of Paragraph Four, section ninety-one, of the Semantic Revision to the Constitution, wherein the Secretary of Sabotage is exempted from all immunities. I move to quash the indictment as it regards myself. I was at the time a legal officer of the Bureau required by my duties to test the abilities of my superior.'

Vohnbrook scowled at McKie.

'Mmmm,' Dooley said. He saw that the prosecutor had detected where McKie's logic must lead. If McKie were legally dismissed from the Bureau at the time of his conversation with the Pan-Spechi, the prosecution's case might fall through.

'Does the prosecutor wish to seek a conspiracy indictment?' Dooley asked.

For the first time since entering the courtarena, defense attorney Oulson appeared agitated. He bent his scarred features close to Watt's gorgon head, conferred in whispers with the defendant. Oulson's face grew darker and darker as he whispered. Watt's gorgon tendrils writhed in agitation.

'We don't seek a conspiracy indictment at this time,' Vohnbrook said. 'However, we would be willing to separate ... '

'Your Honor!' Oulson said, surging to his feet. 'Defense must protest separation of indictments at this time. It's our contention that ... '

'Court cautions both counsel in this matter that this is not a Gowachin jurisdiction,' Dooley said in an angry voice. 'We don't have to convict the defender and exonerate the prosecutor before trying a case. However, if either of you would wish a change of venue ... '

Vohnbrook, a smug expression on his lean face, bowed to the judge. 'Your Honor,' he said, 'we wish at this time to request removal of defendant McKie from the indictment and ask that he be held as a prosecution witness.'

'Objection!' Oulson shouted. 'Prosecution well knows it cannot hold a key witness under trumped up ... '

'Overruled,' Dooley said.

'Exception!'

'Noted.'

Dooley waited as Oulson sank into his chair. This is a day to remember, the judge thought. Sabotage itself outfoxed! Then he noted the glint of sly humor in the eyes of saboteur extraordinary McKie, realizing with an abrupt sense of caution that McKie too had manoeuvred for this position.

'Prosecution may call its first witness,' the judge said, and he punched a code signal that sent a robo-aide to escort McKie away from the defense table and into a holding box.

A look of almost pleasure came over prosecutor Vohnbrook's cadaverous face. He rubbed one of his downdrooping eyelids, said: 'Call Panthor Bolin.'

The Achusian capitalist got to his feet, strode to the witness ring. The robo-clerk's screen flashed for the record: 'Panthor Bolin of Achus IV, certified witness in this System High Court.'

'The oath of sincerity having been administered, Panther Bolin is prepared for testifying,' the robo-clerk reelslatted.

'Panthor Bolin, are you chief officer of the civil organization known as the Tax Watchers?' Vohnbrook asked.

'I ... ah ... y-yes' Bolin faltered. He passed a large blue handkerchief across his forehead, staring sharply at McKie.

He just now realizes what it is I must do, McKie thought.

'I show you this recording from the robo-legum indictment proceedings,' Vohnbrook said. 'It is certified by System police as being a conversation between yourself and Jorj X. McKie in which ... '

'Your Honor!' Oulson objected. 'Both witnesses to this alleged conversation are present in this courtarena. There are more direct ways to bring out any pertinent information from this matter. Further, since the clear threat of a conspiracy charge remains in this case, I object to introducing this recording as forcing a man to testify against himself.'

'Ser McKie is no longer on trial here and Ser Oulson is not McKie's attorney of record,' Vohnbrook gloated.

'The objection does, however, have some merit,' Dooley said. He looked at McKie seated in the holding box.

'There's nothing shameful about that conversation with Ser Bolin,' McKie said. 'I've no objection to introducing this record of the conversation.'

Bolin rose up on his toes, made as though to speak, sank back.

Now he is certain, McKie thought.

'Then I will admit this record subject to judicial deletions,' Dooley said.

Clinton Watt, seated at the defense table, buried his gorgon head in his arms.

Vohnbrook, a death's-head grin on his long face, said: 'Ser Bolin, I show you this recording. Now, in this conversation, was Sabotage Agent McKie subjected to any form of coercion?'

