

A-W-F Unlimited

Frank Herbert, 1961

The morning the space armor problem fell into the agency's lap, Gwen Everest had breakfast at her regular restaurant, an automated single-niche place catering to bachelor girls. Her order popped out of the slot onto her table, and immediately the tabletop projecta-menu switched to selling Interdorma's newest Interpretive Telelog.

'Your own private dream translator! The secret companion to every neurosis!'

Gwen stared at the inch-high words doing a skitter dance above her fried eggs. She had written that copy. Her food beneath the ad looked suddenly tasteless. She pushed the plate away.

Along the speedwalk into Manhattan *ayou-seeker*, its roboflier senses programmed to her susceptibilities, flew beside her ear. It was selling a year's supply of Geramyl - 'the breakfast drink that helps you LIVE longer!'

In sudden anger, she turned on the roboflier, whispered a code phrase she had wheedled from an engineer who serviced the things. The roboflier darted upward in sudden erratic flight, crashed into the side of a building.

A small break in her control. A beginning.

Waiting for Gwen along the private corridor to the Single-master, Hucksting and Battlemont executive offices were displays from the recent Religion of the Month Club campaign. She ran a gamut of adecals, layouts, slogans, projos, quartersheets, skinnies. The works.

'Subscribe now and get these religions absolutely FREE! Complete text of the Black Mass plus Abridged Mysticism!'

She was forced to walk through an adecimal announcing: 'Don't be Half Safe! Believe in Everything! Are you sure that African Bantu Witchcraft is not the True Way?'

At the turn of the corridor stood a male-female graphic with flesh-stimulant skinnies and supered voices, 'Find peace through Tantrism.'

The skinnies made her flesh crawl.

Gwen fled into her office, slumped into her desk chair. With mounting horror, she realized that she had either written or supervised the writing of every word, produced every selling idea along that corridor.

The interphon on her desk emitted its fluted 'Good morning.' She slapped the blackout switch to keep-the instrument from producing an image. The last thing she wanted now was to see one of her

co-workers.

'Who is it?' she barked.

'Gwen?' No mistaking that voice: Andre Battlement, bottom name on the agency totem.

'What do you want?' she demanded.

'Our Gwenny is feeling nasty this morning, isn't she?'

'Oh, Freud!' She slapped the disconnect, leaned forward with elbows on the desk, put her face in her hands. *Let's face it, she thought, I'm 48, unmarried, and a prime mover in an industry that's strangling the universe. I'm a professional strangler.*

'Good morning,' fluted the interphon.

She ignored it.

'A strangler,' she said.

Gwen recognized the basic problem here. She had known it since childhood. Her universe was a continual replaying of 'The Emperor's New Suit.' She saw the nakedness.

'Good morning' fluted the interphon.

She dropped her right hand away from her face, flicked the switch. 'Now what?'

'Did you cut me off, Gwen?'

'What if I did?'

'Gwen, please! We have a problem.'

'We always have problems.'

Battlement's voice dropped one octave. 'Gwen. This is a Big problem.'

Uncanny the way he can speak capital letters, she thought. She said: 'Go away.'

'You've been leaving your Interdorma turned off!' accused Battlement. 'You mustn't. Neurosis can creep up on you.'

'Is that why you called me?' she asked,

'Of course not.'

'Then go away.'

Battlement did a thing then that everyone from Singlemaster on down knew was dangerous to try with Gwen Everest. He pushed the override to send his image dancing above her interphon.

After the momentary flash of anger, Gwen correctly interpreted the act as one of desperation. She found herself intrigued. She stared at the round face, the pale eyes (definitely too small, those eyes), the pug nose and wide gash of mouth above almost no chin at all.

Plus the hairline in full retreat.

'Andre, you are a mess,' she said.

He ignored the insult. Still speaking in the urgency octave, he said: 'I have called a full staff meeting. You must attend at once.'

'Why?'

'There are two military people in there, Gwen.' He gulped. 'It's desperate. Either we solve their problem or they will ruin us. They will draft every man in the agency!'

'Even you?'

'Yes!'

She moved her right hand toward the interphon's emergency disconnect. 'Good-by, Andre.'

'Gwen! My God! You can't let me down at a time like this!'

'Why not?'

He spoke in breathless haste. 'We'll raise your salary. A bonus. A bigger office. More help.'

'You can't afford me now,' she said.

'I'm begging you, Gwen. Must you abuse me?'

She closed her eyes, thought: *The insects! The damned little insects with their crummy emotions! Why can't I tell them all to go to composite hell?* She opened her eyes, said: 'What's the military's flap?'

Battlement mopped his forehead with a pastel blue handkerchief. 'It's the Space Service,' he said. 'The female branch. The WOMS. Enlistments have fallen to almost nothing.'

She was interested in spite of herself. 'What's happened?'

'Something to do with the space armor. I don't know. I'm so upset.'

'Why have they tossed it into our laps like this? The ultimatum, I mean.'

Battlement glanced left and right, leaned forward. 'The grapevine has it they're testing a new theory that creative people work better under extreme stress.'

'The Psychological Branch again,' she said. 'Those jackasses!'

'But what can we do?'

'Hoist 'em,' she said. 'You run along to the conference.'

'And you'll be there, Gwen?'

'In a few minutes.'

'Don't delay too long, Gwen.' Again he mopped his forehead with the blue handkerchief. 'Gwen, I'm frightened.'

'And with good reason.' She squinted at him. 'I can see you now: Nothing on but a lead loincloth, dumping fuel into a radioactive furnace. Freud, what a picture!'

"This is no joke, Gwen!"

'I know.'

'*Youare* going to help?'

'In my own peculiar way, Andre.' She hit the emergency disconnect.

Andre Battlemont turned away from his interphon, crossed his office to a genuine Moslem prayer rug. He sat down on it facing the floor-to-ceiling windows that looked eastward across midtown Manhattan. This was the 1479th floor of the Stars of Space building, and it was quite a view out there whenever the clouds lifted. But the city remained hidden beneath a low ceiling this morning. Up here it was sunny, though - except in Battlement's mood. A fear-cycle ululated along his nerves.

What he was doing on the prayer rug was practicing Yoga breathing to calm those nerves. The military could wait. *Theyhad* to wait. The fact that he faced the general direction of Mecca was left over from two months before. Yoga was a month old. There was always some carry-over.

Battlemont had joined the Religion of the Month Club almost a year ago - seduced by his own agency's deep motivation campaign plus the Brotherhood Council's seal of approval. This month it was the Reinspired Neo-Cult of St Freud. A test adecal superimposed itself on the cloud-floor view beneath him. It began playing the latest Gwen-Everest-inspired pitch of the IBMausoleum. Giant rainbow letters danced across the fleecy background.

'Make your advice immortal! Let us store your voice and thought patterns in everlasting electronic memory circuits! When you are gone, your loved ones may listen to your voice as you answer their questions exactly the way you would most likely have answered them in Life!'

Battlemont shook his head. The agency, fearful of its dependence on the live Gwen Everest, had secretly recorded her at a staff conference once. Very illegal. The unions were death on it. But the IBMausoleum had broken down with the first question put to Gwen's ghost-voice.

'Some people have thought patterns that are too complex to permit accurate psyche-record,' the engineer explained.

Battlemont did not delude himself. The sole genius of the agency's three owners lay in recognizing the genius of Gwen Everest. She was the agency.

It was like riding the tiger to have such an employee. Single-master, Hucksting and Battlemont had ridden this tiger for 22 years. Battlemont closed his eyes, pitched her in his mind: a tall, lean woman, but with a certain grace. Her face was long, dominated by cold blue eyes, framed in waves of auburn hair. She had a wit that could slash you to ribbons, and that priceless commodity: the genius to pull selling sense out of utter confusion. Battlemont sighed.

He was in love with Gwen Everest. Had been for 22 years. It was the reason he had never married. His Interdorma explained that it was because he wanted to be dominated by a strong woman. But that only explained. It didn't help.

For a moment, he thought wistfully of Singlemaster and Hucksting both taking their annual three-month vacation at the geriatrics center on Oahu. Battlemont wondered if he dared ask Gwen to take her vacation with him. Just once.

No.

He realized what a pitiful figure he made on the prayer rug. Pudgy little man in a rather unattractive blue suit.

Tailors did things for him that they called 'improving your good points.' But except when he viewed himself in a Vesta-Mirror to see the sample clothes projected back onto his own idealized image, he could never pin down what those good points were.

Gwen would certainly turn him down.

He feared that more than anything. As long as there remained the possibility ...

Memory of the waiting Space Service deputation intruded. Battlemont trembled, broke the Yoga breathing pattern. The exercise was having its usual effect: a feeling of vertigo. He heaved himself to his feet.

'One cannot run away from fate,' he muttered.

That was a carry-over from the Karma month.

According to Gwen the agency's conference room had been copied from a Florentine bordello's Emperor Room. It was a gigantic space. The corners were all flossy curliques in heavy gilding an effect carried over into deep carvings on the wall panels. The ceiling was a mating of Cellini cupids with Dali landscapes.

Period stuff. Antique.

Into this baroque setting had been forced a one-piece table 6 feet wide and 42 feet long. It was an enlarged bit of Twentieth Century Wailstreetiana fenced in by heavy wooden chairs. Beanbag paper-weights and golden wheel ashtrays graced every place.

The air of the room was blue with the smoke of mood-cigs. ('It rhymes with Good Bigs!') The staff seated around the table was fighting off the depressant effect of the two Space Service generals, one male and one female, seated in flanking positions beside Battlement's empty chair. There was a surprising lack of small talk and paper rustling.

All staff members had learned of the ultimatum via the office grapevine.

Battlement slipped in his side door, crossed to his chair at the end of the table, dropped into it before his knees gave out. He stared from one frowning military face to the other.

No response.

He cleared his throat. 'Sorry I'm ... ah ... Pressing business. Unavoidable.' He cast a frantic glance around the table. No sign of Gwen. He smiled at one officer, the other.

No response.

On his right sat Brigadier General Sonnet Finnister of the WOMS (Women of Space). Battlement had been appalled to see her walk. Drill-sergeant stride. No nonsense. She wore a self-designed uniform: straight pleated skirt to conceal bony hips, a loose blouse to camouflage lack of upper development, and a long cape to confuse the whole issue. Atop her head sat a duck-billed, flat-fronted cap that had been fashioned for the single purpose of hiding the Sonnet Finnister forehead, which went too high and too wide.

She seldom removed the hat.

(This particular hat, Battlement's hurried private investigations had revealed, looked hideous on every other member of the WOMS. To a woman, they called it 'the Sonnet Bonnet'. There had been the additional information that the general herself was referred to by underlings as 'Sinister Finnister' - partly because of the swirling cape.)

On Battlement's left sat General Nathan Owling of the Space Engineers. Better known as 'Howling Owling' because of a characteristic evidenced when he became angry. He appeared to have been shaped in the officer caste's current mold of lean, blond athlete. The blue eyes reminded Battlement of Gwen's eyes, except that the man's appeared colder.

If that were possible.

Beyond Owling sat Leo Prim, the agency's art director. He was a thin young man, thin to a point that vibrated across the edge of emaciation. His black hair, worn long, held a natural wave. He had a narrow Roman nose, soulful brown eyes, strong cleft in the chin, generous mouth with large lips. A mood-cig dangled from the lips.

If Battlement could have chosen his own appearance, he would have liked to look like Leo Prim. Romantic. Battlement caught Prim's attention, ventured a smile of camaraderie.

No response.

General Sonnet Finnister tapped a thin finger on the tabletop. It sounded to Battlement like the slack drum of a death march.

'Hadn't we better get started?' demanded Finnister.

'Are we all here - finally?' asked Owling.

Battlemont swallowed past a lump in his throat. 'Well ... ah ... no ... ah ... '

Owling opened a briefcase in his lap, glanced at an intelligence report, looked around the table. 'Miss Everest is missing,' he announced.

Finnister said: 'Couldn't we go ahead without her?'

'We'll wait,' said Owling. He was enjoying himself. *Damned parasites need a touch of the whip now and then!* he thought. *Shows 'em where they stand.*

Finnister glared at Owling a hawk stare that had reduced full colonels (male) to trembling. The stare rolled off Owling without effect. *Trust the high command to pair me with a male supremacy type like Owling!* she thought.

'Is this place safe from snooping?' asked Owling.

Battlement turned his own low-wattage glare on the staff seated in the mood smoke haze around the table. No glance met his. 'That's all anybody ever does around here!' he snapped.

'What?' Owling started to rise.

'Busybodies!' blared Battlement. 'My whole staff!'

'Ohhh.' Owling sank back into his chair. 'I meant a different kind of snooping.'

'Oh, that.' Battlemont shrugged, suppressed an urge to glance up at the conference room's concealed recorder lenses. 'We cannot have our ideas pirated by other agencies, you know. Absolutely safe here.'

Gwen Everest chose this moment for her entrance. All eyes followed her as she came through the end door, strode down the length of the room.

Battlemont admired her grace. Such a feminine woman in spite of her strength. So different from the female general.

Gwen found a spare chair against the side wall, crowded it in between Battlemont and Finnister.

The commander of the WOMS glared at the intruder. 'Who are you?'

Battlemont leaned forward. 'This is Miss Everest, our ... ah ... ' He hesitated, confused, Gwen had never had an official title with the agency. Never needed it. Everyone in the place knew she was the boss. 'Ahh ... Miss Everest is our ... ah ... director of coordination,' said Battlemont.

'Why! That's a wonderful title!' said Gwen. 'I must get it printed on my stationery.' She patted Battlement's hand, faced him and, in her best undercover-agent-going-into-action voice, said: 'Let's have

it, Chief. Who are these people? What's going on?'

General Owling nodded to Gwen. 'I'm Owling, General, Space Engineers.' He gestured to the rocket splash insignia on his shoulder. 'My companion is General Finnister, WOMS.'

Gwen had recognized the famous Finnister face. She smiled brightly, said: 'General Woms!'

'Finnister!' snapped the female general.

'Yes, of course,' said Gwen. 'General Finnister Woms. Must not go too informal, you know.'

Finnister spoke in slow cadence: 'I ... am ... General ... Sonnet ... Finnister ... of ... the ... Women ... of ... Space! The WOMS!'