'Objection!' Oulson roared, surging to his feet. His scarred face was a scowling mask. 'At the time of this alleged recording, Ser McKie was not an agent of the Bureau!' He looked at Vohnbrook. 'Defense objects to the prosecutor's obvious effort to link Ser McKie with ... '

'Alleged conversation!' Vohnbrook snarled. 'Ser McKie himself admits the exchange!'

In a weary voice, Dooley said: 'Objection sustained. Unless tangible evidence of conspiracy

is introduced here, references to Ser McKie as an agent of Sabotage will not be admitted here.'

'But, Your Honor,' Vohnbrook protested, 'Ser McKie's own actions preclude any other interpretation!'

'I've ruled on this point,' Dooley said 'Proceed.'

McKie got to his feet in the holding box, said: 'Would Your Honor permit me to act as a friend of the Court here?'

Dooley leaned back, hand on chin, turning the question over in his mind. A general feeling of uneasiness about the case was increasing in him and he couldn't pinpoint it. McKie's every action appeared suspect. Dooley reminded himself that the saboteur extraordinary was notorious for sly plots, for devious and convoluted schemes of the wildest and most improbable inversions -like onion layers in a five dimensional klein-shape. The man's success in practicing under the Gowachin legal code could be understood.

'You may explain what you have in mind,' Dooley said, 'but I'm not yet ready to admit your statements into the record.'

'The Bureau of Sabotage's own Code would clarify matters,' McKie said, realizing that these words burned his bridges behind him. 'My action in successfully sabotaging *acting* Secretary Watt is a matter of record.'

McKie pointed to the gorgon mass visible as Watt lifted his head and glared across the room.

'*Acting* Secretary?' the judge asked.

'So it must be presumed,' McKie said. 'Under the Bureau's Code, once the Secretary is sabotaged he ... '

'Your Honor!' Oulson shouted. 'We are in danger of breach of security here! I understand these proceedings are being broadcast!'

'As Director-in-Limbo of the Bureau of Sabotage, I will decide what is a breach of security and what isn't!' McKie snapped.

Watt returned his head to his arms, groaned.

Oulson sputtered.

Dooley stared at McKie in shock.

Vohnbrook broke the spell. The prosecutor said: 'Your Honor, this man has not been sworn to sincerity. I suggest we excuse Ser Bolin for the time being and have Ser McKie continue his *explanation* under oath.'

Dooley took a deep breath, said: 'Does defense have any questions of Ser Bolin at this time?'

'Not at this time,' Oulson muttered. 'I presume he's subject to recall?'

'He is,' Dooley said, turning to McKie. 'Take the witness ring, Ser McKie.'

Chapter IV

Bolin, moving like a sleepwalker, stepped out of the ring, returned to the prosecution table. The Pan-Spechi's multifaceted eyes reflected an odd glitter, moving with a trapped sense of evasiveness. McKie entered the ring, took the oath and faced Vohnbrook, composing his features in a look of purposeful decisiveness that he knew his actions must reflect.

'You called yourself Director-in-Limbo of the Bureau of Sabotage,' Vohnbrook said. 'Would

you explain that, please?'

Before McKie could answer, Watt lifted his head from his arms, growled: 'You traitor, McKie!'

Dooley grabbed the pommel of his sword of justice to indicate an absolute position and barked: 'I will tolerate no outbursts in my courts!'

Oulson put a hand on Watt's shoulder. Both of them glared at McKie. The medusa tendrils of Watt's head writhed as they ranged through the rainbow spectrum.

'I caution the witness,' Dooley said, 'that his remarks would appear to admit a conspiracy. Anything he says now may be used against him.'

'No conspiracy, Your Honor,' McKie said. He faced Vohnbrook, but appeared to be addressing Watt. 'Over the centuries, the function of Sabotage in the government has grown more and more open, but certain aspects of changing the guard, so to speak, have been held as a highly placed secret. The rule is that if a man can protect himself from sabotage he's fit to boss Sabotage. Once sabotaged, however, the Bureau's Secretary must resign and submit his position to the President and the full Cabinet.'