'Oh, how stupid of me,' said Gwen. 'Of course you are.' She patted the general's hand, smiled at Battlemont.

Battlemont, who well knew the falsity of this mood in Gwen Everest, was trying to scrunch down out of sight in his chair.

In that moment, Gwen realized with a twinge of fear that she had reached a psychic point of no return. Something slipped a cog in her mind. She glanced around the table. Familiar faces leaped at her with unreal clarity. Staring eyes. (The best part of a conference was to watch Gwen in action.) *I can't take any more of this, thought Gwen. I have to declare myself.*

She focused on the military. The rest of the people in this room owned little pieces of her, but not these two. Owling and Finnister. Space generals. Symbols. Targets!

Let the chips fall where they may! Fire when ready, Gridley. Shoot if you must this old gray head ... Wait until you see the whites of their eyes.

Gwen nodded to herself.

One misstep and the agency was ruined.

Who cares?

It all passed in a split second, but the decision was made.

Rebellion!

Gwen turned her attention on Owling. 'Would you be kind enough to end this stalling around and get the meeting under way?'

'Stall ...' Owling broke it off. The intelligence report had said Gwen Everest was fond of shock tactics. He gave her a curt nod, passed the nod to Finnister.

The female general addressed Battlemont. 'Your agency, as we explained to you earlier, has been chosen for a vital task, Mr Battlefield.'



'Battlemont,' said Gwen.

Finnister stopped short. 'What?'

'His name is Battlemont, not Battlefield,' said Gwen.

'What of it?'

'Names are important,' said Gwen. 'I'm sure you appreciate this.'

The Finnister cheeks flushed. 'Quite!'

Owling stepped into the breach. 'We are authorized to pay this agency double the usual fee for performance,' he said. 'However, if you fail us we'll draft every male employee here into the Space service

'What an asinine idea!' said Gwen. 'Our people would destroy the Space Service. From within.' Again she smiled at Battlemont.

'Andre here could do it all by himself. Couldn't you, ducky?' She patted Battlemont's cheek.

Battlemont tried to crouch farther down into the chair. He avoided the eyes of the space brass, said : 'Gwen ... please.'

'What do you mean, destroy the Space Service?' demanded Finnister.

Gwen ignored her, addressed Owling. 'This is another one of the Psych Branch's brainstorms,' she said. 'I can smell the stench of 'em in every word.'

Owling frowned. As a matter of fact, he had the practical builder's suspicion of everything subjective. This Everest woman made a good point there. But the military had to stand shoulder to shoulder against outsiders. He said: 'I don't believe you are properly equipped to fathom military tactics. Let's get on to the problem we ... '

'Military tactics yet!' Gwen rapped the table. 'Deploy your forces, men. This is it! Synchronize your watches. Over the top!'

'Gwen!' said Battlemont.

'Of course,' said Gwen. She faced Finnister. 'Would you mind awfully outlining your problem in simple terms that our un-militarized minds could understand?'

A pause, a glare. Finnister spewed her words through stiff lips. 'Enlistments in the WOMS have fallen to an alarming degree. *You* are going to correct this.'

Behind Gwen, Battlemont nodded vigorously.

'Women can release men for the more strenuous tasks,' said Owling.

'And there are many things women can do that men cannot do,' said Finnister.

'Absolutely essential,' said Owling.

'Absolutely,' agreed Finnister.

'Can't draft women, I suppose,' said Gwen.

'Tried to get a bill through,' said Owling. 'Damned committee's headed by an anti-military woman.'

'Good for her,' said Gwen.

'You *do not* sound like the person for this job,' said Owling. 'Perhaps ... '

'Oh, simmer down,' said Gwen.

'Miss Everest is the best in the business,' said Battlemont.

Gwen said: 'Why are enlistments down? You've run the usual surveys, I suppose.'

'It's the space armor,' said Finnister. 'Women don't like it.'

'Too mechanical,' said Owling. 'Too practical.'

'We need ... ah ... glamor,' said Finnister. She adjusted the brim of her cap.

Gwen frowned at the cap, cast a glance up and down the Finnister uniform. 'I've seen the usual news pictures of the armor,' she said. 'What do they wear underneath it? Something like your uniform?'

Finnister suppressed a surge of anger. 'No. They wear special fatigues.'

'The armor cannot be removed while they are in space,' said Owling.

'Oh?' said Gwen. 'What about physical functions, that sort of thing?'

'Armor takes care of everything,' said Owling.

'Apparently *not quite* everything,' murmured Gwen. She nodded to herself, mulling tactics.

Battlemont straightened, sniffed the atmosphere of the conference room. Staff all alert, quiet, attentive. Mood had lightened somewhat. Gwen appeared to be taking over. Good old Gwen. Wonderful Gwen. No telling what she was up to. As usual. She'd solve this thing, though. Always did. Unless ...

He blinked. Could she be toying with them? He tried to imagine Gwen's thought patterns. Impossible. IBMausoleum couldn't even do it. Unpredictable. All Battlemont could be certain of was that Gwen would get a gigantic belly laugh from the picture of the agency's male staff members drafted, slaving away on space freighters.

Battlemont trembled.

General Finnister was saying: "The problem is not one of getting women to enlist for Earth-based service. We need them in the ships, the asteroid stations, the ..."

'Let's get this straight,' said Gwen. 'My great-great-grandmother was in some kind of armed service. I read her diary once. She called it the "whackies" or something like that.'

'WACS,' said Finnister.

'Yes,' said Gwen. 'It was during the war with Spain.'

'Japan,' said Owling.

'What I'm driving at is, why all the sudden interest in women? My great-great-grand-mother had one merry old time running away from some colonel who wanted ... Well, you know. Is this some kind of a dodge to provide women for your space colonels?'

Finnister scowled her blackest.

Quickly suppressed chuckles sounded around the table.

Owling decided to try a new tack. 'My dear lady, our motives are of the highest. We need the abilities of women so that mankind can march side by side to the stars.'

Gwen stared at him in open admiration. 'Go-wan!' she said.

'I mean it,' said Owling.

'You're a poet!' said Gwen. 'Oh ... and I've wronged you. Here I was - dirty-minded me - thinking you wanted women for base purposes. And all the time you wanted *companions*. Someone to share this glorious new adventure.'

Again, Battlemont recognized the danger signals. He tried to squeeze himself into as small a target as possible. Most of the staff around the table saw the same signals, but they were intent, fascinated.

'Exactly!' boomed Finnister.

Gwen's voice erupted in an angry snarl: 'And we name all the little bastards after the stars in Virgo, eh?'

It took a long moment for Finnister and Owling to see that they had been gulled. Finnister started to rise.

'Siddown!' barked Gwen. She grinned. She was having a magnificent time. Rebellion carried a sense of euphoria.

Owling opened his mouth, closed it without a howl.

Finnister sank back into her chair.

'Shall we get down to business?' snapped Gwen. 'Let's look at this glorified hunk of tin you want us to glamorize.'

Finnister found something she could focus her shocked attention on. 'Space armor is mostly plastic, not tin.'

'Plastic-schmastic,' said Gwen. 'I want to see your Iron Gertie.'