'He's out?' Dooley asked.

'Not necessarily,' McKie said. 'If the act of sabotage against the Secretary is profound enough, subtle enough, carries enough far reaching effects, the Secretary is replaced by the successful saboteur. He is, indeed, out.'

'Then it's now up to the President and the Cabinet to decide between Ser Watt and yourself, is that what you're saying?' Dooley asked.

'Me?' McKie asked. 'No, I'm Director-in-Limbo because I accomplished a successful act of sabotage against Ser Watt and because I happen to be senior saboteur extraordinary on duty.'

'But it's alleged that you were fired,' Vohnbrook objected.

'A formality,' McKie said. 'It's customary to fire the saboteur who's successful in such an effort. This makes him eligible for appointment as Secretary if he so aspires. However, I have no such ambition at this time.'

Watt jerked upright, staring at McKie.

McKie ran a finger around his collar, realizing the physical peril he was about to face. A glance at the Pan-Spechi confirmed the feeling. Panthor Bolin was holding himself in check by a visible effort.

'This is all very interesting,' Vohnbrook sneered, 'but how can it possibly have any bearing on the present action? The charge here is outlaw sabotage against the Tax Watchers represented by the person of Ser Panthor Bolin. If Ser McKie ... '

'If the distinguished Prosecutor will permit me,' McKie said, 'I believe I can set his fears at rest. It should be obvious to -'

'There's conspiracy here!' Vohnbrook shouted. 'What about the ... '

A loud pounding interrupted him as Judge Dooley lifted his sword, its theremin effect filling the room. When silence had been restored, the judge lowered his sword, replaced it firmly on the ledge in front of him.

Dooley took a moment to calm himself. He sensed now the delicate political edge he walked and thanked his stars that he had left the door open to rule that the present session was a hearing.

'We will now proceed in an orderly fashion,' Dooley said. 'That's one of the things courts are for, you know.' He took a deep breath. 'Now, there are several people present whose dedication to the maintenance of law and order should be beyond question. I'd think that among those we should number Ser Prosecutor Vohnbrook; the distinguished defense counsel, Ser Oulson: Ser Bolin, whose race is noted for its reasonableness and humanity; and the

distinguished representatives of the Bureau of Sabotage, whose actions may at times annoy and anger us, but who are, we know, consecrated to the principle of strengthening us and exposing our inner resources.'

This judge missed his calling, McKie thought. *With speeches like that, he could get into the Legislative branch.*

Abashed, Vohnbrook sank back into his chair.

'Now,' the judge said, 'unless I'm mistaken, Ser McKie has referred to two acts of sabotage.' Dooley glanced down at McKie. 'Ser McKie?'

'So it would appear. Your Honor,' McKie said, hoping he read the judge's present attitude correctly. 'However, this court may be in a unique position to rule on that very question. You see, Your Honor, the alleged act of sabotage to which I refer was initiated by a Pan-Spechi agent of the Bureau. Now, though, the secondary benefits of that action appear to be sought after by a crèche mate of that agent, whose ... '

'You dare suggest that I'm not the holder of my cell's ego?' Bolin demanded.

Without knowing quite where it was or what it was, McKie was aware that a weapon had been trained on him by the Pan-Spechi. References in their culture to the weapon for defense of the ego were clear enough.

'I make no such suggestion,' McKie said, speaking hastily and with as much sincerity as he could put into his voice. 'But surely you cannot have misinterpreted the terranic-human culture so much that you do not know what will happen now.'

Warned by some instinct, the judge and other spectators to this interchange remained silent.

Bolin appeared to be trembling in every cell of his body. 'I am distressed,' he muttered.

'If there were a way to achieve the necessary rapport and avoid that distress I would have taken it,' McKie said. 'Can you see another way?'

Still trembling, Bolin said: 'I must do what I must do.'

In a low voice, Dooley said: 'Ser McKie, just what is going on here?'