General Owling took two deep breaths to calm his nerves, snapped open the briefcase, extracted a folder of design sketches. He pushed them toward Gwen - a hesitant motion as though he feared she might take his hand with them. He now recognized that the incredible intelligence report was correct: this astonishing female was the actual head of the agency.

'Here's - Iron Gertie,' he said, and forced a chuckle.

Gwen leafed through the folder while the others watched.

Battlemont stared at her. He realized something the rest of the staff did not: Gwen Everest was not being the usual Gwen Everest. There was a subtle difference. An abandon. Something *was* very wrong!

Without looking up from the drawings, Gwen addressed herself to Finnister. 'That uniform you're wearing, General Finnister. You design that yourself?'

'What? Oh, yes. I did.'

Battlemont trembled.

Gwen reached out, rapped one of Finnister's hips. 'Bony,' she said. She turned a page in the folder, shook her head.

'Well!' exploded Finnister.

Still without looking up, Gwen said: 'Simmer down. How about the hat? You design that, too?'

'Yesss!' It was a sibilant explosion.

Gwen lifted her attention to the hat, spoke in a reasonable tone: 'Possibly the most hideous thing I've ever seen.'

'Well of all the-'

'Are you a fashion designer?' asked Gwen politely.

Finnister shook her head as though to clear it of cobwebs.

'You *are not* a fashion designer?' pressed Gwen.

Finnister bit the words off. 'I have had *some* experience in choosing -'

'The answer is no, then,' said Gwen. 'Thought so.' She brought her attention back to the folder, turned a page.

Finnister glared at her in open-mouthed rage.

Gwen glanced up at Owling. 'Why'd you put the finger on this agency?'

Owling appeared to have trouble focusing his attention on Owen's question. Presently, he said: 'You were ... it was pointed out that this agency was one of the most successful in ... if not the most successful ...'

'We were classified as experts, eh?'

'Yes. If you want to put it that way.'

'I want to put it that way.' She glanced at Finnister. 'So we let the experts do the designing, is that clear? You people keep your greasy fingers off. Understood?' She shot a hard stare at Owling, back to Finnister.

'I don't know about you!' Finnister snapped at Owling, 'but I've had all-'

'If you value your military career you'll just sit down and listen,' said Gwen. Again, she glared at Owling. 'Do you understand?'

Owling shook his head from side to side. Amazement dominated him. Abruptly, he realized that his head shaking could be interpreted as negative. He bobbed his head up and down, decided in mid-motion that this was undignified. He stopped, cleared his throat.

What an astonishing female!he thought.

Gwen pushed the folder of design sketches up to Leo Prim, the art director. 'Tell me, General Owling,' she said, 'why is the armor so bulky?'

Leo Prim, who had opened the folder, began to chuckle.

'Marvelous, isn't it?' said Gwen.

Someone farther up asked: 'What is?'

Gwen kept her attention on Owling. 'Some jassack engineer in the Space Service designed a test model suit of armor like a gigantic woman - breasts and all.' She glanced at Finnister. 'You ran a survey on the stupid thing, of course?'

Finnister nodded. She was shocked speechless.

'I could've saved you the trouble,' said Gwen. 'One of the reasons you'd better listen carefully to what *expert me* has to say. No woman in her right mind would get into that thing. She'd feel big - and she'd feel naked.' Gwen shook her head. 'Freud! What a combination!'

Owling wet his lips with his tongue. 'Ah, the armor has to provide sufficient shielding against radiation, and it must remain articulate under extremes of pressure and temperature,' he said. 'It can't be made any smaller and still permit a human being to fit into it.'

'Okay,' said Gwen. 'I have the beginnings of an idea.'

She closed her eyes, thought: *These military jerks are a couple of sitting ducks. Almost a shame to pot them.* She opened her eyes, glanced at Battlemont. His eyes were closed. He appeared to be praying. *Could be the ruination of poor Andre and his lovely people, too,* she thought. *What a marvelous collection of professional stranglers! Well, can't be helped. When Gwen Everest goes out, she goes out in a blaze of glory! All flags flying! Full speed ahead! Damn the torpedoes!*

'Well?' said Owling.

Fire one! thought Gwen. She said: 'Presumably, you have specialists, experts who can advise us on technical details.'

'At your beck and call whenever you say the word,' said Owling.

Battlemont opened his eyes, stared at the back of Owen's neck. A ray of hope stabbed through his panic. Was it possible that Gwen was really taking over?

'I'll also want all the dope on which psychological types make the best WOMS,' said Gwen. 'If there is such a thing as a best WOM.'

Battlemont closed his eyes, shuddered.

'I don't believe I've ever been treated this high-handedly in my entire career!' blurted Finnister. 'I'm not entirely sure that -'

'Just a moment, please,' said Owling. He studied Gwen, who was smiling at him. The intelligence report said this woman was 'probable genius' and should be handled delicately.

'I'm only sorry the law doesn't give us the right to draft women, too!' barked Finnister.

'Then you wouldn't really have this problem, would you?' asked Gwen. She turned her smile on Finnister. It was full of beatitudes.

Owling said: 'I know we have full authority to handle this at our own discretion, General Finnister, and I agree that we've been subjected to some abuse but ...'

'Abuse!' Finnister said.

'And high time, too,' said Gwen.

A violent shudder passed through Battlemont. He thought: *We are doomed!*

'However,' said Owling, 'we mustn't let our personal feelings cloud a decision for the good of the service.'

'I hear the bugles blowing,' murmured Gwen.

'This agency *was* chosen as the one most likely to solve the problem,' said Owling.

'There *could* have been a mistake!' said Finnister.

'Not likely.'

'You are determined to turn this thing over to ... to ... ' Finnister broke off, tapped her palms on the table top.

'It's advisable,' said Owling. He thought: *This Gwen Everest will solve our problem. No problem could resist her. No problem would dare!*

General Owling had become a Gwenophile.

'Very well, then,' snarled Finnister. 'I will reserve my judgment.'

General Finnister had become a Gwenophobe.

Which was part of Gwen Everest's program.

'I presume you two will be available for technical consultations from time to time,' said Gwen.

'Our subordinates take care of details,' said Owling. 'All General Finnister and I are interested in is the big picture, the key to the puzzle.'

'Big picture, key to puzzle,' mused Gwen. 'Wonderful idea.'

'What?' Owling stared at her, puzzled.

'Nothing,' said Gwen. 'Just thinking out loud.'

Owling stood up, looked at Finnister. 'Shall we be going?'

Finnister also stood up, turned toward the door at the end of the room. 'Yesss!'

Together, one on each side of the table, they inarched the length of the room: tump-a-thump-a-tump-a-thump-a-tump ... Just as they reached the door and Owling opened it, Gwen jumped to her feet. 'Charrge!' she shouted.

The two officers froze, almost turned, thought better of it. They left, slamming the door.

Battlemont spoke plaintively into the silence. 'Gwen, why do you destroy us?'

'Destroy you? Don't be silly!'

'But, Gwen ... '

'Please be quiet, Andre; you're interrupting my train of thought.' She turned to Leo Prim. 'Leo, take those sketches and things of that big-breasted Bertha they designed. I want a decal workups on them, full projos, the entire campaign outlay.'

'Big Bertha a decals, projos, the outlay,' said Prim. 'Right!'