'Two cultures are, at last, attempting to understand each other,' McKie said. 'We've lived together in apparent understanding for centuries, but appearances can be deceptive.'

Oulson started to rise, was pulled back by Watt.

And McKie noted that his former Bureau chief had assessed the peril here. It was a point in Watt's favor.

'You understand, Ser Bolin,' McKie said, watching the Pan-Spechi carefully, 'that these things must be brought into the open and discussed carefully before a decision can be reached in this court. It's a rule of law to which you've submitted. I'm inclined to favor your bid for the Secretariat, but my own decision awaits the outcome of this hearing.'

'What things must be discussed?' Dooley demanded. 'And what gives you the right, Ser McKie, to call this a hearing?'

'A figure of speech,' McKie said, but he kept his attention on the Pan-Spechi, wondering what the terrible weapon was that the race used in defense of its egos. 'What do you say, Ser Bolin?'

'You protect the sanctity of your home life,' Bolin said. 'Do you deny me the same right?'

'Sanctity, not secrecy,' McKie said.

Dooley looked from McKie to Bolin, noted the compressed-spring look of the Pan-Spechi, the way he kept a hand hidden in a jacket pocket. It occurred to the judge then that the Pan-Spechi might have a weapon ready to use against others in this court. Bolin had that look about him. Dooley hesitated on the point of calling guards, reviewed what he knew of the Pan-Spechi. He decided not to cause a crisis. The Pan-Spechi were admitted to the

concourse of humanity, good friends but terrible enemies, and there were always those allusions to their hidden powers, to their ego jealousies, to the fierceness with which they defended the secrecy of their crèches.

Slowly Bolin overcame the trembling. 'Say what you feel you must,' he growled.

McKie said a silent prayer of hope that the Pan-Spechi could control his reflexes, addressed himself to the nexus of pickups on the far wall that was recording this courtarena scene for broadcast to the entire universe.

'A Pan-Spechi who took the name of Napoleon Bildoan was one of the leading agents in the Bureau of Sabotage,' McKie said.

'Agent Bildoan dropped from sight at the time Panthor Bolin took over as chief of the Tax Watchers. It's highly probable that the Tax Watcher organization is an elaborate and subtle sabotage of the Bureau of Sabotage itself, a move originated by Bildoan.'

'There is no such person as Bildoan!' Bolin cried.

'Ser McKie,' Judge Dooley said, 'would you care to continue this interchange in the privacy of my chambers?' The judge stared down at the saboteur, trying to appear kindly but firm.

'Your Honor,' McKie said, 'may we out of respect for a fellow human, leave that decision to Ser Bolin?'

Bolin turned his multi-faceted eyes toward the bench, spoke in a low voice: 'If the court please, it were best this were done openly.' He jerked his hand from his pocket. It came out empty. He leaned across the table, gripped the far edge. 'Continue, if you please, Ser.'

McKie swallowed, momentarily overcome with admiration for the Pan-Spechi. 'It will be a distinct pleasure to serve under you, Ser Bolin,' McKie said.

'Do what you must!' Bolin rasped.

McKie looked from the wonderment in the faces of Watt and the attorneys up to the questioning eyes of Judge Dooley. 'In Pan-Spechi parlance, there is no person called Bildoan. But there was such a person, a group mate of Ser Bolin. I hope you notice the similarity in the names they chose for themselves?'

'Ah ... yes,' Dooley said.

'I'm afraid I've been somewhat of a nosy Parker, a peeping Tom and several other categories of snoop where the Pan-Spechi are concerned,' McKie said. 'But it was because I suspected the act of sabotage to which I've referred here. The Tax Watchers revealed too much inside knowledge of the Bureau of Sabotage.'

'I ... ah ... am not quite sure I understand you,' Dooley said.

'The best kept secret in the universe, the Pan-Spechi cyclic change of gender and identity, is no longer a secret where I'm concerned,' McKie said. He swallowed as he saw Bolin's fingers go white where they tightly gripped the prosecution table.

'It relates to the issue at hand?' Dooley asked.