'Gwen, what are you doing?' asked Battlemont. 'You said yourself that -'

'You're babbling, Andre,' said Gwen. She glanced up at the ceiling. An eye in one of the Cellini cupids winked at her. 'We got the usual solid recordings of this conference, I presume?'

'Of course,' said Battlemont.

'Take those recordings, Leo,' said Gwen. 'Do a sequence out of them featuring only General Sinister Sonnet Bonnet Finnister.'

'What'd you call her?' asked Prim.

Gwen explained about the Finnister nicknames. 'The fashion trade knows all about her,' she finished. 'A living horror.'

'Yeah, okay,' said Prim. 'A solid sequence of nothing but Finnister. What do you want it to show?'

'Every angle of that uniform,' said Gwen. 'And the hat, Freud! Don't forget that hat!'

Battlemont spoke plaintively. 'I don't understand.'

'Good,' said Gwen. 'Leo, send me Restivo and Jim Spark ... a couple more of your best design people. Include yourself. We'll ...'

'And, lo! Ben Adam's name led all the rest,' said Battlemont,

Gwen turned, stared down at him. For one of the rare times in their association, Battlemont had surprised her with something he said.

I wonder if our dear Andre could be human?she mused.*No! I must be going soft in the head.* She said: 'Andre, go take a meditation break until time to call our next conference. Eh? There's a good fellow.'

Always before when she abused me it was like a joke between us,thought Battlemont dolefully.*But now she is trying to hurt.* His concern now was for Gwen, not for the agency.*My Gwen needs help. And I don't know what to do.*

'Meditation break time,' said Gwen. 'Or you could go to a mood bar. Why don't you try the new Interdorma mediniche? A niche in time saves the mind!'

'I prefer to remain awake for our last hours together,' said Battlemont. A sob clutched at his throat. He stood up to cover the moment, drew himself to attention, fixed Gwen with a despairing glare. 'I feel the future crouching over us like a great beast!' He turned his back on her, strode out through his private door.

'I wonder what the devil he meant by that?' mused Gwen.

Prim said: 'This is the month of St Freud. They go for prescience, extrasensory perception, that sort of thing.'

'Oh, certainly,' she said. 'I wrote the brochure.' But she found herself disturbed by Battlemont's departure.*He looked so pitiful,* she thought.*What if this little caper backfires and he gets drafted? It*



*could happen. Leo and the rest of these stranglers could take it. But Andre ... She gave a mental shrug. Too late to turn back now.*

Department heads began pressing toward Gwen along the table. 'Say, Gwen, what about the production on ...' 'If I'm going to meet any deadlines I'll need more ...' 'Will we have to drop our other ...'

'Shaddup!' bellowed Gwen.

She smiled sweetly into the shocked silence. 'I will meet with each of you privately, just as soon as I get in a fresh stock of crying towels. First things first, though. Number one problem: we get the monkey off our backs. Eh?'

*And she thought: You poor oafs! You aren't even aware how close you are to disaster. You think Gwen is taking over as usual. But Gwen doesn't care. Gwen doesn't give a damn any more. Gwen is resigning in a blaze of glory! Into the valley of death rode the 600! Or was it 400? No matter. War is hell! I only regret that I have but one life to give for my agency. Give me liberty or give me to the WOMS.*

Leo Prim said: 'You're going for the throat on these two military types, is that it?'

'Military tactics,' said Gwen. 'No survivors! Take no prisoners! Death to the White Eyes!'

'Huh?' said Prim.

'Get right on that assignment I gave you,' she said.

'Uhh ...' Prim looked down at the folder Owling had left. 'Workups on this Big Bertha thing ... a solido on Finnister. Okay.' He shook his head. 'You know, this business could shape up into a Complete Flap.'

'It could be worse than that,' Gwen cautioned.

Someone else said: 'It's absolutely the worst I've ever seen. Drafted!'

*And Gwen thought: Ooooh! Someone" has trepidations I* Abruptly, she said: 'Absolutely worst flap.' She brightened. 'That's wonderful! One moment, all you lovely people.'

There was sudden stillness in the preparations for departure.

'It has been moved that we label this business the Absolutely Worst Flap,' she said.

Chuckles from the staff.

'You will note,' said Gwen, 'that the initials A-W-F are the first three letters in the word *awful*.'

Laughter.

'Up to now,' said Gwen, 'we've only had to content with Minor, Medium and Complete Flaps. Now I give you the AWF! It rhymes with the grunt of someone being slugged in the stomach!'

Into the laughter that filled the room, Prim said: 'How about the U and L in awful? Can't let them go to waste.'

'*Unlimited!*' snapped Gwen. 'Absolutely Worst Flap Unlimited!' She began to laugh, had to choke it off as the laughter edged into hysteria. *What in hell's wrong with me?* she wondered. She glared at Prim. 'Let's get cracking, men! Isn't a damn one of you would look good in uniform.'

The laughter shaded down into nervous gutterings. 'That Gwen!'

Gwen had to get out of there. It was like a feeling of nausea. She pushed her way down the side of the room. The sparkle had gone out of her rebellion. She felt that all of these people were pulling at her, taking bits of herself that she could never recapture. It made her angry. She wanted to kick, bite, claw. Instead, she smiled fixedly. 'Excuse me. May I get through here? Sorry. Thank you. Excuse me.'

And an image of Andre Battlemont kept intruding on her consciousness. *Such a pitiful little fellow. So ... well ... sweet-Dam-mit! Sweet! In a despicable sort of way.*

Twenty-five days slipped off the calendar. Twenty-five days of splashing in a pool of confusion. Gwen's element. She hurled herself into the problem. This one had to be just right. A tagline for her exit. A Gwen Everest signature at the bottom of the page.

Technical experts from the military swarmed all through the agency. Experts on suit articulation. Experts on shielding. Pressure coefficients. Artificial atmosphere. Waste reclamation. Sub-miniature power elements. A locksmith. An expert on the new mutable plastics. (*He had to be flown in from the West Coast.*)

Plus the fashion experts seen only by Gwen.

It was quite a job making sure that each military expert saw only what his small technical world required.

Came the day of the Big Picture. The very morning.

Adjacent to her office Gwen maintained a special room about 20 feet square. She called it 'my intimidation room.' It was almost Louis XV: insubstantial chairs, teetery little tables, glass gimcracks on the light fixtures, pastel cherubs on the wall panels.

The chairs looked as though they might smash flat under the weight of a medium-sized man. Each (with the exception of a padded throne chair that slid from behind a wall panel for Gwen) had a seat that canted forward. The sitters kept sliding off, gently, imperceptibly.

None of the tables had a top large enough for a note pad *and* an ashtray. One of these items had to be balanced in the lap or placed underfoot. That forced an occasional look at the carpet.

The carpet had been produced with alarming psychological triggers. The uninitiated felt that they were standing upside down in a fishbowl.

General Owling occupied one of the trick chairs. He tried to keep from staring at the cherub centered in a wall panel directly across from him, slightly to the right of the seated figure of Andre Battlemont. Battlement looked ill. Owling pushed himself backward in the chair. His knees felt exposed. He glanced at General Finnister. She sat to his right beyond a spindly table. She pulled her skirt down as he watched. He wondered why she sat so far forward on the chair.

Damned uncomfortable little chairs!

He noted that Battlemont had brought in one of the big conference room chairs for himself. Owling wondered why they all couldn't have those big, square, solid, secure chairs. For that matter, why wasn't this meeting being held in the big conference room? Full staff. The Big Picture! He glanced up at the wall panel opposite. *Stupid damned cherub!* He looked down at the rug, grimaced, tore his gaze away.

Finnister had looked at the rug when she came into the room, had almost lost her balance. Now, she tried to keep her attention off it. Her mind seethed with disquieting rumors. Individual reports from the technical experts failed to reveal a total image. It was like a jigsaw puzzle with pieces from separate puzzles all thrown together. She pushed herself backward in the chair. *What an uncomfortable room.* Intuition told her the place was subtly deliberate. Her latent anger at Gwen Everest flared. *Where is that woman?*

Battlemont cleared his throat, glanced at the door to his right through which Gwen was expected momentarily. *Must she always be late?* Gwen had avoided him for weeks. Too busy. Suddenly this morning she had to have Andre Battlemont front and center. A figurehead. A prop for her little show. He knew pretty much what she was doing, too. In the outward, physical sense. She might be able to keep things from some of the people around here, but Andre Battlemont ran his own intelligence system. As to what was going on in her mind, though, he couldn't be sure. All he knew was that it didn't fit. Not even for Gwen.

Finnister said: 'Our technical people inform us that you've been pretty interested -' she pushed herself back in the chair - 'in the characteristics of some of the newer mutable plastics.'

'That is true,' said Battlemont.

'Why?' asked Owling.

'Ahhh, perhaps we'd better wait for Miss Everest,' said Battlemont. 'She is bringing a solido projector.'

'You have mockups already?' asked Owling.

'Yes.'

'Good! How many models?'

'One. Our receptionist. Beautiful girl.'

'What?' Finnister and Owling in unison.

'Oh! You mean ... that is, we have the one to show you. It is really two ... but only one of ...' He shrugged, suppressed a shudder.

Finnister and Owling looked at each other.

Battlemont closed his eyes. *Gwen, please hurry.* He thought about her solution to the military problem, began to tremble. Her basic idea was sound, of course. Good psychological roots. But the military would

never go for it. Especially that female general who walked like a sergeant. Battlemont's eyes snapped open as he heard a door open.

Gwen came in pushing a portable display projector. A glance of mutual dislike passed between Gwen and Finnister, was masked by mutual bright smiles immediately.

'Good morning, everybody,' chirped Gwen.

Danger signal! thought Battlemont. *She's mad! She's ...* He stopped the thought, focused on it. *Maybe she is. We work her so hard.*

'Anxious to see what you have there,' said Owling. 'Just getting ready to ask for a progress report when you called this meeting.'

'We wanted to have something first that you could appreciate as an engineer,' said Gwen.

Owling nodded.

Finnister said: 'Our people report that you've been very secretive about your work. Why?'

'The very walls have ears. Loose lips lose the Peace! Don't be half safe!' Gwen positioned the projector in the center of the room, took the remote control, crossed to a panel which swung out to disgorge her chair. She sat down facing Finnister and Owling.

Seconds dragged past while she stared in fascination at Finnister's knees.

'Gwen?' said Battlemont.

Finnister tugged down on the hem of her skirt.

'What do you have to show us?' demanded Owling. He pushed himself back in the chair.

'First,' said Gwen, 'let us examine the perimeters of the problem. You must ask yourself: What do young women want when they enter the service?'

'Sounds sensible,' said Owling.

Finnister nodded, her dislike of Gwen submerged in attention to the words.

'They want several things,' said Gwen. 'They want travel ... adventure ... the knight errant sort of thing. Tally-ho!'

Battlement, Finnister and Owling snapped to shocked attention.

'Gives you pause when you think about it,' murmured Gwen. 'All those women looking for something. Looking for the free ride. The brass ring. The pot at the end of the rainbow.'

She had them nodding again, Gwen noted. She raised her voice: The old carousel! The jingle-dingle joy journey!'

Battlement looked at her sadly. *Mad. Ohhh, my poor, poor Gwenny.*

Owling said: 'I ... uh ... '

'But they all want one commodity!' snapped Gwen. 'And what's that? Romance! That's what's that. And in the unconscious mind what's that romance? That romance is sex!'

'I believe I've heard enough,' said Finnister.

'No,' said Owling. 'Let's uh ... this is all, I'm sure, preliminary. I want to know where ... after all, the model ... models they've developed ... '

'What's with sex when you get all the folderol off it?' demanded Gwen. 'The psychological roots. What's down there?'

Owling scratched his throat, stared at her. He had a basic distrust of subjective ideas, but he always came smack up against the fear that maybe (just maybe now) they were correct. Some of them appeared (and it could be appearance*only*) to work.

'I'll tell you what's down there,' muttered Gwen. 'Motherhood. Home. Security with a man. The flag.'

Owling thought:*It all sounds so sensible ... except., .*

'And what does your armor do?' asked Gwen. 'Armor equals no amour! They're locked up in desexed chunks of metal and plastic where no men can get at them. Great Freud! Men can't even see them in there!'

'Women don't really*want* men to get at them!' barked Finnister. 'Of all the disgusting ideas I've ever -'

'Just a minute!' said Gwen. '*Anormal* woman always wants the*possibility*. That's what she wants. And she wants it under*her* control. You've eliminated the possibility. You've taken all control out of their hands, put your women at the mercy of the elements, separated from cold, masculine, angular ABRUPT AND FINAL DEATH! by only a thin layer of plastic and metal.'

Battlemont stared at her helplessly.*Poor Gwen. Doomed. And she won't even sell this idea. We're all doomed with her.*

Finnister glared at Gwen, still smarting under the implied dig of the word*normal*.

'How do you propose to get around these, ah, objections?' asked Owling.

'You'll see,' said Gwen. 'Let's go in from the perimeter now. Remember, the basic female idea is to be able to run away with the assurance that she will be caught. She wants a certain amount of exposure as a female without being too bare-ahhh-faced about it.'

'Mmmmp!' said Finnister.

Gwen smiled at her.

Gwen is deliberately destroying herself and us with her,thought Battlemont.

'Do you see what is lacking?' asked Gwen.

'Hninimm-ahhhhh-hmmmmm,' said Owling.

'A universal symbol,' said Gwen. 'A bold symbol. A symbol!'

'What do you propose?' asked Owling.

'That's it!' said Gwen. 'A proposal! Plus -' she hesitated - 'the symbol! The key is very simple.' She sat up, perky, grinning at them. 'In fact, it's a key!'

Finnister and Owling spoke in unison: 'A key?'

'Yes. Two keys, actually. Symbolism's obvious.' She produced two keys from her jacket pocket, held them up. 'As you can see, one key is hard, angular ... a masculine key. The other has fancy curves. It's daintier, more the ...'

'Do you mean to tell me,' howled Owling, 'that you people have spent all these weeks, all those consultations with our experts, and come up with ... with ... with ...' He pointed, unable to continue.

Gwen shook her head from side to side. 'Oh, no. Remember, these are just symbols. They're important, of course. One might even say they were vital. Each key will be inscribed with the name of the person who gets it.'