'Most definitely, Your Honor,' McKie said. 'You see, the Pan-Spechi have a unique gland that controls mentation, dominance, the relationship between reason and instinct. The five group mates are, in reality, one person. I wish to make that clear for reasons of legal necessity.'

'Legal necessity?' Dooley asked. He glanced down at the obviously distressed Bolin, back to McKie.

'The gland, when it's functioning, confers ego dominance on the Pan-Spechi in whom it functions. But it functions for a time that's definitely limited - twenty-five to thirty years.' McKie looked at Bolin. Again, the Pan-Spechi was trembling. 'Please understand, Ser Bolin,' he said, 'that I do this out of necessity and that this is not an act of sabotage.'

Bolin lifted his face toward McKie. The Pan-Spechi's features appeared contorted in grief. 'Get it over with, man!' he rasped.

'Yes,' McKie said, turning back to the judge's puzzled face. 'Ego transfer in the Pan-Spechi, Your Honor, involves a transfer of what may be termed basic-experience-learning. It's accomplished through physical contractor when the ego holder dies, no matter how far he may be separated from the crèche, this seems to fire up the eldest of the crèche triplets. The ego-single also bequeaths a verbal legacy to his mate whenever possible - and that's most of the time. Specifically, it's this time.'

Dooley leaned back. He was beginning to see the legal question McKie's account had posed.

'The act of sabotage which might make a Pan-Spechi eligible for appointment as Secretary of the Bureau of Sabotage was initiated by a ... ah ... cell mate of the Ser Bolin in court today, is that it?' Dooley asked.

McKie wiped his brow. 'Correct, Your Honor.'

'But that cell mate is no longer the ego dominant, eh?'

'Quite right, Your Honor!'

'The ... ah ... former ego holder, this ... ah ... Bildoon, is no longer eligible?'

'Bildoon, or what was once Bildoon, is a creature operating solely on instinct now, Your Honor,' McKie said. 'Capable of acting as crèche nurse for a time and, eventually, fulfilling another destiny I'd rather not explain.'

'I see.' Dooley looked at the weather cover of the court arena. He was beginning to see what McKie had risked here. 'And you favor this, ah, Ser Bolin's bid for the Secretariat?' Dooley asked.

'If President Bindley and the Cabinet follow the recommendation of the Bureau's senior agents, the procedure always followed in the past, Ser Bolin will be the new Secretary,' McKie said. 'I favor this.'

'Why?' Dooley asked.

'Because of this unique roving ego, the Pan-Spechi have a more communal attitude toward fellow sentients than do most other species admitted to the concourse of humanity,' McKie said. 'This translates as a sense of responsibility toward all life. They're not necessarily maudlin about it. They oppose where it's necessary to build strength. Their crèche life demonstrates several clear examples of this which I'd prefer not to describe.'

'I see,' Dooley said, but he had to admit to himself that he did not. McKie's allusions to unspeakable practices were beginning to annoy him. 'And you feel that this Bildoon-Bolin act of sabotage qualifies him, provided this court rules they are one and the same person?'

'We're not the same person!' Bolin cried. 'You don't dare say that ... that shambling, clinging ...'

'Easy,' McKie said. 'Ser Bolin, I'm sure you see the need for this legal fiction.'

'Legal fiction,' Bolin said as though clinging to the words. The multi-faceted eyes glared across the courtarena at McKie. 'Thank you for the verbal nicety, McKie.'

'You've not answered my question, Ser McKie,' Dooley said, ignoring the exchange with Bolin.

'Sabotaging Ser Watt through an attack on the entire Bureau contains subtlety and finesse never before achieved in such an effort,' McKie said. 'The entire Bureau will be strengthened by it.'

McKie glanced at Watt. The acting Secretary's medusa tangle had ceased its writhing. He was staring at Bolin with a speculative look in his eyes. Sensing the quiet in the court-arena, he glanced up at McKie.

'Don't you agree, Ser Watt?' McKie asked.

'Oh, yes. Quite,' Watt said.