'What are they keys to?' asked Finnister. She was fascinated in spite of herself.

'To the space armor, naturally,' said Gwen. 'These keys lock your people in their armor - both men *and* women.'

'Lock them?' protested Finnister. 'But you said ...'

'I know,' said Gwen. 'But, you see, a key that will lock people into something will also let them out. As a matter of fact, any one of these keys will open any suit. That's for the safety factor.'

'But they can't get *out* of their suits when they're in space!' howled Owling. 'Of all the ...'

'That's right!' said Gwen. 'They can't *really* get out. So we give them the *symbol* of getting out. For exchanging.'

'Exchanging?' asked Finnister.

'Certainly. A male astronaut sees a girl astronaut he likes. He asks her to trade keys. Very romantic. Symbolic of things that *may* happen when they return to Earth or get to a base where they can get out of the suits.'

'Miss Everest,' said Finnister, 'as you so aptly pointed out earlier, no astronaut can see one of our women in this armor. And even if he could, I don't believe that I'd ...'

She froze, staring, shocked speechless.

Owen had pushed a stud on the solido projector's remote control. A suit of space armor appeared to be hanging in the center of the room. In the suit, wearing a form-fitting jacket, stood the agency's busty receptionist. The suit of armor around her was transparent from the waist up.

The bottom half remains opaque at all times,' said Gwen. 'For reasons of modesty ... the connections. However, the top half ... '

Gwen pushed another stud. The transparent upper half faded through gray to black until it concealed the model.

'For privacy when desired,' said Gwen. 'That's how we've used the new mutable plastic. Gives the girl some control over her environment.'

Again, Gwen pushed the first stud. The upper half of the model reappeared.

Finnister gaped at the form-fitting uniform.

Gwen stood up, took a pointer, gestured in through the projection. 'This uniform was designed by a leading couturier. It is made to reveal while concealing. A woman with only a fair figure will appear to good advantage in it. A woman with an excellent figure appears stunning, as you can see. Poor figures -' Gwen shrugged - 'there *are* exercises for developing them. Or so I am told.'

Finnister interrupted in a cold voice. 'And what do you propose to do with that ... that uni ... clothing?'

This will be the regulation uniform for the WOMS,' said Gwen. There's a cute little hat goes with it. Very sexy.'

Battlemont said: 'Perhaps the changeover could be made slowly so as to ... '

'What changeover?' demanded Finnister. She leaped to her feet. 'General Owling?'

Battlemont thought: *I knew it. Oh, my poor Gwenny! They will destroy her, too. I knew it.*

'We can't waste any more time with this agency,' said Finnister. 'Come, General.'

'Wait!' yelled Battlemont. He leaped to his feet. 'Gwen, I told you ... '

Finnister said: 'It's regrettable, but ... '

'Perhaps we're being a little hasty,' said Owling. There may be something to salvage from this ... '

'Yes!' said Battlemont. 'Just a little more time is all we need to get a fresh ... '

'I think not,' said Finnister.

Gwen smiled from one to the other, thought: *What a prize lot of gooney birds!* She felt a little drunk, as euphoric as if she had just come from a mood bar. *Rebellion, it's wonderful! Up the Irish! Or something.*

Owling shrugged, thought: *We have to stand together against civilians. General Finnister is right. Too bad, though.* He got to his feet.

'Just a little more time,' pleaded Battlemont.

Too bad about Andre, thought Gwen. She had an inspiration, said: 'One moment, please.'

Three pairs of eyes focused on her.

Finnister said: 'If you think you can stop me from going through with our threat, dissuade yourself. I'm perfectly aware that you had that uni ... that *clothing* designed to make *me* look hideous!'

'Why not?' asked Gwen. 'I was only doing to you what you did to virtually every other woman in the WOMS.'

'Gwen!' pleaded Battlemont in horror.

'Be still, Andre,' said Gwen. 'It's just a matter of timing, anyway. Today. Tomorrow. Next week. Not really important.'

'Oh, my poor Gwenny,' sobbed Battlemont.

'I was going to wait,' said Gwen. 'Possibly a week. At least until I'd turned in my resignation.'

'What're you talking about?' asked Owling.

'Resignation!' gasped Battlemont.

'I just can't toss poor Andre here to the wolves,' said Gwen. 'The rest of our men, yes. Once they get inside they'll chew your guts out, anyway.'

'What *are* you talking about?' asked Finnister.

The rest of the men in this agency can take care of themselves ... and you, too,' said Gwen. 'Wolves among wolves. But Andre here is helpless. All he has is his position ... money. He's an accident. Put him someplace where money and position are less important, it'll kill him.'

'Regrettable,' said Finnister. 'Shall we be going, General Owling?'

'I was going to ruin both of you,' said Gwen. 'But I'll tell you what. You leave Andre alone and I'll just give *one* of you the business.'

'Gwen, what are you saying?' whispered Battlemont.

'Yesss!' hissed Finnister. 'Explain yourself!'

'I just want to know the pecking order here,' said Gwen. 'Which one of you ranks the other?'

'What does that have to do with it?' asked Finnister.

'Just a minute,' said Owling. 'That intelligence report.' He glared at Gwen. 'I'm told you've prepared an



adecal on the test model we made before coming to you.'

'Big Bertha,' said Gwen. 'And it's not just an adecal. I have everything needed for a full national campaign. Look!'

A solido of the breast-bearing test model replaced the transparent suit hanging in the center of the room.

'The idea for Big Bertha here originated with General Owling,' said Gwen. 'My campaign establishes that fact, then goes on to feature an animated model of Big Bertha. She is a living panic. Funniest thing you ever saw. General Owling, you will be the laughing stock of the nation by nightfall of the day I start this campaign.'

Owling took a step forward.

Battlemont said: 'Gwen! They will destroy you!'

Owling pointed at the projection. 'You ... you wouldn't!'

'But I would,' said Gwen. She smiled at him.

Battlemont tugged at Owen's arm. She shook him off.

'It would ruin me,' whispered Owling.

'Presumably, you are capable of going through with this threat,' said Finnister. 'Regrettable.'

Owling whirled on Finnister. 'We must stand together!' he said desperately.

'You bet,' said Gwen. She pushed another stud on the remote control.

A projection of General Finnister in her famous uniform replaced Big Bertha.

'You may as well know the whole story,' said Gwen. 'I'm all set with another campaign on the designing of this uniform, right from the Sonnet Bonnet on down through the Sinister Finnister cape and those sneaky walking shoes. I start with a dummy model of the general clad in basic foundation garments. Then I go on to show how each element of the present WOMS uniform was designed for the ... ah ... Finnister ... ah ... figure.'

'I'll sue!' barked Finnister.

'Go ahead. Go ahead.' Gwen waved a sinuous arm.

She acts drunk! thought Battlemont. *But she never drinks.*

'I'm all set to go black market with these campaigns,' said Gwen. 'You can't stop me. I'll prove every contention I make about that uniform. I'll expose you. I'll show why your enlistment drives flopped.'

Red suffused the Finnister face. 'All right!' she snapped. 'If you're going to ruin us, I guess there's nothing we can do about it. But mark this, Miss Everest. We'll have the men of this agency in the service. You'll

have that on your conscience! And the men we draft will serve under friends of ours. I hope you know what that means!