The note of sincerity in Watt's voice startled the judge. For the first time, he wondered at the dedication which these men brought to their jobs.

'Sabotage is a very sensitive Bureau,' Dooley said. 'I've some serious reservations -'

'If Your Honor please,' McKie said, 'forbearance is one of the chief attributes a saboteur can bring to his duties. Now, I wish you to understand what our Pan-Spechi friend has done here this day. Let us suppose that I had spied upon the most intimate moments between you, Judge, and your wife, and that I reported them in detail here in open court with half the universe looking on. Let us suppose further that you had the strictest moral code against such discussions with outsiders. Let us suppose that I made these disclosures in the basest terms with every four-letter word at my command. Let us suppose that you were armed, traditionally, with a deadly weapon to strike at such blasphemers, such -'

'Filth!' Bolin grated.

'Yes,' McKie said. 'Filth. Do you suppose, Your Honor, that you could have stood by without killing me?'

'Good heavens!' Dooley said.

Chapter V

'Ser Bolin,' McKie said, 'I offer you and all your race my most humble apologies.'

'I'd hoped once to undergo the ordeal in the privacy of a judge's chambers with as few outsiders as possible,' Bolin said. 'But once you were started in open court ... '

'It had to be this way,' McKie said. 'If we'd done it in private, people would've come to be suspicious about a Pan-Spechi in control of ... '

'People?' Bolin asked.

'Non Pan-Spechi,' McKie said. 'It'd have been a barrier between our species.'

'And we've been strengthened by all this,' McKie said. 'Those provisions of the Constitution that provide the people with a slowly moving government have been demonstrated anew. We've admitted the public to the inner workings of Sabotage, shown them the valuable character of the man who'll be the new Secretary.'

'I've not yet ruled on the critical issue here,' Dooley said.

'But Your Honor!' McKie said.

'With all due respect to you as a saboteur extraordinary, Ser McKie,' Dooley said, 'I'll make my decision on evidence gathered under my direction.' He looked at Bolin. 'Ser Bolin, would you permit an agent of this court to gather such evidence as will allow me to render verdict without fear of harming my own species?'

'We're humans together,' Bolin growled.

'But terranic humans hold the balance of power,' Dooley said. 'I owe allegiance to law, yes, but my terranic fellows depend on me, too. I have a ... '

'You wish your own agents to determine if Ser McKie has told the truth about us?'

'Ah ... yes,' Dooley said.

Bolin looked at McKie. 'Ser McKie, it is I who apologize to you. I had not realized how deeply xenophobia penetrated your fellows.'

'Because,' McKie said, 'outside of your natural modesty, you have no such fear. I suspect you know the phenomenon only through reading of us.'

'But all strangers are potential sharers of identity,' Bolin said. 'Ah, well.'

'If you're through with your little chat,' Dooley said, 'would you care to answer my question, Ser Bolin? This is still I hope, a court of law.'

'Tell me, Your Honor,' Bolin said, 'would you permit me to witness the tenderest intimacies between you and your wife?'

Dooley's face darkened, but he saw suddenly in all of its stark detail the extent of McKie's analogy and it was to the judge's credit that he rose to the occasion. 'If it were necessary to promote understanding,' he rasped, 'yes!'

'I believe you would,' Bolin murmured. He took a deep breath. 'After what I've been through here today, one more sacrifice can be borne, I guess. I grant your investigators the privilege requested, but advise that they be discreet.'

'It will strengthen you for the trials ahead as Secretary of the Bureau,' McKie said. 'The Secretary, you must bear in mind, has no immunities from sabotage whatsoever.'

'But,' Bolin said, 'the Secretary's legal orders carrying out his Constitutional functions must be obeyed by all agents.'

McKie nodded, seeing in the glitter of Bolin's eyes, a vista of peeping Tom assignments with endless detailed reports to the Secretary of Sabotage - at least until the fellow's curiosity had been satisfied and his need for revenge satiated.

But the others in the court-room, not having McKie's insight, merely wondered at the question: *What did he really mean by that?*