'You don't have any friends,' said Gwen, but her voice lacked conviction. *It's backfiring*, she thought. *Oh, hell. I didn't think they'd defy me.*

There may even be something we can do about you!' said Finnister. 'A presidential order putting you in the service for reasons of national emergency. Or an emergency clause on some bill. And when we get our hands on you, Miss Everest ...'

'Andre!' wailed Gwen. It was all getting out of hand. *I didn't want to hurt anybody*, she thought. *I just ...* She realized that she didn't know what she *had* wanted.

Battlemont was electrified. In 22 years, Gwen Everest had never appealed to anyone for help. And now, for the first time, her appeal was to him! He stepped between Gwen and Finnister. 'Andre is right here,' he said. He felt inspired. His Gwen had appealed to him! 'You assassin!' he said, shaking a finger under the Finnister nose.

'Now, see here!' snapped Owling. 'I won't stand for any more of-'

'And you!' barked Battlemont, whirling. 'We have recordings of every conference here, from the first, and including this one! They show what happened! Don't you know what is wrong with this poor girl? You! You've driven her out of her mind!'

Gwen joined in the chorus: 'What?'

'Be still, Gwen,' said Battlemont. 'I will handle this.'

Gwen couldn't take her attention off him. Battlemont was magnificent. 'Yes, Andre.'

'I will prove it,' said Battlemont. 'With Interdorma psychiatrists. With all the experts money can buy. You chink you have seen something in those campaigns our Gwen set up? Hah! I will show you something.' He stabbed a finger at Owling. 'Can the military drive you insane?'

'Oh, now see here,' said Owling. 'This has gone -'

'Yes! *It can* drive you insane!' said Battlemont. 'And we will show, step by step, how you drove our poor Gwen out of her mind with fear for her friends. Fear for me!' He slapped himself on the chest, glared at Finnister. 'And you know what we will do next? We will say to the public: This could happen to you! Who is next? You? Or you? Or you? Then what happens to your money from Congress? What happens to your enlistment quotas?'

'Now see here,' said Owling. 'We didn't ...'

'Didn't you?' snarled Battlemont. 'You think this poor girl is in her right mind?'

'Well, but we didn't ...'

'Wait until you see our campaign,' said Battlemont. He took Gwen's hand, patted it. 'There, there, Gwenny. Andre will fix.'

'Yes, Andre,' she said. They were the only words she could find. She felt stupefied. *He's in love with me*, she thought. Never before had she known anyone to be in love with her. Not even her parents, who had always been repelled by the intellect they had spawned. Gwen felt warmth seeping through her. A cog slipped into motion in her mind. It creaked somewhat from long idleness. She thought: *He's in love with me!* She wanted to hug him.

'We seem to be at a stalemate,' muttered Owling.

Finnister said: 'But we can't just -'

'Shut up!' ordered Owling. 'He'll do it! Can't you see that?'

'But if we draft-'

'He'll do it for sure, then! Buy some other agency to run the campaign.'

'But we could turn around and draft -'

'You can't draft everybody who disagrees with you, woman! Not in this country! You'd start a revolution!'

'I ... ' Finnister said helplessly.

'And it's not just us he'd ruin,' said Owling. The whole service. He'd strike right at the money. I know his type. He wasn't bluffing. It'd be catastrophic!'

Owling shook his head, seeing a parade of crumbling military projects pass before his mind's eye, all falling into an abyss labeled 'NSF.'

'You are an intelligent man, General Owling,' said Battlemont.

'That Psych Branch!' snarled Owling. 'Them and their bright ideas!'

'I told you they were fuzzy-heads,' said Gwen.

'You be still, Gwen,' said Battlemont.

'Yes, Andre.'

'Well, what're we going to do?' demanded Owling.

'I tell you what,' said Battlemont 'You leave us alone, we leave you alone.'

'But what about my enlistments?' wailed Finnister.

'You think our Gwen, sick or well, can't solve your problems?' asked Battlemont. 'For your enlistments you use the program as outlined.'

'I won't!'

'You will,' said Owling.

'General Owling, I refuse to have ... '

'What happens if I have to dump this problem on the General Staff?' asked Owling. 'Where will the head-chopping start? In the Psych Branch? Certainly. Who'll be next? The people who could've solved it in the field, that's who!'

Finnister said: 'But -'

'For that matter,' said Owling, 'Miss Everest's ideas sounded pretty sensible ... with some modifications, of course.'

'No modifications," said Battlemont.

He's a veritable Napoleon!thought Gwen.

'Only in minor, unimportant details,' soothed Owling. 'For engineering reasons.'

'Perhaps,' agreed Battlemont. 'Provided we pass on the modifications before they are made.'

'I'm sure we can work it out,' said Owling.

Finnister gave up, turned her back on them.

'One little detail,' murmured Battlemont. 'When you make out the double-fee check to the agency, make a substantial addition-bonus for Miss Everest.'

'Naturally,' said Owling.

'Naturally,' said Battlemont.

When the space brass had departed, Battlemont faced Gwen, stamped his foot. 'You have been very bad, Gwen!'

'But, Andre -'

'Resignation!' barked Battlemont.

'But -'

'Oh, I understand, Gwen. It's my fault. I worked you much too hard. But that is past.'

'Andre, you don't -'

'Yes, I do! I understand. You were going to sink the ship and go down with it. My poor, dear Gwen. A death wish! If you'd only paid attention to your Interdorma Telelog.'

'I didn't want to hurt anyone here, Andre. Only those two -'

'Yes, yes. I know. You're all mixed up.'

That's true.' She felt like crying. She hadn't cried ... since ... she couldn't remember when. 'You know,' she said, 'I can't remember ever crying.'

'That's it!' said Battlemont. 'I cry all the time. You need a stabilizing influence. You need someone to teach you how to cry.'

'Would you teach me, Andre?'

'Would I ... ' He wiped the tears from his eyes. 'You are going on a vacation. Immediately! I am going with you.'

'Yes, Andre.'

'And when we return - '

'I don't want to come back to the agency, Andre. I ... can't.'

'So that's it!' said Battlemont. 'The advertising business! It bugs you!'

She shrugged. 'I'm ... I just can't face another campaign. I ... just ... can't.'

'You will write a book,' announced Battlemont.

'What?'

'Best therapy known,' said Battlemont. 'Did it myself once. You will write about the advertising business. You will expose all the dirty tricks: the hypno-jingles, the subvisual flicker images, the advertisers who finance textbooks to get their sell into them, the womb rooms where *theyou-seekers* are programmed. Everything.'

'I could do it,' she said.

'You will tell all,' said Battlemont.

'Will I!'

'And you will do it under a pseudonym,' said Battlemont. 'Safer.'

'When do we start the vacation, Andre?'

Tomorrow.' He experienced a moment of his old panic. 'You don't mind that I'm ... ugly as a pig?'

'You're just beautiful,' she said. She smoothed the hair across his bald spot. 'You don't mind that I'm smarter than you?'

'Ah, hah!' Battlemont drew himself to attention. 'You may be smarter in the head, my darling, but you are *not* smarter in the heart!'

